



# LUKE BURTON

## *Westminster Coastal*

BOSSE  
& BAUM

8 February - 2 March 2024



## Luke Burton – Westminster Coastal Text by Octavia Bright

Politics is like weather – you can ignore it if you want, but eventually at some point it will ruin your day. It can be ‘good’ and it can be ‘bad’. What constitutes ‘good’ or ‘bad’ is more subjective than we like to think. Its impact is uneven: what amounts to a small annoyance for the well protected can be devastating for those who aren’t. Most of us accept it without really knowing how it works. In both cases, the general outlook seems to be getting worse.

People have been painting the weather forever, but painting politics is trickier. How do you use pigment to represent a system of governance? How do you show its mechanisms, its scope, its violence? Its pomp and its circumstance? Its absurdity? How do you paint the opaque bits of its very specific language? Or the way it touches everything from the most mundane, such as the food we eat, to the most consequential, things like citizenship, healthcare, and human rights? And what about the fact that those in power so often treat the whole thing like a game?

Language is where politics starts, so why not begin with a word? Westminster: a borough, a palace, a metonym for Parliament. A place where people live, that tourists visit, where government happens, and has for centuries. Westminster has historical baggage.

In front of the High Altar inside Westminster Abbey lies a bejewelled pavement. Commissioned by Henry III and decorated with an intricate pattern of inlaid coloured stone and glass, every monarch has been crowned there since the twelve hundreds. Beneath the seat of power (beneath the royal arse), you’ll find opalescent shards. If we decorate what’s precious, does this encourage us to treasure our subjugation?

Half a mile away, those same jewel tones glow on the pavements on Marsham Street, where on good weather days sunlight illuminates a canopy of coloured glass. It fringes a long, white building made up of lines and grids and cubes, which looks a bit like a crossword. The people puzzling away inside are concerned with Law and Order, working under the sign of an oxymoron: the Home Office. A home is where you live and an office is where you work. A home is where you relax and an office is where you submit yourself to hierarchies of productivity and systems of power. (Apart from when the pandemic arrived and collapsed the boundary, indefinitely making offices of all our homes.)

Behind the bejewelled facade, anonymous bureaucrats follow procedures to decide who gets to be at home here. They’re officious about the meaning of home inside that office (it’s not very homely inside that office). Who are they, these besuited cogs, steadily powering the machinery of the state? What do we call them? Like ‘home’ and ‘office’, it’s the absurdist vocabulary of government that brings together the ‘civil’ and ‘servant’ of their title. A civil servant claims political impartiality – always measured and polite. But does a servant have the freedom to be uncivil? And is it really possible for a person to leave their partiality behind?

What happens if you give a face or two to these shadowy attendants of order? Portraits of political men sit in a long lineage of white masculine features committed to canvas or stone. Inside the Home Office of course they’re not all white men, but the big bosses usually are. If you pick a few of them out of the line up, will anyone recognise their faces? Their individual humanity? Will anyone recognise the toll taken by this kind of work? The current head of the Civil Service, Simon Case, has been signed off on medical leave, and in 2021 his colleague Sir Philip Rutnam was awarded a large payout by the government after making bullying claims against the Home Secretary, Priti Patel. Inside her Home Office, whose humanity do they recognise, anyway?

Looking at the body politic, we might consider what fuels it. Hurried breakfasts in boardrooms, endless apples, baskets of croissants no longer a treat but a commonplace, their crumbs delicately adorning lapels. In the mornings, perhaps the home invades the office. Later in the day, do the bins in there overflow with the detritus of modern day treasures, glistening empty packets of boldly named snacks? Future relics, un-biodegradable. In spite of their efforts, have the Space Raiders infiltrated the system? A bureaucracy is a hungry beast. It feeds on rules and regulations, digesting ideology and spewing it out as law and order, sowing the government’s seeds. It leaves a trail of dusty filing cabinets. When you’re on the receiving end of its unfeeling conclusions, any of its cross words, a bureaucracy is at best a puzzle, at worst a monstrous, arbitrary machine.

So, how do you paint all that? Politics and painting are systems of representation, one of few things they have in common. Both are open to interpretation, and given meaning by the sense we choose to make of them. In which case, maybe the way to paint politics is simply to start by painting something, anything at all.

*Design by Lida Koutromanou*

Image: Luke Burton, *Sir Crawford Dunlop Falconer Nine Letters First Letter 'F'*, 2024, acrylic and oil on canvas