What I Painted and Why

Until my mother died I had never worked from photographs. The static one-eyed perspective of the camera had always seemed to disqualify them as source material for paintings, even if I had wanted to. I studied art at a University in the late 1970's, when televisions, wall texts and performance art bulked out the programmes of public galleries and shows by living painters were a rarity. Nevertheless I still believed in painting as a sustained and rigorous interrogation of the visible world in the pursuit of an underlying physical or social structure that was in some sense 'true' or 'real'. This was a conviction I had bought in wholesale from those I considered to be the last exponents of serious figurative painting: David Bomberg, Frank Auerbach and Leon Kossoff. Using photographs was cheating.

Working directly from the landscape had sustained me through college until constant rain and farmers' dogs killed off my inclination to paint outdoors. Instead, I began working in the studio from sketches, which were a lot quicker and easier to make outside. The resulting landscapes lurched from overheated expressionism to cubist inspired cool geometries, but a move from rural Wales to Brighton and summers spent drawing in the town and on the seafront meant that the passer-by began to take centre stage. Despite this shift in the subject matter, problems translating drawing into painting dogged these years spent lugging a studio easel along crowded pavements, promenades and piers, backing into corners where no one could disturb me, clutching pin sharp 8B pencils.

As the eighties figurative painting revival gathered momentum and extravagant personal and national mythologies gained currency, I retired permanently to the studio in an attempt to develop some kind of painterly language. There, I wasted gallons of pigment on a trowelled and rutted romantic symbolism I hoped would convey a universal drama. Gone was the sense of a dynamic engagement with a particular location, the flow of pedestrians moving through streets, washing up against railings and barriers, crossing roads in clotted bunches. In an urge to make a more compelling statement and naively inspired by Charlton Heston's performance in 'The Agony and the Ecstasy', I embarked on what became a 20 year programme of painting the human form in isolation from any recognizable context. Surely love, conflict and betrayal were timeless, transcultural themes calling for a new vocabulary of tangled

bodies that could evoke the sensuous proximity and labyrinthine negotiations of life.

'The Embrace' (1996)

Compositions were improvised during the process of working and I used myself and a few willing friends to model the stock characters that pushed themselves into the foreground of these oversized canvases.

Looking back, I was in the process of exhausting a set of preconceptions that had somehow become installed during my youth. Complete ignorance of the professional dimension of artistic production and its entanglement as a pursuit with historical and economic forces had left me with only the vaguest sense of what constitutes art as a practice. My themes were recycled from the work of artists I found particularly heroic or had entirely misread and represented a lowest common denominator of human experience. Even here, at this ebb tide of content, I couldn't assume that say, religious, ethnic or class differences never cut across or inflected the issues I was attempting to address.

The paintings I made from memory when my mother was ill in hospital were the last attempt to represent what I had convinced myself was the 'human condition'. They were pitifully inadequate and miserably failed to convey any of the feelings or reflections I had at the time, even to me. There was an irreparable breakdown in the way I went about making work and within weeks I was listlessly compiling a photographic inventory of my hometown and the estate I had grown up on, with no clear idea why.

However hilariously late I was in considering using photographs (artists have used them as reference since at least the 1860's) the main problem in hand was to excavate myself from a sensibility better suited to an art historian. When visiting galleries I had always been drawn to Baroque painting, attracted by the vigorous modelling of form without noticing that artists were clearly under orders from their patrons and using any optical aids they could get their hands on.

Back in the studio I asked myself whether I could use these snaps as 'aides memoires' of a place I knew would become increasingly remote and inaccessible. Could I paint from a photograph?

Before I acquired the means to enlarge them, I worked by holding the standard 6" by 8" prints in one hand while painting with the other. The paintings, monochrome and with a deadpan matter of factness remote from the generalised forms and expressive distortion I had resorted to previously, seemed to suggest absence by purely formal means. By transcribing the compositional content, the contours and surfaces of the buildings in each photograph, into tonal, painterly terms rather than

taking a photorealist approach to variations in exposure, depth of field and focus, I was able to produce an image that had some kind of unity as a physical object.

'46-44' (2002)

By leaving out the pedestrians that had populated previous townscapes, the onlooker was cast as lead player in the depicted scene. The incorporation of telegraph poles and lampposts in the immediate foreground, partially obscuring the bungalows and semi-detached houses that formed the focus of each composition, further implicated the viewer as voyeur in the visual field of the painting. He or she had to be subjected to a sense of loss emanating from a claustrophobic suburban setting that offered no refuge via third person narrative devices such as those employed by Edward Hopper.

However detached and forensic this approach felt at the time, the overwhelming connotation of melancholic isolation and the inevitable associations I brought to the work eventually became stifling for me too.

The motivation to make paintings regardless of consistent financial and moral support is hard won and draws heavily on the drive to enact a resolution of conflicts that may prove insoluble in other contexts. Whilst a disciplined working routine can help to pull through a personal crisis, eventually it can start to make things worse.

Nevertheless, I felt that the urban landscape could still provide the motifs for an examination of the conditioning of experience by place. I just needed a wider repertoire of states of mind beyond my own.

By changing the location there was a possibility that I could step back to take a broader look at the built environment via specific architectural forms familiar within particular social groupings.

'Edwards Place, Rochdale' (2006)

I would finally yield the 'high ground' of universal content for a more honest trade in the lived experience of 'typical characters in typical circumstances' to quote Engels on realism.

Terraced streets, art galleries, factories, estates and building sites were all to hand near my Manchester studio and the then new digital camera extended my range and eliminated the risk of not having enough decent shots to work with. The factories and mills of the north of England have been a subject for painters throughout the decline of the textile industry but the deliberate lack of any obvious elegiac glow in my own work emerged from a detachment that eventually also fostered a creeping contrivance. It became difficult to avoid the compositional devices that I had initially imported from the American documentary tradition via photographic artists such as Thomas Struth, Andreas Gursky and Candida Hofer but that had inevitably come to seem formulaic and mannered when transposed into painting.

'Corner of Newton St and Faraday St 2' (2007)

Travelling with the camera seemed to offer a way out of this cul de sac. London, Paris and Berlin certainly yielded some evocative locations that seemed at least topographically resonant with some of the cultural theory I had been reading as a reaction to the failure of the anti-war protests of 2003. Underground stations, airport terminals and other spaces of transit fascinated me by their studied lack of distinguishing characteristics, to the

same degree that vernacular architecture had compelled by its regional flavour.

The problem was with my agency in the production of the source material. If I was already working with photographs, why was I confining myself to the images I had produced myself? In theory I could appropriate any photograph taken since the advent of the apparatus in the 1830's. This could in turn enable the engagement with historical themes closed to me in any key other than the nostalgic.

'Potsdamerplatz' (2005)

Politicised by world events, I wanted to find a way of making critical work capable of interrogating the vast web of assumptions that underpinned the actions of Western Governments. It became imperative to look into the function of art in a society where mass political protest had failed to divert a genocidal foreign policy.

This would obviously be a long process. Starting with Marx may have helped to clarify the articulation of economic forces with the cultural field but I needed to find out whether painting could be ripped from its moorings in 'commodity fetishism' and put to some other use, short of

propaganda. Work by Althusser and Eagleton on ideology and further reading in Brecht, Lukacs, Burgin and Bourdieu quickly fleshed out a Marxist aesthetics and sociology that remained only fragmentary in the 'classic' texts. I got a clearer sense of the photograph as a condensation of the ideological and social functions of image making into a material form that is literally historical and about history at the same time.

I had already worked with images from a local library collection when I discovered an archive of slides in a Frankfurt flea market. These provided a number of useable images taken by an architect with a professional appetite to document all manner of sites and projects both in Europe and the USA.

'Found Image 1' (2005)

I began an ongoing series of 'Found Image' paintings from these and other slides and photographs picked up second hand from markets and junk shops. The first paintings in this series were of modernist buildings but as I acquired more and more family snaps on trips abroad, it occurred to me that a return to the human image could be attempted, but in historically specific terms.

These worn grey tokens of life in continental Europe both before and after the Second World War manifested the artefacts, hierarchies and rituals of existence in the teeth of conflict. Here was a means by which to allegorise contemporary political issues using source material from similarly fraught periods in European history, whilst also looking at photographic representation as a political act. The paintings incorporated the agendas of the original photographers, whether private, commercial or institutional.

The gift of an East German family album dating from the 1950's opened further possibilities for immersion in the concrete domestic circumstances of life under a regime relentlessly demonised in the West to the present day.

'Neujahr 1937/38' (2011)

Put together by Doctor Wilhelm Munscheid for his daughter on her 5th wedding anniversary, this bound and annotated personal archive brimmed with associations and incidental details of village life in the GDR at a time when medical professionals were leaving for West Germany in huge numbers. Having made 30 paintings from images in the album, I

discovered through a German neighbour in Manchester that the Doctor's daughter Renate was still alive. In January of 2012 I visited her in a nursing home near Frankfurt, returned the album and interviewed her about her life both before and after the war. At 83 years old, her warmth, sense of humour and hospitality reminded me of my mother. She had never seen the album, which she thought may have been misplaced in some furniture that her Uncle had inherited after her father's death. The furniture, in turn, had ended up at a flea market where the album had been bought for me.

'Wohnzimmer Mit Blick Aufs Esszimmer' (2008)

At last painting seemed to make sense as an activity; through a collaboration with photography it could act as a means of retrieving forgotten testimonies and to make a case for lived experience as the driving force of art. The viscous materiality of paint and the quality of the photograph as a trace of reflected light can be fused in order to reinvest images of the past with a tangible presence. The resulting hybrid can persuade us that history is far from incomprehensible as a concordance for the present.

In a determinedly 'post medium' art world, commitment to painting can appear hopelessly provincial, particularly when painters make the kind of ill-advised confessional remarks I've made here. To follow the instructions that come in the box rather than diversifying, to avoid (not by choice) a metropolitan art education and attempt instead to work out these kinds of problems 'on the job' can take up the larger part of a lifetime. Most artists are uncomfortably aware that nobody asked them to do it and there is little if any demand for what they produce beyond what they can conjure up by relentless self-promotion.

'Das Glückliche Paar Auf Fahrt' (2011)

If anything has superseded the drive to map the contingencies and determinations of the phenomenal world in art, it's the obsessive urge to build a career. A reassessment of the role of the artist in society however, needn't mean the adoption of an entrepreneurial wheeler-dealer mentality. Art can console, entertain or celebrate and that may be where the money is, but it also retains a critical potential that can make a clean breast of its own conventions at the same time as it addresses the state we're in.

Many artists are preoccupied with the semiotics of discourses drawn from fields that have no obvious visual manifestation. This research driven engagement has acted to deconstruct many of the mechanisms through which power is exercised in society while at the same time relativising

more traditional media such as painting and bringing on a crisis of subject matter. Perhaps this has been overdue for decades, but for those artists committed to it, painting continues to promise a chance to connect, not by resting on its popular appeal, but by extending and fortifying the appetite for community of consciousness.

The silent, static, handcrafted representation is obstinately contemporary through its quotidian 'thereness'. Paintings condense time through the very process of their making, laminating bouts of work and evolving negotiation with content. They act to explicate the optical field, fixing the fugitive and irreducible and in the process, enabling our re-engagement with the world.

'Der Jubilar' (2011)

This may sound like an instrumentalisation of art as a social tool; an exchange of thematic 'universals' for an equally vague ragbag of neo-Marxist categories. But what if any kind of artistic commitment requires a leap of faith, a conviction that however localised in effect, art can make a difference? Perhaps it's time we moved on from the 'politics of representation' to the representation of politics, which will always be a human story.

All works illustrated are oil on canvas.

Full details are as follows:

'The Embrace' 241 x 163 cms (1996)

'46-44' 168 x 214 cms (2002)

'Edwards Place, Rochdale' 183 x 244 cms (2006)

'Corner of Newton St and Faraday St 2' 92 x127 cms (2007)

'Potsdamerplatz' 166 x 214 cms (2005)

'Found Image 1' 173 x 241 cms (2005)

'Neujahr 1937/38' 122 x 173 cms (2011)

'Wohnzimmer Mit Blick Aufs Esszimmer' 92 x 142 cms (2008)

'Das Glückliche Paar Auf Fahrt' 92 x 153 (2011)

'Der Jubilar' 92 x 127 cms (2011)

www.davidgledhill.co.uk

www.rogueartistsstudios.co.uk

'Renate' Documentary

www.youtube.com/watch?v=rlMywxEC8SQ&feature=plcp