

FEED Catalogue Essay

The pursuit of the uncanny, the strange and the unsettling persistently haunt Rebecca Hastings' paintings. While previous work has revelled in contradiction through candy colours, juicy flesh and unflinching gazes, these recent paintings push and play with new depths of imagination. Hastings has created a world that hums within a stifling atmosphere of hands, fur, fabric and fakery. A palette of warm oxides and deep blue contain her subjects in a field, where it feels hard to draw breath. Through technical skill and command of her materials, she draws us down to where reality is slippery, and narrative elusive.

Hastings loves the challenge and demands made by painting. These latest works reveal her dedication to methods around how to construct imagery for a painting. Initially asking AI to generate images led to unexpected disappointment. It resulted in an endless stream of pictures that were never 'quite right' and produced its own anxiety for the artist. Attempting to work with a multitude of confusing details and 'dead behind the eyes' subjects took time and thought away from the studio. A place that is most important to Hastings. She is meticulous and uncompromising with what, and how she paints, with an astute eye, trained to evaluate and feel what is required to articulate her concepts. The problems around using images generated by an unseeing, unfeeling process of data rearrangement resulted in her reverting to using live models, making props, and improvising new ideas that came about through her AI adventure. The exhibition FEED has evolved through time consuming wayward methods, succinctly presented in these dense and exquisite paintings.

It has been said that we are living in a 'deep doubt' era. The use of AI has impacted our shared understanding of events, with deepfakes being weaponised to discredit authentic occurrences and invent fictional ones. Doubt is not new to painting- fakes and copies have plagued auction houses and the market for years. We can doubt the authenticity of a painting, but we rarely doubt the authenticity of an artist. We acknowledge their representation as a version of 'truth'. With the work in FEED, I am struck by how Hastings' painting of active hands- real, wrapped and fake- correspond to an early doubter, St Thomas, in particular Caravaggio's 1601 work, *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas*. More commonly known as *Doubting Thomas*, he was the apostle who would only believe Christ has returned to life by sticking his fingers into his wounds. This painted physical representation of Jesus guiding the hand of Thomas into his gaping side is about belief, not only symbolic religious belief, but a belief that this is occurring. Through Caravaggio's dramatic realist technique we feel it, we believe it. Belief is reflected in the uncanny reality of Hastings paintings. Her technical accomplishment and willingness to adjust, change and feel her way through to make a work succeed is clear. All the subjects in these works exist in an atmosphere thick with an enigmatic weirdness that doesn't correspond to a real time or place, yet we surrender and believe this reality. A reality based on imagination, visual acumen and a supporting team of subjects willing to cooperate with an artist's vision.

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