



Documentary Realism

Painting in the Digital Age

By Robert Priseman

With essays by Sophie Cummings and Paul O'Kane

SEABROOK PRESS

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2015

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Wayne Clough

Death in a Northern Town
Pencil Crayon on Paper, 39 x 42 cm
2011

Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| Documentary Realism: Painting in the Digital Age | |
| Robert Priseman | 01 |
| The Many Returns of The Real | |
| Sophie Cummings | 07 |
| Real Painting? | |
| Paul O’Kane | 15 |

The Paintings

| | |
|--------------------------|----|
| Nathan Eastwood | 30 |
| Robert Priseman | 36 |
| Alex Hanna | 42 |
| Wayne Clough | 48 |
| Katherine Russell | 54 |
| Natalie Dowse | 60 |
| David Sullivan | 66 |
| Barbara Howey | 72 |
| Lee Maelzer | 78 |
| Nicholas Middleton | 84 |
| Wendy Saunders | 90 |
| About the Artists | 96 |
| Thanks Due | 99 |



Alex Hanna

Pill Packs
Oil on Panel, 30 x 30 cm
2014

About Robert Priseman

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He completed a PhD in History at Goldsmiths College, 2009 and teaches Fine Art at Central St Martins, Chelsea, and other colleges and universities in London and the UK. His fine art practice explores creative writing in dialogue with the particular values of mechanised and moving images, investigating their status as image, object, and the particular ways in which they inform narrative. www.okpaul.com

An Essay
By Robert Priseman



Robert Priseman

Dylan Klebold #1
Oil on Board, 17.7 x 12.7 cm
2012

Documentary Realism: Painting in the Digital Age

In 1936 Walter Benjamin wrote his seminal essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. In this he argued that the “sphere of authenticity is outside the technical” which makes the original artwork independent of the copy. He went on to argue that in the act of reproduction something is removed from the original by this change in context. This he described as the “aura” of the work which he defined by “its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be.”

It was formed, Benjamin wrote, in an effort to describe a theory of art that would be “useful for the formulation of revolutionary demands in the politics of art.” Up until this point, Benjamin felt that the traditional art forms of painting and sculpture had been produced, viewed and consumed exclusively by the ruling elite. With the advent of photographic means of reproduction however, the doors were opened for the democratization of art, and what was lost in the facsimile of the original was more than compensated for in a new egalitarianism.

John Berger expanded on these ideas in his 1972 essay *Ways of Seeing*, in which he outlined a theory that modern means of production have destroyed the authority of art, that “For the first time ever, images of art have become ephemeral, ubiquitous, insubstantial, available, valueless, free.”

This has appeared to become increasingly true with the dawn of the digital age in the 21st century. However, what Benjamin and Berger couldn’t foresee was the adoption of the mass media by the ruling elite to manipulate and present key messages for the promotion of capitalism. These messages are presented to us through broadcasting and publishing channels and appear to offer up conflicting views on the economy, war

on terror, celebrity culture and the celebration of wealth in a time of mass unemployment, food banks and social poverty. In doing this, the mass media has stimulated a sense of unease; a growing feeling of anomie. This appears to be resulting in a fragmentation of collective identity and a perception of social alienation amongst many groups and individuals. It is a theory that was first illustrated by the French sociologist Émile Durkheim in his influential book *Suicide* (1897) and finds its expression today in the drive to consume and the loss of any effective voice of political opposition to the ruling class.

It is within this context that an increasing number of artists are returning to the “aura” of the authentic art object and claiming it as their own. In doing this they are using the traditional genres of still-life, urban landscape, satire and modern history painting by commandeering the images they find on the internet, in newspapers, magazines and from their mobile phones. They are then reflecting the mass-media back on itself. In painting what they see in the mass media artists are choosing to slow down the speed of engagement, in order that they can develop a deeper understanding on the nature of the subject. Painting is, by its very nature, a labour intensive undertaking and this time-consuming act makes a painting by turns an act of meditation. That meditation yields a sense of consideration upon the completed art object which re-processes the ephemeral throw-away image into an item of thoughtful contemplation.

Painting is now no longer the voice of the bourgeois speaking to itself as Benjamin once saw it. It has instead been requisitioned for the 21st century by artists like Katherine Russell, Wayne Clough, Natalie Dowse and Wendy Saunders who draw source material directly from the news media in order to create paintings which carry a social commentary. It is as if the landscape we see and picture before ourselves is no longer the physical environment of earth, sea and sky, beloved of Turner and Constable, but is instead a world of digital noise and confusion which we wish to put the brakes on, in the hope that we might gain a real insight into what we’re looking at. We see this in the work of Barbara Howey who sources images from the internet so that she can re-connect to her own personal history or Nathan Eastwood who uses his mobile phone to surreptitiously photograph people in working

class environments in order to conceive paintings of socialist solidarity. Then there is Nicholas Middleton and Lee Maelzer who capture the urban environment on a film camera in order to paint the poetry of the mundane and Alex Hanna who uses a camera obscure he built himself so that he may compose paintings which meditate on the nature of utility which stands in a quiet opposition to the aesthetics of advertising. Whilst David Sullivan subverts newspaper images to produce satirically soaked paintings which the Guardian newspaper's art critic Adrian Searle described as *brave, stupid, wildly ambitious and arrogant*.

This is a new generation of artists who are creating real objects for an unreal world.

Robert Priseman, January 2015



Katherine Russell

6

Accused
Oil on Canvas, 60 x 97 cm
2014

An Essay
By Sophie Cummings



Nicholas Middleton

8

Black Bloc
Oil on Panel, 36 x 46 cm
2013

The Many Returns of the Real

“The photograph provokes horror, and the painting... something more like grief”¹

It may seem clichéd to begin a discussion of representation in contemporary painting with Gerhard Richter, but in one short quote the artist reveals his motivations in creating a ‘photo painting’ and the transformative power of representational painting. Photopainting and representational painting offer a uniquely concrete and personal engagement with the realities of life. The ability of art to view the world honestly and unflinchingly is evidenced by the artists in this exhibition who transform their material into work that offers space for reflection. This essay is a companion piece to the exhibition ‘Documentary Realism: Painting in the Digital Age’ which focuses on the wider art historical and theoretical context in which representational painting is created. It will show the influence of key texts and exhibitions and emphasise the enduring diversity, relevance and potential of representational painting.

There is a conventional and widely accepted art historical view of modernism, which sees art undergoing a progression from realism, through abstraction and on to conceptualism, minimalism, installation and performance. This view may be attractive for its simplicity and sense of progression, but it is also false. Realism and representation have always existed in a variety of forms throughout the 20th century. However in the 1980s, several key texts and exhibitions, such as ‘A New Spirit in Painting’, led to a reappraisal of representational painting and the growth of a new critical engagement.

Any discussion of realism in contemporary painting must acknowledge Hal Foster’s seminal study “The Return of the Real” of 1996, and recognize its limitations. Foster’s book was an attempt to recognise and address the ‘return’ of realism in contemporary art and rediscover the importance of reality in modern American art.

It highlighted a number of artists re-engaging with representation and reality, and did much to add complexity and depth to existing interpretations. These tended to down-play representation as anachronistic. Moving our understanding of representation away from the gloss and precision of 1950s hyper-realism, Foster instead showed that realism was a conscious response to “the neos and posts” of postwar Western culture.²

At the same time, Foster’s book is problematic. His view of representational art includes Cindy Sherman, Andy Warhol and Robert Motherwell, but not Richard Hamilton, Luc Tuymans and Vija Celmins. Even Gerhard Richter only gets the briefest of mentions. While Foster remains positive about representation, he seems squeamish around paint and non-American artists. By ignoring so much powerful, important painting, he implies that representational art is a new, American phenomenon. European painting is ignored, perhaps tainted by the lingering spectre of Socialist Realism, despite Richter’s photopaintings being a deliberate riposte to state-sanctioned realism.

The title of this essay is both a nod to Foster, and a rebuke. It is a simplification to imagine that all representation disappeared from art between the 1940s and 1980s. Representation was always present. The real did not return: the academic recognition of representational painting emerged. Foster recognises this, to some extent. For him, representation is historical, contemporary theory is modern, and combined they become important. This suggests that it is only with appropriate theoretical packaging can representational painting be considered valid. This is patently not true.

Returning to the artists in the exhibition, as contemporary painters they are as yet unencumbered by the fifty years of interpretation that often obscures the immediacy of Richter’s early photopaintings. The works exist outside a somewhat parasitical theoretical framework; in which ever more complex interpretations create an art dependent on its interlocutors. Instead these works are free to enjoy a direct dialogue with the viewer.

After Foster came ‘The Painting of Modern Life’, an important and underrated

exhibition staged at the Hayward Gallery in 2007. Bringing together Vija Celmins, Luc Tuymans, Richard Hamilton and Richter, this was an exhibition that showed the potential and the power of representational painting in all its forms. In part, this was due to the nature of the subjects depicted, from Malcolm Morley's images of Iraqi detainees to Hamilton's Northern Irish prisoners. The social seriousness of the works gave gravitas to their approach.

Some of the most powerful works were those that captured the "transient, the fleeting, the contingent", rather than the epic and historical. Richard Artschwager's monochrome office and dormitory scenes of the 1960s were a subtle riposte to the vibrant Pop Art of the same period and a far more relatable image of everyday life for most viewers. Peter Doig, a slightly unusual inclusion in the show, offered colourful and painterly treatments of landscapes and found photographs. Marlene Dumas, receiving a welcome Tate retrospective in 2015, brings a slurred, nightmarish quality to her portraits.

The Hayward exhibition emphasises the "conceptually driven practice" of representational painting, which stresses the importance of image selection and transformation, and the "activity of reading images". The selection of images, itself a form of curation, is both the greatest opportunity and challenge facing contemporary painters. It poses the question of what is worth consideration, transformation and sharing. It asks what happens to an image when it becomes a painting. It asks how those activities affect the viewer. It shows that representational painting comes from a place of deep intellectual consideration and is not mere, thoughtless mimesis of the world around us.

Returning to Richter's quote, it outlines what he tried to do with his photopaintings. Like Warhol in his 'disaster' works, some of Richter's strongest works are those that engage with the most challenging subjects: history, society and personal memory. These reveal the process that underpins much of representational painting, the selection of an image and the time and choices needed to transform that image into a work of art. For Richter and Tuymans, they chose images in order to understand them, to make some sense of a frightening, strange and sometimes violent world.

The process of painting enables the artist to take some control of the images they see.

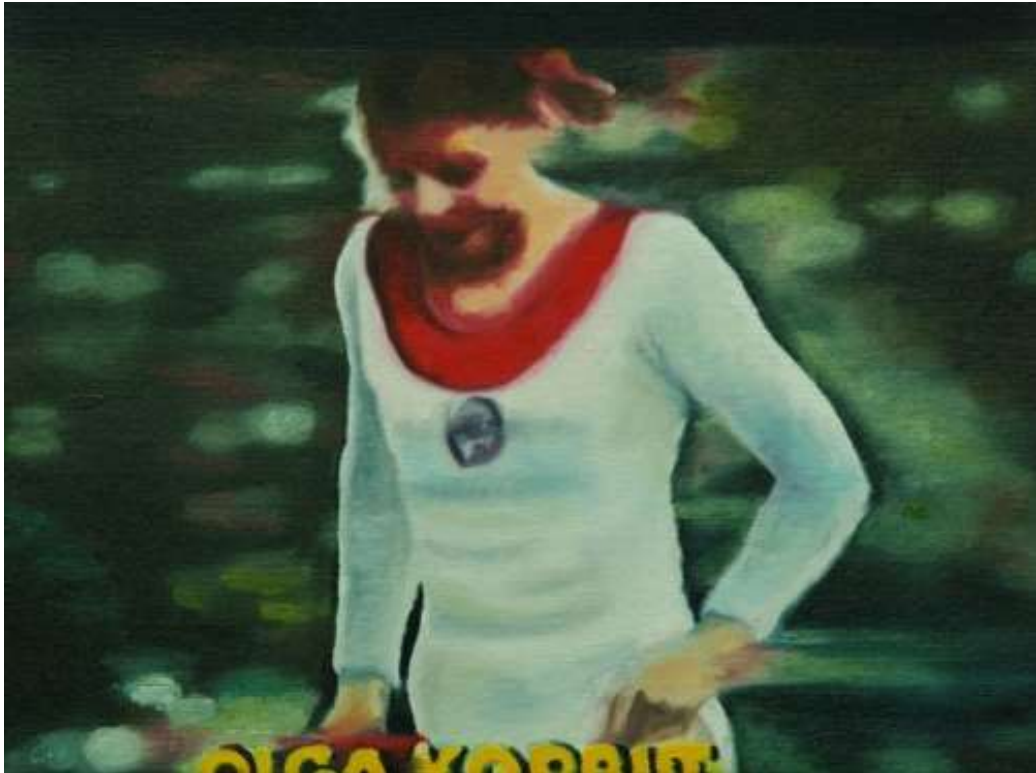
Photography, often the source for contemporary representational painting, does not have the same connection with truth as it once had. For decades, photography was seen as exemplifying the truth, capturing reality and making a moment permanent. Now, Photoshop and other manipulations have compromised this bond, that there is still a sense that photography has a greater claim to reality than art. By being overt in their use of photographs, these works of art stake their own claim to truth while highlighting the arbitrary nature of the photographs they reference.

If the process of representational painting is about contemplation and control, the finished work has an equally profound effect. Representational painting creates an opportunity to remember, reflect and to grieve. It does that by acknowledging the difference between most photography we see (numerous, digital, disposable) and the way we still view art. The paintings slow time and create a space in which we can look, and be aware of looking. Depending on the nature of the painting, it can make its source image more vibrant or opaque and make us aware of our distance from the original source.

The purpose of this essay has been to provide an art historical context for the work in this exhibition. Representational painting has been ill-served by much art theory, but is part of an important and valid tradition which engages with the material nature of everyday life. It emphasises the transitory and everyday, interrogates the nature of image making and forces viewers to be conscious of the very activity of looking in a world full of images.

Sophie Cummings, 2015

1. 'Gerhard Richter in conversation with Jan Thorn Prikker', from Hans-Ulrich Obrist, ed. Gerhard Richter *The Daily Practice of Painting, Writings and Interviews 1962-1993* (London: 1998) p189
2. Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real* (Massachusetts: 1996) pp1-2



Natalie Dowse

13

Olga 3
Oil on Canvas, 22.5 x 30.5 cm
2006



Lee Maelzer

14

Yellow Curtain
Oil on Canvas, 101.5 x 76.5 cm
2013

**An Essay
By Paul O'Kane**



Barbara Howey

16

After Image
Oil on Board, 15 x 20 cm
2010

Real Painting?

“The equipment-free aspect of reality here has become the height of artifice; the sight of immediate reality has become an orchid in the land of technology.”

Walter Benjamin 1

Introduction

The ‘orchid’ used in our epigraph above is one of those Benjaminian metaphors that remain elusive and almost infinitely malleable in the hands of subsequent interpreters. Nevertheless, we might assume that Benjamin’s orchid is a symbol both of beauty and fragility, as well as a form of exception or difference - though we should perhaps refrain from awarding it the quality of a *rarity* as Benjamin surely knew that *all* orchids are *not* rare. We are appropriating the metaphor here however to help us consider whether painting today may be exceptional, standing-out as a difference amid a terrain dominated by other technologies which in some senses seem to surpass it. Elsewhere in the same essay Benjamin declares that the new (1930s) technologies, of still and moving photographic images, provide access to a ‘different nature.’ This might leave us asking just how many ‘natures’ there might be and how might these plural natures then relate to reality or realities, after all, we use both ‘reality’ and ‘nature’ as similarly universal defaults and legitimising verities that provide reassuringly reliable contexts against which we can compare anything as less real or ‘unnatural.’ Significantly it is technology here that leads Benjamin to nature (as if a Sat-Nav guided us to and from Eden) and so every technology that can lead us to a ‘different nature’ might also lead us to another reality.

If we want to make, or write about Social Realist painting in the age of digital technology one problem that confronts us is that almost every aspect of our life can now be deemed ‘social’, whether we enter the extraordinary edifice of Blenheim Palace or check-out the corner-shop fried-chicken franchise. We are also socially

connected at almost all times. There are further complications in store for us as we are here compelled to investigate, not just 'society' and 'reality' but the reciprocal influence of and interaction between one technology (painting) and others (photography, film, video, digital imaging etc.) Where does the humble painter, with the relatively modest vehicle of a stretched canvas that can often be held in one hand, stand in relation to a 'society' whose events can easily and rapidly assume epic proportions? Furthermore, if we are going to paint reality, to paint 'really' and 'socially', we may have to accept that the reality we want to paint is the reality *with which* we paint (i.e. paint itself), and that the 'real' society we want to paint is itself a kind of painting.

Reality & Madness, Consumerism & Capitalism

If reality didn't exist we would have to invent it. It doesn't, and so we do. It seems unlikely that there is any objective and shared reality, anything like the 'common sense' in which politicians, newspaper editors and advertisers would have us believe. Just as a bird's cry reaches our ears only there to mean something no bird could understand, there are, ultimately, only different experiencing organisms and mediating filters through which we experience or relay an experience that is ultimately and always inadequately and erroneously translated. Reality is an invention, or rather reality *is* invention and artists play a crucial part in changing, playing with and maintaining this invention.

Are other life forms visiting the earth from the far-flung reaches of outer space? Perhaps it is they who 'disappear' our Malaysian airlines jets filled with loved ones? If Hollywood were to say so, and convince us of that reality with an array of CGI effects, and if millions then attended the screenings and talked about the film at home, at work and on Twitter it might become difficult to maintain any defence against this reality as it seeps into and informs any other reality that we might concurrently maintain.

To lose, or be forced to leave a job, a relationship, a home (the kind of inconsistencies that are surely increasing for all those living the fag-end of

capitalism), and to thereby lose our context, identity, routine and security, demands that we ditch one reality and are forced to negotiate or cultivate another if only to avoid going mad. Our new reality might involve new places, faces and economics but it also requires revising concepts. E.g. to recover from an apparent injustice and perceived unfairness we might have to rethink our notion of and belief in justice or fairness (which may, in retrospect, come to seem like ‘make-believe.’) We might survive and endure only by accepting that such abstract concepts do not exist in reality (in a reality which itself may no longer seem to exist), and by conceding that one has thus-far been ‘deluded’ and so must (to use a colloquial term) ‘get real’ in order to carry on. But even this ‘getting real’ will not confirm the existence of reality, rather it requires to buckle down to a pragmatic compromise as a response to the *absence* of any reality. To ‘get real’ is in fact to ‘get unreal’ along with the majority of similarly compromised, lost and deluded zombies who plod a directionless path through a socio-scape bereft of any meaning other than what Frederic Jameson once called the ‘logic of late capitalism’ (now Neoliberal global capitalism.)

Any reality -along with any principled stance in defence of a particular reality- can thus be made (it has to be said, by coercion) to seem naive and immature in order to enforce the particular kind of infantilisation necessarily induced by consumerism, which, by degrees, consumes all other more dignified ways of life and all more noble aspirations of democracy. Reality is the mall, or rather the ‘Click-amp-Collect’, but we cling to it if that is all we have and all we are allowed. It may be unpalatable but is nevertheless the most pervasive and therefore convincing of realities on offer, acting as a kind of monopoly realism. Ultimately we must concede that any cherished notion of a different or ‘alternative’ reality to which we might like to cling is less important than basic survival. Thus we survive only by surrendering, in a society where we have learned that while we must aspire we can never actually win. Nevertheless, as we compromise we quietly refuse to completely and utterly lose. We find beauty increasingly resides within the archived past and desirable retro-chic while storing-up the treasure of our most valuable gifts and contributions in and for some unknowable heaven of a future where and when we hope they will one day be recognised, appreciated and respected.

Sometimes, some of us (even some of our heroes) *do* lose our minds and thus lose

touch with any bond of reality that makes for an effective operator or participant in that great collective denial of the absence of a shared reality that we call 'society.' Even then, in a deranged state, we do not necessarily forego or lose sight of any reality *per se* but rather enter (and eventually, if fortunate, also exit) a different experience. Madness may be unhealthy, frightening, disruptive and forlorn but we cannot deem it wrong or right, it is another (or an *other*) experience. What makes it terrifying is not that it is so different and so distant but that it is so similar and so close.

If reality does not exist perhaps there is nevertheless *a* reality. Gilles Deleuze, a philosopher who championed a certain radical form of empiricism (as well reviewing the relationship between capitalism and schizophrenia), says something similar concerning his distinction between 'life' (abstract and transcendent) and *a* life (immanent and empirical.)² Every painter, photographer, filmmaker and writer has *a* life and thus *a* right and even *a* responsibility to reflect and reveal *a* reality, so, if we want to make *a* real or *a* realist' art, what should we paint, photograph, film or write? All and none of our varied experience might be deemed worthy of inclusion, even the "incredibly realistic dream" we may have had last night.

The Material Society of Painters

"Well, you have a brush and you've got paint on the brush, and you ask yourself why you're doing whatever it is you're doing, what inflection you're actually going to make with the brush and with the paint that's on the end of the brush. It's like handwriting. And I found out that I just didn't have anything to say in those terms. I didn't want to make variations; I didn't want to record a path. I wanted to get the paint out of the can and onto the canvas. I knew a wise guy who used to make fun of my painting, but he didn't like the Abstract Expressionists either. He said they would be good painters if they could only keep the paint as good as it is in the can. And that's what I tried to do. I tried to keep the paint as good as it was in the can."

Frank Stella ³

Painters are involved in a real material transformation and translation of one experience into another by means of a particular, more or less constant medium and process, but few painters today grind their own colours (this writer can name only one) and so, in this fundamental way, we might say painters are mediated from reality by the technology or, indeed by the 'society' of painting, as evidenced even by the mediated and prescriptive supply and manufacture of their basic materials.⁴ The pursuit of painting also demands a special and particular space and time (we might call it a 'lifestyle') and in this way painting becomes both its own reality and its own society as well as its own technology, ultimately concerned with revealing (as Heidegger might say) or attempting to reveal, a truth or reality in and through painting itself.⁵ Even where and when it succeeds in doing so, the 'reality' that painting reveals might not be recognisable *as* reality, far from it, the history of painting (at least the current, known history, written by its winners) provides us with a procession of extremely diverse, competing and clashing realities, all of which are nevertheless 'really' (undeniably) painting.

Gustave Courbet, perhaps the most famous or first Realist of all, once painted a vision of himself in a studio surrounded by what might be deemed his social and technical paraphernalia as a painter.⁶ While this notorious self-portrait seems a fanciful image it may be 'Realist' or even 'Social Realist' in the way it reveals that painting's most immediate reality might be the reality of paint and of painting, while its most immediate 'society' is that of the painter, the pigment, the oil, acrylic and solvent, the stretcher, the canvas, the easel and the board, the art school, the model, the admirer, the studio, the art shop, the dealer, the hang and the opening, the gallery discussion and PV, the reviews and the art criticism, the catalogue essay and art history, all of which enable and contextualise painting as its *parergon* and paraphernalia⁷ even if they are not 'painting itself'. Perhaps then this is the real society to which any 'Social Realist' painting or painter necessarily belongs.

Painting, Writing & The Law

Painting and photography have their own realities just as we have our own

respective, personal realities. Various strands of literature, from poetry⁸ to the *Nouveau Roman* or Magic Realist novel, have realities of their own. So how will we ever arrive at 'real' painting, at the reality of painting, at 'The Truth in Painting' or, for that matter its real relation to 'society'? A painter recently implied that we best hear the real truth of painting "from the horse's mouth", i.e. claiming that an inter-view between one painter and another is superior to any 'external' critical commentary. But this reeks of exclusivity while also sounding ill-informed. It might be convenient to construct a reassuring reality in which painting is painting and writing is writing and where painters are painters and writers are writers, but the two share more complex similarities and differences than this simple dialectic can accommodate. Painting might also be a kind of writing, a hieroglyphic proclamation or topographic record, while words and ideas are materials and images too, equally meticulously manipulated and composed to make a convincing and satisfactory composite. And so, as we write 'about' painting, 'on' painting or 'in' painting, we also *make* a kind of painting, a painting 'of' painting, a palimpsest or form of *ekphrasis*.⁹ If there then remains a distinct and distinguishing space or difference between writing and painting - notwithstanding the contingent, mutually legitimising relationship of these two images, these two acts - can we trust that difference, that gap, to make itself known to us, and if it does, can it help us define real or Social Realist painting?

We may have asserted above -albeit in somewhat cavalier fashion- that reality does not exist. We might nevertheless concede that it *persists* (thereby bringing into question the existence of existence) as a kind of anachronism or aspiring ('wannabe') concept. We may have also suggested that any reality will go largely unaffected by painting's (or any particular painting's) particular mode of technological transformation. Any transformation that *does* take place might be a merely private and temporary affair, a transaction between a consenting artist and their very own consenting reality. Perhaps the best we can say is that, in painting, a deal is done, a pact agreed and that every painting and act of painting thus becomes a contract and the outcome of a negotiation, perhaps a compromise. A contract is a convenient construct, contrived of clauses, caveats and commas, written in a particular language and reliant upon translation, interpretation and

implementation which may moreover be wrangled over subsequently, like the Torah, Bible or Koran, to sway its meaning this way or that in attempting to prove, defend or lay claim. Like any contract, a painting should therefore be carefully examined, its terms and conditions scrutinised (assuming we have the patience and understand its jargon and lingo) before adding our signature or otherwise showing our approval or disapproval.

But even this legal model (immediately undermined by our suspicions concerning any form of law) will not render either painting or *a* painting synonymous with reality, truth or nature, but only, at best, *akin* to them as a *species* of reality, truth or nature. Indeed *kinship* seems more convincing to us today than reality, truth or nature. Sameness, difference and their contingency have come to rule an increasingly post-human paradigm more convincingly than the reality, truth or nature that once orientated us as legacies of the gods. And while a modern, rational and pragmatic legal system may appear to ground or found modern society it continues to depend upon traces of irrational religion, aristocracy and monarchy which therefore simultaneously underpin and undermine it, exposing the unreliable inconsistency of any foundation in which we might be encouraged to believe or might wish to believe-in as an unstable tissue of interlinked and overlaid, yet ultimately irreconcilable concepts and belief systems. Given this instability and unreliability - of reality, society, truth and law- we must, perhaps inevitably, turn to the consistent uncertainty and inherent mendacity of *images* for any hope of reassurance or possibility of redemption.

Images: Moving & Still, Mendacious & Omnipotent

A moving image, we might argue, is imbued with more realism than any image that is 'merely' still. On the other hand, if we attempt to define the fundamental and particular qualities of 'an' or 'the' image we might postulate that the still image is the more quintessential and that the addition of motion, sound and more dimensions to the still Image compromises or confuses this essence. In the realm of images painting inhabits a highly respected strata, appearing almost sovereign, above the law and way beyond mere reality, its proud tradition also serving to inform all subsequent, even the newest, visual technologies. An educator featured

in Frederick Wiseman's recently released cinematic homage to the National Gallery claims that paintings are emptied of time, but this seems difficult to corroborate either technically or philosophically. In Wiseman's film moving images do bring a new and special consideration to the still oil paintings. The temporal aspect of the flattering influence resulting from a moving image made of a still image may remain mysterious but it is clear that the paintings in the film are unusually well illuminated (like movie stars) and recorded to an extraordinarily high standard before being projected for us with a clarity greater than that provided either by our unaided eyes or by our spectacles, as a detail the size of a single flower in the corner of a Leonardo is shown the size of a house. It seems impossible then to disagree with the Benjaminian notion that the 'unconscious optics' of the moving image can deliver us a 'different nature', at least in terms of entirely new ways of experiencing paintings, meanwhile suggesting (as does photography, digital photography, mobile-phone photography, internet-linked photography etc.) new ways in which painting might interact with both society and reality.

Beyond the territorial realm surveyed by painting there is rumoured to lie something or somewhere called 'society', in relation to which painters are sometimes reluctant to position themselves, sometimes hermetically claiming an apolitical position as a self-professed, passionate believer in painting alone, or claiming to fuse the two in a form of political painting of which a Social Realism could be an example. The first problem that comes to mind here is that politics is itself a kind of painting, while society is also a form of technology. Few would disagree that today even the least savvy participants in democracy understand that they are involved in a play of images, not of truths, a spectacular game in which politicians have become, to a certain extent, and for better or worse (performing) 'artists.'¹⁰ Whomsoever rules the image rules the world we might say, and this surely holds true for an age in which the 'spin doctor' recently took on the stature of a 'witch doctor' or shaman, as the central focus of a tribe, consulted for reassurance, orientation and prognoses, turned-to in search of a particular tribe's reality, or at least the continuing narrative of that tribe's particular collective delusion.

Robert Bresson, in his last minimalist movie masterpiece *L'Argent* (1983),

portrayed society as a technology or 'machine' (a word once used to describe grand, academic, history paintings), as a mechanised theatre in which money, law, wealth, class, poverty and justice all work like props, scenes, effects, actors and costumes in a drama within which (as Kafka might agree) we are helplessly inserted, as into a labyrinth with a logic all its own and that can never be known to us, unless (we suspect) we could gain a better position, nearer to the top, or somewhere within the control room of this society (a fanciful idea that is perhaps the most unlikely aspect of the entire story.)

Jacques Tati's *Playtime* (1967) may be among the greatest of all cinematic failures but nevertheless succeeds in showing the modern city as a kind of photographic construct that we now inhabit as something like photographs ourselves. Aki Kaurismäki's *Le Havre* (2011) seems to be an overtly political film about a young African economic migrant, a refugee and stowaway trying to reach the UK via France and yet it is filmed with equally overt stylisation, so that scenarios candidly confess themselves to be heavily enhanced, carefully staged tableaux, and props (migrants' cloths, a Taxi, a coffee table) are clearly selected not for socio-historical accuracy but for their sensual, visual style. Wolfgang Becker's poignant and popular comedy *Goodbye Lenin* (2003) portrays political 'reality' as little more than an ever-changing *mise-en-scene* that merely alters the props and scenery whenever the socio-political paradigm is changed. As history shows, great bronze monuments erected to 'eternal' martyrs are soon melted down for canons by an invading army, or removed according to the ethics of a consequent historical revision, while the modern housing, library and shopping mall delivered by one politician to their people is quickly bombed to rubble by another politician promising victory for their own constituents.

Johan Grimont's grim movie collage '*Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y*' (1997) long ago urged us to awaken to the fact that, even by the 1970s, in a media-saturated age, the image had already supplanted reality for a post-modern society, becoming our surrogate for that lost reality and henceforth our only 'legitimate' currency for exchanging experience. This victory of the image itself left the 1970s artist (simultaneously experiencing 'the death of painting', 'the end of art' 'the death of the author', 'the end of the novel' and the influence of Structuralism, concurrent

with the birth of video, performance, happenings, conceptual art etc.) barely capable of exerting any influence on any reality, not even on the uncompromising endgames and teetering brinkmanship of late modernism. The model of the *avant-garde* was waning, and according to Grimonprez the figure who now furthered -and indeed supplanted- the *avant-garde* artist was no longer the next, yet more *avant-garde* artist, but the *terrorist*, who hi-jacked, not only planes and passengers, but the image itself, doing unexpected and unprecedented things with it, just as the *avant-garde* artist once had. Grimonprez might today justifiably argue that the billions of dollars spent daily for the past 14 years in the armed combat wing of an apparently endless 'war on terror' (initiated by '9/11' the 'mother of all images' and also branded 'the devil's masterpiece'¹¹) might have been better invested in emulating relatively poorly funded terrorists by concentrating on what Jean Baudrillard called 'symbolic exchange' and conducting, not a war on 'terror' (which has in fact been a war on territories, infrastructures, arms, armies and civilians) but a war 'on' and 'with' images. Any iconic images of the war on terror are noticeably few and most were illicitly leaked and not officially produced, as officially 'embedded' image-makers appear to have been carefully guided from the possibility of making such 'real' images. As a result we now think of that war only in terms of unusually abject prisoners living close to the ground in bright Orange jumpsuits, while recalling rumours of mysterious jets landing on remote islands, and thinking of a smartphone photograph of a hooded and caped human figure, nervously balanced on a piece of furniture with electrodes attached to its limbs.

Images speak to images in this world, and some speak louder than others. When we attempt to commune with them we might notice that they retain the upper hand, withholding from us any ultimate and unarguable meaning that they might tantalisingly promise to share, leaving our all-too-human claim to truth as so much inadequate armour rendered powerless by the relative power of the Image. As W.J.T Mitchell implies in the title of his book *What Do Images Want?* (2005), images might maintain their very own territory, sovereignty, dare we say their own reality, a reality that humans who make, manipulate and wield images never actually infringe upon or significantly transform. Images may well occupy a world of their own and be a law unto themselves.

Conclusion

Any aspiring 21st Century Social Realist painter is welcomed then, to take on-board, and/or critically evaluate the suggestions made available above, and to let their painting's consequences unfold accordingly, or correspondingly, but at least without presumptions as to what social, real, realist, Social Realist, political, or painting might mean today, and always keeping in mind that these terms are themselves images, every word a small but no less significant 'painting' requiring its own construction, etymological provenance, interpretation, evaluation, framing and historicisation. It is perhaps *via* this holistic and vigilant, critical method, that painting is most likely and most effectively to 'really' influence, entertain and inform both itself, and thereby, the mercurial and dynamic phenomenon we call society.

Paul O'Kane

1. All citations from Benjamin refer to his essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in 'Illuminations', Schocken Books, 2007
2. Gilles Deleuze, *Pure Immanence: Essays on A Life*, Zone Books, MIT 2005
3. From: *Questions To Stella & Judd*, Interview by Bruce Glaser, Edited by Lucy R. Lippard. In: *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, Edited by Gregory Battcock, University of California Press, 1995, pp.148-164
4. As well as Frank Stella wanting paint to look as good on the canvas as it does in the tin we might here also consider the historical and technological breakthrough provided to 19th century *plein air* painters by the arrival of conveniently tubed, and therefore easily transportable paints.
5. Reference to Heidegger's essay *The Question Concerning Technology*, in the book of the same title, Harper Perennial, 1977.
6. Painted in 1855 and fully titled: 'The Artist's Studio, a real allegory summing up seven years of my artistic and moral life between 1854 and 1855.'
7. *Parergon* is a term used by Derrida in a chapter of the same name in 'The Truth in Painting' (first published by Flammarion, Paris, 1978) referring to those aspects or conditions of a work of art that make the work possible but which are not the work itself.
8. Consider the relation that Mallarmé's words have to the surface on which they appear.
9. In fact, as we write about painting we invariably also write about 'about', thus turning about *about* and changing the way we perceive the words and concepts we use even as we use them.
10. Though, considering the long history of the art of rhetoric, perhaps this was ever the case.
11. By the notoriously *avant-garde* composer Karlheinz Stockhausen



Pussy Riot Protestor 1
Oil on Linen, 50 x 40 cm
2013

The Paintings

Nathan Eastwood

All my paintings are based on photographs I take using a camera phone. By using the photograph as a vehicle my objective is to re-present and examine everyday life, to reveal real life, one's human conditions; social relations. At certain moments, when making the bed, cooking dinner, sitting in a cafe, picking up the kids from school, cleaning the bathroom; surfing the internet, or watching question time, I think, yes, this is real life; this is what one knows, and so this is what one should paint. Painting and lived experience in the ontological sense has become symbiotic for me. My intention is to make a contemporary Kitchen Sink painting that comes from out of lived life.

The paintings I make reveal loose brushwork marks and the surfaces are riddled with imperfections, such as trapped dust and hair. These imperfections inherent within the paintings reveal the inability to make the painting simulate the photographic print; this then positions my paintings as not being photo real. I specifically chose to work with enamel paint as they relate to the interior spaces, where you will find a painted radiator, skirting boards, or something like this.

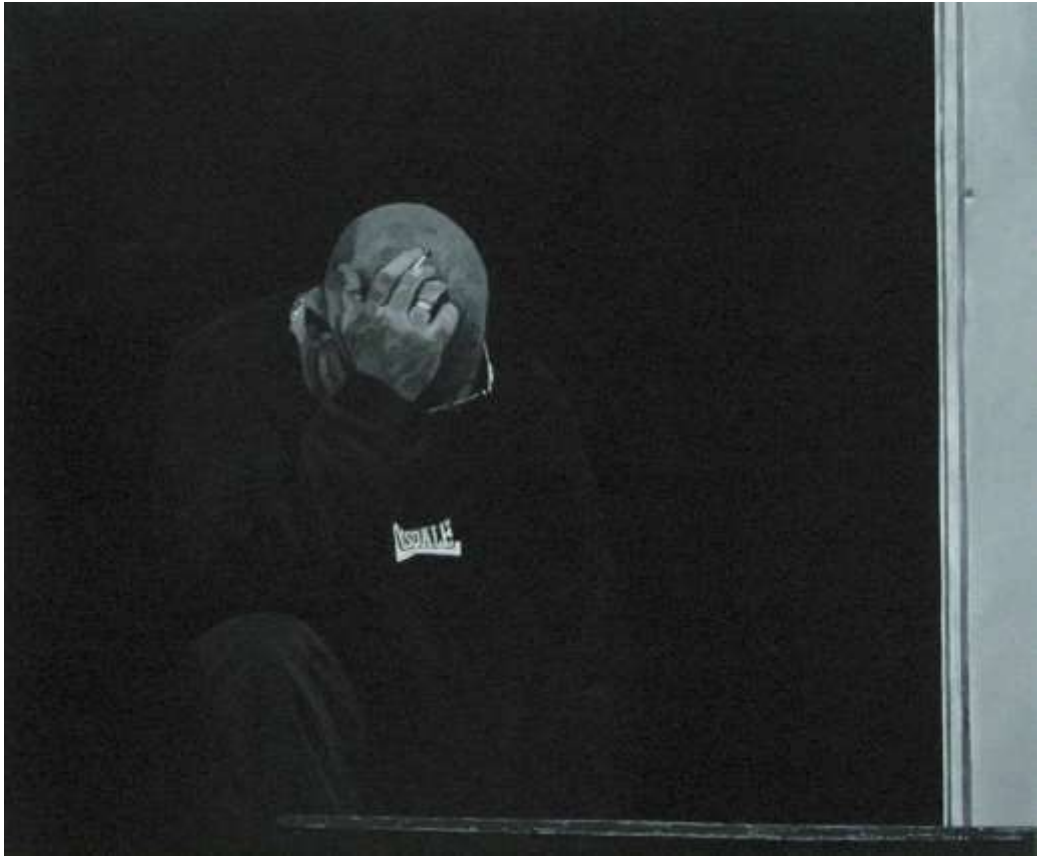






Fiona in the Bathroom
Humbrol Enamel on Board, 33.5 x 40.5 cm
2012





Robert Priseman

In my own painting I prefer to work from photographs, either images I take myself or those found on the internet, in magazines or newspapers. The photographs don't work as an end point to be copied directly, but as a starting position for the paintings which follow.

The paintings I produce simplify the visual information available in the original document and make a fresh presentation which harmonises the colour, overlays perspective or in some way alters the original. The painting of Jackie Duddy for instance (*The White Handkerchief*) is actually an amalgamation of three separate photographs, re-configured into one. By working in this way my aim is to 'unlock' some kind of new understanding from the original material and present it as an object in its own right to be considered anew.





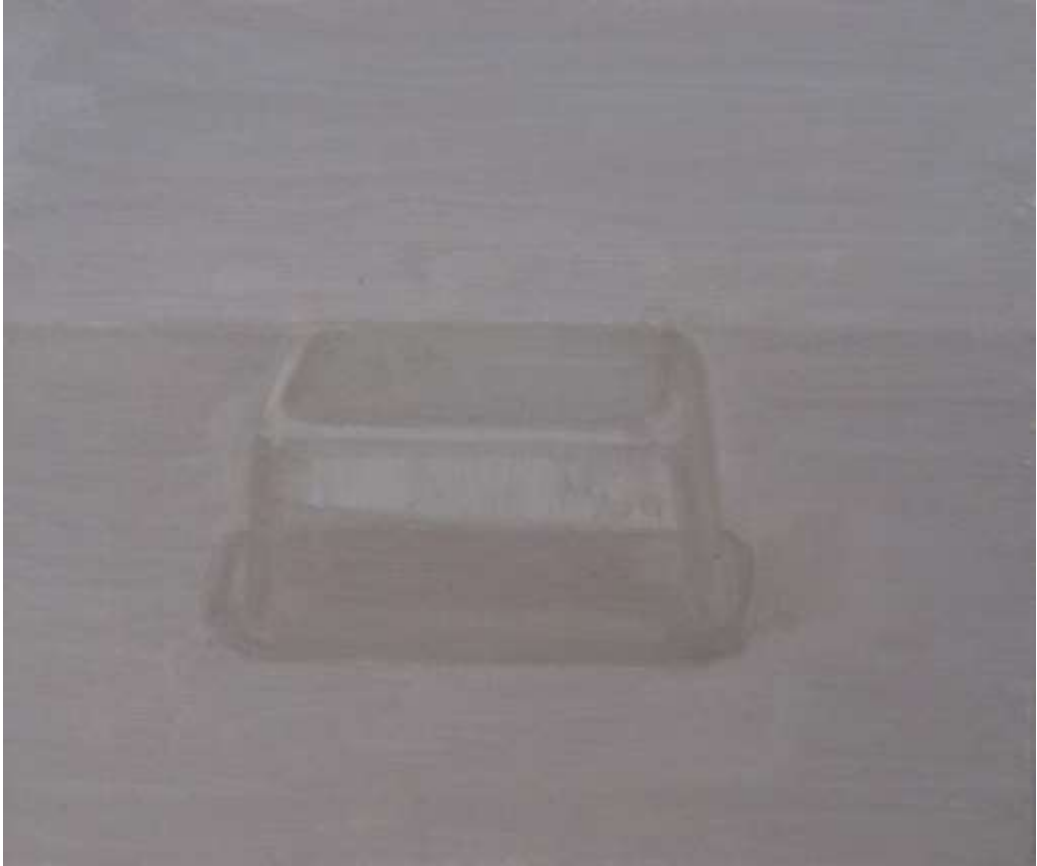






Alex Hanna

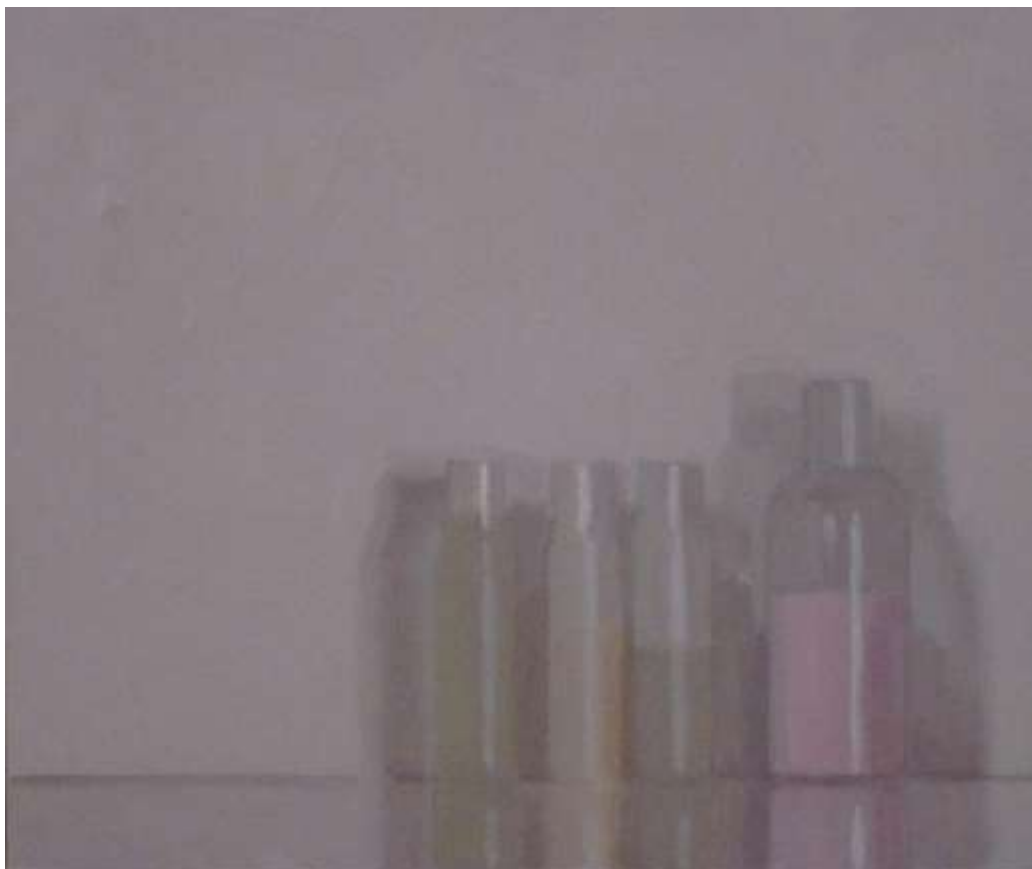
My work involves painting everyday objects using a reduced colour arrangement. Much of the removal of colour owes its self to the selection of objects and material that has little or no colour. In fact in a number of cases I have sought out ambiguous and visually vague subjects. I am interested in the objects and things around me, that I see in my daily life. Much of my painting involves a meditation with this visual world of the everyday.







Folded Fabric
Oil on Linen, 60 x 75 cm
2012





Empty Pill Packs 2
Oil on Canvas, 25 x 30 cm
2014

Wayne Clough

I am a painter who examines the way personal and societal experience is represented through press photography. Images that appeal to me as source material tend to have a focus on trauma and social upheaval which appears to have played a significant role in shaping collective memory along with galvanising perceptions of cultural identity.

My works are transcriptions of photographs that depict traumatic events that have punctuated various moments within my own lifetime.







Clipper Maid of the Sea
Tempera on Paper, 18 x 25 cm
2013





I Started Something I Couldn't Finish
Tempera on Paper, 20 x 30 cm
2013

Katherine Russell

My paintings attempt to deconstruct a fraction of the mass media imagery which we encounter on a daily basis. I look to consider how we as individuals engage with these images on a personal, subjective and emotional level. In doing this I aim to capture a particular moment, more specifically the feeling within that moment which will allow a deeper contemplation and penetration of the inevitable associations, both objective and subjective.

In this way I hope my painting questions what real meaning these images hold for us, not just as non-discerning mass consumers, but instead, in a personal and emotional way. By doing this what often results in the finished works are images which on the one hand may appear at first glance superficially familiar, but which on the other, are ultimately imbued with a new emotional understanding.



This is Not Guantanamo
Oil on Canvas, 70 x 50 cm
2014









Natalie Dowse

I work from the close examination of the photographic image or extracted film still, derived or created through surveillance, documentation and scrutiny of various scenarios. By using these photographic sources, I am elevating the status of the original image by drawing on the considered value and the historic eminence of painting and image production.

The Sum of the Parts is a series forming a larger painting installation. Each portrait is based on a digital 'selfie' chosen and provided by the subjects themselves, usually originating from their own mobile device. The project combines the concept of self-portraiture with the commissioned portrait; both of which have remained traditional subjects for painters over the centuries.

Each 'selfie' portrait in the series is painted twice to produce a near identical twin. One is then given back to the participant and the other is retained to form the larger installation; therefore raising debates around original and replica, authenticity and reproduction.



The Sum of the Parts (No. 1)
Oil on Board, 10 x 10 cm
2014



The Sum of the Parts (No. 4)
Oil on Board, 10 x 10 cm
2014



The Sum of the Parts (No. 6)
Oil on Board, 10 x 10 cm
2014



The Sum of the Parts (No. 7)
Oil on Board, 10 x 10 cm
2014



The Sum of the Parts (No. 8)
Oil on Board, 10 x 10 cm
2014

David Sullivan

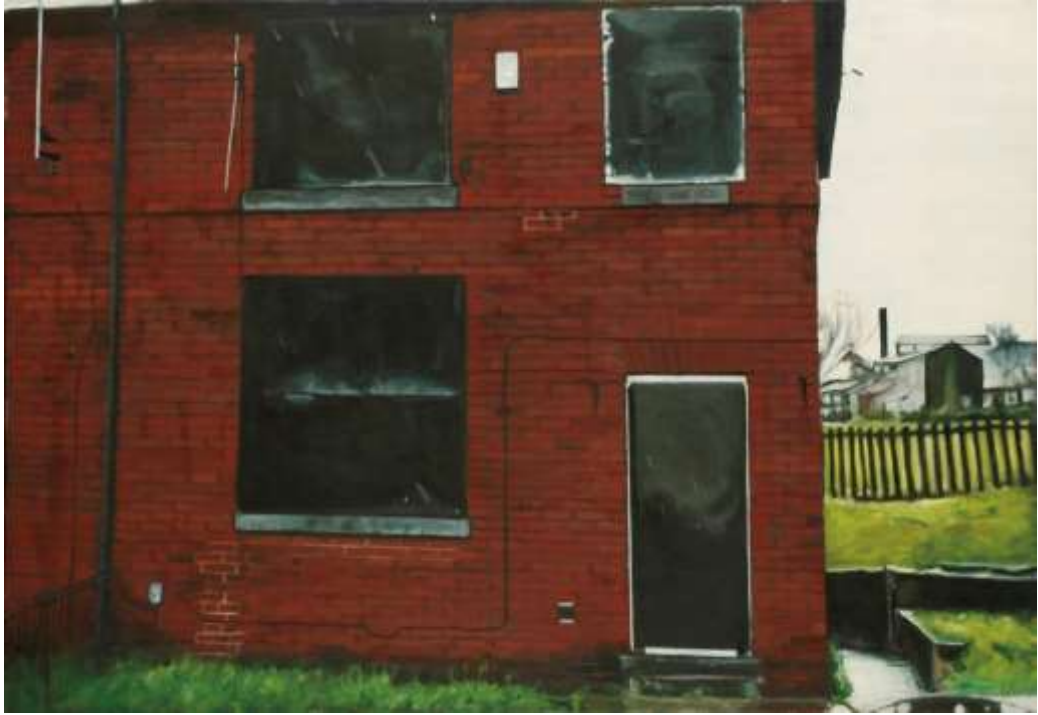
As far as possible I try to keep the concerns I explore in the studio unbounded - that is to say I work from a range of found, or more accurately *stolen!* imagery, sourced from what the critic Peter Fuller described as our *Mega Visual Tradition*. Images arrive - they stay, or they leave... and I am free to take inspiration from where ever I find it.

What seems necessary is a conviction to tell the truth. Art, in order to have purpose, must have something real to say about humanity. About its psychology, its condition of existence, and its connection with lived experience in order to examine and understand life. Sometimes the works oscillate at the cusp of the surreal or our sense of the beautiful, and sometimes they just emerge from the tragedy of fate... or the politics of survival.

As I typically work from reproduced imagery culled from the media, it is in that transformation from documentary into the language of painting where the art must reside.

I am a painter... but I make paintings like a poet.











Barbara Howey

This series of paintings emerged as a series of investigations into the use of the internet as a memory archive. I lived abroad in various RAF camps during my childhood but had little visual memory of them.

The internet was a revelation, in that many of the places I had lived were now documented by other people and readily available to see on-line. Some places had disappeared, some abandoned and ruined and some were just as I remember them. The paint is applied quite quickly as if trying to catch the moment like a fleeting memory.





After-Image Seletar Barracks
Oil on Board, 42 x 60 cm
2010



After-Image Seletar Camp
Oil on Board, 42 x 60 cm
2010





lee Maelzer

My paintings originate from photographs which are extensively tampered with or physically broken down by chemicals before I begin working from them.

I'm particularly interested in exploring redundant sites and discarded objects and finding visually poetic meaning in them. With the sites specifically, the signature trace of rituals and a 'ghost' of the human presence is especially powerful to me and I find myself constantly drawn to the idea of the melancholic and its location in the discarded.







Gold Dust
Oil & Oil Pastel on Canvas, 91.5 x 121.5cm
2013



Stage Dust
Oil on Canvas, 38 x 59.5 cm
2014



Nicholas Middleton

The painting 'Worker' represents a development in my work where I moved away from an approach in which I felt it necessary to complicate my source material. I had been using compositional devices of collage and trompe l'oeil to set up references between pictorial elements. 'Worker' is based on a photograph taken from the window of a moving London Underground train. The stilled gait of the figure instantly recalled that of the most prominent prisoner in Gustave Doré's image of 'Newgate Prison - Exercise Yard' from 'London : A pilgrimage' by Doré and Blanchard Jerrold from 1872. This wood engraving was notably copied by Van Gogh in a painting of 1890.

The subsequent paintings here have echoes of other artworks, from the obvious to the obscure or tangential. All are filtered through or reflect personal experience.



After Vermeer
Oil on Canvas, 80 x 50 cm
2006



Protest, 1st April 2009
Oil on Canvas, 116 x 204 cm
2010



Demolished House
Oil on Canvas, 104 x 156 cm
2008-9



Entrance to Communal Living
Oil on Canvas, 104 x 142 cm
2009



Wendy Saunders

I have a broad interest in how we intuitively 'read' and react to faces from fleeting impressions, and the subtle combination of features, even if they are largely absent or covered that contribute to human expression. These paintings portray themes of identity and expression which are often deliberately obscured to reflect the complex interplay between expression and understanding. Three of the paintings are taken from the images and actions of the PussyRiot feminist protest group. The contrast of masked anonymity overlaying a strong feminist identity struck a chord in me particularly in the context of protest against authoritarian oppression.

'White' is painted in portrait style. I have used a broad band across the eye area instead of a mask. The intention however remains the same, a desire to interfere sufficiently with the facial expression so that the response provoked is based more on intuition than a simple interpretation.



Red Square (3)
Oil on Linen, 49 x 61 cm
2013





Boy Protester
Oil on Linen, 26 x 26 cm
2012



Profile (2)
Oil on Linen, 30 x 30 cm
2013



About the Artists

Wayne Clough was awarded a special commendation at the John Moores Painting Prize and has exhibited extensively including at the National Portrait Gallery.

Natalie Dowse has received the Jonathan Vickers Fine Art Award, an ACE International Residency and Braziers Fellowship, Riga, Latvia.

Nathan Eastwood is the winner of the East London painting Prize 2014 and was awarded a South Square Trust Scholarship in 2008.

Alex Hanna has exhibited at the RA the National portrait Gallery and been selected for the Marmite Prize for painting.

Barbara Howey is a John Moores Prize exhibitor who has held solo shows in Tokyo and New York. She is the founder of Paint Club East.

Lee Maelzer has work in the Frank Cohen, Anita Zabudovicz and David Roberts collections and was awarded the Abbey Fellowship to Rome in 2004.

Nicholas Middleton is a John Moores Painting Prize winner, Kew Studio Prize winner and was selected for the BOC award.

Robert Priseman has held solo shows in New York, London and San Francisco with work in the collections of the V&A, MdM Salzburg and Art Gallery NSW, Sydney.

Katherine Russell has exhibited extensively in London with a recent solo show at the A&D Gallery 2014 and Battersea Park, London 2011.

Wendy Saunders is a London based painter and Threadneedle Prize and ZAP exhibitor 2013 and 2014.

David Sullivan MA RCA won a Leverhulme Trust Award in 2008, Mercury Art Prize 2007 and a bursary from the Worshipful Company of Painter-Stainers 2006-8.



David Sullivan

97

The Conscript Salute

Oil on Canvas over Board, 30 x 25 cm
2014

Special Thanks Due

Simon Carter
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Alex Hanna
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Lee Maelzer
Nicholas Middleton
Stuart Möller
Paul O’Kane
Katherine Russell
Jim Park
Wendy Saunders
Ally Seabrook
David Sullivan
Dan Twyman

