

KEITH COVENTRY: ONTOLOGICAL PICTURES

26 May – 28 June 2014

‘Ontology: Branch of metaphysics concerned with identifying, in the most general terms, the kinds of things that actually exist.’

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Keith Coventry's series of Ontological Pictures (1996 – 2004), like his celebrated Estate Paintings (1992-2000), comprise of visual elements lifted from the stylized aerial view plan maps common to British council estates replanted as isolated aesthetic forms onto the white, painted surfaces of jute canvases.

In the Estate Paintings, Coventry, famously used the diagrammatic representations of the buildings themselves that, when denuded of the surrounding information, strangely recall the formal aesthetic language of Suprematism - that aimed at the creation of a new, pure, abstract visual language freed from the dull constraints of representation.

In the Ontological Pictures, Coventry took the arrow and location symbols that accompany the legend YOU ARE HERE frequently found on those same estate maps, turning them into wooden models which he then scattered randomly onto the canvas to create the content of the paintings.

In both series the process of isolating and re-contextualizing these specific visual elements allowed Coventry to, with an extreme economy of expression animated by a subtle, dry wit, throw the ideological and theoretical meanings encoded in those symbols and the systems that spawned them, into stark relief.

In both series Coventry acutely mocks the utopian social hopes of certain strands of Modernism that conceived high-density urban housing as a solution to a raft of social ills of modern life.

In the Ontological Pictures, the critique becomes gently absurdist, treating the ubiquitous 'YOU ARE HERE' legends as if they were philosophical statements of an ontological nature. Taken as such, their tragic-comic bluntness, steamrollers over myriad, nuanced problems and traumas of modern life, both those specific to the various failures of progressive visions of how society might be reengineered, be that the relations between the individual and the collective or between rich and poor as well as the universal philosophical problem of existence itself.

This is the first show dedicated to this important series.