

# Nathan Eastwood: A Quiet Revolution

*Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please.*

Karl Marx

In 1888 the artist Vincent van Gogh rented a little yellow house at no. 2, Place Lamartine in Arles. While he was staying there he painted some of his most famous masterpieces, one of which, *Vincent's Chair with His Pipe* (1888) was almost unprecedented in art, as until then furniture had never been considered a sufficiently grand subject for painting. Central to the composition of this modest picture we can see a simple stool comprised of four roughly carved legs with a ladder back and straw seat. It stands on a red tiled floor, and just as the sitter is absent, so too is any sense of grandeur. It appears to be the kind of chair you would expect a country peasant to own. With this focus on the ordinary van Gogh elevated the humble and overlooked to the centre stage of art, a platform traditionally reserved for the grand narratives of history and religion. There was a precursor for his painting, a drawing titled *The Empty Chair* (1870) by the English artist Luke Fildes. Fildes' work depicts Charles Dickens's empty study shortly after the novelist's death; in it we observe a vacant book-lined room dominated by a writing desk and chair which look out over a beautiful garden. Fildes, like van Gogh, shows us that absence is really the memory of presence, and that what we can't see often has a greater meaning for us than that which we can.

Fildes' drawing was reproduced in *The Graphic Newspaper* and van Gogh bought a print of it, a print he admired so much that he tried to get a copy of it for his brother Theo. Like Dickens, Fildes's work centred on a concern for the poor and a belief in the power of art to change public opinion on poverty and injustice. He painted in a social realist style and often focused on images depicting the underclass of London. One of his most significant paintings, *Applicants for Admission to a Casual Ward* (1874), was reproduced to illustrate an article on the Metropolitan Houseless Poor Act of 1864, an act which imposed a legal obligation on Poor Law unions in London to provide temporary accommodation for "*destitute wayfarers, wanderers, and foundlings*". In this painting Fildes presents a line of the unfortunate and destitute as they apply for tickets to stay overnight in a workhouse. Thick snow lay on the ground and a street light shines over their heads, revealing that night has already arrived. The poor huddle, heads bowed low, bodies stooping as they wrap their arms around themselves and their children as a measure against the cold. This is a harsh and unforgiving world, a world before social security and the National Health Service, it is a world which dictates the physical posture of a whole class of people.

Over a century later and these same concerns are central to the paintings of Nathan Eastwood who cites *Applicants for Admission to a Casual Ward* as a key influence upon his own paintings, saying of his practice that the "*realist painting I am promoting is an art that reveals social truths, a reflection of social realities, social relations.*"<sup>1</sup> This core interest underpins much of his work and is revealed in paintings such as *Sunday Afternoon* (2013). Here Eastwood presents us with a painting of his wife

Fiona. She is seen through a doorway, unaware of our presence as she cleans the bathroom of the home they share. Her back is turned to us as she stoops over a sink next to a toilet. As with Fildes' painting of the poor, we become aware that her pose has not been staged by the artist, but instead is observed as a result of her task, environment and economic situation. In a society where those who can afford it often prefer to pay someone else to do their cleaning for them, the absence of colour acts as a further signifier of her apparently lowly status. Yet here Eastwood deviates from Fildes in his approach to painting, because the care to detail and delicacy of presentation he observes has the effect of elevating the most mundane of labours to something poetic. In this way Eastwood sees no hierarchy in humanity, instead finding a beauty in all human endeavour.

The domestic scale of much of Eastwood's work also re-inforces the project he is engaged with in elevating the everyday. In *Break* (2014), Eastwood portrays a close up view of a man in profile wearing a flat cap and jacket. He sits behind a second figure who we can only just make out, hand raised to his mouth eating what appears to be a biscuit. From the title and the scene we observe, we can begin to speculate that this is a working man taking a rest during the course of his day. As with *Break*, *Nico's Café* (2013) also depicts a solitary diner who appears to us in profile, lost in his own thoughts and utterly unconcerned that we may be staring at him.

Painting the poor whilst eating is a subject van Gogh also visited in his painting *The Potato Eaters* (1885). In this work we witness five people sitting around a tiny table, under the flickering light of a lamp. Their room is cramped, their clothes coarse and all the colours muted. Van Gogh deliberately chose models he felt were ugly and painted them eating potatoes, a basic food staple they had cultivated themselves. He wanted to paint hard-working people eating an honest meal, honestly earned. Like Eastwood's diners, van Gogh's potato eaters do not notice us, but are instead locked into a world of their own, caring for and serving each other. This is the opposite of an art traditionally commissioned by the rich to represent their power and wealth, paintings such as *Mr and Mrs Andrews* (c. 1750) by Thomas Gainsborough. In Gainsborough's picture we can see two figures, Robert and Frances Andrews, who pose together as they look out of the canvas in our direction. Confident, they are assured of their place at the apex of society. Robert Andrews stands with a rifle under his right arm and a hunting dog at his feet. To his left his wife sits on a rococo styled bench under a mature oak tree, she is wearing a beautiful sky blue dress. On the right we see a rolling English landscape, their estate, with a wheat field which has been fully harvested by the labourers they employ, while a herd of sheep graze in the distance. What we view in this idyll is a couple who form part of the landed gentry, two people of wealth and influence displaying their status and privilege to us.

Where Gainsborough paints the ruling elite, Eastwood, like van Gogh and Fildes, portrays the governed. In van Gogh the hand of the artist is boldly present in every stroke of the brush, while in Eastwood's work the use of enamel paint has rendered the mark of the author invisible. This simultaneously offers a photographic quality whilst functioning to place the artist as subservient to the theme. This is perhaps not surprising as van Gogh used to work rapidly and observe directly from life, whereas Eastwood begins with images he takes surreptitiously of people in the East End of London on

his camera phone. He then uploads the photographs onto a computer and manipulates them in Photoshop, before printing the final images which form the basis of his reference material. In the act of painting, Eastwood then builds up consecutive layers of thin paint to achieve a refined quality of tonal depth. This begs a question though: Why not just print off the manipulated j-pegs and present them as the final art work? Part of the answer lies in the sense of time taken over the production of the painting and its creation as a unique art object. Eastwood himself maintains that his paintings betray *“marks and surface riddled with imperfections; trapped dust and hair. This series of imperfections inherent within the painting conveys the inability to make the painting simulate the photographic print”* going on to say *“The enamel paint relates to the domestic; you could say that the medium is the message, but paradoxically the medium acts as a vehicle transmitting content, as a series of painted signs.”*<sup>iii</sup> What Eastwood sets out here is a new way artists at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are thinking about painting. The 20<sup>th</sup> century model dominated by abstraction and conceptualism where the medium was the message has begun to draw to a close, being replaced instead by a return to an approach where the medium carries the message.

By employing a medium to carry a message, Eastwood’s painting acts as a meditation on the original image because the very act of painting takes time, and we inherently know this when we look at the painted surface. So when we look at a realist painting we ask ourselves, why has the artist spent so long looking at this? Is it because the image has some kind of fundamental meaning over and above the photograph itself? For Eastwood the answer is yes, and this is expressed in all the things he chooses not to paint. Living as he does in 21<sup>st</sup> century Britain, a consumerist led free market society he seeks to remind us that our social aspirations lead us to think of a future free from boredom, isolation and effort. That many of us hope someday someone else will cook for us, clean for us and care for us. In this future paradise we sense the promise of being surrounded by beautiful and expensive objects where we will be free from illness and find ourselves perpetually entertained. Eastwood explores this idea by focusing on all the things we do not wish to do for ourselves; for him, cleaning is elevated to centre stage and beauty is revealed in the chores of daily working class life. In *Bored* (2014) for example we see an old man standing in front of a row of washing machines in a laundrette. We cannot see his face or make out what he has in his hands, but we know he is doing something as he is clearly busy and has no interest in our presence. What Eastwood achieves in placing his focus on these ordinary everyday routines, in painting without colour and on a domestic scale, is to remind us that when the luxuries of life are stripped away there is a natural flow and soothing repetitive order to life. Elevated, the mundane and overlooked take centre stage and reveal a core of human dignity. Painted, this idea is distilled into an art object.

When confronted with an empty chair we are reminded of the person who is absent, when our attention is focused on the deprivations of the poor, the superfluous luxuries of the wealthy are brought to mind, and when colour is muted, we are reminded that joy is absent. Yet in this pared down state of boredom and work the rich would not choose to do for themselves, we find the seeds of grace. Nathan Eastwood does not paint war or conflict, power or possession, instead he paints the opposite of advertising. In doing so he offers an alternative message to the presentations

multinationals make to potential consumers, a world Shakespeare's Hamlet might describe as "*full of sound and fury signifying nothing*". If we take a moment to look at the overlooked, we can find a self-contained realm of elegant beauty which underpins all our world.

Robert Priseman, 2015

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<sup>i</sup> From an email sent to Robert Priseman on the 4<sup>th</sup> January 2015.

<sup>ii</sup> From *Theory and Studio Notes* by Nathan Eastwood, 24<sup>th</sup> February 2015.