

Outage by Tom Morton

Let's begin with the title of Roger Hiorns' exhibition, 'Depotenziare', which might be translated into English as something like 'Depower'. To depower a given entity — an organism, a mechanism, an idea — is not to destroy it, but rather to deprive it of its animating energy, be that the fossil hydrocarbons that fuel a military aircraft, or the belief that fires a living faith. Static, and often isolated in some forgotten space or dimly remembered time, a depowered entity becomes a symbol of its own lost potency. The dethroned leader, the obsolete technology, the exhausted cultural form — these remind us that power is not inherent, but something that is subject to human investment, and divestment. In this there is the possibility of freedom, of a new and different form of life.

In Hiorns' sculpture *Depression* (2024), two white polystyrene containers lie end to end on the gallery floor, like cattle troughs, or bath tubs in an institutional washroom, or perhaps twin sarcophagi. Manufactured from petrochemicals, these found objects were designed to protect consumer goods in transit, and the dents and grime that mark their once-pristine exteriors suggest a history of use. Now, emptied of their contents, they resemble pale shells or skulls abandoned by a predator, who has slunk away, satiated, drowsy, lips smeared with salt and fat. Not that the interiors of the containers have been licked entirely clean. Each is stained with a thin wash of brown fluid, which recalls at once dried blood and dried shit. It is, in fact, liquified bovine brain matter — the remains of what was once a mammalian consciousness, home to unknown and unknowable thoughts.

At first glance, we might assume that at some point the containers were filled almost to capacity with this fluid, which was then drained off, like water from a sink, leaving a dark skin of proteins in its wake. Look closer, however, and we note the absence of a level tide line on the surface of the polystyrene, and of any drainage holes. What has occurred here, then, is not a subtraction, but an addition. Hiorns has applied the brain matter to his found objects by hand, stroke by purposeful stroke, an action that summons thoughts of both a painter applying pigment to a support, and of the anointment of the faithful with holy oil.

Depression is the latest in a series of works by the artist to make use of this charged organic material. There is an allusion, here, to the British Bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) crisis of the 1980s and 1990s, in which a lethal degenerative brain disease was passed to humans via beef from infected cows, who had been fed a cannibalistic diet of meal made from the rendered flesh and bones of other ruminants — a then widespread practice in the profiteering meat industry, and one approved by the era's Conservative government. And yet, *Depression* is not a sculpture about a particular historical episode, but rather speaks more broadly to how capitalism — that all-pervasive and seemingly invulnerable system of power — degrades and ultimately empties out the human mind. If the containers may, indeed, be read as sarcophagi, then we might ask what has happened to the corpses, to the grave goods? Perhaps these once solid things have melted into air. The English word 'depression', of course, refers to a type of mental illness, but it also refers to a hole in the ground — a hollow, empty space. What, here, might take root?

The suite of new copper sulphate, acrylic, and latex medium paintings on canvas presented by Hiorns in 'Depotenziare' depict forms that resemble variously spiny plants, angular male nudes, vaguely insectoid warplanes, and hybrids of these things. He has referred to this body of work as 'trans' paintings, calling to mind the Latin prefix meaning variously 'across', 'beyond', 'through', and 'so as to change'. Notably, their palette of grubby turquoise, bruised pinks and soiled whites echoes the (far cleaner and crisper) colours of the transgender flag. Several of the canvases show us shaven-headed men, whose emaciated limbs and distended abdomens suggest that they might be malnourished inmates in a prison camp, or monks pledging to fasting, the mortification of the flesh. Deprived of calorific energy or not, they seem compelled to engage in instinctive acts of what might be sex, or maybe violence, or else a novel and ambiguous form of movement.

Is the man who places his skinny penis inside a giant, disembodied spotted head undergoing punishment, seeking physical release, or performing a solemn religious ritual, and who is the figure crouching beside him, guiding his actions? A prison guard, a sexual partner, a priest, or his own shadow self?

With its blotchy washes of pigment, the environment Hiorns' figures inhabit — a landscape, a skyscape? — feels dreamy, almost fantastical, a place where the usual rules of space and time do not quite obtain. Here and there, the surfaces of these canvases are corrupted by fleshy polyps of latex, or else obliterated by ragged, mutedly shimmering fields of blue copper sulphate crystals. Unlike the cells of living beings, these crystals do not multiply through mitosis, through splitting from a central zygotic point. Rather, born out of a liquid solution, their own amniotic fluid, they developed simultaneously, according to what mineralogists term their 'crystal habit' — a set of specific conditions that include heat, pressure, trace impurities and the slow grinding of their lattices against each other as they agitate for space.

'Habit' is a word that suggests compulsion, an absence of self-control. The blue shards that fur the surfaces of these works have not been shaped by a masterly, commanding consciousness, of the sort we associate with the figure of the artist, or indeed with a divine creator. Instead, they are auto-generative, auto-aesthetic, radically indifferent. It's tempting to interpret the crystals in these canvases as contaminants, which taint intention with accident, meaning with meaninglessness, form with anti-form. Right now, their growth appears to have been arrested, but were they to spread, metastasize, then these works' status as paintings — at least as we conventionally understand the term — would be open to serious doubt.

In *Pathway* (2024), more scaly copper sulphate crystals afflict, or perhaps grace, a found photographic image reversed onto canvas. Here, two fundamentalist Christians brandish protest placards outside an abortion clinic, stating that 'PRAYER IS NOT A THOUGHT CRIME'. Notably, to us this slogan appears to run backwards, its letters belonging not to the Latin alphabet but some obscure — even otherworldly — collection of runes of hieroglyphs. Whether the protestors know it or not, the term 'thought crime' is borrowed from George Orwell's dystopian novel *1984* (1949), and describes a notion or belief not tolerated by the prevailing political authorities, who criminalize its public expression, and seek to eliminate it, through intimidation and propaganda, from the private realm of cognition. Looking at this image, we'd be hard-pressed to conclude that the protestors are thus policed. Rather, it seems that the staff and patients of the abortion clinic must suffer their presence, as the price of living in a polity that upholds the freedoms of worship and speech.

So in a sense, the fundamentalists are correct: prayer, here, is not a thought crime. Assuming they believe that their acts of supplication will be noted and honored by a supernatural being, we might also add that prayer, for them, is not synonymous with thought at all. Rather, it is a form of power — an arsenal siloed in their heads. How we respond to *Pathway* will, of course, depend in part on whether we share these fundamentalists' particular model of reality (Hiorns does not, and for what it's worth neither do I). Given the mirror writing on the placards, we should perhaps think of this work as a kind looking glass, fogged with mindlessly multiplying crystals. What it reflects back to each of us is our own politics, our own metaphysical understanding, our own consciousness.

'Depotenziare' concludes with *A Clearing* (2016-ongoing), a new black and white film discussed at length elsewhere in this publication by Alessandro Rabottini, which revisits Hiorns' 2016 burial of a decommissioned Hawker Siddeley Dominie T1 military aircraft beneath a field in Suffolk, England — one of an ongoing series of such actions by the artist that he has titled *A Retrospective View of the Pathway*. Footage of the plane's interment has been reversed according to the Sabatier effect, so that dark tones appear light, and light tones dark — an echo of the reversal enacted by Hiorns, when he removed this deadly piece of machinery from the sky, and placed it in the earth. The film's soundtrack features field recordings of the burial, and also the rumblings of a human digestive system, which the artist notes have drawn sympathetic gurgles from the stomachs of some viewers, as though this noise was as contagious as laughter, or a yawn. The suggestion is that the aircraft is being processed — even perhaps assimilated — by an unknown body, perhaps our own. What strange nutrients, we wonder, might this depowered object give up?

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