

The Poetry of the Real

Reality is a recent invention in art. Only with the onset of modernity did we really begin to think that what we can see around us, the collective detritus of our existence, was a suitable thing to make art about. In many ways the rise of reality was an indication of our collective and growing self-consciousness: our sense that the things that happen to ordinary people are worth recording, and making special. Perhaps also it signified that we were in an increasingly secular world: the twilight of the gods was upon us. And it begs the question, when we make use of the real in art, what exactly are we doing?

This publication then, and the exhibition it accompanies, is a muse on the ways reality has been pursued over the last century, in painting and sculpture. All the artists here use the materiality of existence in their art. This links them together. But having said this, they use it in different ways.



Chris Stevens

Twila looking right in the Brewery Tap
2017, Oil on Canvas, 30 x 30 cms

To answer the question posed, Chris Stevens knows exactly what he is doing with reality in his art. In a recent interview he said he was "trying to make something that is about my world. A painting cannot be a pretty picture. That's what the history of art teaches us". For him, the aim of art isn't to pursue an abstract concept of beauty, or to comment on other art that has been made. It is meant to take the world and make something from it, and to comment on it while you are doing that. For Jonathan Leaman, whose imagery is very different from that of Stevens, the real is likewise a vital part of his practice, but it functions not so much as an end, as a starting point. The underlying tension in his practice is that of the relationship between the real and the imagined: "I like the idea of mystery being made into a thing". His art sits in a complex space between what we can see in front of us, and what we can internally invent. And for Alexander Augustus, the process is different again. By contrast with Stevens and Leaman, it is as though the real, the thing he observes, is itself an actual active component of the work: "I am interested in the patterns of people's lives, in the spaces they occupy, in

the symbolism and iconography that they surround themselves with I suppose." And Chris Stevens is right about art history of course. It is what it teaches us. From the later Renaissance and then significantly into the early Enlightenment, artists increasingly concerned themselves with the nature of reality: real places and things began to appear in painting, sculpture, tapestry, woodblock, and ceramic, for example, and this was undoubtedly tied to a new curiosity about the world and humanity's place in it.

The Le Nain Brothers, Jan Steen, Rembrandt, Velasquez, and Vermeer, spring to mind as artists who saw their subject matter rooted in mortality, and the conundrums posed by what was around them. It was really in the 19th century though that reality came fully to the fore. From the 1840s onwards, across the media, artists engaged with the material world as never before. Gustave Courbet is credited with making the term 'Realism' an art expression, and under this banner he and his circle pioneered a new approach to representation. This doesn't mean they simply copied what was in front of them. Rather, it implies that their subject-matter was to do with what was outside of themselves. Realist art wasn't to do with transcribing, with attempting to capture the superficial appearance of the world. Undoubtedly much naturalist art did try to do that. But if one looks at the greatest of the Impressionists for example, their concern wasn't so much to capture what they saw, as interpret it. Monet spent his life thinking about reality, not copying it.

The Impressionist ethos didn't end with Monet and Degas. It moved through the 20th century, albeit developed and exacerbated by a Modernist sensibility. Walter Sickert's life and work, for example, carried the idea that art is about confronting the situations one finds oneself in from the 19th into the middle of the 20th century. His dark expressionist last period resonated with a sensibility that originated with Degas and Van Gogh. In the same way, Jacob Epstein carried a fin de siècle intensity into the Modern Age. There is a Rodin-esque grandeur to his late portraits and figures, tempered by a sense of introspection, and even melancholy. A number of historians have come to see the dark, raw, and even brutal vision of Sickert and Epstein as vital for British art after the Second World War.

In the 20th century, something wholly novel happened, that didn't have roots in earlier forms of Realism. The advent of Cubism immensely expanded how artists might deal with the world: the real could now be cut up, rearranged, collaged together, and fragmented at will. A still-life, portrait, or landscape might be reconfigured entirely in support of the artist's search for meaning. After Cubism, reality could take many forms. The brutally flattened expressionism of David Bomberg, the collaged planes and letters in the seminal early work of David Hockney, or the digitized, polygon-faceting in the recent bronzes of Alexander Augustus, were all ultimately made possible by Cubism.

The early work of Hockney in many respects provided the underpinning for everything that came after in his extraordinary career. More than anything else, his is an art of thinking with drawing, of taking incidents, situations, and personalities, and lacing them together with superb draughtsmanship. There is something Bacon-like, perhaps, in the emotional directness of *The Most Beautiful Boy in the World*, and influences such as this are entirely mediated by a lyrical post-Cubist approach to composition: an informal geometry that holds the scene together. It is important to remember, of course, that these powerful works, demonstrated an idea of love that was, in 1960s Britain, against the law. These are images painted with

courage, and a sense of what freedom is really about. The early career of David Bomberg was dominated by Cubism. The artist developed his own language that was poised between Futurism and Abstraction, idioms that spouted from the Cubist root. In his later life, when he returned to a very different representational approach, with landscapes and portraits that often had a dark, melancholic, anxious spirit to them, his work still never wholly lost his earlier Cubist formality.

Frank Auerbach is interesting in this respect. In some ways his art pulls in everything that has been discussed so far. More than any other post-War artist, in Auerbach, the paint itself seems to become part of the subject-matter: an amazing alchemy is always at work in the depths and ploughed furrows of material. There is a constant presence of a secular reality in his work, regardless of how he chooses to depict his subjects. In *Head of Helen Gillespie* (1962) for example, we immediately feel the resonance of a specific person; in *Mornington Crescent* (2004), we are in a specific place, bathed in enthusiastic sunshine. Clearly, this is post-Cubist art of the very highest order, but it also calls on the heritage of Courbet's Realism, and perhaps it shows an awareness of the darkness of late Sickert.

A new idea emerged in the middle of the Cubist revolution. The poet Guillaume Apollinaire is credited with inventing the word 'surreal'. What he meant by it, and interestingly, how his friend Picasso understood it, was rather different from how it came to be used. For Apollinaire, 'surreal' described art that could go beyond and above seen reality: 'sur' is the French for 'over', or 'above'. It implied an exploration that started in the materiality of existence, and pushed past this into another realm. By scrutinizing the world with a poet's eye, it was possible to make something more fundamentally real than what we can observe around us.

There is something of this original concept of the surreal in Jonathan Leaman's practice I think. In a description of how he created his epic work *Memorial to the Feeding Chain* (2001), for example, he recounted how he was perched in the cliffs above Nanjulan Harbour in Cornwall. While there, he became "convulsed by a force of inspiration". He obsessively made studies, producing over eighty drawings, many in considerable levels of detail. These provided the imagery of the painting, a craggy, detailed cliff face, with the sea lapping at its base, and dozens of unexplained objects: a tin of corned beef, cherries, bacon, a crown, columns, sheets, hats, a ladder, and people in various disturbing forms of activity. Like many of his works, it has a simultaneity to it, in which, without explanation, beauty and fear rub shoulders. Of *Memorial to the Feeding Chain*, he asks a key question; "Did I see this?" and answers, "probably not". In *Corronach* (1997), a youngish person in full body armour lies in a field deep with flowers. Is he – or she – asleep? Most certainly not: *Corronach* is a Scottish Gaelic term that refers to the songs sung when someone has died.

Just behind the corpse, a heaped pile of mainly 19th and early 20th century furniture inexplicably fills the middle distance. The anachronism is interesting, as the young knight and the furniture belong in different ages, unless we see this as someone dressed up as a knight, as the Victorians often did, and who somehow died in this fin de siècle situation. But the whole scene doesn't feel anything other than of our times, regardless of the evidence of different periods the artist has given us. The poetry of this image is in the fact that it feels to be in the now, in a contrary situation that isn't of the past.

Richard Barrett is an American painter based in New York. His work isn't easy to pin down. Perhaps the most recurrent thread running through his career has been to do with people in urban, inhabited space. More precisely, he has spent decades exploring the symbolic nuances of the everyday, of the foibles of leisure and pleasure in the modern world. Underpinning this is the theme of isolation, of individual cognition in relation to the outside world. Much in the manner in which Edward Hopper might give us a street, a bar, a building, and then populate it with a few figures, divided-off from one another, and lost in their own inner-selves, Barrett's imagery seems to reduce to one central concern: what it is to be alone. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to describe it as the inevitable alienation of people from each other, no matter how close they might physically be.



Jonathan Leaman

Detail: Memorial to the Feeding Chain
2001 - 02, Oil on Canvas, 175 x 117 cms



Richard Barrett

6th Avenue

1997 - 99, Oil on Canvas, 89 x 71 cms

The quiet melancholy that pervades Barrett's work comes from somewhere else as well. In all his work, we wonder what the depicted characters are up to, and why they are there in that form. In *6th Avenue*, for example, the woman in black has an odd, ritualistic demeanour to her, which makes us question what she is there for, and what kind of ritual she is performing. It is in some senses a late manifestation of Symbolism, the movement in art and poetry that reached a peak at the end of the 19th century, and then continued on episodically into the 20th. Fin de siècle Symbolism wasn't about escapism, or inventing worlds that weren't there: *The Lion*, *the Witch*, and *the Wardrobe*, and *Lord of the Rings* weren't the product of Symbolism, but of theologically-driven utopianism. Symbolism was an attempt to restructure what we see, to generate magic from the material conditions around us. Poets like Charles Baudelaire, or later Stephan Mallarmé, took things they saw in front of them, and they made them into something else. In some senses it is a kind of situationism, and it can be felt in the work of Seurat, early Bonnard, and later Di Chirico. In Barratt's *Lake Placid* why are the two women so alike, and what are they waiting for? There is a sense of unknown ritual here. A quiet anxiety pervades this and his street scenes and baseball paintings; as though we are looking at a performance that is just about to start.

Alexander Augustus is part of a new generation of artists working across a range of media, driven by installation work, but who are very much interested in the heritage of the individual disciplines – painting, bronze-casting, woodblock print, metalwork, printed textile, jewellery, dance. His interest in skill-based expression however, is very technologically savvy. He enjoys fusing classic idioms with computer technology and digital media, to create grand, performative installation pieces.



Alexander Augustus

The Dangerous Figure 3

2017, Lost wax Bronze cast, 14.5 x 30 x 15 cms

In this sense, much of his work is an orchestration of ideas and objects, like Christo, Claes Oldenbourg, or the Chapman Brothers. As co-founder of The Bite Back Movement, with Korean artist Seung youn Lee, over the last six years he has exhibited in Berlin, Seoul, Marseilles, and in London at Somerset House and Tate Modern, and in all this work, the underlying themes have been the symbolic relationship of the present to the past, and the position of the individual in the contemporary environment. *The Dangerous Figure* bronzes, give us a young person of our times, alone, isolated, frightened, and frightening, and representative of

disenfranchised youth. The size and format of Renaissance objet d'arts, and made in the same way, the surfaces of these archetypal figures also deliberately reveal the patterning of digital technology.

Their 'hoody' jackets mimicking monk's habits, these youths reference ancient classical works. An archaic standing pose with one foot behind the other; a youth extracting a thorn from his foot, and a dying Gaul: standards of the classical sculpture canon for millennia, here they are again, reminding us of the tragedy and ultimately of the danger to us all of youth unemployment.

Ray Richardson's oeuvre is also about the streets, but from a different perspective. There is a certain quietness to his vision that in some respects has a pedigree at the base of the last century. At the fin de siècle, Eduard Vuillard and Pierre Bonnard were loosely connected to the Nabis Group of Symbolists, and were also labeled Les Intimistes. Intimism: such a good name for these artists, the silent observers of buried emotion, and nuanced, low-key gesture. I have come to think of Richardson this way. If we look at his masterly *Our side of the water* (2012), we are being invited, at first sight, to accept that nothing is happening. We are asked to embrace the ennui of the man staring out into the void, and to embrace the possibility of emptiness. But then, as with Vermeer's *Milkmaid*, we are gently encouraged to see the underlying complexity of what is there. Richardson tells us:

After dawn the river is silent, but with small movements in the
rhythms of the tide. The birds are quiet and the water is as empty
as the sky. It's a time shrouded in loneliness but also with hope.
Knowing the busy day is opening up ahead of us. And not wanting
to strive against the elements that present themselves, we're just
trying instead to get along with the energy that comes our way.
That's the way it is.

This makes one think of W.H. Auden's beautiful observations of the everyday in art and life. In his poem *Musée des Beaux Arts* of 1938, he mused on how painters think, as he walked around the galleries of the Royal Museum of fine Arts, in Brussels. He came to understand that painters begin with what is around them, and was struck, when looking at Bruegel, that no matter what miracles or human traumas might be happening in a scene, the stuff of everyday life stubbornly carries on:

About suffering they were never wrong,
The Old Masters. How well they understood
Its human position; how it takes place
While someone else is eating or opening a window or just
walking dully along...

In other words, there is a quiet beauty in the persistence of everyday life. In Ray Richardson's words, 'that's the way it is'.



Ray Richardson
Our Side of the Water
2012, Oil on Linen, 137 x 127 cms

There is a great deal of exactitude in the work of Phil Harris. In some respects the key aesthetic determinant, especially of his larger-scale works, is bound up in the orchestration of minutiae into larger, consistent wholes. The breath-taking level of detail doesn't fragment the composition. And it is all underpinned by drawing. In 1993, the acerbic and brilliant critic Brian Sewell recognized the fundamental role of drawing in Harris's work: "Beneath the immaculate paint lies drawing, direct onto the canvas almost of Degas' strength and delivery." Marina Vaizey recognized this, and also the fact that his approach didn't detract from his commitment to contemporaneity: "Harris is a genuine, unexpected, formidable talent, grounded in the most ardently traditional technique but with something to say which is totally au courant." A few years back, I was lucky enough to hang the large work *Arizona Bloom* (2014) not long after it was finished, in the exhibition *Reality*, staged at the Sainsbury Centre and the Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool.

The work seemed to throw-off a dry heat. The intensity of the environment the artist had given us has a physical impact. After we have felt the environment, we look at the people depicted. In this case, a man in a red suit, holding a bunch of twigs, poses in such a way as to suggest a mixture of greeting and servility. One notices this in much of the work, large and small. In *Self Portrait at Lago di Pilato*, we feel the cold. The work is heavily about people in particular environments; we are invited to engage with them, and to physically feel what they are experiencing. Among other things, Philip Harris's work is about the nature of empathy.



Philip Harris

Self Portrait at Lago di Pilato
2006 Oil on Linen, 30.5 x 30.5 cms

There is some of this in Chris Stevens too, but a more potent force with him is his predisposition toward candour. There is a deliberate rawness to many of his figures, which make the paintings into a harsh theatre of humanity. It's as though he has gone out among the things he wants to depict, and then captured them in a deliberately simplified format. In his earlier years, he would absorb the imagery of disenfranchised youth by spending time among them: football fans, skinheads, the longterm unemployed. In this sense, his imagery has much in common with Augustus's *Dangerous Figure*. But there is an obsessive intensity to the analysis here: his work has the feel of people trapped on glass-slides, like specimens in a lab, put there not in order to harm or diminish them, but so that we can better see their situation.

Their clothes, jewellery, and tattoos become signifiers for who they are. I asked him why his work focuses on this harshness: "because life is often not anything else. I am really privileged, and have a nice life, but there are a lot of people out there who don't have a chance, and we aren't making it any easier for them". Sentiments that echo Gustave Courbet. In *Everything is Folly*, or *Twila looking right in the Brewery Tap*, both of this year, actual people are trying to get on with actual lives. At the same time, his larger compositions are often collaged in their feel; disparate and even contradictory components are brought together, seemingly without explanation, like the man and the horse in *C.I.A Ros(e)*. Echoes of early Hockney here. The elements are pulled in from external reality, but after that the painting becomes an arena driven not by direct observation, but the artist's approach to composition:

Its about a process, an evolution, from the first moments, when you don't know what it is going to be, and then this layering of ideas, of images, and then you arrive at a moment when it could be finished, when the ideas and images have gelled. It is only then that the narrative appears, and it is often by accident.

A group of artists then, operating in very different ways, in a number of contexts, but with this in common: they are looking at reality, and trying to make poetry with it. Isolation, harshness, candour, fear, quietness, sur-reality: in one way or another over the last century, artists have started with what is there, and strived to go beyond it. And the evidence in this exhibition is that in art, reality is undiminished.

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