

Saskia Leek

b.1970

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At first glance Saskia Leek's *You And Me* looks like a painting of a pair of lovebirds, a variation on the entranced birds hovering wing-to-wing on plates decorated with the famous 'Willow' pattern. However, this is not a bird painting so much as a painting of a painting based on a pair of ceramic budgies that might once have sat on a kitchen table or mantelpiece.

Leek was given the birds-on-a-branch ornament by someone who noticed she had painted budgies before. Despite this, Leek is no bird painter, her choice of subject relates not to bird-ness but to the way budgies, like horses, houses, sunsets, landscapes, mountains and many of the things she paints, exist in a category of well-worn and discarded subjects.

That Leek had painted the budgies before is typical. The degrees of separation between subjects and her painting of them are an important consideration. Cast-off or neglected paintings are favoured starting points, whether paintings rescued from local 'op' shops or ones that have long sat around in her studio. It's worth noting that, unlike a great number of contemporary painters, Leek makes a point of avoiding working from photographs. The different qualities a painting has and that very painting-centric slippage between what is observed and what is represented is what she is after.

Leek is particularly drawn to the 'airless' quality of reproduced paintings, like prints of 1950s era landscapes that have faded to an all-over low tonal flatness. In the aging process some colours 'go off' more than others. She appreciates and emulates the low-impact melancholy that a lifetime of sunny afternoons has worked over these pictures. They are inspiration for her chalky, thinly painted, small oil on board paintings that tease out the 'picture-ness' of pictures. The eye for the worn-out displayed in Leek's work makes you wonder whether you should ever really give up on anything. Her paintings also incline you to question art fashion and the value judgements made about the seriousness of different subjects and the merits of different ways of painting.

Leek paints slowly and often changes her colours over and over. The result is parts of these paintings take on strange kind of 'sticking-out' lives of their own. Leek has become a specialist in particular varieties of 'off-ness'. There is

something disturbing, dated, but not exactly dateable about the smoothed-back pastel teacup colour schemes she favours. Like all her works of this era, nothing in this particular painting coheres quite convincingly. The two budgies, *You And Me*, huddle on a branch that inexplicably sprouts from the choppy surface-of-a-pinecone-like landscape. The way Leek paints keeps drawing your attention to the small oddities of pictures that make them stick in our minds.

At some point Leek's paintings become about what they are rather than the reference points they come from. It is not what she chooses to paint but how she chooses to paint it that is ultimately important. While her paintings contain figurative elements, in many ways they feel closer to abstraction. Leek is a recycler and experimenter, entranced by the flimsiness of meaning. Her titles tend to pin her paintings in some direction, while opening them up in another. Titles might refer to the process of the painting, the original picture, or something the result reminds her of. Whatever their particular root, however, they are an element of Leek's work that reminds you her painting is not just about subject matter. There is probably no better example than *You And Me*, a title that sounds rather more like a coupling of painter and viewer than a pair of budgies.

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Books:

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