

White windows

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White windows

Across towns and cities, the extent of the current recession is made visible in the mouldering creep of whited-out shop windows – high street commerce overtaken by a fuzzy bloom of cloudy paint. The blankness could be considered a relief amidst the relentless demand to consume – here, there's no call to spend money on things we think we want, but don't really need – and, in the beginning at least, there is a pleasing purity about the appearance of these monochromes.

Without the regular attention of window cleaners however, it doesn't take long for the glass of closed shops to accrue an additional scurf of sooty dirt, quickly spattered with bird shit or drunken vomit, tagged by graffiti writers, fluttering with the remnants of fly-posting, and in areas with nearby takeaways and off licences, it is often garnished with a sticky residue from people larking about with cans of fizzy beer or soft drinks, and with smears of squirted ketchup and mayonnaise.

For councils this contagion is wholly negative; just as the so-called 'broken window theory' proposes that one unrepaired window in a residential street will trigger vandalism and crime with its indication that no one much cares, the commercial decay manifest in a series of grubby and whitewashed shops is thought to put off shoppers and new investors alike; high street trade withers at each new instance.

Some authorities try to magic away the evidence of decline through photographic illusion: printed imagery on huge window vinyls instantly turn vacant shops into virtual restaurants or boutiques, but of course if no new tenants are found, these too eventually decay; sunlight fades once attractive colours into nauseous greens and blues, and dull patches corrupt glossy surfaces as the inevitable appearance of graffiti is repeatedly removed by over-zealous scrubbing.

There can be something brutal about the whiting out; it seems a cruel rite for failed shopkeepers, akin perhaps to the wearing of sackcloth and ashes, or being tarred and feathered: maybe by daubing their windows penitentially they seek atonement from the gods of retail and hope to ensure success in their next venture?

The blanked out windows are certainly full of the traces of those who made them. Hands and bodies are revealed in the way that white is variously dabbed about, sloshed on or swirled around; one tell can from the application just how someone had to crouch awkwardly to cover the lower parts of the glass, how the pigment thins at the top where it was hard to reach, and where different patches mark the points at which a ladder or stool had to be moved to allow the painter to complete another section. The technique and process by which paint is added generates patterns: depending upon the use of brushes, rollers, cloths or sprays, there are whorls and roundels, horizontal or diagonal stripes, an opaque speckle, runny dribbles or concentrated spatter. Malevich, Argento, Rauschenberg, Ryman and Martin may have introduced the twentieth century to white monochromes but it is the anonymous utilitarian street artists of the twenty-first who have proliferated the form.

Mark making continues long after the original application. When people enter the shop – landlords showing around potential new tenants, estate agents marketing the property for sale, builders remodeling the premises – they scuff and scratch the doors as fingers reach repeatedly for the handle; shopfitters, leaning back against the glass to consider their work, abrade the paint with the seams of their trouser pockets; materials stacked

nearby topple over and score the white. Some marks are more purposeful: workmen may rub out little spaces so that those inside can see out to the street, or use the surface to jot down a phone number when no paper is at hand; more frivolously, people habitually make hand prints, or produce smiley faces and other doodles.

The whiteness seemingly craves intervention: just as some kids have an urge to draw rude pictures in the steamy windows of their school bus, many adults with access to the interior of empty shops also want to affront – comedy cocks and obscene words or phrases are common, though in the latter case, the effect can be undermined by the writer’s failure to form letters in reverse so they can be read correctly from the street... The malleability of the medium means inscriptions are quickly added to or amended: on one window I saw how someone had clearly taken exception to the word ‘cunt’ being used in a public place and cleverly adapted both the ‘u’ and ‘n’ into ‘o’s so that it spelt out an inoffensive ‘coot’ instead.

I wondered for a time what substance was used for whitening out and whether there was some special product available for the purpose, but it turns out people employ a variety of house and garden stuff: look out for the pinkish tinge of Windolene or more yellowy Cif, sometimes it is denser limewash, occasionally diluted emulsion, or even the shading gardeners apply to their greenhouses to protect plants from sun scorch. Noting these different tints, I think for a moment that if Farrow and Ball can market ‘Down Pipe’ or ‘Mouse’s Back’ as paint colours, why not also ‘Derelict Store’ or ‘Empty Shop’? It strikes me that we may not have to wait too long for this future period of nostalgia, perhaps when online shopping has finally eradicated the high street and we wax lyrical over the lost wonders of the ‘vintage’ Poundshop and similar emporia.

The retail universe is unstable, shifting. The arcades, already in decline by the time Walter Benjamin described them, gave way to department stores and eventually to identikit high streets populated by the same set of brand name businesses; corner shops, precincts and parades of local shops served suburbia till people used their cars to travel out of town to hypermarkets and huge malls; today the small metro versions of major supermarket chains are returning to the centre, and concern over food miles and carbon emissions bring regional food back to city farmers’ markets... Surely, the only certainty is that none of this will endure; different practices will emerge, prompted by new types of manipulated consumer desire if times are ‘good’, or forced into existence by economic and environmental necessity. The especially ephemeral phenomenon of white washed windows on the high street are themselves such a brief moment in culture that some future person reading this text or perusing Abigale Neate Wilson’s images may struggle to understand this curious practice at all. Their presence is a pale and temporary ghosting, but one that metaphorically suggests just how short has been the capitalist modernity we take for granted; it is right, therefore, that that their aesthetics and affect do not pass unremarked.

Joanne Lee