

Real Painting talk: the cultivation of (difficult) surfaces or “I know that’s a tree”

S 1. what happens in a minute?

What happens in a minute? Amongst other things...

S 694,445 Google searches

S 370,000 Skype calls are made

S 695,000 Facebook status updates

S 6,600 new pictures on Flickr

S 600+ videos posted totaling over 25 hours duration on YouTube

Don’t want to rehearse the implications of this predicament here today but, if we are now hardwired to receive what seems like an ever–burgeoning proliferation of images, then what *Real Painting* presents us with is perhaps the opposite – there is arguably very little to see here.

S In the case of...

S In the case of...

What we perhaps mean when we say that there is nothing here is that there aren’t any recognizable images.

Indeed, to the unseasoned observer, it may appear that if these objects are indeed paintings, as the title of the exhibition suggests, then they are paintings that are blank, empty, pictures of nothing...

Of course the opposite is in fact the case, and it is within the context of my talk that I want to begin to think about, as it were, how we might think about the work that’s currently on view.

S 2 black squares and the repudiation of picturing

To begin it might help if we attempt to locate this work historically

S Finbar

S Finbar/Umberg

S Umberg

On one level, we might say that stylistically at least, several of these works (for example) seem comparable to the monochrome, a sub–genre of abstract art that emerged during the beginning of the twentieth century and that was usually comprised of a single, unmodulated area of colour painted on a flat, usually square support.

Although not necessarily painting, historically, there were instances of the monochrome before the twentieth century. For example:

S Fludd

Instance 1. Between 1617 and 1621 *The metaphysical, physical and technical history of the two worlds, namely the greater and the lesser* was published. Written by the English physician and polymath Robert Fludd, the two worlds of which the title referred to were those of the microcosm and the macrocosm.

Of the 60 engravings that were included within its five volumes, perhaps the most striking is the image of a black square, which is bracketed along each of its four sides with the words “Et sic in infinitum,” (and so on indefinitely).

Fludd had intended his own black monochrome to signify the primordial, undifferentiated darkness prior to the beginning of time

S Tristram Shandy

Instance 2. With the first two volumes published originally in 1759, (there were nine in total published over a period of seven years), *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* follows the eponymous narrator as he seeks to describe particular episodes and events that befall him.

Of the novel’s many digressions that Laurence Sterne includes over its entirety, perhaps the one that is the most singular in its determination occurs on page 73 of volume one, wherein the death of Yorick the Parson is marked by the inclusion of what is ostensibly a black monochrome.

– Signifies death

– Playful admission with regard to the impossibility of language to articulate the inexpressible qualities and aspects of finality.

These are instances of the monochrome’s prehistory.

The black square, and more specifically the monochrome arguably begins with the Russian artist Kazimir Malevich.

S 010 installation shot

When: 1915, 0.10 exhibition

Where: St Petersburg

S Malevich Black Square

Malevich exhibited a total of 389 paintings, amongst which was Black Square.

The significance resides within the fact that, as Arthur Danto, writing in *The Nation* notes:

S "...Black Square is not a picture; it does not, in other words, depict a black square outside the frame. One of its immense contributions to the concept of visual art lies in the fact that it liberated the concept of painting from that of picturing and thus opened up a new era in the history of art."

So picturing, or to use a term we might be more familiar with, representation, a role we traditionally had accorded painting with has been, at the very least, placed under question.

S 3. windows

If it's not a picture of something, if it doesn't picture or represent something then we don't necessarily have to treat these works as windows onto another world.

As some of you might know, we've inherited the analogy of painting as a window from the Renaissance, and specifically from the architect/cum theorist Leon Battista Alberti.

It was in 1435 that Alberti first published the theoretical treatise *De Pittura* or On Painting.

In seeking to systematically set out a comprehensive artistic and theoretical rationale for the Renaissance artist working in Quattrocento Italy, Alberti reverted to the trope of a window:

S "Let me tell you what I do when I am painting. First of all, on the surface on which I am going to paint, I draw a rectangle of whatever size I want, which I regard as an open window through which the subject to be painted is seen."

S grid

This analogy enabled reality to become both framed or indeed 'enframed' and painting to directly correspond with reality. This correspondence would then be further established through the utilization of grids.

(I teach painting to undergraduate students and I often remind those students who are averse to 'theory' that ever since painting became formalized as a specific discipline, figures have attempted to theoretically account for what it is and what it does; the theorization of painting is certainly not a recent phenomena).

So if we don't conceive painting as a "window" onto another world, then perhaps we then choose to acknowledge rather than ignore the obvious, namely that any painting is a physical object in much the same way that this chair is a physical object.

In this respect we are asked to consider its opaqueness, its physicality, its materiality.

In this respect the move from a transparent Albertian model of painting towards a model that is opaque is perhaps signified by early modernist painting wherein the continuity of the picture plane is ruptured by way of their investigations into the fundamental and often paradoxical appearance of things.

S Goncharova

The shard-like, geometrical patterns many cubist, futurist and indeed cubo-futurist works are often organised around could be seen as the product of errant behaviour – namely of the modernist artist having thrown a stone, figuratively speaking, at Alberti's window which shattered what up until that point had been, or so it was believed, a unified world view.

Try this out with Goncharova's painting...

In fact, we could say that as well as throwing a stone at the window, the stone was also hurled at a mirror if we take painting's received role as that of reflecting the world of appearances.

S 4. the isness of things

Whilst both historical moments that I have mentioned thus far form part of what I would say is *Real Painting's* implicit horizon, it will be useful if we consider a third historical moment, and one that we might be able to both work in order to somehow begin to make sense of the exhibition.

S "My painting is based on the fact that what is there is there. It really is an object. Any painting is an object and anyone who gets involved enough in this finally has to face up to the objectness of whatever it is he's doing. He is making a thing."

This is from a radio interview with the American artist Frank Stella in 1964.

S Stella at work

The painting that this statement seems to be most synonymous with are the large-scale paintings that had been systematically executed in black enamel paint on unprimed cotton duck canvas using a two and a half inch house painter's brush.

S Stella painting

This is part of a broader tendency that Richard Shiff has deemed to be "efficient materialism."

But on another level this plain-spokenness, this modesty, this matter-of-factness is not necessarily self-evident.

Although they're certainly not matters of fiction, or 'windows,' they might not be matters of fact, or at least not necessarily straightforward ones.

Going back to Stella's statement: "what is there is there..."

The law of identity – a lot rests on the meaning of 'is.'

For example, to state that a train is a form of transport is qualitatively different to stating that a train is late.

Fundamentally, "is" is a word that carries with it at least three discrete usages.

S When someone says that the audience is clapping, it indicates predication.

S When someone states that there is a mountain in Africa, it indicates existence.

S When someone says that Paris is the capital of France, the “is,” which carries the same sense as “is the same as” indicates identity.

It would appear then that Stella’s use of if not reliance upon the word is an example of the third determination of the word ‘is.’

However, and as Thomas McEvilley points out, the indication of identity is the means whereby we can begin to think about the work, rather than draw any conclusions from the work:

[artists] who have made statements of this type have misunderstood an underlying ground rule of thought for a reasoned conclusion of thought. The error might be paralleled by mistaking the axioms of Euclidean geometry for its conclusions. Recognition of the law of identity does not mean we have come to the end of a line of reasoned thought, but that we are now ready to begin thinking.”

So it would appear that we can’t just simply shrug our shoulders and say “these paintings are what they are.”

So what should we think?

S 5. phenomenology as the cultivation of surfaces

For a minute, let’s go back to fourteenth century Italy and Alberti’s treatise and let’s consider another observation the Florentine architect cum theorist makes:

S “when they move away from what they are painting and stand further back, seeking to find by the light of nature the vertex of the pyramid for which they know everything can be correctly viewed.”

Alberti is talking here about...

S Masaccio

This vertex denoted a station point whereby the viewer would stand...

S Masaccio diagram

The promise of an ideal viewing position for painting was never realized...this is another story...

S perspectival eye diagram

However, for our purposes whilst Alberti’s claims suggests an experience of the artwork that was in effect static and was essentially, from the standpoint of the audience’s physiology, optical in determination, the experiential basis of the work here (the exhibition) invokes, if not directly involves a more physical, embodied encounter that is ambulatory, episodic, durational.

S Callery

This is certainly true of Simon Callery's large scale work that requires the viewer to...

"The objects tingle and the spectator moves
With the objects..." Wallace Stevens, "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven."

This is partly, (going back to the first point) because the works don't seek to dissemble the particularities of their physicality, of their objectness.

Which, in one sense, brings us back to Stella, or perhaps more specifically the contexts of production that he found himself in during the period he made the black stripe paintings.

S Judd

It is perhaps not a coincidence that joining Stella in the interview was the artist and unofficial spokesperson for Minimalism, Donald Judd.

S installation shot of minimalism exhibition

Moreover, Minimalism became synonymous with, amongst other things an experiential basis of the artwork that was both embodied and durational.

And it was phenomenology that worked to critically frame Minimalism.

What is Phenomenology?

Rather than go towards the obvious figures who are usually seen to be representative of what is a branch of philosophy, (for first generation Minimalists it would have been Maurice Merleau-Ponty), Simon Critchley's own determination of the term seems particularly apt for our discussion here today.

S "Phenomenology is the refusal of metaphysical or mystical depth and the cultivation of surfaces. It is a matter of opening one's eyes and seeing the palpably obvious fact of the world that faces one and that one faces..."

In light of which, what is both refreshing and notable about this exhibition is the way that it asks, perhaps even demands close scrutiny, considered and sustained attention and a quickening upon the physical things of the world.

S **6. doing philosophy in gardens**

S Cézanne

OK, so by way of a conclusion...

It seems to me then that there is an interesting connection between the works in the exhibition and a particular construal or understanding of attention, not to what is imagined but to what is necessarily real or palpable.

This is not to say that this is necessarily a straightforward process...

With regard to phenomenology, Critchley admits that these cultivated surfaces “only show themselves with great difficulty, they are enigmatic surfaces that come to appearance through the felt variations...”

An equivalent form of difficulty that modern painting has educed is beautifully articulated within a letter Rainer Maria Rilke write in (date) discussing Cézanne’s paintings:

Perhaps then Simon Critchley is right when he reminds us that:

“If there is a mystery to things, it is not the mystery of the hidden, it is the mystery of the absolutely obvious, what is under one’s nose.”

Ludwig Wittgenstein, another philosopher in *On Certainty*, a series of notes published posthumously in 1969 18 years after he had died makes the following observation:

S “I am sitting with a philosopher in the garden; he says again and again 'I know that that’s a tree', pointing to a tree that is near us. Someone else arrives and hears this, and I tell him: 'This fellow isn’t insane. We are only doing philosophy.’”

S Angela

S Finbar

So, with this in mind, when we consider, carefully consider x by or x by x, we are, amongst other things, doing philosophy.