

PAINTINGS FOR PERSONS

October 13 – November 12, 2016

Opening Reception: Thursday, October 13, 6-8 PM

Sikkema Jenkins & Co. is pleased to present *Paintings for Persons*, an exhibition of work by Merlin James on view from October 13, 2016 through November 12, 2016.

James's solo exhibitions frequently feature new paintings alongside ones dating back across his career. As such they are sometimes wrongly classed as retrospectives or surveys. Rather, working and re-working images over extended periods, James presents all his paintings – from student works right to the latest – as essentially concurrent, to be viewed in the present, even while the changes in their physical and stylistic 'look' and their connotations and associations change through time. Such changes are actively engaged with as part of the complex way works of art continue to signify. His present exhibition again juxtaposes earlier and more recent paintings, and includes the diverse range of modes, formats and imagery for which the artist is known.

The exhibition is further built around several works the titles of which include a dedication to someone; sometimes an artist James may have an affinity with; sometimes a person he knows or has known personally; in some cases closer friends or family members.

The practice of dedicating works in this way is less common among visual artists than among poets or authors of books. To dedicate – as to entitle – is to use language performatively (in philosopher John Austin's sense), and it has many implications. For James it is part of his on-going play with factors like signature, date, title and even frame – apparently peripheral or adjunct material that is nevertheless part of the work, effecting its meaning.

The act of dedication highlights questions of audience and reception by specifying one privileged addressee. The more general audience is put in the position of 'listening in' to an exchange between the artist and the recipient of the dedication. In a sense the work is even gifted to the dedicatee, without becoming his or her physical possession, and a question is raised as to what constitutes the true ownership of a work of art.

Several of James's dedications are to known artists (and he will sometimes title works with artist's names). In such cases his long and involved dialogue with painting's history and evolution is especially evident. In more personal dedications – perhaps to a parent, or partner – we are made conscious of private biographical contexts that may or may not be permissible information in a critical reading of the painting. James has spoken and written frequently of the critical concept of 'biographical heresy' – the reduction of works of art to illustrations of their creator's life story. A number of portraits and figure paintings feature in the current show, and questions as to the anonymity/specificity of these and other subjects depicted are also alluded to in the dedications.

Despite the conventional propriety of sometimes only giving first name, or initials, nevertheless to dedicate a work of art remains paradoxically a more public than private act, presupposing other viewers for whom a hint is offered of a possibly unknowable 'back story' behind the creation of the piece. Most works of art are inevitably addressed to an audience of relative strangers, and ultimately to those coming to the work after the lifetime of the artist or of any individual for whom the work was supposedly made.

Indeed, as a sub-category of titling or naming, dedication may even suggest parallels or equivalences *between* paintings and persons – the senses in which works of art are also individual, having unique character and 'personality'. They finally present themselves to the viewer independently of the author's *envoi*.

Born in Cardiff, Wales, in 1960, Merlin James studied in London at the Central School of Art and the Royal College of Art. He currently lives and works in Glasgow, Scotland.

James' work has been exhibited widely, including in recent solo shows at CCA Glasgow (2016); Kunstverein Freiburg (2014); Parasol Unit, London; KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin (2013). In 2007 James also represented Wales at the 52nd Venice Biennale.

For additional information please contact Scott Briscoe at 212.929.2262 or scott@sikkemajenkinsco.com.

UPCOMING EXHIBITIONS:

TONY FEHER

Nov. 17 – Dec. 23