

Sundae Sessions: On Kit Poulson

In 1922, Wallace Stevens published “The Emperor of Ice Cream”, a poem that serves as a brightly ambivalent advertisement for the wake of a woman with hornlike toes. It is itself structured something like an ice-cream sundae, piling on evanescent promises – cigars and ‘wenches’ among them – aimed, appropriately or not, at sweetening the unhappy occasion. Who is the Emperor of Ice Cream? The only emperor there *is*, apparently. If you’re the Emperor of Ice Cream, you stay indoors in hot weather, holding onto your cherries, or you stroll in the sun and accept the likely consequences. You’re a poet’s analogy for transience, briefly resplendent and soon to become a multihued puddle.

And now it’s ninety-one years later and Kit Poulson is making a painting entitled *Ice Cream (Emperor)* (2013), a pastel confection through which associations glint and refract without ever settling: a sundae glass, a figure, a still life, drapery of some kind, an overcast sky-like backdrop. The connection to Stevens is not direct. Except, considering literature, one should note that Poulson also writes; that he’s spoken of his writing practice, in winningly quixotic terms, as analogous to assembling a sundae; and that something of this carries over to his painting practice – which is built up in unruly layers, melting into each other in a softened, shifting architecture. “The Emperor of Ice Cream” is about time, dissolution and compensation; *Ice Cream (Emperor)* looks like it could liquefy at any moment but is, instead, frozen. Where it melts, spreading and colourful, is in the mind.

If the painting is a poem of sorts, though, it’s one whose poetics have arisen in a highly structured, conscious way. Stevens could famously be seen walking to his day job as an insurance executive, composing in rhythm with his stride: when he rewrote a line, he’d walk backwards. There’s something of that workaday practicality in Poulson’s compositional practice, though for him it’s not a side matter but close to the point, a spur. It sounds unremarkable. He puts something down, then he puts something else down in reaction to that, then something else, something else, etc. until it’s done. But Poulson divides up his painting sessions into specific episodes and, to hear him tell it, at least partly removes his personal taste from the equation. Rather, he enjoys getting into trouble on canvas, then finding a way out of it that is, effectively, a way into more trouble.

He may start with an abstract mark he doesn’t much like, and then find a way to respond to it, and respond to his responses: *Slouching towards Vitebsk* (2012), for instance, has a pretty hairy tangle of brushstrokes near its centre that feels like three or four different painters – or one painter in three or four different moods – had a go at it before resolving it into tentative equipoise. Some of those marks recur

across other paintings, offering a degree of stability. There are other guy-ropes, too, militating potential disorder while pointing out the necessity of their presence, like peacekeepers. Poulson has a tendency to build up a semi-coherent architectonic form against an implicitly spatialised, atmospheric background – in a manner that recalls, variously, Alan Davie, Graham Sutherland, *Guardians of the Secret*-era Jackson Pollock and, perhaps most of all, Paul Nash – so that, no matter how internally gnarly his compositions, they make a provisional sense. *Slouching...*, too, roots itself in art history via specific nods to Kasimir Malevich. Vitebsk, in Belarus, was where the latter taught, formed a short-lived group, and hotheaded Suprematist ideas and projects: here, the speckling of vari-sized black circles seems a nod to the iconography of the Cubo-Futurist ballet *Victory over the Sun* (1913), for which Malevich provided set designs, and which led to his epochal *Black Square* (1915). To slouch towards Vitebsk, then, is slowly to move (albeit backwards in time) towards pure abstraction.

The title, furthermore, clearly nods towards another poetic source, written at the same time that Malevich was in Vitebsk: W.B. Yeats's "The Second Coming (Slouching Towards Bethlehem)" (1919). Here, do things fall apart? Can the centre not hold? Is mere anarchy loosed upon the world? This is an opaque knot of renascent associations – for all that it's tempting to take Yeats' words out of a post-WWI context and plot them, somehow, onto painting – and one not easily unravelled. *Slouching*, then, is a knife-edge painting. It says that by turning painting into a Fordist procedure – putting a mark down, putting a very different mark on top of it and then strategizing to make them work together via a third, and so on – you can construct intricacy; you can deepen this with nods to the past, and you can remind viewers that there's theatre at work in all these stratagems by literally, as in *On the Boards* (2013), incorporating set-like ephemera (for all that this, too, recalls works such as Nash's *Landscape from a Dream* (1936-8)).

And yet, even while one knows how these works were made, they escape – or overpower – the materialist, processual narrative. Take *The Way Things Are* (2012). It's night, or at least there's a midnight-blue background to contend with. In the foreground, it looks like a Carmen Miranda hat is toppling onto a beach and somehow belching grey smoke, or a clown has been pelted with prawn cocktails, or a laughing creature made from sweets is posing for a photo. (Polymorphous, in other words.) Part of you remembers how this came about: Poulson coming in, painting, going away again, coming back in a different frame of mind, frowning, struggling, leaving gaps to fill in later, and admitting that you can't, now, go forward without going back. But part of you is lost in the essential kaleidoscopic uncanny of the medium, and when that part wins, *The Way Things Are* doesn't sit at an observant remove from the history of painting but joins it: these are the hoops

we have to jump through to paint honestly today, it says, which involve not trucking with divine inspiration or being sui generis. Paintings get made in stages (indeed, what was modernism but stage upon stage, voice upon voice) and the painter is a slightly different person each time he comes back: s/he can leverage that and make something of substance. That *is* the way things are; and at those moments the place is the canvas and the time, in its resonant self-awareness, is very much 2013. The centre is holding, the ice cream hasn't melted and the wake, as in the temporality of the poem, is perpetually deferred. Call the roller of big cigars.

Martin Herbert