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Topping/Teasdale

Text to accompany Cuckoo Revue by Fiona Jardine

In “A Picture of Dorian Gray”, Basil Hallward’s studio is conjured from tussore silk and the heavy scents of lilac, rose and laburnum, the sullen murmur of bees audibly manifesting a stillness that verges on oppressive. The fin de siècle studio is erotically charged, a place for intimate encounters existing at a degree of remove from society, as important to the conception of Decadence and Symbolism as working “en plein air” is to Impressionism. For all their appreciation of the casual Impressionist pose – Degas’s “Little Dancer” an obvious influence – Billy Teasdale’s sculptures resonate with the remove and quiet intimacy of his studio: its subtle palette of infused whites – yellowing gloss, washy emulsion, scuffed and pock-marked – translated in an array of violet-grey shadows thrown from pink-tinged Jesmonite and plaster. His work is characterized by a fascination with the vagaries and correlations – the cul-de-sacs and dog-legs – produced in shifts between the real and surreal: if the pallid subject in “Boy with Towel” evokes the milk-fed youths of Picasso’s Rose Period, bow-legged frames and mirrors given human heads obliquely recall the peculiar fusion of head and lyre in Gustave Moreau’s “Orpheus”. There is a ludic quality to his work which is carried Beckettian through the skirts of a dummy fanned in pirouette and the splayed limbs of an anthropomorphic umbrella blown inside out to a black leather shoe sumped in mud and a sludgy protuberance lent porcelain eyes. Marked by a constancy of material, colour and scale, Teasdale prioritises the historical simultaneities which underscore them by presenting them formally on plinths. His interest in the municipal

confections of Victorian park architecture is discernible and lends the collection the air of one destined, perhaps, for a quadrangle or garden.

If Wilde's use of the studio in the opening scene of *Dorian Gray* constructs an era-defining social context, his understanding of Beauty as necessarily inanimate and artificial results in the aestheticisation of Basil Hallward's subject prior to its incarnation on canvas. Dorian Gray, with his great and ideal Beauty, is an artefact before he is painted: the picture is of a man conceived as a statue made from rose petals and ivory rather than seen as a corporeal human being. The consumption of personalities through their appearance or biography, and the degree to which they can exist as artefacts or glyphs, has been a consistent field of interest for Jane Topping. Her recent vignettes make use of features – lips and nostrils – excerpted from an eclectic range of published sources and push the fixed expressions of Paris Hilton, David Bowie, and members of the Smiths amongst others past recognition and any signifying role into anonymity and Topping's personal lexicon, where they are subject to reinvestment with meaning. The pop sensibility of these sources is reinforced by the manner of delivery which conflates the devotional sketches of the bedroom obsessive with technical device: it is a sensibility which provokes "subjectification" (defined as "objectification for personal use") and is an overarching condition of daily life. Circumscribed by incongruous oval frames fashioned in the single, deliberate sweep of a laden brush, "mirror" and "face" become interchangeable organising principles for these excerpts: further stages of superimposition and layering black out areas of background and introduce speculatively familiar head-and-

shoulder outlines. In the title to “Dorian Gray”, Wilde pointedly uses “Picture” as opposed to “Portrait”: the notion of the “portrait” is concerned with the depiction of specific individuals whereas that of a “picture” or “effigy” is concerned with generality of type: (the ideal hovers somewhere in between). In these fugitive cameos, Topping plays with this distinction, ultimately concerned with the idea of rendering them players in her “Cuckoo Revue”.