

## Colour Supplement. Weared by the grislier end of BritArt? Find all that sensationalism de trop? James Aldridge is on a mission to rediscover beauty

Hari Kunzru, March 2000



**COLOUR SUPPLEMENT** Weared by the grislier end of BritArt? Find all that sensationalism de trop? James Aldridge is on a mission to rediscover beauty. Hari Kunzru reports

you see something, you can't get away from all the other representations of that thing you've seen in the past.

Referentiality aside, Aldridge's art is also about the straightforward pleasures of seeing. Rich complementary colours and shapes create bold optical effects. 'It's about daydreaming, seeing something and making it new. It's about sitting on the bus and staring at the back of someone's head.' This exact experience has led Aldridge to painting images of hair, vastly magnified single strands, a curtain of blonde reduced to abstract coils and whorls. He works from memory, often being peculiar things in his attempts to review his own perceptions. The beef steak picture, for example, started by making certain points and pressing against the canvas. The texture was worked and reworked 'in a kind of mechanical way, stripping out certain elements, with the

painting almost stopped being about anything but itself'. Instead of painting his background first for the intricate pictures of patterns of branches or leaves, he has taken to doing the reverse, starting with a foreground of colour and painstakingly filling in the sky, the subject of the painting gradually coming into focus on its own.

'In a way it's about setting myself a problem, giving myself a huge headache. It's a way of revealing an image without actually being able to control it, letting it come about by itself. Then you can't impose assumptions. A thing is stripped down to whatever it is that confirms to me that it exists. I enjoy the fact that you do it backwards, but because you're brain recognising what the object is, it gets reversed.'

**'I like the fact that my paintings are decorative. I'm interested in rediscovering beauty'**

An obvious point of comparison for Aldridge's work is that of artist Guy Hunt, but in contrast to Hunt's cold, disaffected canvases, Aldridge's seems suffused with emotion. Even when working with something as clichéd as a sunset, he is interested in playing off the standards of traditional representations against the undeniable beauty of the thing itself. 'I like the fact that my paintings are decorative. I'm interested in rediscovering beauty – I think it's OK to do that now. I want my paintings to be as direct as possible. I don't want to tick anyone looking at them. I want them to be enjoyed.'

*'Spreading', a group show with David Camm and Daisy Kelly, runs from 20 to 26 March (Thursday to Saturday only, 10am to 6pm) at Lock 25, 173 Holloway Road, London N7. James Aldridge is represented in New York by the Annina Neri Gallery, 330 West 23rd Street. Tel: 1 212 747 8573 or e-mail annina@anninagallery.com*

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James Aldridge, fresh from his first solo show in New York, sips coffee in a Soho patisserie. 'My painting is about exploring the world in a less knowing way,' he says, looking at the slides of his work spread over the table. Representations of flowers and sunsets are mixed with other images that, on first sight, appear to be abstract, but on closer inspection also reveal themselves as representations. Smoke coils upwards from an unseen cigarette. A line of white meandering across a background of deep red turns out to be a strand of fat in a beef steak.

'I often paint quite mundane objects, things we're used to seeing every day,' says Aldridge. 'I take these things we don't look at any more and try to re-engage with them.' The result is a kind of simplification of the world: acrylics that flatten a leaf or the branch of a tree into a basic, two-dimensional field of saturated colour. Aldridge enjoys this stripped-down immediacy: his objects become shorthand versions of themselves. 'I think they have a kind of iconic quality. A flower becomes like the sign of a flower. I'm influenced as much by graphic art and computer graphics as I am by the mainstream fine art tradition. When you see something, you can't get away from all the other representations of that thing you've seen in the past.'

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Aldridge into painting images of hair, vastly magnified single strands, a curtain of blonde reduced to abstract coils and whirls. He works from memory, often doing peculiar things in his attempts to renew his own perception. The beef steak picture, for example, started by soaking meat in paint and pressing it against the canvas. The texture was worked and reworked 'in a kind of mechanical way, bringing out certain elements, until the painting almost stopped being about anything but itself'. Instead of painting his background first for the intricate pictures of patterns of branches or leaves, he has taken to doing the reverse, starting with a foreground of colour and painstakingly filling in the sky, the subject of the painting gradually coming into focus on its own.

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An obvious point of comparison for Aldridge's work is that of BritArt star Gary Hume, but in contrast to Hume's cold, disaffected canvases, Aldridge's seem unafraid of emotion. Even when working with something as clichéd as a sunset, he is interested in playing off the blandness of traditional representations against the undeniable beauty of the thing itself. 'I like the fact that my paintings are decorative. I'm interested in rediscovering beauty – I think it's OK to do that now. I want my paintings to be as direct as possible. I don't want to trick anyone looking at them. I want them to be enjoyed.'