

In Plain Sight

What I am trying to convey to you is more mysterious; it is entwined in the very roots of being, in the impalpable source of sensations.

J. Gasquet, *Cézanne*

The entire history of painting in the modern period, with its efforts to detach itself from illusionism and acquire its own dimensions, has a metaphysical significance.

Maurice Merleau Ponty, *Eye and Mind*

Vision doesn't just happen, we learn how and what we see. Once the optic nerve fires the grey matter kicks in, deciding what is worthy of attention and what not. Our ability to see is, of necessity, embedded in daily life to the point of unconsciousness. Mostly, we see what we expect to see. Even in moments of reflective awareness, when we consciously describe the world to ourselves, the descriptions are schematic and fugitive. One of the characteristics of great art is that it can disrupt this shorthand, subtly resetting our relationship to the world and ourselves by prompting us to recognise, question, or reconsider aspects of our sensory life.

A painting can recall not only the look of things, but also the feel of that seeing. It reminds us that vision is primary because it is not just visual. The eye brings together a complex interweaving of the senses so that vision registers as both spatial and tactile. In Western culture technological developments have tended to favour the optical rather than the more haptic or the "whole of body" experience of vision. From Velázquez to Freud, Chardin to Tapies however, painters have acknowledged this more elusive aspect of vision in the physical structure of their works, capturing an equivalence in paint that establishes an important link with the viewer. In the imaginative conception of the painter, vision may even have olfactory and auditory dimensions, if only we will bring our imagination to the task. Thus Paul Cézanne could write to his first biographer, Joachim Gasquet, "the blue smell of the pines... must be married the green smell of the plains which are refreshed every morning, with the smell of stones, the perfume of distant marble from Sainte-Victoire..."

In 1905, a year before his death, Cézanne wrote to Emile Bernard "I owe you the truth in painting and I will tell it to you"... Truth is a little out of fashion lately, maybe because we have given up on a certain idea of it, but it cannot be entirely forsaken especially in the arts. In the 2017 Reith Lectures, Booker Prize winner Hilary Mantel reflects on the place of truth in the writing of historical fiction. She describes it as a "rough beast", but one that is denied at the writer's peril: "the truth" she says, "... is better, stronger, stranger than anything you can make up". The metaphor appeals to me: it suggests that truth, no matter how unruly and ultimately beyond our ken, is nevertheless something to be sought. Mantel also says that as a young writer she remembers feeling morally inferior to historians who dealt with "the facts", and creatively inferior to novelists who (she uses the term again) "made things up". I

recall having similar doubts, wondering if my interest in observation based painting reflected a lack of imagination. Yet it seemed to me that nothing I could “make up” was as interesting as what I could see around me and nothing was as engaging as trying to capture something of it in paint. Thirty years on it is clear to me that to be effective, representation in paint requires above all else, imagination.

Mantel regards the limits imposed by historical facts as a stimulus to thought and something similar drives me to return time and again to the genre of still life. This often small, quiet category of painting has informed all my work from portraits to larger interiors as well as etching and video. The least rhetorical of the observation based modes, it can have a wordless eloquence that takes one back to the very condition of painting. Traditionally loaded up with allegory and religious symbolism, the trappings of status or domesticity, I prefer its other inclinations: to detail, to the overlooked, even the abject. Unlike other genres which lend themselves to expression and narrative, still life is a strange and largely mute mixture of the analytical and the sensual. For the early Modernists it was profoundly experimental, a critical tool in development of painting beyond representation. Later mid 20thC artists such as Giorgio Morandi and Philip Guston found the genre useful in resisting of the emerging orthodoxy and fashion for abstraction, demonstrating that the distinction between abstraction and representation was by no means clear - something that painters have always known. More recently, as with many persistent dualisms where the poles have ossified, interesting painting is emerging in the divide. As artists explore hybrid models, old ground is opened and there is yet another emergence of curiosity about painting’s humblest genre.

The still life studio functions as a laboratory of sorts, a space of stability where light can be controlled and objects considered in relation to one another in the context of the painting at hand. It is a limited environment which opens onto a field of visual immediacy that feels anything but... In fact the familiarity of the studio is a welcome anchor as, with time and patience, vision itself emerges as evanescent, mobile. More than once it has been remarked by those who see my paintings as being very tranquil, that my work process must be similarly “peaceful”. Quiet perhaps, but not peaceful. The way a painting looks does not necessarily reflect the affective and cognitive conditions of its making. Such an approach to painting might perhaps be described as quiet, but the internal processes required involve a rigour and persistence that is not necessarily peaceful.

Translating three dimensions into two is now so commonplace and immediate that we have ceased to consider the complexity of the proposition. Armed only with pencil, paint brush or some other ancient tool, it is quite a different matter. The mind says: there it is, it’s obvious... what’s the problem? You see it but rendering what you see is challenging, and making something substantial of what you see - making that substance “live” - is downright elusive. Assumptions must be questioned, attitudes examined. The more serious and thoughtful the artist, the more complex these issues become: whether one cares to acknowledge it or not, every mark one makes bears the weight of history and tradition. Undertaken with the necessary rigour, painting is the very *template* for critical practice.

Imaging technologies have been with us for centuries and artists have made use of innovations with the usual opportunism. Painters use digital technology to explore

the two dimensional possibilities of compositions that have their origins in three dimensional complexity in much the same way Vermeer, Ingres and others might have employed the camera obscura. These days many rely on photography as their primary source material. Although I do not use it for still life, I find it enormously helpful for resolving questions of scale and composition when working on portraits and large paintings of architectural interiors. It is also an important addition to drawings when working between portrait sittings. In both these cases photographic documentation functions as a distancing mechanism, helping me to manage the balance between the representational content of the painting and its material presence. Technology is always a two-edged sword: over-reliance on such sources, especially by students, can rob the painter of the very experience of complex spatial perception necessary to create a sense of form and space in painting. This said each new technology has much to offer the painter, not least the opportunity to ask that inveterate and very useful question: why paint?

One of the primary delights of representational painting, the play of substance in the service of depiction, requires some kind of pictorial depth. A sense of space in painting is not dependent on representation however. One only has to think of the paintings of Mark Rothko or Ad Reinhardt to understand that with Modernism the experience of pictorial depth became less attached to illusionism and perspective, a sense of depth emerging instead from the subtle integration of formal and material components of the work. Space or depth in painting can be generated in an enormous variety of ways (linear structures, chromatic variations, transparency and opacity, material impositions to name a few) but whatever form it takes, the integrity of the phenomenon emerges from some element of perceptual experience shared by the painter and the viewer.

Artists and contemplatives of all traditions have long understood that it is in stillness that an awareness of reality emerges. Digital technology makes things happen quickly, which should give us “more time”. Instead life seems to have sped up and time is in increasingly short supply. As the time available for contemplation or reflection diminishes and becomes less familiar we cling to our distractions, and the process of quietening the mind and body registers as alien and unnerving. A friend who teaches drawing took his class to the local museum where it is possible to draw directly from exhibits such as skeletons and stuffed animals. He noticed that some of the students were taking photos of the exhibits and drawing them from their phones while the subject stood before them. He said “It was almost as if they were scared of looking directly at the subject for any length of time”.

In an exchange about movement in sculpture Rodin famously told his biographer Paul Gasquet: “It is art that tells the truth and photography that lies. For in reality time does not stand still...”. Rodin’s point is that the instantaneous nature of the photographic image renders it inadequate to convey the “felt temporality” of embodied experience, whereas the sculptor or painter observes and interprets over time. The resulting work compresses many perceptual moments, in Rodin’s case creating the impression of physical movement in a still object such as *Walking Man* or *St John the Baptist*. I am interested the way great painters can bring a kind of density to stillness, an intensity that conveys the mobility inherent in visual perception. In such work, by taking time, compressing it, making it visible, the artist

draws the viewer, even across centuries, into a tacit sense of time experienced and shared.

The perceptual dilemma presented by painting is fascinating because it never settles. I have painted for more than forty years and I am still astonished that I can move coloured mud around on the surface of a canvas and communicate some quite subtle aspect of my own visual experience to another person. The interplay between illusion and materiality is simple but endlessly variable and engaging: strong illusion reduces awareness of the paint surface, pronounced materiality disrupts illusion. The choice of support adds another layer to the physicality of the work, modulating the presence of the painting as object. The difference between canvas and board, for instance, is enormous. For years I have favoured a particular linen canvas which has a slight slub, cotton canvas being entirely characterless. The subtle irregularities of texture enhance the “feel” of a painting at a level that is just at the margins of conscious perception (which I suspect makes it all the more effective). Switching to a coarser weave has significantly changed the way paint behaves, which has changed the way I paint. The resistance of board is quite different to the springiness of stretched canvas, altering the tactile experience of the painter and that touch is in turn sensed by the viewer.

Few philosophers have written with such inspiration and subtlety about perception, and the very special case of painting, as Maurice Merleau Ponty. As a phenomenologist Merleau Ponty was part of a tradition of philosophy that opposed Cartesian dualism: the division of human consciousness into mind and body, subject and object, observer and observed. Merleau Ponty proposed that this approach to human understanding, while useful to mathematics and the sciences, failed to provide an integrated sense of human experience, something that artists over the ages have understood intuitively. His thinking drew on the work of painters and sculptors that suggested alternative ways to understand what perception tells us about our place in the world. He was particularly inspired by Cézanne’s life long struggle towards a realisation of the profound mystery of vision in painting.

Merleau Ponty’s thought permeates much of the most interesting recent writing in art history and theory, particularly attempts to think about painting from the point of view of practice. For him painting was a kind of hinge between two incommensurable registers: between the bodily experience of seeing and the interpretive experience of knowing. Painting points to a deeper significance: to the way that knowing or interpreting can impede seeing, to the uncertainty at the centre of vision which mirrors the uncertainty upon which consciousness turns. Cézanne’s ambiguous remark about “the truth in painting” has prompted much speculation amongst writers. It has been suggested that the truth of painting can only be told *in painting*. This seems to admit to the mystery of painting, to its resistance to language, but as with all mysteries, resistance is no reason to give up on the challenge of thinking and writing about them. Quite the contrary...

Jude Rae, Sydney, 2017.