

NOTES ON MY PRACTICE

The collection of notes below has been written during my Master's degree at The Glasgow School of Art (GSA). They reflect my forays into concepts of time, memory and absence and how I investigate them through painting, photography and film.

The use of Photographs in my practice

I have always used photographs in my work as a way of collecting material for my paintings. I use the camera both as a sketchbook of my travels but also as a visual aid. The use of photographs, either my own or found, has often acted as a catalyst for the composition of the piece. When I commenced my Mlit in Fine Art Practice at the GSA, I considered myself primarily a painter, with photographs subordinate to the practice of painting. However, my newly expanded interest in the moving image has led me to rethink my approach to the still. This new line of work reflects a theoretic concern as I committed a significant amount of time in 2012 to the study of the work of video and photo artists such as Doug Aitken and David Claerbout.¹

My initial interest in photography was sparked by a very personal project. Having always suffered with poor memory, last winter I undertook the task of revisiting old photographs with the hope of triggering some recollection of past events. This personal mission has subsequently filtered into much of my work and ultimately led to the script of my short film *Circular Madness*.

Photographs play a significant part in this story. I use them both as a visual device to advance the narrative right through the film but also as emblematic motifs around which the plot of the film pivots. Acting as instances of remembrance they help to highlight the passage of time, yet as Raymond Bellour² states "...at precisely this moment the temporal flow of the film is arrested, its momentum suspended, albeit briefly". At this point, at which "*the film seems to freeze, to suspend itself*", the viewer is made aware of two kinds of temporality: that which belongs to the film and the intrinsic forward movement of the narrative, and that which is the time of viewing the film and which carries the phenomenological force of the here and now. On a similar theme, David Green³ had the following view: "*Paradoxically, it is the photograph caught on film that directs our attention to the present – even as it functions within the narrative of the film in accordance with its predominant cultural forms to symbolize the past. The presence of the photograph has the effect of uncoupling the spectator from the image. The photo becomes a stop within a stop, a freeze-frame within a freeze-frame. Two kinds of time blend together but without becoming confused*".

The use of the still within the movie allowed me to experiment with different temporalities. Photographs are irredeemably linked to the past (there and then) but also to the present (here and now). Within the flow of the film, they also proclaim the future as the viewer is constantly propelled forward, following the continuous tide of images. The use of stills in the context of the moving image explicitly helped me to explore the idea of time and memory and how the two merge into each other. Without time, memory cannot exist. Without memory, one becomes the prisoner of an illusory experience. This is the theme I explore within the short: falling out of time, the woman is unable to grasp the link with her past or the outside world. In other words, she is condemned to madness. She is fated to a future that has already happened.

The use of old stills in the movie reawakened my interest in photography both as a means to blur the line between reality and fiction (a point that I shall develop further) but also as a means to further explore the idea of time through tangible artworks.

A snapshot represents a very brief moment in time. This instant, however, cannot wholly reflect the subjective time surrounding an event. Interested in how a moment becomes immortalized and goes on to endure in one's mind, I started exploring ways to reinvest time back in to photographs. This led me to experiment with photopolymer etchings and embossment. The different stages that the photo-polymer etching requires: transferring the photograph onto acetate, then onto the photo-polymer and finally printed onto paper – all of this places emphasis on the process. Each step requires the investment of time but also results in a subtly distorted image, thus starting the assignation of a new meaning to it. In this respect, the medium echoes what constitutes a memory. While we like to believe that memories offer a true reflection of

¹ David Claerbout, *the time that remains*, Parasol Unite, London, 31 May – 11 August 2012

² *The Pensive Spectator*, *Wide Angle* 9, n°1 (1987)

³ David Claerbout, *Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus und Kunstbau München*, 2004

the past, they are in fact malleable and constantly influenced by present events in order to fit one's personal story. In a way, something similar happens to a photograph that I put through the etching process: details get cast adrift. As the work become more ambiguous and anonymous, it can be re-appropriated by the viewer who in turn can project onto them their own reminiscence. A similar interest drove my experience with embossment. I positioned the metal plate in the acid for an extended period. The acid began to eat away at the metal, the procession of time leaving a strong dent in the plate, which in turn paradoxically produces a very ethereal print.

Reality versus Fiction

Photographs are endowed by a presumption of truth. As Susan Sontag expresses in *On Photography* "a picture may distort but there is always a presumption that something exists or did exist". It acts as a proof that a given thing happened. Roland Barthes holds a similar position when he says about photographs: "What I see is not a memory, an imagination, a reconstitution but reality in a past state".

I became very interested in the idea of how fiction versus reality applies to memory and time. The photopolymer etchings are derived from photographs, which themselves are derived from the movie. They have a very 'real' look. Their nostalgic feeling is reinforced by the super 8 effect I superposed on them, which assigns to them the authoritative look that the past confers on old photographs. They act as a sort of memento mori, reminders of our vulnerability and death and but also an invitation to a certain sentimentality.

The photo-etchings can be viewed as photographs in their own right and as autonomous pieces of work, summoning up the real by virtue of their mechanical nature, as André Bazin⁴ puts it. Taken from a fictional piece, they reinvest the realm of reality or at least creates their own reality. As with memories where time and space cease being one single reality but gradually transform into a fiction, here fiction gradually transforms into reality. I titled this series of etchings *Reconstructed memories*. Effectively all memories are reconstructions, affected by a subjective sense of recollection. Taken from a fictional work, the photo-etchings develop their own reality to the point of becoming autonomous pieces, which in turn can be read or interpreted by the beholder's own subjectivity.

While welcoming this blurred boundary between reality and fiction that the photographs bring when taken out of the movie, I cannot deny that the photographs still do depict something that already exists. Paintings enable me to explore this territory yet further. As with cinema, wherein the author can consider himself as the creator of an unconditional reality, quite literally his own world, I view painting as a way to bring the viewer into another reality born from my imagination. I continue to use elements of figuration within each piece, for example referring to a place or a road, however, the suggestive quality of the work leaves a significant portion open to the beholder's own vision and interpretation. With a movie, the viewer largely observes events already shaped, whereas in a painting incorporating abstraction, he has to shape his own narrative.

Absence versus Presence

Another recurrent theme in my work is that of absence. This has been a constant preoccupation of my paintings, which while ostensibly devoid of people, through their titles call out for the invisible narrator whose absence is strongly felt. The use of film and photography has enabled me to probe the concept further. In the installation for the degree show I deliberately instigated the use of photography in relation to my film in order to emphasize the idea of presence-absence.

Although the film points to a distinct absence via the narrative and the two main protagonists are never revealed, it convinces the viewer of their actual presence through its ability to render movement. As Christian Metz highlights "the film is able to convince the viewer of the actual presence of something because of its ability to render movement". Barthes noted that photography differs from cinema in the sense that in photography something has posed in front of the tiny hole and has remained there forever while in cinema something has passed in front of the same tiny hole. The pose is swept away; each new image cancels its predecessor. To quote David Green talking about Claerbout's work "on the one hand we have movement that not only is present but also endows the image with 'presence' and, on the other hand, we have a moment frozen in time and an immobility that is lodged within an ever-receding past that can only testify to an absence".

4 André Bazin, What is Cinema?

For Robbe-Grillet, “*the essential characteristic of the (film) image is its presentness*”, and that “*by its very nature what we see on the screen is in the act of happening, we are given the gesture itself, not an account of it*”. We have to distinguish here between ‘presentness’ as in the sense of the present tense, and that which we experience as being present in real-time life. The film reveals to us actions or events that we take to be immediately present. However, if there is a convergence between screening time and real time, the two never get confused.

Taken in the flow of the movie, we are constantly propelled forward while a photograph refers to the image's finitude. There is a pathos irremediably associated with photography. My choice of printing the photographic work through the etching press, one of the oldest ways of printing associated with black & white ink and semi-abstract images bearing traces of human activity but devoid of people, reinforces the sense of melancholia, loss and absence. The photopolymer etchings are more like the evidence that someone has been there or might have been there but they can only testify to someone's absence at the time it was taken.

My paintings investigate this same idea of absence. They often reference the road or elements of landscapes seen through mist or through a light reminiscent of dawn or dusk when people are rarely out. They appeal indirectly or directly through their titles such as *My Dreams are Like Your Waking Hours*, *That Day*, *It Was Crowded In My Head* or *La Nuit Sera Blanche et Noire*⁵ to someone's presence but whose absence in representation creates a psychological tension in the canvas. In the series of painting presented for the degree show, I deliberately created ambiguous canvases. Displayed in the same room as the movie – where the viewer is given the narrative I want him to read – he has to construct for the paintings his own narrative. The use of different mediums allows me to articulate the pieces in such a way that a story is told by the body of work and not through the autonomous paintings. It creates a dynamic between circularity and linearity, between stillness and narrative.

Viewing times in the artwork

The use of different media allows me to play around with the viewing time of each individual medium.

Movies are a temporal art. The filmmaker sets the viewing time of a film. The images are perceived only as fast or as slowly as the editing permits. My short movie follows a chronometrical order and is measured in abstract units we call minutes, seconds, etc. In this instance it lasts exactly 5 minutes and 21 seconds. The viewer can decide to remain watching but will always be constrained by the time boundary that I applied to the movie.

On the other hand, the reading time for a painting or a photograph is up to the observer. Whereas film is a process, a flow in time, a still freezes a moment in a life. It allows the viewer to linger over a single moment as long as they like. The photograph nevertheless still holds a relation to time that is chronometrical as it undeniably refers to a moment located in the past. However, it also opens the door to a psychological or subjective time that does not move at a regular pace.

If I stretch the argument further, I believe that painting is the only medium that really transcends time. A photograph can never transcend its subject as a painting can, nor can it ever transcend the visual itself, which is the ultimate goal of modernist painting. A painting tries to capture the essence of something and in that sense becomes timeless.

Materiality versus immateriality

Whereas film takes an intangible form, a flow of images projected or passing on a screen, paintings and photographs in their most common form are tangible objects. My curiosity lies in photography's atomisation of time, its freezing of a singular moment isolated and abstracted from the temporal flow, which can find a concrete form in a thing that can be held in the hand.

Instead of a palpable memory, the photograph becomes a single trace on a piece of paper. In my choice of presenting the photo-etchings, I specifically wanted to emphasize their presence as objects, framing them in

⁵ “*Ne m'attends pas ce soir, car la nuit sera noire et blanche*”, were the last lines written by Gérard de Nerval, a 19th century French poet, before he hung himself.

a way they can be looked at, moved around, and ultimately taking a three dimensional form. The viewer passes from the object here and now to its elsewhere in the past when looking at the image. It reinforces the dichotomies of absence and presence, past and present, proximity and distance.

Unicity versus Reproducibility

This is the core issue I started addressing in my work and that I want to develop here in relation to painting and photography.

Barthes justly noted in *Camera Lucida* that “*The photograph reproduces to infinity what has occurred only once. The photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially*”. A photograph is a trace of the real, a vestige of its subject. It resembles something real but it is no more than a resemblance that can be endlessly repeated. In a way, photography creates a duplicate world, a reality in second degree. Walter Benjamin thought that a photograph, being a mechanically reproduced object, could not have a genuine presence, which he considered the defining characteristic of a work of art. For him, even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be.

While I do believe photographs can have a genuine presence, specifically in the way photographic work can be curated today or shown in a specific context, they obviously greatly differ from paintings where each object is unique, a handmade original. A painting is not a duplication of the real but an interpretation of the real. Whereas the photographer discloses something that is already there, the painter constructs. In that sense, his work is closer to that of the filmmaker's, which Tarkovsky defines as sculpting in time: “*the filmmaker, from a 'lump of time' made up of an enormous, solid cluster of living facts, cuts off and discards whatever he does not need, leaving only what is to be an element of the finished film, what will prove to be integral to the cinematic image*”.

I see my paintings as cinematic. I try to impart to them a feeling of anticipation. I attempt to put the viewer in a position where he wonders about what has just happened and what is about to come. This is probably why I became very interested in the idea of repetition in paintings and commenced this serial work⁶. I tend to progress from the broad view to a detail. Sometimes the detail can become so focussed that it becomes semi-abstract, thus introducing an implicit temporal dimension.

The imperfect repetition in my paintings highlights their similarities but also their variance. Viewed as a series, a sequence, they create a narrative. I believe that paintings can often end up containing more narrative than film. Because they remain ambiguous and open-ended, the beholder has to create his own story. In that sense, it enables him to enter another world that allows him to look at the work and beyond it.

Conclusion

While painting remains at the core of my practice, my intention is to continue working with film and photography. In broadening my range of media, I believe that I can better confront the common linear conception of time through my work. I will continue to explore the intricacies of chronometrical time versus psychological or subjective time. I intend to allow to emerge from my work an alternative conception of time, where time is no longer a succession of now-points but where a multiplicity of perspectives coexist as in Borges' labyrinth of forking paths.

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⁶ Such as *That Day, It Was Crowded in My Head* or *La Nuit Sera Blanche et Noire*, abstracted from *It Was One of Those Deserted Afternoons that Seemed Like Dawns*.

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Degree Show Installation, Glasgow School of Art, September 2012



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