

The Alwast Aesthetic at a Glance

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The names for things sometimes resonate more than they should. Take 'Colgate Palmolive Park' for instance. I would love to live next to this park because it summons up the imagery of Colgate Palmolive advertising; all the cleanliness and comfort implied by their corporate slogan "bright smiles, bright futures". In Peter Alwast's 2006 video *Delivery*, a representative of the Colgate Palmolive Corporation and a member of the local government gathered there to speak about what 'community' meant to them. Although such a conceptually-driven work is unusual in the context of the rest of his oeuvre, situating the video within a park called 'Colgate Palmolive' was pure Alwast.

Alwast taps into the fact that metonymies are encountered on a daily basis, particularly within advertising. Filmmakers such as David Lynch show us how names can conjure up a character's personality; 'Frank Booth' is claustrophobic, 'Jeffery Beaumont' is light and suburban, 'Mr. Eddy' is dominant and shifty, and 'Nikki Grace' is glamorous yet

reserved. Like Lynch, Alwast deals with words as shortcuts to particular yet elusive feelings – whether this is in exhibition titles such as *Working Like a Tiger* (2005), *Now That the Neighbours Can Dance* (2006) or *Places That Don't Exist* (2007), titles of particular works such as *Janek the Cloud* (2007), or within the works themselves such as "I am pregnant, single and on an island in the middle of nowhere" which features in the video *Night Sky* (2006). He uses words that have a utopian sensibility, even if they sound empty.

Alwast combines an interest in words with imagery that arises out of an interest in drawing. Drawing informs the videos which inform the paintings which inform the videos which inform the drawings. As in the work of German painter Sigmar Polke, behind an apparent arbitrariness is a select range of imagery which is recycled and combined with different working methods. The most important element of both Polke's and Alwast's practice is their attentiveness to the mediums in which they work.



Still from 'Janek the Cloud', 2007, Digital Animation.

It is also an element that is often critically undervalued, particularly by those who are fixed within a Duchampian tradition in which the materiality of the art object represents a kind of puerileness that the concept should overcome. In contrast to Polke, Alwast isn't entirely free of the intellectual guilt which can result from simply making aesthetically-driven pictures. His work is restless and questions both the conceptual and the intuitive approaches to art making. This ambivalence is evident in his fluctuations from illusory space to the brute reality of the picture plane, from an interest in the plain physicality of things to the mystery that they behold, from self-conscious perspective to unconscious doodling.

Like his use of words, Alwast's imagery is particular yet elusive. Even though one might become familiar with his repertoire of images, his work always gives the impression that you are encountering it for the first time. Whether it is drawing, video, painting or sculpture, Alwast is continually building, dismantling and then rebuilding again; constructing an aura of rigour that justifies his love of abstraction.

Places That Don't Exist, Peter Alwast, 2007