

Uri Aran: Take This Dog For Example

Douglas Hyde Gallery, Dublin, 31 March to 25 June

There's a lingering incompleteness to the title of Uri Aran's exhibition. What, 'for example'? It seems there was an explanation taking place which, for some reason, has been curtailed and cut short. The dog, for example (and the absence of that comma in the title feels frustratingly pertinent here), was about to elucidate something, to firmly establish a meaning and, hopefully, a common understanding. Left on its own, without context or conclusion, it simply dangles in place unsettled, indeterminate and, as Julia Kristeva once noted, 'in a syntactic irresolution that opens a path to various logical and semantic connotations, in short, to daydreaming'.

Language is braided through Aran's installation, with its elusive characters cast in bronze, animated squiggles, smudged chalkboards and letters shaped from baked bread. The symbols that make up words are essentially arbitrary, only taking on communicative value when we collectively agree what sound they make, where they take their place in a word, or, cumulatively, what they will represent. Aran has noted this aspect in his practice, 'the infinite possibilities of producing meaning through the interplay of sign and signifier', as well as his background as a non-native English speaker (born in Jerusalem, he is currently based in New York). In *Bread Library*, 2023, the alphabet is both comically banal and unsettlingly strange, as shelves of doughy letters lean flaccidly against each other, stacked and slumped, an endless procession of curled 'S's and 'A's. They smell, and presumably taste, like bread, and this sensory confusion runs counter to what we expect a system of language to be: precise, impersonal, acquired through the sheer repetition of usage.

Untitled, 2023, comprises a slide projector, set on the floor and directed towards an adjacent corner wall. There doesn't appear to be much happening, just a series of steady clicks from one empty 35mm frame to the next, and an unwavering modest window of yellow light. After an interminable wait, the projector judders onto one of the six slides evenly positioned in the carousel, with an overexposed, upside-down, and almost inscrutable black-and-white image (I later found out that this was Ernie, the puppet from the educational children's television show *Sesame Street*). The interval heightens the anticipation of the slide's arrival, and, in this protracted pause, illuminated by one blank, bleached rectangle after another, one is left to ruminate on childhood nostalgia, repetition and boredom, and memorisation as a means of instruction. A lot happens between moments of legibility.

As for 'this dog', he's a recurring motif in Aran's practice, and a symbol of how we project ambitions, failures and feelings onto our pets. Dogs are mutely loyal, an anthropomorphic mirror to our inner selves



Uri Aran, 'Take This Dog For Example', installation view

(I'm also reminded of recent studies that showed how their eyebrows evolved over time to express emotion and, in turn, to generate sympathy from their owners). A photograph of a dog, cradled affectionately in his owner's lap, repeats across the exhibition in various permutations: a full-colour print, a faded Xerox, and as the subject of Aran's video *Clean*, 2020. This last work, set in a recording studio, records the narrator calmly reciting a litany of increasingly impassioned phrases. 'He's a mad fucking dog and I love him. I love my fucking mad dog. I love my brilliant mad fucking dog. I love my dog. I love my dog.' The intensity of feeling being expressed doesn't quite match the measured delivery and, in this gap, the speech becomes suspect. Is he really talking about his dog here or is this staged reading a mere *performance* of feeling? Is language inherently trustworthy simply by virtue of being understood?

Aran's installation is similarly slippery. It approximates a linguistic system, with its archaic beliefs embedded within impenetrable symbology, its flickering signs and floating signifiers and metaphors which allude to ... what, exactly? The recognition of a familiar image or item might propel one onwards to another object - an arrangement of chocolate chip cookies, or a scribbled sketch buried beneath oil paint and pastel, for example - but these elements never cohere into an attainable meaning and this, of course, is a process of translation itself, with phrases hammered from one language into a version of another, bent out of shape or trimmed at the edges. Communication is always an attempt: an idea forced and squeezed onto a shared surface where the listener might grasp just the gist of it, even if most of the material gets left behind.

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