

Alistair Frost

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IF YOU HAVE ANY FAMILIARITY with Apple's aesthetic, Alistair Frost's painting *Out of Office Auto Reply*, 2012, will click immediately. It features the side-on speaker of the Mac OS volume icon, muted by an overlaid black cross whose faux-ragged "expressive" edging suggests—like much of the London-based artist's Google-powered work—clip art. The immediate feel, then, is of a symbol dragged and dropped; the implicit definition of painting is as something lacking a voice, and the title proposes that not only was this nonstatement generated without human interaction but that the artist is also a mere bureaucrat (albeit one

who's recently deserted his desk). Vis-à-vis the diminished status, today, of the ostensibly analog medium of painting—and even of unformatted creativity—all of this might suggest a shrug, a capitulation.

Then again, painting *is* silent, the experience before the canvas a caesura within the world's general noise and the specific babble of digital stimuli. And the little glyph magnified here is, for many of us, just what modern silence looks like. But this near-ambient commonplace, floating on a creamy field, is also an insider's nod: a halving of the polysemic motif—a bow tie or a gallery in sharply recessive

perspective—featured in many of René Daniëls's paintings. The minimal graphic whole, meanwhile, whose each element multitasks hard, nods back to Raoul De Keyser (Frost, who studied at Amsterdam's Rijksakademie after leaving London's Royal College of Art, knows his Low Countries forebears) and across, too, to the X-generating Wade Guyton. This lucidly irresolute tangle—a mix of resolve and disconcertion as regards painting right now, and the larger culture that frames it—structures Frost's art.

Since 2009, his canvases and installations have distilled the art world into a place where revelry and

productivity coexist. Works from that year include *On the other hand . . . It could just be the taste*, a cocktail bar decorated with 1950s-ish luxe graphics of martini glasses, dotted with drained bottles and Frost's mawkish sculptures of cocktail ware, all splashed with purple wine stains; and *Hostess with the Mostess*, a clip-art graphic painting of what looks like a jiggling girl in at least part of a bikini. (As his alcohol-infused works in particular clarify, Frost shares both iconography and a droll, ambivalent mien with Matthew Brannon.) By his 2011 show at Zach Feuer Gallery in New York, "Airplane Mode"—another title, like *Out of Office Auto Reply*, that suggests an interstitial, present-and-absent mode of being—Frost was augmenting sociable, pastel-daubed paintings featuring démodé chunky monitors, an office chair, and a bra, as well as casual-looking near abstractions, with real, colorful-cocktail-filled water coolers and stacked pizza boxes.

Atmospherics aside, though, Frost's paintings here weren't downtime doodles. A quiet rightness and unity belied their apparent lightness; protracted formal decision-making underwrote their nonchalant, aerated surfaces and tweaked imagery. (In con-

versation, the artist invokes Baldassare Castiglione's famous notion of *sprezzatura*—toilsome poise made seemingly effortless—as his artistic ideal.) The show also suggested a portrait of the contemporary artist as working stiff, putting in the hours, then letting rip a little with his coworkers. Frost, in other words, is a self-performing producer who posits artmaking as inescapably inflected by, on the one hand, a global ideology that apotheosizes productiveness, and, on the other, an art world that's become the glossily contoured province of a leisure class.

And while countless artists are grappling with this condition, rarely is the result so accurately rife with reversals and schizoid thinking. When Frost figures a world of leisure—as in his 2012 show at Mary Mary in Glasgow, "Image Coming Soon," which used hammocks as painterly supports, or this year at BolteLang in Zurich, where he accoutred fluffy bathrobes with palm-tree and martini-glass graphics—it's one that is easy to find attractive, in weaker moments, but that doesn't chime with the precarious reality of many artists' working lives. At the same time, the banked-down precision of Frost's paintings militates against superficial gazing, stylism, and art-

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Opposite page: Alistair Frost, *Out of Office Auto Reply*, 2012, acrylic on linen, 39 3/4 x 31 1/2".

Below: Alistair Frost, *Okay, you're a visionary, I'm a visionary, everybody here is a visionary . . . but what do you do for a living?* (detail), 2013, mixed media. Installation view, Cell Project Space, London. Photo: Mariell Amelie.



From top: Alistair Frost, *Metaphors don't count*, 2011, oil on linen. Installation view, Zach Feuer Gallery, New York. View of "Alistair Frost: Airplane Mode," 2011, Zach Feuer Gallery, New York. From left: *Not a lot of action but it's part of a set*, 2011; *How are you enjoying it so far?*, 2011. Photos: Christopher Burke.

as-decor even while shamelessly flirting with them. So, indeed, does his use of (mostly Web-heisted) language. "Don't use repetitive brush strokes: these put the viewer to sleep," advised a note accompanying "Image Coming Soon," before clarifying correct etiquette for lounging on the beach.

For a recent group show at Cell Project Space in London, this textual aspect bloomed. Alongside lethal vodka-and-Gatorade-filled watercoolers, a single Lichtensteinesque canvas of a hashtag, and bright murals, Frost displayed bulletin boards featuring A4 PDFs that offered "rules of engagement," alternating between a mostly found blend of artistic and corporate-culture advice. After a pep talk on fixing artworks that aren't going well, for example, he offered a series of tips on how to "be cooler at your office job" and get "a better social life." The artist—or the persona presented here—is, it seems, in part defensively amused, in part socially anxious, in part determined to hole up in the studio and do the job seriously, and in part admitting to a wish for shortcuts to serious, meaningful painting. All of this notwithstanding the fact that Frost's very vacillations are timely and substantial in themselves: rote replies made eloquent. □

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