



Ruairadh O'Connell interviewed by Elizabeth Neilson in October 2012

**Elizabeth Neilson:** The Invites series offers artists the opportunity to produce new works for the space; how did you respond to this small room in the former Methodist chapel?

**Ruairadh O'Connell:** The works I made for Invites explore notions of subtlety and perception. I started to consider the principles of ambient devices, which are inventions one overlooks whilst one acclimatises to one's environment. I liked the idea of a faint presence proposing a reconsideration of what we are surrounded by. A rearrangement of the conscious mind, but by default somehow. The strategies employed in ecclesiastical architecture, and still quietly resonant in this former chapel, were relevant. As the show opens in October I knew it was going to be exciting to consider the windows in the space as the season would offer differing experiences of the works due to the changing light during the gallery opening hours. With the installation being set alongside the original architectural features the show is technically more exciting than it would be in a formal white cube.

**EN:** As I understand it ambient devices are computer displays which are used to communicate fluctuating information at a glance. They take a variable given – a stock market price for example – and display a coded version of it, i.e. an object might move to the top of the screen when stock is expensive, or to the bottom for lower cost. They take a politically sensitive and complex system of value and production and communicate it in an easy to digest, infantilised way. What is it about this simplification and immediacy which attracts you?

**RO'C:** These programmes were developed primarily for dealing with behavioural problems in both children and adults. The technology and design are organised to exploit the difficulty people have in maintaining focus directly on their activities. When a break

in concentration occurs people need some sort of stimulus to refocus on the task in hand. The ambient devices are therefore triggers to regain one's orientation. They are almost announcements saying 'get back to work/stay on task', but they are indirect, and effective for that reason. They bear information without pointing to it. I like the concept of the out-of-focus, or the off-view. A way of viewing or engaging by default.

**EN:** To me there's something 'retro-future' or sci-fi about this – a creative and imaginative response to paranoia about the future and its effect on the human body, both physically and mentally. Does this come into your thinking?

**RO'C:** The static encapsulation of a dragonfly suspended in a moment relies on our immediate concentration. We have moved to a place now where experience is so overloaded with attention grabbing stimuli, that there is a place to recognise the informative potential of idle time, a place where information can be attained through the momentary lapse of attention. I am also interested in the way that misgivings or suspicion can inform the way we think about materials. I am interested in when it is difficult to predict how things finally come together.

**EN:** You use painterly conventions in unconventional ways; wax, latex, printing and stretching are all somehow used 'improperly'. You reference existing images and patterns, as well as physical movements and patterns such as massage. In previous works you screen printed casino carpet patterns onto wax panels and then used massage techniques to create physical disruptions of the surface on top of these images. How and why do you approach and select each material and technique?

**RO'C:** I go back to look at the basic properties of materials, and the proper or correct ways to treat them. I use materials

for their properties and what they can offer me. For the silkscreened wax series I wanted to explore notions of pleasure and design, and to join the sculptural possibilities of massage with the hypnotic effect of the Las Vegas casino carpets. It's almost like an investigation into how each material and process can be calculated to find somewhere they marry over. It can be a bit exploitative also.

The psychedelic nature of the casino carpets is one of seven strategies to make the gambler/visitor spend more. When we are tired our brains tell us to look down, where there is less visual stimulus to occupy our thoughts. However, with the crazy networks on the floors the brain is not able to do this and is therefore encouraged to re-engage. Different massage techniques ease this state of mind, be it by relieving pain or releasing aches. Combining the two, I wanted to find that precarious balance between stimulation and tranquillity. The visual and the physical. The series was a description of different sighs, sustained moments of gasps.

**EN:** What do you mean by 'exploitative'?

**RO'C:** I mean in the way that I can keep techniques and materials exciting by using them in what you call an 'improper way'. I can twist, even spin principles. This applies to relationships too, where there is an excitement in learning from one another, developing moments together.

**EN:** What are the sources of the images and patterns in your Invites works, and why do they interest you?

**RO'C:** The works are positioned within the space, suspended and static. They are latex casts of Superfresco wallpapers. The design of the wallpapers is intended for a domestic setting, to be overlooked yet decorative, appealing but not over the top. A developed technique for a new change in one's environment.

Their form is based on these ambient devices which utilize pre-attentive processing to display information: the ability for the brain to perceive information without any apparent cognitive load. I'm interested in this notion in relation to exhibition making.

**EN:** Can you expand on what the lack of cognitive load means in an exhibition context?

**RO'C:** The success of ambient devices is subject to our habitual reliance on them and our familiarity with them. Information is gathered through diversion, immediately and effectively.

I am interested in the way that humans can be managed to have particular thoughts and actions, and design can create a very physical human direction. For example floors are coded to give direction. Prisoners can't step over such a band of colour, cyclists are arranged in their lane with clearly coded highways. I think it's interesting to think of this kind of subliminal mise-en-scène in relation to painting.

**EN:** What are the links you see between the subjects you research to make work, i.e. painting, technology, ambient devices, liminal architecture and environmental psychology?

**RO'C:** I'm really interested in differing stages of persuasion. This relates to different decisions or processes within the works themselves, and to how information can unconsciously accumulate. With the recent works there is a process of layering, or even an embedding; there is no foreground or background. There is a lack of narrative and primary focus; everything operates on the same plane. There is no grappling between materials and ideas. This interests me as it provides a purpose in my investigation and my attempts to put all these components together.

**EN:** As well as ideas-based work, there is always a visceral and physical element to your

practice. In these new untitled works the latex is resonant of flayed skin and the hand-drawn biro dragonflies appear like bruises on this 'skin'. Do you see a dichotomy between manifestations of the physical and mental experiences of our surroundings?

**RO'C:** The physical and mental experiences are reliant on each other. There is a combination of primitive techniques allied to the idea of controlled or designed environments. A stare disorients our interactions.

The screens are somehow human, like your description of the skin. It's interesting as it leaves the viewer in a state of imbalance, a bit like the fossilization of insects in resin. There is a value in the antiquity of such preserved information, in the way that the sustained perfection of such a historical object can guarantee our trust in it, and how it encapsulates a time so well. Art also has this temporal reference point, disguised somehow within its moment. But when we look back with hindsight, art evolves somehow to become greater than this natural preservation of an insect. It's a fairer way to understand human thoughts and the times we once lived in.



Artist's presentation  
Saturday 10 November, 3pm

Zabludowicz Collection Invites is a new initiative dedicated to presenting UK-based artists who do not currently have representation by a commercial gallery in the UK. Taking the form of monthly solo presentations, exhibitions will result from an open-ended invitation to exhibit new work.

Reverse:  
Illustration by K Nesbitt

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