

Around Painting

Extract from an ongoing dialogue between Christopher Stevens and Paul Tebbs



PT *How would you describe the conceptual themes that link the works selected for this show?*

CS I have, over the past few years, begun to recognize a set of ideas that recur in all of my paintings, drawings and, more recently, digital animations. These centre on the notion of painting as a practice, a way of thinking, and as a distinct language. What is painting? Why continue to paint (at least figuratively) when it is so much easier, quicker and more efficient to take a photograph? Why hasn't painting died yet? Do paintings offer ways of experiencing that differ from our apprehension of lens-based and mechanically produced images? The paintings from *Diary of an Omnivore* set out, in part, to test out this difference by creating works that removed as many of the obvious distinguishing characteristics of painting from the works (expressionism, distortion, evidence of

process, an obviously subjective colour-range, the edges of the works – they are all painted on beveled panels so that they appear not to have any physical depth, unlike a canvas). I wanted to make paintings that looked as much like photographs as possible so I could see what remained. All the works I have produced since *Omnivore* have sought to investigate what this remainder is, and why it seems so important. In deciding on this line of enquiry, I decided to limit the content of the works to depictions of the medium itself.

PT *There are a number of interesting points raised here. But for the moment I want to go back to a certain formulation in language you use to explain your work. You've used it here, and elsewhere. You've referred in the past to your painting as 'the history of a unique and intense relationship with an idea over time'. Could you*



say more about how this 'idea' of painting relates to the material production of the work?

CS What is the idea of painting? To say something using a visual language that involves the manual dexterity of an author developing ideas through a series of processes. Language is a key word here. Within a language, its medium – the means by which it is carried out – affects how we use it. Speech does not rely just on our ability to articulate, but on how well we can read a series of cues from a listener thereby gaining feedback on how well we are communicating. These cues are absent in writing, making the process more difficult. Furthermore, writing is slower than speech, causing a disjuncture



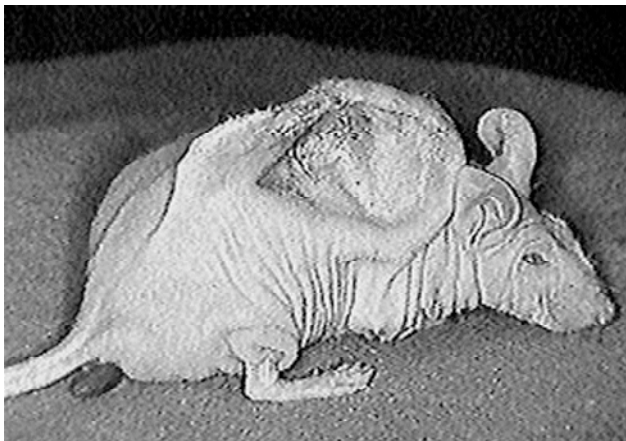
between the speed of our thoughts and the speed of expression. This difficulty affects what you say, and therefore affects what you think. If you affect the medium, and the medium affects you, then what you are involved in must be described as a relationship. Different methods of communication make you think in different ways and we now have the possibility of thinking with: our mouths and ears, a keyboard, a camera, a camcorder and, for me, with paint. Painting is a slow and difficult process involving a range of considerations that could go wrong at any time. When you start out on a painting, while you may have an idea that seems fairly clear to you, you have only a precarious control over where the work is going to end up, or if it is going to be successful. And there is a lengthy process separating the initial idea and the finished work. For this process to be meaningful, more than just colouring in, you have to enter into a dialogue with the surface you are working on. Painting is a real relationship based on negotiation with a surface that doesn't always do what you want, a surface that suggests things back to you and so perpetuates the dialogue. Painting not only makes ideas visible, but produces them, and these ideas arise out of a personal engagement with a set of processes that have a particular quality. I think this relationship is visible in any finished painting, even a photorealist work, and perhaps this is why people look at painting: so they can engage, and therefore be included in this relationship.

PT *There is something vaguely Platonic in the notion that through the activity of painting you're having a relationship with an idea of painting - the idea of painting being painting in its most perfect and intelligible form; any material manifestation of paint, being, by comparison with the idea, imperfect. Citing Plato may mislead us here, but your recent phases of working do seem driven by an essentialist reduction: a movement away from representation to a more basic material presentation. Representation hasn't disappeared altogether, but it has*



been significantly repositioned in relation to the materiality of the paint. This recalls not only Plato and his hostility to secondary-order representation, but also certain Modernist gestures in the history of painting.

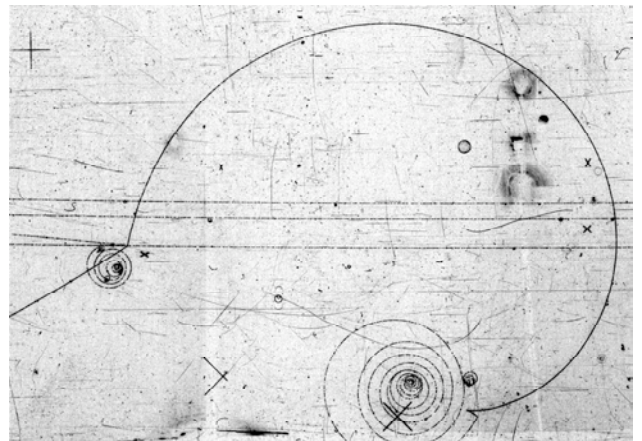
CS This is interesting. I'm not hostile to secondary-order representation (as I understand it, making pictures), quite the opposite, but I am also extremely interested in the lacunae between the thing and its representative, perhaps for the same reasons Lacan was interested in language and the way we use it. Representation has become a kind of game for us, with consequences we need to think about. The modernist gesture you refer to was about moving away from representation: a painting wasn't of anything; it was paint being itself. But by painting paint being paint (and drawing and animating it) I am doing the opposite. This is therefore a perversion of the modernist goal. Rather than representation disappearing as one logical end point of reductionism, I wonder what happens when the representational medium is made to represent itself, rather like two mirrors facing each other. To extend the analogy, I think you can only see the essential nature of mirrors when they endlessly reflect themselves, disappearing into a green hazy infinity redolent of their substance. The multiplication of a reflection magnifies its imperfections and makes you aware of the things that are doing the reflecting. Unlike the modernists who concerned themselves with paint's physicality (which was one particular way of looking at the medium) I am more interested in painting's function as a medium for making images. Every time we say something (therefore using language) we resort to a kind of secondary-order representation. We are re-evoking something and are therefore representing it. Doing so, even when we refer to something in front of us, assumes all parties concerned have the same understanding not only of that which we refer to, but also how we choose to describe it. This can lead to

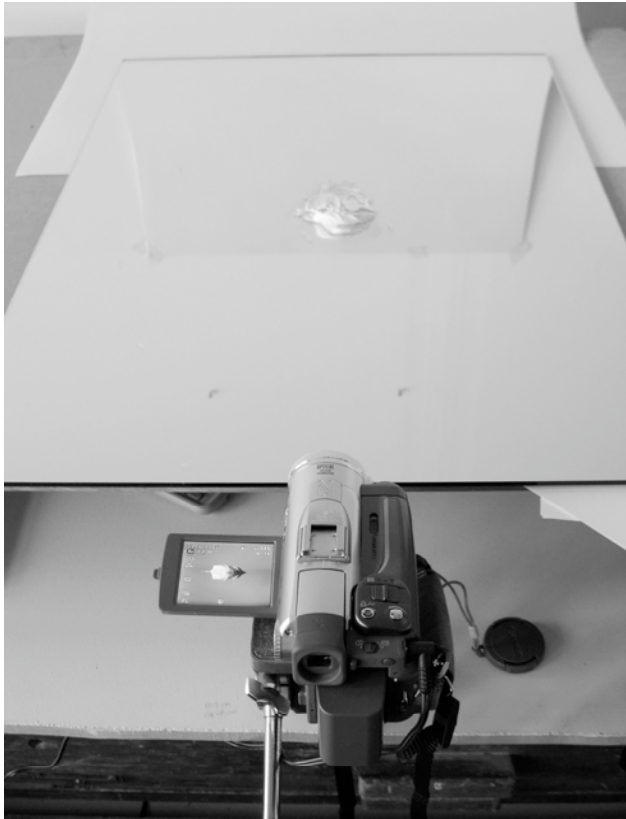


problems, and precisely because of this, it is also the point when things become interesting. Perhaps you can understand more by dissecting how you misunderstand. Rather than the perfect idea of painting, I am interested in how painting, like any language, fails, or perhaps, how it intrudes. In other words painting's opacity as a medium for carrying and generating ideas.

PT *I would like to understand what the medium is through these different phases of work? You've suggested that painting makes ideas visible, and these are specific to the medium of painting. But what is the medium through these various phases of painting, photography, animation and drawing?*

CS I started out wanting to see why paintings and photographs operated in different ways and didn't believe that they should be characterised by final appearances (flat, static, alluding to a third dimension not physically present in the work) because images employing the two media are arrived at by substantially different means. At a certain point, I wondered whether paint should be solely the subject rather than the medium so, to this end, thought I should photograph paint rather than paint paintings that resembled photographs (at that point I thought I was





leaving behind the idea of thinking through paint) but the resulting photographs felt wrong, and I realised that if they were to be successful the images now needed to be drawn. This was, at least in part, because drawing holds such an important position in our history of attempts to document and order natural phenomena (and the drawings allude to the idea of an impossible attempt to classify something that only exists for a few moments) but also in making the drawings I was re-involved in a kind of engagement similar to painting. I have begun to suspect that there is a certain frame of mind associated with painting as a practice that defines it as much as exclusive use of the medium, and that this issue of practice, or involvement, could be expanded to include certain other media. Making the digital animations has involved me in a set of processes that are surprisingly similar to those involved with both painting and drawing. In one of our recent conversations you used the word 'immersion' in relation not only to looking at a work of art, but also to the processes involved in its making. I wonder if this is what you were referring to, because this is the case with the three media I have been using to make these works. I would say therefore that painting remains the medium, but that rather than define painting as a specific material, it should be characterised by the way that we have to engage with its processes to produce a coherent work.

PT I think of each of the digital animations as dynamic things-in-themselves. Part of the experience for the viewer is a gentle rejection on the grounds of their joyous self-sufficiency. Immersion in these works (as a viewer) is to experience something like the material undoing of thought.

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1. Still from *Café Delight 8* Christopher Stevens, digital animation, 2006
2. *The Knight Death and the Devil* (detail) Albrecht Dürer
3. Used Nicotinell Chewing Gum. Photographed by CS
4. *Pinnacle Iceberg 1*. US Coastguard
5. Mouse Ear Chimera. Dr J Vacanti, Massachusetts General Hospital, Boston
6. *The Rising of the Sun* (detail) Francoise Boucher, Wallace collection, London
7. Neutrino interaction in a bubble chamber, Fermilab, Batavia, Chicago
8. Photograph of rostrum used for filming the *Café Delight* series. Photographed by CS

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Published by Permanent Gallery on the occasion of Christopher Stevens' exhibition: *Unstable*, at Permanent Gallery 11th November – 5th December 2006

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