

AN INTERVIEW: Jude Rae and Terence Maloon 2017

PART 1 (the poetics of still life)

TM: Still life is a very strong component of your work and it seems paradigmatic of so much else that you do. It seems to set the agenda and to set the tenor for your work generally – because of its immobility, its formality and the precise determination of relationships.

JR: I can remember feeling bored by still life when I was a student but later I started to realise that it would teach me about painting in ways that perhaps other genres wouldn't. I found it presented me with a kind of laboratory for painting – that it was teaching me not just about painting but about my perceptions, and the relationship between my perceptions and painting. It also has the potential to give equal weight to both the descriptive tradition in painting and the formal considerations that have always guided painters but which were revealed and concentrated with the development of abstraction.

TM: Painting as basically a two-dimensional construct, yes. And there's also the sense of staging – the *mise-en-scène* of objects that's a consistent feature of your work. I note that you have adopted Giovanni Bellini's device of the ledge which can act as a kind of proscenium or as a threshold to another world – to a world of fiction or ideality or sacredness. Through their relationship to the ledge, objects in a still life can suggest contrasting personae assembled on a stage.

JR: I understand the sense of *mise-en-scène* but I don't think of the compositions anthropomorphically. I am aware that some of the objects – particularly the gas bottles and extinguishers – have a kind of animated presence. Generally though, the still life paintings are very formally conceived. Sometimes I will glimpse an intriguing composition in the corner of my studio and it will attract me, but such "found" arrangements rarely hold my attention. I have to impose order to find a composition that will sustain the focus I require.

TM: They're formal relationships that concentrate the resources of the beholder: they presuppose the stillness, patience and alertness of the beholder. I'd like to stay with this idea of the proscenium, the ledge or a threshold mediating between fact and fiction, life and art, "here" and "there", "inner" and "outer", and I'd like to read you something that I discovered recently – it's from Michael Polanyi's book *Personal Knowledge*. I thought of you as soon as I read it. It's quite a long and involved passage, so bear with me:

"As observers or manipulators of experience we are guided *by* experience and pass *through* experience without experiencing it *in itself*. The conceptual framework by which we observe and manipulate things being present as a screen between ourselves and these things, [the immediate, sensuous qualities of things] transpire but tenuously through this screen, which keeps us aloof from them. Contemplation dissolves the screen, stops our movement *through* experience and pours us straight *into* the experience; we cease to handle things and become immersed in them. Contemplation has no ulterior intention or ulterior meaning; in it we cease to deal with things and become absorbed in the inherent quality of our experience, for its own sake. And as we lose ourselves in contemplation, we take on an impersonal life in the objects of our contemplation; while these objects themselves are suffused by a visionary gleam which lends them a new vivid and yet dreamlike reality..."

I'm struck by the fact that Polanyi describes a sort of threshold or a screen that stands between automatic, unreflective, everyday experience and what he defines as *contemplation*. Contemplation is very objective and very subjective at one and the same time.

JR: Yes, he's talking about the automatic or instrumental responses that protect us from the chaos of direct experience. I think of it as a kind of membrane. It's an interesting idea that an art work – a painting – might be able to represent or reproduce the effect of the contemplative "dissolution" of the screen that he describes. I am reminded of something Richard Shiff wrote about Cézanne, where he said that the more intensely and

scrupulously the painter observes a given site, the less objective the picture will become. I thought that was fascinating – a positive spin on the theory-ladenness of observation! When Shiff says “objective” he means that the painting is first and foremost about what’s out there, but the intensity of the observation reveals it as equally about what’s in here, *in the painter’s head*. When I start a still life painting, the objects on the table are inevitably the most interesting thing, because there’s nothing on the canvas. As the painting develops the focus shifts (all being well!) so that the canvas holds the attention more than the objects do. I find it hard to describe but it is a kind of

TM: You have mentioned the fact that people anthropomorphise Morandi. That makes me think of Philip Guston’s later works, which I associate very strongly with Morandi’s. Like Morandi, he invented a very distinctive repertoire of forms. Also like Morandi, he made a radical feature of the fluidity and viscosity of the paint surface – you never forget that you are looking, first and foremost, at a tremulous, squirming substance. The fluidity of the medium inspires the shapes in Guston’s pictures, which are conspicuously “plastic” – they are able to mutate and metamorphose, one into the other. An ellipsoid shape, for instance, can be a horse-shoe, a head, a boot, a rising sun, a dustbin lid – and there’s the ever-present possibility of slippage between one image and another.

JR: Yes, Guston turbo-charged Morandi’s squirmy paint! My work is often compared to Morandi, never to Guston. The Morandi comparison is superficial and relates more to picture content than painting per se. Both those painters were interested in “denaturing” the objects they painted – a kind of abstraction I suppose, but I don’t think my interest in abstraction plays out in quite the same way.

TM: Yet there’s a dialogue between objects...

JR: A dialogue between the objects, and a certain indeterminacy or neutrality in the way they register – the objects themselves and also their relationships. By this I mean that they are not just inert shapes, they generate an energy that is relational.

TM: And assert their difference in a slightly antagonistic fashion.

JR: I don’t think of it as antagonism so much as a kind of subtle resistance. I am interested in my paintings resisting both formal expectations and those associated with representational traditions such as narrative or allegory.

TM: The proportional relationships on the canvas are two-dimensional relationships, but once you’re tempted to read the motif naturalistically, you have to renegotiate, and maybe even renege on, those perfectly beautiful ratios that exist on the flat plane. Isn’t that the beautiful paradox we so love in Vermeer and de Hooch? If you imagine that you move a little bit forward or back, move a bit to the left or the right, this perfect order would be instantly lost?

JR: Yes, a productive tension can arise between the two-dimensionality and the pull of the third dimension, and the solution is an artifice with the *appearance* of truth. And sometimes the truth of things, for instance the formal two dimensional reversals that the refraction of light in fluid filled vessels produces can read like artifice despite its veracity. What did Morandi say – “nothing is as abstract as reality”? It always seems to come back to uncertainty, the *uncertainty* of perception, and the necessity of embracing uncertainty in approaching truth of things, of perceptions.

Still life is almost by definition an art of limitation which no doubt explains its lowly status. I realised a long time ago that I like working within narrow limits, and find that you can push those limits until they sort of warp beyond themselves into something like infinity. Finding that moving an object slightly to one side causes the relationship between two tone-colour patches in the painting to be enlivened, or that a refraction can solve a formal problem – these things give me enormous pleasure.

PART II (enigma)

TM: There's a book by Daniel Arasse on Vermeer – it's about the occurrence of enigma in Vermeer's paintings. Vermeer had an odd position in Dutch society because he was a Catholic convert in a Protestant country, and some of his works he quite clearly intended to go to Catholic patrons. He was also no doubt extremely aware of the moralising predilections which ran through this young Dutch Protestant culture, and of the symbolism and allegory that were rife in those moralised still lifes and interiors that were the stock-in-trade of visual artists at the time. Yet Daniel Arasse emphasises how the things that we encounter in Vermeer's paintings may once have been construed as symbols yet may subsequently have lost their symbolic meaning, or they may never have been intended to function in this way at all. The result is an enigma, and Daniel Arasse treats this as if it were a deliberate aim on Vermeer's part, creating images that are resolutely opaque and haunting in their mysteriousness.

JR: I think the resolute opacity you refer to – as you say, some kind of resistance to narrative and allegory -- is at the heart of the enigmatic quality of Vermeer. The women in those rooms have an interiority which is absolutely compelling.

TM: Yes, and the pointers to the "outside world" – the letters that are being delivered or being read, the pictures and maps on the walls all evoke "space" or a series of spaces which are hypothetical. They're figments of the world you might imagine when you're by yourself in a secluded interior. They suggest the possible ways of thinking-out and thinking-beyond.

JR: According to some interpretations, the maps allude to wars in the Dutch provinces, but they're equally pictures of a conceptualised space. So in a sense they're a double for the space of the painting. It's not just confined to the women who are reading of course: in Paris recently I revisited Vermeer's *Astronomer*, which is in the Louvre. He is reaching out to turn a globe. And his hand is like this: his thumb and finger steady the globe and one finger is looking. It's a picture of searching and thinking. There's no moralising in it at all.

TM: In your still lifes you juxtapose objects that allude to various contexts and different modes of production. You might have a fire extinguisher juxtaposed with a ceramic vase and an old plastic bottle. Some objects relate to the hand and others are made by machines; they may be projections of a designer's mind as well as pure expressions of function.

JR: Such unexpected combinations are a way of eluding predicability – the expectations set up by a traditional genre – but I try to avoid heavy handedness. It is a matter of subtle disruption. So for instance the reversal of a refraction, depending on how I configure it, can lend a vaguely heraldic to a table full of old bits of metal and plastic. It carries a subtle whiff of *gravitas* which sits at odds with an array of ordinary and ill matched objects.

TM: Doesn't that chime in with what we've been discussing? The impression of *gravitas* makes the object look emblematic, so there's a sort of absent or defunct allegory implied, and this serves to underline its enigmatic character.

JR: Yes, although these moves are often the result of chance rather than strategy, of formal solutions hidden in plain sight. I remember needing a vertical in a painting and wondering: "How can I construct this?," then realising the cords of my studio lights, that I had carefully tucked out of the way, were just the thing. Once incorporated into the pictorial composition they can become almost like swags, a compositional device that has been obsolete in painting for ages.

PART III (formative years)

TM: Can we talk a bit about your early experiences?

JR: I was attending the Julian Ashton art school while I was at high school. Both my parents had studied there and knew the Ashtons, so I started just before I turned 12 and I was the only child there. Back then it was on the top floor of the old Mining Museum right under the Harbour Bridge at Millers Point. Large semicircular windows faced Kirribilli across the water. The plaster room was exotic and dusty, and everything shook when a train went overhead. It was still quite disciplined – no-one would dream of teaching you to paint from a photograph – and terribly out of fashion. I attended on Saturday mornings and later some week nights, at first only drawing skulls and plaster figures then later life classes and painting.

TM: Were you allowed to erase? Was that permitted? Someone I know showed me drawings he had done at Ashton's, and he explained that students weren't allowed to use erasers. I was appalled to hear that.

JR: No, nothing like that. In fact I had already been watching my dad since I was a toddler. He still had a studio at home when I was little. My mum gave me some nudes that I drew when I was three or four, copying my father I suppose.

TM: Fantastic! Would you like to put them in your show?

JR: We could have a graphics room starting at the age of three – it would be a very long survey! On second thoughts they might make my current drawings look a bit lame – you know what Picasso said about finally learning to draw like a five year old!

TM: So your family was encouraging of you.

JR: Yes, Ashton's would have been expensive for them. My mother was always encouraging, my father was more distant as was common in the 50s. The family environment was socially isolated but quite "artistic" – my dad painted, my mum played the cello. I absorbed things rather than having them directly pushed at me.

TM: They were glad that you'd shown signs of aptitude so early?

JR: I think so. My father was shy, sensitive man, very critical of himself and, by extension, us. I was the eldest of two girls and mum was very ill when I was about six, for about ten years. We all struggled and I had quite a troubled time from when I left high school until I finished a degree in art history nearly a decade later. I recall announcing that I was going to be a painter and I remember my dad leaning forward and saying almost angrily: "Well then, you should paint more and you should get a job". Even at the time I knew that what he said was very much about him, and his fears for me. He had narrowly missed out on the Travelling Art Scholarship the year I was born and for years he had been trying to paint around the edges of a full time job on an ordinary wage, with a sick wife and two little kids. There was little distance between the pressures connected with his own work and what he expressed to me.

TM: It's terrible what you do to the people you love when you drive yourself so hard and beat yourself up for your failures and shortcomings. It's very hard just to limit that to yourself.

JR: Yes, collateral damage. I fled to London and ended up in New Zealand with my then husband. When I was starting out Dad was dismissive, even negative. He was a very fine and intelligent painter who turned later to sculpture, and his sensibility was informed by Degas and the best of late nineteenth-century European art. My attempts to understand the late twentieth-century art world must have seemed utterly pretentious to him.

TM: I wonder what he would have thought at the time of the controversy around William Dargie winning the Archibald Prize in 1953? There were a lot of younger artists who held a protest, including John Olsen brandishing a placard saying “Archibald Decision Death to Art”. They decried the fact that Dargie “wasn’t creative”, and so the question arose of what they actually thought “being creative” was. I think your father would have been of an age where he might have felt he was trapped between the devil and the deep blue sea.

JR: Absolutely, and perhaps he wasn’t equipped with a tough enough hide for the art world. He respected neither the dead hand of Dargie nor the young firebrands such as John Olsen who wanted out with the old and in with them. I think he felt there was no place for him, or for the things he valued in painting. And by the time I had realised I wanted to find a place for those things in my practice, he was old and angry and our relationship was strained.

TM: Yet, having witnessed your father’s dismay in relation to his epoch, and to its fashions and conventions – whatever you might choose to call them – this would surely have fortified you in your own independence. We have something now called “contemporary art” and I can only begin to imagine how bewildering and brain-curdling it would be to attempt to reconcile the very focused, very specialised, very serious pursuit of yours with all that.

JR: I don’t know how I actually got here, Terence. It’s a common experience – young people trying to sort out their confusions in the arts – but back then I had a bit of extra freight. I look back at the drapery paintings I made for my first show and it seems I was doing something else, if you know what I mean – interrogating painting, obscuring painting, avoiding painting, painting the canvas I was painting on...

TM: You were making a skin. I think that’s manufacturing ...

JR: ...making a hide, perhaps the one my father lacked? Yes, possibly, but I had no idea of doing that at the time.

PART IV (the wages of tone, a history lesson)

TM: A few months ago, you and I visited a lot of museums in Paris and in Italy, and during that time we had many conversations about the significance of *tone* in painting, prompted by some of the things we were seeing. This turned out to be a particularly interesting subject for both of us. Your painting is very staunchly anchored in tonalism, and of the artists that you feel closest to and admire most are exemplary tonalists, I gather.

JR: Yes, many of them are.

TM: The question of tone in the European painting tradition perhaps comes to a head in the lifetime of Whistler, who was an extremely refined, maybe even over-refined and over-specialised tonalist. Whistler was bowled-over by his discovery of Oriental art, including the classic Chinese and Japanese ink painters – who were able to improvise fantastic configurations of tone that can open up vast illusory spaces for the mind’s eye to journey into. Whistler was also looking very hard at Velázquez, and at the great Dutch realist painters of the seventeenth-century, including Vermeer, de Hooch and Hals.

In contrast to Whistler – though it takes some time for this distinction to become apparent — we have Claude Monet, who eventually fell into the habit of using the white of his canvas, the white of the primer, as the ground base for everything he applied to the canvas. He was phenomenally skillful in getting his brush marks to mesh together into a unity, and sometimes there are chinks of white primer that have remained visible, but they do no violence to the weave of his brush marks.

Cézanne evidently picked up on this feature of Monet's painting (and it would have been consistent with his practice as a watercolourist as well), but he had very much less of an innate aptitude for handling tone than Monet. So the interconnection of coloured marks in Cézanne's paintings occurs over a bare white or slightly tinted ground, and the ground is unconsciously, accidentally incorporated into the association Cézanne develops among the brushmarks, so that blanks were sometimes drawn into the configuration – to the point where Cézanne recognizes he can't simply fill in the gaps. He thinks that the compositional logic he's been following up till then has run aground, become gridlocked, checkmated: he can't decide on the next move. The white of the primer ultimately prevails.

Coming on the heels of Cézanne, preserving the whiteness of the ground became an article of faith for the neo-impressionists, and for them it was a deliberate way of challenging the hegemony of tone and the persistence of tonalism. From the neo-impressionists to Matisse, to Kandinsky and onwards – the ground-base of tonalism was deliberately wrecked. And you can find an exact parallel in avant-garde music of that time, and also in certain avant-garde poetry, too. The ironic truth of the matter is that the neo-impressionists generally had a very subtle and refined feeling for tone, in spite of their overt disavowal of it. You and I were looking at some Matisses in the Musée de L'Orangerie a while ago – his feeling for tone is fantastic.

JR: Yes, I recall at one point we were looking at a Matisse interior and we noted that the cream-white of the view seen through the window was virtually the same as the cream-white of the interior of the room – a perceptual impossibility. Somehow you are convinced there's a contrast, even though there is no tonal differentiation at all. It is a tour de force of tonal painting. To make a work like that would involve a much more artificial and irrational set of relationships than you would find in a Vermeer interior – although Vermeer never really dealt with the contrast of inside/outside... But this idea of abstraction liberating artists from tonal painting is not quite as simple as all that, is it?

TM: It's not as simple as all that. And it has a similar history to the reception of atonal and serial music, which have had their moment in the sun, and then people began to wonder whether they were perhaps more a limitation than a liberation, and they began to say: "Alright, okay, enough of that".

JR: It's a "return to order"?

TM: Not even that, because there's no denial of the legitimacy of the attack on the tonal system and its significance as a historical event, and there's no denying the ultimate greatness of Schoenberg and Webern and what they accomplished in music, any less than Matisse and Kandinsky in painting. I'd like to think that there's been an intelligent acceptance and appreciation of their respective "breakthroughs", yet in this day and age people don't see any point in resisting or defying or destroying tonality for some dogmatic reason or other. Perhaps most importantly, we realise there is something about tone that is closely related to our feelings.

JR: Yes, the most important thing to me in painting is the feeling it generates. Sensitivity in painting can take on many, many different forms, and tone and colour certainly carry feeling with them. Tonality arises from a series of relationships that generate a sense of light. For me the sense of light seems to be an even stronger vehicle for feeling than colour.

TM: In the early twentieth century, there was an assumption that tonal painting was a way of illustrating light, whereas colour generated a light of its own. The distinction made at that time was between the generation and illustration of light. I don't think that's a particularly useful opposition for you and me right now. People who are very receptive to the power of colour are usually extremely sensitive to light.

JR: And you can't have colour without a certain tonal value. What this seems to imply is that if a painting that can't generate light, it's in some way inert. I think there is more to painting than light. Lately the catch cry seems to be "materiality"...

TM: Well, Matisse said that in painting there's only one light that truly exists, which is the light of the artist's brain.

JR: It seems clear to me that painting does not exist separately to its tradition. My early art education was almost exclusively pre-20th century. In effort to understand Modernism and the various deconstructive forces of the 20th century I steeped myself in the Postmodern theorists of the 1980s. The irony of this search was that eventually I came, albeit rather late, to Matisse and Morandi. My own practice incorporates this history of personal discoveries. When I leave the raw linen edges of a canvas exposed it is an acknowledgement that painting is more than an image, that the canvas behaves as an object and the painting is a kind of skin. These are tropes of abstraction that have entered the tradition along with others, and the tradition will continue as long as there are painters.

TM: Exactly right.

PART V (camera lucida)

TM: Let's talk about your series of works depicting airports. There's a strong rectilinear framework in all of them – they're cage-like – and through the panes of glass comes a dazzling light, a sense of open space, and the intimation of a landscape. You have talked about these as landscapes which have been pushed-back and deferred.

JR: Yes, there's a confusing reflectivity in those environments. They are full of spatial ambiguities that present interesting opportunities for the convergence of figuration and abstraction. Still life would seem to be all about proximity, tactility and a close-up involvement with painting, but there is an immersion factor in bigger paintings. The spatial relationships are more distanced – internally in terms of the composition, but also in the body's relation to the canvas – which presents a raft of new possibilities. Working on a larger scale changes my relationship to the physical determinants of a painting.

TM: Your still lifes are implicitly spaces of introspection and withdrawal, but these are public spaces. My impression is that there is something devouring and ravaging in their quality of openness.

JR: Maybe that was my experience of them – they are places of transition, nowheres. I was traveling quite a lot and it seemed to me that airports – particularly Munich – are like transparent cattle runs. They're all about people-moving. They are alienating environments, but fascinating.

TM: Paul Virilio had interesting things to say about airports.

JR: And speed. Modernity is all about efficiency and movement.

TM: And there's a relation to photography in these works, isn't there?

JR: Yes, my early training left me feeling that using photographs was somehow cheating. Eventually I realised that it was *how* painters use photographs that matters. I found that they gave me scale, and more surprisingly, they gave me distance in the act of painting. The process of representation is all about describing and it is easy to forget about painting *per se*. Photographs can intervene in a positive way, but of course it cuts the other way too. It is no good relying entirely on a photograph to make a painting. Quite aside from the obvious question "why bother?", a two dimensional image is an extraordinarily impoverished source compared to the world of three and four dimensions.

My enlightenment began with the drapery paintings which started as small still life studies "in the round" as they say. Using photo documentation I could make wall-sized works, but the process was enriched by my experience, gleaned by having painted for years from three dimensions. Eventually the large paintings bored me because the input was so limited. It was this and a growing appreciation of early Modernism that brought me to regard still life as the primary generative genre in contemporary painting.

These days I find photographs useful for image gathering and analysis. The larger scale and deeper pictorial space of the interiors allows for more torsion between image and materiality than is possible in still life paintings which, for me, are limited by the size of canvas I can see around. In portraiture, photography relieves the painter of the impossibility of requesting the hundreds of sittings that Lucian Freud and Cézanne could demand. More significantly, it creates an “airlock” between the intensity of sittings, where I can recalibrate my relationship with the both the painting and contemplate my impressions of the subject in a slower more reflective way.

TM: Are you interested in the fact that some of the great Dutch masters used visual aids, mechanical aids in making their images?

JR: I’m not interested in reading about their various devices, as reconstructed by David Hockney and various academics. I am sure Ingres and Vermeer would have used photographs if they were to hand. I know that sounds peculiar, but a painting, even a realist painting, is an invention. It’s not just copying. Unlike a photograph, it’s quite synthetic.