

Guy de Cointet



Guy de Cointet
I Smoke all the Time
 1983
 Ink on paper
 51x65 cm

Greene Naftali, New York, USA

Guy de Cointet's *I Smoke all the Time* (1983) is a drawing in red ink and an admission in delicate pencil. It is also a ciphered rendering of that titular sentence – the eponymous words buried in the interlocking mountains, valleys, snowlines, church steeples and windows that seem the work's subject matter. Of course, *I Smoke all the Time* might also be a fire (where there is smoke, after all); the lines are so stacked, so red, and so pyrrhic. It's most certainly a confession, too. But whose? Is it made in jest? Out of frustration? With a wink or a nod?

And so we're left to wring our hands and wonder – as Polonius must have when young Hamlet went on and on about the oddly insightful clouds above – how all the meanings are there in the symbols, floating in a disjointed conversation between shapes, circumstances and cohabitating narratives.

Such is the wonderful question of De Cointet's work, most famously asked in his theatrical pieces, but reiterated with great nuance in "Works on Paper" at Greene Naftali. This solo show, the first in New York since his death in 1983, comprised 17 drawings from the 1970s and '80s, video documentation of four dramatic works performed by the actress Mary Anne Duganne Glicksman at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, in 1985, and a one-night-only performance of three of those same dramatic pieces done live by Glicksman in the gallery's main room.

Of all the gold present at the show – and there was a great deal – the live performance glittered most. *My Father's Diary* (1975), in which Glicksman tells a tale of fleeing war, while displaying, decoding and taking direction from a 'curiously shaped green book' filled with broken diagrams, hieroglyphic doodles and signifiers of other varieties, is De Cointet at his best; strolling the lines between symbolic systems, conjuring narrative worlds that open on to the damndest places, and having a laugh all the while. This is the stuff of his legend, part of the grist that made its way to Mike Kelley's mill.

The drawings on display, despite sparkling a bit less, are precious metals in their own right. With mirrored writing, turns of phrase as likely pulled from Charles Baudelaire as roadside billboards, and a striking sense of polysemic shapes, De Cointet's works on paper perform as cheeky and self-aware a structuralist two-step as any of his scripted theatrical pieces, with a hand as light as the pencilled script he sets next to his heavily inked patterns and forms. They ask disarmingly straightforward questions about the way meaning is made, a sensible line of inquiry for those in the business of making things that mean.

Graham T. Beck