

David Noonan

left
David Noonan, *Untitled 'portrait'*, 2005,
fabric painting, 51 x 76 cm, courtesy the artist
and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney.

right
David Noonan, *Untitled owl*, 2003,
monoprint, gouache on paper, 52 x 38.5 cm,
courtesy the artist and Uplands Gallery, Melbourne.



John Mateer

On the third page of W. G. Sebald's novel *Austerlitz* (2001), the narrator recalls entering the enclosure for nocturnal animals in Antwerp Zoo:

All I remember of the denizens of the Nocturama is that several of them had strikingly large eyes, and the fixed, inquiring gaze found in certain painters and philosophers who seek to penetrate the darkness which surrounds us purely by means of looking and thinking.

In the midst of this sentence, in Sebald's characteristic mode, four images interrupt the text: two images are of the eyes of animals and two are of the eyes of unidentified intellectuals.

This is a seeing-double, an illusion taking place in the mind's eye that makes the simple act of looking an eerie experience. We encounter this visual doubling in the works of the young artist David Noonan in his first survey exhibition, 'Films and Paintings 2001–2005'.

Over the past six years David Noonan has enjoyed extraordinary success, holding prominent international exhibitions and securing representation in New York. However, until now Australians have not had the opportunity to see the diversity of his work gathered together in one show. 'Films and Paintings' was beautifully installed and, despite its title, the exhibition included a wide range of work: the films and paintings one would expect, as well as examples of Noonan's photography, prints, collages, installation and sculpture.

One of the qualities of Noonan's work is its coldness, its impression of industrial process: his paintings look like photographic images; his films like extracts from video clips or Hollywood movies. In spite of this cold aesthetic, few viewers could

remain unaffected by the mood of the work, especially when it is presented en masse.

It is surprising to see so much work, in such a diversity of media, conveying a consistently powerful mood. In this Noonan's work is reminiscent of Sebald and the scene in *Austerlitz* in which the narrator steps into the Nocturama, which is in fact an ersatz night, to see animals in the dark who return his gaze. It could be expected that Noonan, a child of the 1970s, would use found imagery as his subject, evident in the collages and kitsch, the Javanese shadow-puppets, owl paintings and films; but what is unexpected (and the core of Noonan's work) is the intensity of mood he evokes with what seem to be found images.

Noonan's work resonates visually with the genres of popular culture, appropriating the ambience of those genres without adopting their modes as conventions in themselves. For example, in the short looped film, *Owl*, 2004, Noonan pursues the haunting power of the visual while keeping the image's context at bay (in this case the actuality of the zoo and the genre of nature documentary or home movie). By keeping the 'thing depicted' in a decontextualised state and by enhancing the visual quality of the image, Noonan creates an experiential dynamic that maximises the work's emotive quality. This disposition is amplified to such an extent that what should appear emotionally flat and visually unengaged becomes, in the deepest meaning of the word, iconic.

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, with digital media monopolising much of the art world as well as our everyday lives, David Noonan resuscitates

the visual through the use of images redolent of the 1970s. The work reminds us of the possibility of art returning to the past. This return affirms the substance of a reality that seems, presently, to be slipping away.

Noonan's work, like that of his equally prominent peer Ricky Swallow, moves beyond the critique of media culture found in the work of Sigmar Polke or David Salle. Noonan achieves this through the use of childhood nostalgia to verify the reality of his mood. Working in the era beyond the anti-aesthetic critique of the image, both Swallow and Noonan evoke the present by means of the past. Whether this kind of seeing-double will help us confront the darkness of the rest of this century is something future audiences will have to decide.

David Noonan: *Films and Paintings 2001–2005*, Monash University Museum of Art, Melbourne, 7 April – 11 June 2005.