

NEW WORK MATT BRYANS

# Matt Bryans

"I like to push things to breaking point, and stop just before the material breaks down completely"



- 1 **Untitled (2004)**, erased newspaper cutting, 20.5 x 27cm
- 2 **Untitled (2005)**, erased newspaper cuttings, 33 x 44cm
- 3 **Untitled (2006)**, sandblasted wood installation (detail), 200 x 180cm
- 4 **Untitled (2006)**, erased newspaper cuttings, 61.1 x 72.5cm
- 5 and opposite **Untitled (2006-08)**, installation view, *Stray Alchemists*, Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing

MATT BRYANS first gained notice for his altered newspapers, in which he rubs out all background and facial details, leaving disembodied eyes and mouths suspended in an ectoplasmic haze. He typically plasters entire walls with these disturbing images, which have been seen as alluding to death, censorship, and information overload. Bryans' varied practice has since included creating panoramic landscape and outer space collages, fashioning skulls from discarded Christmas trees, and growing mould on his studio wall. His recent vast installation for *Stray Alchemists* at the Ullens Center in Beijing featured 27km of aluminium foil, as well as several years' worth of full moon photographs. Words such as gothic, surreal, mystical – and even silly – recur when contemplating Bryans' densely layered output. He says it's all about "reducing things to their origins". But perhaps, at root, lies simple wonder at nature – in all its grandeur and absurdity. **INTERVIEW: Paul Karey-Kent**

**What is your full name?**

Impressively biblical: Matthew James Daniel David Bryans.

**Why did you start erasing newspapers?**

I've been doing it since about 2002. I had lots of newspapers, pens and pencils lying around. When the pens ran out I used the pencils, and when they ran out I started to use the little rubbers some pencils had on the end. To me they were just materials to be investigated.

**Do you enjoy the way your newspaper works keep changing as they age?**

I don't want them to stay the same. Often they have rips anyway, and they will turn yellow or brown or curl at the edges or ripple, and I like all that. It's not really about the image, making them is just a moment in a process. When I started rubbing things out, I was also deliberately growing mould on the studio walls to see how the spore developed, and I felt that was related.

**Do you like the political or memorial echoes you get from newspapers?**

I'm presenting something of the content, but at the same time without any reverence so I'm almost working against it. I'm saying this is something to look at, but just as it's almost falling apart – and that's the tension I like.

**There's a certain equality in your undermining of the distinctions between celebrities and ordinary people which newspapers are so keen to promote...**

They could be anyone – or anything; there are lots of animals which go into them, too. At a certain point it's just a raw material. That underlies all my work, the aim of getting back to something very basic, reducing things to their origins. The newspaper can start to look like tree bark. People see ghostly or animal spirits but at the same time it is vegetable matter.

**Is it significant that your landscapes collage images from all over the world?**

In some ways... I moved around a lot as a kid, and I remember that wherever we went there were scenes on our walls of flat, generic reproductions which weren't particularly anywhere. You just thought "that's water", or "that's a mountain". So it's about bringing everything together that way.

**Are you doing less rubbing out now?**

Probably, yes, though it's always been only part of what I do. Or I do it differently: for the recent show in China I wasn't rubbing out images so much as establishing a weird psychedelic space around them.

**What are the Christmas tree skulls about?**

I absolutely can't stand Christmas, the way people feel they have to pretend to reinforce a bond which isn't there by repeating it. It isn't even a ritual, it's just an attempt at comfort. The Christmas tree represented that for me, and I started collecting them over the years, not knowing what I wanted to do with them. My studio smelled like a pine forest. I thought of how the tree gets so covered in decoration that you don't even notice that there's a tree underneath, and it made sense to try stripping the branches away with an axe. I liked it that there was a little hollow if you removed a branch. I put varnish into that, then chopped around it and got skulls.

**And what appeals about aluminium foil?**

It's like paper: very thin and flexible. You can always go back into it. The 20 metre high wall installation in Beijing used used balls of aluminium foil which I heated and then whacked the hell out with a hammer till they were flattened. I liked the sound of that. They end up fragile but surprisingly heavy. There were also thousands of tiny blobs of solder on the wall. The globe took 27 kilometres of aluminium foil, and local supplies ran out. There were eight days of

rolling on site by up to four people as it got heavier. What interested me was the nature of the changes as it went along, how hard it was to avoid it becoming a square, and the effect of rolling it on different surfaces. It was all a bit nutty – there were lots of people standing round gawking at me, and I enjoyed it.

**How do such public actions contrast with the more introverted task of rubbing out newspapers in a tiny studio?**

Both can have an element of performance. I like the way that with cave art you were living with the work where you made it. I used to work in my bedroom, which gives you some of that, and one time I did deliberately turn a studio into a mock bedroom. Now my studio floor is covered with newspapers: I work on the floor and I only put stuff on the wall when it's done.

**How do you know when you've finished?**

I like to push things to breaking point, and stop just before the material breaks down completely. I often go too far and destroy it!

**Are there any artists who influence you?**

I prefer to be a bit out of that. It's walking the streets that gets me going. In China, instead of going to the Great Wall, it was more fun to see how life worked in ordinary places.

**Finally, if you could live with any work of art in the world, what would it be?**

I'm reminded of Krazy Kat comic artist George Herriman, who kept all the proof sheets for his entire output. After his death his family kept these files in a leaky garage for a couple of decades. Twenty years of winter rain dripping regularly on those sheets finally welded them into a single, soggy, inseparable mass. Dried, a comics collector currently uses the remaining archive as a doorstop. **Exhibitions:** Kate MacGarry, London, 17 Oct–23 Nov; www.katemaagarry.com



All images courtesy Kate MacGarry, and Kate MacGarry, London. All photography installation view, *Stray Alchemists*, Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing. Photos: Oak Taylor Smith