

Review of *Illuminated Manuscripts* by Alex Dodd, in Art South Africa,
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MALCOLM PAYNE

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The first thing that struck me about Malcolm Payne's show, *Illuminated Manuscripts*, was the startling originality of the aesthetic; acid-bright colours swirling about explosive computer-generated surfaces in a casino-like frenzy of cheap and dangerous thrills. Monkeys, skulls, lucky numbers, voodoo charms, curio dolls, morphed globes and fairground whistles compete for the viewer's attention in a riot of kinetic manipulation. And yet, despite the initial and lasting sense of delirious entropy, each work is immaculate in its conception and execution.

Throughout his career, Payne has worked in a wide variety of media, from drawings and paintings to sculpture and, more recently, video. Across media, his works share an exact, pristine quality – this series being no exception. The calculated construction of these new creations belies the sense of unnerving disorder they convey. This sense of jittery paradox seems to emanate from each image – engineered by unique, but linked conceptual equations and weighted, riddle-like titles like *Luck*, *Spell*, *Sex*, *Joy*, *Charity* or *Fate*.

How can this be sex? one wonders, gazing at a furry toy monkey that is apparently bounced up and down by a pair of outsize cupie-doll legs in the midst of a swirling globe, and what could be billiard balls or cherries. And then, with some dread, the possibility seeps through. Yes, maybe this is sex.

Payne's surfaces seem jolly and menacing at the same time. Twisted little fat pigs fall within the same frame as Mickey Mouse and an only half-recognisable accordion. With Photoshop anything and everything seems possible. You can serve it up exactly as you want it or fear it. And in this case, the medium is the message – the wizardry of Photoshop hinting obliquely at a world of morphed meanings in which too much possibility courts dementia.

Interestingly, Payne lives in Cape Town. Not that living in Cape Town is interesting in and of itself. But it seems to stand out when you see his work in a context as quintessentially Gauteng as the Goodman Gallery. Artists up here on the hectic Highveld seem to experience the world and its pressing social concerns up close and personal, whereas in the work of Payne one senses a detachment from the immediate concerns of socio-political context.

His concerns, if you could even call them that, seem to be wider and more in the realm of philosophical projection. What if? What if the world is just one giant swirling heap of fake and furious desires? What if gravity ceased? What if your lucky number really did come up? What if you could have it and do it all at once? His is a conceptual universe of bold postulation, which seems wild and wacky at first, but intensely serious as you proceed.

Payne's politics are not easily decipherable, but they are present in a very postmodern, post-belief sense. Belief and faith seem to be key here – or the loss of these convictions. Whether faith in a lucky number, belief in a religion, idol worship, voodoo practice or political fidelity are going to go any way towards getting you through the reigning chaos seems dubious here. The power of idols, symbols and precious keepsakes is recklessly toyed with. They bob about in abstract space, dominated by computer-generated swirls, somehow potent and impotent at the same time.

Certainly Payne means to mess with meanings we allocate to sacred plastic objects. But it's not quite as simple as saying that they're meaningless pieces of junk. Dogma has been dethroned, but old meanings are still flying about, disassociated from their original context, used and battered like pathetic old cupie dolls, but still around. This is interesting if you consider that Payne's previous work was driven by some degree of moral imperative.

"The medium is unimportant," Sue Williamson has written of his work. "Each work is the vehicle through which Payne comments on some aspect of society, whether this be racism, the exploitation of labour, the oddness and lingering potency of old monuments, the greed of international pharmaceutical companies who refuse to sell drugs at reasonable prices, the difficulties of reconstructing the truth of past events, or the folly of believing any particular doctrine." It is the absence of doctrine Payne has chosen to take forward with this show. The laughable and sometimes terrifyingly random jumble of meanings we get by on.

"I don't take art particularly seriously," Payne has said. "I make... work because I enjoy making it... I like the seriousness of the game." With this new body of work, Payne has upped the odds. *Illuminated Manuscripts* heightens one's sense of the risk and gamble inherent in believing anything at all.

■ Alex Dodd

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