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Darren Almond

BERLIN,
at Max Hetzler

by Mark Prince

When Darren Almond emerged in the late 1990s at the tail end of the YBA generation, his empirical approach ran counter to the constellations of found-object signifiers his elder contemporaries' works were based upon. He seemed more interested in addressing how images and objects signify than in finding new ways of exploiting their signification. He forged a link to early British Conceptualists' attempts to make work that was structuralist, objective and textual but that did not sacrifice the deep vein of landscape representation running through British art.

In the mid-1990s, Almond's live video feeds—from his studio or the side of a highway—highlighted the dematerialized subjects of time and space, and questioned our presumptions about digital technology's ability to provide access to other moments and places. That an object could exist in two locations—as physical entity and live image—seemed to him a mystery worth attending to. In more recent work, filmic images of exotic locations seem subversively poised between a touristic indulgence in exoticism for its own sake, and a critical scrutiny of the connection to remote cultures that the images appear to offer.

All Things Pass (2012) is a sensuously all-encompassing, six-channel video installation filmed at a step well in Rajasthan. Cinema-scale projections create an immersive environment out of footage—including shots of a lime green algae carpet rattled by monsoon rain, and cirrus clouds racing across a still moon—so lavish it tends to detract from the well's function within the film as a temporal mechanism, like an hourglass, and from the self-reflexive trope of the



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camera lingering over surfaces long enough for us to assume that we are watching a still. With its mesmerizing soundtrack of Hindustani music, the installation is escapist even as it impels an awareness of how a desire for the exotic tends to overlook its mediation.

Almond began making art as a painter but gave the medium up early on. This exhibition, however, included a series of hard-edge black and white paintings, consisting of grids of small canvases, each bearing half of a number stenciled in thick oil paint. The canvases have been arranged into abstracted numerical jumbles, resembling slot machines with the rolling symbols caught between the frames. This version of painting comprehends time and movement, not only in the abstract sense of numerical sequence, but illusionistically, in a painting's evocation of numbers sliding out of view. *Perfect Time (24x6)*, 2012, is an assemblage of digital clocks—24 clocks high by six clocks wide—with numbers that flip over every minute. But each number has been horizontally divided to meet half of another, disabling the clocks' functionality and superseding it with that of an audio track, as the clocks in concert snap off minutes. Systems of empirical measurement have been rendered illegible, even as the form (24 hours = 24 clocks) paradoxically suggests an investment in the order that is being subverted. The show ran this paradox through a spectrum of alternative guises. For example, five photographs of Scottish standing stones—originally used to tell time—resemble numerals that will not quite gel into coherence.

Almond's text works constitute a further facet of his investigation into how we measure reality. They are produced on steel plaques that allude to the name plates affixed to early British trains—the names replaced by poetic phrases such as "At times there are no words." Almond was a trainspotter as a boy, making this work a compounding of cultural nostalgia, early Conceptual textuality—which often assumed taxonomical forms—and an implicit critique of the terms on which objective representation is based. Almond's deconstruction of linguistic and numerical signification asserts reality's recalcitrance to being framed and assimilated. In this sense, despite the scientific trappings that surround much of his work, Almond is a quintessentially Romantic artist.

Photo: View of Darren Almond's exhibition "All Things Pass," showing (foreground) Perfect Time 184, 2012, 184 synchronized digital clocks, 10 feet tall; at Max Hetzler.

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