

From Victoria to Arcadia

As a student I attended a lecture by the eminent art historian Pamela Gerrish Nunn. From the position of a feminist, her argument was that Rembrandt's depiction of women was irrelevant to contemporary society and as a structuralist, the notion of Rembrandt's painting as a unique creative subject was a bourgeois myth. Rembrandt, we were told, had very little to offer us. Lectures of this kind did not mark my art education as an undergraduate but they were a frequent occurrence in art schools and art history departments as the teachings of structuralism became more fashionable. This was indicative of a much wider war being waged between modernists and postmodernists.

This conflict was due largely to the creative failures of modernism itself. Modernism had become so reductive that finding a unique position had become increasingly more difficult. As a result, much of what emerged in the post-war period was not just esoteric but very insecure. In such a fragile state, it was doubtful whether this art was sustaining an ideology of individualism, and was in fact simply conforming to cultural models and stereotypes. For many, the creative burden to be uniquely original resulted in a state of despair and many abandoned the possibility of existential authenticity altogether. I recall talking to artists in New York over twenty years ago, who remember the struggle for originality within the later stages of Abstract Expressionism. Had Pamela Nunn cited the work of an artist from these declining years as epitomising the myth of the autonomous artwork, she may well have persuaded me. But she didn't. Instead she chose a Rembrandt. No matter how much she asserted that it was just cultural mystification that entrapped us to believe in this as a unique individual subject, the existence of the Rembrandt asserted that it was she who was deluded.

But as the failure of modernism demonstrated, a concept of art as original, unique and self-determined just seemed to be both unsustainable and illogical as a broad social and cultural definition of art. Society defines art in accordance with its relevance to society and not the individual's will to stand apart from it, and there were far too many practitioners working within known styles to accept only a tiny minority of authentic innovators. The mainstream is now much happier in embracing the poststructuralist notion that art is not about being original in its invention, as everything that could be invented has been done. Instead it is a dialogue, and valued in accordance with its social and political relevance. It is also a dialogue about art itself, parodying the styles of the past. Underpinned with theory, art of this kind can proliferate in an untroubled climate.

So postmodernism was culturally expedient. It defined art as language, determined by and for society for the purpose of communication. It condemned the notion of an autonomous artwork and in doing so, removed the challenge of creativity. Art became a matter of reconfiguring all that is known. Novelty resulted from the juxtaposition of different "texts" in ways that had not been tried before. We had entered a post-art era not of originality but cleverness.

But as a student, I failed to be convinced by the *specialness* of our era to suggest that it was so at odds with our more distant history. Were we so different to abandon art which was once thought of as integral to the human condition? The poststructuralist assertion that it is a fallacy to regard art as being uniquely creative was potentially catastrophic and demanded a large degree of scepticism at the very least. It could just be enshrining mediocrity and justifying creative failure, unable to imagine anything greater.

Throughout art history, artists have always struggled to understand what defines the uniqueness of art and have made pastiches and parodies of

other artworks, whether in sympathy or mockery or just in the attempt to learn. Many have been happy to be followers, establishing a cultural stream of production in the wake of a few originators. There has always been a demand for lots of things that look like art. Our era is no different from other eras that conveniently defined art to validate the activities and interests of the many, often at the expense of the few.

Poststructuralism is the new academicism. Looking around the art world, I see this to be evident because, although poststructuralism is intended as a broad critical tool which helps to understand art as culture, inevitably it becomes a guiding force for what actually happens in the studio. Theory becomes illustrated. There is discrimination and a favouring towards what is demonstrably *knowing* of its poststructural precepts at the expense of what appears to be delusional and outmoded. It encourages activities such as reproduction, mass-production, appropriation, text based art and all the rest, and dismisses those practices more suited to making an autonomous work of art.

So mainstream teaching which denounces art as a creative act becomes self-fulfilling, unless it is knowingly resisted.

Rather than mainstream thinking and practice demonstrating a new kind of liberalism and enlightenment, it seems to have consolidated a more historical occurrence that the fashions of the day are set against the individual artist, marginalising their art. My history, which brings me to this current exhibition, is against this background.

Throughout my career I have been subjected to the kind of dismissal that Nunn voiced about Rembrandt. From being told not to attend a leading art school by its head on the basis that I could and wanted to draw, to

being forced to complete my postgraduate studies away from the department studios, has shown me the strength of opinions. To hold my views on art affronts the cultural norm and is met with real hostility.

I have said nothing to prove that a Rembrandt has a unique and astonishing existence. At the outset it has to be a matter of conviction and belief. That is a belief in art itself, over the dissolution of art into texts, to be discussed as other disciplines such as politics and language. But what is also evident is that without that belief, there is no fundamental impetus to create something astonishing and art quickly descends into a nihilistic wasteland or a playground for entertainment. Whether based on a suspension of disbelief or a whole hearted commitment to the unique existence of art, the continuation of art cannot be sustained under a Marxist mantra of art solely servicing society.

There has always been a refuge for my beliefs. Countering the theory of Nunn, I was taught by the painter David Tinker. His question to me was simple but has kept me fuelled in the studio ever since. "If you walk around the National Gallery", he said, "you will see many paintings of the Madonna and Child. They all carry the same meaning, but some are great works of art and some are not. Your problem as a student of art is to understand the difference."

It was a question of distinguishing between the meaning of art in society and its essential nature. Or its subjective interpretation against its objective state. To ask what an artwork means, is to ask what it means in relation to something else, perhaps ourselves. To ask what it is, is more a matter of tautological cognition. That is, art simply is, just as a tree that stands in a forest is. It might be defined in terms of its place within an ecosystem but it still has a material form which is tangible and unique. It is not surprising then that, within the chapters of late modernism, the existence of art was underwritten by a qualitative emphasis on its

material form, which is its flatness, colour and shape, rejecting any references to the world outside.

But the answers don't reside in a return to formalism, and my understanding of the autonomy of art isn't focused on the formal properties of painting per se, but the immaterial. There is a curious parallel in my thinking to that of the conceptualists who think of art as being outside of the material. But I don't jettison the material and the artist's interaction with it. Quite the opposite. The artist manipulates the material to the point where it begins to fall away. The resulting space is art. It comes about through a very physical engagement but art resides in neither the material itself nor the artist's gesture.

Art is the constitution of authentic space. I think of this not as a space like a room in which events can be played out, but space at its most cosmic, with all the complexities and life forces that this implies. It is important to distinguish this space from the space that we occupy in our world.

Structuralist theories define art in terms of language. Subject-matter is easy to understand as narratives, symbols and signifiers, but this is also applicable to entities such as space. And so the space of our world can be signified, or illustrated, through conventional means. The illustration of space is illusionism. Typical to all linguistic frameworks we are not presented with the real thing but something that stands in for it, marked out by its unreality. An illusion is a lie. Such deceptions do not constitute an alternative reality, but document our world.

It is not surprising then that postmodernism embraces standardised means for the representation of space. Photography and all lens-based media are preferred because of their systemic normality. As Roland Barthes noted, it is not that photography is that convincing, just that it is without the unwarranted subjectivity of the human hand.

For the postmodern painter, photorealism, as the exact replication of photography, is the perfect means to reiterate space, with the minimum of artistic choices. Realism, whether it takes the form of such banal kinds of painting or as the ready-made, the cast object, photography or video inevitably dominate postmodernism. If authentic creation is banished to the past or regarded as a myth, and even denounced as culturally harmful, there is little will or point in engaging with any of those practices associated with it. Consequentially this leads to inertia, where the enthusiasm of youthful rejection becomes a perpetual state of adolescence, unable to evolve. For example, since its inception in the 1960s, photorealism's only development has to become more adept in imitating photography. Its failure to evolve over 50 years despite attracting many thousands of practitioners is the outcome of a structuralist conception of art.

But what the proliferation of photography and photorealism helps me to understand is the difference between the illustration of space and the constitution of space. I have worked through this conflict in the studio, and I have come to understand that rejecting the normality of photographic space is a prerequisite for the creation of autonomous art.

Art has to be a matter of invention not imitation. For art to exist at all it cannot occur as a standardised product of, and consumed by the pervading culture. Art has to resist this commodification and the only means it can do this is to resist the possibility of deconstruction. If it is to refute the claim that it is no more than an assembly of cultural conventions that have been learnt and passed on, it must defy explanation. In matters of space, the construction must be unique and it must also be credible.

It has become clear to me that perspective is of no use to the artist. This rigid system established in the Renaissance and now underpinning photography and film is culturally known. If art is about creating a new space, the means through which this is done cannot be known. Perspective is only of use if it is liberated from its conventional formulae, but in this variable state we would be better to describe it as spatial mathematics. The spatial mathematics of my paintings has more in common with chaos theory than any prescribed system. There are sequences but they can only be seen in the actual state that they occur in the painting. To deconstruct my space and reduce it to a diagram would destroy it.

There are other means to invent space. Constable talks of chiaroscuro as his primary system, but by this he wasn't meaning the kind of tonal modelling that we might find in Correggio. The more I have looked at his work, the more it becomes apparent that it is an unmappable shifting of light and shade. When Constable talks of chiaroscuro he means only how it is in each of his paintings. And Constable was outspoken against the spatial formulae that dominated the cultural mainstream of his day. His loathing of David's Neo-Classicism is an example of this.

Dissecting paintings down to an underlying geometry is a kind of deconstruction associated with formalism rather than the hard-line deconstructionism of the "New Art History". It is a more gentle cultural assimilation but equally problematic because it makes art accountable to known systems. Often referred to as a hidden geometry, it is advanced as a way of understanding such remarkable painters from Piero della Francesca to Piet Mondrian. Much of my early work was based on proportional divisions relating to the golden section.

But I have come to understand the limitations of making and analysing paintings in this way. Hidden geometry is an artistic fallacy. It is not that artists don't use proportional divisions at the outset of a painting, they

may do this in a very deliberate way, just as they draw upon other aspects of the world around them, but the outcome is always unique. It is what distinguishes art from systems painting. The form in a Piero della Francesca and the edges in a Mondrian have particular nuances and inflections that we would have to overlook in order to bind the work to a rigid geometric system. This is absurd. It is the deviation from the norm that creates the complexity and the autonomy of art.

What fascinates me then is art defined by an inimitable space that is outside of any cultural norm. Such spaces, such universes have been created by a thread of individuals throughout art history. Art is a matter of individualism and not society. The uniqueness of Rembrandt's pictorial invention defies deconstruction. This is a conception of art that makes art very rare and very difficult. It also makes it astonishing and unfathomable.

There comes a point where the only place to carry out further investigation is in the studio.

The studio is not a workshop where work is fabricated but an environment solely for the creation of art. To meet this outcome it must be a space where the needs of society are left at the door. The studio is not a social space, nor is it a forum for the artist's opinions or ego. There is no audience to play to. It is art that determines the activity of the occupant. My current studio is a converted billiard room in my home. Only I go in there, and I have done so, on a daily basis since giving up my departmental chair in academia over 12 years ago.

Training, learning, knowledge and practice are all necessary in the pursuit of art but they have an uneasy relationship with each other. Everything

that I hold to be true has emerged through painting in the studio. As my understanding develops, I will share my thoughts with others, often with my friend the writer Michael Paraskos. Our relationship is like that between Henry Moore and Herbert Read. Some of my thoughts will have a precedent quite unknown to me, and Michael will quote Conrad Fiedler or Jean-Luc Marion or even the Archbishop of Canterbury, and the resulting discussion will add weight to something which began as an inkling. But whether it is new or known ground, the only understanding of any use is that which is discovered through practice. It matters little what artists or theorists have said in the past if it doesn't resonate as true in the studio.

With understanding comes the realisation that art is greater and more challenging than could be imagined at the outset. The possibilities are extraordinary but with that freedom to explore comes the need to recognise those false avenues of cultural reiteration. The truth can be hard to bear, but the greatest pleasure is enabling and witnessing the creation of space from nothing.

My work begins in the reality of my surroundings, in particular the urban landscape. Apart from "Leicester Square", all the paintings and etchings in this exhibition began in my visits to Victoria Underground Station and its surroundings. But none of the paintings depict a view that I have selected from this area. I am not an illustrator, framing the world and duplicating it on to the canvas. Instead my paintings begin with me moving through the world, looking all around me. The views that finally emerge on the canvas only exist because I have invented them. My challenge is to make credible and make possible that which is impossible. The titles of my paintings often hint about some of my preoccupations. "Sun Setting over Victoria" as opposed to "Sunset over Victoria" implies the passing of time, "Artist Descending a Staircase" tells of my movement through the world. In this, I am not illustrating the passing of time or movement, just indicating that my paintings are an invention which began with such things. Impossible

problems require me to invent. It is a very simple method that throws me in at the deep end at the beginning of each painting.

The solutions that enable me to create each painting are unique. Nothing is transferable to any other painting. Visitors to the studio are rare, but for the few that have seen my work in progress I am happy to explain my process. Recently I have done this to Michael Paraskos and my dealer Geoffrey Parton. But on both occasions it becomes clear that they have understood some of what I do but there comes a point where further explanation is fruitless. This is partly because I can no longer recall all the decisions that I have made as the endeavour has become so complex, but also that I don't really understand how the painting is functioning. It is not a deliberate attempt to obfuscate, just a simple statement of truth that the means by which the painting is created is ultimately unknown.

Both Michael and Geoffrey have arrived at this position in regards to my work, and share my view that the nature of art is always mysterious. It refutes the poststructuralist position by resisting deconstruction. It is unrepeatably and even I could not make the same painting twice. Compare this to photorealism, where every painting shares the same conception of space.

Perversely, seen from a distance and without any interrogation, there is an attempt to deconstruct my work to the point where a virtual Clive Head has been invented who assembles photographs through a computer programme, projects the image and fills in the line in a dispassionate manner. This vilifies the work but the intention may not be malicious. Society will define art in terms that it can understand. The distance between this fiction and the truth as witnessed at close quarters in the studio, is indicative of an art beyond the boundaries of cultural acceptability and understanding.

I seek a pictorial construction that has an indefatigable certainty, whilst being unfathomable. The paintings in this exhibition were made since my exhibition at the National Gallery and have embarked on more daring problems. The space in a painting either functions or it doesn't. Nevertheless it was satisfying to see a large audience at the National Gallery believe (quite literally) in the work whilst acknowledging its difference from our world. But the popularity of the work is not calculated; quite the opposite, as it results from an indifference to any audience, be that the public or a cultural elite. I need to focus entirely on listening to the demands of the painting and any extraneous concerns will upset that relationship. For the space to function it has to reach a point of ease, like Matisse's description of a painting being a comfortable armchair. But that armchair could not have been designed prior to going into the studio or ever be put into production. Ease is contrary to easy. And the ease of art is always compelling.

Painting can be arduous. The extraordinary history of painting sets a standard that is difficult to attain and the craft skills take years to master. But painting only becomes art when craft, which is the outcome of following all that has been laid down by others, is surrendered for inventive thought and action. In my studio there is now very little time for craft, beyond stretching canvases and washing brushes.

But long before art is possible there must be craft, and all painters have learnt from others. My time spent in Richard Estes' studio when I was 23 was a useful beginning. I never adopted the typical codification of Estes' painting which was to replicate a photograph. But in the wake of Estes flowed a culture of photorealism which had little to do with his work. For some years I was associated tangentially with the photorealist movement.

The difference between my objectives and those of the photorealists was highlighted at an international project which I took part in several years

ago. In discussing my work I described a method that rejected any mechanical dependency on the photograph. I also talked about my desire to make paintings that were as convincing as any photorealist painting but of a space that could not be photographed as a still. The response was that this was simply not possible. The crystal plausibility of such hyper realism was rooted in copying photographs. My proposition was too difficult and unimaginable.

In many ways, what was being voiced by the majority was Gerhard Richter's opinion that photography was the final word in realism.

The consequence of thinking the unimaginable isolated me from the group. As a culture, photorealist painting is dealing in the knowable and all that could be learnt, mastered and passed on. It also keeps pace with technological innovations, defining its modernity through a dependency on the latest digital cameras and computer imaging. It is modern by being in league with our culture, rather than offering a critique. Its complicity is typical of so much postmodern activity.

Representing a visual experience of the world that could not be photographed would dispel Richter's claim. Far from photography being the last word in realism, a painting like "Terminus Place" shows that it is possible to make a convincing image of the world viewed from different positions. Although I had moved away from a desire to be faithful to my subject when this painting was made, the principle remains that systemically, photography had been displaced, which renders photography and photorealism as historic. But my solution exists as an autonomous work of art. It can't enter the cultural stream because it can't be codified, learnt and used. It stands alone, outside of culture, and remains useless.

But the greater consequence for me in embarking on this ambition was to abandon any thoughts about photorealism entirely. The freedom to move

away from photoreality was also the freedom to move away from realism and understand the necessity to create a new reality.

Given photorealism's compliance with the photograph, such painting became a matter of surface. Unwilling to contemplate anything beyond, Richter's conclusion was that painting continued to be important for the sensory pleasure in handling paint. As a result his work, in all its variety, has become a celebration of the elegance of the painted surface.

In my work, the opposite has become the case. I have no interest in matters of style and paint effects. I ask of my materials and my tools that they enable the painting to hold its form with certainty and clarity. I paint directly and without any concern for finish, and I have no conception of how the surface should be. I stop painting when the space and the form are established and in harmony. Information is used and discarded in accordance with what is integral to the painting. I am concise but I can also be elaborate. There are no rules that I follow and the outcome is the result of the process.

Printmaking is bedevilled with all kinds of problems, so when Marlborough invited me to make some prints I knew it was going to be difficult to find a pathway through it.

Historically, printmaking has always facilitated the reproduction and distribution of art, long before artists spoke of the commodification of art. Whether for financial gain or the dissemination of ideas, painters turned to print as way of reaching a wider audience. In the Victorian era, which saw the commercialisation of the art world, original paintings were

extensively reproduced through engraving to satisfy an expanding market.

Printing as reproduction is a means of integrating art into society. It is an act of cultural assimilation. Not surprisingly then it has been embraced by the postmodern mainstream. Warhol's activities are particularly significant because print techniques are offered as painting, replacing the uniqueness of art with an outpouring of endless mechanical reproduction. Warhol prints, he doesn't paint, as a dialogue about commodification and as a commodity to make him wealthy and famous. This agenda for printmaking is an anathema to me.

The fundamental problem at the core of so much printmaking is the absence of anything original or the displacement of the original for an image. I would define an image as *being of* something else rather than having any essential value. Its meaning resides in its source, but it does not have the source's status. It is a facsimile.

There is an inherent problem with any print process that relies upon a facsimile of an original, which is twofold. Firstly the original is flawed if it can so easily be reproduced (it is not sufficiently resistant to deconstruction) and secondly, the print is the outcome of a mechanical surrogacy which denies any possible autonomy. The current fashion to make a drawing on acetate or paper, or make a photograph or montage, which is then given to the printer as a template for subsequent processes can only result in making images.

I decided to work in print in the same way that I work in paint. That means recognising what the medium can allow me to achieve but also transcend both materials and mark making. For all the technological interference that can distance the artist from the process, printmaking techniques still have a tremendous latent potential.

“Terminus” is the first etching that I have made since I was 20. It is not a reproduction of the painting “Terminus Place”. It began where the painting finished and is a development of this project. Perhaps it is its conclusion. My paintings always begin with a complex drawing on the canvas which is subsequently painted over. The print is an attempt to constitute the space as a continuation of this drawing. With only line, as there are no half-tones and no blocks of shading, I wanted to create a credible space. The point at which I stop is the point at which the lines begin to fall away to create space, and the black ink and white of the paper become light. As with my paintings, I don’t hide my mark making but work through it until a new reality transcends both the image and the process.

To achieve this I draw directly onto the copper plate, biting the lines with acid every few days. I have to think in reverse, there is no room for error, and the process itself is full of risks. I look at the configuration of the lines in the final proof and have no idea how they constitute the space. The print is autonomous but the copper plate allows there to be an edition, which is a by-product of the process.

My approach to printmaking is almost unheard of amongst the artists of my generation. I did not set out to stand against the mainstream and I have no interest in returning to the past. My subject is all that surrounds me, both physically and culturally. The urban landscape is the poststructuralist landscape, rich in signs of low and high culture, ethnic diversity, capitalism and class, language and image. Its appeal is for its visual complexity and because it doesn’t belong to the art of the past.

Since Pop in the 1960s the prevailing attitude towards high art is to debunk it of its elitism. The relentless parodying of Western art has

repackaged it as having no greater value than the back of a cornflakes packet. Although such parodies fail to understand the uniqueness of that which they set out to deconstruct, they are intended to demystify art. Low and high art are merged, and everything becomes a text in a flatbed of contemporary culture. My response is to reverse this and elevate all that I find indiscriminately into a state of art. I don’t see this as elevating the common place to high culture, but lifting it out of culture altogether.

In doing this the journey from reality to art is to strip our world of its signification. Art then overthrows semiology. If the dominant cultural trend is to commodify our history, our environment and ourselves into knowable and usable language for the purposes of communication, I seek a different relation with reality, where this bombardment of signs and narratives are resolved in a different space where none of this is important. We can’t escape by pretending it doesn’t exist, but render it as mute.

In this I have a greater affinity with Realism from the 19th Century than realism as it occurs today. In its ideology, the realism of Ruskin, Manet and Van Gogh had nothing to do with the production of texts and facsimiles. Instead, they took as a starting point their environment as the subject for art, rather than the narratives of history. Manet is such a pivotal artist. His painting of modern life is totally convincing whilst rejecting all conventions.

But there are a number of important contemporary artists representing the world around them who might be described as figurative or realist.

As a committed modernist my undergraduate tutor David Tinker occasionally voiced his doubts about the whole realist enterprise as it didn’t offer sufficient room for an inventive programme. But the apparent limitations imposed by a rigorous representational enquiry can actually lead to astonishing results. My conclusion is that the only means to

constitute a pictorial fact is through drawing, and the tools, processes and materials must be sufficiently flexible and malleable to allow this. But this must be coupled to a willful resolution of our world which demands a discipline that might appear to be limiting.

It is tricky to find a pathway between imitation, devoid of any life and an escape into painting which loses any purposeful focus. Realism by its nature is passive, and art requires an active, non-compliant approach, but this must be measured. It is a fine line between resolving life and fabricating a fantasy. What attracts me is art that is not trying to be art, but finds a reality out of necessity. I often think of Antonio Lopez-Garcia, relentlessly keeping pace with his changing subject as he gradually teases a new reality that stands independent, or Frank Auerbach, who finally establishes a configuration of marks to reconstitute his subject. Neither of them resorts to symbolism, imitation, nor meretricious displays of colour and paint handling.

As with both these artists, I begin each painting in a haptic experience of the here and now. My presence in the urban landscape is a deliberate act of looking in order to see. It is prolonged and at odds with the casual browsing and glancing of the people who I encounter as they pass by. I am focusing on the actuality of the environment rather than its subjective relevance to me. Although I am centred in the world, I am also interested in how it is from every angle, and this becomes manifest in the paintings where the viewer is both centred and displaced.

My understanding is that artists differ from non-artists in how they negotiate the world. They are instinctively different so it is a matter of nature over nurture. Children develop an understanding of the world around them through building a mental map. This schema can be seen in the kinds of pictograms that children draw. They show an understanding of their surroundings in terms of importance to themselves, described

through symbols and signifiers of relevant meaning, rather than seeing the world as a concrete environment in which we exist. Children do not draw space and construct a credible representation of the world, because this would be contrary to their cognition of the world. It is not possible for children to draw in any other way.

As with all theory, it must be measured against experience. As I could draw like an adult draughtsman from a pre-school age, I can only assume that intuitively I do not negotiate the world as others might. This early self-discovery is probably the beginnings of my scepticism towards any theoretical approach to art based on semiotics. It may well be true for the majority, and as such would explain why it dominates contemporary culture, but as a means of understanding art, it is irrelevant if it is so at odds with what distinguishes artists in the first place.

Of course this is not true of all those who are culturally named as artists, only those who do not regard art as a vehicle for dialogue.

My paintings begin with an enormous amount of information. I think of subject matter as beginnings, of which the final outcome may or may not be a reminder. The subject matter is everything that comes into my experience, and continues to do so throughout the making of the painting. A chance encounter with a person on the day that I paint a figure might result in their painted likeness. My paintings of the modern world have developed from being landscapes to *inscapes*.

All art begins in art as much as in our surroundings and my interest in art history began as a child. Once I recognised a concept of art outside of my own making, the innocence is lost, influences begin to mount and there is a desire to improve. Although there were chapters of modernism keen to recapture the innocent eye it simply is not possible. In acknowledging the

existence of art, I recognised my responsibility towards learning and understanding. Naïve art is now disingenuous in the Western world. The history of art might seem daunting, even a burden, but I have always found it to be inspiring and fascinating. As a teenager I set out to see as much as possible.

My paintings are influenced by the art that I have seen, but it does not define them. Any attempt to cite the work in a meaningful context needs tempering. It is not that influences are not identifiable, but art itself cannot be understood by all the critical and historical references that we have at our disposal. And that is all we have. Perhaps it is enough to say that art history influences the shape of art, but not its essence.

I have always been comfortable in looking at art from all periods. This distinguishes me from most artists of my generation who tend not to look at any art beyond our own era. Perhaps it is seen as less relevant, as it is regarded as foreign to our culture. But I see all art as existing in the present and outside of culture. The importance of looking at historic art has become particularly pertinent to me as I have been involved with a number of museum projects.

The project at Dulwich Picture Gallery is described as a conversation with Nicolas Poussin, in which I explore a relationship to art history which is very different from the usual interventions occurring in our historic museums. Typically, the simplest means to relate to a painting from the past is to reduce it to a text. This can either be a codification of an aesthetic, that is, the look of an old master painting with its cultural connotations or, looking at the text on which a painting has been based. So the significance of a painting by Titian, for example, is a story from Ovid. This enables the painting to be side-stepped, allowing for a new interpretation of an old narrative.

Neither approach has any relevance to the development of art. I wanted to make an independent painting that learnt from Poussin's profound understanding of art. What defines Poussin is not his subject-matter. My painting, "Terminus Place" is not an appropriation of Poussin. Instead, in the same way that I have described the painting of a figure as influenced by a chance encounter with a person, my painting is shaped by an encounter with Poussin's painting. There is no deliberate attempt to make the painting like his work. As I have been looking at Poussin for many years, it is a very natural process.



Nicolas Poussin *The Triumph of David*

My response to Poussin is typical of my approach to painting. The painting that followed, "Artist Descending a Staircase" is shaped by my

trip to Holland to look at Dutch art at the point of its conception. And my current painting, "Thinking about Georges Braque" began with a fascination with Braque's late studio paintings.

The connections between "Terminus Place" and Poussin's "Triumph of David" are both startling and subtle. These projects are how I continue to learn, and because they are the focus of public exhibition, can also demonstrate the value of historic art in developing contemporary painting.

The problem with historic art is that it tends to be discussed in the context of social and political history. Traditional art history is more genteel than the New Art History but it remains Marxist in orientation. The formal qualities and the spatial function of historic art are rarely studied and poorly understood. This became apparent to me when I was asked to discuss my interests at the Canaletto colloquium to coincide with my exhibition at the National Gallery. My premise that many of Canaletto's paintings were founded on an elliptical space which drew the viewer into an invented world, came across as an astonishing revelation. It is clear to see that he deviates from the rules of perspective, but the implications of this have never really been considered.

So the purpose of my exhibition entitled "Modern Perspectives" became a forum for considering perspective as a creative tool that does not adhere to mathematical conventions. This non adherence connected my work to Canaletto, but it also connects my work to other painters.

I continue to look at Vermeer. His work is often cited by the photorealists as a forerunner because he used a camera-obscura to establish pictorial space. His painting is of pivotal importance because it would appear to be validating a straight-forward approach to documentary realism within the continuum of art history. It also corroborates claims that most

representational art throughout the ages is based on lens-based technologies.

But this is too simple. Closer inspection shows that he is actually subverting a conventional lens-based space. There are hints to understanding this in the quality of his painted edges and his multiple vanishing points. Although Vermeer used a camera obscura as a beginning for some of his paintings he did so in order to resolve rather than mimic the mechanised image. He reminds us of his beginning but the outcome is a unique resolution. It is difficult to describe. Vermeer replaces conventional perspective that is plotted within a cuboid structure with an original polyhedral structure, where planes fold and move off at unpredictable angles. Only the plane across the front of the painting is a conventional window that separates our world from his. The modesty in which he does this might fool us to believe that his paintings are realist when they are way beyond our reality. Vermeer's paintings oppose perspective, much in the way my paintings oppose photography.

All is not as it first seems in Poussin's paintings. Looking at them afresh, we see that he is not the master of classical convention that art history would have us believe. In fact, although Poussin's subject may well be classical, if he is a classical painter at all, it is in the spirit of Dionysus, so radical and celebratory is his invention.

I have been fascinated by Poussin's paintings for decades. I remember giving a lecture to my painting students on "shadow plane space" based on my observation that Poussin created a shadow plane behind the actual plane across the front of his painting. The value of this was to show that Poussin's concept of art was at a distance from our mundane reality. If the picture plane is the point of contact between our world and the painted world, and the point at which art can falter into reality, Poussin ensured that this could never happen by creating a margin between the two.

Poussin establishes pictorially that life and art are quite separate.

But Poussin's stunning invention is the way he creates an expanding universe. Conventional space, seen through a rectangular window frame gives us a world of overlapping subjects, where objects in the foreground obscure our vision of things that are further away. It is a limiting space that closes down. Poussin's space is the opposite, where nothing is obscured and there is a generosity of different spaces which allows more and more pictorial events to continue opening. Each event is in relation to the whole, and will be an echo of its rhythm but nothing is repeated.

Poussin is so keenly aware of his spatial invention that he even taunts us with figures placed behind columns, knowing that they will not be obscured. I do this sometimes in my work. The creation of space is founded in his drawing. The presence of his line simultaneously depicts form and delineates a unique pocket of space, though precisely how and why this works remains a mystery. The work of Poussin's followers, such as the early paintings of Charles Le Brun, only have an appearance of Poussin, and do not share his expansion. But Le Brun later found a lateral and dynamic space that doesn't surface again until Pollock.

Poussin's creativity is as inspirational as Cubism in developing a contemporary approach to painting which is expansive and complex; allowing the viewer to see around corners and explore a vast array of different spaces. The means by which I do this cannot be the same, though in recent years I have become more concerned with the drawn line and the painted edge which is central to the spatial invention of both Poussin and Vermeer.

The painted edge became explicit in Analytical Cubism. For a long time I have spoken about a desire to make a seamless cubism as these edges were too fragmentary. To an extent, this fragmentation was a signifier of

modernity, and could lead to a dysfunctional painting. But understanding the value of the edge is to understand the structure of painting.

The edge distinguishes painting from imaging. The significance of an image resides in all that it refers back to. A photograph is an image. Although the principles of photography are underpinned with conventional perspective, the photograph itself has no space. It is an image of the space that the camera has been pointed at, but it is materially and spatially flat. If looked at up close, the photograph is made up of a homogenous surface of coloured dots. Because there are no edges, there is nothing to demarcate space and information. As such then the photograph is without differences, and it is a peculiar irony that there is no detail in a photograph. The detail belongs to the subject of which it is an image.

Painting differs in that it is built on edges, and each edge creates a spatial inflection. A painting can be read as an image, much in the way that we read a photograph, but this is to disregard the structural differences that create spatial complexity. And it is this complexity that is the actual detail of a painting, not the information that it illustrates. Whether it is a Van Eyck, a Poussin or a Cezanne, there is always difference established by the edge of a brush mark. Only a painting that destroys the edge will relinquish the detail of its spatial complexity and become mundanely flat.

It explains why photographs are so out of place in an art gallery. As images they are useful references to our world but without any means to create space they are irrelevant as art.

Through colour and light, Poussin continues to distinguish between our world and his painted world. He creates a pervading light to which every colour is registered. Inert pigment is transubstantiated into space and light which is different from the light of our world. Only in hindsight, when I have seen my work exhibited alongside realist paintings have I understood the preternatural light of my paintings. Rejecting a realist agenda is intuitive rather than an intellectual decision.

What defines Poussin is radicalism. Although they are incomparable, it is the same kind of radicalism that I have noted in Vermeer, Constable, Rembrandt, Titian, Manet and Braque, to name just a few in this remarkable thread of pictorial invention. In every case they have challenged the cultural norm and displaced it with something unmappable. It defines art over cultural artefact. If you walk around the National Gallery you will see lots of paintings that depict the Madonna and Child. Some are great art works and some are not. It is this radicalism that defines the difference.

Radicalism that challenges cultural expectations can become a rallying cry for subversion which is more destructive than creative. I could not decide to be radical. My invention results from a gradual progression of seeing what I am capable of establishing. Coupled to a criticality, I try to paint beyond my limitations with every new canvas, but I am not addressing an audience with this challenge. It is personal and entails much that seems quite prosaic. But a freedom finally emerges to work outside of what is known. So the work actually develops, quite startling so if I look back over the decades, each painting replacing the last as a provisional solution to being in the world. Given the complexity of this project, it is a very long apprenticeship. The will to relevance must be supported with ability and insight, and perhaps only the recent work is innovative. It is a hard won radicalism that is indefinable, not the cliché of radicalism owned by contemporary culture.

The history of making a work of art, and my history as an artist, is to begin in the normality of the world, its geography and culture, and gradually establish an alternative that displaces this normality. My history is that of a private artisan and anarchist. It is a creative journey, not a philosophical position. Compare this to Michael Craig-Martin's conceptual piece where a glass of water becomes an oak tree because the artist wills it to be so. This is a displacement strategy by declaration only. Without the artist's assertion it remains a glass of water. The act of transubstantiation in Poussin's paintings is a reality. It's absurd that we should regard Craig-Martin's piece as avant-garde and Poussin's paintings as conservative.

The difficulty seems to be accepting the beauty and coherency of Poussin as avant-garde. The displacement of our normality is deemed more radical if it results in a dysfunctional void. Since Pop, a lot of art has overthrown the meaning of the subject but the ending is left open for the audience to complete, and this audience participation fosters a curiosity that equates with profundity. But art does not ask us to think. It asks nothing of us, apart from a space and light.

Creating a functioning totality is truly profound, though our mainstream culture is uneasy about this. But if we abandon completeness, we also abandon the human desire to create something remarkable and breathtaking. Displacement is easy; creating a coherency in its wake is truly worthy of human endeavour. It is the only outcome that terrorises the cultural order by being better.

All art is anarchistic, though not as a subversive text but as a functioning universe. Great artists are important to me because of their mastery in creating this functionality. The value of looking at art from the past is to challenge the limitations of the present. Throughout the 20th Century, artists have dismissed historic art as rooted in rationalism, and defining bourgeois values of good taste. I recall sweeping opinions against

Victorian art when I was a student. But it is clumsy to attack art from any period when the target would more likely be the pervading culture.

How ironic then that the Dadaists declared art to be a fallacy, only to clear the ground for the development of Surrealism which rediscovered the mystery of art, in all its unfathomability. The illustration of dreams is no more creative than the illustration of the world around us, but the *structure* of art is always surreal. The post-dada activities in more recent history have had the opposite effect, creating a more cynical era where art is cultural commodification. But this is only the mainstream. There will always be art, and there will always be cultural artefacts.

The problem with regarding a painting as a mirror held up to our world is that it fails to take into account what happens to experience, subject and materials when they are transformed into a work of art. That process changes everything, so any cultural reading is highly unreliable. A painting may betray where the artist has been and whom he has met, but the subject becomes autonomous which annuls its normal meaning and function.

Everything becomes a pictorial fact or, to be precise, an immaterial spatial fact. Within these painted universes everything is defined in accordance to its position with everything else, and everything exists at once, in the present, and forever. There is no history and no future and so there is no time to permit a narrative. Everything exists in stasis. I have always thought that it is this that makes art so at odds with literary theory. Narratives and histories belong to the past. Codifying the present into narratives is how we make sense of it as it becomes the past. But art offers an alternative to this endless continuum of present becoming a

narrative of time passing. Paintings are not a still, like a photograph freezing a moment in time. Painting is outside of time.

Paintings can have a human presence but any narrative reading is an invention of the viewer. Poussin turns the story of the triumph of David into a spatial event. The same could be said of my paintings. "Artist Descending the Staircase" is based on the passing of time as I walked down the stairs, but time is painted as one spatial event. It is how this would be if time did not exist at all. As if we were free to see everything simultaneously.

The title of this painting refers to Duchamp's "Nude Descending a Staircase", in which he painted a sequence of stills of the nude in movement as seen from a fixed point. The artist is static and so the space he makes is conventional. In my painting, the act of looking is not anchored to one spot, as it is the artist who is moving. The outcome is not an illustration of movement but a new pictorial space. It is the kind of invention that we find in Poussin and Titian. Duchamp's references were Muybridge's stop motion photography and the moving image, and the logical solution to illustrating movement is through film. But film and video create a narrative through the passing of time, and add to the flux and uncertainty of our world. The certainty of art is that it does not move.

The narrative of time passing is always unsettling. Poussin recognised this in his seminal painting "Et in Arcadia Ego". Literally translated as "And I am in Arcadia", it is not an invitation to the artist or viewer to take refuge in Arcadia, but a reference to death. It is a *memento mori*. Even in Arcadia time passes and everything withers and dies. So Poussin's subject, his ideal landscape is no different from my subject, in that time passes, and life is in a state of flux resolving only in our final demise. The chaos of passing through the London Underground seems an apt reminder of our transience.

But Poussin has taken the literary ideal of Arcadia and made it permanent and forever. It is the point at which the narrative is in conflict with the stasis of art, so much so that art is the antidote to death. Poussin's Arcadian subject is not significant, but the pictorial world that he invents is truly ideal. Poussin realises an *Arcadian space*, as an alternative to the earth bound space of our mundane world.

So much has been made in the spirit of modernism and postmodernism that has failed to recognise the potential of art as an alternative reality. Carl Andre's dismissal of pictorial space as being the most objectionable relic of European art is typical, saying that, "actual space is intrinsically more powerful than paint on a flat surface." My exhibition begs to differ.