

MODELS AND MATERIALITIES:
CONFABULATION AND THE CONTEMPORARY STILL LIFE

A CORRESPONDENCE: FRANCES WOODLEY AND JAMIE STEVENSON

JS It strikes me, after only such a brief time as I have had to observe your tendencies as both curator and art theorist, that your fascination with contemporary still life is an almost archeological one. The paintings are your dig sites, the artists and their intentions are your lost civilizations, and this exhibition and those correspondences are your brush and trowel with which you eagerly, yet fastidiously unpick the secrets hidden beneath every layer of paint.

FW Your archeological metaphor is an interesting one and it's close in some ways but not in others. I'm interested in uncovering rather than excavating, in discovering potential rather than reconstruction, in taking small risks rather than aiming for dead certainty. So when I go in search of contemporary painting of still life, I'm not digging down into history or even into established practice, rather, I am going in search of something in circulation, something alive and not entirely graspable, on the move, fleeting and imminent. Your archeological metaphor assumes that the object, its maker and the civilization in which something was made are all dead but I'm not much interested in the dead and buried, nor am I much interested in deconstructive archeology. I'm more taken with how things and ideas can escape their past yet at the same time remain rooted in it. Looking at contemporary painting of still life can be like spotting a family resemblance, momentary and subtle sometimes, instantly recognizable at others. So, though I'm interested in historical art and art history I don't consider myself much of an art historian and certainly no theorist. I like to look at still life painting from any period but in a way that is conscious of my present involvement, that is, the sort of looking that can lead to new forms of interpretation.

JS Such an endeavour requires an enormous amount of care and respect, but also a relentless enthusiasm and a drive to know and learn. You are constantly trying to place yourself, if not in the mind of the artist, then at least somewhere in their atmosphere; distanced so that you remain yourself, critical and apart, just close enough that some of the humanity that imbues each of you may crackle across the gap, like static.

Such energy is powerful, and profound. Its traces are evident in your writing and in your correspondences with the artists. Is it indeed a desire for human connection in such a fascinating psychological and artistic context that motivates you to create these exhibitions, or something else? I have already invested myself heavily here into analogy and metaphor, as might be inevitable when trying to familiarise oneself with something, or someone, but is there a similar analogical lens through which you view your own curatorial practice?

FW You are very perceptive. I had no idea that my writing, editing and curating revealed so much about me; my intention was quite the opposite! The only way I was able to come to any sort of meaningful understanding of the contemporary interpretation of this traditional genre was through various forms of conversation, correspondence, writing and curation. Importantly, there was never any attempt on

my part to get to the 'essence' of an artist's practice, nor did I presume to impose theory upon it. What has been learnt on both sides has occurred in the interchange (where some discussion of history and theory did occur) and in the build up of trust between us.

I always think that I don't know enough and that I forget too much! Such is the nature of my eagerness to 'know and learn'. I have discovered things about myself through these projects—how I like to set ideas and connections in motion through bringing artists together in curatorial contexts and how I enjoy positioning myself as a catalyst and conversation partner, stirring things up a little, creating a little interruption in artists' practice, and likewise, have them impact on mine. Though the main intention of the projects has always been to develop methodologies for gathering evidence for practice based research, the whole process has also been an enormous privilege and pleasure as well.

I agree with you, I was looking for forms of human connection but specifically in artistic and intellectual contexts. It has been a search for a community of practice that barely knows itself as such. I am interested in painters, not as a breed but as unusual individuals who, because they are so immersed in their sensory and conceptual worlds, often do not appear to appreciate how different and extraordinary they are. The artists invited to participate in these projects were very generous, not only with their time, but also in taking the risk of being questioned, challenged and changed by what we undertook together. Throughout there has been a 'human connection', the development of a rapport, a 'crackle across the gap, like static' as you say. I realized early on that empathy, respect, patience, generous critique, genuine interest, gentle coaxing and humour would be the most effective manner in which to proceed if we were all to get something out of it and beyond it. However, it is also worth remembering that the mix and the pace of our exchanges and the degree and nature of our reciprocity were, as might be expected, different in each encounter. You say that you are new to this sort of correspondence, yet so was I when I started out, but balancing the voices of researcher/curator and artist in this way seems to have worked well for all of us. Using an idea as the fulcrum for the exhibition also served to bring artists together in ways that a simple group show might not have done. Curation together with conversation, correspondence and critical writing has uncovered much that had previously eluded capture.

JS Yes, you're right, perhaps my archeology metaphor does not properly acknowledge the vitality and state of flux so intrinsic to these paintings and your correspondences. It does raise in me some interesting thoughts about this exhibition's relationship with time and history, however.

A lost civilisation is generally lost in time far more so than it is in space, but one strange aspect of a curated exhibition is that, when considered as a single phenomenon in its entirety (curator included), it appears atemporal. This might seem a strange observation to make, and forgive me if I appear to go off-piste a little, but it is crucial to my understanding of your curatorial processes and how your engagement with the artists has shaped the show itself.

FW I'm not sure about atemporality. Isn't a cultural event, a painting or an exhibition for instance, always of its own time even when we don't necessarily recognize it as such at the time of its making? The time in which art is made is crucial both for its execution (materials, technologies, gestures and so forth) and its reception (that is,

what is available to sight and sensation and open to being understood at any one time). Fundamental to all three projects has been a developing awareness of how current painting of still life exists in forms of conversation with past art. This is not a yearning for the past (nostalgia) but in how past art, existing in the present in museums, collections, books and websites and so forth, addresses painters today. Traditional painting lives on, yet its address is different, and differently received, at different times.

JS For my part, you see, I have experienced *Models and Materialities* in several stages. The first, the exhibition, is anchored to time in two ways: for one, I can place the visit to the gallery within my own singular timeline. Secondly, I had the power to choose the order in which I viewed the artworks, how many times I viewed them, and for how long. The visit was a tangible, recallable event with another miniature timeline of events held within it.

When I read the essays and correspondences in the catalogue, however, and begin our own process of correspondence, that clear chronology with regards to my interaction with the exhibition becomes muddled. Suddenly I am grappling not only with the vast context of the history of still life and how it informs these contemporary painters and their practices, but also with *your* timeline as researcher and curator, and finally the timelines and histories of the artists themselves.

FW Yes, I can see that when unpicked in that way it can become a bit confusing. Yet this is how we all normally live and experience time isn't it—all muddled up? In our Western culture we operate in interconnected modes of sequential, historical, virtual and future time. We situate ourselves in relation to memory, its confabulation and effacement. No-one's experience of time is quite the same yet we choose to make a 'human connection' through its shared technologies such as digital clocks, timers etc. and regulated cultural structures and practices such as art history and museums. In the early modern period during which still life painting was established people were arguably more aware of seasonal, mythological, classical and biblical time than we are now and were happy to mix it up, as can be seen in floral still lifes, for example, where seasonal flowers were presented synchronically. Then too, just as now, we see the anachronic appropriation of motifs from previous periods. So *Models and Materialities* and my other projects do not deal primarily with time or its telling (art history) but instead with traditional art's address to contemporary painters.

JS It may be my position as an outsider, as a newcomer not only to this method of correspondence but also to this area of research, that causes me, perhaps mistakenly, to search for temporal order that may aid my understanding. I think my only instinctive (and perhaps subconscious) option when faced with a chronological maze such as this one is to dispense with the notion of time altogether, choosing instead to examine only the things themselves—the people, the artworks, and the ideas. These are doubtless the most crucial and the most vital subjects available to discuss, but I wonder if you have given any thought to how someone entirely outside the curation process might attempt to consider it metaphysically as a whole, rather than simply as an assortment of tangible end products connected by intangible ideas? Moreover, do you believe such a consideration to be pertinent at all, or is it merely a distraction from said ideas and their reflexive relationships with the end products? For instance, I am sure that my thoughts and ideas regarding the nature of the paintings would change if I knew whether they were created *before* or *after* the artists were introduced to any of the concepts put forth by you in the

correspondences, but are the paintings intended to inform the ideas rather than the other way around?

FW Yes, 'the people, the artworks, and the ideas' are the thing but they are also products of the past, of memory, and history. I'm arguing that certain contemporary painters of still life, because of the nature of their relation to a tradition, make a turn not only to receive the address of historical painting but in doing so address it in return in ways that are only possible by them and in their own time. For example, Picasso and Braque's response to the tradition of still life can be said to be specifically of their time, but, and this is crucial, it also became open to a degree of understanding at that time. This is the way I'm thinking of 'conversation', a back and forth between paintings, painters, viewers, and writers. This raises the question as to what the difference is between the manner in which a painting can 'speak' to you (this is the viewer's experience) and the way in which a painting can, in speaking to you, also elicit a response or reply (the artist's experience).

Modernism turned its face against the past yet it wouldn't have existed without it. Prior to the twentieth century most painters would have been cognizant of the traditions that preceded them through their everyday cultural circulation. That's not the case any more. In our media dominated times cultural references have become a bit of a mash-up and disconnected from their sources.

The curation process must operate on different and complementary levels. A blockbuster show at the RA or Tate Modern can be hugely popular whilst also being thoroughly informed by sophisticated historical, critical, connoisseurial and curatorial expertise. In the much more modest exhibitions that I have curated as part of my research, my intention has been to make visible the community of practice that I have uncovered, to share that experience with the artists and the public, and to extend the field intellectually through inviting others to contextualise and critique it alongside me. Ultimately an exhibition stands or falls on the artwork it shows. Curation and critique are, however, additional interpretive tools that, amongst other things, situate artworks in time—present, past and future. Recently, curation has even come to be regarded as a creative practice.

As I said earlier, when approaching an artist I merely invite myself in to talk with them, and then afterwards, to correspond. To address your concerns, I should say that the paintings of theirs that we talked about tended to be recent and hardly ever those in progress. My thinking here was that the latter could have led to my involvement becoming too prominent and influential. In my previous curatorial project, *Still Life: Ambiguous Practices* (2015), I had intentionally led artists into theoretical territory when I thought it was useful to do so. This time I drew back, with the result that very few of the painters situated their work in a theoretical context of their own accord, though all understood their painting in relation to historical and contemporary art.

JS You've spoken, in the catalogue and in this correspondence, of several different instances of 'conversation' that exist throughout this project: contemporary still life painters' conversations with past tradition; your conversations with the artists; our conversation with each other. The link between all of these conversations is what could be considered the very essence of a conversation—a deep reflexivity that uses the mutual connection with a subject, circumstance or concept to enable a

transformation either in the conversers' perception of that subject, or in their perception of themselves and each other.

FW You discriminate between different sorts of conversation, and you're right to do so. If I understand you correctly, you are suggesting that there may be a problem with how far the elasticity of this term can be usefully stretched. The way in which I have been thinking about conversation is drawn and adapted from Gadamer's writings, particularly *Truth and Method* (first published in 1960), a critique of method, particularly in relation to Socratic dialogue and Platonic dialogic. That sounds as though it's very dry, but it isn't! Your definition of conversation as a process of 'deep reflexivity' is very well expressed but we shouldn't overlook the intersubjective nature of conversation, that is the shared language and agreed procedures that make these sorts of conversations possible. Gadamer's conversation happens when its partners acknowledge the prejudice of the other and are open to what the other has to say with the intention of coming to an agreement as to what is being questioned. This is different from arguing each other down in search of a fixed truth (Platonic dialectic) or assuming that together we will achieve a higher understanding (Hegelian dialectic). So in this sense Gadamer's notion of conversation is always contingent, felicitous, interpretive and transformative. Heidegger, and Gadamer to a lesser extent, write about this as a circular process (the hermeneutic circle), but I'm not convinced. I'm not a great fan of using geometric analogy in this way (is it a circle or a sphere, or maybe even flat like a Moebius strip, a double sided continuum) but I don't have the philosophical background to argue that one! And I think there is another point that you hint at, and which I also need to keep in mind. That is, that over time, in my familiarity with my own point of view and way of doing things there lurks the danger that I take my own position for granted, both in forms of conversation and curation, so that I forget to see it all as others might. However, I'm also conscious that there is only so much that the viewer wants to know, and only so much time to know it! So it's a balance, and sometimes like eating your greens, you have to slip them into the rest of your food without drawing attention to them.

JS It is worth acknowledging that the painters' conversation with the still life tradition is only reflexive in that such a tradition exists merely in our own physical and collective psychological constructs, and it is these constructs that are open to transformation.

FW I think that this is important. A still life painter can only paint a painting that can be said to be a still life because of the continuing existence of the still life tradition and its recognizable conventions – painterly, hermeneutic, art historical, connoisseurial and critical. As you say, tradition is not a thing, it is a construct, but a construct that becomes manifest in paintings. I'm not sure that I agree with you that it is a psychological or even a phenomenological construct as both of those seem to have more to do with affect, something that is generally experienced individually rather than collectively as is the case with tradition, though I agree with what you infer, that both come with cultural contexts.

A still life is made (not necessarily in paint), in different ways at different times, but always with sufficient reference to the tradition if it is to be recognized as such. Contemporary still life re-presents a historical tradition (this can take a number of different forms) at the same time as it represents and/or depicts objects, spaces and light of the artist's choosing (either those of traditional still life or entirely new ones), a combination that marks still life out from other art practices that involve objects. It is

the willingness on the part of the painter to enter into a conversation with particular paintings of the distant and recent past on the one hand and/or the idea of the tradition (often misremembered) on the other, that are the two threads that both anchor and liberate their still life practice. They and their painting enter into still life's conversation, one that always takes place in their present.

JS All of that said, I would like to discuss perhaps another form of conversation at play – one that rearranges this structure I previously put forth of [converser] \leftrightarrow (subject) \leftrightarrow [converser] – and that is the conversation between the paintings themselves. The nature of an exhibition is such that the artworks on display can no longer be considered as singular 'cultural events' as you described them. They no longer exist only in their own private contexts; instead they are forced to open themselves to the contexts of all the other artworks. Given that paintings exist as much in the viewer's perception of them as they do in materiality, if that perception is altered by the presence of another painting then the transformation could be said to be taking place in the paintings themselves rather than just in the perception of the viewer. In this conversation then, the structure is [painting] \leftrightarrow (viewer) \leftrightarrow [painting]. The reflexivity remains, but now the viewer is the shared circumstance rather than a concept or idea.

Given all that is discussed by you and the other writers in the catalogue about the nature of paintings as ambiguous, semi-material, confabulated 'things' as opposed to merely representations, how does this notion of paintings being actual members of the conversation engage with that discussion? Does it confirm or contradict any of your ideas or beliefs?

FW Yes, this is a difficult one, but I don't think it leads to a contradiction of what I have already said and written. But you had better be the judge of that! The first, and most obvious thing to say here is that paintings do not speak in words though poets like Wergeland, for example, gets close. So, having got that out of the way I think what we are both aiming for here is to come to some understanding of how they speak and converse with us and with each other.

Paintings themselves can 'speak' through their quotation of past, recent and current art, that is, the reiteration or reference that occurs in pastiche, allusion etc.. This is commonly referred to as intertextuality (Kristeva). At its most basic level it's probably easier to apply the idea of intertextuality to forms of writing or speaking because a common language between the two interlocutors requires no intermediary or interpreter. Painting, however, absolutely requires the interpretation and mediation of a viewer to bring understanding to its intertextuality.

It is common to hear people say that a work of art speaks to them. This is where a psychological and/or phenomenological response forms in the viewer's mind and body that can take them by surprise, unsettles them, or gives them pleasure. This response is affect but as you said earlier, is also connected to memory and psychological states.

Then there is the question of how paintings converse with one another. This is perhaps a slightly metaphorical way of expressing this phenomenon, but one that is sympathetic and encouraging to our will for it to happen and our willingness to make it happen. It would seem that what we mean by conversation between paintings may occur most effectively when consideration is given to their curation through which

conversation between paintings and viewers can be made to happen by suggestion or chance. This means that from the start we have to accept that not only are paintings unable to speak without the mediation of a viewer, but that they can be made more open to conversation with one another when assisted by a curator. Seen this way the curator functions as enabler, mediator and interpreter. Their intervention, however, should probably not be too intrusive or they run the risk of viewers being unable to enter into conversations of their own making.

In this exhibition, although I had anticipated that such conversations would take place between paintings, viewers and artists and had planned for this in advance, I was also taken unawares when the pinks and carmines of Clare Chapman's amorphous and erotic things made a connection across the gallery with Christopher Nurse's crimson military jackets. Prior to this experience I had understood Nurse's paintings as absurdist anamorphic arrangements of objects, but through this cross-gallery conversation, brought on by my own curation, I understood something of the absurdity of those WW1 generals that went beyond his paintings of them when caught in the glare of Clare's erotic blushes. To a lesser extent I found that Chris' works also reinforced the slight absurdity of Chapman's practice, that is, her painting of the same thing over and over again. Incidentally, another connection that the gallery's curator, Philip Nicol, made was between the moustaches of those painted generals and a fringe of marks in 'Pert' by G.L. Brierley. The latter's marks then became moustache-like for him thereby reinforcing a bodily association in what are otherwise ambiguous, though suggestive, forms, shapes and textures. I think that it is worth defending this as a form of conversation. It is certainly more than a comparison and embodies a back and forth that exceeds comparison on its own.

There is, I think, an important difference in the degree of potential for transformative conversation when we compare the viewer's experience to the artist respondent's. In the latter, forms of exchange are sought prior to, or during the making of new art. This sort of conversation anticipates and welcomes the risk of transformation to painting and painter alike. Feeling compelled to respond, whether to a particular work of art or to the idea of the tradition as a whole, new questions and challenges inevitably arise, not least that of the possibility of a swerve, return or departure from still life's conventions.

Incidentally, what do you mean semi-material? I don't recall any of the artists or writers using that word. Maybe it was something that suggested itself to you.

JS I suppose by 'semi-material' I was simply suggesting that the materiality of paint and canvas cannot entirely fulfill our definition of a painting. It is difficult, however, because a painting is in fact simultaneously entirely material (in the physical plane) and entirely immaterial (in our psychological one). It is only our tendency to create 'things' by merging these two planes in our own memory that gives a painting this dual nature. Perhaps 'semi-material' tries too hard to quantify that phenomenon without specifying where/how the divide exists. After all, Henri Bergson in *Matter and Memory* (first published in 1896) suggested that every object is subject to this same blending of mind and matter as soon it enters our perception – a philosophy to which I subscribe – and yet I am happy to describe most objects as purely material things, even after I have perceived them. Why do paintings demand a more fluid definition?

Perhaps it is because part of their nature is to bypass the subconscious. We attribute memories and associations to objects constantly and involuntarily, rendering them

things, yet paintings explicitly demand this of us. We do it consciously, because our cultural knowledge tells us that when paint is applied to a canvas, it is done so in an attempt to show us something beyond what exists in materiality. I suppose that is what makes both this exhibition and this field of research so fascinating. The intertextuality of it all, as you say, gives these paintings a sense of self-awareness; as if they look out from their gallery wall at all the other paintings in the room, and back through time at the paintings that have come before them, and allow a subtle shift in how they wish to be perceived—like a changing of the light. It is this ability to tap into a far larger world of reference than merely the viewer's lived experience and the chosen objects of representation that makes a curated exhibition such as *Models and Materialities* so crucial to the understanding and progression of the still life genre.

To my mind, one thing that is intrinsic to all forms of conversation surrounding contemporary still life, even art in general, is equivocality. My understanding of the intertextual potential of painting came through my research on Anselm Kiefer, wherein I was struck by the discursive power of ambivalence and ambiguity on the part of the artist. By deliberately not making his stance clear, and complicating issues further by employing a multitude of ruthlessly specific cultural and historical references and representations, Kiefer was able to stir the pot of contentious discussion surrounding German national identity with his artwork. Similarly, by choosing to arrange, create or materialise objects that are shrouded in ambiguity, the artists in this exhibition are allowing the viewer to engage in conversations with these paintings in a way that a more unequivocal attempt at representation (or indeed curation) would not.

As you say, the conversation also exists between the paintings and the artists, and it is through your correspondences that we as viewers are given privileged glimpses into those otherwise hidden interactions. Your aim, I hope you will agree, has clearly been to explore and evolve the intellectual, critical and creative wingspan of conversation in all the many alcoves and expanses of the artistic process. It exists at every level, from the mixing of Alex Hanna's industrial oils in the privacy of his own studio to—as you so beautifully put it—the 'erotic blushes' of Clare Chapman's amorphous materialisations; their womb-like warmth radiating out across the gallery floor towards Chris Nurse's bagged and bewildering decorated generals.

To sit and discuss, as we have, the very nature of conversation and the still life tradition, is to dip one's toes into a deep and ever-changing ocean of history, memory, and cultural perspectives. It is a discussion that is vital and must continue in order for contemporary art of all kinds to flourish in the cultural consciousness. Apart from this, there is also the silent response in the gallery that must be treasured. To stand for a while in front of a painting and look, and think, and perhaps for a fleeting instant get caught in one of those painted blushes as they spill their wordless voices into the world, is to respond to the utterance of art speaking to art, artist, and viewer. The thing is that artists go beyond response; they reply.

FRANCES WOODLEY – Researcher and curator of *Models and Materialities: Confabulation and the Contemporary Still life*, (BayArt gallery, 1-29 October 2016). ©

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