

Mary Mary

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That digital technology has changed how we create, consume and interpret images is indisputable. At the same time, painting – despite its resolutely analogue nature – is increasingly, and inevitably, developing a dialogue with the Internet and with digital culture at large. It was the digital sphere and the contemporary artist's place within it that Alistair Frost's exhibition at Mary Mary wittily navigated. By reproducing off-the-peg stock art from the web in a gallery context, the young London-based painter asked questions about the nature and value of this readily available and easily distributed imagery, and painting's relationship to it.

Conceived as a single installation, 'Image Coming Soon' (all works 2012) consisted of six striped hammocks that were hung on the walls – both horizontally and vertically – of the gallery's two interlinked spaces. While in the past it may have conjured images of lazy days in the sun, the hammock is now just as likely to prompt thoughts of tech-savvy young urbanites recharging in the relaxation room of some start-up's brightly coloured offices.

Frost had disrupted the stripes of each hammock with a bold but simple graphic: a too-perfect splash of paint; a smiley-face emoticon in solid blocks of black; three identical, cartoonish black sunglasses; the word 'ARTISTS' with a brush poised on the 'S'. Black and white posters of a vector image of a zebra's head were pasted next to one hammock that had been intersected with four horizontal stripes, creating a black and white grid at the top. Many of the motifs derived from free-to-download Clipart graphics; a number of them also featured in paintings in Frost's summer 2012 solo show, 'Out of Office Auto Reply', at Christian Andersen in Copenhagen.

Previously, Frost has playfully combined clean lines and a detached coolness with the physical reality of paint, contrasting a sense of completeness with brushstrokes that intentionally suggest a job partly done. Yet at Mary Mary the work avoided any sign of the human hand. Instead, paint was applied evenly and precisely to the hammocks, the results purposefully flat and anonymous. In keeping with the show's title (like that of his previous exhibition, a reference to automated online responses – in this case the message that pops up when a picture is missing), there were gaps in the story that needed to be filled.

An accompanying text, written by Frost, provided some clues as to his process. Consisting of a series of unrelated extracts from various uncredited online sources – presumably the result of Google searches – the piece was an amusing mash-up that offered a narrative of sorts. There were tips on how to hang a hammock ('You can't just fool with it and whack it up anywhere'); advice on what to avoid when becoming a painter ('Don't use repetitive brush strokes: these put the viewer to sleep'); and extracts on beach etiquette ('If you choose to stare at strangers on the beach [...] wear dark sunglasses'). The same A4 sheet also included a list of seven song titles and, every few minutes, ten-second clips of these were played through two large speakers. The music – derived from anonymous, free-to-download samples – was universally insipid, from Kraftwerk-lite to soft-focus rock. The titles were Frost's own and ranged from the descriptive and cryptic – 'Atmospheric groove', 'Happy corporate summer journey', 'European banking' – to the names of three well-known artists: 'Michael Craig-Martin', 'Imi Knoebel', 'Daniel Buren'.

By bringing together art-historical references – most obviously Buren's 1960s stripe paintings – with off-the-shelf imagery, 'Image Coming Soon' created a sense of the competing visual noise that is so much a part of our lives. Reflecting on digital technology's ability to replicate, archive and order our aesthetic language, Frost explored how contemporary painting has become complicit in this visual cacophony, while at the same time reacting to and reinterpreting it.