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Sign In

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The Dicey Allure of Cerith Wyn Evans's System of Signs

Translations of Proust's *Sodom and Gomorrah* and Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel* come together and fall apart in the artist's latest show



'Style', Jeff Dolven writes in *Senses of Style* (2017), 'keeps things going and keeps them from falling apart.' It makes you see continuities, charms you into conferring connections, like charity, onto various things that one hand has made. Cerith Wyn Evans, then, is a stylish artist in two senses: his works are laced together by commonalities – his play with perception, quotation and light – and they share an insistence on being lovely, on snaring the viewer's eye.

Take, for instance, the work *F=O=U=N=T=A=I=N* (2020) – a wall of white neon three metres tall and ten metres wide – in Evans's latest show at White Cube Bermondsey, 'No Realm of Thought ... No Field of Vision'. It's an unbroken paragraph from Marcel Proust's *Sodome et Gomorrhe* (*Sodom and Gomorrah*, 1921–22), translated into Japanese. The kanji characters hang in the air, mounted on a translucent curtain in the middle of the gallery; as you stare at their steady glow, the surroundings ebb out of your visual field, other people become shadows slipping to and fro. In the English translation (provided by the gallery), Proust's passage is about a fountain, shedding translucent drops that are backlit gorgeously by the sun. Signs in a system become miniature sculptures; each linguistic element, made to be read but illegible to most, asks to be liked for its form as well.

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Cerith Wyn Evans, 'No realm of thought... No field of vision', 2020, installation view. Courtesy: © the artist and White Cube, London and Hong Kong; photograph: Ollie Hammick

Evans, whose native Welsh lives under the conquest of the English tongue, has played for years with legibility. The romance of his work is in its hope for the translator's art: how beauty is passed from language to language, then transmuted into sculpture and sound. Several of his light works have flickered to the beat of Morse code, Gustav Mahler and the Rolling Stones; his paper cut-outs have cited, through reference and violence, the poems of Stéphane Mallarmé. This exhibition is loving, too, in its tributes to the pianist David Tudor, via windscreen mobiles, and Marcel Duchamp, via leaves of glass. Both pieces are fractured and the damage runs in filigrees over them, splaying light in different directions from one inch to the next.

Then there are the neons, of either a strict or a contorted kind. The former, in the corridor, are decomposed tesseracts – rigorous but without the subtle disconcertion that only curves can bring. The latter, in the rear gallery, make a more eerily absorbing quartet. Entitled *...take Apprentice in the Sun I–IV* (all 2020), they stem from a photograph: Evans captured Marcel Duchamp's readymade *Bicycle Wheel* (1913), then sculpted the shapes and shadows of the image in elaborate neon twists. These works are tangled yet seem at rest. When neon sculptures use words, they often make gaudiness sincere or vice-versa (think Tracey Emin or Bruce Nauman); but Evans's abstractions, and forays into other tongues, turn the curve and swell of his forms into things that, despite being drawings of decomposition, are quietly elegant. Like all elegance, it's a trick. The radiance draws you in, makes you fond of coherence coming apart.

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Cerith Wyn Evans, 'No realm of thought... No field of vision', 2020, installation view. Courtesy: © the artist and White Cube, London and Hong Kong; photograph: Ollie Hammick

'Style', says Dolven later in his book, 'disappears as you get truly close, disappears under conditions of intimacy or close combat.' Evans's work is built on this evanescence: on visual pleasure, on the anxiety you then feel at seeing that the parts are all separate objects, and realizing that the effect of the whole is in your head. Some of these pieces are sterile – the paintings do nothing for me – but the rest has a dicey allure. The windscreens, for instance, are on the cusp: with a touch, they could shatter and fall, and they wouldn't be art anymore. What makes them beautiful is your worry – or secret thrill – at how that beauty might be lost.

Main image: Cerith Wyn Evans, 'No realm of thought... No field of vision', 2020, installation view. Courtesy: © the artist and White Cube, London and Hong Kong; photograph: Ollie Hammick