



review soundings

Jonathan Callan

Hales Gallery, London
15 January – 19 February

When we were at school we were always told not to tear the pages out of books or scribble in them. Jonathan Callan's work is obviously telling us something different. He clearly thinks there is something to be said for the act of defacing and destroying the very thing that has been ingrained in us to hold sacred. As we enter the gallery we are presented with rows of books on long, desk-height plinths and on individual shelves of varying heights. Some books are open, some closed. Common themes such as famous paintings, city/country life and architecture are threaded throughout the books. The aim is not merely to destruct, but to transform. Sometimes this involves the arduous task of finely scraping away at the cover of a book, sometimes cutting into pages and manipulating lumps of silicone onto and between the pages, words and images.

It is unclear how important the content of the books are to the overall view of the work. The impression is that it is not an attack on specific books, the exhibition seems to focus more on the titles. The act of erasure by the artist references these titles. There are some exquisitely beautiful examples like *Country Life* where, with the use of photography, maps and landscapes have been blasted onto hardback covers. This leaves a visceral impression where skilled and delicate marks, which look like pin pricks, form the outlines of maps. These are set against much harsher mark making, where the layers of cardboard, which make up the cover, are exposed like earth on landscape reliefs. The art history books on the walls continue with this play on the surface of the image. In some of these, Callan has sculpted blobs of white silicone to replace heads in the representations of famous paintings, as in *Heads of Department*. Other works like *Practice* are more quirky and lighthearted, where black silicone is used to replace a picture of a dog in different positions. How do these works operate as art objects? If we assume that art is involved with the production of meaning, potentially everything is material for art. But the assertion of meaning also involves its cancellation, as one kind of meaning needs to be produced through denial. What Callan seems to be attempting is an erasure of the books' original meaning for a more personal truth which has to do with the excavation of an object's materiality, where the repetitive activity involved

is a source of discovery and transformation. Of course there is an inherent question in the work involving books as a source of learning. These works convey that this sense of materiality is a very important aspect to our learning, understanding and development. It is as if the artist wants to destroy the meaning of the words and images and bring the actual object of the book to life. Who cares anymore whether something is an art object and how it operates as such? Surely the important issue is its resonance and power to induce reflection and thought. Callan achieves this in a particularly understated but poignant way in this show, precisely by enticing the viewer into the physicality of his objects, which can be beautiful but are always frustrated, angry little things.

• **Bitter and Twisted, art critic.**