

The Observer Art

William Kentridge; Uwe Wittwer review - exhilarating and melancholy

Laura Cumming Sun 13 Sep 2015 08.00 BST



Cracking Glass (after Jarman), 2015 by Uwe Wittwer. © Uwe Wittwer; courtesy Parafin, London

Uwe Wittwer is much admired in his native Switzerland but scarcely well known here, despite a career stretching back 20 years and works in galleries all over the world, including the Metropolitan Museum, New York. His paintings are pensive, delicately made and distinctly elusive in their bewildering range of imagery, from Dutch interiors and Swiss landscapes to old-master art, their allure as mysterious as their often spectral content.

A row of ruined buildings shines white in the light, the gaping windows a series of burning black holes; each has a number written below it, as if the image was some kind of document. A cottage in a dark landscape that appears to be cracking like concrete is based on Derek Jarman's home at Dungeness, Kent, the image remarkably expressive in its low-toned quietude. The famous white garden at nearby Sissinghurst, light and dark reversed, turns into a glowering forest of black firs.

Images are slippery; painters who work from photographs, such as Gerhard Richter and Luc Tuymans, have been making this point for years. But Wittwer has something else in mind. He can take apart Poussin's *The Triumph of Pan*, reconfiguring the elements of its composition over and again in semi-abstract variations that seem to unleash the intensely structured violence of the original. He can take an image of a solitary card-player and make the painting itself seem lonely.

The high point of this show is a suite of 28 monochrome paintings, each image appearing to emerge from the words it partially covers – fragments of TS Eliot's *The Waste Land*. What you're looking at is both a mood and a time of war, as it seems: watchlights, slumped bodies, industrial compounds, a cottage seen through a viewfinder, blazing buildings, a sepia photograph of a grandma and child in some other long-ago summer. History spools through these images, casting shadows everywhere, as it runs through their source, Jarman's hypnotic masterpiece, *The Last of England*. The effect of Wittwer's marrying of word and picture is that each haunts the others and every painting feels lifted on some kind of breeze – funereal, but no longer static.