

Lawrence Leaman
Computers and Field Systems

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1

Sandwiched with bespoke clip-frames, Lawrence Leaman's watercolour series presents us with a range of seemingly simple forms, motifs and logos. Uniformed by their earthy palette of browns and sand yellows, grassy to moss greens and stone greys, these works, all on paper, range from 42 x 30cm to 84 x 60cm; dimensions which can be recognised as standard sizes of office paper between A3 and A1.

This series is made through economical means: the application of watercolour paints with a decorator's brush on unprimed sheets of general purpose cartridge paper. The light-weight paper buckles and warps under layers of watercolour paint—an effect that is amplified through their being pressed, like a drying plant, between plates of glass and aluminium Dibond in adapted clip-frames.

Compositions are laid down through broad divisions of the image-space and the subsequent production of colour fields. This sectioning can take the form of a centrally aligned four-part grid. However more often than not, these arrangements are layered to avoid rigid geometry in exchange for a more organic, cell-like and nuanced provision of forms and blocks.

The work *Untitled (Fields)*, 2016, is set roughly around centrally converging divisions, made up of eleven irregular rectangle blocks in gently differing hues of clay brown. This image, as its title confirms, is a depiction of a field pattern. The irregular contoured boundaries refer to the 'open field system' of the medieval era¹. In other drawings blip forms, lozenges and dots are arranged as glyphs playing out differing yet basic relations. These compositions of shapes interacting in a simply defined space are reminiscent of diagrams showing conceptual thought or mechanical processes.

The logos of the pay-per-view online academic archives JSTOR and ProQuest appear intermittently in the wider series of works. In *Untitled (Search 25)*, the phrase 'Search 25' runs vertically down the page, referring to an initiative to link the libraries and databases of educational facilities within the encircling ring of London's M25 motorway. These logos are applied using a rudimentary stencil technique. They are then washed over, partially erased and muddied.

2

Over the past few years Leaman has been working with found images. For his 2010 exhibition at Outpost Gallery, Norwich, disparate images drawn from a range of internet sources were surveyed and bought together in various guises. This included a watercolour of an iconic album cover copied as it appeared in a found photograph, with sun bleached colours. In another example a Christian educational cartoon, depicting a man nursing a sick woman, originally made by digital means, was

¹ A medieval agricultural system of field division whereby large areas of land were apportioned out to be farmed in narrow strips. This land was administered by a land owner, the Lord of the Manor, amongst peasant families. Without field boundaries, each allotted strip was identified by an agreed number of ridges and furrows.

re-interpreted as a painting on glass. The overall emphasis of these works was the heightened status of the found image, and what might be carried or fall-out in the process of appropriation. An operation which involved the transference of computer generated graphics to hand-drawn reproductions.

These images, most of which were presented in the artist's homemade frames, were shown alongside a pair of carefully sculpted venetian blinds, and a series of table sculptures of wheat sheaths bound with dress ties, all neatly modelled in air-drying clay. A seemingly ambiguous set of signifiers coming together in a single exhibition. A sense of compounding prevailed. Motifs and imagery assimilated from recent and contemporary visual cultures were placed in proximity to the aesthetics and languages of era's both bygone and ancient: the exhibition's title *Floreat Salopia* took its cue from the latin motto of Leaman's home county Shropshire, UK; the image of the exhibition invitation showed an Egyptian mummy in a C.A.T. scanner.

3

For this recent body of work, on display in the exhibition *Computers and Field Systems* at Walks News, Leaman is again drawing on found imagery, but with a different emphasis. Modern aerial photographs showing medieval field systems, cell diagrams made as study aids taken from academic exercise books, flow charts setting out business transactions, and, as mentioned, the text based logo's of online databases are the components that provide Leaman's new work with its staple of visual forms.

From this pool of resources, certain elements are isolated and chosen for their visual qualities, be it the contours of a landscape, or the shape of a logo. Leaman subsequently rearranges these components into compositions of his own, a process that could be likened to a kind of personalisation.

A programme of mimesis in Leaman's work has here been substituted for a considerably less predictable process of image making. Compositions are now dictated largely by intuition, favouring one attribute over another through an idiosyncratic logic of his own. Following a procedure of selection and arrangement, the work advances much like a painting, by compositional trial and error. Spontaneous actions are made and left unrefined, without successive finessing. Areas of the image space are masked off to create crisp lines and geometries. Painted washes are then laid down and allowed to bleed into one another, forming inconsistent and lumped pools of thinly diluted paint which collect and dry to become residue. The paper suffers from an over saturation of fluid paint. A certain loss of control, characteristic of watercolour painting, is embraced—a willing impairment imposed by the artist.

A procedure of copying, then, becomes a single aspect within a broader range of syntaxes. Our attention is transferred from the significance of the found image, to something more speculative, open or influx about the materials and processes involved. In Leaman's own words: '...conceived as diagrams (they) have begun to generate themselves through compositional possibilities and the dispositions of the watercolours. They have developed their own painterly logic'

4

The works in *Computers and Field Systems* make a visual analogy between the geographical spaces of medieval fields, and the virtual spaces of online archives. They put side by side two

historically distant understandings of public, becoming-private space. They could also be thought of as a vague charting system for the artists own sensibilities, observations and actions—non-informative diagrams that record detected associations across both collective and personal historical narratives. Leaman locates repetitions in form, material and structures that straddle styles, cultures and epochs, all potentially irreverent of one another, and concludes here, in the form of a set of modest, painterly arrangements.

Notes:

a

Charles Babbage's early designs for an automatic mechanical calculator were first drawn up in the early 1800's. Unrealised during his lifetime, Babbage's 'Difference Engine' is considered to be the blueprint for the worlds first computer. His design, a posthumously realised version of which is kept at the London Science Museum, was conceived in order to produce a totally automated, 'error free' mechanism for calculating large and complicated mathematical sums. Its form, a large, shed sized network of arms, cogs, junctions, gears and teeth, evolved out of the late industrial era.

b

Time Team was a British television series that ran on Channel 4 from 1994 to 2014. Presented by actor Tony Robinson, each episode followed a team of archaeologists to historical sites where digs would take place. Members of the viewing public, as well as local archeologists, academics and private land owners, were able to suggest sites for digs. Excavation took place across the British Isles and resulted in the discovery of Palaeolithic artefacts, Medieval churches, Roman settlements as well as material and weapons from World War II. Alongside it's presenter, the programme's prominent figures included Mick Aston, who specialised in early medieval landscape archaeology and published papers including *Interpreting the Landscape: Landscape Archaeology in Local Studies*, Routledge (1985), and the *The Landscape of Towns*, Littlehampton Book Services (1976).

c

The Heritage Group ² have located and catalogued a range of retrofitted heating systems which integrate themselves, in various ways, into the historical architecture of British church and chapel buildings. Photographic documentation showing this heating technology, encountered by the group, is periodically uploaded onto their website. These images include shots of Victorian cast-iron fittings and pipework layouts, installed into churches dating back to the 12th century. There is also documentation of restoration efforts, both successful and failed. Complicated tubing systems snake past wooden pews and route, at low level, around the church's tiled aisles and stone walls. Sockets and spigots (a small peg or plug) creating joins and junctions connect pipes to stoves and boilers to provide the churches with sufficient water circulation and heating.

² The Heritage Group was established in 1973 with the main purpose of discovering and recording all aspects of building engineering services history.