

And Some Ran Away 2017

After the last shipment of paintings and drawings, the studio became empty. I took this opportunity to have it painted, a periodic requirement to maintain a semblance of purity and order. It is now at its most pristine.

Gradually the space is now being colonised with new developments; a few drawings, fresh stacks of photographs, a new canvas on order, one now underpainted.

Painting doesn't get any easier. It often feels like an impossible quest to make something that doesn't simply reiterate the known cliches of the past. I recently watched a programme on the elderly surrealist Desmond Morris. He talked about finding a reality, that the forms that he made were defined by the new status of being of and in paint. It could have been me talking, yet there was also the terrifying realisation that Morris was entirely deluded. His biomorphic forms were not unique inventions at all. They had nothing to do with the ideological aspirations of surrealism. They were, and have always been, a cultural pastiche, derived from the inventions of Miro. To make a painting that has the cultural appearance of surrealism will ensure that it can never be true, real or surreal. It can only be a cultural product. If Morris acknowledged his failure, he would then be a knowing post-modernist who has no faith in art.

But this would be a futile aspiration, irrespective of the art world's willingness to celebrate it. In the empty and private space of the studio, such false accolades have no meaning.

Despite a plentiful supply of large pieces of paper, and even blank canvases, invariably all I can do is to try to define a new beginning on a tiny sheet of tracing paper. The desire to make remains as strong as ever, but how to structure a new reality is always an impossibly difficult question from the outset.

Mindful of a Perfect Stranger

I finally ordered a stretcher today in the proportions of a new drawing. It began on the day we delivered the last consignment of work. It began from being in London, in the area around Vauxhall, which I have painted several times before. I set about documenting all the places that we visited, recording the passers-by, the traffic, the river, the cafes and restaurants where we ate. Back in the studio, I used this mass of material to forge a new pictorial event through a series of small drawings. My emerging concern seemed to be a tension between the presence of the familiar, in particular myself and Gaynor, and all that was foreign, distant and unfamiliar. Of course, distant in this context could be that which is seen from afar, but it can also be the unknown stranger sitting next to me in a café or walking past me on Vauxhall Bridge. The former has an obvious pictorial solution, the latter, less so and as such, more deserving of my invention.

Mindful then of a perfect stranger, I am now embarking on a new canvas (about 56" x 49"). There is a dominant central figure. More accurately, there is a mass of human presences, but to be worthy of art, this cannot remain just a fragmentary collage of observations. The sum must be both a testimony of where I have been, and new, astonishingly different and super-human.



Drawing for Mindful of a Perfect Stranger 2017 pencil and acrylic on tracing paper

And Some Ran Away

Its difficult to know how large a painting should be when I only have a small drawing. These drawings shape my thought but they don't shape the space in the studio. Yet art must always be concrete, material and interrupt real space. A drawing, just as a photograph, could be enlarged to any size, but whereas this limitless variable is the natural state of photography, the resolution of a drawing into a painting has an optimum size. In short, an artwork has a true size, from which it risks the danger of becoming overblown or miniaturised if this is not discovered at the outset.

This is due, in part, to the structure of an artwork being made from unique components established by the physical manipulations of the individual artist. The scale of art is always human, the building blocks are not just mentally conceived by the artist, they must also be forged by his hands, and placed at the reach of his body. In front of an artwork the artist performs a unique dance. Play this

back and it is obvious that the artist's movements through space are essential to the creation of the artwork.

So to determine the size of a painting, I often make a fast study on paper, following the final drawing. The paper is fixed to the painting wall and I paint without any predetermined thoughts about size. I will often look at a small section of the drawing, and paint it instinctively. The resulting studies help me to gauge the overall size of the final canvas.

These fluid studies in acrylic are then stored but occasionally I will chose one for further development. This painting was developed on top of such a study.



And Some Ran Away 2017 liquitex on paper 28¾ x 22¾ inches

The original study, just in brown acrylic was made prior to “Calder’s Ascension”, and there are common features in both this painting and the larger oil painting. But the process of painting has resulted in two autonomous artworks, with distinctive narratives. Not only are the formal blocks that make up the pictorial structure so fundamentally different to set up alternative motifs but I made these paintings at different times, drawing upon different thoughts and preoccupations. Of course, I cannot necessarily know what these might be at the outset, art is not a conceptual activity where an artist just illustrates a predetermined idea. I can start from the same source material but the process of making and time spent in the studio will lead to very different images.

The title of this piece “And Some Ran Away” draws attention to the outlined figure that runs across the picture plane. This began with the dark lines at the top of the painting that formed the profile of a head.



There are many other figures that emerged during the painting process, most notably a three-quarter head that fills the painting, facing towards the left.

As with “Calder’s Ascension” this began in the area around Victoria Tube Station, but it was made at the time of the terrorist attack on Westminster Bridge. Perhaps the running figure, and the frenetic activity that surrounds it relates to this?

The title also recounts an infamous show of YBA froth at the Serpentine Gallery, “Some Went Mad, Some Ran Away”. At least the title on the spine of this exhibition’s catalogue has stayed with me. Whatever the connotations of the motifs, this modest painting is also a new step into a bare studio where I yet again confront the challenge of making art.

On the right is a standing figure painted realistically. Her rendition conforms to a conservative mode of representation. There is little that is inventive in this portrait. Its cultural certainty fixes the space and scale at this point, but as we follow her gaze, we are brought into a medley of painted inventions where figures form and dissipate. In the centre, certainty has been replaced with ambiguity, flux and anarchistic juxtapositions.



There is always a risk in following this direction. We could end up with nothing, and for most of the duration of these new paintings, it seems that I am effectively creating nothing at all, not even a signifier of normality for mundane dialogue. The temptation to run away to safer ground and peddle a bit of social or aesthetic realism is always an option. But to do so would be a failure to make art. Typically, it is a maddening challenge, and I am reminded of how so many artists recognised the need to be free of conventions, often looking towards the art of children, primitive cultures or the insane. Of course the influence of these traditions belong to a history of modernism but what I can distill from this example is the absolute need of art to depart from normal structures and to teeter on the edge of chaos if it is to have any validity in an era of rigorous structural normalcy in its everyday culture of communication.

I often think of our digital culture as an overwhelming example of this structural normalcy. Whatever is being said, it is all being said through the binary formulations of 0 and 1. Whereas this negates the possibility of art being made from digital media, it doesn't negate the value of digital tools if the artist is aware of the need to resolve its binary codification with a unique humanly determined structure.

When photographing the world, I have always preferred using film, but I have recently started using a digital camera, largely out of expediency. I find it difficult to carry the medium format cameras, nor wish to burden Gaynor with the task.

These new paintings have been informed by digital photographs. I have no interest in the photographs as such, but using the digital camera in London and then in Maastricht sharpened my awareness of how modern cameras can change the realisms of art.

Photorealism continues in a blissfully uncritical climate, and even Lou Meisel's latest volume "Photorealism in the Digital Age" continues to promote images fixed to one spot and frozen by a split second in time as the latest development in hyperreality. But the new digital cameras are not 19thC plate cameras, mounted on a tripod. They allow us to document our experiences as they unfold. So my photographic record of my trip home from Maastricht consists of over a thousand photographs. A truly modern "photorealism" must be an art that is rooted in all this imagery, not just a single moment.

I am beginning to make some drawings based on this material, but on the studio wall is now a new oil painting, just underpainted in thin paint and a limited palette.



Work in Progress Portrait (*As yet Untitled*) 2017 oil on canvas 40 x 27 inches

Based on an acrylic study "Portrait" which had its origins in the preparatory work for a painting last summer "Blue Galatea", this new oil centres on the human presence. All three works in this essay are portrait in format and might nominally be seen within the portrait tradition. They all hint at being filled with large, head and shoulder portraits.

Not that a head and shoulders mug shot of a human being can be any more of a true portrait than a postcard view of the city of Maastricht can reveal my experience of being in a place. These are redundant modes, at best worthy of preservation for their most poignant features.....a painting might contain within its fluency and slippage, passages of particular stillness, which contribute to the massing of a new, uncharted human presence. In this, humanity becomes a new pictorial reality, perhaps more aptly, a new pictorial muscle.

And that is where all this work seems to be headed, drawing upon hugely complex histories. This new portrait of Gaynor stumbles into different titles as its various narratives come to the fore. I let the painting go wherever it needs to. In painting someone I have shared a life with, there is so much territory which could influence its directions and how that coalesces is as yet unknown. At the start of working on this painting I hung above my desk, one of my early paintings of Gaynor and myself from when we were students. This marks the beginning of a private history, and also the beginnings of a pictorial challenge. But this is an image of an event, it is not a pictorial resolution of a history.

