

## Stuart Middleton *Improvers* 20.09.18 - 27.10.18

*Improvers* is the second exhibition by Stuart Middleton at Carlos/Ishikawa. It is comprised of two-dimensional works.

Polychromatic drawings, based on photographs taken by the artist, are rendered smoothly in coloured pencil. They depict cattle being exhibited at a county show this summer. In each frame the young handlers twist their charges' heads to present the animal's best side to the judge. Stiffly dressed in formal clothes, their attention is focussed away from the viewer, as they struggle to hold the cattle still.

The cattle are judged on criteria including musculature for meat, udder proportion, skeletal structure for bearing calves. The tender way these beasts are curried and dressed contrasts with the violence implied by judging, capturing the tension of husbandry; of living stock. These images represent units of value, but also breathing, mooing beings.

Spreading across two walls of the gallery a mural depicts a pair of HGV's equipped to carry logs. Painted nearly life size, using highly pigmented scenic paint, the vehicles, like the cows, appear to have been cleaned up. Their contoured body work is smooth, sanitised and new.

The mural is a forest scene. Rather than an unknown realm of fantastical potential, unchecked growth and decay, the forest is packaged and in motion, it's trees razed and rolled onto trucks, carried away to the plywood factory.

*Improvers* takes its title from the colloquial term for the experimental livestock breeders of the 18th Century. It also evokes the relentless drive for self betterment and progress at the expense of all else, espoused by those familiar deacons of good breeding and entrepreneurial spirit.

The exhibition is accompanied by a flip book that documents the arrival of the Virgin Pendolino from London into Glasgow Central.

### Notes

1. The cows are an Ayrshire called Allstar Provider Honesty and a Holstein called Katal Le Must Frank Rhapsody, both shown in the class 'Open Heifers' (cows that haven't had a calf yet). The third drawing is a British Blonde Bull named Lower Croft Nimrod. It was a very cloudy white skied and windy day at the show, but still at the height of the drought and the grass was scorched yellow.

"the cow is a real modernist figure. I feel like after God died, the cow became the onlooker in great works of modernism...it's like the residue of the divine in the twentieth century." - Ariana Reines, *The Cow*, (2006)

As much a symbol of divinity, the cow is also an image of wealth. Cattle originally meant moveable personal property (as opposed to real property, land). The word is a variant of chattel and closely related to capital in the economic sense. These exhibition cattle have a strange status - as progenitors of their genes they are exempt from the meat grinder, but they are not quite pets either.

In Britain many breeding lines are deeply intertwined with the genealogies of the farming families whose sons and daughters twist the halters. As more industrial farming systems become the norm, these less commercial species fall out of favour.

2. I began seeing these logging vehicles in an Aberdeenshire village where I was staying and they rumbled past the window all night. I saw them on the motorway particularly in the 'Scottish borders' whilst making the journey between London and Glasgow. In the book *Border Ballads* by James Reed (1973) I found a map of ancestral names and their historic geographic affiliations. They were the heroes and villains of the ballads, describing cattle raids, betrayal, love and feuds between families. Many of these family names (e.g. Armstrongs of Longton) are seen on the vehicles of haulage companies operating today in the area, they are still engaged in the removal, transport and competition for natural resources.

3. There is an understanding that the species which became domesticated were edge of forest dwellers like the goat or cow. Domestication is also closely linked to imprisonment - its original meaning 'to belong to the household'.

4. Improvers was a term coined in connection to Leicestershire agriculturalist Robert Bakewell, born 1725, who pioneered artificial selection in sheep, and was also the first person to breed cattle solely for beef. He was a controversial figure for his aggressive use of in-breeding.

5. Agriculture is the extension of the arm into the soil. - Elaine Scarry.

6. The Virgin Pendolino was introduced in 2002, after the take over of the West Coast franchise from British Rail in 1997, as a supposed improvement to British Rail's APT (Advanced Passenger Train). Although the APT retains the ultimate speed record for the west coast mainline. The new class 390 built in Savigliano in Italy now has a self-deprecating talking toilet, spoofing precarious labour. The flip book doesn't flip as well as I'd hoped.