

SEAN KELLY

Spence, Rachel. "The real thing," *The Financial Times*, July 13, 2012.

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The real thing



'Cornered #4' (2012)

There is little new about James White's paintings. His photorealist technique draws on a heritage that started with Gerhardt Richter in the 1960s; his subject matter – fugitive glimpses of mundane interiors – has fascinated painters since the Flemish Old Masters set their Madonnas in sunlit, clutter-filled salons.

So the joy of this exhibition, *Cornered*, is that it reminds you that innovation matters less than imagination; painstaking craft counts for more than faux-philosophical concepts; and that there is nothing more viscerally moving than the tension produced by a painter with a passion for light and a distaste for emotion – think Richter, Robert Ryman, or, at his best, Luc Tuymans.

Born in 1967, White showed with the Young British Artists in the 1990s but his decision to keep faith with the unfashionable medium of Leonardo and Rembrandt probably did him no favours. Yet other painters, Tuymans for example, and the American John Currin, have shown that the 21st-century art pantheon is not an oil-free zone. However, their vocabulary – dark, ironic, exhaustingly self-aware – is far from White's language.

For this is a painter enthralled by what he sees where he finds himself: a plughole in the shower; four glasses on a table; a tangle of electric cable and guitars; a wooden staircase spiralling into nowhere. In the past, he has added tantalising glimpses of human intimacy: a pair of cast-off stilettos, the designer label on a shirt in the wardrobe. Yet for the six new works on show at the Max Wigram gallery only the toiletries scattered on a bathroom basin hint that the bland, anonymous spaces – he likes to paint hotel rooms from photographs taken in the small hours, a habit that must ramp up the air of suspended limbo – shield private lives.

That is the science bit. The soul of White's paintings spring from his gift for paint itself. He sticks to black and white yet finds fifty shades of grey in the reflections in a bathroom mirror. Thanks to meticulous white highlights, his quartet of glasses is simultaneously a triumph of dullness and dazzle. The plughole sits proudly in an ocean of shabby grouting and scuffed ceramics. The grain on the wooden staircase pulses with mineral energy.

In certain ways, these new canvases mark a departure. Other than the muddle of musical instruments, all enjoy a cleaner architecture than previous works. The swooping arabesque of the staircase, exquisitely countered by the curve of a handrail, testifies to a Tatlin-like grasp of pure form.

Like most photorealists, White has too often been judged purely on how lifelike he can render his vision. Yet a painting that is indistinguishable from a photograph might as well not be a painting at all. Recent innovations suggest he is aware of the danger. His decision to shift from plywood to aluminium bestows a liquid shimmer that boosts the painterliness of the image. A wide metallic band left blank at the bottom of each painting underlines the leap from one-dimensional void to three-dimensional presence, thereby magnifying the artistic illusion.

White himself has said that he feels close to On Kawara, a conceptual painter who uses minimal tools – a sequence of canvases bearing single dates, for example – than a photorealist like Chuck Close. Like Kawara's, White's paintings can be seen as meditations on time; but while Kawara's numerals merely highlight its merciless passing, White's lingering homage to the material world reminds us of those lost moments where the human eye is absent yet the world keeps turning.

But the real strength of his art lies in its capacity to transcend all concepts. Like his Flemish ancestors, White shows us how the extraordinary properties of oil can translate the secular into something close to sacred. Don't be distracted by photographs and realism; White's passion – and ours when we look at his work – is for paint.

'James White: Cornered', Max Wigram Gallery, London, until August 11