

Painting

The painting, proudly hung in most homes, be it in reproduced poster format, commercial forms of 'habitat' style home decoration, investments in works of critical acclaim, or pieces that have a personal or aesthetic significance, remains nonetheless an object. An object, whose primary function is to be placed on a wall in order to be looked at. Could this be defined as functional? What use is this? It contains no domestic or corporate usefulness. Yet, what function is there in make-up, high-heeled shoes, an Armani suit, a diamond encrusted watch? It involves prestige, a historical significance, an arguably noteworthy display of talent. Indeed, in relation to portraiture it gained its significance from portraying the wealthy, the rulers and heads of society, the people with cash. But in a western contemporary society where wealth has become commonplace, this function has become somewhat dormant. With opportunists on the street reproducing your image at a moments notice in the expansive runway to the Centre Pompidou.

Photography has, in many ways, replaced the painted portrait, (with images of Queen Elizabeth's most recent seated photograph selling 6,000 copies within its first week)¹. With the introduction of the aesthetic regime of the arts, the subject matter placed within the picture plane began to broaden. Photography was no longer a method of reproducing imagery and a form of scientific archival but allowed for those with meager means to be reproduced in a visual format. The postmodern reversal of appropriate regimes of representation opened a gateway for consideration of class divides, of the inequalities of those who were mostly focused on through portraiture, to be highlighted. In Jacques Rancière's essay "Mechanical Arts and the Promotion of the Anonymous", he discusses these issues at length and maintains that it is "because the anonymous became the subject matter of art that the act of recording such a subject matter can be an art."² Photography became a method of allowing those who were not necessarily the

heads of
state to produce, and appear in the image. So where does painting fit in?

James Elkins describes the painting as “annoyingly, and dauntingly, entangled in art history.”³ Painting has become difficult to categorise due to the wide range of approaches to it as a subject, be it ignoring the ideals of the painted image, or embracing them as a means of creating a post-modern or critical comment. Some believe that painting can be viewed as a form of expression where becoming involved in the historical contexts of it can

only limit its progression, others see acknowledging paintings past as the only way forward.

“To an unsympathetic eye, in short, contemporary painting must always seem to be either completely lacking in historical knowledge (the common complaint that artists no longer refer to any models before Andy Warhol can be cited here, as well the often-heard charge that through ignorance they keep repeating what the artists of the 1960s and 1970s have done) or, on the contrary, completely bogged down in the past.”⁴ Therefore the critical perceptions of contemporary painting seem to create a discussion as to how one can classify a painting, be it through historical embeddedness, marketability or individuality.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty describes painting as a form of ‘brute meaning’ that goes beyond systems and cultural regimen. His description of phenomenology describes painting as a sensuous act, which negotiates the world through descriptive and emotive actions. It is about presence, and is a gateway to the imaginary. “The enigma derives from the fact that my body simultaneously sees and is seen. That which looks at all things can also look at itself and recognize, in what it sees, the “other side” of its power of looking. It sees itself seeing; it touches itself touching; it is visible and sensitive for itself. It is a self, not by transparency, like thought, which never thinks

anything except by assimilating it, constituting it, transforming it into thought – but a self by confusion, narcissism, inherence to the see-er in the seen, the touch-er in the touched, the feeler in the felt – a self, then, that is caught up in things, having a front and a back, a past and a future . . .” 5

Seeing, for Merleau-Ponty maintains all of the complexities and ironies involved with the human mind, is sensitive to its own body placed within these complexities and a method of responding to this is to attempt to describe and negotiate this method of thought.

For Ranci re there must be an acknowledgement of the contradictions and difficulties involved in the painted image.

“The art of painting is the specific realization of nothing but the possibilities contained in the very materiality of coloured matter and its support. But this realization must take the form of self-demonstration. The same surface must perform a dual task: it must only be itself and it must be the demonstration of the fact that it is only itself. The concept of medium guarantees this secret identity of opposites.” 6

Ranci re seeks an artwork which is complacent in the contradictions and voraciousness of the active translation of sight and thought through painted means. He strives for an artwork that acknowledges its failings in being an accurate representational model, but an object that remains truthful to the possibilities inherent in the painting in relation to its method of creating something significant, something which combines both thought and difficulty of medium.

In painting these images, I am trying to activate a response, a rupture in the form of viewing an image and recognizing it as titillating, upsetting, monstrous or otherwise. I am thinking about how I look at images, how I navigate my way through the day, how I spend the majority of my time aimlessly trawling through different screens on my laptop. I think I am growing up a bit too. I remain spiced with elements of the narcissistic of course, but I believe that gratifying oneself continually can only become tiresome. An element of conscience has elapsed itself into my work where I find myself continuously

questioning

what it is that I can do as a painter, and whether the exercise of painting is merely, in itself, an act of self gratification. As being a painter is a marvelous existence. The openings, the parties, the ability to read philosophy, watch movies, look at art and have the opportunity to respond, and the fact that when I mention what I have chosen to pursue as my career

immediately makes me more intriguing. But in many other circumstances this would not have happened for me, as I am not the most skilled technician, nor the most intelligent scholar

What benefit is there in my obsessively and ritually painting these characters? Perhaps it is that I am giving each one their moment in the spotlight. Yet, there are certain choices I have made whilst painting them. I have deliberately chosen the hobby style daler board commonly and cheaply bought in art supply shops, and the scale of the postcard or in the larger images the scale typical of a plasma screen TV. I have chosen to paint them with watercolours in a very casual manner; I have pushed the watercolour to reveal its failures in image making; I have erased images; I have placed so much water on the boards that my touch begins to disappear; glazing the boards with glazes not suitable for watercolour. My source imagery is so pixilated and small that my imagination comes into play consistently as I make each image, in order to keep my mind occupied and make the activity of making the painting remain interesting.

Within the final show, each small work is hung in a small grid of four images. Each four images have a relationship to each other, either it is two different people that are within the same source image, it is the same person repeated, or the expression in the faces of the different figures is almost indistinguishably similar (apart from slight variations). The larger works are hung very traditionally, in a straight row, slightly above eye level. Taking paused video imagery as a source, it was inevitable that there would be some

discrepancies with the detail and the level of how one could depict these images accurately. The subject matter, though highly contemporary, has strong links to rococo portraiture of ecstasy and with the nature of the painted image, combining the traditional format of hanging with that of contemporary internet imagery of pornographic, paparazzi and journalistic material is more of a comment on the history embedded within the nature of paint as a medium. The grid formation relates to Greenbergian notions of modernism, the painting as 'pure' image. "Realistic, naturalistic art had dissembled the medium, using art to conceal art; Modernism used art to call attention to art."⁷ Yet these notions with which Clement Greenberg was so strict to adhere to, seemed ignorant of the poetic nature of the painted image in relation to the capacity to utilize representation in order to move beyond it and was infused with concepts of grandeur. Rancière would champion a train of thought in relation to this superiority with which Greenberg approached the painted image as artwork. "It is the modernity that claims to vouchsafe each art its autonomy and painting its peculiar surface. Here indeed is something to fuel resentment against philosophers who 'talk too much'."⁸ And so, with deviations from that grid-like format throughout the installation, it relates to both my own lack of attention to the subject matter, and that of how these images are consumed, in a fragmented, absent minded fashion, but also of the deviation from the previous superiority imposed on the painted image, and the unavoidable history so intertwined within it as a medium.

The juxtaposition of particular images in some cases is deliberately witty, (such as a combination of Heidi and Lauren from the 'Hills' programme on MTV with a woman performing oral sex sandwiched between them), others, are deliberately disturbing, combining an image of a woman who has lost her child with a woman masturbating is not the most conventional manner of considering grief, yet the similarity of the expression within both of their screams is evident and cannot be avoided. Both images

are executed
in a similar manner, backgrounds forgotten, clumsy watercolour application,
yet both
reveal an exquisite sense of extreme emotion. Empathy, orgasm, grief, human
emotion is
a curious subject, and the method with which it is expressed, the form a
face takes to
communicate it, and how people read and respond to it are all crucial
points of
interrogation within this body of work.

Contending with the notion of the painting as an object and the difficult
subject matter
involved, there remain yet aspects of my own personality, my sense of
humour, my desire
to be skilled at the craft I have chosen to utilize. As Rancière puts it “...
the operation of a
hand that cancels one visibility in order to produce another: a ‘tactile’
visibility, the visibility
of the gesture of the painter substituted for that of its result.”⁹. This
operation involves my
own input, a sense of editing what I chose to show and erasing what I deem
unnecessary.
This activity renders the source imagery as much a tool as my small box of
watercolour
paints and my paintbrush, and as the works have progressed and matured they
have
become increasingly malleable as I have encouraged more and more water to
be placed
upon the canvas board, eradicating the choices my own hand would make and
leaving the
art work in a space more absent of my control.

“Art is alive as long as it is outside itself, as long as it does something
different from itself,
as long as it moves on a stage of visibility which is always a stage of de-
figuration.”¹⁰

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3 Elkins, James, “Why nothing can be accomplished in painting and why it is
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4 Breuvert, Valerie, “Vitamin P – new perspectives in painting”, Phaidon

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6 Rancière, Jacques, The Future of the image, Verso, 2007, pg 71

7 Greenberg, Clement, 'Modernist Painting', Modern Art and Modernism: A Critical

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8 Rancière, 'The Future of the Image", op.cit. pg 89

9 ibid, pg 80

10 ibid, pg 89