

Horror

“Terror is as much part of the concept of truth as runniness is the concept of jam. We wouldn’t like jam if it didn’t, by its very nature, ooze. We wouldn’t like truth if it wasn’t sticky, if, from time to time it didn’t ooze blood.” – Jean Baudrillard¹

To equate images of the horrific with those of an erotic foundation, or a moment of frivolous activity of a minor celebrity with a person being tortured, places this imagery into a sphere of thought plagued with the ironies and difficulties involved in narcissistic pursuit. It broaches the subject of the nonchalant approaches to information consumption and instantly involves it becoming polemic by its very nature. The Marquis de Sade established the idea that the manifestation of horror in creativity was a response to a world desensitized to violence (in his essay *Idee sur les Romains*), and horror is often an exorcism of the cultural fear of moral disintegration. Within my recent work there is very deliberately an element of instigating this train of thought. It is not only images of people climaxing that are depicted. Dotted amongst these faces in ecstasy are celebrities, politicians, pornography, journalistic images of torture, impacts of violence and grief.

To incite an anxiety when viewing imagery as to whether the image is made out of pleasure or otherwise, involves an element of considering one’s approach to image consumption, and should you choose to purchase or even select an image as a favourite, there is an element of fear to voicing this opinion as the image may have originated from a site of despair. “Fear is one of life’s most powerful emotions – it is immediate, it is very instinctual and in art, it is a way to connect to the viewer in seconds. It is a language that can communicate politics, rebellion and humour all at the same time.”²

It is this cacophony of emotion that allows for an image to become intriguing, though, and by its very nature, the beauty of the painted object becomes compromised by its very intention as an image. Making use of a similar treatment when approaching each image, yet removing the contextualization of the background, I focus on the

expression of the faces on each character, and as the liquid melts to form an imitation of human emotion, multiple failures begin to occur. By pausing a video, and removing a still, the image is already pixelated, by increasing the size of the image and printing it out, the image is once again diminished, and by attempting to paint from this image and to depict a human expression the imagery is compromised. I have also contended with watercolour as a medium, in relation to its lack of longevity and fragility, by way of the fact that it can so

simply be erased. All of these processes can relate to the diminished capacity of a horrific image to create an impact.

Benjamin Alexander Huseby describes the inextricable links between horror and sex;

“Horror has also always been linked to sex, specifically the failure to repress sexual desire.

Sex breaks the boundaries of conservative society – its not clean or hygienic. It’s

animalistic, irrational, violent, and powerful. In a way, the sexual element that underlies

horror is what makes (art which deals with horror) political. This art focuses on the idea of turning society upside down.”³

Sexualised imagery is enticing, intriguing, mischievous and has a sense of the forbidden to

it. As does supposed private images of celebrity in paparazzi situations. They are linked to

a desire, be it animalistic, idealistic, it maintains the sense of a want; the desire to be

more, to have something to strive to be. Yet there is an ambivalence to these notions,

which counteracts considerations of empathy and places a spotlight upon narcissism.

What can one deem an image of pleasure? What makes the activity of viewing particular

images pleasurable? With all kinds of imagery at such easy access through YouTube,

Google, and other internet sources, how does this impact upon contemporary forms of

visual imagery? And due to the popularity of particular images, how does this reflect on

contemporary society? Paul Wombwell broaches the subject in his essay on contemporary

celebrity culture and how its effects are rippling through society. "The recent sale of images of Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie's newborn twins for \$15 Million to Hello! and People magazines is now the highest price ever paid for a photographic work. It overshadows any price that a fine art photographic work has ever fetched at auction. The world of celebrity photography is now the market that defines the value of photography."4

The fact that imagery of celebrity is, not only more lucrative, but seems to be becoming more successful than the fine art photograph, is intriguing. Particularly with the ambivalent nature which one flicks through and consumes such imagery. If contemporary theorists are to be believed, celebrity culture has become a source of worship and meditation, much as the body beautiful has become its temple. "For many people, meaning and self-identity are derived from the world of the celebrity, where previously they usually derived from religion, There is a sense that because the famous live on through their reputations and images after death, they preserve a part of themselves for eternity, and as a result may achieve the kind of afterlife promised by religion."5

Through Internet imagery there has been a shift of focus to highlighting a new economy based not on intelligence, leadership, or the ability to create an impact on the world, but to play out one's private life in full view of an anticipant public hungry for the latest development. So much so that many aims for the future involve a total lack of empathy for anguish, and focus spectacularly singularly on objects, which are of monetary value (the painted image included), and on beauty, which can now be achieved on a monetary basis also.

"We have no faces on electronic money, but the faces of celebrities are standard gold. They are the new currency based on the individual, where photographic images are traded on the pages of websites and weekly magazines. This is the land of the new economy, where wealth is based on intangible assets such as looks."6

Because the Internet is a global phenomenon it categorises a reflection on how imagery is

viewed. What is interesting to me about painting from the Internet is that everything happens within a flat space. There is an illusory aspect to it. And by depicting such imagery through a painted surface I am attempting to activate a critical response to both the painting as beautiful object and the nature of viewing imagery as a curious activity. If a painting is to depict horrific or even erotic events, does it remain an object of beauty, or something cringe-worthy, shameful? The notion of enticing and tricking a viewer into an

intimate or erotic moment, when essentially they could be viewing a victim of a tsunami, short-circuits this moment of pleasure, with something else: it draws attention to a lack of attention. Fear, terror and horror allow for a level of unsettled twinges to instigate thought about the context in the consumption of imagery. What is evident within each of the expressions within the series I have created is that the burdens of the world seem to culminate into a moment of release, a moment of feeling something, a moment of being alive. By clouding the origin of the story from which the individual depicted has come to this expression, it allows for the viewer to implant their own imagination upon the work, they take from it what they desire the image to say, yet it is somewhat unsettling to consider that this image may, in fact, be an image of torture. "The ideal plane of the painting is a theatre of de-figuration, a space of conversion where the relationship between words and visual forms anticipates visual de-figurations still to come."⁷

The series of images within my final exhibition of work could be seen as relative to notions of the sentence-image: "constructing not the 'designerless dress of reality', but the seamless fabric of co-presence – the fabric that at once authorizes and erases all the seams; constructing the world of 'images' as a world of general co-belonging and interexpression."

⁸ Each screaming face is a voice of contemplation upon the horrors and ecstasies which exist from moment to moment, and the vitality of being alive, in terms of

existing within a space where the opportunity for both extremes could elapse itself at any moment. These instances of sheer emotion are what inspires this monotonous churn through existence, the possibility of something happening. “The power of the sentence-image is thus extended between these two poles, dialectical and symbolic; between the clash that effects the division of systems of measurement, and the analogy which gives shape to the great community; between the image that separates and the sentence which strives for continuous phrasing.” 9

Postmodern culture seems to expect a level of opposition to the norm. Yet, in participating in such activity as internet networking, and attempting to project oneself as an alternative open-minded character willing to publicly climax for your viewing pleasure, is this not similar to any other hegemonic structure that can be found on facebook or myspace? They can all be placed under a similar categorization. The difficulty attached to such activity is that of the sheer pleasure in creating such imagery, yet when it is compared to torturous events, the expressions, the open mouths, the eyes radiating with a sense of release, and the melting conditions of the resultant imagery and of how they are seen, all become a brief snapshot in attempts to survive, to become significant, to be documented, recorded, to become immortal.

1 Benjamin Alexander Huseby, “The Art of Fear”, Dazed and Confused; Vol 2, issue 66 oct 08

2 ibid, pg 161

3 ibid, pg 161

4 Paul Wombwell ,”The Britney Economy”, British Journal of photography 03/09/08 vol 155, pg 22

5 ibid, pg 24

6 ibid, pg 24

7 Ranciere, Jacques, The Future of the Image, op.cit. pg 88

8 Ranciere, ibid

9 Ranciere, ibid

