

Oliver Clegg

Berceuse

15 January – 19 February 2011

Singled out by the British press as a 'rising star' of the London contemporary arts scene, Oliver Clegg (b. 1980) has gained a reputation as a multi-faceted artist whose meticulously executed works hover between two and three-dimensional disciplines. A masterful draughtsman and skilled painter, Clegg is a purist when it comes to working with natural light and obsessive about the quality of his materials (whether he be painting, drawing, etching, wood carving or executing an embroidery). Paradoxically Clegg is one of the most conceptually minded young artists working today, playing with language, narrative and memory and drawing from symbolism and surrealism in his practice.

Play is a motif that runs throughout Clegg's work, exemplified by his paintings of discarded toys, executed on found drawing boards. The objects speak of private nostalgias but evoke commonly held experiences of the moment when the child 'gives up' a treasured blanket or toy. Though it is the object that disappears, far more is often lost. Freud's essay 'Creative Writers and the Daydream' – where he states that though the fantasy world of childhood is lost to grown ups, it can be kept alive by writers and artists in their work[nbsp]–, is of key importance to Clegg, reminding him that it is possible to remain 'open'.

If Clegg is captivated by play, he is also drawn by the possibilities of literature, poetry and language. While working towards a show at the Freud Museum in London in 2008, Clegg discovered the poems and plays of Heinrich Heine. It was Heine who wrote in 1821: 'Where they burn books, so too, will they in the end burn human beings'. Clegg is sensitive to the significance of ordinary objects, transformed in the hands of writer or artist. This act of recycling began when Clegg was still at art school. He collected old drawing boards, prizing them for their scratchings and doodles. Clegg likes the fact these come with their own unique history that relates to somebody else's life. By working with these artefacts, Clegg allows the viewer to wander between narratives and worlds, uniting extant references with new images, or creating entirely new ones, recalling Duchamp: 'it is the onlookers who make the pictures'.

Clegg recently lost his Father. The two were close and the artist believes this event and turning 30, have forced him to confront life's fragility and brevity. Playing as he likes to with words in different tongues, Clegg found himself returning time and again to: 'berceuse', (the French for lullaby), as the genesis for a new body of work. The onomatopoeic quality of the word is soothing, mimicking the sound of a parent coaxing their child into dreamland. Dreams are significant to the artist as a means for creating a space that seems half way between the real and the surreal and indeed the surrealist notion of 'the harmony of disharmonious elements' is one the artist stands by.

An emotive object such as a diary or well-thumbed book, a school desk, blanket box, chess-set or even floor boards from a de-consecrated church- acquires a noble quality in Clegg's hands. His carefulness, born out in patient handling and workmanship, conveys his awe for the past and sense of responsibility. The question of what the present owes to the past, and the ultimate future that awaits us all is familiar throughout Baroque painting and indeed, the elements one associates with this era: vanitas, chiaroscuro and a dramatic sense of theatre, with death always 'waiting in the wings' also find a commonality in Clegg's work. Life – a see-saw that tips between tragedy and comedy, runs a vivid line through the artist's work sometimes taking the form of a bold outline, an etched groove or a delicate thread: a force that connects past to present and the surreal to the real.

Jane Neal