



Michael Petry, *Common Ground*

Michael Petry is an artist, author and Director of the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA)

London. His art work has been shown in museums globally and his Thames & Hudson books include *Installation Art* (1994); *Hidden Histories: 20th Century Male Same Sex Lovers in the Visual Arts* (2004); *The Art of Not Making: The New Artist/Artisan Relationship* (2012); *The Touch of the Oracle* (2012); *Nature Morte* (2013); and his most recent book *The Word is Art* (2018).



Edward Chell *Willow Projection* 2018
Acrylic and lacquer on gesso on quarter size Euro pallet
60 x 40 x 15 cm each

Edward Chell's new works recall the ancient Japanese tradition of hand lacquering wood and paper objects, which were often done at sea to prevent dust landing on still sticky surfaces, which would have ruined them. The artist's painted sculptural works, including solo pieces, couplets and the large nine-panel installation *Common Ground*, are fictive as they look like hard ceramic tablets. Their surfaces are highly lacquered, a process that has to be completely dust free. They are in fact hand painted by Chell on gessoed boards, lacquered to such a fine finish that they look like glazed and fired porcelain. The works sit on small wooden pallets that add to a fictional narrative of mass production. At odds with his delicate hand painted imagery, the immaculate surfaces are created by a cold manufacturing process where thin layers of lacquer are repeatedly built up over time.

In Chell's work the sea is at bay, and it is technology that keeps the dust away. Chell's work mimics and celebrates a skilled handcraft from a different age, both in finish and in form, as it is not porcelain or ceramic: it is only the hand painting that remains. Chell's hand makes the marks and forms a signature that transforms the works from domestic objects into paintings. The craft of lacquering is done by others and is there to lure the eye beyond the surface. Chell is interested in how craft and fine art differ, or at least how they are supposed to differ, or are hierarchically prescribed as differently valued forms of activity within a global market, with differing prices. These works speak the language of 18th and 19th century trade: goods shipped from Japan or China to a ready European market longing for its idea of luxury. The fact that today China is seen as a mass producer of other countries' ideas, and Japan is at the forefront of robotic production is an irony implicit in Chell's hand produced works.

The individual pallet 'tiles' recall Vermeer's quiet floors and the striking use of blue and white is also redolent of Dutch domestic interiors. Oscar Wilde claimed that he found '...it harder and harder every day to live up to my blue china.' The aesthetics Chell alludes to in his work are the quiet backdrop of just such good Victorian taste which was mass fed to the emerging middle classes and even the working poor who might have had one special plate for best. Chell's diptychs, *Willow Projection I* and *II*, are based on the familiar 18th century English 'willow pattern' found on domestic crockery that echoes Chinese designs. These decorative table wares and objects aped historic handmade artefacts that the wealthy had in their homes. What is fascinating about these historic fictive 'craft' works (as they were mass produced) is that the stories behind the pattern, said to have been about two Japanese or even Chinese lovers, were embellished by the British manufacturers themselves to boost sales, a form of early marketing through cultural appropriation.

Chell's large floor installation, *Common Ground*, gently goes from a dark blue where the painted surface is most dense, to a pale white offset by the blue. Chell has painted a mesh of interlocking weeds that collectively look as if they are floating in a stream or are at the bottom of a very clear pool. The work is immersive, the viewer almost feels they can fall through the surface, and recalls David Hockney's large pool prints from the 1970/80s, made up of many adjacent paper panels or overlapped Polaroids, both forming grids. Hockney's photos reference the multiple viewpoints of some Chinese scrolls; a visit to China changed his work completely, leading him to eschew a Western dominance of a vanishing point. Here too in Chell's work there is no one way or right way to view his 'pool', which if seen from a particular standpoint appears as a 3D projection.

Chell's small pallets featuring oval landscapes show how detritus can pile up but also be transformed into something more. Chell has photographed man-made hills and slag heaps, transfer-printed them onto lacquered, gesso panels, and added hand-painted oval borders and plant silhouettes taken from Spode designs. The works can be wall hung, like traditional porcelain plates, or placed on the floor as sculptural objects. Chell travelled to Stoke, home of potteries such as Wedgwood, Spode and Royal Doulton, whilst also documenting slag heaps and mounds of industrial waste travelling as far as Sellafield where the contents of those mounds are nuclear, protected and highly secretive. Stoke's old mounds and excavations were full of refuse clay as well as broken china and rejected pieces that the factories could not sell – profit, surfeit and waste cheek by jowl. The idea of tons of rubbish stacked up in mounds gradually reclaimed by vegetative nature has similar narratives at play.

Why have we turned a blind eye to such wanton pollution? And what of the future? These questions are begging to be asked. But the works are silent. They look like Victorian plates celebrating the industrial age, when such heaps and despoliation might have been seen as badges of progress and victory over nature. Those plates now look out of date, and out of touch with the contemporary world. Chell references their nostalgia value, suggesting a critique of those who want to return us to those days of British colonial 'glory'. They point to the foolishness of blind belief in a fictive and at times outright vicious past, where those prosperous enough to eat off blue and white porcelain had a monopoly on good living. Never forget that 99% of us were servants, if not slaves to the 1%.

In all these works, formal issues about any narrative reading. The highly polished surfaces call to mind the 1960's fetish finish works of John McCracken who, along with other Los

Angeles based minimal artists (Larry Bell, Robert Irwin et. al.), made up the Light and Space movement. McCracken used techniques from California surfboard production to make large, perfectly finished geometric sculptures. No particle of dust was allowed to mar their surface, though they do attract a lot of dust in museum settings and need constant attention to keep their perfect sheen. Chell's works, placed on the floor, their surfaces sometimes at an angle, could be calling out to the dust in the air to settle on them. Equally when the 'tiles' are placed next to each other, especially in the large installation, they recall the work of Carl Andre with their faux manufactured surface. There is a real tension between the formal and the visual qualities of these works.

That tension almost breaks when one looks at the support structures themselves, the wooden pallets that form their bases. The glossily surfaced boards are completely (and invisibly) attached to the rough, partially whitewashed pieces of wood. They look like they would give you a nasty splinter if you picked them up, and yet their faces are so polished. Chell plays with the concept of mass production and goods moved on pallets by incorporating these handmade ones to support the polished surfaces. What is craft, what is art, what is manufacture in these liminal works that change before our eyes? It takes some time and a little getting used to, to see that the rough supports are integral to the whole. They disrupt the surface more than any speck of dust could. They are the base to the paintings/sculptures and yet, they are the sculptural element to the painterly face. They do not sit politely within any frame of art reference.

Equally at odds with themselves are Chell's paintings and prints rooted in the memory of dusty motorway verges. In certain prints he uses actual road dust to form pigments, collecting and mixing it with binding agent. The dust used in *Creeping buttercup Ranunculus repens: Dust A20 (M)* (2012), is a very pale grey. Other dusts are the colour of dried blood as in *Hairy bittercress Cardamine hirsute: Road Dust M20* (2013), and suggest crime scene photos as the plants are visually flattened out.

We usually think of dust as grey, but perhaps it is not even as solid as that. Chell has mixed a form of grey used in his new works (oil on shellac on linen or paper) that recalls the idea of grey, yet is barely a defined colour. In these works *Idyll Tundras*, he paints memories of motorway verges, and the artificial mounds at the base of concrete flyovers. His elusive pale grey acts as a negative to the paintings' pallid yellow grounds, presenting fields of flowers as Chell remembers them. The sense of looking at an old 35mm film negative is overwhelming. It takes a while to focus on what we are seeing, and then once we make out the expanse of plants, there is a

real dissonance, a disconnect.

In making work, Chell uses photographs he has taken as “aide mémoires”, but the paintings are more memories than depictions. In *M2 Medway Services Eastbound* (2013) and *M2 Motorway Island, Junction 3* (2013), both oil on shellac on linen, banks of wild vegetation give way to tarmac roads and the unlovely concrete structures that span them. It is interesting that in his Tate Britain exhibition (2019), Mark Leckey built a life-sized replica of an M53 concrete motorway bridge in the gallery, onto which he projected a semi-autobiographical video. For those of us who look at motorways as a means to a journey’s end and not a place of fascination in themselves, Chell and Leckey are a corrective. They want us to remember those overlooked manmade spaces that seem to repel the natural world, but sit within it and are so easily overcome by it. They remind us of lost cities in jungles and it is possible to imagine a time in the future when these structures will also be reclaimed by fields and trees.

Chell’s work, in a quiet way, reminds us that nature does not need humans. Death and decay are at the heart of all still life works and Chell’s new paintings readily shift between being landscapes, portraits of landscapes and still life paintings of flowers. *Nature Morte* is at the heart of his work, as time passes by and slips away into the long grass. There is also the slow death of the painted surface itself, for over time, original colours fade and shellac varnishes yellow. Museums know restoring work is a complicated process, but no amount of cleaning can return us to the original that left the artist’s studio. Chell’s work remind us that we too will soon become food for the wild things and all our memories will turn to dust.

Cover: **Edward Chell** *Spode Tip Pallet* 2018
acrylic and lacquer on Gesso on eighth size Euro pallet,
40 x 30 x 15 cm



Edward Chell *Tundrascape 2* 2019
oil on shellac on linen
40 x 53 cm

Edward Chell *Common Ground*
16 November - 14 December 2019

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