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Real Pictures

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Visual Art

by

Olivia L Hill

June 2020

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Prologue

It was the year 2000 and I had hitched a ride with friends from my high school, the Los Angeles County High School for the Arts to Marshall High in Los Feliz, where my mom was ending her day of teaching. The car pool would get me halfway home, and Mom and I would finish the journey together up the Angeles Crest Highway to La Crescenta, a foothill township that boasts the nickname, “The Balcony of Southern California”.

It was a brittle autumn evening and the breeze was still warm as if the desert were blowing out exhaust. The sky was a deep rose, but like a rose nearing the end of its bloom, its edges curled and smoky. It could have singed the horizon if not for the deep blue of oncoming twilight chasing it down.

Turning and ducking into her VW Cabriolet, Mom’s eyes locked onto something in the sky.

“Oh my god, look at the moon!”

I looked up in the direction of her astonishment to see the plump moon, more enormous than the moon should ever look from this planet and ridiculously well placed, slightly up and to the right of the Griffith Park Observatory. We both stared for a moment, wedged in a state between seeing and understanding, our minds sorting and processing the scene as if it were a digital image rendering in fits and starts.

Before comprehension had time to crystalize a second glow drew our attention to a part of the sky across the city. It was another moon, a small, gibbous, much less photogenic moon, the real moon.

Introduction

My mom and I understood quickly that the phenomenon we witnessed was cinematic funny business because it was L.A. after all, and these sort of stunts, like earthquakes came with the territory even if they weren't everyday events. Though we knew that what we saw was an illusion, the mechanics of that illusion aren't obvious to me even today. Was it a projection of the moon onto the atmosphere like the Batman symbol? More importantly, did I really see a moon at all, with its familiar cratered surface? Was it really in the sky? If I had examined it more carefully and if I had been less willing to believe it, would I have seen that it was actually an orbital lighting balloon suspended above the balcony of the observatory? Has the image only finally rendered in my mind's eye now as a moon when, at the time, it was only a round, albeit, very high wattage movie light? I know that the distance between myself and the object I saw made the scene that finally reached my retinae a distorted one-one that didn't reveal the whole truth. I know that distance served as a filter in the

same way a camera lens does, occluding the cables tethering the balloon light and the laboring crew.

Twenty years and a film career later I'm trying to understand that vision in the sky and create the same sensation in my paintings. It's the sensation of trusting familiarity to hold my hand while crossing a street I think I know, and finding myself estranged on the other side, forced to learn the world anew. In my current work I'm relearning the geological, agricultural, and psychological boundaries of my home region, Southern California, through scenic and landscape painting. I'm making myself at home in the un-homelike or *Unheimlich* as it was first uttered by psychiatrist, Ernst Jentsch. The Uncanny, as it is known in English.

What Is A Painting?

When I paint, I'm aware that I'm participating in an activity that humans have performed for at least 44,000 years. Cave paintings were made as both references to things in the world and as things themselves. Their creators seemed to intend for a painted image to *produce* rather than merely *allude* to an event like a successful hunt or favorable weather. Prehistoric artists rendered animals and natural phenomena in the controlled environment of the painting surface in order to make illusive things present and manageable. Creating a likeness of something proverbially endows the creator with authority over the entity and its representation. A painting of a hunted

animal would allow the creator to enact rituals upon the rendering that were thought to impact the real world.

It is likely that the way prehistoric artists understanding of a painting as something that harbors emergent properties, has not changed very much over the millennia. Painting doesn't seem to be able to shake itself free of its spirit despite the mutations and reductions it has undergone. There persists a sense that in looking at a painting, regardless of its simplicity or complexity, we are seeing something like the tip of the iceberg, or a limited view of something that extends beyond its finite dimensions. In considering the presumed function of cave paintings, it's interesting to apply to them a contemporary notion in physics called the Holographic Principle. This far-out theory developed by scientist and philosopher, David Bohm suggests that what we experience as three-dimensional reality is a holographic projection of information encoded on a distant black hole. Given that early humans likely understood their actions and nature to be closely linked, it is provocative to consider that prehistoric artists may have believed reality to be something like what we know today as a hologram in that what was inflicted upon the flat information of a cave painting could be projected onto the outside world making the painting in a sense, more real than nature.

The proposition that something can have a *real* presence even if it doesn't exist in the *real* world is emphasized in Mike Kelley's essay, "The Uncanny". He considers this very idea, "If meaningful reference is eradicated, what kind of repression could exist

that would produce uncanny sensation? On some level, it strikes me that notions of both the uncanny and the simulacrum are connected to questions of the *real*." (Kelley 1993) By this definition, a better word to stand in for *real* may be *believable* if we take *believable* to mean that it is viable, that it exists, and that it impacts or interacts with other things. It may be that at the core of the artist's enterprise is to make something *believable* even if it is new in our consciousness.

Painting and drawing lends itself to achieving this sort of believability both because and in spite of its limitations. Since we already expect reality to be distorted on the flattened plane, the imagination has a chance to intervene and finish the rendering more than it would need to in the presence of a three-dimensional object. The illusion of three- dimensionality is achieved rather economically, in fact, on a flat surface.

Producing that illusion is well- known and regularly taught in drawing by way of perspective, foreshortening, and shading and has become associated with illustration. An image made through these techniques, however, is twice



Figure 1 Villa Celmins, *Ocean*, 1975

removed from the experience of the real. It is drawing that looks like photography that looks like reality. This is an interpretation of reality embraced in the photorealistic paintings of artists such as Villa Celmins, Mark Tansey and Gerhard Richter.

Bypassing photographic mitigation while still invoking the qualities of light and perspective that allow us to understand depth and placement in the physical world makes for an interesting suspension of identification in painting. The mark made by a paintbrush loaded with fluid paint and wielded so that it leaves the indexical impression of its movement and texture bears, in its imprint, all the signifiers of something *real*. The shadows, highlights, and texture, although not more than abstract marks, can give the viewer the sensation of seeing something believable, even if it is new and un-locatable, as an alien thing would be. A genre of painting that consistently deploys this technique is Chinese ink painting.



Figure 2 Artist demonstrates traditional Chinese painting technique

Chinese Ink Painting

In Ernst Jentsch's "On the Psychology of the Uncanny" he states,

"The finer the mechanism and the truer to nature the formal reproduction, the more strongly will the special effect also make its appearance." (Jentsch 1906)

There has been somewhat of a smear campaign waged against special effects in painting in the last century, but it hasn't taken into account this principle described by both Jentsch and Kelley wherein the special effect is exclusive to the world of the artwork and isn't either effecting or *affecting* the practical world. A ubiquitous example of this that comes to mind is practiced in traditional Chinese bamboo painting.

Reflecting on how I came to understand painting, I've realized that I've had no stronger influence than that of Mr. Lin's Chinese painting class at LACHSA where we dutifully painted bamboo stalks and leaves with the goal of performing a coup with the



Figure 3 Artist demonstrates traditional Chinese painting technique

brush so sure and swift that the bamboo brush itself virtually became the painting!

Letting the perfectly diluted ink fall to the tip of the brush and then pressing the bristles to the paper at the appropriate angle would produce a calligraphic line with a built-in shadow and highlight so natural that resulting stalk of bamboo was almost

more real- more *believable* in its immediacy than a photo would be. It became evident in this endeavor that what we were trying to achieve was not a likeness of any



Figure 4 Artist demonstrates traditional Chinese painting technique

bamboo we could find in nature, but rather, an original entity conjured into existence by the paint brush, so present as to convince one that its living likeness was out there in the world.

It is, in fact, the purpose of bamboo painting to create rather than *recreate* nature.

The Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting describes bamboo painting as not a photographic copy of some bamboo at some particular place, seen from a particular angle; instead it is a suggestion of the true essence of the bamboo, an expression of the qualities of a “true Chinese gentleman”, whom the bamboo symbolizes.

In this way, bamboo painting occupies a realm somewhat outside of figuration, abstraction, or invention that can be described as indexical. By the definition of indexicality in semiotics outlined by linguist Charles Sanders Pierce, indexicality is the condition of having an existential relationship to its referent unlike a symbol, which operates more like an illustration of its referent. In art, this has been explored in photography but there's a paucity of literature available on this theory as it relates to painting. This may be due to the way the process of making a photo is better understood because the process is embedded in its name. It is, after all, a photograph- the forensic residue of light hitting emulsion, which is more easily understood as indexical than the seemingly aggregate way a painting is made. "The photographic sign bears a connection to the thing it represents by having been caused physically by its referent. The index is the only sign which carries the trace of its referent, its origin, in the physical process of imprinting within itself." (Krauss 1977)

"The photograph, as such, and the object itself share a common being after the fashion of a fingerprint. Wherefore photography actually contributes something to the order of natural creation, instead of substituting for it..." (Bazin 1960)

Indexical Painting

Painting, on the other hand, is known as both an object and an action, but less often as a graph, an imprint, or a fossil. Instead, the forms are known to come about through rendering. The image comes into being through marks and layers that constitute a

whole but do not exist independently. Exceptions to that are, perhaps, Yves Klein's *Anthropométries*, wherein Klein choreographed the prints of paint-coated female bodies on surface, leaving behind the evidence of an event.



Figure 5 Yves Klein, *Anthropométrie de L'Époque Bleue* (ANT 82), 1960

Similarly, Jackson Pollack's drip paintings might be seen as indexical in that the image looks like the action. The presence of the action in these works is so apparent that they bridge the gap between painting and performance whereas the process of making a figurative painting is often much more opaque to viewers.

My Paintings

“The index asserts nothing; it only says “There!” —Charles Sanders Peirce

An indexical figurative painting subverts the categories of abstract and representational. At first pass, representational painting does not seem like it could be mimetic. A painting isn't made by capturing the light reflected off an event in the way a photo is. Painting water, for instance, at least the way painting is often taught in traditional lessons, is a matter of forgetting what's known about water- it's wetness and sloshiness, and focusing on only its superficial qualities. Those superficial qualities come down to the way that light and colors reflect on it and how it distorts objects seen through it. In the 1975 drawing, *Ocean*, by Villa Celmins there is certainly nothing wet about the way she depicts water, yet in its dry static state, it looks exactly like water does in a photo.

A common way to realistically paint water would be to render it based on the shapes it makes when it's agitated. To flick the paintbrush back and forth in the motion of waves or to slosh the brush around in the motion of a boat rocking at sea is not a reliable way to create the illusion of water. That, in theory, would amount to a childlike painting that mocks the behavior of water mimetically, but doesn't *look* like water. In other words, a mimetic painting motion shouldn't, in theory, produce, a retinal likeness of water. Similarly, a reliable way to paint the superficial likeness of a flower would be to start with a contour drawing based on observation of its shape,

color and value. A more indexical method of painting a flower would be to choose a paintbrush of a similar size, shape and texture of the flower petals and by manipulating the brush strategically to produce marks that both mimic and reference flower petals, much like Chinese bamboo paintings are made.

This is precisely the way of painting that I advocate and explore. Fluid paint on a sloshing brush *can* create the effect of water, sanding dry paint creates the appearance of sandy earth and the fibers of a brush mimic the fibrous stalks of plants and grass. This seems almost to speak of something like homeopathy where *like heals like*. In what's known as homeopathic magic to anthropologists, walnuts, because of their cerebral shape are thought to be good for the brain, and kidney beans heal the kidneys. When I'm painting the paintbrush is a magic wand that with an economical but strategic series of gestures gives way to an event on the canvas. Master bamboo painters know that when the mind, and body and tool are in harmony the impact is

potent in a quasi- magical way. In the right hand, with the right practice, the right tool will produce the indexical mark of its likeness.

Like Pollack's drip paintings or Klein's anthropometries, this sort of indexical figurative painting is very



Figure 6 Olivia Hill, (detail) *Three Holes With Flower: Close-Up*, 2020

physical. However, there's caprice to Pollack's ejaculations and Klein's prints that the sort of figurative painting I'm trying to achieve can't withstand. When I paint, I frequently dispatch sets of planned gestures with various painting tools in attempts to produce phenomenal events on the surface that I half anticipate, but are almost always surprising. I can only imagine that this is something like delivering a bare-handed blow to a wooden board and breaking it cleanly in half. An example of a technique with which I've experimented many times is to make an ad hoc decal to create an image on an oil painting rather than rendering it with constitutive brush strokes. At times, I have made decals by applying oil paint loosely in a shape on wax paper, crumpling it up, and opening it to reveal a kaleidoscopic paint effect that I press to the canvas in a designated area, leaving a print of something that resembles a recognizable form, but what caused it is somewhat mysterious. There is one shot at doing this gracefully. The result is a painted area that surprises even me because the mark can never be fully anticipated and the image is intriguingly unresolved and imperfect.

The unusual mark is otherworldly but *believable* as something that is supposed to exist in the world of the painting and impacts space by blocking the light or



Figure 7 Olivia Hill, (Detail) *Space Object #1*, 2019

creating an obstacle. In the case of the wicker chaise detail of my painting, *Space Object #1* the technique of crumpling the painted wax paper creates an intricate lacy effect that mimics, or even embodies the intricacy of filigree that would otherwise be tedious to paint. The objective, though, is not only to shorten painting time, but for the painted filigree to assert nothing, but say, *there!*

Sophisticated knowledge of space, material, and physics applied to a painting allows for indexicality to emerge in a way that merely copying the superficial attributes of something won't produce. A deep fascination with water is a prevailing theme in the works of David Hockney. He painted water so many times in so many of its states that his intimate knowledge of it allowed him to almost reinvent water for the sake of his paintings. The way he paints the splash in *A Bigger Splash* doesn't really look like



Figure 8 David Hockney, *A Bigger Splash*, 1967

water does in a photograph. It isn't translucent, and it doesn't reflect light or color. A contemporary gauge for the recognizability of a common thing might be whether or not it can be identified by Artificial Intelligence. In many instances, AI may not be advanced enough yet to recognize Hockney's

water. Humans do recognize it, though because we bring to the painting an archive of associations with water's other sensory and emotional impacts. Hockney's water has become a nearly archetypal representation of water in western consciousness. We trust that painted squiggles and dashes in *A Bigger Splash* amount to water in its disrupted condition because, as Charles Sanders Pierce says of indexicality in his theory of semiotics, the splash in this painting has an existential relationship with its referent.



Figure 9 Olivia Hill (Detail) Border: Wide Shot, 2020

Recognition of an existential relationship between things couldn't be a more human ability. Identifying the splash in *A Bigger Splash* as water is possible because we possess an archive of memories of the experience of water that Hockney is tapping into. We know splash, smack, plunge and spray even when wet and cold are missing and in that way, Hockney has achieved a sort of onomatopoeic way of painting.



Figure 10 Tala Madani, *Red Interrogation*, 2012

It's childlike in its curiosity, but very sophisticated in how diligently studied it is. This level of painting is generated when an artist has become so familiar with a subject or phenomenon that both reverence and endearing mockery are evinced.



Figure 12 Tala Madani, *At My Toilet #3*, 2019

The way that Tala Madani has consistently painted light, and recently *shit* in her figurative oil paintings goes beyond just tapping into this intimate knowledge of subjects through paint to make a veritable exploitation of it. Whether she's painting the therapeutic divinity of sunlight through windows, or the seediness of red light in a confined space, the light is an animate character in the scene. She knows

light as intimately as Caravaggio or Manet, but rather than treating it reverently she

beats it at its own game. Madani frequently uses airbrush to paint light, but rather than portraying it for its *lightness* she invokes its flooding characteristics, pushing the light to the point of drowning rather than merely bathing the figures in the tableau. Similarly, in her recent exhibition, *Shit Moms* at David Kordansky Gallery in L.A., *Shit* assumes the leading role that light formerly had in her paintings. These works viscerally communicate the less romantic side of motherhood by way of a less romantic way of using oil paint, exploiting its smeary fecal qualities. The brown paint in these works is smeared on the paintings themselves as much as it is smeared within the world of the painting.

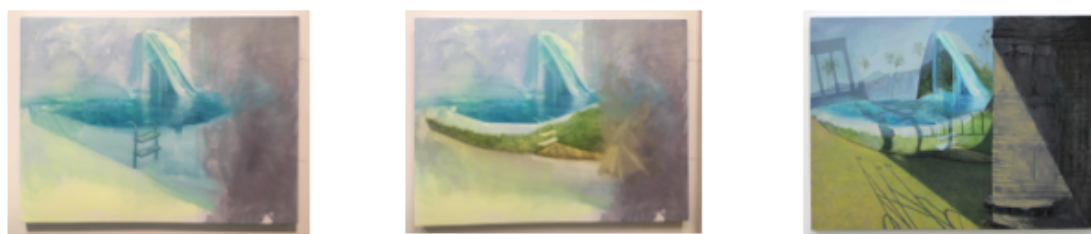


Figure 11 Olivia Hill (stages in process) Space Object #2, 2019

My project in representational painting is to freeze an image at a chosen point on the way from referent to abstraction to counterfeit. I think of representation as book-ending abstraction. On one side is the known entity in life or in a photograph- the referent. The between stage is the mental image, the emotional response, or the essence of a thing, and from there the representation is manifested.

I don't assume that all representational painters work this way as the middle stage can be skipped over by way of tracing from a photograph or some other way going directly from simulacrum to simulacrum without breaking it down in between. When I paint something from the visual world, I approach it as if I'm building it, or rather, deconstructing it and then rebuilding it. The effort to rebuild is sincere, but error is par for the course. Inevitably, the deconstruction means that parts go missing and the order of things is forgotten. The resultant creations tend to evoke the pet projects of a mad scientist, being a little mal-adapted for real- world function, caught in a state of arrested development. Inherent in representational painting seems to be the interest in being both the creator and the steward of a domain. To do this it's necessary to



Figure 13 Ithell Colquhoun, *Scylla*, 1938

cultivate an understanding of the inner workings of things and all the constituent parts and then deploy those elements in the building of a world. To quote Carl Sagan, "If you want to make an apple pie from scratch, first you must invent the universe." The universe in which, I think, some of the most interesting paintings exist is not one that throws out all the laws and constraints of physical reality, but instead, harnesses and bends them into a state of tension that supports the world of the painting.

The painter Ithell Colquhoun is known as a surrealist, and was indeed a member of the surrealist school, but I think her more interesting paintings don't contain the more obvious tropes of the surrealist movement. The painting *Scylla*, from 1938 resides in a critical state between realism and fantasy that makes it more compelling than her more overtly fantastical works. Although this painting can be appreciated for its bodily symbolism and clever double imagery, what is most seductive to me about this painting is how strange the perspective and the rendering is of what is apparently the bow of a ship peaking through a partition

between two seaside rock formations.

Colquhoun's rigorous working out of spatial and figurative problems in this painting provides a more durable point of interest than the sexual innuendo and double entendre.

I see an even subtler example of this intriguing strangeness of perspective in Georgia O'Keeffe's painting, *Church Steeple*.

Amidst an oeuvre of bodily metaphor paintings this rendering is apparently naturalistic but the use of not only perspective

but color and framing makes the viewer question whether or not the scene in the



Figure 14 Georgia O'Keeffe, *Church Steeple*, 1930

painting could be possible. The uncanny resides in this suspension of understanding. Surrealist paintings by Magritte and Dali on the other hand, sometimes depict such overt defiance of physical reality that they are, in fact, easier to understand as purely psychological states. A painting by Magritte called *The Battle of Argonne*, shows a cloud and a boulder appearing to float at equal altitude in the air. The impossibility of this scene is so overt that it amounts to a pun. Paintings that are more precariously crafted can smuggle in strangeness in a way that keeps the viewer mining for meaning.



Figure 15 René Magritte, *La Bataille de L'Argonne*, 1959

Strangling Space

The defiant world is so boundless that the ease with which art can be created is less challenging. It's the struggle with the constraints of the physical world that keeps me digging into a painting. In a short interview with David Hockney called "I am a Space Freak" he describes perspective as *strangling* space. It's clear, though, that his frustration with space and perspective doesn't lead him to merely throw it out the window. Instead, like Picasso, like Matisse, and like Colquhoun, he confronts the

challenge and wrestles against the strangulation for an effect in a painting that has the familiar allure of figuration but is deeply unsettling.

The same wrestling match must take place with gravity in a painting. Like in the Battle of Argonne, some of Georgia O'Keeffe's more famous paintings depict floating objects. The surrealist gesture is again overt, but I'm drawn to the paintings that succumb to or are even *encumbered* by gravity. O'Keeffe's flowers are beautifully seductive, but her mountain landscapes are undulating and clunky in a



Figure 16 Georgia O'Keeffe, *Near Abiquiu, New Mexico*, 1930

way that has a visceral impact on the viewer. Whereas the flowers are painted with appropriate levity, the mountains and earth seem to have to be worked and kneaded into place. The shadows mercilessly define cracks and folds in the landscape and cast dark shapes over the composition, making every form seem solid and formidable. It is this working out of gravity, levity, space and light in a painting that generates a surreal experience as opposed to merely looking like a surrealist painting.

Thinking About Physics



Figure 17 Olivia Hill, *Flattened Doorknob*, 2017

For some time I've looked to theory in the realm of quantum physics as a way to peer into the sublime. The mental yoga required to even attempt to visualize the six-dimensional space of a Calabi-Yau Manifold or to conceive of

building blocks so small they're

measured in Plancks seems to prime my brain for shaping ideas. Reading about quantum physics is a salve for the sharp immediacy of the practical world that allows me to focus on bigger, older things. It has become my interest to both enter art making in this state of mind and for the artwork itself to generate this state of mind in its beholder. This endeavor has lead me to experiment with trying to create a confounding experience of space and objects within it. I wanted to understand physical forces in the world and also understand how they play out in a painting. I made paintings of what I imagined it would look like if the surface area of objects were unwrapped and flattened out.

The paintings were made on canvas and molded into volumes so I could see brush strokes curve and recede into space. I subjected these forms to different physical

environments to see real sunlight and shadows upon painted light and shadows. I then made new paintings based on these warped forms. I imagined that, in some way, by painting a three- dimensional scene on a flat surface and then bending the picture into a three-dimensional volume and finally reconstituting that as a two-dimensional painting I might begin to perceive the curvature of spacetime.



Figure 18 Olivia Hill, photos of images on canvas shaped into volumes

Seeing through this process proved to be generative of experiences but did not produce the results I wanted. I had achieved the *look* of crunched and bent space, but the paintings did not heighten my senses in the way something does when safety is slipping away. I'd travelled too far into another world when what I wanted to paint was our world's chiral twin. This world is stranger



Figure 19 Olivia Hill, Space Object #3, 2019

than anything I could invent and my assignment as an artist is to watch it very closely. I observed that it's very difficult to predict how a shadow will fall, or how a reflection will appear on various surfaces. I realized that there are many things we see every day that we don't examine closely enough to really know them. A painter builds the world rather than documenting it.

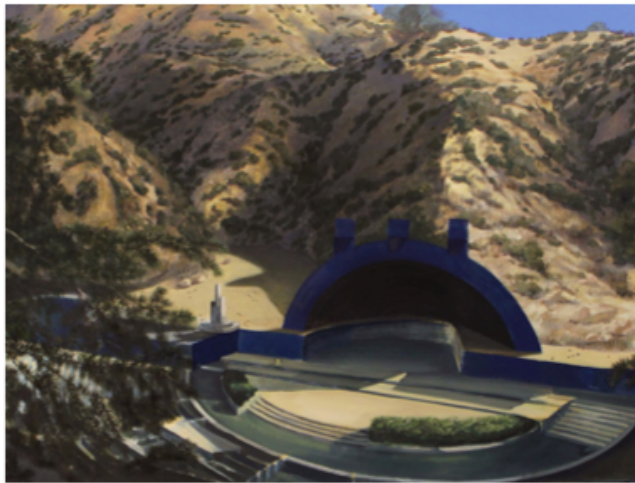


Figure 20 Olivia Hill, Bowl: Establishing Shot, 2019

To really paint something literally is a strange experience for me and for the viewer. The more something is rendered, the more it is rendered unrecognizable. If I don't have the source imagery I need to reference every element of the

painting I resort to confabulating from a stash of memories and prior knowledge. This is much the way that a computer renders objects. The resulting images in my paintings are not unlike digitally rendered ones that have been Frankensteined together. In effect, the paintings are uncanny in the same way that digital images are because they're trying, but never quite succeeding at following the laws of nature.

Painting the Landscape

At some point my exploration of space, curvature, topography and volume collided with what I'd identifying in O'Keeffe's *Church Steeple* and Colquhoun's *Scylla*. It again points to the indexical in that the salient objective in my painting practice was revealed to



Figure 21 Olivia Hill, Bat Cave: Establishing Shot, 2019

be that the painted event and the sense of physical forces at play in the world at large and within the painted scene should be present. I would paint things into existence by painting their mortality.

A consistent motif in my recent paintings has been both mountains and water which



Figure 22 J.M.W. Turner, *The Lake of Lucerne From Brunnen*, 1842

meander throughout and peak through the backgrounds of landscapes and domestic tableaux. In this way, gravity is always imposing itself. I push back against gravity and then let it take over, literally

sometimes by tilting and rotating the canvas to let fluid paint run to create rivers and tides. I build the landscapes from the inside out, first shaping and sanding the solid terrestrial matter in the paintings like land, hills, and concrete and then letting the fluids flow over and in between them and finally painting the plants in a way that almost mimics growth in twisting and blossoming gestures, pushing the shrubs out of the ground.

This way of painting the world is anathema to plein air painting in that the world is depicted as heavy and hard and lacking atmosphere. I recently saw for the first time many Turner paintings at the Tate Britain in London and observed that Turner's enterprise was to paint everything in a scene *except* solid matter. The volumes are defined by the light that touches them honoring an exclusively spectral experience and subduing the more tactile ones. One feels that in reaching out to touch the treetops and castles on the hill, they would collapse like an insect's molted shells. These are paintings of the ether and mine are paintings of dirt.

My paintings lack air. They depict something that is distinctly animal, vegetable, mineral. There's no dreamy haze or sunset to give the world a gauzy glow. It's all revealed, as if the house lights have been turned on. It is measurable, weighable, impressionable dense matter and it bears the cuts and depressions of a well-used battleground. To quote Paul Simon on his 1990 album, *Rhythm of the Saints*, in my paintings "The earth groans as it registers another birth". These paintings are neither heavenly nor infernal like the paintings of Turner. They are more like models of

movie sets in that humans, rather than Nature seem to have the upper hand. In these paintings, one senses that the world is tipping and sinking from human presence.

Why Southern California?



Figure 23 Screen- grabbed from "The Diner Scene" in Mulholland Drive

The broad sunlight depicted in my paintings allows everything to be seen in its fully rendered state. This full light is at once revealing and deceptively reassuring. The comfort of the bright sunlight is in the comfort that there isn't anything hiding in the shadows. This false sense of comfort is demonstrated in what's colloquially known as "The Diner Scene" in the movie, *Mulholland Dr.* (2001) directed by David Lynch. Dan and Herb are two men at a diner called Winkie's. Dan describes to Herb a fear derived from a dream that there's a Being behind the diner with a face so terrifying that he couldn't ever bear to see it in real life. The two men decide to face the fear and investigate the diner's back lot. They exit the diner to meet a typical flat cloudless L.A. afternoon and as they begin their procession past the exit door, past the Agave plants and down the stairs. Dan's fear is palpable. The fear is as intense as it would be alone in the dark. As the two men and the camera move in, the terrifying face emerges from behind the dumpsters. Dan is struck by such overwhelming terror that he collapses into Herb's arms.

What is it that's hiding in California's shadows? One thing that's always made me cautiously aware is the sleeping earthquake that taunts the stilted hillside homes as well as all of us below. The earthquake's history and its potential are omnipresent. As I've been meticulously making paintings of the LA landscape, I've become more aware of things that are physically hidden. The satellite views of L.A. that I use to source my paintings provide me with a voyeuristic look into almost any backyard, but the most expensive homes are shielded from view in what Mike Davis calls "thickets of privacy" in *City of Quartz*. This draws attention to the notion that water is not simply absent in this draught-stricken region, it is disguised as landscaping around the homes of those who can afford to water. But the hidden water isn't only in the gardens and swimming pools of the affluent. A steady flow is running through the toilets and showers of immigrant families where a two-bedroom house on record may actually shelter multiple families in bunk beds, basements, and unpermitted converted garages.



Figure 24 Ed Ruscha, *The Back of Hollywood*, 1977

LA frequently plays itself in art made about LA. It's that way in the paintings of transplants like David Hockney and Ed Ruscha as well as natives like Ken

Price. It indicates something unique about LA that even someone born there is aware of being part of a simulacrum. Nonetheless, I think it's possible to present a depiction of L.A. that's something other than the cliché, or perhaps the embedded cliché can be a little harder to find. After all, one of the surreal things about L.A. is its orientation within and between landscapes. It is a glint of Fool's Gold wedged in fault line between an ocean and a desert. If Ed Ruscha scrutinized the cliché of Los Angeles using its veneer- not just the advertised version of it, but the ad itself, then Ken Price, in his drawings, gives us something closer to what I'm after in my paintings which is an examination of a strange phenomenon nestled in the hinterlands.

If you grow up in LA, unless you're a child star or the progeny of the L.A. elite, what's accessible to you is the landscape. You might go to the mountains and the beach and Joshua tree, or at the very least, you can play outdoors nearly every day. You have dirty feet and a suntan for six months of the year. You can walk from the boxy mid-century apartments in the flats of Hollywood up to medieval castles in the hills by way of bleached sidewalks and



Figure 25 Ken Price, *Living Without Fences*, 2001

winding roads. You notice that Christmas doesn't look like it does in the movies, but

it's ok because you get to take your toys out and play in the sunshine on December 25th. Life is as gauzy as promised, even if it's just because you're seeing it through a dusty window screen.

Liminal Conditions

I'm interested in mapping Southern California by its liminal spaces and conditions. I like the wobbly places between myth and reality, between territories, between desert and sea, between ground and underground. I want to paint the perceptual threshold



Figure 26 Olivia Hill, *Rainbow*, 2020

crossed at twilight when the omnipotent sunlight flashes green on the horizon and things are tricky. I'm interested in sites that are like portals, where I might enter a cave as a human and come out the other side as a rattlesnake or a red ant. These are holes, tunnels, trenches and borders. In a very literal sense, the guiding of water from the Owens Valley to the city is an engineering feat of mythic proportions. These sites represent the symbolic life support of the city, upholding the value of a place that otherwise would be rather barren.



Figure 27 Olivia Hill, (Detail) *Bat Cave: Establishing Shot*

The sites I'm painting also appear object-like although they sit within environments. This scale disorientation was surprising to me as it was more of an epiphenomenon of the way I've been painting than a goal. This has occurred partially because of the over-rendering of subjects even when we

know from they're orientation in the picture plane that they are in the distance. The Downtown LA skyline in *Bat Cave: Establishing Shot* is painted as if it were a cluster of tiny blocks whereas in a photo or a painting with realistic perspective, the city would have been shown to be hazy and out of focus. The same is true of the mountains in *Riverside Pool: Establishing Shot* wherein the distant mountains are

painted with such presence that they appear to be small and close- up rather than huge and far away.



Figure 28 Screen grab from *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*

It doesn't matter that the paintings are full of things of known scales like trees, houses, and mountains. They seem to be paintings of models of trees, houses, and mountains. This has come to further support the

cinematic motif in these paintings. It doesn't seem, however, that the apparently diminutive size of these sites and objects on the landscape diminishes their importance. They become, instead, less like places, and more like objects in that they're handle-able. The handle- ability of these sites gives me a sense of knowing and understanding these places in the same way that prehistoric artists may have believed they could get a handle on nature by painting it. In *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, a climactic point in the movie is where Roy, played by Richard Dreyfus uses the mashed potatoes on his dinner plate to sculpt a model of the mountain that he believes might be the future landing site of an alien spacecraft. The significance of the mountain is so daunting to him that making a manageable model of it gives him a sense of control in an uncontrollable situation.

3D Maps

Plein air and landscape painting are concerned with the forces of nature. The light, the haze and the changing of seasons are the experiences of nature from five or six feet off the ground with all the psychological encumbrances that come with human observation. It is one of our unfortunate human foibles that we can't see very far. Making paintings based on satellite imagery allows for the notion of a landscape to expand to see across time as we see across space. In Hito Steyerl's essay, "Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective", she criticizes the aerial view familiarized through satellite imagery when she says,

...this virtual ground creates a perspective of overview and surveillance for a distanced, superior spectator safely floating up in the air. Just as linear perspective established an imaginary stable observer and horizon, so does the perspective from above establish an imaginary floating observer and an imaginary stable ground. (Steyerl 2011)

Steyerl's critique seems to stem from a notion that an observer from above is singular or few, and the observed are the many. In the case of satellite imagery, I argue, the surveyed and surveyors are one in the same as they are the world watching itself on the Internet.

In my establishing shot paintings, the viewer sees not only specific sites in the Southern California Region from a familiar distance but miles and miles beyond, across the city and into the mountains as if things very far away are very present.



Figure 29 Olivia Hill, *Riverside Pool: Establishing Shot*, 2020

Looking across California's landscape one gets the sense of looking into history- a history of migration and displacement, a history of agriculture, a history built on real estate speculation and gold prospecting. At the same time one has a sense of looking into the future. California provides a sampling of multiple ecologies that allows us to observe the effect of climate change on various fragile environments. In looking at my landscapes one can imagine the way it works. The water seems to pour down the canvas like it pours toward the equator. One detects the hidden water in the selective clustering of greenery in *Bat Cave: Establishing Shot*. Imagined environments like

LA and Dubai- those that have to be engineered seem precarious, but maybe they are actually more stable for human life because we understand how they're made- they're made from scratch. Cities that support us naturally are perhaps more unpredictable. Seeing all of this from above makes the viewer keenly aware that all the elements that guide and influence our psychic lives are mapped out on the infinite tilt of the land.

Sci Fi

The perspectival position of some of my landscapes could be that of a drone or a crane, but I also think of it as the vantage point of someone extraterrestrial, watching the Earth and wondering what the humans are up to now. My exploration in painting doesn't need to be limited to the Southern California region, but it is a fertile breeding ground that promises to be more than its physical condition. Through cinema, it has stood in for other countries, other cities, other epochs, a day for a night, an Earth for a Mars. In *City of Quartz* there's a quote from David Mogen regarding Ray Bradbury's *Martian Chronicles* (1950). "Bradbury's Mars is really Los Angeles's metaphysical double: 'a product of fantasies imposed upon it... magical promises and disorienting malevolence.'" (Mogen 1986)

The Los Angeles gestalt from an alien perspective is what Ken Price portrayed so well in his drawings. Perhaps it takes a native perspective to know the Alien one.

There have been plenty of outsiders, however, who saw the fiction in the Los Angeles Landscape and anticipated Baudrillard's idea of it as a simulacrum. For early European immigrants to Los Angeles, the pretense of age, history, and culture in

Hollywood's patina was the very embodiment of the *Unheimliche*. Egon Irwin Kisch in his travelogue *Paradies Amerika* spoke of a city built only on sunshine and critiqued the notion of make-believe landscapes. After the 1932 Olympics drew attention to LA, German Geographer Anton Wagner wrote *Zweimillionenstadt in Sudkalifornien* (1935) Wagner was interested in how the principle of the movie set was mirrored in the facade landscapes, particularly Hollywood's vain attempt to create a Euro influenced "real urban milieu".

The Real Deal

Tristan Garcia, in his essay, "In Defense of Representation" says,

An image, for example, is certainly a material object or a real object, but it is also another object that has the particular nature of not being what it is: a watercolor and gouache by Dürer that represents a hare is not itself a hare; moreover if it were the animal, it would no longer represent the animal. But if it is not in any way the thing itself, how can it represent that thing? Must I admit the existence of an ideal hare, in addition to its image? In that case, entities proliferate: there's the real hare, the image of the hare, the hare of which this is the image. Or perhaps the hare of which this is the image exists neither outside of the image nor in the image, but rather in the mind of the one who sees it? (Garcia 2015)

What makes something *real* and what is to be trusted or mistrusted about the *real* is an ongoing theme of my artistic practice. The illusive threshold between real and counterfeit is an enduring space of uneasiness in the human consciousness. In 15th century Europe convex mirrors were outlawed because the distorted reflection was thought to be so hellishly confounding that it was believed to be the devil's mischief. This suspicion associated with counterfeits and human-made things that are nearly

natural is surely one reason that “realism” in painting fell out of favor while the realm of pure fiction has been accepted as benign, stable territory.

Conclusion

What happens when instead of expecting something to be real and it proves to be a replica, you expect something to be a replica, but it seems very real. What does it mean, anyhow, for a painting to look real? Does it mean that the painting looks like a real photo? That the painting looks like a photo of a real thing? That looking at the painting provides a real experience of looking? That the painting looked like a real painting? In “Ontology of the Photographic Image ” by Andre Bazin he states that

The photographic image is the object itself, the object freed from the condition of time and space which govern it, no matter how fuzzy, distorted, or discolored, no matter how lacking in documentary value the image may be, it, the photographic image, shares, by virtue of the very process of becoming, the being of the model of which it is in reproduction.
(Bazin 1960)

I think this something a painting can do too. It’s a thing that paintings don’t normally do because they exist in our culture as, for the most part, impotent pleasant things that don’t represent reality. There is no rule, though, that a painting can’t make a reality of its own, just like L.A..

If nothing at all is reproduced, then nothing bad is reproduced. The declaration that substitutions and idols are impure is deeply rooted in the Euro-American protestant sensibility and is surely the impetus for the bounty of theory on the uncanny in the

last century. The uncanny is with us all the time. It is mapped on to our experience of the world. After all, the uncanny is the un-homelike and for it to be *not* like home, it must be *almost* like home.

The story in the prologue about the giant moon is fictional. My mom told me that she had mistaken an unusually large prop moon above the Observatory for the real one as she was leaving work that day, but I was not actually there. I don't remember what year it was and I had never had my carpool take me to Marshall High to meet her that day. I don't know what month it was or how the sky looked and for all I know my mom was exaggerating how convinced she was about the alien moon. I placed myself in a yet unpopulated story and put all the necessary pieces in place to create the scene. Dubious simulacra are with us all the time. A simulacrum is created whenever we make a memory and then recall it over and over until it becomes the reality.

When I drive around Southern California now on breaks from my studio I see the landscape as a painting. Each different type of non-native tree, whether a palm or an Afghan Pine I know as a crunch or twist or jab of the paintbrush. The dry grass on the balding hills is short scumbly marks and I can hear the sound of them as I see them. I scan the buildings with my mind's eye as I drive by and imagine how Google Earth's algorithm would try to wrap that scan into a 3D rendering. It's all passive observation, though, a mere virtual reality experience, compared to the task of building it all from scratch.

Epilogue

As I was stretching the canvas for my final painting of my thesis show, *Border: Wide Shot*, California was asked to go into lockdown to slow the spread of Covid-19. I continued painting from my home studio in Yucca Valley. Yucca Valley is a town that knows about social isolation. It has one foot in the past and one foot in the future, and maybe a third limb in another place entirely. From here, life has continued on desert time as it always has, but through the mediasphere I receive images from abroad of empty beaches, empty stadiums, the wide-open lanes of the 405 Freeway. These familiar places, in their unpopulated state now possess an uncanny resemblance to my recent paintings. A coyote crosses the road and the crows cluster. L.A. now reaches its foot into the future. Degree shows around the world were cancelled along with every other art show and just about everything else. I made a 3D virtual reality exhibition called *Faultline* using pictures of my paintings and people can roam around the gallery and look at my paintings like they're in a video game. I'm sad that there's not a reception and I can't invite all my friends. People keep telling me they love the virtual show, but wish they could see the *real* one and I can't help thinking that somehow they're seeing exactly what's real.

Blurbs

“On the one hand, there is, in the long view, this geological precision that people seeing (the paintings) for the first time perceive as photorealism. But the closer one looks, the less naturalistic and the more abstract they become, until finally the scientific precision dissolves into a metaphysical blur of vibration.” - Andrew Hill (Dad)

“When I tell people that we grew up in L.A. I think they imagine we had some kind of glamorous childhood, but we grew up in the dirt!” - Andrea Hill (Little Sister)

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