

“Duncan Poulton Word Salad”

–Rosa Tyhurst

Stored in folders on Duncan Poulton’s portable hard drive are thousands of images authored or generated by others. This archive is a sprawling 22.41GB of data gathered over the last two years and the basis for his solo show, *Factory Reset*. In these folders there are polystyrene takeaway boxes nestled beside fragments from an unfinished Egyptian tomb, creepy latex masks next to a Taiwanese train ticket, and close-ups of fish eyes alongside human hands mistakenly recorded when scanning a book. Pixelated and lossy, artist Hito Steyerl would call these “poor images”; ones that travel quickly and that are deemed suitable for our compressed attention spans. If high resolution images are privatised and inaccessible, these are for the proletariat – made, seen, and transferred quickly between the masses. However, this sharing is destructive. The images are degrading under our very eyes. And whereas Poulton’s archive only ever expands, you can never add more detail or information to a digital image.

In Poulton’s control this collection makes its way into enigmatic and dissonant digital collages. In one, *Victory, Loss* (2022), what looks like a knotty explosion of light on a black background is anthropomorphised by two animal eyes that are flanked by Grecian-style angels; a ribbon graphic acts as a stand-in smile. Cartoon droplets for tears run down from the eyes leading you to the word “Victory!” in small Gothic 8-bit font. Another (*Job Work*, 2021) brings together digitally generated signatures of the artist in a variety of handwritings courtesy of DocuSign®; a workplace accidents diagram and various office-related pictograms that are all overlaid onto a repeated image of a volcano erupting at night. I’m reminded of “Unpacking My Library: A Speech on Collecting”, where philosopher Walter Benjamin posits that collectors are “..dialectically pulled between the poles of disorder and order.” And that a collection can get tangled in a web of synchronicities and remembrances, forming sudden and unexpected alliances or parting from each other incongruously. Poulton’s arrangements make for a wild ride.

Produced during the UK’s nation-wide lockdowns in 2020 and 2021, when Poulton was compelled to move back to his childhood home, the works in *Factory Reset* were largely made in his teenage bedroom. It was there that his world, like many of ours, shrunk overnight. He began working, eating, sleeping, socialising, and making art, all in the same confined space. Processing this change, Poulton began hoarding images. In insomnia-fueled nights, with his face lit by the glow of a laptop screen, collages then started to emerge. And as each individual image slowly lost its distinctiveness, combined with others they became a kind of self portrait, a site of memory or mnemonic ritual.

We all seem to trip up when talking about time over the last two years. As we attempt to trace our activities over this period, a coherent timeline seems more slippery than usual. Most modern computers use the Unix epoch (January 1st, 1970 at 00:00:00 UTC), an arbitrary date that for computers is the start of time. When image files lose their date data, either from a transfer or file error, it often shows this date as default, a computer is unable to place it in relation to others. During the time of lockdowns and restrictions on our movements it was like our own clocks had defaulted – we too couldn’t chart our experiences in relation to others and so we wiped this time clean, almost like a factory reset.

For Poulton, *Factory Reset* is a beginning and an ending. It’s his first solo show but also a culmination of this work and archive. The exhibition brings together his digital collages as prints and videos, in an intricate and busy installation, remodelling the gallery into a chaotic, IRL, computer desktop. The works are made digitally but fabricated physically. Layered and annotated, elements are stuck on with glue, airbrushed and scribbled over with familiar signs or shapes totally out of proportion further, all combining to complicate an easy read. Poulton effortlessly flickers between states, evoking moments

when he was haunted by digital imagery and when he would misinterpret digital and physical spaces. Citing the strange haptics of digital mark-making, when basic pictorial graphics attempt to denote very physical experiences; where cursors and pictograms of spray paint canisters, pipettes, lassos and tins of paints are ciphers for the noisy thrill of spray painting, colour-matching, choosing items and painting everything the same colour, Poulton infuses both methods in his work. As if constantly zooming in-and-out of subjects and themes, he uses scale as a tool to encourage a close-looking and to playfully disrupt the viewer who must carefully navigate not only the content but also the space.

In 1992, when the Joint Photographers Expert Group (the committee that created the JPEG standard and other picture coding standards) were tasked to produce the eponymous digital compression they deduced that the most important visual aspect of an image, the one that the eye notices most, is the edges. In *Factory Reset*, the edges might hold the most importance too. They appear in the boundaries, borders and outlines of images, the scrappy frames and tables that hold up the works, that from one angle appear monstrous and the other, almost imperceptible. But it's also about the phone, or computer screen, the bedroom and our bodies, that are all so very susceptible and permeable. When you enter *Factory Reset* you become subsumed by Poulton's archive, it filters into you and you into it. These edges give you access but can also take it away.