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20 ARTS

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Has he got news for you

Newspaper puzzles and perplexing sculptures: Jack Mottram reveals in the games that artists play

THE latest exhibit at Inverleith is neither a group show, nor a pair of solo outings. Instead, curator Paul Nisbitt has brought together two Glasgow artists, sculptor Nick Evans and painter Tony Swain, who share certain concerns, rooted in a deliberate, investigative approach, and a tendency to set their audience a series of challenges.

Tony Swain paints over newspaper pages, allowing existing images - photographs, design elements and the flow of text - to guide his brush and set his colour palette. It seems that, first and foremost, he has taken to the medium for its suggestive properties, a way to prompt his imagination and to constrain it, a chance to accept new challenges posed by a page's layout. But there is much more going on than that.

Newspaper is a fragile, temporary medium, not just in the sense of being tomorrow's fish-and-chip paper, but in the way it dimples under the weight of paint, and yellows in sunlight, becoming brittle over time.

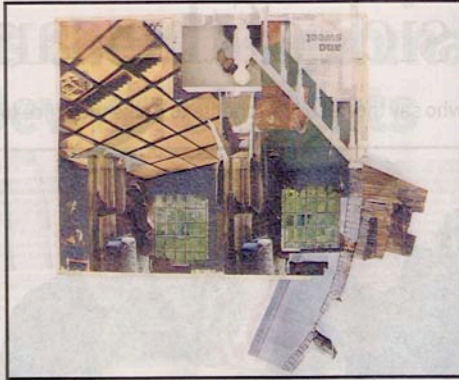
Swain makes no attempt to halt this process - the works here curl up at the corners, and waft in the draft from an open window - as if he wants his paintings, for all the care he takes over them, to be seen as of a moment, the moment of their making. Even his titles - brief, gnomic and sharing an economy of language with newspaper headlines - hint that these are works for today, not for all time.

Swain must be aware, too, that

in choosing to leave this image intact, or letting that paragraph peep through his layers of paint, viewers will attempt to puzzle out meaning. In *According to Ezra*, a figure of indeterminate gender, trapped behind painted bars, is almost completely obliterated, with nothing remaining but a shock of hair and a pair of folded arms. In the bottom left corner, a pull-quote leaps out, reading: "I planned my suicide for weeks. My pump rope was made of leather so I knew it would hold my weight."

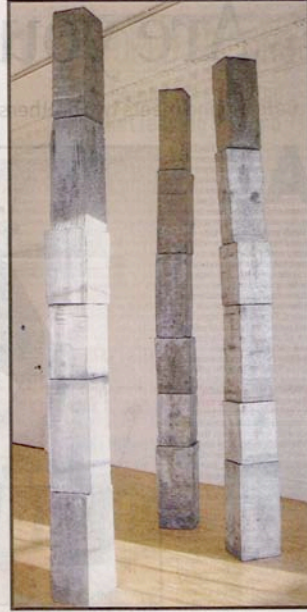
Is this, then, a painting about attempted suicide, with the absent figure and prison bars suggested as much by the text, which Swain must have read, as they are by the formal aspects of the printed image? And if it is, how are we to account for the single legible gobblet of printed text that remains unpainted in among the collaged suburban apocalypse of *Remembered As One*? This time, it seems impossible to reconcile old news of Menzies Campbell's tenure as leader of the LibDems with the overblown fantasy landscape Swain has crafted over and around the text.

In the family kept changing shape, an out-of-focus printed photograph of what looks like a dancer's legs, Swain crafts a completely incongruous miniature cityscape, dwarfed by the limbs above it. Then, returning to *Remembered As One*, the viewer is faced with a work made of multiple slices of newspaper, with a tidal wave looming over sets of windows, a brick-walled tunnel, an



IN THE HEADLINES: Tony Swain paints over newspaper pages, while sculptor Nick Evans's creations, right, throw up a different set of contradictions.

This is a powerful pairing, bristling with subtle connections



inverted image of crowds at a procession of carnival, the collaged parts linked together by brushwork in such a way that it is nigh-on impossible to tell where one image begins and another ends, or whether a given element has been slightly altered or completely created by Swain's hand.

In the downstairs galleries, Nick Evans offers a different set of problems for the viewer to ponder. Like Swain, his work is born of his chosen materials, and the result of an intuitive process.

First come *Figures Standing*, a trio of towering, totem-like forms. They are made of blocks of cast aluminium that betray their

origins as shaped polystyrene. This is the first in a series of internalised contradictions. The brittle, breakable and disposable nature of polystyrene is contrasted with the soft, pliable but permanent nature of aluminium. But polystyrene and aluminium are not opposites; they share a lightness, and Evans, contrarily, uses that lightness to set up another contradiction - these monumental structures that loom over the viewer are, regardless of their real weight and stability, dangerously fragile, threatening to topple at the slightest touch.

Next door, another contradiction comes in the form of Num-

bers, seven small pots resting on a shelf. This time, the title is less than; hinting that these are editions in an ongoing series that sees Evans aiming, if not at the Platonic form of a pot, then to make a very good pot indeed, a project suggested by his material, porcelain. And yet these cast pots, be they vase-like or gourd-shaped, show signs of their making, bearing traces of the moulds that made them. Like the standing figures, there is also a sense that Evans is playing games with the properties of his materials and methods - these drab little things are resolutely matte, with none of the translucent sheen associated with

porcelain, and their skew-whiff nature must be meant to undermine the usual goals of the potter: symmetry and balance.

The final pair of works on show, *Figures Fallen*, are, despite their title, quite unlike the first three. This time, Evans's figures come closer to representation than before, with twin Z-shaped sculptures resting on the floor, calling to mind seated versions of the figures that guard the coastline of Easter Island. Made of plaster, their surfaces are ridged, suggesting they were cast in moulds made of corrugated cardboard. And, while the title is apt in the sense that these are, indeed, figures, it offers

another deliberate inconsistency: the twin works are mounted on the floor to give the illusion they are hovering just above it, figures falling, not *Figures Fallen*. In the end, this is a powerful pairing, bristling with subtle connections. Evans and Swain are not simply a good match, they are allies of a sort, both deeply attuned to their media, both exposing the strategies and tactics they use to make work, both among the very best artists working in Scotland today.

Tony Swain: Impulse Postports and Nick Evans: Primary School are at Inverleith House until April 20.