Sensible Signs: Pictures and Not Painting After Conceptual Art

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Sensible Signs:
Pictures and Not Painting
After Conceptual Art

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Abstract

This PhD by published work contributes to debates regarding aesthetics versus art history and theory. It provides a contextual review of anti-aesthetic legacies of pop and conceptual art developing from an understanding of modern art as de-humanized. The research is concerned with *why*, *how* and *what* to paint after conceptual art and proceeds by making a distinction between *postconceptual* painting and a *return* to painting. These themes are tested in the first of two of the author's solo exhibitions titled 'Four Circle Paintings'. The show consisted of lo-fi mechanical mono-chrome *copies* of gestural painting and promotes a conclusion that the label postconceptual painting is applied to artworks that are representations of painting and as such are not *real* painting. The thesis argues that in its urgency to distinguish itself from (authentic) painting, postconceptual painting demonstrates a contradictory appeal to aesthetics, which prevents the artwork from becoming merely a sign. Therefore, at risk of the same return to painting, the postconceptual painter values sensibility with the intention that the "fake" painting——or sign——is vexed by a 'real' aesthetic.

In an attempt to circumnavigate the requirement to validate medium, the second exhibition titled 'Handmade Colour Pictures' argues for a categorical shift from the making of 'paintings' to 'pictures'. The show consisted of eight mid-sized works, using painting conventions—oil paint on primed linen stretched over rectangular frames—to produce images, derived from a hunting theme, that brought attention to their own pictorial conditions. The author, having outlined visual attention as a premeditated motivation, concludes that the "there" and "not there" quality of the picture that must be consciously switched between to see it as either image or object, provides an "*experience* of meaning" that is significant for the artwork in its distinction from an anti-aesthetic dominance of rationality.

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I declare that all the material contained in this thesis is my own work

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Four Circle Paintings

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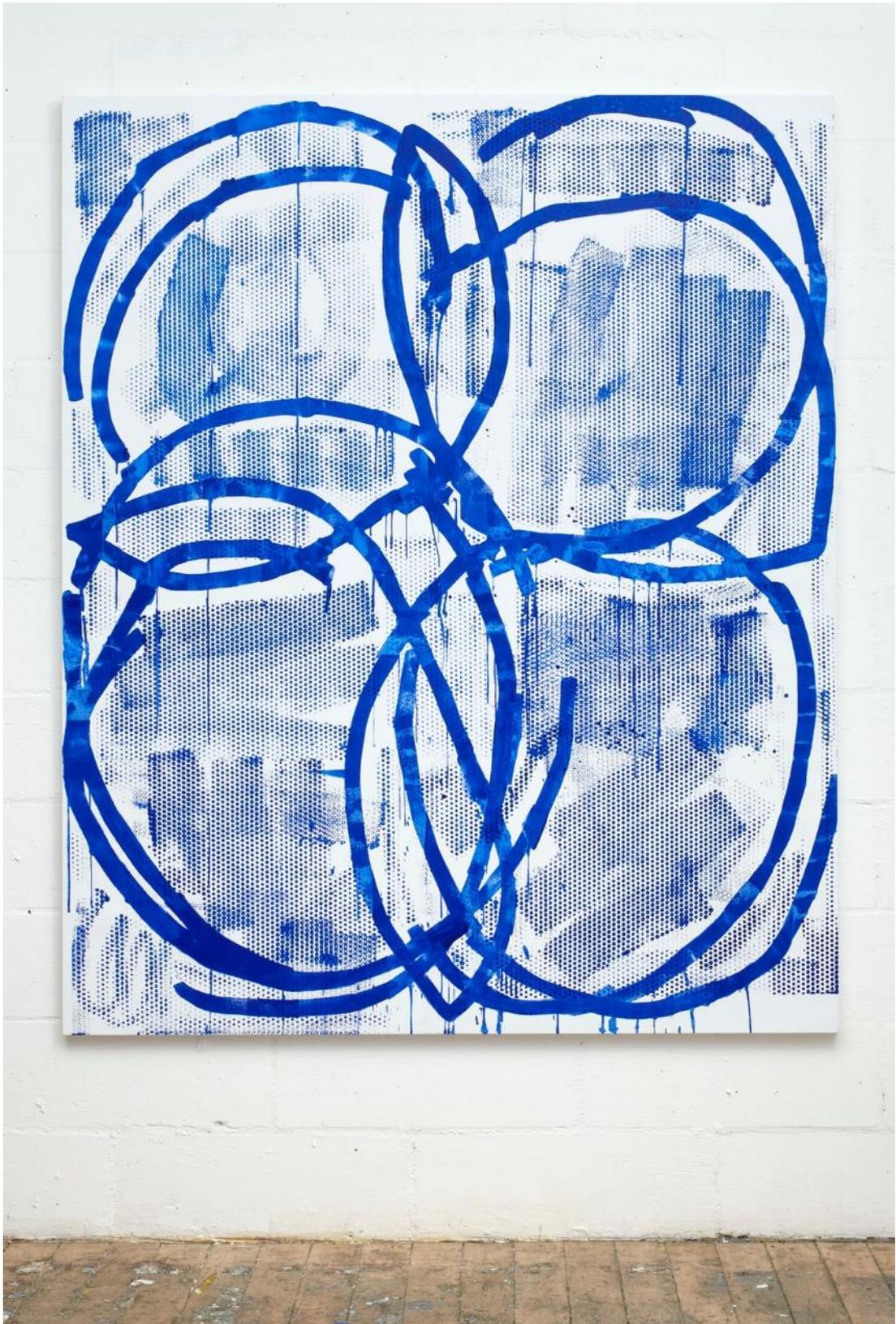
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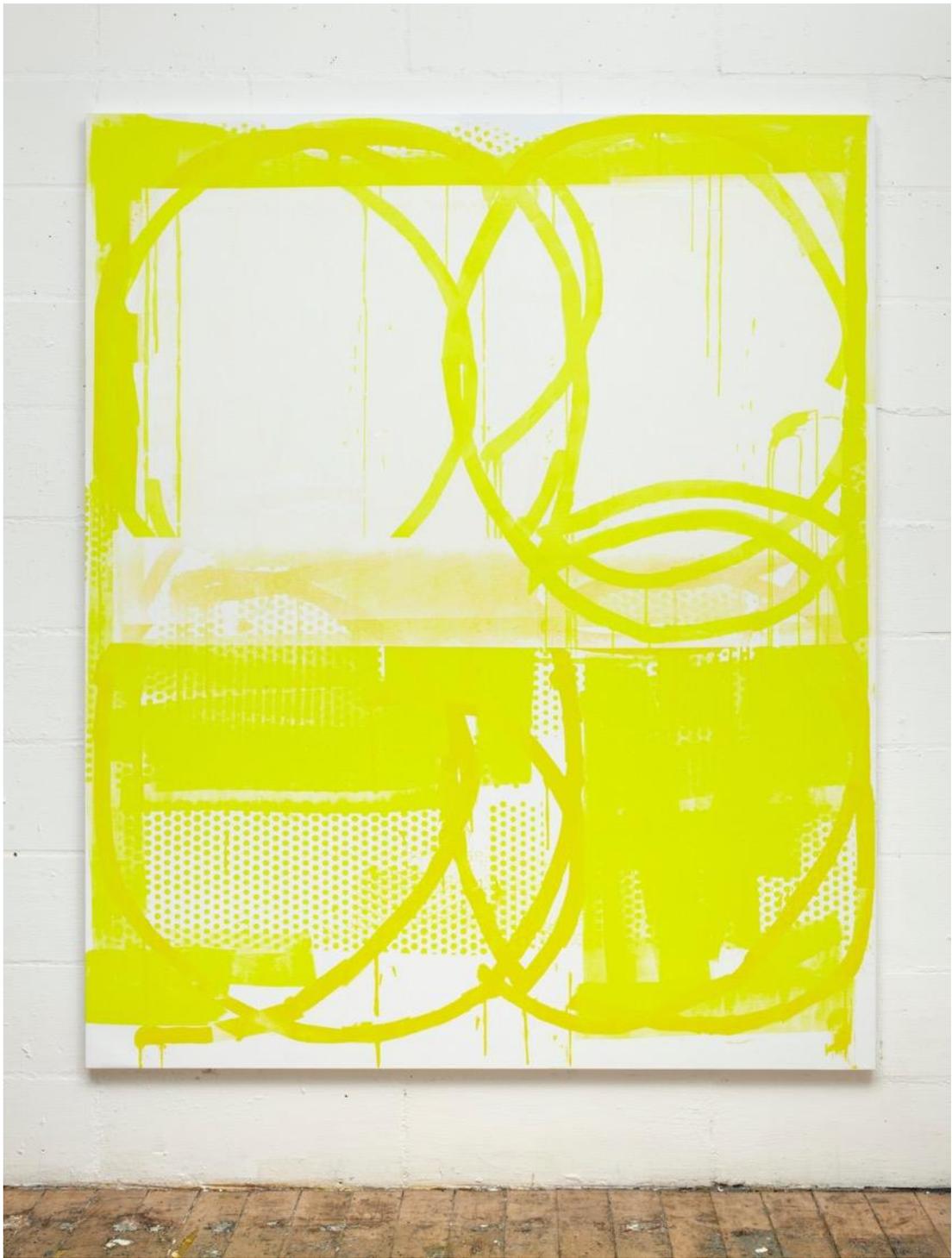
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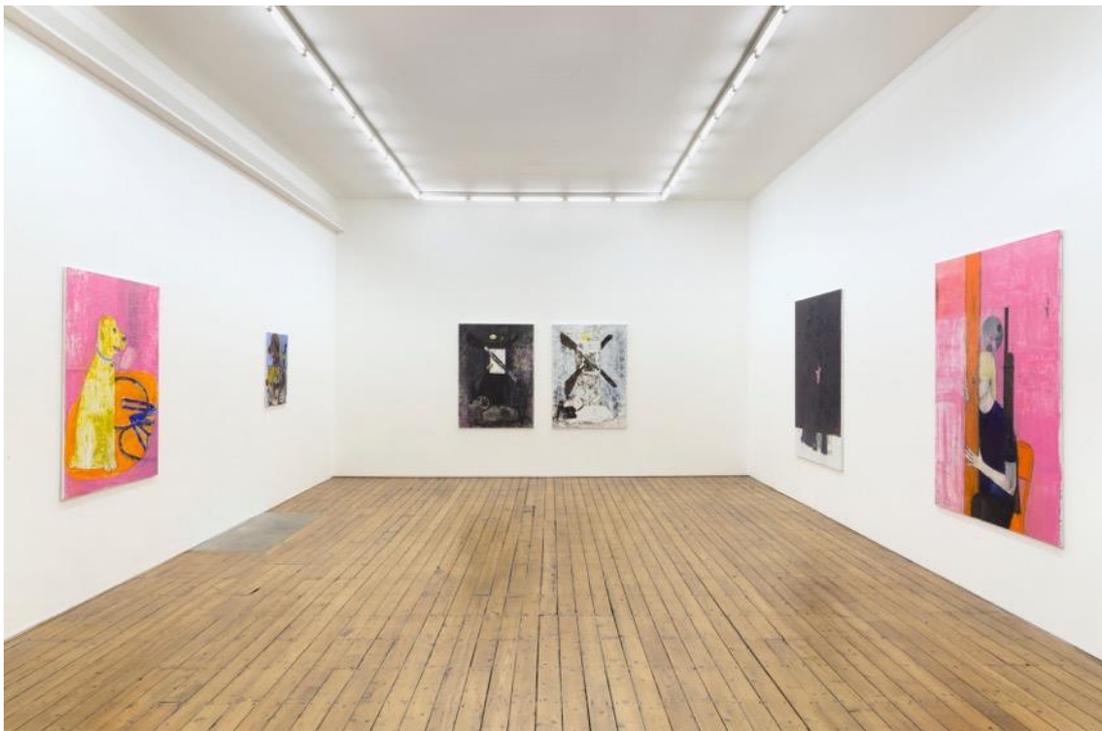
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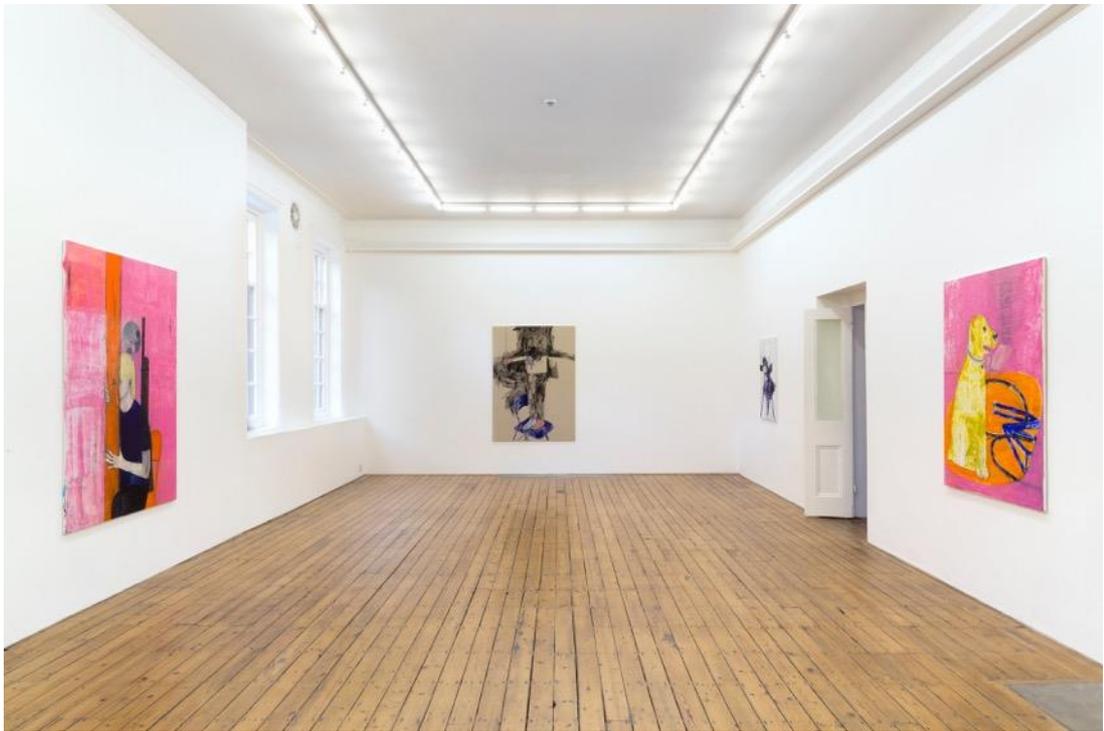
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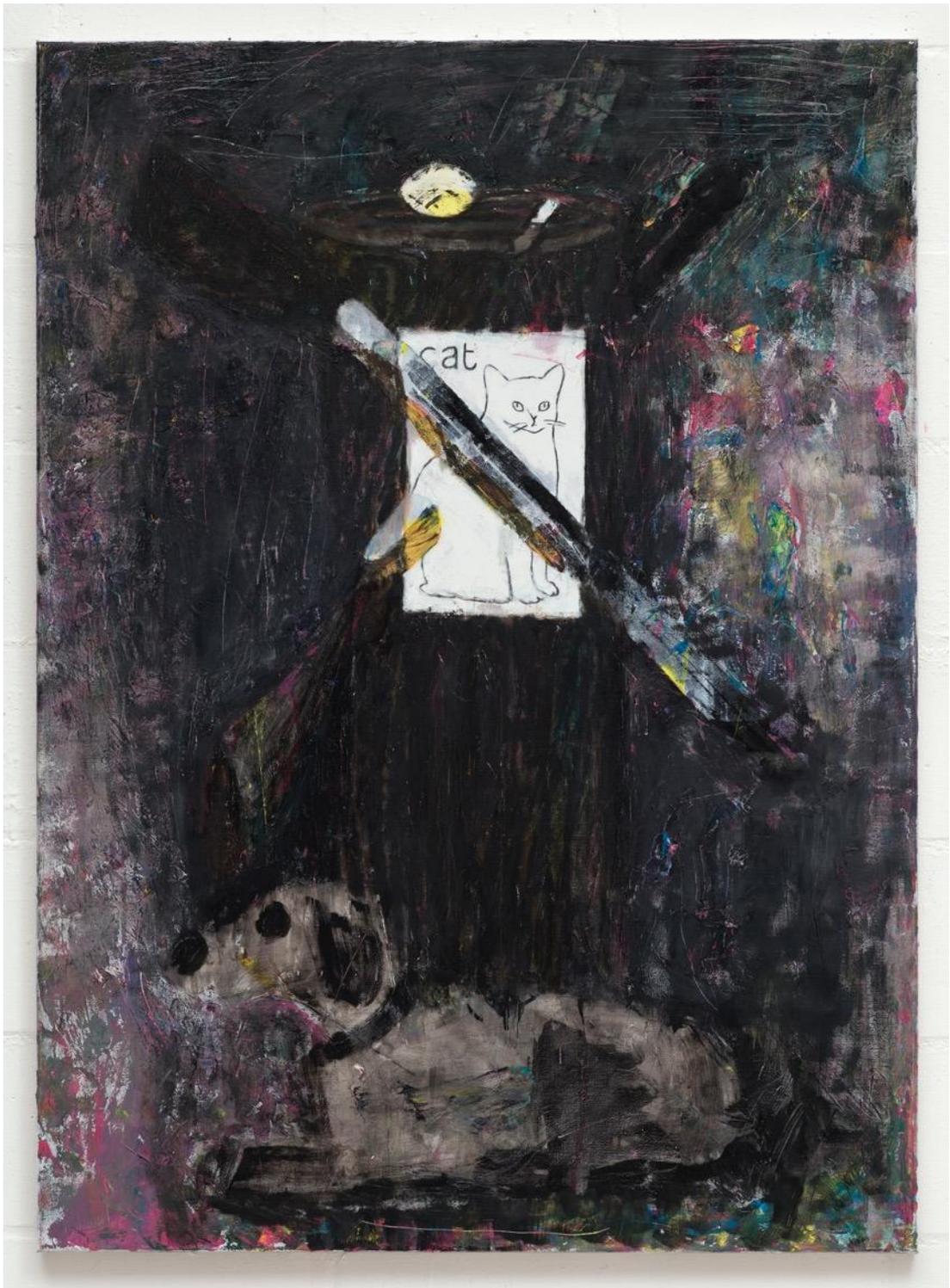
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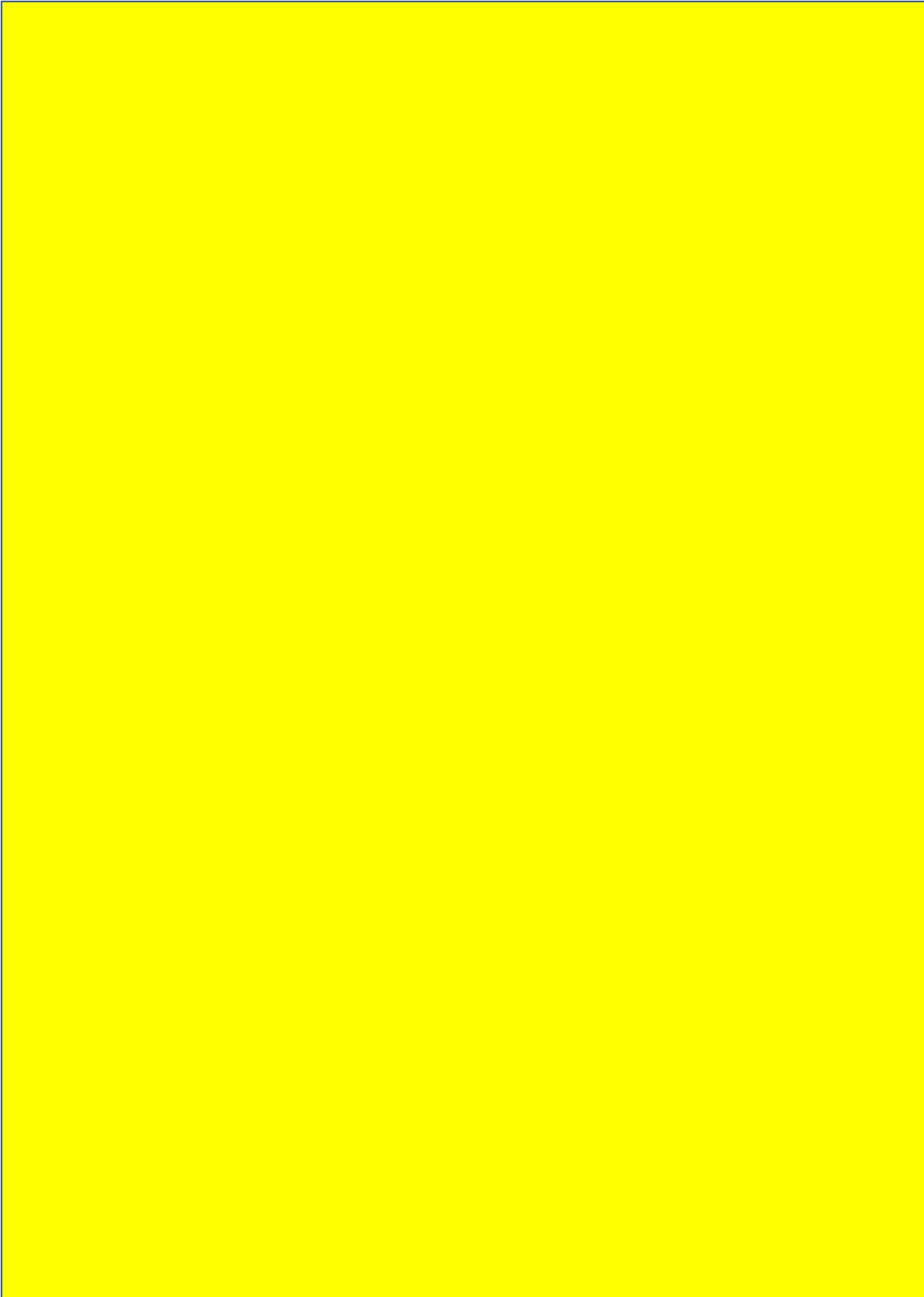
Part II

Introduction

"Painting" is not an end*, but a* means.[1]

Robert Smithson 1967

The paintings look real, but they are fake.[2]

Thomas Lawson 1981

I'm fucking painting, I'm fucking painting, I'm fucking painting, I'm fucking painting.[3]

Paul McCarthy *Painter* 1995

This PhD by Publication develops from four 'paintings' made by the author in 2010
and exhibited under the title *Four Circle Paintings,* and eight 'pictures' subsequently
made and exhibited in 2016, with the title *Handmade Colour Pictures*. The analysis
traces a distinction between a so-called 'return' to painting and, if it can be

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[1] Robert Smithson, 'Towards the Development of an Air Terminal Site', in Robert Smithson: The
Collected Writings. Ed. Jack Flam, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996, p.60.
[2] Thomas Lawson, 'Last Exit: Painting' reprinted in *Art After Modernism,* Eds. Wallis and Tucker, The
New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984, p. 160.
[3] Paul McCarthy, (1995) 'Painter' *YouTube,* available from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-
fw4gYWkXgo [accessed 25 March 2018].

separated, what constitutes postconceptual painting, before finally considering a shift of category from paintings to pictures.

Painting, despite its infamous death at some point during the 1970s, appears to continue, but is this in name only, has 'painting' in fact ceased?[4] Art since this historic, conceptual turn has been understood as both postconceptual and postmedium, that is realised from ideas and not bound by the specifics of medium.[5] Conceptual art reveals painting as an ideology in the sense that it is a set of values reflecting a historic domination by a particular group which serves to render it as natural and universal, whilst concealing its intentional construction.

Through a studio based practice, using conventional painting materials (oil paint, primed linen and rectangular stretcher frames) and for simplicity sake, the label of painter, I have set out to interrogate what painting amounts to after the pivotal break from the constraints of self-contained medium based categories. Arguably, when every artwork is destined to be digitally transposed into code, medium based categories cease to make sense at all and to comprehend the diversity of links that construct a work as art "we must discard the concept of *medium* (along with its mirror image, the postmedium)".[6] I contend that if painting continues, it does so on a bi-polar spectrum: at one extreme, as a 'return', an insistently humanist form,

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[4] Marcel Duchamp of course, is credited with enacting this 'death' through the 1913 readymade and his final painting *Tu m'* of 1918. Rodchenko's *Pure Red Colour, Pure Yellow Colour, Pure Blue Colour,* Oil on canvas, 1921 alongside his affirmation "It's all over. Basic colours. Every plane is a plane, and there is to be no more representation" is also of significance. See *Art Since 1900*, Hal Foster et al, Thames and Hudson, 2004, p. 184. The death of painting comes in a variety of forms; the simplest is the photographic replacement of painting's prior mimetic function. Classic death of painting texts includes: Douglas Crimp 'The End of Painting' *On the Museum's Ruins*, MIT Press, 1993, Donald Judd 'Specific Objects' 1965, and Joseph Kossuth 'Art After Philosophy' 1969, both reprinted in, *Art in Theory 1900–2000*, eds. Harrison and Wood, Blackwell Publishing, 2003 p. 824 & p. 852 respectively. See also the catalogue *Endgame*, The Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, 1986 in particular Yve-Alain Bois, 'Painting: The Task of Mourning' reprinted in *Painting as Model*, MIT Press, 1990.
[5] Rosalind Krauss has called the collapse of medium specificity, an ontological *cave-in*. See Rosalind Krauss *Reinventing the Medium* Critical Inquiry, Winter 1999. The boundaries of medium specifics have collapsed or 'expanded' to such an extent that we could ask, 'whether medium as such is even possible in the' postconceptual context? see Michael Newman 'Medium and Event in the Work of Tacita Dean' in Clarrie Wallis (ed.) *Tacita Dean*, Tate Gallery, 2001. Re 'postconceptual' see Peter Osborne *Anywhere or Not at All*, Verso, 2013. Osborne insistently defines contemporary art as postconceptual (not vice versa and notably not interchangeable).
[6] David Joselit, *After Art*, Princeton University Press, 2013, p. 2.

casual with art history; and at the other extreme, postconceptual, sub-labelled

painting and problematically de-humanised.[7]

Postconceptual painting re-states the conditions of painting and does not make

medium based assumptions. 'Painting' is its ontological subject.[8] The 'return'

painter by contrast, has the advantage of a less agonistic method. Not requiring

constant legitimation of their choice of painting, allowing them to proceed with

other ambitions, the achievement of which may provide retrospective medium

validation. However, painting as a 'return' risks *re*situating painting as an agency

that 'naturally' authorises the work made with the medium as art. In accordance

with the very premise of conceptual art, the *return* painting cannot be clearly

distinguished because all art is conceptual, even painting that is painterly or

expressionist and ignorant of conceptual art's significance.[9] However, I would insist

that the very notion of a return, repositioning painting as art by default of medium,

is in denial of any historic conceptual turn and must therefore be positioned as

opposite to postconceptual painting.[10] That is painting in accord with conceptual

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[7] I use *bi-polar* intentionally to signify the relative swings of mood of the 'return' painter who typically has an elevated mood (at least in relation to painting but not necessarily contemporary art) to the melancholia associated with the postconceptual (death of painting) painter. There are innumerable 'returns' to painting; from Barbara Rose's 1979 exhibition *American Painting: The Eighties*, to Charles Saatchi's 2005 exhibition *The Triumph of Painting*. The most cited text on painting as a *return* is Benjamin H. D. Buchloh 'Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression' reprinted in *Art After Modernism*, eds. Wallis and Tucker, New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984. The label of *return* is commonly used, see for example Jason Gaiger 'Post-conceptual Painting' in *Themes in Contemporary Art,* eds. Perry and Wood, Yale, 2004, p. 92, and Peter Osborne 'Modernism, Abstraction, and the Return to Painting' in *Thinking Art: Beyond Traditional Aesthetics*, eds. Benjamin and Osborne, ICA, 1991. Postconceptual painting is also reliant today on a recent market, arguably equally ignorant of art history but in thrall to a self-conscious package, see Jerry Saltz, *Zombies on the Walls: Why Does So Much New Abstraction Look the Same?* http://www.vulture.com/2014/06/why-new-abstract-paintings-look-the-same.html - accessed June 2016.

[8] In accord with Peter Osborne, "I use the term ontology here quite generally to refer to any discourse about forms and modes of being." Peter Osborne *Anywhere or Not at All*, Verso, 2013, p. 224, Note 3. For an ontology of painting see Douglas Fogle 'The Trouble with Painting' in *Painting at the Edge of the World* Walker Art Centre, Minneapolis, 2001. And Barry Schwabsky 'Object or Project? A Critic's Reflections on the Ontology of Painting' in *Contemporary Painting in Context,* eds. Petersen et al, Museum Tusculanum Press, 2010.

[9] For an argument against the expressive/conceptual binary see Isabelle Graw, 'Conceptual Expression: On Conceptual Gestures in Allegedly Expressive Painting, Traces of Expression in Proto-Conceptual Works, and the Significance of Artistic Procedures' in *Art After Conceptual Art,* eds. Alexander Alberro and Sabeth Buchmann, MIT Press, 2006.

[10] The "return to painting . . . [is] regressive in principle . . . because it seems to reinstate a traditional notion of artwork as an autonomously meaningful object" Peter Osborne, 'Modernism, Abstraction, and the Return to Painting' in Benjamin and Osborne (eds.) *Thinking Art: Beyond Traditional Aesthetics*, ICA, 1991, p. 70. This is also the point David Joselit raises to introduce his influential essay 'Painting Beside Itself', quoting Martin Kippenberger: "Simply to hang a painting on the wall and say

art's effectual destabilising of traditional mediums and their assumed notions of autonomy.

In the writing that follows I begin chapter one by outlining my research questions; namely *how, why* and *what* to paint since conceptual art. These questions equally take the form of *what is postconceptual painting?* Chapter two sets the postconceptual context typified by: a collapse of medium specificity, an anti-aesthetic, and a postmodern pluralism that, contrary to postmedium, has allowed for a painting 'return'. I contend that if an artwork exists simply as 'painting', that is not problematised or critiqued as painting, it is most likely a 'return' and not postconceptual. Postconceptually, painting has lost its status as self-evident; as Jan Verwoert writes:

> Since painting today is realised today within the horizon of
> conceptual practice, it must be grounded in a context that is no
> longer its own. That means, on the one hand, that an appeal to the
> specifics of medium as its sole justification is no longer possible.
> [Concluding:] painting can no longer just be painting.*11*

Painting therefore, is a form of conceptual art, because all art is first and foremost conceptual. Hence *"[p]ainting* is not an *end,* but a *means."*[12] It follows that an artwork made by the *means* of painting should be received in relation to the diversity of conceptual practices using methods and media not necessarily those of painting. Conceptual artists who use paint are as much painters as conceptual artists who use photography are photographers. In other words, how can we think about artists who paint, in ways equivalent to artists who use photography, who we do not consider or label photographers?[13] Parallel to the stated aims of the conceptual

that it's art is awful. The whole network is important!" David Joselit, 'Painting Beside Itself' *October* 130, Autumn 2009.

[11] Jan Verwoert 'Why are Conceptual Artists Painting Again?' *Afterall* Journal, Autumn/Winter 2005 p. 6 of 7.

[12] Robert Smithson, 'Towards the Development of an Air Terminal Site', p. 60.

[13] The list of conceptual artists using photography is vast: Ed Ruscha, Sherrie Levine, Eleanor Antin, Robert Smithson, Douglas Huebler, Jan Dibbets, Bruce Nauman, Dan Graham, Bas Jan Ader, Vito

artists, postconceptual painting often assumes a position of surrogacy; what a number of artists from the 1980s called 'generic' painting.[14] As Lawson observed, the "paintings look real, but they are fake."[15]

Chapter three outlines the strategies I have used to strive for a practice comparable with other contemporary art, which, as painting, risks a regressive *return* that occupies the status as *an* art in a separate and specialist field, alternate to the horizon of (contemporary) art as postconceptual.[16] The methods I use, partly in common with other artists who problematise painting are: stencilling, what I call a willed withholding, generic painting, and latterly a categorical switch in my own thinking from *painting* to *pictures*.

Chapter four limns the two published outputs of work introduced above: *Four Circle Paintings* (Plates 1–9) which most specifically relates to postconceptual painting; and *Handmade Colour Pictures* (Plates 10–23). The first exhibition, consisted of four canvases, of the same size, each with an all-over pattern of four hand-made circles, rendered exclusively in either red, blue, yellow, or green and made using stencils and sometimes the same stencil from one canvas to the next. The *appearance* of dripping paint (Figs. 1, 2) and a rapid process gives the paintings the look of being unique and spontaneous, but their pre-planned fabrication challenged the notion

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Acconci, Marcel Broodthaers, Sarah Charlesworth, Valie Export, Louise Lawler, to name some. See for example, A. D. Coleman "I'm Not Really a Photographer" (1972) reprinted in *The Last Picture Show*, Walker Art Centre, 2003. Which begins with a quote from Ed Ruscha. "Photography's just a playground for me. I'm not a photographer at all." See also Nancy Foote 'The Anti-Photographers' *Artforum*, 15 September 1976, reprinted in Douglas Fogle, *The Last Picture Show*, Walker Art Centre, 2003, p. 24. "For every photographer who clamors to make it as an artist, there is an artist running a grave risk of turning into a photographer."

[14] This is a *nominalist* strategy of sorts that derives from Duchamp, see Thierry de Duve *Pictorial Nominalism: On Marcel Duchamp's Passage from Painting to the Readymade* (1984) trans Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991). It is applicable to work by a number of artists, such as, Roy Lichtenstein, Marcel Broodthaers, Christopher Wool and Sherrie Levine.

[15] Thomas Lawson, 'Last Exit: Painting' reprinted in *Art After Modernism*, p. 160.

[16] See Barry Schwabsky 'Painting in the Interrogative Mode' in *Vitamin P*, Phaidon, 2007. Schwabsky refers to Jean Luc Nancy who poses the question "Why are there several arts and not just one?" in: Jean Luc Nancy *The Muses*, Stanford University Press, 1994, p.1.
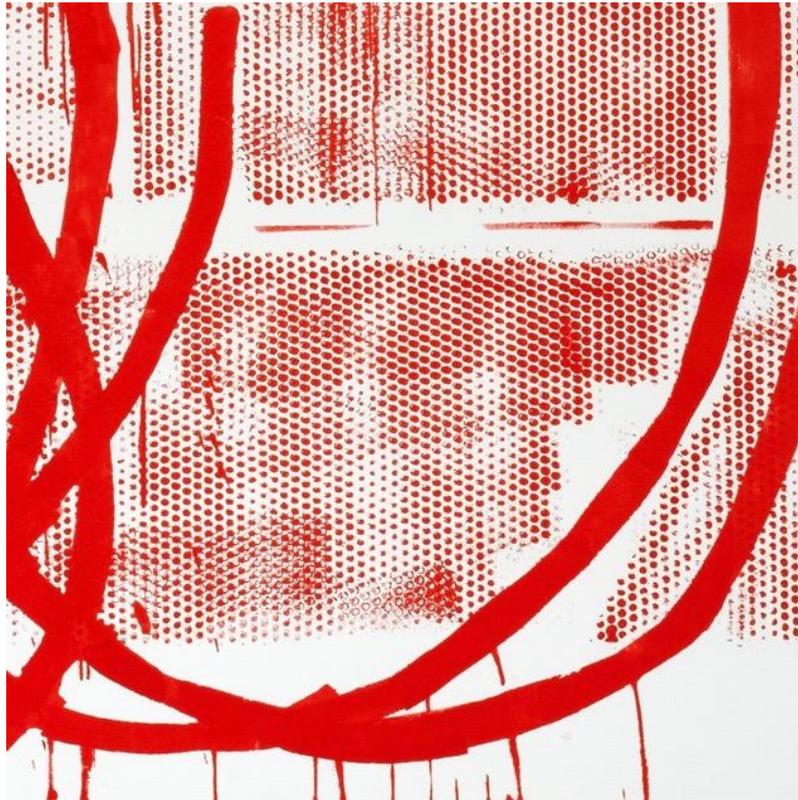
Figure 1. Detail of Plate 6. *Ron Hickman*
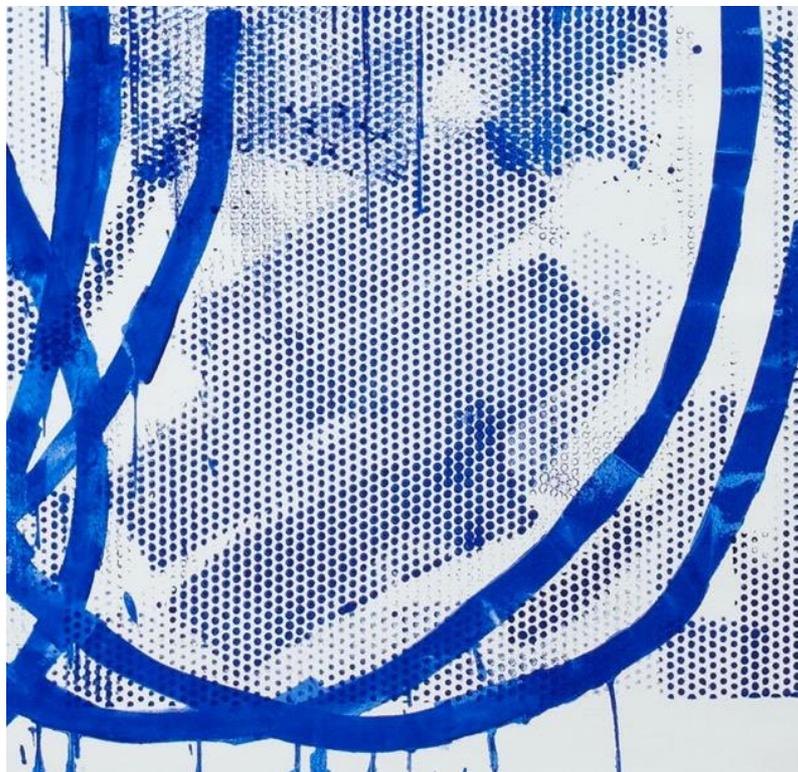
Figure 2. Detail of Plate 7. *Ingrid Pitt*
Images show benday fill and stencilled line with fabricated drips repeated.

that the paintings were 'real'. It is exactly this paradoxical challenge to notions of authenticity, that may signal a painting as postconceptual.

The second exhibition, *Handmade Colour Pictures*, maintained methods from above but attempted to make a categorical switch, away from *painting*, to *pictures*. My focus was to circumnavigate the problems of medium specifics as well as to extend the conceptually derived generic painting through the picture of a picture, or meta picture, in part derived from the *trompe l'œil* genre. Specific subject matter was introduced such as a painting and photography relationship, and comparisons between picture making and hunting, looking and hiding.

I finally conclude by outlining the contributions and arguments my published outputs have reached. For the most part these circulate around an understanding of modern and contemporary art as de-humanised and the confusion painting reveals regarding its distance from anthropomorphism and the human body as subject. It is in fact the body that both validates painting in contradistinction to new media and invalidates it as postconceptual. Hence, despite postconceptual strategies, most notably the artwork as generic, painting consistently relies on an essentially humanist motivation. Such a fall-back—humanist—position, becomes for the postconceptual painter, a complex to be assertively, but impossibly, denied.

Before continuing I would like to add a more biographical note by way of introduction to my trajectory as an artist before the first of the two exhibitions, and likewise a brief summary of the work and occurrences between the 2010 exhibition and the second—latter—2016 exhibition.

I studied Fine Art Painting for a BA (Hons) degree at Bath Art School where I first became interested in a death of painting and in fact (consequently) made video work for my final third year and exhibition. My videos used structural systems derived from minimalist musicians, such as Steve Reich, to make sound and image works predominantly using humans walking, with comparisons to contemporary dance. Some of these videos were included in BT New Contemporaries 1992-93

which gave me an added level of confidence to continue working as an artist and begin renting a studio after moving to London straight from graduating. After four years of working in studios shared with friends and organising London based exhibitions I applied to Goldsmiths and the Royal College of Art and was accepted to the latter where I commenced two year MA Painting study in 1997. My MA was completely focussed on painting and my work began with an intense dependence on European masters, especially Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso. As gallerist Kate MacGarry noted shortly after my graduation: "The artist's admiration for the work and vitality of the modern masters is clear in his motifs and technique. He strives for, and manages to retain a fresh and energetic approach without making caricatures of historical works."[17]

At the RCA I wanted to make up for the time I considered I had lost physically practicing painting whilst not painting at Bath. It was through looking at (reproductions of) George Condo paintings that my interest in American Art (American Painting) began in earnest. Condo—through his skill based ability and postmodern irony—enabled me to address Picasso without being overwhelmed. However, my way through, and also a way back to the conceptual art that had pushed me towards video on my BA, came through encounters with the work of Christopher Wool, whose paintings (difficult to see in the UK) I encountered in 1998 on trips to Paris, Hamburg and New York.

I proceeded (over the next three years) to incorporate and develop a Picasso derived vernacular, by way of a (late) Philip Guston figurative 'piling' of abstracted (cartoon) body parts into a mechanised 'all-over' image derived from a post-Warholian process deconstructed through Wool. In Artforum International almost ten years later––in 2007––the British art critic Ben Luke astutely noticed such a referential structure to my work, writing: "These pieces suggest most strikingly the guiding presence, implicit throughout the show, of late Picasso and Philip Guston."[18] And

[17] See Kate MacGarry (2003) 'Stuart Cumberland' Press Release, *Kate MacGarry*, available from http://www.katemacgarry.com/exhibitions/stuart-cumberland/ [accessed 5 Nov 2018]
[18] See Ben Luke (2007) 'Stuart Cumberland' *Artforum International*, available from https://www.artforum.com/picks/-15823 [accessed 5 Nov 2018]

testament to my profound engagement with painting, he continued, "Cumberland employs his ironic theme with subtlety, and his work's assurance is such that [his work] . . . ultimately acts as a playful celebration of the enduring power of painting."[19]

Today there remains in my paintings a mix of visual references, as Sacha Craddock has written:

> A highly respected painter . . . Stuart Cumberland has, more consistently and for longer than practically any one else in the UK, maintained a flirtation with the visual power of Modernist painting. Cumberland enjoys the possibilities opened up by an almost endless expressive recombination of artistic styles and statements. His paintings are a satisfying mix of knowing, disciplined gestural abstraction and a riot of referential ambiguities.[20]

In 2006 I entered into Lacanian psychoanalysis (as a patient) which helped me to realise a less subjective working practice. In short, I was able to keep more personal subject matter away from my paintings. An interest in psychoanalysis and psychoanalytical theory did become more broadly significant, as Craddock noted, "Cumberland paints in series with the intent to humorously communicate specific themes, for the most part relating to Sigmund Freud's idea of 'sublimation' – the channelling of 'lower' sexual urges into 'higher' aims such as art or science."[21]

Sublimation had become a fascinating alibi for me as an artist. Participating in the 2010 *John Moores Painting Prize Exhibition*, my artist statement read:

> "Wielding a wide brush or roller loaded with dripping paint [the artist does not consider himself] to be so different to the suburban so-called sexual deviants who install a wet room for sex and pissing

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[19] ibid
[20] See Sacha Craddock (2009) 'Stuart Cumberland' *artlyst*, available from http://www.artlyst.com/whats-on-archive/stuart-cumberland-melissa-marks/ [accessed 5 Nov 2018]
[21] ibid

in the second bedroom of the house. These . . . paintings, reflect a

studio (a site like a wet room but less domestic and more market

orientated) where the commonly repressed desires to slosh about

and make a mess are processed and mediated."[22]

In between the two exhibitions (research outputs) a number of significant traumas occurred that ruptured my practice and called for change. The catalyst was an abrupt stop to sales of my paintings. This affected the making of work because I was working to a kind of production line and paintings simply became a storage problem. This issue soon contributed to my mental health, which rapidly suffered. The financial pressures of living in London; renting—both accommodation and a separate studio—came to a head as I began my forties. In short, the advice that young people are given to get a dependable career and not become an artist, hit home. A growing sense of insecurity coupled with a resulting deep depression had a profound effect on my marriage which eventually collapsed in late 2012, early 2013 following a three month residency at the British School in Rome. On returning to London, aware that a (buying) audience for my paintings had dried up, I resolved to ask more questions of my work with regard to what I wanted from it.

The emphasis I had previously placed on positioning immediacy at an intentional distance was in some senses a problem because it had taken the instantaneous pleasure out of the process of painting. In other words, I missed the pleasure of making (a painting) in a short amount of time. In an attempt to get back to basics, and through thinking about my childhood interest in football, I devised to make a football curtain, which combined a conceptual understanding of painting as a screen with the (Matissean) idea of painting as window. Most importantly, I was able to insist on a blunt—non-theoretical—brute stupidity; the image did not require any intentionally learnt or acquired complex linguistic comprehension to be seen, and instead used a popular vernacular. *Football Curtain* (Fig. 3) was a painting I made

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[22] See Stuart Cumberland (2009) 'YLLW240' *Liverpool Museums*, available from http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/walker/johnmoores/recent-exhibitions/jm2010/exhibitors/cumberland.aspx [accessed 5 Nov 2018]

quite suddenly—in a couple of hours—with paint brushes and without processes that required pre-planning, such as stencilling. Its simplicity and positivity signalled a 'pictorial' path for me to follow.

Figure 3. *Football Curtain*, Oil on Linen, 195x130cm, 2013.

Questions

Postconceptual painting (and not a 'return' to painting) is most explicitly that painting which fulfils six tasks:

1. An assertive denial of the corollary that human experience should reassume its place at the centre of art and that painting is uniquely equipped for such a task.[23]

2. To make art, as distinct from painting as *an* art.

3. Anti-aesthetics; materials are used to document, index or record information.

4. A sustained enquiry and evaluation of art as (a type of) ornament.

5. Acknowledging the possibilities of ontological expansion yet *withholding* painting at material and conventional limits because those limits resonate within a "context of ideas it changes and joins."[24] Concluding: painting is a valuable method of artmaking if viewed pragmatically rather than historically.

Most significantly, the sixth task and question being:

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[23] Jason Gaiger 'Post Conceptual Painting: Gerhard Richter's Extended Leave-taking' in *Themes in Contemporary Art,* eds. Gill Perry & Paul Wood, Yale University Press, 2004, p. 94. It is not necessarily the artists that are making humanist claims, but their work has been framed as such. See *A New Spirit in Painting,* Joachimides, Rosenthal and Serota, Royal Academy of Arts London, 1981.

[24] Brian O'Doherty *Inside the White Cube*, San Francisco: Lapis Press, 1986, p. 70. A gesture 'depends for its effect on the context of ideas it changes and joins.'

6. "How to paint, why to paint, what to paint, "after photography""?[25]

Jeff Wall has written of photography's two part emergence (as art): an initial "[p]ictorialist photography . . . dazzled by the spectacle of western painting [that it] attempted, to some extent to imitate"; and a later formative "rejection of a classicizing aesthetic of the picture—in the name of proletarian amateurism" taken up by conceptual artists as photodocumentation.[26] If photography initially *to some extent* imitated painting and was unable to establish an independent relation, I want to use photography in its later conceptual form following Wall's conclusion that:

> Conceptual art played an important role in the transformation of
> the terms and conditions within which established photography
> defined itself and its relationships with other arts, a
> transformation which established photography as an
> institutionalized modernist form evolving explicitly through the
> dynamics of its auto-critiques.[27]

By positioning photography's most significant emergence, *as an institutionalized modernist form* consequently indebted to conceptual art, I am able to rephrase task six above as 'how to paint, why to paint, what to paint, after *conceptual art'*, or as a question 'what is postconceptual painting?' Although it is difficult to order *how, why* and *what* into a sequence that flows by implication, from one to the next, by first answering *why*, I am able to set a motivation from which *how* and *what* might follow.

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[25] Peter Osborne forms this question in: Peter Osborne *Painting Negation: Gerhard Richter's Negatives* October 62 (Autumn 1992), p. 104.
[26] Jeff Wall, 'Marks of Indifference', in *Reconsidering the Object of Art, 1965-1975*, Goldstein and Rorimer (eds.) exh. cat. Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1995, pp. 248-250.
[27] Ibid p. 247.

Why to Paint

Painting can be defended by the arguable necessity for art to deal with 'laws, limits and history' that can only be appreciated in dialogue with like for like.[28] However, this pragmatic approach rests on an intentional withholding of painting from its expanded sense, whereas under the conditions of postconceptual art mediums have no clear borders.

In answer to *why to paint*, I am motivated to be actively engaged in *looking* and *seeing*, which I contrast to a passive reception of the contemporary flood of information. Through the activity of painting, and the type of looking and seeing it requires for its making and its reception, I find a place at odds with the constant wash of information, that transfers seeing to the trash. Marc Augé similarly outlines this 'wash' as passivity in his thinking on *Non-Spaces.* That being, spaces, or places, such as airports, motorways and supermarkets but also increasingly in front of TVs and computers, which Augé suspects, profoundly alter our awareness; still a perception, but only partial and incoherent.[29]

Why to paint can be answered therefore by insisting on painting's aesthetic potential, that being: material colour manipulated with the intention to be looked at, seen and to sustain visual attention, which, in contradistinction to the non-place, is not passive and not partial. Bois used the term *Painting As Model* to insinuate that painting—like language—can be used as a structure for thinking and that painting therefore can be considered as thought made visible. However, Arthur C. Danto explains that whatever "art is, it is no longer something primarily to be looked at."[30] In short, art is no longer (primarily) aesthetic; contemporary art, he continues, is instead modelled on engagement. My *engagement* remains with seeing as allied with physical activity. I engage in the perception, practice and materiality of painting, to have something to look at, that is indexically linked to the body, through the

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[28] Jan Verwoert 'Why Are Conceptual Artists Painting Again?' *Afterall* Journal, Autumn/Winter, 2005.
[29] Marc Augé, *Non-Places*, Verso, 2009.
[30] Arthur C. Danto *After the End of Art,* Princeton University Press, 1997, p. 16.

physical processes required for its making. Quite simply, as Barnett Newman said "[a]n artist paints so that [they] will have something to look at" insinuating that other industries do not make things to look at, and if they do, they are (aesthetically) unsatisfactory.[31]

Because it is technologically obsolete, painting has proved unfertile ground for the capitalist colonisation of visual attention as exponentially realised through ideology saturated advertising.[32] Similarly, as Thomas Lawson argued, painting has potential because it is undervalued and has distance from "the dominant media"; analogue photography at his time of writing, digital imagery today.[33] Therefore, painting remains of use because it has not been appropriated by the so-called 'attention economy'.[34] Painting provides an experience other than semiotic when it refuses to coalesce into a sign, usually owing to materiality and processes that are traced to the body. Isabelle Graw, consistently refers to paint's "positively bodily materiality, which has always instilled fantasies of *presence*".[35] She also makes reference to a "related hypothesis: that the normalization of digital technologies bolsters the value of analog materials [and that] painting, no doubt, is one such analog material."[36]

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[31] Barnett Newman – as quoted from the Introduction to *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews* University of California Press, 1990, p. xxiii (*The Ides of Art*, 1947, p. 160).

[32] I use colonisation as derived from Sut Jhally, (2010) 'Advertising and the Perfect Storm' *YouTube*, available from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WNy9s5qR4i0 [accessed 25 March 2018].

[33] Thomas Lawson, 'Last Exit: Painting', p. 163. Benjamin—quoting Moholy Nagy—also pointed out the redemptive potential of obsolescence, see Walter Benjamin, 'Little History of Photography', *Selected Writings Volume 2, Part 2 1931–1934,* eds. Jennings, Eiland and Smith, Belknap Press of Harvard, 2005, p. 523.

[34] For attention economy see, Claudio Celis Bueno *The Attention Economy: Labour, Time and Power in Cognitive Capitalism,* Rowman & Littlefield International, 2016. As information and knowledge become central to the process of capital, human attention becomes itself, a valuable commodity. Ultimately 'paying attention becomes a new form of labour.' Not only is painting not colonised by the attention economy, it is, owing to its visibility as medium, not possible to colonise. Yet, in the market place, it can be literally used (economically colonised) as a "parking lot for money" or "a safe place to park money". See Gareth Harris (2013) 'Why the Rise of Christopher Wool' *The Art Newspaper.* available from http://ec2-79-125-124-178.eu-west-1.compute.amazonaws.com/articles/Why-the-rise-of-Christopher-Wool/30337 [accessed 23 April 2018] and Jerry Saltz (2015) 'The Malignant Influence of Michael Krebber' *Vulture.com,* available from http://www.vulture.com/2015/11/how-michael-krebber-brought-us-zombie-formalism.html [Accessed 12 January 2017].

[35] Isabelle Graw *The Love of Painting,* Sternberg Press, 2018, p. 161. Also see p. 98: 'oil paints and their pigments . . . retain a connection to earth and nature'.

[36] Ibid p. 202, Note 64.

How to Paint

I shall proceed with *how* on a physical and practical level, although postconceptual artists could argue that how they work is by the mind and not by the hand. In any case, I maintain that *how* to paint is more significant than *what* to paint, process being more an integral aspect of the meaning of 'painting' and art than imagery. It is not so much as Marshall McLuhan says "the medium is the message" but the *gesture* is the message.[37] The image of a painting can be consistent in a variety of works, but the reception of the work will vary according to *how* it is made, which becomes more obvious by comparing, for example, *Marilyn* by Willem de Kooning and *Marilyn* by Andy Warhol. The former gestural and hence subjective, linked inextricably to a *single* author; the latter anti-expressive, utilising photomechanical technology and therefore with claims to objectivity.

What to Paint

What I paint is therefore determined in part by *how* I paint. I maintain that abstraction is proper to painting, which prioritises medium above image, and figuration, which attends to the image, is proper to pictures. By which I mean 'painting' brings attention to the medium and support, whereas images are closer to windows through which we see.[38] Following this logic, with painting as subject, I contend that (for want of better terminology) non-figuration or abstraction are what to paint, although I am not interested in abstraction per se, simply as a vehicle for, or outcome of, process. *What* and *How* become more intimately intertwined however when we situate postconceptual painting as a representation of painting, in which case *how* a painting is made becomes an *image* for a subsequent (reproduced) next painting. The *how* thereby becomes the *what* to paint because it (*how*) is recognised

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[37] Marshall McLuhan, *The Medium is the Message*, Bantam, 1967.
[38] Painting as medium specific subject of modernism, and in particular Greenbergian-art as aesthetic-modernism. Clement Greenberg 'Modernist Painting' *Clement Greenberg. The Collected Essays and Criticism,* Vol.4, edited by John O'Brian, University of Chicago Press, 1993.

merely as an image, and an image once reproduced is emptied of its initial
methodical procedure. All that remains of *how* is its appearance, its *what*.

Despite recognising the insufficiency of art as aesthetic, I am, because of a personal
motivation (or desire) to see, moreover visually bored by art as conceptually derived.
Clement Greenberg expressed a similar dissatisfaction when he criticised certain
artwork as "meager in aesthetic results".[39] As an artist, I acknowledge the logical
conquest of conceptual art and am fascinated by it, but my humanist boredom
returns me to painting like the proverbial dog that returns to its vomit.[40]

More recently, in my switch to *pictures,* the question 'what' to paint has become
subsumed within the question, how to make pictures? And love, as a theme, has
come to play a part in the imagery. Writing in the catalogue to a touring exhibition
the curator Linsey Young wrote "as much as he might strive to avoid the romance of
painting by denying its physicality and gestures, Cumberland's recent work is
dominated by the fallout of romantic love."[41]

Isabelle Graw has recently tied painting and love together, suggesting that the
painter loves painting in the same way they might be in love with a person, a lover.[42]
Hans Belting who defines the picture as "the image with a medium" argues that the
"question "[w]hat is a picture?" . . . cannot be understood without the "how,"
without in other words some understanding of the visual strategy by which the
"what" is carried out." Despite doubting whether the "how" and the "what" can

[39] In reference to the 'square' paintings of Malevich, who, in any case, was intentionally anti-aesthetic, stating: "Aestheticism is the garbage of intuitive feeling". Kazimir Malevich, 'From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Painterly Realism' 1915, in *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde: Theory and Criticism* 1902–1934, edited and translated by John E Bowlt, Thames and Hudson, 1988, p. 135. Clement Greenberg, 'Review of Four Exhibitions of Abstract Art' (1942), Collected Essays, Vol. 1, p. 104. I do not share Greenberg's opinion of Malevich. Charles Harrison, working as part of *Art & Language*, was surprised to find that despite making works using a programmatic system they aesthetically valued some works more than others. This was at odds with their post-aesthetic understand of art. See Dave Beech and John Roberts 'Spectres of the Aesthetic' *The Philistine Controversy*, Verso, 2002, p. 27.
[40] "As a dog returns to his vomit, so a fool repeats his folly" from the Book of Proverbs in the Bible – Proverbs 26:11. Wikipedia, accessed 8 March 2018.
[41] Linsey Young, 'An Adequate Object', *The Painting Show*, British Council, 2015, p. 32
[42] Isabelle Graw *The Love of Painting*, Sternberg Press, 2018.

actually be separated Belting states, "the "how" is the true statement, the real speech of pictures."[43]

[43] Hans Belting *An Anthropology of Images*, Princeton University Press, 2011, p.10

Chapter Two

Context

Aesthetics

Jean-Luc Nancy's interpretation of Freud's *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* most complements my use and understanding of aesthetics.[44] Aesthetics, Nancy writes, is produced (almost as a by-product) by its opposite, namely modern rationalism. By contrast, aesthetics is subjective and unknowable. Rationalism (classically recognised as *superior* thought) produces understanding whereas aesthetics (*inferior* thought) "depends on a *je ne sais quoi*".[45] Equally, for Freud, the joke is like aesthetics because its affect is sensed. The joke is an inseparable binding of form (language) and (repressed) content that, received all at once, provides a libidinal jolt, or as Seth Price puts it, "little tugs at the parts of you in charge of eating and fucking and shitting."[46] If rationalised and consequently understood, the joke's essential union of form and content is broken. To *get* a joke is not to rationally understand it, but rather to allow for it to be sensed. After the joke's content has been jolted, the repressed must, by the subject's immediate requirement to be societal, be forgotten (again), and hence jokes, like dreams (also

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[44] Jean-Luc Nancy 'In Statu Nascendi' in *The Birth to Presence*, Stanford University Press, 1993. *In Statu Nascendi* meaning in the nascent state. See also Rachel Haidu *The Absence of Work,* MIT Press, 2010, p. 31.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Seth Price, *Fuck Seth Price*, Leopard Press, 2015, p. 63.

Freudian repressions) are seldom remembered.[47] When the joke's essential combining of form and content have been fragmented and translated, it is no longer taken in all at once–it is fractured and incomplete, no longer whole–and our response ceases to be a synchronic knee jerk reaction. In other words, we cease to laugh. Aesthetics, for Freud, is therefore a *synchronic* and perceptual act of sensing or (for the painter) seeing. Reading, by contrast, and significant in relation to (postconceptual) painting as anti-aesthetic sign, is a *diachronic* and rational act of interpreting.

The Dehumanization of Art

Peter Halley, after Jose Ortega y Gassset, argues against the idea of postmodernism and instead defines modern art (and after) as dehumanized.[48] According to Ortega modern art is premised on doubt and he lists the characteristics of such an art that tends to:

1. dehumanize art
2. avoid living forms
3. see the work of art as nothing but a work of art
4. consider art as play and nothing else
5. be essentially ironic
6. beware of sham and hence aspire to scrupulous realization
7. regard art as a thing of no transcending consequence

For Halley, all of the above are characteristics that continue from the modernist to the so-called postmodernist period. Halley's outline is notable on two accounts:

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[47] Does society suppress (artistic) freedom? Society suppresses freedom because in a society you do not want people upholding their individual freedom because it's not societal. Forgetting repressed content is societal. Adorno likewise places significance on forgetting, arguing that rational knowledge eclipses felt knowledge. See T. W. Adorno, 'The Meaning of Working Through the Past' trans. Henry Pickford, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords,* Columbia University Press, 1998, pp. 89–103.

[48] Peter Halley 'Against Post-Modernism: Reconsidering Ortega' in *Peter Halley Collected Essays 1981-87,* Bruno Bischofberger Gallery, Zürich, 1988 p32. José Ortega y Gasset 'The Dehumanization of Art' in *The Dehumanization of Art and Other Essays on Art, Culture, and Literature.* Princeton University Press, 1968.

firstly, it is able to include and account for the diversity of significant art practice in the modern era, including the contemporary, without need of any postmodern break; and secondly, despite favouring a cultivated taste, it does not exclude aesthetics. Conceptual art would later reject aesthetics outright and in so doing more consistently fulfil a dehumanised art. Ortega differentiates between a popular humanist aesthetic and 'artistic forms proper' or pure aesthetics. The former he explains thus:

> To the majority of people aesthetic pleasure means a state of mind which is essentially indistinguishable from their ordinary behaviour . . . By art they understand a means through which they are brought into contact with interesting human affairs . . . As soon as purely aesthetic forms predominate . . . most people feel out of their depth and are at a loss what to make of the scene, the book, or the painting.[49]

But what does Ortega mean by "artistic forms proper" or pure aesthetics? Above he decries the 'real' emotional engagement—*contact with interesting human affairs*—as not art, merely an extension of 'ordinary behaviour'. He outlines the problem through an analogy with the window, wherein the window pane is the art and the view through the pane simply the subject.

> Take a garden seen through a window. . . Since we are focussing on the garden . . . we do not see the window but look clear through it. The purer the glass, the less we see it. But we can also deliberately disregard the garden and . . . detain [our vision] at the window. We then lose sight of the garden. . . Hence to see the garden and to see the windowpane are two incompatible operations.[50]

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[49] Ibid p. 9.
[50] Ibid p. 10

For Ortega, a work of art equally vanishes from sight when we are "brought into contact with [the] interesting human affairs" it portrays–such as the garden–as real. But, "an object of art is artistic only in so far as it is not real."

> In order to enjoy Titian's portrait of Charles the Fifth on horseback
> [as art] we must forget that this is Charles the Fifth in person and
> instead see a portrait—that is, an image, a fiction.[51]

Therefore, Ortega stresses the work of art as an unreal, dehumanized and artificial construction.[52] "Far from going more or less clumsily toward reality, the artist is seen going against it. He [or she] is brazenly set on deforming reality, shattering its human aspect, dehumanizing it."[53] For Ortega dehumanized art is not realist, it does not create an illusion for the viewer to fall into and for them to react as they might ordinarily. Modern—dehumanized—art, Ortega tells us, is aesthetically unnatural.

Postconceptual Art

Conceptual art–opposed to aesthetics and its misapprehension as art–enacted a more complete dehumanised art than Minimalism and Pop, both retaining aspects of anthropomorphism.[54] Medium specific traditions, painting and sculpture, were direct targets of such movements in art. Painting's claims to (in)significance have been more than adequately described by critics such as Douglas Crimp and Yve-Alain Bois to name but two, so I commence avoiding an overly historical pre-amble and in agreement with arguments rehearsed elsewhere.[55]

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[51] Ibid p. 10
[52] Ibid pp. 8-11.
[53] Ibid p. 21.
[54] On Minimalism and anthropomorphism (indebted to Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood") see Isabelle Graw, 'Human Figures with a Painterly Appeal. On Anthropomorphism, Mannequins, and Painting in the Work of Isa Genzken and Rachel Harrison.' *The Love of Painting.*
[55] See Douglas Crimp 'The End of Painting' *On the Museum's Ruins*, 1993 & Yve-Alain Bois, 'Painting: The Task of Mourning' *Painting as Model*, MIT Press, 1990.

The *aesthetic* modernist (broadly Greenbergian) work of art proved unable to integrate artwork derived philosophically, socially, and historically; most conspicuously exemplified by Marcel Duchamp and including the work of artists such as, Francis Picabia, René Magritte, and Frank Stella. Conceptual art does not mistake art's ineliminable aesthetic for an exclusivity that is qualitatively 'felt' and instead prioritises art as ontologically derived. In other words, thinking "or writing about art *as art …* is required as an *a priori* condition to *art*-making. Art requires the writing and thinking about art to exist, otherwise objects are understood, even perceived, as something else."[56] The mid twentieth century pressure exerted by art as ontological on the once dominant art as aesthetic, too exclusive and inelastic to accommodate the actual diversity of modernist practice, caused an unsustainable tension and eventual collapse, or as Rosalind Krauss has called it, an "ontological cave-[in]".[57]

With an emphasis on a postmodern antiaesthetic art, Peter Osborne defines postconceptual art—art after a modernist collapse—through six main points which I summarise here:

1. Art is conceptual as opposed to merely aesthetic.
2. All art requires a form of materialisation and will therefore have an aesthetic dimension.
3. Art's necessary conceptuality requires 'an anti-aestheticist use of materials'.
4. Any material can be used to realise an idea.
5. A work is not rooted to one (auratic) site.
6. Mediums have no clear borders.[58]

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[56] Alana Jelinek, *This is Not Art* I. B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2014, p. 48.
[57] Rosalind Krauss, *Reinventing the Medium* Critical Inquiry, Winter 1999, p. 290. The ensuing postmodern shift from specific to generic art, or the post medium condition, has become for Krauss, a benign and historical norm. See also Jan Verwoert 'Why Are Conceptual Artists Painting Again?', which argues that a 'change to conceptuality as the historical norm' has released art from medium specificity for it to be condoned only if it accepted by the institutions, that is, the museums and the market. For a further account of the bureaucratisation of art see Benjamin Buchloh *Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions,* October, Vol. 55 Winter 1990, pp.105-143.
[58] Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not At All*, Verso, 2013, pp. 48-51.

The limits of aesthetics are vital to an understanding of postconceptual art, and Osborne outlines a gap between art and aesthetics that cannot be bridged, concluding that aesthetics alone is insufficient. "[A]rt becomes aesthetically pure only when it appears *as if* it" was produced merely by nature, yet "aesthetic judgement does not reflect on the conditions of this 'as if' . . . it merely takes it as its condition."[59] Aesthetics, it is argued, thereby excludes much of what is significant about art, art's difference from nature by virtue of it being art.

While conceptual art, in a 'pure' sense, failed, because it was unable to eliminate aesthetics (all art requires a form) 'art as aesthetic' made the mistake of taking its necessity as the whole rather than a part of art's many conditions. Aesthetics excludes from art aspects outside taste-based judgements "it seals and legitimates the exclusion of art's other aspects from the philosophical concept of art, reducing it to a single plane of significance – namely [opticality], its capacity to appear . . . as the object of pure judgements of taste."[60]

Osborne continues by providing three postconceptual strategies, which logically imply or lead from one to the next:

1. Fragment and Sentence.
2. Information and Series.
3. Process and Project.

The *fragment* is a proposed solution to the philosophical problem and impossibility of knowing the world "that is, in its truth."[61] Instead the *fragment* acknowledges its incomplete form as part of a plurality of fragments. Which implies *information and series* that Osborne illuminates through the following description taken from Sol LeWitt:

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[59] Ibid p. 42.
[60] Ibid, p. 43.
[61] Ibid p. 58. The fragment dates to at least the late 18th Century as a central concept of early German Romanticism.

> The aim of the artist would not be to instruct the viewer but to
> give him information. Whether the viewer understands this
> information is incidental . . . The serial artist does not attempt to
> produce a beautiful or mysterious object but functions as a clerk
> cataloguing the results of the premise.[62]

Language is hereby used simply to record, like conceptual documentary photography, beyond concerns of expression or aesthetics and notably without the necessity to be useful, legible or even understandable. This transference from the receptive subject as significant to the objective record, centres on Osborne's third category *process and project.* The work of art, in becoming fragments, changes from a singular object to a serial project, within which its method, or process, is raised above the fragment's use value.

The 'Return' to *Real* Painting

At some point in the early 1980s and signalling postmodern plurality, a groundswell of gallery and financial attention was heralding a return to painting. The exhibition, *A New Spirit in Painting* held at London's Royal Academy in 1981 being a case in point; a diverse group of thirty-eight painters, many of whom would be used to fit the misleading 'neo-expressionist' label.[63] Jason Gaiger, describing the show, concluded from the claims made in the catalogue essay that there is "a residual humanism at the basis of the 'new spirit' in painting that manifests itself in a renewed emphasis on the subjectivity of the artist."[64] For many, conceptual art had resulted in a theory centred scene that necessitated an urgent reaction. There was a 'return' argument that human experience should reassume its place at the centre of art and that painting would be uniquely equipped for such a task.[65]

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[62] Sol LeWitt, "Serial Project No. 1, 1966," Aspen 5-6 (1967) in Sol LeWitt: Critical Texts, ed, Adachiara Zevi (Rome: Editrice Inonia, 1995), p75.

[63] Isabelle Graw confirms this broad *lumping* together by the (pejorative) term "Neo-Expressionism" as a generational defensive kneejerk reaction. See Isabelle Graw *The Love of Painting*, Sternberg Press, 2018, p.145.

[64] Jason Gaiger 'Post Conceptual Painting: Gerhard Richter's Extended Leave-taking' p. 94.

[65] Ibid.

For J. M. Bernstein artistic mediums behave:

> as stand-ins or plenipotentiaries for nature as a source or
> condition of meaning; and it is just this notion of meaning that is
> hounded out of aesthetics and eventually art by the reigning
> concept of the concept, the concept cut loose from its moorings in
> materiality and sensible experience, the abstract concept whose
> appearances include the increasing dominance of technological
> reason and rationality.[66]

Bernstein problematises an anti-aesthetic dominance of philosophical rationality, but his description also coincides with Osborne's criticism of aesthetic purity being 'as if' produced merely by nature.[67] It is exactly this *essentialist* notion of medium that contemporary painting risks repeating. In contrast, the postconceptual artist does not conflate art with any materials whatsoever, if they paint they do so denying painting's essence outside of history.

Painting considered a 'return' may be condoned as pluralist, but according to Halley, in some cases, calling it postmodern 'is probably a mistake, since it exhibits all the signs of being, in fact, pre-modernist.'[68] In other words, some returning painters retreat into modes significant for nineteenth century art, most notably the autonomous art object, realism and authenticity. Artists painting since conceptual art have folded a medium critique within their work, most notably by quotation, in short, representing tropes of painting within painting thereby generating a second order representation.

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[66] J. M. Bernstein, *Against Voluptuous Bodies: Adorno's Late Modernism and the Meaning of Painting*, Stanford, 2006, p.15.
[67] J. M. Bernstein, *The fate of Art: Aesthetic Alienation from Kant to Derrida and Adorno*, London, 1992, p. 8. Also see Dave Beech and John Roberts 'Spectres of the Aesthetic' *The Philistine Controversy*, Verso, 2002, p. 22.
[68] Peter Halley 'Against Post-Modernism: Reconsidering Ortega' p.42.

By indicating a (so-called) 'return' to painting I am not referring to individual artist trajectories; for example, artists such as Bruce McLean, who had hitherto rejected painting and subsequently returned. I am also hesitant to define a return using artists who had painted before, and continued through and after the critical phase of the late 1960s, such as Jasper Johns. Instead the term is used more broadly for a wider (art-world) re-embracing—in contradistinction to a cold-shouldering—of painting. In other words, a sense that after a period when painting could no longer be taken seriously nor comprehended as a viable form of artmaking, it was once again collectively deemed significant, or at least a question (reappraisal) of its potential value could be asked. Therefore, I differentiate between a return to painting for individual artists' chronologies and in my use and understanding of it as a wider historical turn.

There is no absolute dividing line between painting as postconceptual and as a return. There is nonetheless a clearly different intention between either extreme they pose: the generic and the real. The former is reflected in postconceptual work such as Mike Bidlo's appropriations, and the latter in authentic painting such as those by Anselm Kiefer. Although, I hesitate to name a returning painter, who is probably better represented by, for example, those many lesser known artists submitting to exhibitions such as the Royal Academy Summer Show, who lack the will and the knowing to register a self-reflexivity within their painting. I acknowledge that Kiefer is fully aware of using painting as a representation of painting. Psychoanalyst Phyllis Greenacre comes to similar conclusions regarding productivity and creativity, which mirror the above poles of generic and real, as she puts it, "the copied product and the new invention."[69] Seth Price has mused similarly that "[r]eproduction was a hallmark of the technology of his age, clearly, but hadn't anyone in the twentieth century invented a new pen or paint- brush, something that *made* rather than *remade*?"[70] Confirming a point that postconceptual

[69] Phyllis Greenacre "Play in Relation to Creative Imagination' *Emotional Growth* New York: International Universities Press, 1971, p. 556
[70] Seth Price *Fuck Seth Price*, Leopard Press, 2015, p. 68.

(contemporary) art is not creative, nor inventive and is instead, like Baudrillard's Simulacra, productive by a strategy of copying.

Figure 4. Christopher Wool. Installation at Secession 2001.

The image shows three black and white silkscreen works, effectively copies of prior Wool paintings and one pink on white spray painting that is the original from which the silkscreen on the far right is a later version of.

While I have clear examples of the postconceptual painter, such as Christopher Wool (Fig. 4) and Rudolf Stingel (Fig. 5), working examples of 'return' painters are more circumspect but would include a number of the 'New Spirit' painters as well as Peter Doig and Jenny Saville who do not auto-critique nor doubt the existence of painting.[71] Many modern painters, from Jackson Pollock to Warhol, to Wade Guyton, have been criticised as 'not really' painters, whereas we might alternatively

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[71] Contra Isabelle Graw who concludes: postconceptually, 'There is no such thing as 'Painting''. See "There is no such thing as 'Painting': A Conversation between Isabelle Graw and Achim Hochdörfer" in Helmut Draxler et al, *Texte zur Kunst*, No. 77 (March 2010) pp. 112-117. Also see, Isabelle Graw *The Love of Painting*, p.46. Regarding the 'New Spirit' painters I equally hesitate to categorically label them as a 'return' and not conceptual. Many of them were painting before Conceptual art; can the same label be applied to artists who span either end of a historic watershed?

Figure 5.

Rudolf Stingel *Untitled (Bacon Triptych),* Oil on Linen, 2007. Installation View

hear the label of 'real' painter attributed to an artist such as Peter Doig, who has said in interview:

> "I met [Sigmar Polke] a couple of times. When he was first
> introduced to me, he walked around me saying: 'Peter Doig, Peter
> Doig, you are a real painter, you are a real painter!' I knew he was
> teasing me because I am an 'oil painter', but that he was also
> making a statement about his own position".[72]

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[72] Mark Godfrey, (2014) 'A Contemporary Visionary (Part II) Peter Doig on Sigmar Polke' *TATE.org.uk,* Available from http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/articles/contemporary-visionary-part-ii [accessed 6 January 2018]. Similarly, Daniel Buren explains that Robert Ryman is often described by curators as a post-minimalist or a conceptual artist and (guardedly) not a painter. See, Daniel Buren in *As Painting: Division and Placement* Eds. Armstrong, Lisbon, Melville, MIT Press, 2001, p. 245. Also see Wade Guyton in conversation with Rachel Kushner 'To Build a Fire' printed in Jeffrey Deitch, *The Painting Factory, Abstraction After Warhol,* MOCA Skira Rizzoli, p.133:
RK: You have a great line, that to be an artist is to be a scam artist.
WG: I said that?
RK: I read it in an interview. I loved it. I don't read "scam" as "scamming the viewer." It's more like scamming perceptual logic, cultural assumptions, fixed narratives.

To their credit Doig and Saville avoid irony, which has proved a valuable alibi for painters, such as John Currin, whom we might otherwise consider as 'returning'. It is most conspicuously via such irony that the readymade is incorporated through a spectrum of painting, muddying attempts to make categorical divisions.

Postconceptual *Generic* Painting

In accord with the agenda of conceptual art—to address the *generic* question what is art, rather than the *specific* question what is painting—postconceptual painting also makes an intentional shift from the specific to the generic. If it is a representation at all, a specific painting is a first order representation, whereas a generic painting is a second order representation, a copy or sign for painting. As such it holds the place of painting without the need to authentically be painting. Luc Tuymans, for example has called his own painting an "authentic forgery".[73] The tropes of painting pre-exist the contemporary artist and wait like words in a language, or images on a page, to be re-used like elements of a collage, from which it is often concluded that painting continues by its fusion "with the tradition of the readymade."[74] It was the Pop artists who, after Jasper Johns, first took a Duchampian method of *nomination* to use painting for tasks it had not previously been conceived as appropriate; more or less a flaunting of new, or rapidly changing, high/low cultural boundaries. These methods, such as appropriation from so-called low culture, have long since expanded the tasks available to painting. The postconceptual painting often takes the form of what a number of artists from the 1980s called 'generic' painting, Sherrie Levine's paintings being a case in point.[75] An artwork that is a painting copy—a simulacrum—may possess all of the conventions of painting yet not be considered as authentic, confirming a spectrum of *real* and *not real*. The generic painting that was very rapidly taken up by artists responding to conceptual art of the 1980s, was realised by Duchamp and described by De Duve as *Pictorial Nominalism*. Lawson notes this shift when he writes "[t]he paintings look

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[73] Loock, Aliaga and Spector, *Luc Tuymans*, Phaidon, 1996, p. 8.
[74] Isabelle Graw *The Love of Painting*, p.13.
[75] *Christopher Wool*, Organized by Ann Goldstein, MOCA, Los Angeles, 1998, p.261

real, but they are fake" which follows conceptual strategies defined by Joseph Kosuth who maintains that art is generic.[76] Painting as postconceptual escapes medium specificity by attempting that same genericism.

In his polemic against traditional forms 'Art after Philosophy' Kosuth writes that painting is based in aesthetics, which has been confused with art and that painting accepts (and does not question) the nature of art. Kosuth's definition of art is a tautology: art is the definition of art and only work that presents a new proposition of art is art. Painting cannot do this because it uses an already accepted form. Kosuth concludes that painting is specific because it concerns itself with propositions of paintings, asking what is painting, whereas art is generic, asking what is art?

Painting after Conceptual art has notably relied on printing to counter many of the prior humanist claims for the medium. Printing, like the readymade, provides a method to avoid the authentic unique so cherished by painting lovers and by contrast, critiqued by artists and writers since Alphonse Allais, Duchamp and Walter Benjamin. If painting relies on uniqueness, obviously, once the painting appears to be mechanically reproducible, it is inauthentic and no longer apparently real. While many artists use silkscreens there are other examples of artists who internalise mechanised processes to similar conceptual ends, for example Gerhard Richter and Robert Ryman.

Since my own making of paintings from 2007 to 2011 an exhibition called *The Painting Factory* and various journalistic terms have served to provide a clear, if possibly with regards to the latter, critically negative, context. Wool and Wade Guyton are perhaps the two most notable artists of this type of painting who make work by focussing on post-Warholian processes presented within relatively restrictive painting conventions. They are both however, in many respects perceived as anti-painting. Wool has said:

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[76] Joseph Kossuth 'Art After Philosophy' *Art in Theory 1900 – 2000,* eds. Harrison & Wood, Blackwell, 2002, p.855

> I have always thought that I paint – make pictures. Certain critics
>
> have not seen it that way. They think I am involved in the
>
> deconstruction of painting, in painting criticism, or in a type of
>
> anti-painting. Ironically this misunderstanding allows those who
>
> were against painting to 'value' my work.[77]

The results of Wool and Guyton's respective combination of painting with de-emotionalised *doubt* generates a *look* from the anti-aesthetic, meaning their work has an anti-aesthetic appearance.[78] Their procedures have proved successful and have generated a flurry of similar works by younger artists.[79] In the catalogue to the 2012 exhibition *The Painting Factory* curator Jeffrey Deitch tells us that artists in the exhibition have "almost become an academy", signaling that this strand has become programmatic. Alongside Walter Robinson's notorious *Zombie Formalism* label, and a host of other critics with their own similar pejoratives the end of this vein of conceptual painting practice has perhaps come.[80]

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[77] In Uta Grosenick, *Art Now Vol. 2.* Taschen, 2005. I disagree with Wool's claim that certain critics misunderstand his work, I think *he* misunderstands, but not at the level of artist. Also see Jarrett Earnest, (2015) 'How Should we Approach Artists Richards Phillips's Substantive 'Conversations'? *The Village Voice*, available from https://www.villagevoice.com/2015/12/08/how-should-we-approach-artist-richard-phillipss-substantive-conversations/ [accessed 18 March 2018]. Also: Cornelius Tittel, (2015) We can talk but you can't quote.' *Luhring Augustine*, available from http://www.luhringaugustine.com/attachment/en/556d89b2cfaf3421548b4568/Press/5579c1831aa8371e53f32e9e [accessed 18 March 2018]. Unlike Wool, Guyton categorically denies being a painter at all. See 'Painting Without a Painter. A conversation with Wade Guyton' in *The Love of Painting*, Isabelle Graw, Sternberg Press, 2018. But recognises that despite his intentions his 'paintings' have been co-opted (for arguments such as mine) as generic, fake and anti-painting.

[78] This anti-aesthetic *appearance* is Baudrillard's quarrel with art since Warhol, see Jean Baudrillard *The Conspiracy of Art*, Semiotext(e), 2005.

[79] See Jerry Saltz, (2014) 'Zombies on the Walls: Why Does So Much New Abstraction Look the Same?' *Vulture.com*, available from http://www.vulture.com/2014/06/why-new-abstract-paintings-look-the-same.html [accessed 3 June 2016].

[80] For *Zombie Formalism* see Walter Robinson, (2014) 'Flipping and the Rise of Zombie Formalism' *Artspace*, available from http://www.artspace.com/magazine/contributors/see_here/the_rise_of_zombie_formalism-52184 – [accessed 19 June 2017]. We could also add Wool's auction prices as evidence, see Silver and Tarmy (2014) 'The 350,000 Percent Rise of Christopher Wool's Masterpiece Painting' *Bloomberg*, available from https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2014-10-09/price-of-christopher-wools-apocalypse-now-soars-with-art-market – [accessed 19 June 2017].

Art, Image and Sign

Hans Belting describes the image as existing relative to the (human) body both internally and externally, that is, the image is doubly "endogenous" and "exogenous".[81] "The medium functions as a support, host, and tool for the image."[82] The 'picture' is an external support for the image, made using a variety of media. The body, Belting argues, is also a medium for images; "our bodies themselves operate as a living medium by processing, receiving, and transmitting images."[83]

On at least three accounts, the image, as art, has proved problematic enough for it to be polarised as versus art: first, in formalist modernism the assertion of medium assumes dominance over the "*image* as a category of artistic analysis"; second, the image is contextualised through popular culture, for Guy Debord "the association of the image with the commodity . . . effectively [reduces] it to a function of capitalist reproduction"; and third, conceptual art, recognising "the constitutive role of discourse in the art-character of the artwork" and not the aesthetic dimension, also distanced art from image.[84]

As signifier, our reading of the image confirms W.J.T. Mitchell when he writes that 'an image is the sign that pretends not to be a sign, masquerading as natural immediacy and presence'.[85] In other words, from a semiotic standpoint, there are no images as such. With the image *masquerading as natural immediacy* therefore, we have a repeat of the 'return' argument that painting and paint behave 'as stand-ins or plenipotentiaries for nature as a source or condition of meaning'. However, Osborne argues that the image cannot be reduced so simply: "it is precisely the *mediating* quality of the image – *neither* aesthetic *nor* logic – that is significant for

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[81] Hans Belting *An Anthropology of Images*, Princeton University Press, 2011, p. 4.
[82] Ibid, p.5
[83] Ibid.
[84] Peter Osborne writes "art *versus* image". Peter Osborne 'The Distributed Image' *The Postconceptual Condition*, Verso, 2018, pp. 135-137. Bois also critiques the image and intends "to rid ourselves of the stifling concept of *image*". Yve-Alain Bois, 'Painting As Model', in *Painting as Model*, MIT Press, 1990, p. 246.
[85] W.J.T. Mitchell *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*, University of Chicago Press, 1986, p.43.

art."[86] The image therefore is a *go-between* for the aesthetic and the semiotic.
Perhaps, when Roland Barthes writes: "[t]he *studium* is ultimately always coded, the
punctum is not . . . What I can name cannot really prick me" he most clearly makes
the same distinction between sensibility and logic.[87]

The later work of Jasper Johns (since 1980, see Fig. 12 for example) noticeably picks
up a precedent for the postconceptual tactic of generic painting in the *trompe l'œil*
genre. Initially *trompe l'œil* marked a point of consciousness: a self-awareness of
painting as an autonomous and transportable object, distinct from its prior place as
a permanent and immobile part of the fabric of a building, mostly churches.
Conceptual painting similarly marked a (modernist) consciousness of the
'objecthood' of painting and the ontological collapse prefigured by Minimalism and
critiqued by Michael Fried who maintained that because painting is unescapably
pictorial it can never be merely an object. Turning to *pictures* allows the artist to
escape end-game painting, trapped within a circular pursuit of the definitive blank
painting.

[86] Peter Osborne 'The Distributed Image' *The Postconceptual Condition,* Verso, 2018, p.138.
[87] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans Richard Howard, New York: Hill and Wang, 1981, p.51

Chapter Three

Methods

A Humanist Complex

As outlined above, the most conspicuous strategy used by the postconceptual painter is a vehement negation of the corollary that, human experience should reassume its place at the centre of art and that painting is uniquely equipped for such a task.[88] Mechanical techniques and processes that avoid the human touch have proved to be the most conspicuous methods for the artist making paintings after conceptual art and I outline a number of the strategies I employ in this section. To avoid the one-off auratic work, or at least in order to hold it at a distance so that I can use it as subject, the one tool that I avoid where possible is the brush.[89] Common to the methods listed is a wavering between art as language and art as sensible experience. Each attempt to maintain aesthetics and humanism at an intentional distance fails and their denial is undone and consequently awkwardly returns. Semantically, a word has significance by what it is not and what it opposes, for example, what is a dog? To which we might reply, not a cat. If painters intentionally distance their work from a humanist call they cannot but maintain the subject's significance. It is in a balancing of these contradictions, and even the value of aesthetics as a stumbling block, that my own interests lie.

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[88] Jason Gaiger 'Post-conceptual Painting' in *Themes in Contemporary Art,* eds. Perry and Wood, Yale, 2004

[89] Jeffrey Deitch, in the roundtable discussion for *The Painting Factory, Abstraction After Warhol* equally states that "few of the artists" in the show "actually use a brush". *The Painting Factory, Abstraction After Warhol*, MOCA Skira Rizzoli, 2012, p. 10.

Figure 6.
Author in the studio, using a roller to apply oil paint through a paper stencil. 2010.

Stencilling

At the start of 2010 I began using cut out paper stencils to create the linear parts of
my paintings (Fig. 6). Traditional artists' oil paint, unparalleled for body, strength of
colour and lightfastness, is applied by foam roller through the cut stencil.[90] This
method allowed me to 'design' the painting beforehand and concentrate on other
aspects of process such as layering, revealing and concealing. Following
experimentation with silkscreens, I began to paint by stencil because of its
comparable simplicity. Although I often used assistants to cut them, the stencil is
basic (technology) needing only paper and a sharp blade and has the advantages of
cost and means.

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[90] As a maker, I consider the physical longevity of my work and attempt to assemble it to last as long as
possible. Particular considerations, such as paint quality and lightfastness as well as oil medium to
pigment ratios, must be taken into consideration. Such matters are beyond the remit of art as
conceptual, yet the experience of colour is radically altered by attention to materials.

Held at an intentional and reflective distance, the human touch—historically credited when it displays a unique mastery—is emptied in the course of being reproduced without recourse to agonistic artisanal skills. Through mechanical processes, prior tropes of painting, valued as significant for art, are re-presented semantically. However, a tension is set, owing to the remaining and 'real' material properties of colour, size, speed of execution and an intentional sloppiness with which the stencilling is carried out. Although given as a re-presentation of painting, using the *appearance* of painterliness, the actual physicality and gesture of the work puts a 'felt' synchronic pressure on the diachronic interpretable logic of the sign.

Ben Lewis had drawn attention to the above when he wrote in 2009:

> There's a visible tension in the work between the traces of the struggle to create the final image and the apparent carelessness with which the painting appears to have been finally executed. There is a sense that this is work about the effort that is hidden in creation, the experience of how little it takes to get something right, but how much effort, how much destruction and reconstruction is required, to reach that simplicity.[91]

In 2010 I began using the four circle motif which is an anti-compositional design, that nonetheless has vestiges of composition owing to its imperfect and thereby unsymmetrical construction by hand. The size of the circles and their placing is more or less derived from the stretcher frame proportions. Ortega's observations of dehumanized art are in accord with the circles as artificial constructs that avoid living forms, however, the size and processes used do not mark a true bodily departure. In fact, the artist's body is brought to the fore by awareness of the manual facture of the work. As Fried noted of minimalist work, whose dimensions were also chosen

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[91]See Ben Lewis (2009), Stuart Cumberland: Comma 10 Essay' *1pdf.net*, available from https://1pdf.net/stuart-cumberland-comma-10-essay-by-ben-lewis_5853b414e12e89c8061d3c3f [accessed 5 Nov 2018]

relative to the human body, there can be little doubt about their "hidden . . . anthropomorphism" and subjective appeal.[92]

A benday dot fill added a new weight and texture to the surface, in accord with the repetitive and mechanical aspects of the cut-out stencils. All of these techniques maintained the canvas surface as flat, avoiding illusions of depth and space. Rollers were used to apply the paint exclusively, although the line had the appearance of a brush stroke with heavy drips, which were of course simply illusions (see Figs. 1, 2). The benday dot fill had a playful 'colouring-in' function and is historically linked with pop art; in particular Roy Lichtenstein's *brush stroke* send-ups of abstract expressionism. Its use therefore, in accord with Ortega's condition to "regard art as a thing of no transcending consequence" aimed to further distance these paintings from loftier claims of exaltation and from any essentialist *return* to painting.[93] Drips and 'colouring-in' both rendered through stencils, allude to a trace of struggle and (modern) painting as agonistic but, like Pop art, the mediation is an irreverent representation of such tropes.

The four circle image attempts to push beyond the grid format although it essentially remains true to its symmetrical and anti-compositional grid mapping; two adjacent circles stacked above two adjacent circles. The circle provides me with no claims to invention or originality. Its echoes of appropriation demonstrate how the strategies of the readymade are routinely folded into the practice of painting.[94] The hand-made circles are noticeably imperfect, it would be easier to use a large compass, but the images are drawn and rebalanced towards a visible stability. Each template originates from a roughly A4 design that is magnified to paper sheets the same size as the final painting. The circles are made at this primary stage, with brush and dripping paint (Fig. 7). Sizing up always necessitates alterations, which are made

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[92] Michael Fried, 'Art and Objecthood', p. 157.

[93] José Ortega y Gasset 'The Dehumanization of Art' p. 14.

[94] It has most in common with Jasper Johns famous line regarding his images, designs as he calls them, as "things the mind already knows." 'His Heart Belongs to DADA' *Time 73* (May 4, 1959) Reprinted in *Jasper Johns: Writings, Sketchbook Notes, Interviews*, Ed. Kirk Varnedoe, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1996, p.82

over proceeding days. The designs can take as long as a week to finalise, working on them daily, and for me to be visually satisfied with proceeding to cut out. Assistants can be employed at this point to do the rather laborious task of cutting the stencil which is a skill that can be grasped easily. The image as painted is cut out, which include splashes and drips, and sometimes other 'accidents' such as footprints or handprints. In this way, the spontaneous and the unique as fetishized in painting are rendered as information; albeit a deceitful type of information.

Figure 7. In the studio, preparing a stencil, 2010

Colour

I use colour unmixed, as plainly as possible, straight from the tube, like a readymade; a standard red for example, that avoids the nuances of a Mark Rothko burgundy.[95] By doing so I seek to avoid emotional weight that is associated with 'heavy', 'moody'

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[95] For the tube of paint as readymade see Thierry de Duve, 'The Readymade and the Tube of Paint' in *Kant After Duchamp*, MIT Press, 1996. See also de Duve's chapter ''Color and its Name' in his *Pictorial Nominalism*.

and uncommon colours, which would necessitate prior specific mixing and be readable as artisanal craft subjectively sited through the author as individual artist. All of my paintings are made on monochrome grounds using basic colours with the intent to avoid allusions to time consuming, skill-based tasks. The variety of colours I use from one canvas to the next, offer the viewer: on the one hand, a diversity of little conceptual significance (if the process, stencil, and hence image, are the same, the ideas remain consistent); and on the other hand, a series-based colour range that provides a ground for subjective and taste-based preferences. The colour range does then *signify* a place for aesthetics, reflected most simply by, for example, a market preference for red paintings over green ones. The black and white paintings I make are possibly more direct (Fig. 8) and also translate well to the inevitable remediation of the image as distributed digitally.[96]
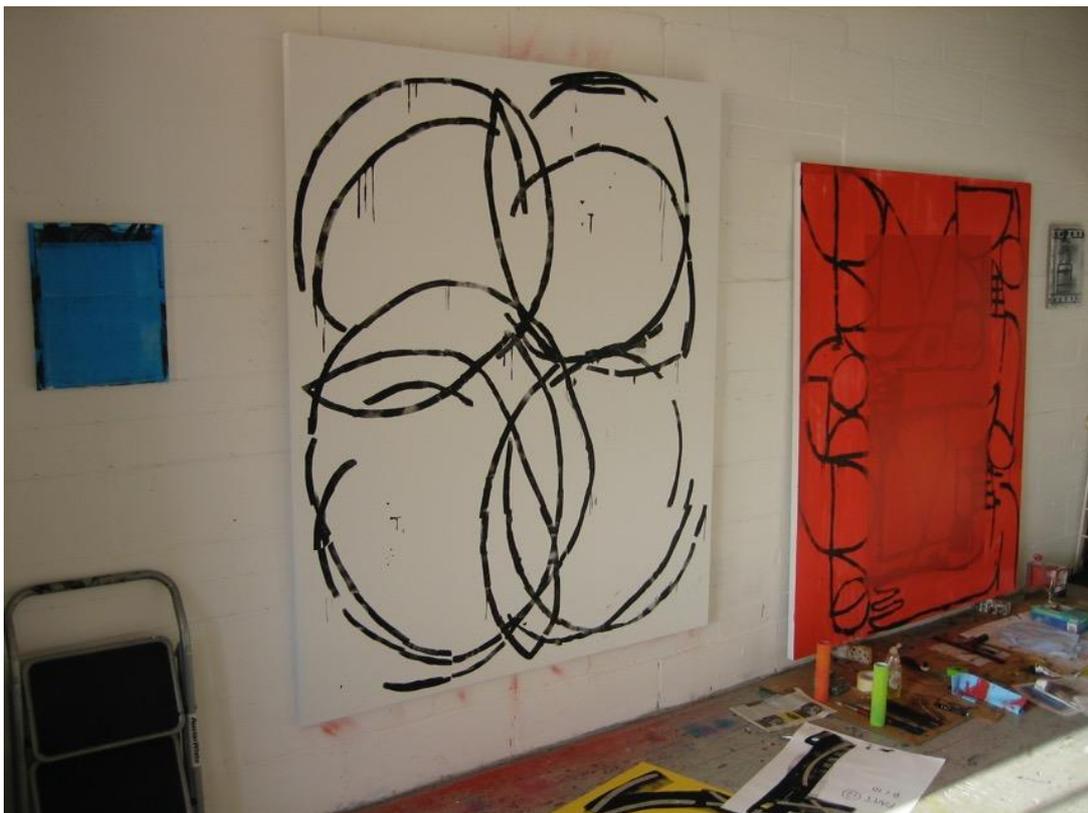

Figure 8.
Studio, January 2010, showing the first four circle painting alongside prior work.

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[96] For *remediation* see Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, MIT Press, 1999.

Many artists have worked in black and white, but it is Christopher Wool in particular who has come to dominate its contemporary use, especially with regard to postconceptual painting. Therefore, as an artist working with similar ideas, I have used colours partly in an attempt to forge possibilities not associative to Wool. However, one has only to witness the dominance of the printed word, as black ink on white paper to realise the futility of denying the practicality of their maximum contrast. For the artist, the use of black on white provides a meta function by both: referring to and declaring its demarcation and properties as sign; and fulfilling its function as sign. In terms of a postconceptual strategy to make work as information and deny a humanist motivation, black on white certainly has its advantages over alternative colour options, although I would not claim that black is any less expressive; black is equally able to evoke emotion or affect.[97]

Therefore, black on white, as non-colours and of high relative contrast, are used anti-aesthetically to carry information, further to which their use is both as sign and analogous of the sign. Colour then by contrast, when used, must have an aesthetic motivation, which is deemed (pejoratively) ornamental and unconcerned with semiology. However, colour used in series, contra black and white, can be interpreted logically (as opposed to sensibly) signifying the ineliminable aesthetic dimension of the artwork. As such I allow colour as sign, declaring aesthetics as required but insufficient, to be intensified and with an intentional animosity to exert pressure—for the sake of pleasure—on the contradictory axis of the conceptual and the sensible.[98]

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[97] Regarding a *Color Loss*, Benjamin Buchloh points towards a post-war painting tendency, a withdrawal of colour in the work of, for example, Johns, Manzoni, Newman and Stella "corresponding to a more general loss of access to psychic plenitude and somatic experience." Benjamin Buchloh, "Painting as Diagram: Five Notes on Frank Stella's Early Paintings, 1958-1959" *October*, No. 143 (Winter 2013) pp. 134-135. Frank Stella emphasised his use of black as a non-color. A monochrome reductivism also operates in accord with the dictates of Greenbergian modernism, to eliminate illusion, such as depth and volume, and reiterate the flat picture plane. De Duve simply writes that the cubists abandoned colour because it "was judged too decorative or not conceptual enough." Thierry de Duve, *Pictorial Nominalism: On Marcel Duchamp's Passage from Painting to the Readymade*, p. 105.

[98] Osborne calls this semiotic and aesthetic axis "decidedly non-dialectical" and instead designates them as paradoxical or contradictory halves. Peter Osborne, 'Sign and Image' *Philosophy in Cultural Theory*, Routledge, 2000, p. 21.

Armstrong and Lisbon similarly describe such conceptual use of colour, naming it "Colour as Language".[99] Colour in this formulation functions conceptually as signifier rather than aesthetically, that is as semiotic information rather than optically, subject to a judgement of taste. These accounts centre on colour and industrially mass-produced tubes of oil paint as 'readymades' of namable colours - red, blue, yellow, green - rather than colour as beyond language, aspirationally metaphoric and expressive as Wassily Kandinsky or Rothko might intend them. Colour as language, colour as name coincides with Osborne's category of "information and series" that he derives from the postconceptual artist who does not instruct the viewer but provides information, "who does not attempt to produce a beautiful or mysterious object but functions as a clerk cataloguing the results of the premise."[100] These accounts of colour as used by Kandinsky in contrast to Duchamp, Rothko as distinct from Warhol, also reiterate distinctions between true—authentic—painters and 'imposter' *artist*, with the corresponding division separating real from fake paintings.[101]

A Knowing *Withholding*

Postconceptual painting "does not take its own legitimacy for granted" and is thereby knowing.[102] Some painters are *knowing* of the possibilities of ontological expansion, that is to make painting in the 'expanded' sense, yet 'withhold' from

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[99] *As Painting: Division and Displacement* Philip Armstrong, Laura Lisbon, and Stephen Melville MIT Press 2001 Their account is dependent most notably to the chapter titled 'Colour and Its Name' in Thierry de Duve *Pictorial Nominalism: On Marcel Duchamp's Passage from Painting to the Readymade* (1984) trans Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991)

[100] Sol LeWitt, "Serial Project No. 1, 1966," Aspen 5-6 (1967) in Sol LeWitt: Critical Texts, ed, Adachiara Zevi (Rome: Editrice Inonia, 1995), p75.

[101] For an account of the 'Imposter Artist', see Donald Kuspit, 'Marcel Duchamp Imposter Artist' *Idiosyncratic Identities* Cambridge University Press, 1996 De Duve describes Duchamp as a painter only out of vengeance, who mocked the 'true painters.' *Pictorial Nominalism*, p. 137.

[102] Jan Verwoert 'Why Are Conceptual Artists Painting Again?' This 'knowingness' is so elastic that it can arguably be applied to many examples of art (including 'return' painting) wherein the debate centres on the artist and their intentions. Isabelle Graw argues that an artist such as Julian Schnabel is fully aware of the expressionist myth of painting, using it at a distance, as a language. Isabelle Graw, 'Conceptual Expression: On Conceptual Gestures in Allegedly Expressive Painting, Traces of Expression in Proto-Conceptual Works, and the Significance of Artistic Procedures'. Thomas Lawson makes a similar claim about Schnabel's "wickedly outrageous taste" although his is more critically negative, except in relation to David Salle. Thomas Lawson, 'Last Exit: Painting' p.157.

moving beyond conventional boundaries, such as rectilinear frame and the use of actual paint. Helmut Draxler argues for an understanding of painting as *apparatus*; an ontological rationale that outlines how painting continues—expanded—by the appropriation of its discoveries if not the specifics of it as medium.[103] After all, as Bernstein writes, "painting need not and indeed is not, always and everywhere, literally painting."[104] *Withholding* painting at material and conventional limits is potentially preferable because those limits resonate within a "context of ideas it changes and joins."[105] I maintain that the postconceptual painter is aware of the contemporary diversity of ways of making art work, especially painting in its expanded sense, yet *withholds*. The artist who withholds accepts the restrictions of convention because of the pragmatic advantages they afford, which I understand to be as follows:

- Work can be related as like for like, within a 'context of ideas it changes and joins.'
- A number of choices are pre-ordained, such as flat rectilinear surface and paint types, simplifying an already complex field.
- Further practicalities of ease and simplicity of exhibition, portability and storage.[106]
- Resistance from 'spectacle', such as, novelty, the new, radicality and the sensational.
- The artist's 'work' can (mostly) be fulfilled by the artist alone.

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[103] Helmut Draxler *Painting as Apparatus: Twelve Theses* Texte zur Kunst, March 2010 / Issue No. 77. This short text, in twelve parts does not define painting as it is bound by specifics of medium, such as paint, canvas, stretcher and brushes. Instead 'painting' is outlined in twelve parts as an institution or more specifically as an apparatus, which is consistent ontologically with its postconceptual status. See also Giorgio Agamben 'What is an Apparatus?' in *What is an Apparatus? And Other Essays* Stanford University Press, 2009. Apparatus, from the French *dispositif,* comes from Foucault who has said: "apparatus consists of 'discourses, laws, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral, and philanthropic propositions–in short, the said as much as the unsaid ... The apparatus itself is the network that can be established between these elements." Foucault is not mentioned by Draxler whose derivation may be closer to cinematic apparatus. See Teresa de Lauretis and Stephen Heath (eds.) *The Cinematic Apparatus* New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980.
[104] J M Bernstein, *Against Voluptuous Bodies: Adorno's Late Modernism and the Meaning of Painting,* p.10.
[105] Brian O'Doherty *Inside the White Cube.*
[106] For "logistical considerations" see Isabelle Graw, *The Love of Painting,* Sternberg Press, 2018, p. 11.

- As Thomas Lawson argues, painting—at a distance from dominant media—
  affords visibility of dominant media and its distribution.

Doubt is epidemic for the postconceptual painter who we might also define as philistine, by which I mean "those who are saying 'wait a minute', those who are resisting certain kinds of change".[107] Doubt is manifest through their agonistic necessity to consistently legislate for their use of painting and it is also present because of a disbelief, at the very least a disinterest, in alternative options, be they 'expanded' painting or other media. They are intentionally philistine and believe in working by repetition, "banging their heads against the wall" because the alternatives have been co-opted or are better served by mainstream culture eager for change for change sake, in the service of accelerated consumerism.[108] The philistines are not "those who do not understand art or, better still, who do not "understand" modern art; rather they understand it only too well".[109] They enact a type of anti-art DADA gesture in so far as they provide a resistance that has the potential to critique dominant discourses by maintaining a distance from them, simultaneously negotiating, and significantly not militating against, relations with other (non-art) cultural forms.[110]

Pictures

My gallerist Jake Miller has noted a paradoxical antagonism in my difficulty to label myself as a painter despite my output consisting solely of paintings. In 2011 he wrote in the catalogue to the *Four Circle Paintings* exhibition, "[Stuart Cumberland is] very much a painter but over the years I have known and admired [his] work, [he

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[107] Thomas Osborne 'Against 'Creativity': A Philistine Rant' in *Economy and Society* Vol 32 No.4 November 2003, p. 520. Osborne provides an account of a philistine in relation to "the creativity industries, consumerist individualism, the cult of the new as ever-unchanging fashion, the forces of intellectual and cultural productivism for its own sake, the performativity of 'ideas' and culture" p. 522.
[108] Ibid p. 520.
[109] Fredric Jameson *Late Marxism: Adorno, or, the Persistence of the Dialect*, Verso, London 1990. p. 152.
[110] Stewart Martin 'The Philistine Controversy: Introduction' *The Philistine Controversy* Dave Beech and John Roberts, Verso, 2002, p. 2.

seems] to have been in a struggle coming to terms with whether this is a good thing or not."[111]

My frustration with painting led me to reappraise where my interests lay and instead of categorising my practice as painting I began to ask whether *pictures* might better serve as categorical boundary. Pictures are not limited by medium and can be made by photography, paint, pencil, collage and iPad, even Duchamp's *Etant Donne*, for example, could be included. An interest in *pictures* relationally opens out the history of art and instead of reasserting boundaries, artists as diverse as Titian, Édouard Manet, Guston, William Eggleston, Jeff Wall, Robert Gober and Carroll Dunham can be comparably linked.[112]

By 2012 my paintings had exhausted their potential for me and I began to search for new ways to work. I refer to the works made since not as paintings but as *handmade pictures* in an attempt to circumnavigate the medium specific concerns of painting. In so doing, I am asking whether considering 'pictures' and not painting, as category might prove more fertile and flexible. Concurring with my pictorial shift, Charles Harrison asks the question "whether anyone should persist with painting as an art" and concludes "that there should be critical and practical reasons to persist with the making of *pictures*", reasoning that this allows the artist "to set aside arguments for the continuation of painting as an end-game art, caught in the toils of "art as the definition of art" and in the possibly endless pursuit of the "ultimate" blank painting."[113]

As a painter I had maintained painting as subject. Similarly, once I made the shift to pictures, I began to analyse how pictures work and it therefore seemed obvious to make pictures about pictures, or, meta-pictures. Evaluating the history of the meta-picture, certain works by Diego Velázquez (Fig. 9), Manet (Fig. 10), René Magritte

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[111] See Jake Miller, *Four Circle Paintings,* Approach Gallery Catalogue, 2011, p.1.
[112] For Jeff Wall, who I consider as specifically addressing medium as pictorial, see Michael Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*, New Haven, 2002.
[113] Charles Harrison, 'Painting and the Death of the Spectator' *Conceptual Art and Painting,* MIT Press, 2001, p. 171.

(Fig. 11) and Jasper Johns (Fig. 12) were my touchstones, especially those works that picked up on the *trompe l'œil* genre.[114] My interest was not so much with a fooling of the eye but with the self-consciousness of the picture as a picture. The distinctions and overlaps between painter, photographer and hunter were my first self-referential preoccupations.

Figure 9
Diego Velazquez
Cardinal Infante Don Fernando as a Hunter
1632-33, Oil on canvas, 191x107cm

Figure 10
Edouard Manet
Portrait of M. Pertuiset, the Lion Hunter
1880-81, Oil on Canvas, 150x170cm

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[114] Hunting portraits and *Las Meninas* by Velazquez; *Portrait of M. Pertuiset, the Lion Hunter* and *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* by Manet; Magritte broadly (notably ones that appear to have influenced Robert Gober) and the later work of Johns, commencing with *In the Studio* of 1982 see Fiona Donovan, *Jasper John Pictures within Pictures 1980–2015,* Thames & Hudson, 2017. W.J.T. Mitchell devotes an excellent chapter to 'Metapictures' in his: *Picture Theory,* University of Chicago Press, 1994.

Figure 11
Rene Magritte
The Survivor
1950, Oil on Canvas, 79x60cm

Figure 12
Jasper Johns
In the Studio
1982, Oil/Encaustic on Canvas, 183x122cm

Figure 13.
Man Photographing a Bird—Missed, 2014, Oil on Linen, 195x130cm
Man Photographing a Bird in the Wind, 2014, Oil on Linen, 195x110cm

Included in the British Council touring exhibition *The Painting Show*
Installation at Contemporary Art Centre (CAC) Vilnius, Lithuania, 2016

In making a painting to picture shift I continued with many of the processes I had used previously. The images were carefully planned. Charcoal drawings were made over days and weeks, even months, until a satisfactory image was arrived at, that was then cut (by myself) into a stencil, from which one or several painted pictures could be made. Stencilled repetitions are visible in the two full length figure pictures (Fig. 13) which play with the difference of framing from painting to photography. In painting there can be no framing mistakes, because unlike the dynamic anticipatory "hunter's consciousness" required to capture a photograph, the painter can artificially recreate a composition.[115]

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[115] Jeff Wall, 'Marks of Indifference', in *Reconsidering the Object of Art, 1965-1975*, p. 249.

Chapter Four

Practice

Four Circle Paintings

In 2011 four oil paintings, each 195x160cm were exhibited at the Approach Gallery
in London under the above title, which described the imagery directly (Plates. 1—9.)
The press release stated that painting as a language was outside "of dominant
currencies of cultural exchange, [and that] celebrity and mass consumption have
become such dominant currencies."[116] In other words, painting is a specialism.[117]
Instead of working directly with the above popular forms, the paintings in the show
used processes associated with "commercial acumen and mass production" such as
clean bright colours and the benday dot, and pitted them against "the debates of the
art historical legacy of painting". Visual pleasure is one of the ambitions for the work,
which "hold in balance a tension between the handmade and the mechanical".

The intent of these paintings was to exert aesthetic pressure on the artwork through
postconceptual strategies, three of which have been contextually outlined in chapter
two. They begin by locating a *fragment*, rather than a whole, and then proceed to

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[116] All quotes are from the press release to the exhibition, see, Jake Miller, (2011) 'Stuart Cumberland:
Four Circle Paintings.' *The approach*, available from https://theapproach.co.uk/exhibitions/stuart-
cumberland-3/press-release/ [accessed 16 Jan 2018].
[117] Isabelle Graw, 'For Connoisseurs Only. Painting Specialists and Their Subject Matter,' *The Love of
Painting*.

reveal this part "conscious of its incompleteness, yet nonetheless also relatively self-

Figure 14. *Ron Hickman*, 2010, Oil on Linen, 195x160cm

Figure 15. *Ingrid Pitt,* 2010, Oil on Linen, 195x160cm

Figure 16. *Leslie Nielsen*, 2010, Oil on Linen, 195x160cm

Figure 17. *Andy Irons*, 2010, Oil on Linen, 195x160cm

sufficient" as simply information, of no transcending value.[118] As it is in itself, the work does not require human understanding as its object relation to a subject is

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[118] Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All,* p. 60.

insignificant. Each canvas in the *Four Circle* exhibition (Figs. 14, 15, 16, 17), made distinct by its colour, has a place in series, and recognised distinctly as not black on white but separate generic colours. If black is an anti-aesthetic use of materials, what change has taken place if it is replaced by a colour? Is the perceived visual charge of red, blue, yellow or green more aesthetic than black?

Key aspects of these works manage to retain a contradictory tension, achieved in five main ways:

1. Spontaneity is used as an image, printed and reproducible.
2. Composition is alluded to rather than overtly employed.
3. The human figure is included not as imagery but through scale and gesture relative to the body.
4. The circle motif avoids the subjective and notions of invention or originality.
5. Colour is used and acknowledged as both language and sensible experience.

From which we might initially conclude that the paintings are types of signs, and as such they are representations of paintings.[119] In other words, if I may repeat the refrain, "the paintings look real, but they are fake." Now, if ""painting" is not an *end, but a means*", then what are these (fake) paintings a means for? In answer, they are principally a means for finding pleasure in a vexed proposition of painting as sign. I have aimed to put pressure on the sign form through aesthetics which vacillate in a gap between meaning and materiality. Aesthetics return extra to semiotics, as sensible experience. In this sense, the aesthetic "represents a critique of the concept of the signifier itself" because it is not so much knowable as meaning but a type of "*experience* of meaning."[120] An indecisiveness that fluctuates at the edge what we can be conscious of, decipherable only in terms of an awareness that it is beyond

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[119] Isabelle Graw has proposed 'that we conceive painting not as a medium but rather as a type of sign production'. Isabelle Graw, *The Love of Painting*, p. 57.

[120] Peter Osborne, 'Sign and Image,' p. 32.

knowing. As Jacques Rancière writes, "the aesthetic regime of art is the one where the thinking of art is identical to an idea of thought itself."[121]

Colour 'Block'

Theodor Adorno, like Freud, pays attention to memory and uses the term "block" to account for a bipartite split of knowledge; the divide in experience as either rational or sensed. "[K]nowledge gives us only phenomena and not noumena" Adorno writes, where noumena is interpreted as, the object as it is in itself and phenomena how it is as we know it through our various methods of understanding. The "block" concerns itself with noumena, the object as it is in itself, an awareness of which cannot be unthought but equally cannot be known. Brian O'Connor elucidates this contradiction (or "block") as, the "world as it is known (the active subject) is non-identical with the world as it is in itself (the object devoid of all relations to the subject)."[122] For Adorno this "is what is reflected in the doctrine of the block; it is a kind of metaphysical mourning, a kind of memory of what is best, of something that we must not forget, but that we are nevertheless compelled to forget."[123] O'Connor concludes: "[m]emory is the preservation of a kind of knowledge, one that we struggle with, since it is at the margins of what we can conventionally know: it is threatened by an allegedly rational knowledge of the object."[124]

The *Four Circle Paintings*, four of them individually made with pigment dense oil paint in either red, blue, yellow or green are notably bold in colour. I have previously referred to their namable colours, from the tube as (readymade) signs for colour, or colour as language, but this distinction of rational and non-aesthetic knowledge,

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[121] Jacques Rancière, 'What Aesthetics can mean' translated by Brian Holmes *From an Aesthetic Point of View* Ed. Peter Osborne, Serpent's Tail, 2000, p.18 This quote is similar to Philip Guston's "What I always try to do is eliminate, as much as possible, the time span between thinking and doing. The ideal is to think and do at the same second, the same split second." 'Philip Guston Talking' in *Philip Guston: Paintings 1969-80* The Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1982, p. 55.
[122] Brian O'Connor, 'Adorno on the Destruction of Memory', in *Memory: Histories, Theories, Debates*, eds. Susannah Radstone and Bill Schwarz, Fordham University Press, 2010 p. 141.
[123] Theodore W. Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Rodney Livingstone, Cambridge: Polity, 2001, p. 176.
[124] Brian O'Connor, 'Adorno on the Destruction of Memory' pp. 141-142.

according to Adorno, requires a compulsion to forget. Each colour, as it is in itself, is beyond "our categories of understanding and forms of intuition".[125] Adorno writes that the "block" "is encapsulated in the idea that the totality that the mind is just able to encompass is no more than the fact that as *mind* it is *unable* to comprehend the totality; but that it somehow contrives after all to comprehend what it does not comprehend and the fact that it cannot comprehend it."[126]

What I learned from the experience of making these paintings—from selecting and buying the paint, to applying it to the primed linen surface, to seeing it in the patterns designated by the stencils, and finally in the gallery exhibition—was that what I had made and what I proceeded to see were incompatible. The colour, as it is in itself, beyond my rational declaration *as language*, is unknowable. The experience of this gap, what I strive to comprehend but cannot comprehend, is what I take to be a "block". For me, this experience—an aggravation of painting as merely a type of sign—is the pleasure of the work.

However, isn't the experience I speak of attributable to painting generally, or at least any monochromatic surface? Isn't it *automatic* of (coloured) paint? Stanley Cavell writes,

> of an artistic medium as an "automatism" … due first to the sense
> that when such a medium is discovered, it generates new
> instances: not merely makes them possible, but calls for them, as if
> to attest that what has been discovered is indeed something more
> than a single work could convey. Second, the notion of
> automatism codes the experience of the work as "happening of
> itself." In a tradition, the great figure knows best how to activate
> its automatisms, and how best to entice the muse to do most of
> the work.*127*

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[125] Ibid p. 141.
[126] Theodore W. Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason.*
[127] Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed* Harvard University Press, 1971, pp. 103-108.

For Cavell the medium provides possibilities that occur automatically, a direct result of its existence. Medium itself generates "new instances: not merely makes them possible, but calls for them" artists subsequently realise the calls. In this way—concurring with Bois when he writes of *Painting As Model,* insinuating that painting can be used as a structure to think through—painting is itself an *automatic* system that artists use (or are used by) until its 'calls' are fulfilled.[128]

Handmade Colour Pictures

In 2016 eight oil paintings, using a similar stencil technique, and of various sizes all smaller than the *Four Circle Paintings*, were exhibited at the Approach Gallery in London under the above title, which described the imagery directly, bringing attention to the work as *pictures* (Plates. 10—23). The pictures were made by hand and not photographically, meant only to differentiate the type of picture on display, not to argue a hierarchy.

Velazquez and Manet had both made hunting portraits depicting men with guns and dogs, and I took those works as starting points. My pictures were not so much portraits, as frozen narratives the experience of which emphasised the importance of questioning rather than the reply. The questions I was asking regarded the ambiguity of the picture structure: how we read the pictorial location of each motif and the relations between them; relations that are both, spatial, and part of a subjectively constructed narrative. For example, (Fig. 19) where is the dog in relation to the fence, gun and leaf and what is the relationship between the dog and the person, what do they represent and how do they correlate as actors? The figurative depiction, which has "similarities with 'how to' guides, illustrated instructions and children's books" is also significant in terms of designating the pictures as signs.[129] By

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[128] Ibid p. 107.
[129] All quotes are from the press release to the exhibition. See Malik Al-Mahrouky, (2016) 'Stuart Cumberland: Handmade Colour Pictures' *The approach,* available from https://theapproach.co.uk/exhibitions/handmade-colour-pictures/press-release/ [accessed 16 Jan 2018].

keeping these questions as questions, and not allowing the signifiers to settle, my aim, not unlike my *paintings* before, was to make an "experience of meaning".

The 'hunt' had become of interest to me because of its parallels with making pictures by trapping images. After all, the picture is an image held in place—captured—by medium or media. Hunting also prioritises looking, necessary too for the making and seeing of a picture. The idea of hunting first germinated in relation to the fruitful rivalry between painting and photography. Highlighting a relation between painting and photography Jeff Wall has written:

> Acts of composition are the property of the tableau. In
> [photographic] reportage, the sovereign place of composition is
> retained only as a sort of dynamic of anticipatory framing, a
> "hunter's consciousness," the nervous looking of a "one-eyed cat,"
> as Lee Friedlander put it.[130]

By comparison my pictures were deliberately slow and undynamic, the emphasis instead placed on a contrived compositional relation between simple components taken from an accessible pictorial vernacular of characters. A dog motif is repeated most often, functioning for me as signifier of: prior (hunting) portraits, loyalty, senses (such as smell and taste) and instinct; something arguably lost to humans. As reviewer Moran Sheleg wrote:

> Hiding, seeking, touching and feeling all become linked through
> the animal, who doubles as a locus of perception and a loaded
> historical symbol of fidelity, death and the hunt.[131]

As an exhibition each picture took a fragmentary place in a series that, unlike the previous *Four Circles* exhibition, limited by a set number of (not black) primary colours, could have no certain end point with regards to quantity. If we read from

[130] Jeff Wall, 'Marks of Indifference', in *Reconsidering the Object of Art, 1965-1975*, p. 249.
[131] 'Stuart Cumberland: Handmade Colour Pictures', The Approach, London, Reviewed by Moran Sheleg in *Journal of Contemporary Painting*, Volume 4 Number 1, 2018.

left to right the images began with a seated dog beside two spatially ambiguous objects; a bike and a foot (Fig. 18.)

Figure 18.
Dog with Foot and Blue Bike, 2016, Oil on Linen, 130x95cm

For me this image relates to absence and an idea of the artwork as a replacement, prosthesis or surrogate (for the body). Ben Lewis had noted this theme in earlier paintings from 2009 when he wrote "these pictures are a representation of the most primary human sensations of loss and return."[132] The bike insinuates an absent figure; the bike *rider* and owner of the dog that loyally stands guard like an impromptu bike lock. As before aesthetic (formalist) pleasure is maintained in the application of paint and notably non-representational use of colour. Figure and

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[132] See Ben Lewis (2009), Stuart Cumberland: Comma 10 Essay' *1pdf.net*, available from https://1pdf.net/stuart-cumberland-comma-10-essay-by-ben-lewis_5853b414e12e89c8061d3c3f [accessed 5 Nov 2018]

ground relationships are also consistently confused through the use of a black outline that often overlaps and continues beyond the point where they make spatial sense, in front of an object that is itself in front (see for example Fig. 27.)
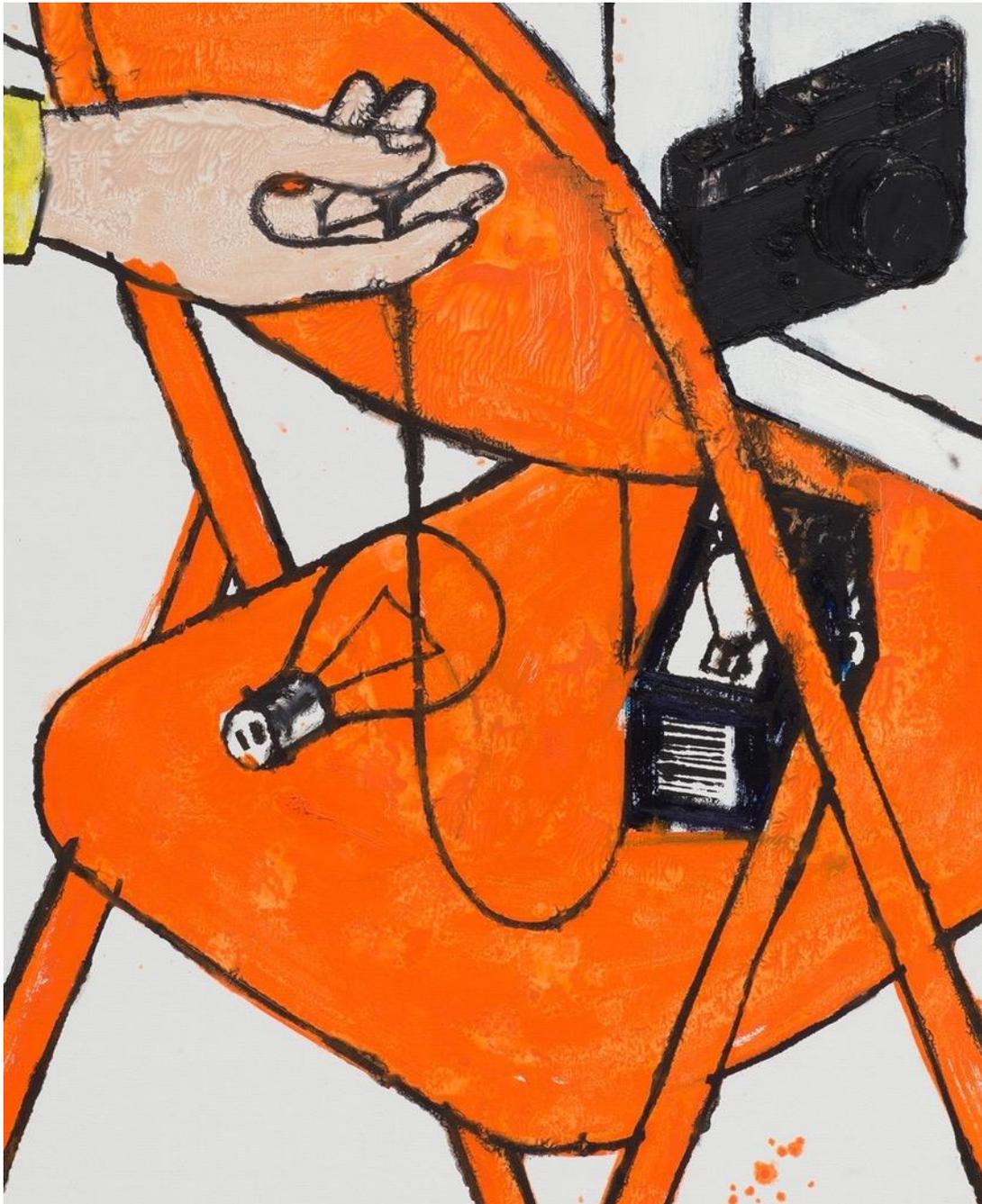

Figure 19. Detail of Plate. 23 *How to Change a Lightbulb—Orange Chair*

In the next picture (Fig. 20) comprising a four part grid of outdoor and hunt related motifs; the leaf that is logically in front of the gun barrel is overlapped by the black paint spatially behind it, creating an impression that the leaf is on the same plane, or buried within the barrel. The outline that marks the edge of the fence as it relates to the head is almost a cut out that the head could be perfectly placed within. And the dogs head looms spatially forward, over the fence that it is (possibly) behind, with its tongue potentially dribbling onto the figure below.
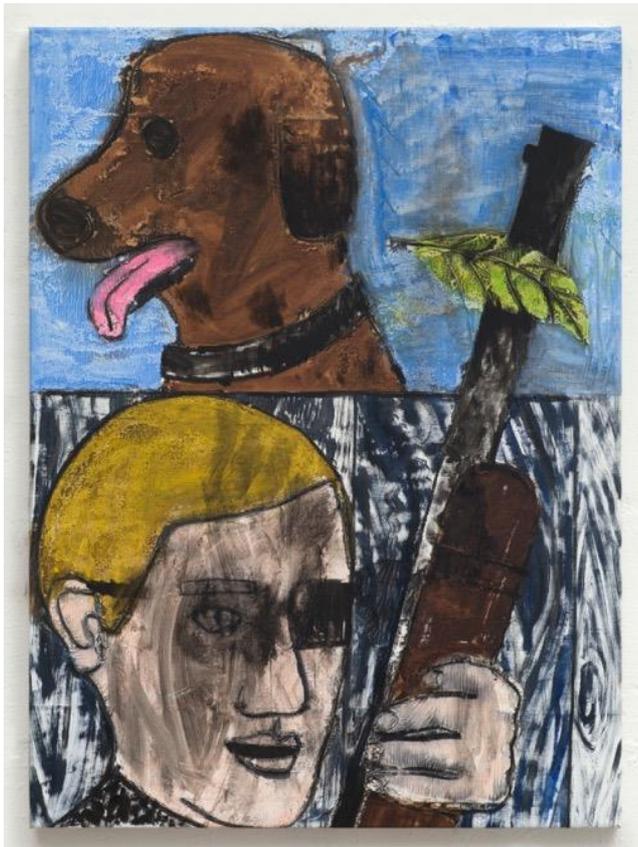
Figure 20.

Brown Dog and Man with Gun, 2015, Oil on Linen, 75x55cm

How do all of these elements relate? Spatially and as characters what is aware of what? Do the dog and person see one another? Are they victims of (a poorly realised) pictorial space, that in its intentional flattening and flaunting of figure/ground relations, creates problems for their designated roles; for the person to hunt undetected, for the dog to guard? Many of these playful characteristics continue from picture to picture. Next in the show was a pair of paintings clearly

made from the same design and stencil (Figs. 21, 22). Unlike earlier work I had begun to vary layers and started these two works by drawing through the stencil onto the primed linen surface with charcoal. As I proceeded to paint the stencil could be re-used with rollered paint to re-establish an outline and keep the two images practically identical. Again, absence is a theme, the *real* cat is obviously lost. Not only are figure and ground relations confused but the two guns—which mark an authoritarian 'X', an out-of-bounds exclusion—clearly violate a realistic spatial logic. The tree stump is cut while the lemon may yet be cut by the correctly foreshortened knife, an obvious reference to the still life genre.

Figure 21.

Tree Stump at Night, 2015, Oil on Linen, 140x100cm

Figure 22.

Tree Stump by Day, 2014, Oil on Linen, 140x100cm

The image started from Manet's *Pertuiset* Portrait (Fig. 10), in particular by extracting and completing the rifle. Gober's *Melted Rifle* (Fig. 23) was a further touchstone as I methodically reworked the image design in charcoal, before commencing to cut out the final stencil image (Figs. 24—29).

Figure 23.

Robert Gober, *Melted Rifle*, 2006, Plaster, paint, cast plastic, beeswax, walnut, lead.

Figure 24. Charcoal on Paper

Figure 25. Charcoal on Paper

Figure 26. Charcoal on Paper

Figure 27. Charcoal on Paper

Figs 24 to 29 showing chronological working drawings (2014) for *Tree Stump*
pictures. All equal in size to final paintings approx. 140x100cm.

Figure 28. Charcoal on Paper   Figure 29. Charcoal on Paper (Final Image)
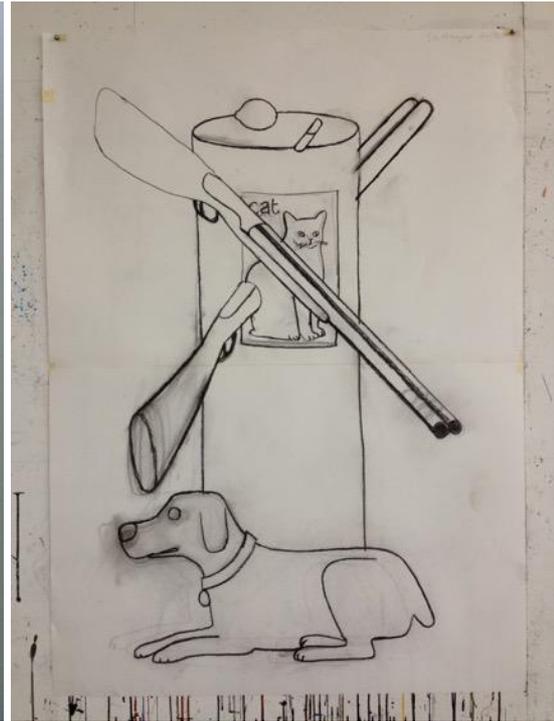
The following picture continues with similar techniques and the theme of absence. If I insist on this theme it is for good reason and I recognise its significance in my earlier paintings that employed the stencil as a type of mechanical means. Through such means the artist—myself—can be at a remove from making the final painting; the task can effectively be 'hired out'. Although the particularities of my paintings do not make this wholly practical, there is, I would argue, an insinuation of the artist as absent. My curiosity here regards the demands an audience places on art to provide access to the artist (body) through the work. In this picture (Fig. 30) the figure is, in plain view, 'hiding' behind the grey paint. The same grey paint that renders the figure and ground as virtually flat, and the dog sightless. The idea of the "formless" is raised in this instance as both the figure/ground relationship and sight are cancelled by an effective monochrome.[133] However, two important senses, especially for detecting feet, remain visible.

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[133] Bois and Krauss, *Formless: A User's Guide*, Zone Books, 1997.

Figure 30.

Hiding, 2015, Oil on Linen, 155x110cm

Of the same dimension, the next picture and continuing with the five senses, came
to define the exhibition, partly because it was used for the show promotion (Fig. 31.)
This picture is perhaps the most complex and ambiguous of the set. An androgynous
figure that is hiding, or hunting, or both. Or are they simply looking through a hole?
A hole which reappears above the head like a cartoon thought bubble, depicting
what is seen (in the head of the figure) through the hole. Or is it an actual hole in the
painting ground behind which the dog senses? The central character was devised as
a reflection on introversion and shyness, corresponding with how we look at
pictures, in so far as we see them but are not reciprocally seen. The rifle, which
clearly has a metaphorical and dreamlike existence as an extension of the figure's

shoulder, provokes a question: what do we when we have found what we are looking for, and once we have seen it? Like a hunter, the task of a picture maker is capture and not necessarily with due ethical care; in fact, the two are often incompatible.

Figure 31.
Looking Through a Hole, 2015, Oil on Linen, 155x110cm

The experience of this picture, with its dream-like imagery, is dependent on visual metaphor, in so far as unlike more finite—plain—analogies, an interpretation cannot be fixed by either author or viewer. The metaphor creates a resemblance by implication and does not have a literal meaning or specific content. As such, the compilation of elements that form the picture may (or may not, dependent upon a

lack in either the viewer or the work) be experienced like the joke form; by affect and not logic.
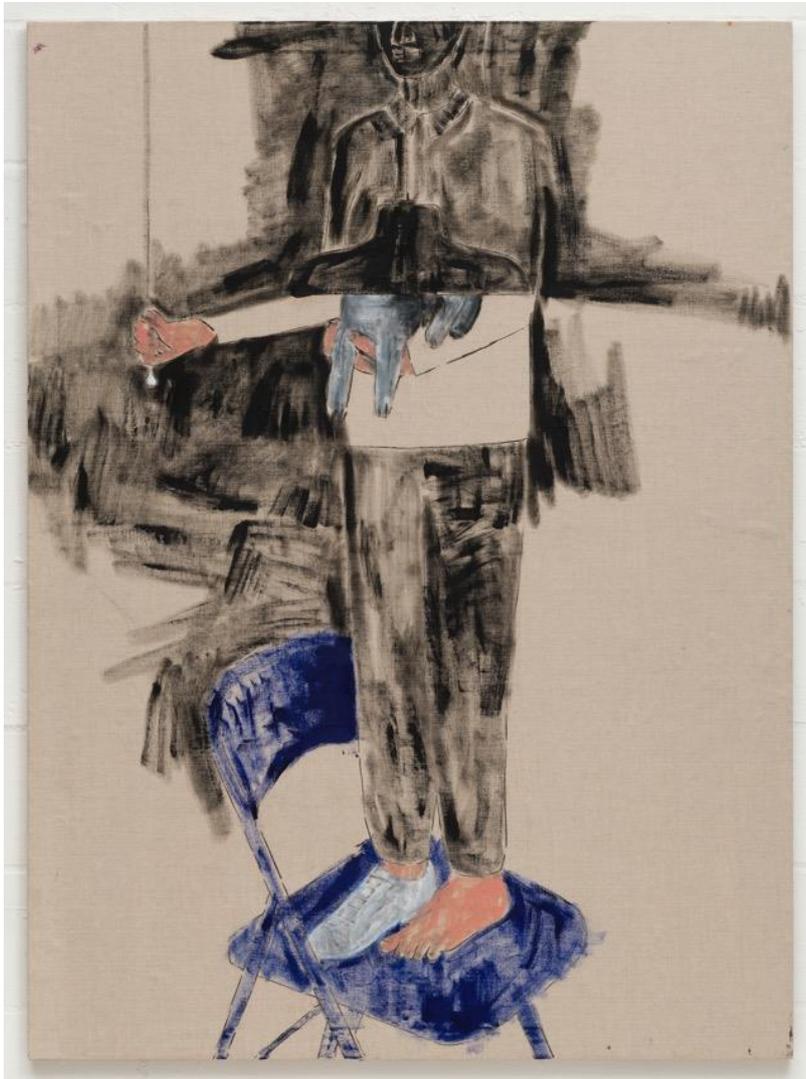
Figure 32.

How to Change a Lightbulb, 2015, Oil on Linen, 155x110cm

The pictures continue with the same type of metal folding chair that I was using for its modern simplicity, because I use them in my studio, and its painted surface, which adapts easily to being represented in mono-chrome. The first picture (Fig. 32) derives from a fascination with paintings by Francis Bacon, in which I had previously shown very little interest. For a variety of reasons, but mostly because Picasso had so dominated the figure in modern art, I have found it difficult to make an image of

the face and head. Many of my paintings use other diversions such as sunglasses or hiding behind fences to avoid tackling facial representation. In the preparation for this picture I had wanted to make a portrait of a figure next to an *empty* chair, much like many of the female portraits by Velazquez, once again the theme of absence being key. I continually failed to be able to make a new version of this type of picture but by an aversive tactic, standing the figure on the chair instead of beside it, thereby forcing their head out of the frame and beyond the requirement to render, I was able to solve a figurative problem. The cat reappeared in this image alongside a notable ambiguity regarding the figure's motivations and intentions, which echoed a dark humour that could be followed through the show.

Figure 33.

How to Change a Lightbulb—Blue Chair, 2016, Oil on Linen, 102x71cm

The final work, including the same folding chair, is a type of still life (Fig. 33). Its illustrational simplicity contrasts with the materiality of its crudely painted surface,

manifesting an objecthood that cannot be seen concurrently with it as a picture. The camera, something a painter, depending on their outlook, might take as either ally or enemy, appears to me to be an interesting object to use as a model for pictorial self-consciousness, or meta-pictures. Jasper Johns has said "I think seeing a picture is one thing and interpreting it is another."[134] In his pictures he explicitly makes this thought manifest through use of the duck/rabbit image. The perception of this image gets to the core of my own interest in presence and absence, the theme of which I have used repeatedly.[135] To look at a painting and see an object is to not see its pictorial dimension, while to see it pictorially is to not see its objecthood. As W.J.T. Mitchell writes:

> an image cannot be seen as such without a paradoxical trick of
> consciousness, an ability to see something as "there" and "not
> there" at the same time. When a duck responds to a decoy, or
> when birds peck at the grapes in the legendary paintings of Zeuxis,
> they are not seeing images: they are seeing other ducks, or real
> grapes–things in themselves, and not images of the things. [136]

Famously, the duck/rabbit cannot be seen as both rabbit and duck instantaneously, one is always absent in the other's presence. The motif in this case can be said to be meta because it refers to the way a picture is seen as a picture or (painting) object, the way consciousness switches between "there" and "not there".

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[134] Kirk Varnedoe (ed.) *Jasper Johns: Writings, Sketchbook Notes, Interviews*, p. 97.
[135] Freud gave thought to such ideas, most notably through his observations of the *Fort/Da* game but it is not in the scope of this commentary to add a psychoanalytical speculation. Sigmund Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay, Vintage, 1995, p. 599.
[136] W.J.T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology,* p. 17.

Conclusion

What is Postconceptual Painting?

Conceptual art, recognising aesthetics as insufficient, no longer gave priority to the human reception of the artwork. Art could be a type of information without necessary concern for its (human) use value and in so being conceptual art fulfilled Ortega's definition of modern art as de-humanised. For many this destination was a throwing out of the baby with the bathwater and a subsequent 'cry' for the human subject corralled a painting 'return'.[137] Contrary to an actual *return* to 'painting' some postconceptual artists, acknowledging that any material can be used to realise ideas, use paint(ing) "as a means" but they do so with doubt, denying painting's essence outside of history. In relation to conceptual art that asks, 'what is art?', 'is this art?' or proposes 'this is art' postconceptual painting uses the priority historically given to painting (as the former metonym for art), as a proposal, asking: is this *representation* of painting—in the absence of its specificity as painting— art?[138] Through this form of self-critique postconceptual painting is effectively a second order representation, a type of generic sign. However, I argue that what is significant for art is how an intentional anthropomorphism and materiality conspire

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[137] John Yau, (2017) 'David Reed Did Not Go Along with Those Who Threw the Baby Out with the Bathwater' *Hyperallergic*, available from https://hyperallergic.com/360956/painting-paintings-david-reed-1975-gagosian-2017/ [accessed 26 July 2017]. Although Reed *continued* to paint rather than returned.

[138] For painting as *metonym* see Peter Osborne, 'The Distributed Image' p. 137.

to aggravate this semiotic form. The dream-like work of the joke or metaphor, which cannot be reduced to a specific meaning without a remainder, is equally vexing.

Recognising a reactionary humanism taken up by 'painting' as a 'return' I have made paintings that intentionally negate a number of subjective motivations. In so doing I have used strategies from Pop and Conceptual Art such as: mechanisation, an erosion of art and non-art boundaries through the use of an everyday image vernacular, for example the benday dot and clean (non-abject) colours that avoid notions of elevated expression; a willed 'withholding' that vindicates painting within conventional material limits for the sake of pragmatism; and a use of appropriation to represent selected tropes of painting (mastery, gesture and authenticity to name the most obvious). Properties of scale, size, materiality and colour have been maintained as aesthetic values to exert pressure on the antinomic axis of knowledge as known and as felt. I have come to recognise contradictions in my willed *withholding* (from a more expanded and anti-aesthetic painting) that I share with other painters who strive to avoid the problems of painting as a return. However, a desire to see, and an experience of meaning through vision, motivates me to retain aesthetics at the expense of adhering to that same humanism that 'return' painting uses as an alibi.

Within the logic of postconceptual (painting) production is a modernist reversal. If modernist painters endlessly asked which conventions can a painting dispense with and still be regarded a painting, they were able to do so because they could take painting for granted. After conceptual art, in post medium conditions—that J. Bernstein calls 'the absence of painting', because 'painting' collapsed as self-validating and can no longer be taken for granted—every artwork proceeds without medium based assumptions and conceptually the work validates decisions of medium and form.[139] Instead of working from a knowledge of painting's existence and *dispensing* with conventions, I have worked from a position of absence and doubt by methodically *acquiring*.

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[139] J. M. Bernstein, see 'Introduction: (Late) Modernism' in *Against Voluptuous Bodies: Adorno's Late Modernism and the Meaning of Painting*.

Bois might have called a postconceptual obsession with an absent medium, which is not the same as a medium that has not (yet) existed, a "manic mourning".[140] More recently, continuing the theme and not without a sense of irony, what has been interpreted as attempts to reanimate a dead, or *absent*, medium—making it 'undead'—have been labelled *Zombie Formalism*. If my *Four Circle Paintings* ask which conventions of painting can be used without the outcome necessarily being regarded as painting, there is some overlap with ideas expressed by Raphael Rubinstein in his description of 'Provisional Painting'. Rubinstein writes if "one could measure provisionality in painting, then Michael Krebber would probably score off the charts."[141] Krebber, whose paintings are sketchy at best, fits the 'provisional' pattern in-so-far as there is a self-conscious contempt towards painting in which one discovers a perverse place of high esteem for the medium. A kind of (oedipal) complex.

From One Complex to Another

With diverse ambitions and through different strategies Pop and Conceptual art provided both a critique of and alternatives to the agonistic artwork that traces a struggle as it seeks its completion, such as in the work of Matisse and Pollock. Postconceptual painting, in so far as it requires consistent self-validation to re-use painting, *returns* to that agonistic place on a rational level, whilst simultaneously denying (human) struggle in terms of manual practice and process. Mechanical techniques and processes that avoid the human touch have proved to be the most conspicuous methods for the artist making paintings after conceptual art. In so doing they intentionally deny that human experience should reassume its place at the centre of art and that painting is uniquely equipped for such a task. Common to the methods listed is a contradictory wavering between art as logical and sensible

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[140] Bois, 'Painting: The Task of Mourning' in *Painting as Model*, p. 243.
[141] Raphael Rubinstein, (2009) 'Provisional Painting' *Art in America*, available from https://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/magazines/provisional-painting-raphael-rubinstein/ [accessed 19 June 2017]

knowledge. By making paintings of paintings, postconceptual artists self-manufacture a type of readymade in the place of Duchamp's notorious——hands-off——*nomination*. Such work fits the label of generic painting in contradistinction to specific or *real* painting, that I position with the return painter and their audience who seek a unique work with the promise of authenticity. However, a contradictory humanism runs through postconceptual painting in so far as the work denies subjectivity and aesthetics on one level, whilst continuing to relate to the human subject in terms of its materiality, experience, size and processes of making, on another. If aesthetics and humanism are intentionally held at a distance their repression is ultimately undone and they return. I call this postconceptual painting's humanist complex.

No Return

The 'return' I have been using centres on: a re-use of paint after conceptual art has itself become the historical norm; and whether painting is intended with a small 'p' or capital 'P'. My work contributes to the horizons of postconceptual art practice by attempting to use painting whilst simultaneously de-stabilising efforts to 'return' painting as a self-validating medium. In short, the bi-polar spectrum I have outlined claims that while postconceptual painting doubts and even denies painting's existence, 'return' painting insists and even relies on it. Duchamp's observation, that paintings are readymades——because painting is recognised by the museum which grants it an exclusive department, and simply on a more practical level, paintings are constructed from mass produced and shop bought components——has become a mainstay. Greenberg's complaint, that "Duchamp is actually an academic artist who takes the *medium of art* too much for granted," is oddly similar to a postmedium critique of painting.[142]

I have as critical target any work that takes painting for granted or attempts to reposition painting as art. I 'return' to Smithson's conclusion that regards 'painting'

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[142] My emphasis. Graham Harman, 'Greenberg, Duchamp, and the Next Avant-Garde' in *Speculations. Aesthetics in the 21ˢᵗ Century,* Askin et al. (eds.), Punctum Books, 2014, p. 259.

as "not an *end,* but a *means*" at odds with McCarthy's authentic 'Painter' who, in the throes of a tantrum, summons the medium to validate his work as art by maniacally repeating the mantra that he is *fucking painting, fucking painting, fucking painting*. Fourteen years separate the quotes that open this text and the same period divides McCarthy's depressed *Painter* from David Joselit's essay 'Painting Beside Itself', in which he argues that painting must raise awareness of the social, political or historical realities that support it. Painting cannot just be (autonomous) things on walls the "whole network is important!"[143]

Why to Paint.

Given the current abundance of painting, the urgency suggested by Lawson's title 'Last Exit: Painting' is no longer so pressing. However, I think his argument, that painting has value in its distance from dominant media, retains validity. Painting, as a technologically outmoded medium because of the skill it requires for realistic depiction, is practically useless as a contemporary popular form. It is not used at all for advertising which is the most conspicuous place of capitalist ideology as experienced visually. Lawson's point is that painting, at a distance from new technology and dominant media in its popular formats, retains a reflective space for engaged contemplation, rather than a passive, partial and incoherent perception generated by the visual world as colonized by an increasingly invasive 'attention economy'.

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[143] David Joselit, 'Painting Beside Itself' p. 125. Joselit's argument was given a larger stage through the exhibition *Painting 2.0*. See Ammer, Hochdörfer and Joselit, (eds.) *Painting 2.0 Expression in the Information Age*, Museum Brandhorst, MUMOK, Delmonico Books, 2016. Crimp similarly asks, "What makes it possible to see a painting *as a painting?*" 'The End of Painting' in *On the Museum's Ruins,* p. 87. Both Joselit and Crimp use Buren as central to their respective thesis.

Reconsidering the Object of Pictures [144]

By 2012, the strategies I have outlined of a postconceptual use of painting were so clearly established that an international multiplicity of artists were using its methods, rendering it virtually an academy. This coincided with my own frustrations and eventual exhaustion necessitating a reappraisal of ambitions, leading me from 'painting' to 'pictures'. As I set out with the *Handmade Pictures* exhibition I shifted focus "in an attempt to circumnavigate the medium specific concerns of painting". Of course, the results were paintings too, the medium is distinguishable from the image and has significance in its selection and use, but pictures and paintings are not identical, most notably in their denial or emphasis of the image.

The generic painting—no longer a real painting—is a type of object. De Duve argues that Duchamp recognised he could 'nominate' objects to contextually assume the place of painting. Once in this 'assuming the place of' form, the pictorial aspect of painting is jettisoned, while its 'objecthood' is promoted. In other words, the generic painting, devalues its illusionistic dimension and is therefore—on the level that is significant for it as postconceptual art—pictorially lacking. The attention I have given is to that split which divides painting as both object and pictorial, and that generic painting in its logic as sign, is unable to contain. Generic painting, as a type of object, could not offer me the potential, the "there" and "not there" duality, because of the insufficiency it apportions to its pictorial dimension. Whether to its credit or detriment, the object as a *thing*, is only "there", it has no "not there" duality. Duchamp's *Etant Donne* is fascinating in this regard because by placing the scene behind peepholes, effectively creating a single vantage point—like a picture—he denied its objecthood. A continued fascination with painting has led me to follow its pictorial qualities over its 'objecthood'.

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[144] This sub-heading is taken from Goldstein and Rorimer's exhibition *Reconsidering the Object of Art, 1965-1975*. Page 13 of the catalogue notes that the "most salient characteristic of this exhibition is the *absence* of painting on canvas . . . the traditional object of art." My emphasis.

Backing up this object and picture argument, the *Four Circle Paintings*, that I am positioning as generic and hence as object with a proportionally diminished pictorial dimension, did not engage the same type of visual attention from work to work as the *Pictures*. In so far as the *Four Circle Paintings* are a type of serially repeated semiotic representation, despite their intentional formalist aesthetic, I found the engagement with the pictures to be a more satisfying one. The move I made away from painting opened out a breadth of picture making as it exists historically and across a diversity of media. I used the categorical transition to explore—as meta pictures—the hunt as allegory of painting, looking, love and loyalty. This shift opened a generous space to play with two components of the picture: the spatial relations of figure and ground; and the narrative relativity between the motifs (or actors) in the composition that could be further affected by the former spatial dimension. By intentional reference to the theme of absence and presence, and a conscious mental switching between seeing the pictorial condition of "there" and "not there" I have continued to place attention on the "*experience* of meaning" as important for the artwork in its distinction from semantic interpretation of the sign form, a distinction that is enhanced by anthropomorphic and material values derived from allusions to the human body.

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DVDs

Philip Guston: A Life Lived (1980). Directed by Michael Blackwood. [DVD]. USA: Michael Blackwood Productions

Exhibition Appendix

i.

Stuart Cumberland

Four Circle Paintings

The Approach, London , UK

24 June — 31 July 2011

https://theapproach.co.uk/exhibitions/stuart-cumberland-3/images/

List of Works:

Ron Hickman, 2010, Oil on Linen, 195x160cm (Figure 6)

Ingrid Pitt, 2010, Oil on Linen, 195x160cm (Figure 7)

Leslie Nielsen, 2010, Oil on Linen, 195x160cm (Figure 10)

Andy Irons, 2010, Oil on Linen, 195x160cm (Figure 12)

Press Release:

Stuart Cumberland is a great painter. However, as brilliant as he may be, a good painter is like a fluent speaker of an obscure language, on holiday in the U.S. Ultimately someone's going to ask "D'ya speak English?". If communication requires the use of dominant currencies of cultural exchange, then celebrity and mass consumption have become such dominant currencies.

Sidestepping without ignoring these topics, the "Four Circle Paintings" in this exhibition take up the debates of the art historical legacy of painting, which has wrestled with the above for over a century. Whilst adopting techniques and attitudes related to commercial acumen and mass production these new abstract paintings take simple visual pleasure as their target.

This solo exhibition, Cumberland's third at The Approach, consists of four single colour paintings of four hand drawn circles. The gestural drawing and rapid colouring in that are rendered using stencil techniques, perfectly hold in balance a tension between the handmade and the mechanical. Many of the lazy basic human desires to decadently slob around, piss, dribble and drip everywhere have been processed and mediated into these elegant paintings, that Cumberland refers to as 'posh ornaments'.

Catalogue:

Stuart Cumberland

Four Circle Paintings

Published by: Approach Gallery

Designed by: Fraser Muggeridge Studio

ISBN: 978-0-09555331-1-2

A 32 page catalogue of fourteen full colour reproductions of the (four) paintings from the exhibition and ten additional *Four Circle* painted works. Also includes a text transcript of Jake Miller of The Approach in conversation with Stuart Cumberland, May 2011.

ii.

Stuart Cumberland

Handmade Colour Pictures

The Approach, London , UK

10 July — 7 August 2016

https://theapproach.co.uk/exhibitions/handmade-colour-pictures/images/

List of Works:

Dog with Foot and Blue Bike, 2016, Oil on Linen, 130x95cm (Figure 18)

Brown Dog and Man with Gun, 2015, Oil on Linen, 75x55cm (Figure 19)

Tree Stump at Night, 2015, Oil on Linen, 140x100cm (Figure 20)

Tree Stump by Day, 2014, Oil and Charcoal on Linen, 140x100cm (Figure 21)

Hiding, 2015, Oil on Linen, 155x110cm (Figure 22)

Looking Through a Hole, 2015, Oil on Linen, 155x110cm (Figure 23)

How to Change a Lightbulb, 2015, Oil on Linen, 155x110cm (Figure 24)

How to Change a Lightbulb—Blue Chair, 2016, Oil on Linen, 102x71cm (Figure 25)

Press Release:

The Approach is pleased to present *Handmade Colour Pictures*, British artist Stuart Cumberland's (b. 1970, Wokingham, UK) fourth solo exhibition at the gallery. On show is a new body of work that displays a significant departure for the artist, which can be understood simply as a change from the making of paintings to the making of

pictures. Cumberland refers to the works presented as 'handmade pictures,' in an attempt to circumnavigate the medium specific concerns of painting and instead examine the field of picture making and the human drive to look.

As a point of inspiration, Cumberland's pictures give a referential nod to hunting portraits by Édouard Manet and Diego Velázquez, wherein both artists depicted men intentionally posed with firearms and animals. Cumberland reinterprets these compositions and reimagines the poses with fresh impetus using newly formed figures, bold flat colour and an undertone of dark humour.

Questionable pleasures that Cumberland is thinking about through self-conscious picture making include looking, hiding, hunting, loving and killing. The works have similarities with 'how to' guides, illustrated instructions and children's books, yet despite their apparent simplicity the images pick-up upon, continue and intelligently play with a history of picture making.

A new inventory of motifs for Cumberland including dogs, guns, cameras, leafs and chairs produce a sense of narrative mystery. Across all of the works is an engagement with the tragicomic, leaving the viewer to slip between the sub-narratives and contemplate the possible connections. Propositions, such as the sitter stood on the chair replacing a light bulb, a fragmented arm shooting a camera or a free-floating rifle are left unanswered.

Peeling back at these graphically rendered motifs, Cumberland investigates ideas of psychoanalysis, voyeurism and of the Benthemian notion of the watcher watching. For instance, *Looking Through a Hole* asks what is it to be watched yet unaware. This controlled tension is also visited in *How to Change a Lightbulb – Blue Chair*, with the mounted camera positioned ready to photograph, yet again there is an absence of any visible photographer or subject. The viewer becomes a participant unravelling and constructing the clues of these unexplained moments, narratives and objects caught in action with no resolve. The pictures are laden with clues but interpretation is slippery and as elusive as the moment between waking and sleeping. While they hint at potential happenings these new pictures reveal no certainty of anything at all.

The exhibition was subsequently reviewed in:

Journal of Contemporary Painting

Volume 4, Number 1

Stuart Cumberland: Handmade Colour Pictures

The Approach, London, 10 July—7 August 2016

Reviewed by Moran Sheleg, University College London.

pp. 219–222

https://www.intellectbooks.co.uk