

I'll start if I may with a couple of very subjective reactions to the work of Benjamin Hannavy Cousen. Firstly: I'm a novelist, and to date I've never encountered artwork so able to embody and understand, in a new and discrete form that exists in the world on its own terms, not just the experience of reading a book – the process by which, in reading, we simultaneously hold and release what it is we've encountered in language from page to page as we progress through the text – but also the very particular individuality of every book we read.

Secondly: because I grew up with a father who was an electrician I spent a lot of childhood hours hanging around in his shop or watching him take things to pieces to repair, and when I look at Hannavy Cousen's work something deep in my own memory kicks in and I can't not see it as an extraordinary and powerful conduit, a life-mass of colour-wire through which energy passes like the opened-up and stripped-back working insides of an extraordinary system of connections.

Hannavy Cousen works with what he calls the "colour unconscious." He works with a chosen text by means of a chronological, quite literal but also still subjective, process of mapping that text's colour references as they occur; where colour can be a literal mention of a colour or a phrase that suggests colour and his noting of it will depend on what he reads as its relevance in the given text.

Using a syringe to lay down strand upon single strand of colour, he builds up, over time, a physical layering of colour. Colour covers colour, and inside and under the surface perception of individual and massed colour there's a sometimes visible, sometimes covered, whole other layering of colours. In other words, he creates a colour dimensionality. That he tends to apply the acrylic he uses with a syringe rather than a brush is to do with the meaning of the word integrity; in an interview a couple of years ago he put it like this: "I needed to find a way of working that would retain the integrity of each layer."

We associate syringes with health and illnesses, and with mind-altering substances, and in both these cases the association sits very close to the internals of the body since syringes are most commonly used for injecting something into or extracting bodily fluids from our (very integral) selves.

But the etymology of the word syringe reveals its connection to yet another art, to music – from the Greek *syrinx*, the word for pan pipes or for a channel through which something passes.

A decade ago he completed his critical PhD thesis in the field of Cultural Memory, a study of post-war cinema "The Seeping and Creeping of Haunted Memory." His work has always been about how art functions, as well as an integral channelling and transforming of powerful realities tapped into at a profound depth, a place where the historical conduits of humaneness and integrity come apart but sensory existence, thought and image hinge together regardless.

The works in this exhibition are concerned, as is Sebald's seminal text with which it shares a title, with historic cycles of loss and the surfacing of articulation and understanding in the face of the human horrors of recent history: world wars, internment, genocide, nuclear cata-

strophe. As is his practice, Hannavy Cousen has been working with literary text. In this show he features visual/sculptural manifestations of works by Alexievich, Murdoch, Solzhenitsyn and Vonnegut, as well as a series of new texts bringing his concerns right up to contemporary date and based on the collected volumes of Refugee Tales, works where refugees and writers come together to make the life experiences and the voices of refugees audible and – crucially – visible.

Where a text acts for Hannavy Cousen as a point of impetus the painted works, in a revelation of the relationship between surfaces and depths, take on a life of their own, one where the words for colour, and the meanings, and the physical apprehensions of the notion of colour plus the presence of colour itself, all meet and fuse and become literally dimensional. Each work is an abstract yet also a physical figuration in itself, one full of human precision and slippage, featuring ridges and valleys as physically as any landscape, any voice track, any process of thinking. Part of a larger dialogue about what and how all sorts of things mean, from colour to language, artform, landscape, syntax, vibrancy, vitality, lifeforce against the odds, the works make their taproot text physically present in the world in a self-complete way as well as in an art act rooted in communality. Its colour fields ripple with physical and metaphysical energies, still but moving, fixed but melting and transforming, finished but shining like the colours are just out of the paint tube.

In one of his interviews, Hannavy Cousen talks about "the onslaught of paint." Parts of his Slaughterhouse 5 rise out of the work like a stilled wave, or a shrouded figure – that's if the word shrouded can ever apply to something so colourful, a mass of colour-melt resisting suffocation and a lifeforce pushing back against the weight of the melt with a terrible uncanniness, terrible bright presence, historically blasting. His First Circle is an empty or refusing mirror, a work of both tangle and liberation, like a glut of veins lining a surface as hard and bright and ungiving as an ice road or a frozen river that shines like a strange blade, life banked up at its sides. But at the same time it's a work where a woven life breaks into and overcomes a barren order in what's both a dissolve and a spread of folk material, folkweave, something almost resembling a tartan – a weave simultaneously entered by or revealing of the metal / mettle of a people working to soften and subsume a circular metal blade, but with substance at their core.

When the artist wrote to me about the Refugee Tales work, he said, "I wanted this to be on a big scale to be a magnification of the forgotten and potentially forgotten. All the stories in the three volumes are here. Some stories do not have any colours so the aluminium surface is left exposed in these places. I think this says something of giving space to the unspoken – that silence also needs to be marked and witnessed. Certainly, a strange and fragile spike is made out of paint in the centre. And if you look closely there is a little window in the spike as well."

Looking at this work I found myself drawn to the various ways in which the paint strands stop off at the very edge of the aluminium wheel, very few strands crossing the boundary or border of the work, in other words the impact of edge and the way the colours meet and cross into each other at that sharp edge. But the central spike, where the colours unite at the core of the wheel, acts like a kind of prayer or demonstration of union against the odds, a sprouting

spout of unexpected growth and power. And it has a rare kinesis, the centre of the piece, like itself it's a magnetic axle or axis where separated things draw together by dint of nature into a communality vitally forming out the too-separate strands. Vice versa, the work also enacts the making of something of the act of separating, being drawn out of and away from a communality. Both of these are held in the implied turn of the wheel, whose hard surface shows through. But the colour, even in its seeming frailty, changes and challenges that hardness in this ceremonious work, a work both quietly shocking and impossibly celebratory, all the brighter and richer for its seeming sparseness and surprising strength.

History, in the serpentine figuring of part of Iris Murdoch's The Sea, The Sea, boils like a sea surface, like a melting shifting spectrum, like a simultaneous insistence on the weave of DNA. It is impossibly cornucopic, a work of primordial wiring, heaving and alive, cloaked and emergent, mountainous and oceanic, peaked and furrowed by its own geometries, a revelation of things coming together and coming apart at the same time. By contrast, Chernobyl Prayer is full of air, a work of ray and fan, birdwing and explosive impact stilled in mid-air to reveal an instantaneous depth and fade of colour in a similarly simultaneous release of wonder and terror.

In so many of these works the colour layers seem to be breathing.

That's how their energy shocks us, enlivens us, enters us like a new understanding of breath, language, history, and of the immediacy of our being here, our own sensory presence and dimensionality pressed close to the process of any philosophical understanding of existence.

It's a powerful, electric way to read and be read. It colours everything.

Ali Smith