

## BASIL BEATTIE

John Bunker, Basil Beattie at Jerwood Hastings,  
Abstract Critical, 23 October 2013



Basil Beattie, Top Up, 2013 (detail)

Take a walk down some steps and jump on the tube. Hurtle through a dark and dirty tunnel. Walk up some more steps then down a few more. Take the train down the tracks from London to Hastings. Check out the cars on the winding roads around you. Everyone's on the road to somewhere right?

Basil Beattie's paintings re-imagine all those 'in-between' places, the hardly thought about journeys and spaces that make up the roundabouts and ins and outs of our every day world. Stairways, corners and horizon lines shoot from the gloom of half felt recollection like a bullet train from a tunnel on to Beattie's new painterly stage. (Almost all the paintings in the exhibition were made this year!) All this energy is achieved with a ferocity and a tenderness that only painting on this scale and ambition can supply. But Beattie mixes hard won virtuosity honed over a long career with a finely tuned but a ggressive ambivalence toward the activity of painting - especially abstract painting. He takes his cue from two of the most awkward of the 'awkward squad' of the New York School - Guston and de Kooning.

And we're really lucky to be given the opportunity to take

a walk across the hall in the beautiful Jerwood Gallery into a room full of Guston lithographs. They are harsh, baggy and bruised depictions of fragments of bodies heaped together. Clothes and shoes are thrown around ambiguous spaces with unruly abandon. It is no surprise then that drawing and line are essential components of Beattie's practice too.

Guston focused on the clothes and detritus that at once comforts and distorts the human form. Beattie explores the quieter yet equally powerful relationships we have with the architecture that surrounds our every move both in the domestic and the public realm. The titles like 'The Irresistible Climb II' hint at how architectural metaphors have permeated our language and shape our thoughts, our drives and feelings.

So it's great to be able to see some of Beattie's drawings from the period of the Janus works of the noughties in the foyer area. It is from here that I think we can appreciate what a fascinating leap Beattie has taken in the new paintings. The previous Janus paintings seemed to hinge primarily on the heavy framing devices of the windscreen shape or that of a rear view mirror. 'Days Begin and End

Here' 2013 literally smashes open these shaping forms. It takes on the uncanny architecture of a demented dolls house full of men-acing spatial permutations. This new found energy sizzles in 'Beyond the Rim II' 2013, 'Top Up' 2013 and 'Making Up' 2013. All previous framing devices and visual tropes have been set adrift suggesting a more complex and dynamic spatial play and gestural handling of paint and colour.

One of the largest and most ambitious paintings, 'Ascent' 2012, has its title immediately undermined by the abject state of the stairs and agitated grounds in which they lay or falter. We are left with an image of a derelict playground full of broken signs. These schematic renditions lay on their backs in an agitated rust coloured ground but cleverly twist open the space of the painting. These stairs and blocks provide boxes of potential space at once balanced and displaced or embedded in more ethereal lavender and black forms.

Almost all these new paintings contain energised fields that either magnetically lock on to or are repulsed by the canvas edge. A subtle dance between a set of repeated signs takes place. But this dance changes in rhythm with surprising agility, fragility and intensity. This is achieved by the various types of speed of attack employed by Beattie. By a process of layering and scraping colour seems to glow and spit through to the surface of the paintings. This works particularly well in 'Step Up On' 2013 and 'Above and Below' 2013. Both explore a fragile balancing act of block forms which seem to glow with a spectral luminosity from darkened grounds.

Guston's turning away from his ethereal abstractions into a guttural expressive figuration is well documented as are de Kooning's 'Women'. They hint at a general frustration with the limits of 'tasteful' abstraction. Its almost as if at different times abstract painting has hit a morass, lolling in its own kind of known forms or colour sequences. Drawing can offer a new kind of freedom as a delineator of space and gestural trace; opening up new connections with the real world.

Basil Beattie is an older artist at once breaking apart old territory and discovering a new found freedom in his work. A joy to behold!

Basil Beattie: Promises, Promises is on at the Jerwood Gallery, Hastings until the 8th of January 2014.