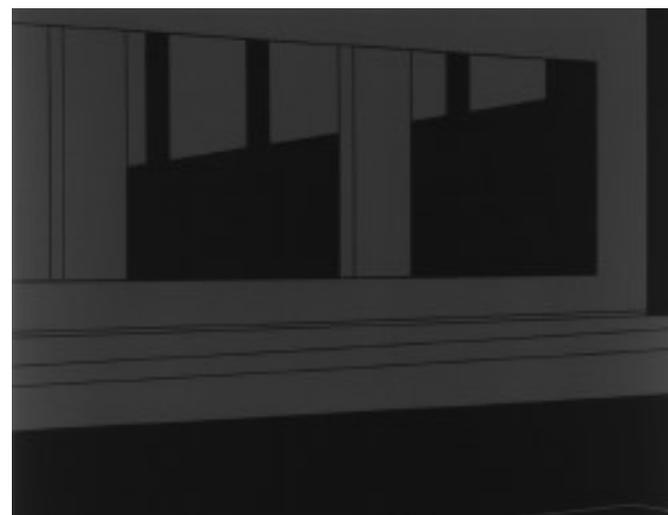
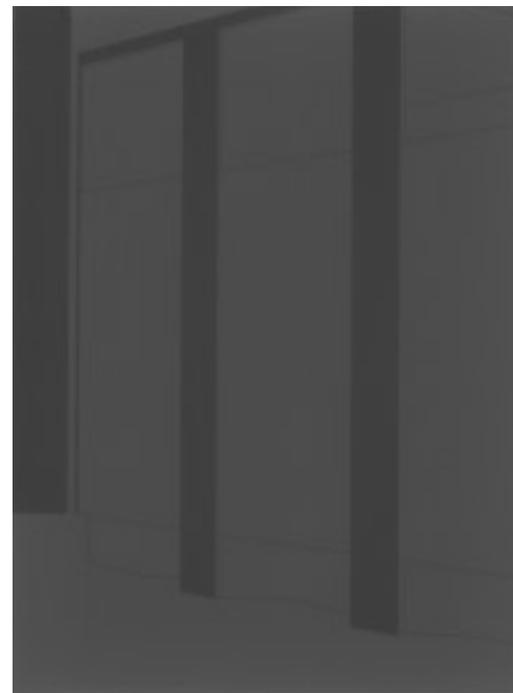


Keith Orkusz graduated in 1999 from Concordia University with an MFA in Drawing and Painting; and in 1995 with a Diploma of Fine Arts from the Alberta College of Art and Design. He most recently exhibited his work in Art-THROB: The Culture of Obsession, a group exhibition at Gallerie Articule in Montreal that was curated by Jo-Anne Balcaen and Peter Hobbs and included Canadian artists Evergon, Shelley Ouellet, Shari Hatt, Daniel Barrow and Cecilia Berkovic.

Images:
This page; **Lessons**, 2003.
Digital photograph, 187 x 122 cm.

Opposite Top; **Lessons (diptych)**, 2002.
Digital photograph, 122 x 168 cm.

Opposite Bottom; **Lessons (diptych)**, 2002.
Digital photograph, 122 x 132 cm.



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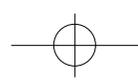
KEITH ORKUSZ

June 27 - July 26, 2003
Reception: Friday, June 27 at 8



the Stride Gallery





What Does It All Mean?

We have no lack of meanings.

We are in a struggle to find the story of our lives, to invest our actions and worlds with purpose, or allegories, or what have you - but not for lack of meaning. We are drowning in meaning, stuffed to the gills with notions, analogies and veiled inferences, bloated with cues, clues, hints and revelations. Meaning is crashing down around our ears, lumbering past us in malls and being delivered to us in perfumed envelopes. Meaning is getting to us even if we aren't getting to it.

So what do I mean by meaning? But let's be careful here, I don't want to pen in the definition with some taxonomy of meaning. Intuition is likely to provide a better sense of my intent than any literalization can afford. Let's say that the world is rife with symbols and that the human experience of these is meaning.

Wake to the bleating of your Seiko alarm clock and immediately meaning rushes in; Another day another dollar; Seiko makes fine timepieces ("Forward Thinking"); They're Japanese, really ahead of the game as far as electronics go but also part of a very strange and unwieldy economy. Punch the snooze button and catch another fifteen minutes of restful meaninglessness (as if). Crack open your eye. Five minutes left; Thank goodness we use Arab numerals. Imagine using numerals where something as simple as a five needed two symbols to represent it (f-i-v-e needs four). The alarm goes off again. Wake up for real this time; Time is an abstract used to keep people in sync with each other; timekeeping was devised to make navigation less erratic I can't get in to this right now, I have to go to work

Step onto the street, narrowly avoid being bowled over by a bike messenger. At the bus stop, stand next to a couple of brooding Goths (the black clad Bauhaus - the band not the school - type, not the barbarian hordes that destroyed the Roman empire). A Harry Potter book is sticking out of the top of one of their bags. An elderly woman approaches a gang of skateniks on a bench. She has a message from the lord Jesus. A dreaded (hairstyle not qualification) teen exclaims "I don't believe in any of that Christian shit, I'm a Rastafarian, man!"

Too much meaning is nearly the same as none at all. People want their meanings focused, distilled in manageable packets. The whole of human history is the process of burying our heads in the meanings we can handle. Simmel had the measure of it. The intellect, he wrote, "acts as a protective screen for the individual that prevents him from being overwhelmed by the sheer volume of stimuli associated with daily life." It never quite works but we try. That's philosophy, that's religion, that's television.

Television used to be our respite, our sanctuary of meaninglessness (well, not actual meaninglessness but what intellectuals fancied as such). "I had a bad day; I had to subvert my principles and kowtow to an idiot. Television makes these daily sacrifices possible," says Hal Hartley's Matthew Slaughter in the wryly acute *Trust*. And that's what it did. The manicured quandaries and realities of *Leave It To Beaver*, *Different Strokes* or *The Cosby Show* were so much more palatable than the dysfunctional imperatives that confronted us in daily life. But it couldn't last forever. Sadly, even television had to evolve. The result, a telematic world that not only reflects the dismaying chorus of meanings but actually contributes to it.

Keith Orkusz's work delves at the knot of these issues. Like us, he is a victim of meaning and like us his struggle is to glean meaning from the excess of it. In popular television, Orkusz has found the muse to feed the cogs of his imagination and the thematic squall in which to shod his images. *Episode* dips into the psychic well of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, as perfect an example of television's semiotic baroque as one could hope for; Like us, like the artist, Buffy and her cohorts are always moving through an impenetrable forest of symbols, assaulted by a ceaseless stream of meaning.

Orkusz's digital paintings, skeletal frameworks of telematic mythologies, are impositions of narrowed meaning, quieting forces. "I select scenes in which the histories and metaphors of Buffy's universe are most powerful, most clearly analogous to our own" he says of these works. "I extract spaces from these worlds and isolate them as key symbolic markers, as types of ready-mades that allow a predefined character or location to extend beyond its original context, and become something new and unknown."

And so they do. Yet, in the wake of so much meaning, the formalistic distillation seems to confound the concept. But that's the point. That is the strength of Orkusz's work. The effect is to the other extreme of meaning, meaning re-slanted as meaninglessness. These spaces and scenes which carried so much expressiveness, such mythology, are stripped of these elements, bowdlerized of even the greater underpinnings of spatial structure. The effect is devastating, ruthless, leaving the viewer with little more than a whiff of what had been, eking stillness from noise.

Though methodologically and superficially dissimilar, Orkusz's pieces parallel the intent of works such as Thomas Demand's *Poll* (2001) or Hiroshi Sugimoto's *Tri City Drive-in San Bernardino* (1993). In Demand's

constructed photograph of a Florida polling station, as in Sugimoto's depopulated drive-in theatre, the key focus is in pulling stillness from where there is (normally) so little, allowing the viewer to experience something familiar as something strange and distinct.

Orkusz's earlier work dealt with juxtapositions between the aesthetics of mass production and the tactile traces of the artist's craft, creating unusual image-objects. These were every bit the laboured result of his artistry but deliberately manifested no trace of his hand in the final form. His latest explorations, the digital paintings of *Episode*, may seem unrelated to these artistic origins (there is little to bind them aesthetically) but in these earlier efforts lie the seeds of his current investigations.

The enchanting pathos of Orkusz's work is in his conflict with himself, juggling his intellectual (and human) impulse towards the conceptual, in the rich allegorical material of popular television, against the stoic simplicity of his aesthetic instincts. As with his early work, the crucial dynamic of his art is rooted in the contradiction between the penultimate aspect of his inspiration, his process, and the ultimate finality of the aesthetic form. The result can be both startling and soothing.

Though for the viewer they may raise more questions than they offer answers, Orkusz's digital paintings do what effective art must, giving us something very unlike our own experience, yet wholly of it.

Dylan Young

