

John Abbate: New Work

Spacement Gallery, April 2006

A labyrinth of derelict rooms – modernist curved corners and stucco walls – perched high in St Vincent's, was once the nurses' residence. Now the rooms house defunct machinery, files, office furniture. The booty is fascinating and melancholic; records of syndromes and diseases. Mostly, painful prognoses of death.

Down the corridor and around a corner, Abbate has been in residence, set up in what was perhaps a record's office, laboriously re-creating images from his photocopies of photographs in charcoal. Inspired by the graveyard of document heavy systems, his photographs record Kafkaesque standard issue – parades of computers, lockers, lives...perhaps.

Abbate then draws us in, magnifying this world to reveal patterns within (the patterns), tracing the workplace's extinction into abstraction, making something beautiful. The worker ant, regardless of its regime, is a complex creature. Abbate privileges the act of rendering his photocopied photographs, flagging his allegiance to conceptualism and concerns about the nature of representation. This, like the make-up of the worker ant, is misleading. Although the drawings sit within an assemblage which has its own discourse, any notion of 'anti-expressionism' behind this process of removal (and the choice of 'banal' subject) is negated by Abbate's highly selective meticulous graphic renditions. If there is an irony in making such precision work from low-quality sources (i.e. photocopies of photographs), it loses its edge when we see

the resulting luminous artworks. A frisson has emerged between the subject's inherent inertness and a dynamism stirred by the choice of perspective and Abbate's touch.

The conceptual intent pressed by the complete assemblage; the photographs as source material as art, the source as readymade, and their multi-layered relationship to the viewer, threatens to slip into aestheticism. The flatness of Abbate's photographs might counter the disquiet of these empty work spaces, but instead abstract shapes that make up the images are brought to the fore. The reconfiguration of the readymade perhaps sums up the whole; the familiar made unfamiliar. Abbate has raised form above moral concerns. Whether he likes it or not, he's got an eye.