



Reviews

Image as language: The calming stillness of Toby Christian's iPhone photography

Our take on 'No Odonata', currently showing at Belmacz...

By Shin Hui Lee January 19, 2023

Toby Christian Belmacz

No Odonata captures a quiet moment of reflection in British artist Toby Christian's (b. 1983) constantly evolving artistic practice. Presenting a series of black and white iPhone photographs taken from the artist's studio-garage window, this exhibition invites us to consider the minutiae of everyday life and to extrapolate from them an understanding of our own processes of looking.

As we enter the exhibition, we are met with two white walls uniformly lined with Christian's giclée prints. Each set back against stark surrounds and ensconced within brushed silver frames, they afford us the illusion of looking through a window ourselves. Where we typically look out of windows and expect to see cars passing by, trees swaying in the wind or strangers walking to random destinations, here we have no real comprehension of what we are seeing. Dark, indiscernible specks occupy Christian's windows, scarring the entirety of some like *Falling Throwing Leaves* (2020) and drifting coyly by the edges of others like *Tourbillion* (2020). Are they dust particles catching ephemeral beams of light? Are they cells pulsing under a microscope? Are they tiny insects flitting from point to point?



Toby Christian: *No Odonata*. Installation view

That we remain ignorant to their actuality is likely by design. Indeed, it is Christian's use of a tight, almost claustrophobic crop that removes all traces of externality or context. The only clues can be found in *Transfer* (2020) and *Scratched Waxing Flame* (2020), in which the dominant interplay of shadows provides a semblance of familiarity- the passing of time. Telling inflections of light and changing hues of the sky that transport us from dawn to dusk and dusk to dawn over and over again. Even then, it is difficult to identify whether these shadows are the

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effect of sunlight or moonlight. Evoking neither brightness or darkness, neither warmth or cold, they appear suspended in non-time and non-place like a memory never lived.

For Christian, looking out repeatedly from the same fixed point of his studio-garage window allowed him to hone in on details often glossed over in favour of the grander mise-en-scene. This is the same opportunity he now extends to us through these photographs. By denying us externality or context and thereby inducing a sense of disorientation, we are compelled to pay attention to what is simply right in front of us. What meaning we give to the specks and shadows is for us to decide. What exists beyond the crop is for us to fantasise about. At their core, Christian's photographs are a study in the temporality and fluidity of looking, an ode to those momentary reprieves from life that can only be found in stillness.



Toby Christian. *Falling Throwing Leaves*. 2020

No Odonata is an exhibition that makes perfect sense within Christian's oeuvre. Training first in sculpture, he later began writing as a means of recording various objects that he had come across. He was particularly fascinated by the close control afforded by language, and by extension its ability to exact objectivity in the future presentation of those objects. Objectivity was integral to Christian's writing as it facilitated an intimate, collaborative journey- one where writer and reader had to "imagine the object together" in the absence of visual cues. It seems counterintuitive, then, for him to choose to work with a medium as literal as iPhone photography for this exhibition. Yet, Christian's meticulous approach to presentation is what imbues his photography with that same level of objectivity mastered in his writing. Zoomed right in, we see exactly how much (or how little) he wants us to see within those 13 x 10 cm windows so that everything else is once again an exercise in imagination.

As such, Christian's work comes across as intensely personal despite its insistence on objectivity. Elsewhere, Christian has spoken before about his interest in "how a supposedly 'objective' description of something is inevitably inflected by subtle strains or nuances of meaning, which can actually produce a very subjective effect." This is telling insofar as the exhibition manages to be rather affecting without ever feeling manipulative. By not providing clarity as to what his photographs depict, we are eased into the thrilling freedom of imposing ourselves upon and subsuming ourselves within them. Perhaps Christian's triumph as an artist lies in his intuitive understanding of when to insert himself in and extract himself from his art.



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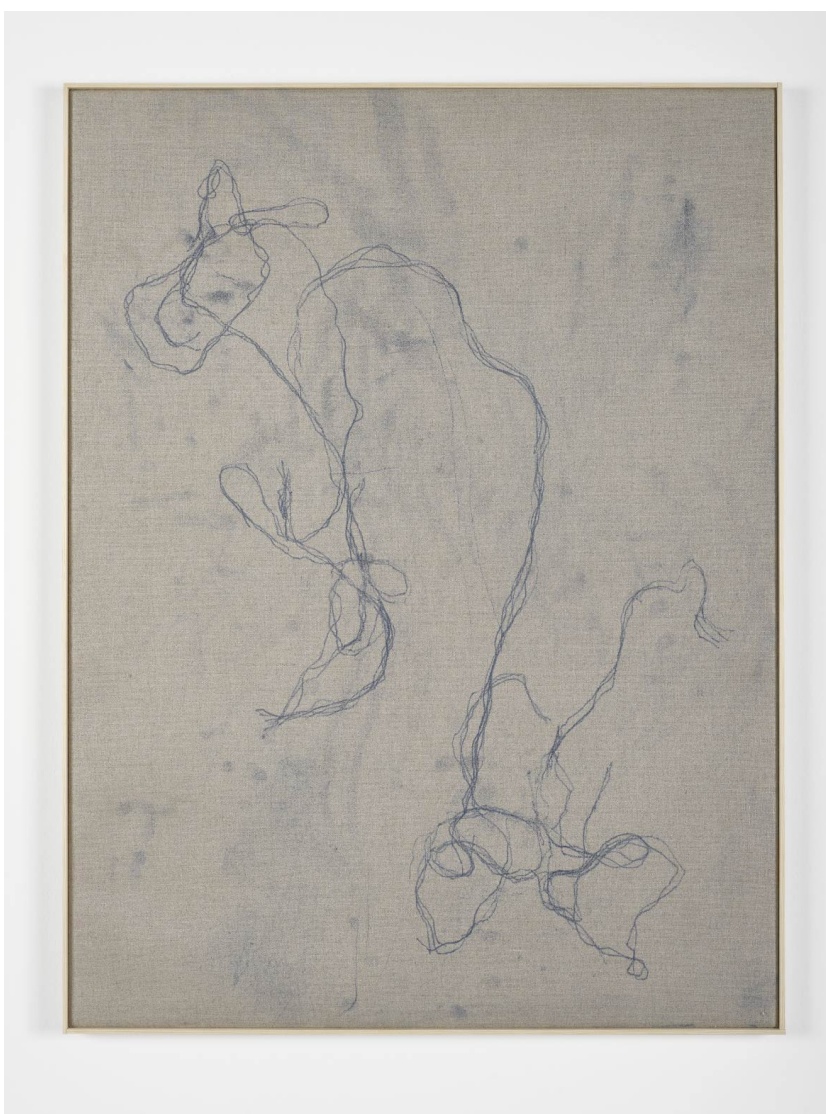
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Toby Christian. *Scratched Waxing Flame*. 2020

Downstairs at the exhibition, there are further indications of Christian's other ongoing project *Stringer*, an AI software which produces digital string sculptures in response to a user's speech. The drawings on display here, are pencil line-tracings of screenshots taken upon the artist individually speaking his photograph's titles into the software. Much like the specks in his photographs, these strings populate his linen canvases like foreign creatures, moving curiously, erratically even. *Stringer Study (no odonata)* (2023) is a particular stand-out, in the complexity of its movement, at times tracing over itself as if to create recognisable form (a horse, or perhaps a flower tilting out of a vase?). It is a shame that this piece is actually situated behind the gallery's office door, rendering it uncomfortable at times to truly appreciate it.

Nonetheless, the beauty of Christian's works is that they exist along continuous lines, always reacting to, growing with and learning from each other. *Stringer*, while still in the stages of refinement, offers fascinating insight into the burgeoning space between language, sculpture and technology that we can expect Christian's practice to inhabit in the years to come. If this exhibition leaves us feeling wanting at times, it is only because Christian so deftly suffuses an element of intrigue throughout his work.



Toby Christian, *Stringer Study (no odonata)*, 2022

Ultimately, *No Odonata* is an exhibition designed to be met and responded to by anyone. It is not pretentious. It is not esoteric. It is not meant for a specific art crowd. It simply is, and that is more than enough. Also, it is interesting to note that the back of the exhibition space is inhabited by a silver reflective wall. With images of us looking at the photographs looking straight back at us, we are left to contemplate the very experience of what it means to look at art.

Toby Christian: No Odonata is on view at Belmacz until 17th February 2023. Make sure to collect your Yamos on [the gowithYamo app](#) when you visit!

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