

Dissertation – Deb Catesby

‘Painting a cloud on a wall’: finding some benchmarks for painting through poetry.

‘The finest colours can be bought ready-made at the Rialto.’ Tintoretto.

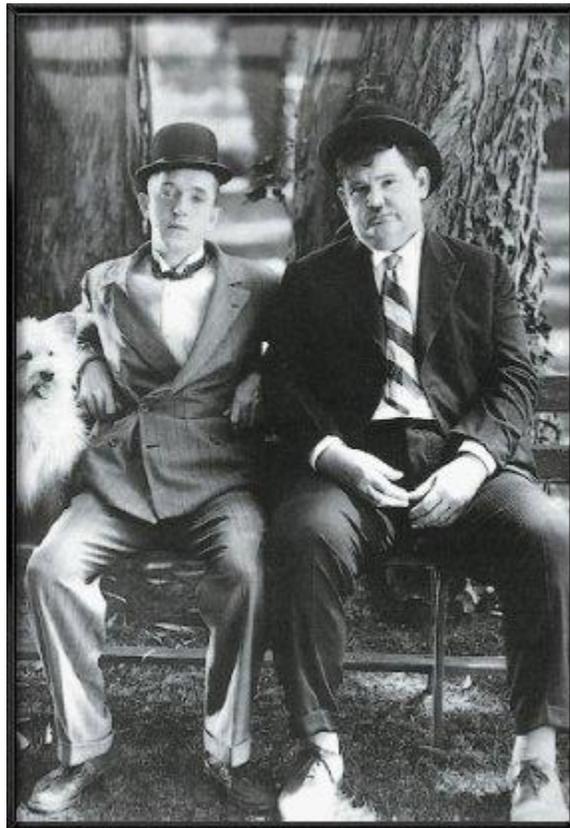
(De Duve, 1996, p. 147)

‘We spend our life, it’s ours, trying to bring together in the same instant a ray of sunshine and a free bench ...’

(Beckett, 2010)

Laurel and Hardy in the film ‘Scram’ in 1932 are up before the judge, pleading not guilty. ‘On what grounds?’ asks the judge. ‘We weren’t on the grounds,’ replies Laurel. ‘We were sleeping on a park bench.’ While there is a bench, you haven’t yet reached the rock bottom level of the ground.

(Heathcote, 2015).



The search for the essence of painting can lead, as de Duve points out, to the discovery of a urinal. I hope, instead, to discover in the course of this essay that there is an essence of painting which does not lead to R. Mutt. I want to argue that for me, for this painter, the essence can be found in painting's similarity with poetry.

This is a personal quest. One woman's park bench, the thing that keeps her off the ground, is not going to be the same as another. I am not interested in going back to very first principles, being happy with the paint I find on the Rialto. I am, however, interested in discovering what the essence of painting might mean *for me* and for my work.

To that end, I intend in this essay to use my knowledge of contemporary poetry – both as reader and writer – to help me examine what the essential ingredients of painting might mean for me. I will be referring to poets whose work sheds light on the wider ideas about painting which will help me to understand better what and how I want to paint.

Samuel Beckett's search for the essentials led him to 'an expanse of scorched grass rising centre to a low mound' ('Happy Days'); to 'two ashbins, covered with an old sheet' ('Endgame'); to 'a MOUTH... about 8 feet above stage level' ('Not I') (Beckett, 1986) His is a visual imagination as well as a verbal one – to the extent that directors of his work are prevented by his estate from altering the staging of his plays away from his specific directions. His characters, his actors, his carefully choreographed movements, the dramatic arc of his plays were his ways of examining what it means to be human. And it is the connection with what is human that I shall attempt to find in the relationship between painting and poetry.

In 2012, Sarah Pickstone won the John Moores painting prize for '*Stevie Smith and the Willow*'. The painting was Pickstone's response to Stevie Smith's famous poem, '*Not Waving but Drowning*.'

Not Waving But Drowning

Nobody heard him, the dead man,
But still he lay moaning:
I was much further out than you thought
And not waving but drowning.

Poor chap, he always loved larking
And now he's dead
It must have been too cold for him his heart gave way,
They said.

Ch, no no no, it was too cold always
(Still the dead one lay moaning)
I was much too far out all my life
And not waving but drowning.

Stevie Smith



from (Smith, 1972)

This is a poem where there is a split between subject and object. There is a see-saw movement between the 'dead man' and the 'I' of the poet. At the end of the first stanza we might think we know where we are. The 'he' has turned into a speaking 'I' - 'I was much further out than you thought'. And we, the reader, have been guiltily turned into the 'you' who thought he was only waving.

In the second stanza there is detached comment, 'poor chap' ... 'they said'. We are complicit in the casual 'It must have been too cold for him his heart gave way,'. The long unpunctuated line followed by the abrupt 'they said' is very judging of us.

In stanza three, we're back to the subjective voice of the 'I' of the poet. 'it was too cold always' ... 'I was much too far out all my life'. But the intrusion of the very odd bracket '(Still the dead one lay moaning)' keeps up the fiction of the division between poet and 'dead man'. But we're left with the awkward question of how, if he is dead, can he still be moaning? Surely this is a call for attention to a person or persons who go on 'not waving but drowning'.

The pathos of the poem, its intimate elegiac call for our attention, is used in an interesting way by Pickstone in '*Stevie Smith and the Willow*', one of a group of paintings about writers and the natural landscape.



'Stevie Smith and the Willow' 2011

Oil, enamel & acrylic on aluminium panel Dimensions: 198.3 x 229 cm

The painting is not an illustration of the poem. Indeed, Pickstone has deliberately taken Smith's own scribbled drawing of a girl and 'pasted it in' to her painting. As Paul Hobson remarks in a perceptive essay in Pickstone's book, '*Park*', the artist has made a painting which is a comment on contemporary alienation as demonstrated by Smith's poem and by our own flatness, experienced through screen and the manufactured grabbing of imagery.

'The painting is large, and the white ground gives the work a flatness that is reinforced by the angularity of the foliage and the doodle-like central character. The work combines a strong painterly quality with a digital aesthetic, as if the image had been created on the blank screen of a tablet, quickly sketched in parts and embellished with texture elsewhere... its uncanny sense of time – not so much a lived moment as a screen-grab of an image experienced time and time again.' (Hobson, 2014, pp. 17–18)

This is painting as comment on the world. It has found a way of matching the sadness of Smith's poem and grounding it in contemporary experience.

For all its large size, this is an intimate, touching painting which is both thoughtful and moving. The brightness of the yellow, the delicate dripping falling of the branches, the red doodle of reflection on the bottom right underneath the figure, the shadowy vanishing cloudy grey marks in the background are all there to express the world – the thing that the small, dwarfed figure hasn't got and isn't a part of.

Rainer Maria Rilke, on the other hand, has the world sensuously in his grasp. Here he makes poetry and painting come together in a simple description contained in a letter to his wife, Clara, in 1907. She had sent him some sprigs of heather:

'like embroidery, splendid; like three cypresses woven into a Persian rug with violet silk (a violet of such vehement moistness, as if it were the complementary color of the sun). ... just look at the radiance of this green which contains a little gold, and the sandalwood warmth of the brown in the little stems, and that fissure with its new, fresh, inner barely-green ...' (Rilke, 1985, pp. 9–10)

And in a letter a few days later:

'...two pomegranates I recently bought from Potin; how glorious they are in their massive heaviness, with the curved ornament of the pistil still on the top; princely in their golden skins with the red undercoat showing through, strong and genuine, like the leather of old Cordovan tapestries ... when they are [ripe], I believe they easily burst of their own fullness and have slits with purple linings, like noblemen in grand apparel ...' (Rilke, 1985, p. 13)

Rilke's observations of what he has seen are passionate, engaged and detailed. The splendour of his language recreates what he is seeing and allows us to see it freshly.



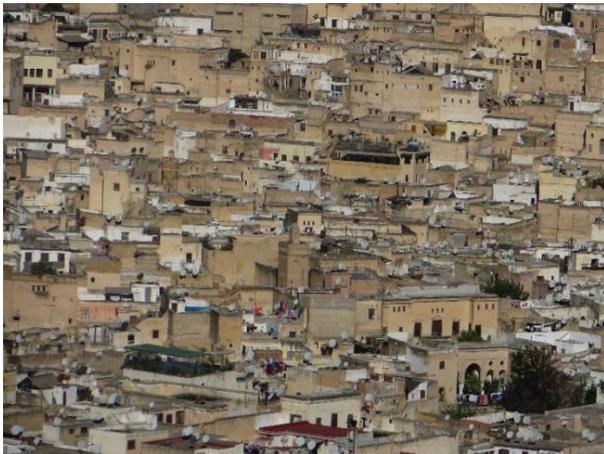
'The Silver Cup', 1769 (oil on canvas)

Chardin's still lifes have a similar sensuous appreciation of the world. Diderot observed of Chardin's paintings:

'O Chardin, it's not white, red or black pigment that you grind on your palette but rather the very substance of objects: it's real air and light that you take onto the tip of your brush and transfer onto the canvas. It's magic, one can't understand how it's done: thick layers of colour, applied one on top of the other, each one filtering through from underneath to create the effect ..' (Diderot, 2000, p. 604)

He is expressing admiration for something similar in sensibility to Rilke's. In the one case it is the world observed through paint. In the other it is the world observed through words.

In a recent painting of mine, *'Facing East'*, I set out to reference the bit of the world I had found when travelling in Morocco. *'Facing East'*, is, I realise, a response to the city of Fes. This is my own photograph of the city.





Facing East, Deb Catesby. Oil on canvas. 20 x 30cm 2016

The painting, however, is not *of*Fes, although it uses the experience I had of the city. It has some of the dense, clustered nature of its narrow, winding streets, its warren of houses, while using the blueness of sky and sea in the underpainting. It could be both drawing us inside an undisclosed place, while at the same time giving a sense of hovering above it, waiting to be drawn in. It uses the stuff of the world in a non-representational, abstracted way. It has a concentrated feel to it, perhaps rather claustrophobic.

Poetry shares with painting a concern with stillness (a great deal pushed into a limited space), wholeness (the need for each of the ingredients to speak with each other and enrich the whole), beauty (affording pleasure through balance and the harmony of parts?) and truth (authenticity?).

It's possible that music would be a more useful analogy for a different artist with an interest in the **'basic signifier of the new language, the 'essential', 'natural' metonym for pure painting.'** (De Duve, 1996, p. 156). Music, or **'organized sound'** – has been defined as **"the art of combining vocal or instrumental sounds (or both) to produce beauty of form, harmony, and expression of emotion"**; (Concise Oxford Dictionary, 1992). Naturally these descriptions can be challenged as not quite properly grounded (Cage's silent 4:33; cultural contexts; what has beauty to do with it? etc.) Music deals with abstraction, formality; with the tools of repetition, rhythm, rhyming, beat; with

the beauty of harmony and melody. All of these could be applied to painting and have a satisfying purity.

In the end, I must deal with my own bench, my own way of keeping off the ground, my own ray of sunshine – and my own practice of painting. The tools of music making and the emotions generated by music are both important and have meaning for me, and indeed have a close and common relationship with both poetry and painting. However, they leave out a vital ingredient. For this, I shall refer to Winifred Nicholson's window sill:



Winifred Nicholson.

Window Sill, Lugano 1923 (oil on board 28 x 50 cms)

Five pots of flowers sit on a ledge. Beyond them we see an expanse of white intersected with blue on the left hand side of the painting as we look at it. We read this as water, probably a lake, judging from the title – *Window Sill, Lugano 1923*. At the top of the painting is a line of hill-like objects in the same blue as the flowers in one of the pots and the streaks of blue in the water. A further blue mass is on the left hand side just beside one of the watery streaks, suggesting the shadow of a cliff or headland. These dark blue sections (on the

left, across the top of the painting and then in the flowers on the right) balance each other and keep the painting held. They also have the effect of flattening the painting so that although there is some suggestion of depth and recession, on the whole the impression is that everything is on the same plane. It refers to the real world, but makes no attempt to pretend that it represents it.

The warm brown on either side, suggesting hills, is echoed in the lighter shade of the central pot. The white of the water sweeping from top left towards middle right keeps us enclosed within the view from behind the plants and implicitly inside the house. It connects with the whitish colour of the window sill at the bottom of the painting. The yellowish brown on the right hand side suggests a frame or edge for the view we are being given, the yellow linking up with the flowers on the right and left and centre keeping the painting unified within its landscape format. Finally, the pink flowers coming into the picture frame on the left and the reddish tulips on the right make us feel connected with the real hidden world on either side so that we are not cut off from it but yet still contained within the world of the painting.

Christopher Andreae, in his introduction to his book on Nicholson, writes of Nicholson's paintings of flowers:

'In these characteristic Nicholson pictures, the indoor and the outdoor are inseparable. Window panes and bars are often eliminated entirely. The artist seems to be looking outward and inward simultaneously. She has discovered a telling visual metaphor for the act of seeing, its objectivity and subjectivity inextricably linked.' (Andreae, 2009, p. 9)

There is a connection here with Stevie Smith's poem. Smith's 'I' and the man who is drowning are the same as the 'outward' and 'inward' referred to by Andreae.

I shall return later in the essay to a discussion of subjectivity in relation to landscape and the sublime. Here, however, Andreae has shown how the intimate, domestic world can provide a portal for understanding the view outside the kitchen window.

The vital ingredient, then, is the visual world and its landscape and the things and people and relationships between those people and that world.

'I don't want to be out of this world, I want to be absolutely in it, all of the time.' Lucien Freud quoted (Gayford, 2012, p. 51)

'I never visualize a picture before I start. I have an impulse and I try to find a form for that impulse. The great benefit of manuring the thing with reality is that reality continually belies one's expectations.' Auerbach, quoted (Lampert, 2015, p. 176)

And that's where poetry and poems can get a look in and perhaps illuminate the ways it might be possible to have the visual world and its doings without having necessarily to represent it.

Winifred Nicholson, Frank Auerbach and Lucien Freud use the bits and pieces of the world and remake them in their own ways much as the multi-award-winning poet Alice Oswald does in her poem, *'Marginalia at the Edge of the Evening'* (Oswald, 2005, p. 27)

Marginalia at the Edge of the Evening

now the sound of the trees is worldwide

and I'm still here/not here
at the very lifting edge of evening.

and I should be up there. Bathing children.

because it's late, the bike's asleep on its feet,
the fields hang to the sun by slackened lines

and when the wind blows it shows
the evening's underside
(when the sun sinks it takes
a moment smaller than a spider)

I saw the luminous underneath of a moth

I saw a blackbird
mouth to the glow of the hour in hieroglyphics ...

who left the light on in the clouds?

pause

the man at the wheel signs his speed on the ringroad.

right here in my reach, time is as thick as stone
and as thin as a flying strand

it's night and somebody's
pushing his mower home

to the moon

Alice Oswald (from 'Woods' 2005)

We have evening, a bike, trees, children, a blackbird, a moth, a mower, the moon. You could almost take the photograph yourself. But Oswald takes us into her *subjective* vision of the evening. She is 'still here/not here' at the 'very lifting edge of evening'. The 'lifting edge', the seesawing motion of 'here/not here', the fields hanging 'by slackened lines' make us sense the stillness, the out of time-ness of the experience as well as making us feel how at any moment the wind might change and the lines become taut and time start up again. The image of 'time as thick as a stone ...as thin as a flying strand' gives us the sense of an experience that is both stopped and eternal and evanescent all at the same moment. The poem holds all these certain uncertainties together at the same time, much as Nicholson's painting holds the moment of the gaze through the window, through the plants and out onto the lake and the hills. Each artist uses her tools – on the one hand of colour and form and placing and rhyming and rhythm – on the other of image ('a moment smaller than a spider') of pacing, of sound ('glow of the hour in hieroglyphics') – and rhyming and rhythm – to create the emotion that is based on the things of the world, that uses them and translates them through the most personal of visions into something universal. Like Nicholson, 'Alice Oswald throws the windows of the imagination open.' (The Times, n.d.)

In Sarah Bakewell's recent *'At the Existentialist Café'*, she discusses phenomenology: 'The point is to keep coming back to the 'things themselves' – phenomena stripped of their conceptual baggage – so as to bail out weak or extraneous material and get to the heart of the experience. ...it gives us back the world we live in ... it restores this personal

world in its richness, arranged around our own perspective yet usually no more noticed than the air.' (Bakewell, 2016, p. 43)

It is this idea of a personal relationship to the 'things themselves' that poetry and painting have the job of rendering as accurately as they can. And Oswald and Nicholson seem to me to have triumphantly achieved this rendering in the examples given above.

So can a painter use reality, be 'absolutely in it' if she doesn't in some way represent it? If I look at a painting by Freud I see a person or persons. In an Auerbach I see something that is recognizably a head or a building or a piece of urban landscape. In a Nicholson I see flowers or a chair or a window frame or a piece of sea. In an early Mondrian I might see a tree or a landscape. But in a later Mondrian I see a geometric form, a square or a line or a block of colour.

Freud is reported by Gayford as saying that these paintings by Mondrian have 'a sense of the world in them ...' (Gayford, 2012, p. 41)

What does it mean to 'have a sense of the world' in a painting?

In my own painting I have tried to find ways of expressing a 'sense of the world' that I have found. In the case of '*Interior, shed*' painted in 2015, there is no particularly recognizable shed-like feature: no rakes, no old chairs, no lumber of boxes, old wires, lawn mowers, discarded sinks – nothing.



The painting is small (20 x 20). It has a fairly limited range of colours – dark grey, green, a hint of yellow, a few blue patches and one small pink–beige mark a third of the way up on the right hand side. There are some straight verticals, which largely dominate the composition, and some box–like shapes. On the left hand side there is a lighter vertical with some pale green horizontal marks speckled with yellow. This might be the outside edge from which we can find a way into the darker interior of the painting – or even the shed. The scraped away patch just above the pink–beige mark further pulls the eye into the painting and gives it some depth and mystery. It’s a shadowy painting, quite still.

I found in Katy Moran’s solo exhibition at the Parasol Unit last year paintings whose power and gesture expressed ‘a sense of the world’. Moran says her work is representational and that ‘it’s been a strange novelty for me to be called an **abstract painter, because my concerns have always been that of a figurative painter.**’ (Ardalan, et al., 2015, p. 17)



Katy Moran ‘*Take me to Barbados*’ 2007 (30.5 x 41 cm)

The painting has some sort of force at its centre – the grey gestural swirls make this the subject. They move against and across the pink and violet marks and lie in front of the pale blue area to their right. The downward thrust and then upward energy of the dark grey to the left of the painting reach out of the denser, darker colour on the far left. The sense is of something breaking across and over the paler colour on the right. The dense touches of turquoise set off the muddier, looser tones and anchor the paler, less saturated colours which lie in front.

Moran says that she uses her titles deliberately, sometimes to mislead, so as not to ‘close the painting down’, sometimes ‘as an aid. I give the works literal titles in the hope that the viewer will see the figurative imagery that has occurred.’ (Ardalan, et al., 2015, p. 18) There is a clear relation here with the ‘sense of the world’. In this case, there is a sense of feeling, of battle, of using the stuff of paint, of canvas, of brushes, to engage the world and make it do something. Again, one might relate this to Stevie Smith’s delicate reproach, her continued engagement with a world ‘too cold for him’.

Is there, then, a similar way in which a poem can have this emotional ‘sense of the world’ without representing it? Poetry’s raw material is words. And words have an inescapable relationship with their meaning in the world. But I would argue that a poet’s job is precisely this: to show us the world in a new way, taking words and putting them together so that their old associations are reminted and understood quite differently. And that this act is directly analogous to the way that a painter takes the stuff of the world, its shapes, its colours, its tones, its painterly old master references and renders them completely new.

The opening of Ruth Padel’s long poem, ‘*Seven words and an Earthquake*’ (Padel, 2014, p. 19) sets a scene for us:

from *Seven Words and an Earthquake*

Forgiveness

Olives in blue-tissue mist. Sunrise in the wadi
one Friday in spring. Bare creviced hills
pink-threaded with cyclamen and flax,

wild almond in bloom and leaves of the rock
rose, green on grey stone. Three gazelles
on the ridge, running. But you, you're on your back

facing sky like mother-of-pearl, in a body
you can't climb out of.
If you could turn your head, you'd see dry

stalks of last winter's grass
lit by rays you feel you could touch:
rays like ingots of fluff,

spokes of a broken wheel, almost
horizontal, piercing the halo of dust
round visitors coming up the path from town.

Ruth Padel

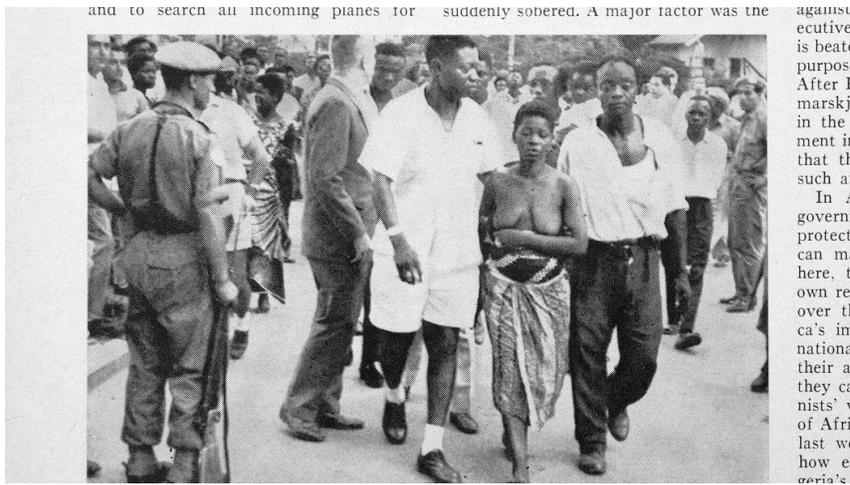
From '*Learning to make an Oud in Nazareth*'

First there is the movement of the verse. The three line stanzas which force the reader to pause and wait between the taut, short phrases lacking 'a' or 'the'; the direct address – 'you' – which shoves us into the position of the body which lies waiting for the arrival of the visitors from town. As with the small figure in Pickstone's Stevie Smith painting, hiding under the willows; and with Smith's drowning man, we are drawn *inside* the poem. In Katy Moran's painting we are caught by the whirl of paint in the centre; in Nicholson's painting we are both inside and outside the window.

Padel's poem might actually be a painter's scene. There is colour: 'blue-tissue'; 'pink threaded'; 'green on grey'; 'mother-of-pearl'. And there is feel and shape: 'creviced'; 'rays you feel you could touch'; 'ingots of fluff'; 'spokes of a broken wheel'; 'almost

horizontal'; 'piercing the halo of dust'. Padel has chosen her details with care: the colour is pastel, gentle; the dry stalks, the fluff, the soft sounds of 'gazelles' are quiet and feel as if they should be unthreatening. But although the sun is shining, the rays are like the 'spokes of a broken wheel', 'piercing' the halo of dust that surrounds the visitors coming up the path from town. If we add in the 'three gazelles on the ridge, running'; the 'body/you can't climb out of'; the 'broken wheel'; the 'halo of dust'; the ominous 'if you could turn your head' we know we're in the presence of something which is not going to turn out well.

United Press International/Time magazine, Feb. 24, 1961.



Marlene Dumas: The Widow 2013

'I remembered that I had once used a picture of Pauline Lumumba ...in a collage of 1982 ... it was the picture of her bare-breasted that struck me ... this picture from 1961 of a woman walking bare-breasted, walking through this crowd of mostly men, all with their clothes on ... her walking bare-breasted was a sign of mourning ...' (Dumas, 2014, p. 169)

Marlene Dumas has said that she paints 'images, not portraits'. Also, that she 'wasn't necessarily predestined to be a painter', that she 'often had more respect for journalists than for artists'. (Dumas, 2014, p. 169) In '*The Widow*', paintings of Patrice Lumumba from 2013, she has taken a contemporary photograph, used by her in an early collage and turned it into two works. Of the larger one, painted first, she says:

'In the collage, the picture is used as a document. I didn't try to make it warmer or more expressionistic. In the painting I try to make it more touching through the use of colour. It has a completely different psychological impact, due to the colours and brushstrokes.' (Dumas, 2014, p. 170)

In the painting on the left, above, Dumas uses depth, full length figures and some detailed passages of paint. To quote my own words from an earlier essay, 'The woman's blue tinged arms, the dark shadows on her skin, the blackness of her face contrast with the sketched skirt with its slight red lines, so that the fact of her nakedness is emphasised and made more touching as she walks so publicly with her grief.'

But this is surely more than a 'sense of the world'; it's a straightforward reference, a representation. Wouldn't a good photograph do as effective a job as this painting?

In '*Camera Lucida*', Barthes speaks of the death blow of the photograph: 'The photograph is violent ... it fills the sight by force.' (Barthes, 2000, p. 91) For him 'it is a kind of primitive theater, a kind of *Tableau Vivant*, a figuration of the motionless and made-up face beneath which we see the dead'. (Barthes, 2000, p. 32)

Are Dumas's paintings the equivalent of the screen-grab that Hobson talks about when referring to Pickstone's Stevie Smith painting? Has Dumas really done anything more with her painting than choose to reference this very moving account of a woman's vulnerability and grief?

Perhaps being drawn into the work, the sense of being simultaneously outside and inside the poem or painting, has to be more subtle and indirect than Dumas' painting?

In Barry Schwabsky's catalogue essay for his recently curated exhibition '*Tightrope Walk*' at White Cube, he eloquently expresses the nature of 'the problem of representation':

'The problem is that it needs to be solved all over again every time'. In a way, this is the great and difficult gift of abstraction to painting: that we can no longer assume that the how and why of it are already given. There is no objective beauty, no intrinsically real and powerful manifestation of space. If we will have it – in painting as in any other art – it will have to be invented as if it had never existed before.' (Schwabsky, 2015, p. 79)

In his exhibition, Schwabsky chooses two works by Ilya and Emilia Kabakov for his section on fragments. The Kabakovs work with ideas of history, memory, nostalgia and dreams. They use installation as their primary mode of work, although painting is also strongly represented. In the catalogue for the '*Palace of Projects*', an installation which I saw at the Roundhouse in London in 1998, they state that 'the only way and means to live a worthy human life is to have one's own project, to conceive it and bring it to its realization ... the project is the concentration, the embodiment of the meaning of life.' (Kabakov & Kabakov, 1998)



Ilya and Emilia Kabakov. *The Colourful Noise Nr.2* 2014 oil on canvas 96 x 98 cm

This painting, in the same series as one shown by Schwabsky, uses a fragment of a colour photograph ‘let into’ a painting. It’s not clear if this is collaged in or painted, but it has the feel of something inserted into a background, a visionary view into a vivid trace of life picked out of a more indistinct blurred area. The fragment has the feel of something conjured out of the past, sunlit and idealized. The leaf-like (or shell-like?) form underneath it points upwards, jabbing for our attention. Or perhaps it is drifting away? The background colour is many layers of grey and blue and red patches which merge softly into each other. Schwabsky quotes Kabakov:

‘The banality of the fragment evokes an entirely non-banal reaction to recreate the missing components, to recreate the context, ultimately to recreate the reasons why this particular fragment was chosen by the author. It becomes unexpectedly an unsolvable, almost detective-like mystery and it turns out to be quite difficult to explain why the fragment appears to be banal, and this turns out to affect the deep layers of consciousness even more, and the problem to which there is no answer turns out to be all the more strange and mysterious.’ (Schwabsky, 2015, p. 53)

Raoul de Keyser’s work exemplifies what it means to take stuff away. His painting has been described as **‘major painting masquerading as minor painting’** Rubinstein quoted by Schwabsky, (Schwabsky, 2010, p. 34). Schwabsky’s admiring review of de Keyser’s work is largely expressed in negatives: **‘no drama of opposition or synthesis’; ‘mere vestiges of something that disappeared in the act of being grasped’; ‘paintings of nothing – of very little that is somehow also too much.’** (Schwabsky, 2010, pp. 34–36)



A wall of paintings by de Keyser from the exhibition at David Zwirner in November last year.

There is much to learn from de Keyser's comment in an interview in 2001: when he speaks of 'taking away ... but not erasing'; of having 'a strategy of correcting' of the importance of introducing risk or chance. His subject matter is simply 'some things I can work with'; 'it was there. I don't know'. (Keyser, 2001). These subjects include a dog on a yellow field and the outlines of a football ground.

The work of the young Brazilian artist, Marina Rheingantz, strikes me as having something in common with de Keyser:



Marina Rheingantz – Revoada, 2015, oil on canvas, 270 x 400 cm

In an interview last year, Rheingantz commented on the work of artist Lolo's collage:

{I was}...amazed by how the combination of all these geometric elements become something so grand: the lines become curves, the rectangles slowly start to shape landscapes and, in the end, there was something like a microcosmos for me in there, as if it was the mockup of a world that is yet to become. I like the feeling of immersing myself in an artwork and being able to build a third thing, that in a way is mine only: sounds emerge from there, trains run through, crossing those lines, the roofs of a house in the countryside... (Rheingantz, 2015)

The idea of being able to 'build a third thing' from the experience of a work of art is another way of putting Schwabsky's observation that a work 'takes form, gathers

force, in someone's imagination'. It may well be that it is the 'taking away' that allows the third thing to emerge.

At the end of his piece in *The Nation*, Schwabsky writes:

'the underlying subjects ... are emotional ones that can be spoken about only through metaphor, and for which the painter's means – color, structure, form, scale – are metaphors too, and not ends in themselves'. (Schwabsky, 2010, p. 36)

And this is true for poetry in the same way – even to the extent that the poets' means – words, structure, rhythm, sound are also 'metaphors ... and not ends in themselves.'

The Sick Rose

O Rose, thou art sick!
The Invisible worm
That flies in the night,
In the howling storm,

Has found out thy bed
Of crimson joy;
And his dark secret love
Does thy life destroy.

William Blake

'Songs of Experience' 1794

There have been many speculations about what this strange poem might 'mean'. The regular, rhythmic beat that drives it; the rhymes; the imagery of the 'invisible worm', the 'bed of crimson joy'; all these contribute to the mysterious sense of something that is at the same time wonderful and destructive. We can simplify it by teasing out the sexual metaphor and letting that take care of things, or we can allow the poem room to be what it is, a powerful metaphor for ... something. And it is important not to be able to say what that something is. Novelist Pat Barker in a recent radio interview said of some lines by Blake, 'We have no idea what it means, but we know it's true.'

In an interview with Chris Ofili, Peter Doig has said that 'the mood of the painting has always been important.' (Nesbitt & Schiff, 2008, p. 121) And Doig's paintings share a similar 'mysterious sense' to Blake's poem. In *'Painting a*

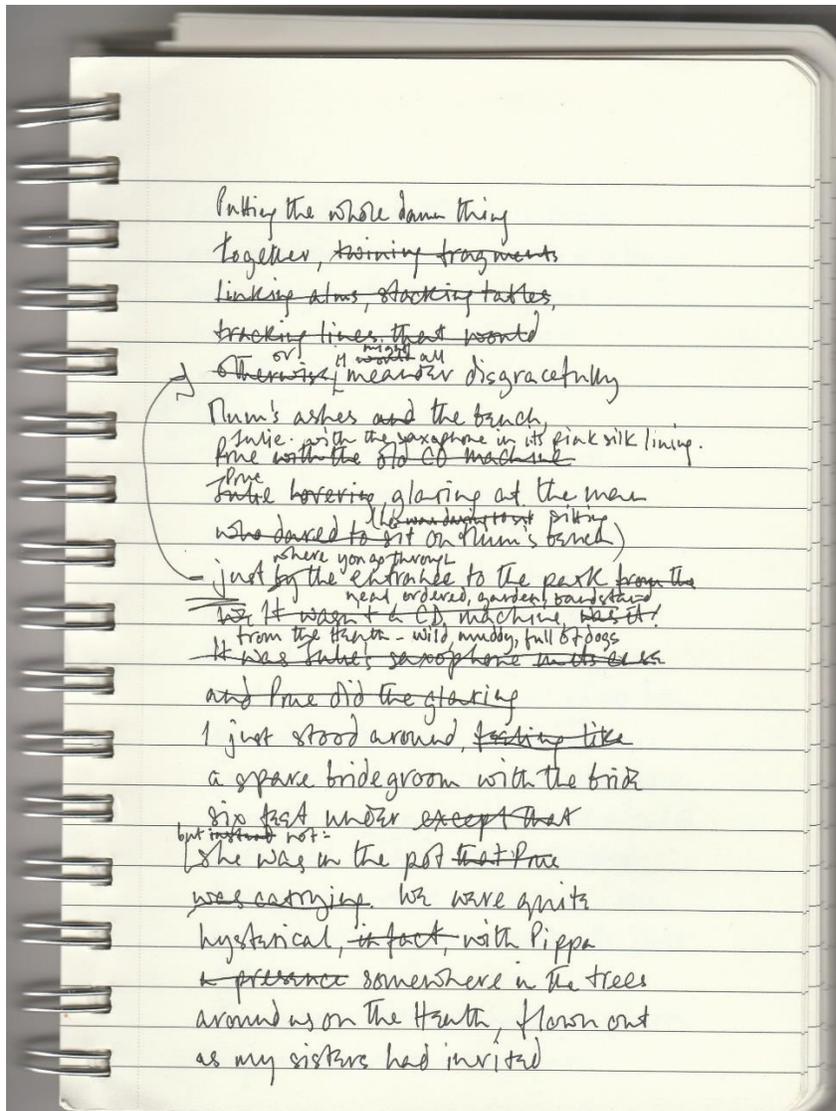
cloud on a wall, Doig creates a world from colour and imagery – a flat, dreamlike place where wall and landscape, interior and exterior are one and the same. The lion with his crown, the figure painting the cloud, the two head-like objects peaking above the wall, the vase of flowers on the left hand side are the personnel in this world of 4 horizontal bands of colour which may represent path, wall, sea and sky. The colour is the predominant feature in this world – the strong blue, the purple wall with the broken, jewel-like pieces embedded in it, the dirty yellow ochre of the lion, his bright yellow crown, the sky with its brushstrokes so finely rendered. Doig’s brushwork is a part of the delicious, sumptuous effect of his work.



Doig will often begin with a snapshot of a scene ‘That may one day become part of a painting.’ (Nesbitt & Schiff, 2008, p. 113) and Chris Ofili, in this same interview remarks that: ‘I might be working on a subject: it can be made up, or from other artists’ work. I find a way to translate it into my own experience.’ Often, a painter or poet won’t know what she intends to say or make. Katy Moran: ‘I don’t plan my work and I don’t use source material... I follow whatever idea reveals itself, knowing I will abandon it at any stage if something better comes along’. (Ardalan, et al., 2015, p. 13)

I have started a piece of work with the intention, as happened recently, simply to make a painting in blue and brown. And a poem, as seen below, with the line

'Putting the whole damn thing together' - which turned out to have nothing much to do with the poem which eventually emerged.



This page from my notebook - a very rough first draft of a poem - reminds me of the way it feels to work on a painting. You might start with a line, scribble some words down for as long as you can keep going, thinking all the while that there's nothing, really nothing here that will ever be worth working on but after all, I've started so I'll finish. As Katy Moran says of her painting, 'I might have a bit of collage material or a colour, a pattern, or a certain type of mark in my head, but I have no

allegiance to it.’ (Ardalan, et al., 2015, p. 13) And later, sometimes a lot later, you read the words over and with luck there are things there which hang together. Moran again, ‘I’m trying to abandon control and rigidity in my thinking and my making, yet I am very controlled in terms of the marks I choose to preserve or reject. I welcome accidents and chance but I want to make sure I’m discerning and focused enough to capitalize on them.’ (Ardalan, et al., 2015, p. 13)



‘Only Temporary’. Deb Catesby. Oil on canvas. 2015

The painting *‘Only Temporary’* started with a black form with red. Some weeks later I covered it over with blue. Then a photograph taken in Gloucester cathedral provided some dropping forms of light. It wasn’t until I drew a frame within the painting that the composition began to come together. The frame contains the falling droplets of whitish light; shafts of yellow (at one point crossing the barrier of the frame); a blue object in the top right hand side of the frame and some lighter blue above. A raised, textural diagonal line comes out of the bottom right of the frame, breaking it up. The painting is busy, urgent and multi-layered. With the frame came a focus for the viewer, a way to look into what was happening inside the painting. It helped to make the painting

work by creating the effect of what might be a mirror, might be a window. It was possible to be both outside and inside at the same time.

Working on the '*Only temporary*' painting was often a matter of taking out bits and pieces which didn't work. Moran again, 'It's necessary to abandon and reject parts of a painting at every stage of the process, even after much investment. It's a process of preserving and rejecting until every area of the canvas works as a whole.' (Ardalan, et al., 2015, p. 13) I am still doubtful about the blue form at the top which might suggest a blue bird in flight. The idea of both the blue bird and the flying run into the danger zone of cliché, and of over-simplified messages.

'The Intentional Fallacy' has been interestingly commented upon by Merlin James. The phrase originated in an essay by Wimsatt and Beardsley in 1946: "the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art." (Authorial Intent, n.d.)

'For me it's bound up with the way art's meanings are somehow always displaced. One does something in order to allow something else to happen. The notion from literary criticism of the Intentional Fallacy has been one of the most useful things to me both as a critic and as a painter. I think we must always transcend our intentions, and at the same time we must always try to catch up – though we never can – with the 'real' significance of what it is we do.'

James continues:

... I think I often feel rather outside my own life and world, and very much outside history, too, with no really strong feelings of owning or being owned by history. And yet my impulse, and that of the work, is against estrangement. It is the opposite of so much art that restates ... our all-too-well-recognized 'alienation'. The pictures are a depiction of a world of meaning intensely valued because all-but-lost.' (James, 1999)

Alternatively, of course, the painting will mean, or not mean, something completely different to each viewer: 'the conviction a painting carries comes not from its materials But to the extent that it takes form, gathers force, in someone's imagination.' (Schwabsky, 2015, p. 79)

The same, of course, can, and should be, true of a poem. Despite its relation with the real world through the meaning of its words, what a poet hopes is exactly as stated above: 'that her poem will take form and gather force in someone's

imagination'. To that end, like a painter, she will work on the poem as poet Lavinia Greenlaw describes:

'The poem already exists but it has to be reached through language ... the experience is more one of taking away – of exposure, refinement and focus.' (Greenlaw, 2008, p. 12)

Elsa Braekkan-Payne's poem, *To Cross a River*, provides an example of fine editing, the kind of editing a painter is doing when she reaches the last stages of a piece of work. The poem is, not incidentally, concerned with the act of making.

To Cross a River

so utterly un- knowable
this scouting for fresh spoors through under-
growth gaps fissures fallen
branches snap- ping twigs to reach

the step ing stones
just visible beneath blue shivers floating
leaves with rhyming life lines
that entangle

or let go

for there are many ways
to cross a river
and sometimes it feels right
to sit quite still on a fox-marked bank and know

that it's the home spun tune that plays
least false when everywhere is equidistant granite ice-
ridged sky the sun
a full stop

eye poised

to blind you if you look straight at it
or slip behind a blot of cloud

if you don't

**'It's nothing to us' you might shrug,
–and you'd be right. Under the bright-hemmed clouds
above the ridge
a dozen jackdaws clack.**

The extra lines are, to my eye, and presumably to Jamie's, as she did not include them in her volume, redundant. They weaken the force of **'–and you'd be right'**. The subject of this poem is directly related to Gerhard Richter's questioning of the nature of our relationship to landscape. Here is Richter, writing in his journal in 1986:

'My landscapes are not just beautiful, or seemingly nostalgic, romantic and as classical as lost paradises: they are above all, 'mendacious' [verlogen] ... and when I say 'mendacious', I mean the ecstasy with which we look at nature; but nature that is against us in all its forms because it knows neither sense nor mercy nor sympathy, because it knows nothing, is absolutely without mind or spirit, is the total opposite to ourselves, is absolutely inhuman. Any beauty we see in landscape, any enchanting coloration, peace or violence of mood, gentle lines, magnificent space and goodness knows what else is a projection of ours, something that we can switch off, then be able to see at the very same moment only the terrifying hideousness and ugliness of it all.' (Antoine, 2004)



Gerhard Richter. Davos (468–2). 1981 Oil on canvas. 50 x 70

Richter's practice of repainting a photographic image with added blur, his deliberate evocation of Friedrich's romanticism, his intention **'to see in what**

measure we can still make use of beauty today. Whether it is still conceivable today' (Antoine, 2004) allow us to question 'The projective character of beauty.' (Antoine, 2004)

Jamie's poem is concerned with exactly the same idea: 'It's nothing to us.' However, where Richter's painting removes all trace of the human, but shows us sun and rock and snow in all their bleak beauty, Jamie will lean 'on this here boulder', ask permission of the bird and the heather, allow nature to be, in Richter's words, 'absolutely inhuman'. At the same time, she will bring us, her reader, into the picture. 'Fugitive' snow-drifts, 'naked' mountain, 'tumbling' burn – these are all human adjectives; we are invited in, to look with the poet at the natural world. At the same time, we are reminded of our true place in that world – 'it's nothing to us'. Any sentimentality is coolly removed.

Poet Lavinia Greenlaw comments: 'There is 'beautiful' and there is 'poetical': one you admire, the other moves you.' (Greenlaw, 2011, p. 4) She writes this in her book '*Questions of Travel*', her essay in the form of an intervention, on William Morris's '*Icelandic Journal*'. She takes as her starting point for this idea Morris's description of Berwick:

'North of the Tweed the country soon got very rich-looking with fair hills and valleys plentifully wooded. I thought it very beautiful: we had left the sea now; but every now and then we would pass little valleys leading down to it that had a most wonderfully poetical character about them ...' (Greenlaw, 2011, p. 5)

The 'fair hills, plentifully wooded' are fine things to admire – but the little valleys which lead to the sea are different in their effect. It's the intimate human involvement which is poetical.

Finally, it was another poem by Alice Oswald which inspired a painting last year. Working on a previously painted canvas, I was reading poems from Oswald's first volume of poetry '*The Thing in the Gap-Stone Stile*' (Oswald, 2007, p. 40)

Prayer

Here I work in the hollow of God's hand
with Time bent round into my reach. I touch
the circle of the earth, I throw and catch
the sun and moon by turns into my mind.
I sense the length of it from end to end,

I sway me gently in my flesh and each
point of the process changes as I watch;
the flowers come, the rain follows the wind.

And all I ask is this – and you can see
how far the soul, when it goes under flesh,
is not a soul, is small and creaturish –
that every day the sun comes silently
to set my hands to work and that the moon
turns and returns to meet me when it's done.



'Small and creaturish'. Deb Catesby. 2016. Oil on canvas. 30 x 20

The painting, like '*Facing East*', (p 7) is small and condensed and detailed. The forms are often outlined, held within themselves, but slide round and under other forms. The centre of the painting is a whitish streak slightly to the right

which is pushed upwards by the force of the shapes on the left. The movement is towards the top right of the painting. Overall, there's a sense of shapes being pushed inwards and upwards. The colour is quite varied, but with a lot of dark, saturated colour dominating. The lighter colours are round the sides and overwhelmed by the dark blues and by the strong, mixed, murky grey on the bottom left.

I don't know how much, or if at all, the poem relates to the painting. I do know that the two things coincided in my mind at the same time. In this case, the 'sense of the world' comes through the sense of the Oswald poem. A poem, or a painting are just as firmly 'things of the world' as a table, a chair or a human event.

I have identified some of the ingredients that work for me as the essence of painting and which I have found through looking at the similarities between making paintings and making poems. These are, firstly, a definite relationship with reality – the things and people of the world. Secondly, a sense of that world that can be partly or wholly non-representational. Thirdly, the recognition that the relationship of the artist to her material can be unintentional: you don't have to set out to paint anything in particular, or what you do set out to do may change radically in the course of making. Fourthly, understanding the importance of taking stuff away: editing is everything.

In order to build 'the third thing' that Marina Rheingantz (p.20) writes about, it is vital to leave room for the viewer to engage with the painting, to find her way into it. However strange and unlikely the experience may be, (like *'Painting a Cloud on a Wall'*, for example), the aim should be to achieve a response like the one Pat Barker gave (p.21): 'We have no idea what it means, but we know it's true.'

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