

venue's function, which is to host classical music and film screenings among other activities. The former chapel's limestone columns are made more visually striking in their purity against the new floor and stimulate a dialectic which reminds us that great civilisations have adorned social spaces with bold polychromy.

On the other side of the town, Lawrence Weiner's work *AT A DISTANCE TO THE FOREGROUND*, 2005/2008, is painted onto the rough stone of the gable end of the Old Silk Mill. Most poignantly, when viewed at the distant end of a generic town street sporting a Jobcentre Plus, a Marks & Spencer and a charity shop, the text can be seen as one among many in an everyday forest of signs. In a manner akin to Louis Aragon's *Paysan de Paris*, where signs assume a mythic status, the work suggests an alternative view of the town. Instead of physically transforming space, Weiner's luminous orange text alters the perception of its surroundings through suggestiveness. The binary terms *DISTANCE* and *FOREGROUND* suggest the interplay of past and present, bringing to mind the social issues raised by Eva Berendes's huge curved curtain, *Untitled*, 2008, which is contained within the converted weaving shed of the old mill and visually references modernist geometric abstraction. Precisely because the piece is displayed in a formal way that leaves, of the works in the project, the least possibility for intellectual interaction, this raises the acute issue of the collusion of much contemporary intervention art with the interests of redevelopment. The inherent division of cultural capital mirrors the acute social divisions between weaver and clothier in the 18th Century.

The overgrown courtyard used by Michael Dean for his work *wednesday*, 2008, found over in the 60s shopping precinct, stands in direct contrast to the regeneration of the weaving shed of the silk mill. Bordering the river and located behind the modernist former library, it had been envisaged as a place of quiet contemplation. Dean has constructed a series of gestures in wooden sticks, black balloons, folded metal and photocopies of his palm, which relate to his esoteric interpretation of simple words and phrases. The neglected space initially seems to be an uncomfortable place to linger in contrast to the white-washed silk mill. Yet the rekindling of utopian ideals of self-education within a peaceful environment, available to all, stands in stark contrast to the history of inequality conjured by the mill's history of the textile industry.

Ruth Ewan's *Unrecorded future, tell us what broods there*, 2008, reconnects with political attempts to create an egalitarian society as she enlists the local town crier to announce, in contrast to his historic role of acting as interface between government and an illiterate populus, extracts from the poetry of pacifist Gustav Spiller (1864-1940). The scripts are subsequently installed in the Black Swan Arts gallery space, previously a public meeting room of the former public house, and now a venue for crafts-based practice. This piece continues the concern with language and communication of ideas of



Eva Berendes
Untitled 2008

'Intervention/Decoration' in the normal town. However, the division between intervention and decoration is overcome by a form of poetic transformation of place. As Mieke Bal has said with regard to the 'frame' of the gallery, 'space becomes conceptual metaphor'. In Frome this experience is translated onto the whole town, and is at once exhilarating and disconcerting. ■

COLIN GLEN is an artist and writer based in Stroud.

■ Janice McNab

Doggerfisher Edinburgh May 9 to July 12

The well worn and often derogatory phrase 'chocolate box painting' is at the conceptual core of this exhibition. But Janice McNab's take on the typically idyllic horse and cart or thatched cottage-style rural scenes manages to be both literal and tongue-in-cheek: for the past four years the Scottish-born painter has been playfully exploring the notion of kitsch associated with chocolate box painting by using the tacky, everyday plastic moulded trays from inside chocolate boxes as an initial point of reference from which to paint.

This particular exhibition marks a shift in McNab's chocolate box paintings, where images and colours from the west coast of Scotland are incorporated into certain works, further distancing them from the original source. Indeed, when enlarged, distorted or seen from unusual points of view they do seem to take on strange and undulating landscape qualities. None of the paintings on display is much larger than a metre square, but this seems



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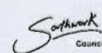
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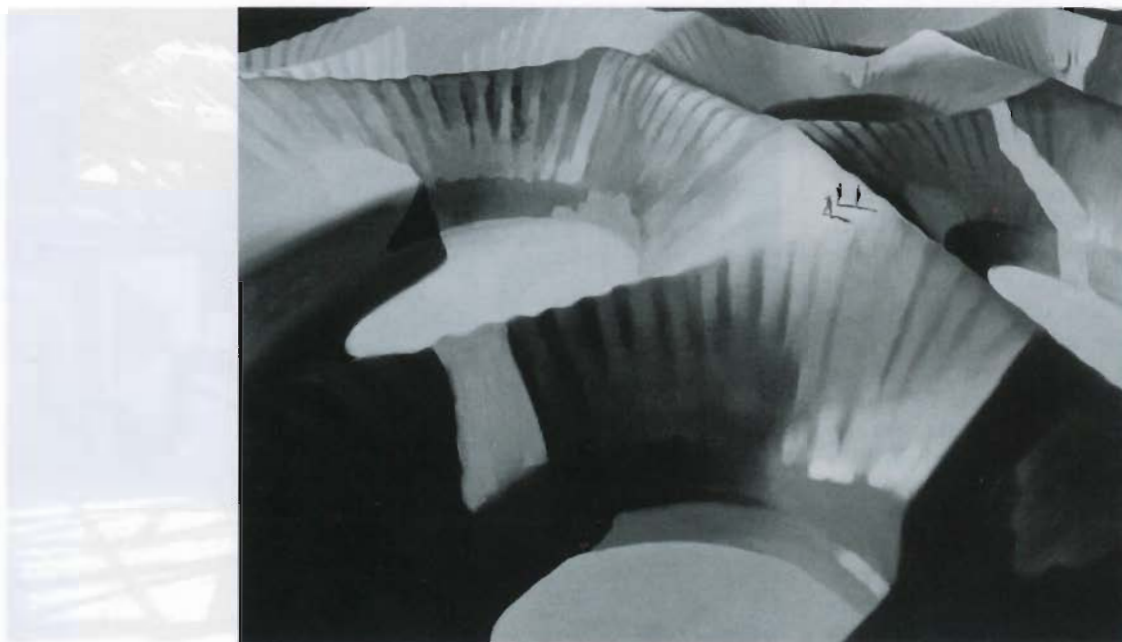
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Janice McNab
Green are our Valleys 2008



enough to create the desired spatial depths and curious atmospheres. Similarly, in almost all of them we look down as if observing from an elevated viewpoint, in keeping with the typically romantic tradition of landscape painting. *Arcady*, 2008, is one such image, but perhaps more surreal than others. It seems to move beyond McNab's previous photorealist leanings, almost taking on the appearance of a Graham Sutherland painting; cool pastels and strange forms merge into one another and sensual drips of paint fall into illusionistic craters which must once have resembled an empty chocolate tray. There is a slight touch of an alternate reality within the image, while a small black handrail curls off the bottom of the painting, minimally suggesting the possibility of human presence.

By contrast, in *Green are our Valleys*, 2008, the strange pastel green and blue modulating ground morphs more believably into giant hills and valleys, as minuscule figures are scattered over it, seemingly fascinated by the pools of liquid collected in the craters around them. *Untitled*, 2008, is similarly populated, but this time the figures line up in the foreground and stare into a huge green and blue abyss as if examining the after-effects of a UFO visit. This sci-fi quality is further echoed in a painting tucked away in its own cornered-off space called *Night Swimmer*, 2008. The darkest of all the paintings, it is a seductive and intriguing work. The former chocolate tray crater here is filled with water and painted with dark greens and blues thereby transforming it into a mysterious, seemingly bottomless blue lagoon. But closer examination reveals a tiny female figure floating on her back in the water, having ostensibly escaped to an unknown fantastical hideaway.

In stark contrast with these landscape-based paintings, *The Heart of Things*, 2008, is a far more direct representation

of a chocolate box tray. Here the ground is not green but the sumptuous purple of typical Milk Tray packaging, the craters more evidently round or square spaces where chocolates would have been. Perhaps most amusingly the background beyond the tray is a silky purple haze like the interior of an empty box, as if we are viewing the scene from inside it. The irony and irreverence of the exhibition is most evident here, where it is almost impossible to be seduced by the aesthetic or imaginative qualities of the work, reminding us with a blunt cynicism the root of all the more painterly and visceral works in the exhibition.

Elsewhere a number of pencil studies have been included, which are works in progress, such as *Untitled*, 2008. In such works black and white studies have been made from frilly chocolate casings which appear to act as preparatory studies for the larger paintings. But seen in this context they play another role; their absence of colour is in stark contrast with the paintings, revealing not only the important suggestive role tone plays in the paintings elsewhere, but also McNab's ability to balance subtle hues.

McNab is a painter who is accustomed to responding to everyday imagery from a detached perspective. Many of these recent paintings are more painterly than previous works and seem to reveal an increasing sophistication in her handling of paint. But though she has allowed herself, and therefore the viewer, to succumb to some of the pleasurable qualities of painting, the detached realism of the flimsy chocolate box foundations to all these paintings adeptly reminds us where they came from. In doing so she reveals a knowing cynicism about painting's history, but more importantly, its relationship to consumerism and consumption. ■

ROSIE LESSO is an artist and writer based in Scotland.

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