

The perceptual world

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For the generation of artists coming of age now, the decision to become a painter is no less serious or ambitious than it ever was, but it is more fraught with complications. Born into a world of accelerated visual overload, where computer games, DVDs and ceaseless internet images define the stimuli of childhood, today's emerging artists paint not against competing media but by incorporating that crowded perceptual world into their canvases.

As a result, 21st-century painting already looks distinctive. Surfaces are dizzying, busy. References are sophisticated, historically astute, laced with humour. Tone is deadpan. High-low hierarchies have so completely collapsed that quotations from everyday culture are taken for granted rather than co-opted for aesthetic or political statements. No one is making statements anyway: a society confused, scary, full of inchoate yearning, contingent, is what emerges here. Through it all, high key painterliness is in favour – what else is left to distinguish this medium?

Katy Moran, born 1975, and Nathan Cash Davidson, born 1988, are two of the brightest stars of young British painting. I initially encountered Moran's work in 2006 at London's Stuart Shave/Modern Art, where a pair of succulent, saturated canvases in dark baroque colours, "Captain Beaky and his Band I and II", looked like updated, abstracted migrants from the Wallace Collection. These open her first solo museum show, launched on Friday at the Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art and confirming her ability exhilaratingly to reinvent the language of abstraction as she goes along.

Moran has chosen just 20 works from private collections, all small, intimate, self-contained canvases that command the space around them in Mima's sweeping upstairs gallery. "Meeting in Love" is a swirl of luscious fat white brushstrokes edged with peachy-pink morning colours and night blues, mauves and browns: portrait of a day in flux. In "Carla's Garden" flurried marks drive you to read the picture rapidly from left to right, shoving you across the garden, yielding mere fragments of its colours and forms. In "Facing Francesca" dense curling pinks gleam at the foot of pale grey/turquoise arches that look on the verge of evaporating as you try to pin them down, leaving a ghostly after-image, like a screen picture dissolving.

Vestiges of landscape or portrait forms persist alluringly. I think I detected a thick, snowy avenue and outline of a shed translucent in harsh winter sunlight in "No to Kandy Kinchin", which briefly reminded me of Monet, and a human figure is suggested in deft gestural outline at the heart of the airy rococo brushwork in "Strange Solutions". Sometimes Moran's luscious surfaces and sinewy marks recall Cecily Brown's jittery abstract/figurative junkscapes but, although this is painting as performance, Moran is less of an exhibitionist, and where Brown looks crucially back to de Kooning, Moran looks to Bacon.

Mima's show makes art historical sense seen after Tate's marvellous Bacon retrospective. Where Bacon in the 1950s and 1960s assimilated photography in pushing representation to the limit of abstraction, Moran responds to the current media overdrive by pushing abstraction to the limits of representation. Using fleeting chance images hastily captured on her mobile phone as starting points for canvases gorgeously evocative of today's shape-shifting, efflorescent visual world, she works on a canvas until the point just before figural forms threaten to cohere into recognition. Here is painting not as frozen moments or memories but as an open-ended attempt to capture the fractured experience of contemporary life in a hurry.

A melting pot of fantasy, reality, history, depicted with unfailing confrontational actuality and detail, is the immediate impression of Cash Davidson's immensely assured first show of 30 largish works, *To Complete My Education*, at Hannah Barry Gallery in south London. A diving/drowning figure with rippled muscles and terrified features plunging in a white haze, entitled "How many doctors are there in the dishwasher?", and a piece of chiaroscuro violence, thick black shot with glints of pink flesh and dripping yellow, "David and Goliath after Caravaggio", both dating from 2005 when the artist was 17, herald Cash Davidson's aspiration to Old Master gravitas crossed with contemporary grotesque. They announce a prodigy who, despite the rush and all-over vitality of his work, reclaims a space for contemplation and interiority.

"Judith's Room" depicts a caveman-like figurine and paintings and mirrors climbing the walls of Cash Davidson's grandmother's living room, a precocious studio interior in subtle greys and greens with a debt, in its mock elegance/primitivism, to Matisse. "Alan Sugar fires a duck because it is not horse-headed" is a narrative flooded with strange figures and animals, statues, lamps, blood, imagining the entrepreneur in a moment of delusion, set within a cavernous receding space. "Smirking Cookie" centres on Eliza Bennett, bow in hair, pristine collar, in *Nanny McPhee*, posed within a Gaudi-esque dream building of shutters, domes and coloured panels. Around her revolve Jeremy Irons, the robot from *AI*, the artist's father and Cash Davidson himself, supine at the bottom of the painting, half-crushed by its plural references but eager, looking up and out.

Everything here already displays mastery of composition, pictorial depth and Cash Davidson's particular flair for architectural detail and love of the picture within the picture. Surfaces are miracles at once of liquid flow and jewelled precision. In "Zint Gradification" a luminously lost young man stares ahead with almost prophetic sadness against exquisitely painted stained glass windows. The same mosaic delicacy gives fragile urban beauty to the bridge and arches looming before mournful vampish faces in "I wouldn't want, is so you, they will and they don't raves that they". "Golden Monkey Ridicule" tells of a young couple standing before a block of flats with a giant graffiti image of Kane, a wrestler; the pair are posed to flee because, Cash Davidson explains in the catalogue, "they just have this thing that they think that if anything is written on their wall ... it will mean that they have to escape. They have a phobia of things drawn on walls".

Cash Davidson has the potential to return the power of myth to "things drawn on walls". Rap rhythms, video remixes, graffiti, Gameboy metamorphoses – a stag turning into a telephone, a scientist chasing his daughter "with a big needle to change her DNA and chromosome layout" – overlap with a robust figuration recalling Mark Gertler, Stanley Spencer, RB Kitaj, in canvases that shine with what it is like to be young, full of hope and dread, in the 21st-century city.

Katy Moran, Paintings, [Mima](#), Middlesbrough, UK to February 15; Nathan Cash Davidson, 'To Complete My Education', [Hannah Barry Gallery](#), London SE15, to December 11