Derek Sprawson *Altars* by Nicolas Alfrey.

For his recent exhibition at TG, Derek Sprawson showed new free-standing works, two occupying the first of the small rooms, another in the one beyond, together with two earlier paintings in the short corridor that connects them. The free-standing works (it is tempting to refer to them as polychrome sculptures, but they are really more like paintings in three dimensions) were made with these spaces in mind, although they are not strictly speaking site-specific. They occupied the spaces comfortably, though visitors needed to negotiate a careful passage round the largest of them, *Immolation- Stance*, in the further room. Their forms may be abstract, but there is something almost animal-like about them, so that they make us think of creatures in their stalls, alert and vital even when there is no human presence in proximity.

The materials and processes involved in constructing the pieces, on the other hand, suggest that an analogy with furniture might be nearer the mark, rather than one with animals. They are made out of birch ply, glued and clamped in successive layers, giving them the light and supple character of a certain kind of modernist furniture, and like pieces of furniture, are suitably scaled for the rooms in which they are situated, which after all were formerly domestic spaces (TG is located in what was originally the school caretaker's living quarters). They are somewhat more makeshift in the crafting than pieces of furniture, however, and don't have as many layers of ply as would be needed to make them weight-bearing or completely stable. Their forms are improvised rather than designed. Instead of the reassuring elegance of modernist furniture, moulded for comfort, style or utility, they have a faintly ungainly, even comical quality. They take us not so much to the world of designers such as Alvar Aalto or George Nelson as to that of Philip Guston, an artist whose disruptive vision has long been a touchstone for Sprawson.

An interest in the materiality of painting has always been a significant part of Sprawson's practice. His early canvases often carried a formidable weight of pigment on heavy-duty stretchers, and while his mode of painting has become more understated, and the pigment thinner, his preference for working with a mixture of oil and wax ensures that his medium still has a tactile, malleable quality. He has always been attentive to the properties of the support, the relative density of the canvas thread, its weft and texture, and regards the making of the stretchers as an integral part of the whole process of painting. The recent pieces even have a certain resemblance to stretchers, but no canvas is stretched across the intervals they enclose. The birch-ply structure itself becomes the painted surface, with the paint applied on both sides so that there is no longer any conventional sense of front and reverse. The odd configurations make some sections of the surface awkward to access, so that what might appear to be a matter of painting with free gestural strokes is in practice not so straightforwardly achieved. Unadulterated oil paint is the medium only in the case of *Waiting-stance*: in addition to oil, the other two pieces involve gouache, wax and graphite powder (*Sfumato-stance*) and gouache and egg tempera (*Immolation-stance*). The layering and mixing of mediums means that the colours - grey, yellow and pink - have a richness of effect that belongs to abstract painting.

Sprawson's interest in the relationship between two and three-dimensional modes is evident in his imagery as well as in his emphasis on materiality and process. It has been a longstanding preoccupation, as is signalled in this exhibition by the inclusion of the two earlier paintings here. Across the modest spaces of the gallery, a series of exchanges are set up between these paintings and the recent free-standing work.

The attenuated forms in the paintings were ultimately derived from commonplace objects, strongly lit from an oblique angle so that substance and shadow are confounded. The compositions arrived at in this way were then photographed, and the image projected on to a canvas already prepared as a single colour field with oil paint mixed with wax. The projected image was then traced out with small brushes, the pigment partially dissolving the wax on contact. In *Immutable*, the larger of the two paintings, a group of trestles that provided the original motif (picking up, perhaps not entirely coincidentally, on that idea of furniture already noted) has become transformed into an open mesh, not so much floating against the grey field as fused with it.

At TG, *Immutable* is first seen down the corridor, framed in the doorway, its surface visible at an oblique angle. It is a large canvas, and in this context can only be properly seen at close range, in such a way that its

tactile qualities are made most evident. We might think of the painting as the tracing of a lost object, from a lost room, now rendered as an enigmatic configuration in two dimensions. Meanwhile, in the real spaces of the two adjacent rooms, mysterious painterly objects hold their own.

The TG website for the exhibition features a lustrous black and white photograph of the interior of a church, with objects arranged on a table in celebration of a harvest festival. The picture was taken by the artist's father, a keen, perhaps obsessive, amateur photographer, and comes from an archive of his photographs that has become increasingly meaningful for Sprawson in the years following his father's death. The photographic archive includes some striking images of the redevelopment of the Liverpool district of Everton in the late 1960s. This was the community in which his father had lived, and in which the artist himself grew up, captured in the process of radical transformation. Sprawson had taken to pinning up enlargements of some of these images on his studio wall - dense blocks of Victorian terraced housing interrupted by the blank spaces of clearance, the streets in which he had played as a child - and even considered ways in which he might incorporate the photographs directly into his own work as a 'found' element. But while this might suggest that themes of memory, dislocation and loss, both personal and social, have begun to inform his art, there is no explicit trace of this in either the form or presentation of the work on display here.

The choice of that photograph of the harvest festival is nevertheless significant, not least because the title of the exhibition, *Altars*, so clearly derives from it. The photograph shows a table groaning with produce: fruit, vegetables, flowers, bottles with labels, vessels of various shapes, a silver dish, while behind it the ornamental woodwork of the organ gleams with reflected light. On the face of it, this is an unexpected image for the artist to go with: it is sumptuous and cluttered, with detail often obscured by deep shadow, whereas his own compositions tend to be spare and understated, with an overall paleness and closeness of tone. But the motif of the altar does connect with Sprawson's interest in sacred places and pilgrimage routes, considered both as places to generate work and as locations in which to site it, and with his wider concerns with questions of faith, yearning and doubt.

A few years ago Sprawson showed work in the remote Lincolnshire church at Laughton, and although the TG could hardly be more different as a venue, the affinities between the two exhibitions are worth tracing out. He called his show at Laughton *The Island of 20,000 Saints*, alluding to Bardsey Island off the tip of the Llyn Peninsula in North Wales, where according to legend twenty thousand saints are buried, and a place that has long fascinated him. Laughton was also significant as an early showing of his painted structures made of birch ply, constructed on that occasion on a very modest scale; he chose to display them not in the main spaces of worship, least of all the altar, but in window embrasures or on ledges. They were discrete interventions, conceived to work just at the threshold of attention (with their bright colours and unfamiliar shapes), but at the same time self-effacing, deceptively casual, easily overlooked. By contrast the work at the TG on a larger scale and displayed in a space now dedicated to the encounter with art. The same sensibility is recognizably at work, however, the same oblique approach to meaning, the sense of something deliberately withheld, but the sense, too, of something risked and ventured.

Even the most devout pilgrim might be sceptical about the idea that 20,000 saints are really buried on Bardsey Island, and certainly Laughton was never a shrine to any particular saint. And perhaps no saints at all have ever been associated with the former school at the corner of Seely and Ilkeston Road in Nottingham where the TG is now located. But that does nothing to detract from the idea that some kind of revelation might be close.