

# ALL THAT'S LEFT

@Durty\_Beanz Feat. Alys Owen



There are five framed gouache paintings hung in the corridor of the Centre for Rural Economy (CRE). The works have been produced over the last 6-months as part of Durty Beanz's residency with the CRE and The Maltings Art Centre in Berwick-upon-Tweed. Their residency research has focused on the relationship(s) between food and online spaces, specifically in regard to rurality and regional identity in Northumbria. Two of the paintings depict jumbo Sports Direct Mugs (you know the ones - they're generally lurking at the back of staff room cupboards). The other three paintings seem to be of rusty tins of cockles from Berwick-upon-Tweed. Both cups and tins are frozen against a white background (something I'll come back to). For now, however, let's get stuck into these fucking Sports Direct mugs.

They're not quite 1x1 scale. They seem to have been slightly enlarged (even further!)<sup>1</sup> The usual branding has been adorned with a few cartoon-like bees (in a likely insincere attempt to assert an environmental agenda?) They're empty. They're rendered in a deliberately wobbly style. There's a joyful relinquishment of realism here, their wonkiness pulling against (and therefore into focus) the monotonous ubiquity of this most British of objects. What do I mean by this?

Sports Direct is a part of the Fraser Group, a sprawling conglomerate owned by British billionaire and half-chewed toffee Mike Ashley.<sup>2</sup> The company is known for its 'controversial' attitude towards business ethics. They are, in short, big dumb bullies. The mugs seem to embody the essence of big Mike and Sporty D's: oafish, and unsubtle.<sup>3</sup> Through their lightly off-kilter use of perspective and line, however, the paintings seem to heighten the mug's slapstick and absurd qualities, rather than dwelling on any of their (many) uglier aspects.

On to the cockle tins. They're (also) not quite 1x1 scale. They (also) feature some kind of horrible little insect, this time in the form of dead flies. They're (also) empty; soulless. They are (also) closely tethered to the North East of England. The tins are an example of some kind of local produce (I think?) that's been almost

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<sup>1</sup> Technically, I suppose given the works are framed against a white void, it is actually very difficult to say anything about how big they may or may not be. Rather, it might be more accurate to discuss how close they are, or, indeed how far off we are. (It's all getting a bit Father Ted isn't it!)

<sup>2</sup> Michael James Wallace Ashley is closely associated with the North East of England for lots of bollocks, but perhaps most notably through his radically unpopular and unsuccessful tenure as owner of Newcastle United Football Club.

comically run down into a state of extreme neglect. Not fresh. Not seasonal. Not good. The paintings are rendered with a tighter level of realism than the Sports Direct Mugs, the lines straighter, the perspective more true. This further seems to sharpen their sense of redundancy (and indeed, heighten the lumbering absurdity of their overinflated counterparts).

Both the mugs and the cockle tins have been framed against/in a white void.<sup>4</sup> It feels like an exercise in capture, like the paintings are stopping their subjects. Extracting them. Replicating and examining them. Probing. And look at them now, all naked and ridiculous.

Through presenting two subjects that are formally kind of similar to each other, but symbolically representative of very different parts of our world, we are being asked to engage in some kind of comparative study. In other words, how do the similarities and differences between the Sports Direct Mugs and cockle tins impact upon each other, and why are the artists asking us to think about these kinds of questions, in relation to both the work on display and the world at large? Yeah, I'm not sure tbfh.

In this instance at least, my not-knowing-ness is because I am spoiled for choice by all the potential ideas, places and people seemingly being activated through the quietly generous paintings. For example, is there a suggestion that the Sports Direct Mugs are somehow symbolic of a metropolitan corporate ubiquity, and the emaciated rusty cockle tins represent a cruel caricature of Berwick and rural Britain? If so, are these works therefore some form of meta self-critique; a review of cultural capitalism as it relates to economic elitism through initiatives such as artist residencies?<sup>5</sup>

Wherever I go with these paintings, I seem to find myself eventually creeping around some uncomfortable and really rather sad notions of British identity; how food, art and of course money are employed to endorse and shape highly individualist, neoliberal ideologies that are used to underpin and justify all sorts of mucky forms of privilege (my own included). So, whether it's celebrating some good, honest, local Northumbrian produce, or writing a nice little text for a thoughtful residency exhibition about rurality and food, both (if we're not careful) can serve as something of a tokenistic band-aid; a glib distraction serving only to further entrench the meritocratic agenda that they allege to critique.

But etiquette denotes that I conclude this text by writing something nice and/or positive. I'll go with this then... It's a testament to Durty Beanz and Owen's work that such apparently simple, sparse and unassuming artistic gestures can manifest such contradictory and complex sets of ideas. Furthermore, it's refreshing to encounter an exhibition that isn't trying to change my view of the world by smashing me round the head with all sorts of big and clever ideas. Rather, this exhibition has instead punctured my reality with a series of insidious pin pricks, blows I didn't even feel until it was too late. Sneaky, brilliant and quietly shocking.

Professor Nigel A. Lawson (2022)

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<sup>4</sup> Sometimes there's a hint of shadow, alluding to some sense of a floor beneath the mugs/tins. These shadows also lend the paintings the feeling of a product/marketing shoot.

<sup>5</sup> The artists neither confirm nor deny, but certainly leave the door open for such analysis. Furthermore, there's a potentially HILARIOUS parallel in the artist's apparent focus on support structures on containment, rather than content(s); that is, these paintings seem to take as their formal subject some mugs and tins, but conceptually seem address the infrastructure of the residency itself – the very structure they themselves are 'contained' within. Deep yo.