



Steve Bishop, *Deliquescing* (detail), 2018, mixed media. Installation view. Photo: Frank Sperling.

Steve Bishop

KW INSTITUTE FOR CONTEMPORARY ART

Steve Bishop's installation *Deliquescing*, 2018, greeted viewers who entered from the left staircase with a cloud of mist, both literal and metaphorical. The real haze was rising from a pair of ultrasonic humidifiers, which, like the rest of this five-part excursion, registered as part of a nebulous clinical environment constructed from false walls—wooden frames shrouded in semiopaque polyethylene tarp—and divided up by PVC crash doors. The drifting vapor's import was hinted at straightaway by a scrolling text, in all caps, on a wall-mounted monitor. The text recounted its narrator's difficulties remembering faces and names, and his or her mother's mental confusion after the death of her husband, leading the narrator to protectively humor her delusions. Less understandable, at this point, was the presence of myriad wrapped objects on shelves, which looked like big chunks of meat with fungi growing out of them. These were specimens of the lion's mane mushroom, *Hericium erinaceus*—happily growing here due to the specific atmospheric conditions Bishop had set up—which apparently stimulates nerve growth in the brain, is sold as a smart drug, and is being studied as a treatment for Alzheimer's disease.

Moving deeper into the show, we encountered paintings behind areas of tarp, blurred but discernible as landscapes. These, we were told, render vistas from a deserted town in northern Canada (Bishop, who is thirty-five, is based in London but was born in Toronto) "built in 1981 to house the workers of a nearby mine and then abandoned in 1983." This place is the subject of a twenty-four-minute video comprising a series of steady, probing pans that reveal its structures to be remarkably preserved thanks to the efforts of a live-in caretaker, who mows lawns, heats buildings, and ensures the surrounding forest doesn't crash through the windows. Bishop's camera explores tenebrous basements and an airy room full of bookshelves—one might have been primed, by this point, to think of the African proverb that holds that when an old person dies, it is as though a library has burned down. At one point, the artist startlingly cuts to a room where a body appears to be lying on the floor; but it's only a CPR dummy in a first-aid room. More dummies lean blankly against the walls, their characterless, identikit faces looping smartly back to the prosopagnosia alluded to in the opening text video. The camera crosses the room, landing on a wall of tennis trophies, evoking forgotten glories.

The Canadian footage came to inflect the rest of the show—more refrigerated cabinets containing more lion's mane, more paintings gone fuzzy—with the fuzziness starting to pivot. These paintings were ungraspable but also protected; the viewpoint was simultaneously from the inside of a damaged mind and from that of a carer, a supporter; the mushrooms both protected and protectors; the mist an enabler of growth and a model of fogged cognition. On display here was an ecosystem of confusion and assistance that felt, in its focused inventiveness, deeply personal. One might have assumed that Bishop, though his work has long dealt broadly with architecture and interior space, has a family member afflicted by mental illness or dementia, perhaps with the kind of ailment—such as, indeed, early-onset Alzheimer's—that's hereditary, and the show endorsed the magical fungus with a feeling of hopeful grasping. As Michael Pollan reports in his recent book *How to Change Your Mind*, the bioactive properties of such organisms are increasingly being harnessed by researchers. *Deliquescing*, outside of its formal gaming with surfaces, thereby spoke to a hinge moment in medical science, a sort of mushrooming of understanding, and I suspect Bishop wouldn't mind if it one day came to look quaint.

— Martin Herbert