

Mary Mary

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It's 8.30 in the morning and artist Torsten Lauschmann has been up most of the night. "I've only had five hours sleep," he explains, leading me to his kitchen where we talk over breakfast. He's taller than I imagined, with the economic gestures of someone accustomed to keeping long limbs in check, and seems younger than his years. Perhaps it's his casual dress sense – he wears jeans and a hoodie – or his awkward stature, but you could almost imagine him a teenager.

He's been busy setting up his solo exhibition at Dundee Contemporary Arts – his biggest yet – and despite a lack of sleep talks enthusiastically about the new work. One installation in particular, called *Dear Scientist Please Paint Me*, has him especially excited. "There's a whole wall that is painted with this luminous paint," he explains. "You know, the paint that you would use for exit signs so they retain the light. And there's this moving headlight that I basically use like a massive pen. When it moves it inscribes the light onto the wall."

Like a lot of the work Lauschmann produces, *Dear Scientist Please Paint Me* doesn't feel much like art. The materials used – luminous paint, moving headlight and controlling software – have none of the integrity we have come to associate with an exhibition of this magnitude. But in no way is this a self-conscious manoeuvre. Lauschmann arrives at these materials intuitively, as though oblivious to the pressures of art history and its tacit conservatism.

"I'm just trying to include every material that is available to me, which includes everything from a mirror ball to paint, or whatever. I'm trying to forget that there's a hierarchy to the material. I find it important just to step back and say this is a playground and it's not symbolic what you use – it just makes sense."

He's dismissive of my compliments as I try to congratulate him on his independence as an artist. "I wish I could limit myself to one thing my

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whole life," he says. "It would make things far easier. I'm really envious of those that have a methodology of working – limitations and materials – and they just go into the studio and they know what they're doing and why."

I suggest the assured figure he imagines in the studio is just as envious of him, what with his ability to flit between video, light and sound installations. His technical competence alone is surely the envy of most contemporary artists.

But this only aggravates the ambivalence that Lauschmann harbours for the technology that is central to his practice. "You could say I'm a geek – like a painter is a geek. But I'm also quite critical. I'm afraid of technology."

The self-playing piano has come to illustrate this ambivalence Lauschmann feels towards technology. One has been positioned underneath a snow machine in the centre of DCA's Gallery 2, almost entirely cloaked in darkness. The snow machine briefly whirrs into life as a spotlight illuminates the snowflakes landing on the instrument's keys. An atonal tune suddenly bursts from the piano but soon comes to a stop as the light is turned off again.

It's pure theatre. Only there's no actors, just automatons programmed to carry out their choreographed tasks. Even the work's title, *The Coy Lovers*, suggests these machines are more than just animated objects. They are characters in dialogue.

The introduction of technology into our cultural foreground, as parodied by Lauschmann's romantic automatons, can be seen across all media, infiltrating everything from books to music. But nowhere is it more evident than in cinema, where technology is firmly in the driving seat. (It was not clever plot devices or directorial integrity that saw James Cameron's *Avatar* the highest grossing film of all time.)

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"Technology was always that thing stuck on at the end," says Lauschmann. "Even filmmaking, when you think about it – it's a script, it's a story, and then there's the technology bit. Increasingly I feel like that technology is coming into view, and you can't not look at it because it's just so overwhelming. It becomes more and more the context. The narrative becomes more and more about the technology that produced it."

As part of this year's Glasgow Film Festival Lauschmann produced a brand new work called *At the Heart of Everything a Row of Holes*. Shown in the Glasgow Film Theatre's main cinema, it was one of the most ambitious and breathtaking works seen in Glasgow since Tramway was in its prime. It received a standing ovation – a degree of effusiveness rarely seen this far north.

A massive projector with a moving head was plonked in the middle of the auditorium – rather than tucked away in the projector booth. Every surface of the room was utilised as a screen: a flying carpet floated above the audience's heads as it slowly unravelled; a cymbal-playing monkey was projected on high.

A more conventional cinema space has been constructed in DCA's Gallery 1, only the films are far from commonplace. *Skipping Over Damaged Areas* is a 10-minute video made entirely from the title sequences of other films. Read aloud by a voiceover actor, the titles form a coherent, if not a little eccentric, story about a character called Sabrina and her elaborate adventures. What transpires is a farcical horror that includes all sorts of gruesome acts and every kind of nocturnal creature.

Not only does it emphasise the ridiculousness of a large proportion of the films we watch (*Attack of the Killer Tomatoes!*), it also parodies the craft of the classic horror film, where the gruesome act almost always takes place out of shot. The anticipation, partly set up by the title sequence, is enough to have you jumping at everything that moves.

How the original films' intended meaning is subverted in this way is central to Lauschmann's practice. "I'm really interested in that question of understanding and meaning," he explains. "Is the meaning created by the author or the listener?"

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"There's a picture that has always stuck in my head, which is this Papua New Guinea warrior with a Kellogg's cereal box on his head – for him a sign of sexual potency and power within the tribe. I always think of the design company in New York in the 50s sitting round a table discussing the type face and spacing on the box – and then suddenly the meaning is out the window.

"The problem with meaning is how far we can fix it as artists – that dilemma of having responsibility for what you do, on one hand, and an inability to actually fix it at all. If you can't fix it as an artist then what are you doing? What is it we're actually doing?"

But surely that's the excitement of making art – that everything's up for grabs. Don't these opportunities to subvert meaning jolt art from its self-referential slump where the media – the very technology that creates it – is the message. Shouldn't this fluidity be celebrated?

"The history of art is the history of misinterpretation," Lauschmann adds. "We simply make it up, and it's just so far from what was probably intended. I find that really liberating as an artist – and perplexing."