

Walking with Ghosts: Six Conversations about Painting

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John Spiteri

Boedi Widjaja and Audrey Koh

Christoph Preussmann

Noor Mahnun Mohamed

Moya McKenna

David Jolly

Talking with Jonathan Nichols

CONTENTS

Preface	p. 4
John Spiteri	p. 6
Boedi Widjaja and Audrey Koh	p. 38
Christoph Preussmann	p. 60
Noor Mahnun Mohamed	p. 86
Moya McKenna	p. 118
David Jolly	p. 152
Acknowledgements	p. 188

These conversations originated in thinking about what happened in painting in the last few decades. I put this question to each of the artists I spoke with, except Boedi Widjaja whose art-making started later, deploying it at the outset of each conversation as a means to consider how and why the collective shape of painting during a key period has been relatively undocumented from a contemporary art perspective.

From the beginning of the 1990s and well into the 2000s, there was a kind of unofficial moratorium on painting in the art world, and although this moratorium wasn't uniform, during this period it certainly formed part of the art world experience for me and other painters in Sydney and Melbourne. At one level this was a turn in theoretical framing, with medium-specific discourse giving way to more generalised debate. What is interesting though is that this turn in theory was fortuitous in practice. As I remember it from the perspective of my own studio, the perceived silence around new painting – not to mention the audience, so to speak, “looking the other way” – left room for the development of a more horizontally extended culture of painting. I came to see it as something like a minor scale that only a few were willing to use. For a time, this granted painting a new energy which stayed through to the late 2000s when painting once again experienced a period of resurgence. All this forms the first reason that the following conversations are with painters specifically, rather than with artists more generally.

The second reason for the medium-specificity of these conversations is that painting is a system that seems inexplicable without a foregrounding of the painter's actual experience (of painting) and knowledge (of painting). My own sense is that painting is more like a subject than an object. Paintings are reflexive and generative in similar kinds of ways that other subjects are: they operate not unlike people do in situ – this is the shorthand of it. Paintings have a life or duration independent even of the artist, and while there are certainly wider relations that are shared and distributed, a painting first takes shape around the character of the painter.

Lastly, these conversations follow my own biographical pathway, or overlay. By this I mean that they largely draw from the art worlds of my own experience: Sydney, Melbourne, Kuala Lumpur and Singapore. This quality is particularly important for me. I take advantage of long artist friendships. In this, the conversations themselves are not so different from the verbal back and forth one finds in artists' studios – they roll and circle, are not always definitive, but nonetheless catch and hold affects that might be common to particular zones of practice, not unlike the way paintings do the same.

– Jonathan Nichols

John Spiteri is a painter who has worked in Sydney since the early 1990s. He studied at Goldsmiths College, London, in 1996 and 2002 and completed a Master of Fine Arts at UNSW College of Fine Arts, Sydney, in 2001. Spiteri was born in Sydney in 1967.

This is an edited transcript of a Zoom conversation in April 2019.

Jonathan Nichols:

I'm hoping to look at particular paintings and talk about where these sit in your thinking. I'm interested in how painters are independent and what this means, and the way paintings operate as artworks in different circumstances. I'll try to orientate towards tactics in painting that you might think about as well.

John Spiteri:

Does that mean like how an artist develops a style or something?

JN:

I won't refer to style so quickly. Style is a conversation I don't think we will pursue. The way I am thinking, it's not so much a visual style thing that is interesting as much as how paintings actually operate in certain ways, the doing actions or what we think is going on in painting. That's very broad. Let's try. Three things I'll try to draw out as we talk. These are that sometimes motivations and intentions are clear and very conscious for painters and address specific boundaries or references directly. Another is that sometimes gestures and motives in painting are quite unconscious. There are motives or expectations that are carried along below the surface, or parallel to the main game or something like that. There are feelings that work lower down. The third thing is about how paintings can be shared. Aspects can be shared even in making paintings. There are nested interests that extend beyond the painter.

So we have a little orientation. Can we start with images of *There's No Time*, your 2010 exhibition at the Potter in Melbourne?¹

JS:

Okay.

JN:

I've just dropped an image into the chat [fig. 1.1].

JS:

I can see.

JN:

Last time, there was a point when we were talking about the person you were with in art college in London.² You said – in a few different ways – that it was strange. I scribbled down that you said, “It was falling into this strange way of finding out that.” Do you remember?

JS:

Yes. In the way I stumbled upon her again? She’s someone I knew.



Fig. 1.1. John Spiteri, *Calamity Resist Vs Trans-act* (detail), 2004–09, in *There's No Time*, Ian Potter Museum of Art, Melbourne, 2010

JN:

Yes, accidentally meeting again and you not knowing her, or were not completely aware. It was the feeling you were talking about.

JS:

I'd actually forgotten her name. I'd forgotten her surname and then I thought, is that someone I used to know? It was like a detective's search.

JN:

Did you recognise her work?

JS:

No, I didn't because her work was different then. It just felt like a familiar name. I had to look up the invites of a couple of shows we were in. So, I had to work [at] it. I had to go into my archive and try and piece it together.

Then I realised it was actually her and I saw a picture of her, and I said, “That’s her.” It was kind of weird. I wasn’t looking for her. I think I read her name somewhere by accident. I knew that name but I wasn’t sure. It’s strange. It was a strange way of knowing something.

JN:

Last time we also talked at another point about my very minimal kind of handrail sculpture [fig. 1.2] from the early 1990s in Sydney. I was saying how I wanted to stop doing these kinds of works. Stop being so open to the art world. We had this conversation and a bit of a chit chat between us. My notes have you saying: “Some work you’ve got to be in the right place and the right time.” I think I responded something like, you actually need to be at the top of the industry that runs the art world. We both agreed certain kinds of work really depend exclusively on the art world. They are super dependent on very specific parts of the art world.



Fig. 1.2. Jonathan Nichols, *Handrail*, 1992, in *Genuflexion*, WINDOW, Sydney, 1992

JS:

It’s like a ballerina rail, isn’t it?

JN:

I just called it a handrail, it’s open. It’s a handrail. But yes, in the environment that I had, it looked like a dancing rail, because it was flat against the wall.

JS:

Yes, but it didn't have a mirror, so, with the mirror that would have set it off.

JN:

It would that's true. It could be a banister rail as well.

JS:

It was ambiguous.

JN:

I was talking about how Jeff Gibson had these really awkward reactions to it. He associated it with another artist's work.

JS:

He was dismissive.

JN:

Yes. He really was. It put me right off. I've realised too who the other person was who made the doppelganger handrail, not that I've ever seen it but I'm sure it was. It was David O'Halloran.

JS:

When?

JN:

In Adelaide.

JS:

Well then, how did Gibson see yours after, if you were before?

JN:

Because he would have gone to Adelaide around one of the biennials maybe. He didn't see my show. It was later he was visiting the studio building I think and saw images or something like that. But he just sneered. It was such a Sydney attitude as well [*laughs*].

JS:

It was a coincidence?

JN:

At a level. It was a coincidence if our eyes are closed. But the decision I took from that point was not to work in ways that can be so coincidentally overtaken. I couldn't cope or I didn't want to work in a way where I [would] walk out a month later and see somebody else make exactly the same thing thanks to the art world.

JS:

Is that because it was like a readymade or something?

JN:

It is a type of readymade isn't it. An institutional readymade. Not an everyday readymade. And it's such a simple idea really and so I just came to the decision such a simple repeatable idea couldn't help me. I questioned the whole thing around that and what it would mean. Or how willing I was to do that, and I decided I wasn't [willing].

I was reading an interview with German painter Charline von Heyl recently where she says, "Not knowing has long been demystified and become an accepted part of painting's operating system."³ What I took that to mean is that the strange "not-knowing" ways of interconnecting things in art-making are things we actually know quite a lot about. Which I think was what you were getting at – what you were meaning – in raising how strange things are in the first place and in speaking about coming across your London friend the way you did. In the world of painting at least, strange ways of finding out things, the not-knowing ways of painting, are actually part of painting's operating system. They are part of painting but clearly not part of how my *Handrail* was working. Maybe that's the assertion I'm making, to myself at least. Do you see?

JS:

Hasn't it always been like that?

JN:

Yes, possibly, but not all kinds of artwork operate in that way. Paintings do but when you have the contemporary art world in full swing it's not usually systems of not knowing, or looking away or whatever, that come to the surface. I think some responses need the art world, or rely

heavily on the authority of the art world. Whereas, with painting particularly they operate without requiring full data sets or something. They operate a not-knowing system. That's the normal ordinary structure for what is painterly. I read these two works [fig. 1.3] for instance in this way. As though perhaps you composed them from fragments of many things – that you don't have a whole.



Fig. 1.3. John Spiteri, (from left) *Dis-solution*, 2006, and *Army Deserters*, 2010, in *There's No Time*, Ian Potter Museum of Art, Melbourne, 2010

JS:

In relation to what?

JN:

Let's try painting.

JS:

I'm just trying to think about that. They're from a long time ago. So I've forgotten what's going on probably. I know that one on the left was made up because I have a cartoon graveyard.

JN:

A cartoon graveyard.

JS:

Yes, of old stencils.

JN:

Okay?

JS:

They're all layered on top of each other on a sheet of glass. So they have all been buried on top of each other.

JN:

The stencils are on glass?

JS:

I've got a sheet of glass, which is like a shelf. You can see it from underneath.

JN:

Oh, righto.

JS:

Whatever you put on top, you can see from underneath. All the stencils then go onto this piece of glass, and then they layer on top of each other like a mass grave.

JN:

This painting on the left here [*Dis-solution*, 2006 – fig. 1.3]. Did you select sections of stencil?

JS:

All those stencils were used before, but they only got used once, and then they go into the graveyard.

JN:

Do you put glass over the top as well?

JS:

Well, no, the glass is underneath. If you look, you can see what's going on. Just imagine you're at the bottom of the grave hole. People are getting buried on top of you, and you look up and you can see there's all these bodies on top of you.

JN:

One on top of the other.

JS:

Do you know what I mean?

JN:

Yes, yes, I can imagine. And I expect you would see these in the studio that way all the time from below. It makes some sense of the paintings having a similar feeling, of bodies or images pushed up against one another. You said they're cartoons?

JS:

They're not cartoons as in Disneyland. You know how Leonardo da Vinci made cartoons of his paintings?

JS:

Painting cartoons.

JS:

You know like [Da Vinci's painting] *The Madonna of the Rocks* was by cartoon? When I say cartoon, I don't know if that's the right word.

JN:

They're drawings.

JS:

What do you call when you make a drawing of something?

JN:

On paper, it can be a cartoon. It's another word for drawing.

JS:

Yes. Why is it called a cartoon?

JN:

It's probably the original form of use, where cartoon as a word came from.

JS:

Has it changed?

JN:

Cartoon in a media sense these days is just a later variation. The original cartoon is like a model isn't it? The cartoon is like a sketch or draft.

JS:

Like a what?

JN:

It's a draft of a painting.

JS:

Yes, so it's a draft of the figures. So then the figure cartoons transitioned to stencils.

JN:

Okay. The figures are from earlier paintings? Or other drawings or photographs or something?

JS:

The stencils are the figures in earlier paintings.

JN:

I understand. The composition of the painting is construed in this way, recomposing the stencil figures.

JS:

It is. It's been changed a little bit, but the concept of it is right. I can see five paintings in there. Because there are five different stencils in one picture. But they're all from earlier works. They're all being mashed together, kind of thing. They're less who they were, do you know what I mean? I don't make stencils any more, but they're all in this one place that you can see from underneath.

JN:

When did you make stencils on paper?

JS:

I used stencils first for the works with the linen.

JN:
Okay.

JS:
The figures would have to be stick-drawn properly, and then cut out and used as a stencil. It was so that I didn't dirty the linen. I worried about that. You can see on that one the linen is clean. I would have to draw around the stencils and then paint them in carefully.

JN:
Oh, righto.

JS:
I used to have to make very accurate stencils before, and then I'd transfer them to the picture. But I didn't throw the drawings away, they just went into the graveyard. Into the mass grave or whatever you want to call it.

JN:
Yes, I understand.

JS:
I'm sentimental about them. I don't want to destroy them, poor things. I don't.

JN:
The work on the right [*Army Deserters*, 2010 – fig. 1.3] – you used stencils there too?

JS:
All those bits of stencil. But for those I didn't put them in the graveyard. I reconstructed those.

...

JN:
I hope this is not too bizarre, but when we're chatting today I'm hoping we can build up the relations around the work, build up interconnections and the circumstances around your work and yourself. In the early

1990s I remember in Sydney and in Melbourne there was a general trend, early on especially, which in my mind is associated with a punk era thing. It got quite grubby and grunge was a term.⁴ The general art principle I think was to undo or cut down the tropes of earlier generations perhaps. It was to take a cultural trope, or take an idea or whatever and pull it down, as a sort of tactic or critique. In social situations too. Some people would argue a big chunk of modernism was like that, that there was a downward trajectory that was constantly unravelling what was before.⁵ The movement of choice was to deskill not reskill. Deskill-ing gets the airplay as a means to build a commentary and traction. This kind of thinking was familiar. Looking at these two works of yours though, *Dis-solution* and *Army Deserters*, these were a little later in time, but I would say they were operating in a kind of opposite direction. They are not dismantling tropes but remembering or building something up, as opposed to things being pulled down.

JS:
Yes.

JN:
In the context of Sarah Cottier Gallery, for instance, where you've been a long time, in that milieu there are fewer instances of artists that work close to the way you have.⁶ From the early 2000s onwards your works involve building up figurative and pictorial processes. I'm not trying to get away from the idea that these are perhaps fragmentary, but they do cobble together and build pictorial elements. Is this okay so far?

JS:
Okay. So, what's this got to do with the post-punk era?

JN:
Grunge and punk were far more consistent with an idea of undoing things and techniques and debunking. Hany Armanious used that vernacular early on by example. I'm remembering the "shit" work [fig. 1.4] he did that was included in *Wit's End*.⁷



Fig. 1.4. Hany Armanious, *The Witness*, 1992

JS:

But do you mean like arte povera.

JN:

I think with your work it is tactically very different, especially in the context of Sydney and Sarah Cottier. I'm just wanting to be able to realise the arena and the contexts that you were working in and the tactics being played out. I don't think I'd know or have seen much of your early work in London. But the earliest work I saw of yours was never involving conceptual tropes or obviously pulling things down. It has no irony at all, even your later abstract-like paintings. So, it's kind of contrary to readymade influences, even the forms of objective abstraction that are more familiar in Sydney. We can see your work is sort of on this pictorial painterly side of things which is quite a minority. Can we go that far?

JS:

Maybe, a little.

JN:

Some of this is unconscious, some of this is conscious. Some of this is

rhetorical or competitive. I know in Sydney I felt there was more competition for instance than I ever remember in Melbourne. I remember people like Tony Schwensen being very competitive, or even aggressive in ways. That's not a complaint.

JS:

I know what you mean.

JN:

David Jolly would say how he'd go up there and Sydney artists were thinking entirely differently and would pull him up and challenge his Melbourne-style meandering. But what's interesting is you've taken a different course even [from] people you are otherwise very close with. There is much less discussion around that.

JS:

But it's only the people my age because it's different now. There are other artists that are trying to think like that.

JN:

There are younger artists, but in the same circles say?

JS:

But they're not like me. They wouldn't have got this through that period.

...

JN:

Reskilling as an idea is not just a technical idea, based in materials. There are pictorial or painterly criteria.⁸ We've talked about composition slightly. In your work there's an apparent randomness in the – what did you call it – cemetery hole?

JS:

You mean the graveyard [*laughs*].

JN:

The graveyard. There's a randomness I just want to follow through a bit further. Looking at these two paintings [fig. 1.3], what's happening isn't entirely accidental.



Fig. 1.5. John Spiteri, (from left) *Fifi*, *Cabaret*, *Tropic Isle*, *The Reception*, 1995–96, in *There's No Time*, Ian Potter Museum of Art, Melbourne, 2010

JS:

I can't remember how I came up with the one on your right [*Army Deserters*, 2010]. I can't remember.

JN:

As elements, they feel quite privately motivated. They are not rhetorical, or making references.

JS:

Yes, that's true. They are not political.

JN:

There are cultural references though?

JS:

Maybe a bit, the little one on the right. Maybe a little bit, but who knows?

JN:

Yes, but if you said cultural references you'd have historical references.

JS:

Yes, maybe.

JN:

Is there a moment when you start to think about other artists or earlier times?

JS:

This is actually just when the figures are starting to vanish from the paintings. I remember that pink painting [fig. 1.6]. That was the first one.

JN:

The first figure, I remember you saying this once before.

JS:

I can remember you showing at Kaliman [Gallery, Sydney] at about the same time. I did that show at Kaliman with that one, the pink one and the one next to it.



Fig. 1.6. John Spiteri, *Die Another Day*, 2003

JN:

The glass with the wood.

JS:

No, the other one on the other side [*Riviera* – fig. 1.7].

JN:

Okay.

JS:

Before that, I'd done a video show and I wanted to give up video. I was sick of video. In the painting show, I had another – the one with a fountain and a woman in the park [fig. 1.8].



Fig. 1.7. John Spiteri, (from left) *Those Who are Governed by Gravity*, 2006, and *Riviera*, 2004, in *There's No Time*, Ian Potter Museum of Art, Melbourne, 2010

JN:

The one of walking in the park.

JS:

It wasn't the same show as the pink sky painting [fig. 1.6]. But it was made at the same time. I saw that as interesting is what I'm saying. I picked this direction of the pink sky instead of going further with the park one. That's all.

JN:

The pink sky [painting] was the earliest one in that direction that goes towards the stencils. With the park, you've got those architecture elements being involved. What is it?

JS:

You mean the fountain?

JN:

Yes. I always had the sense that was from a –

JS:

That's from a calendar.



Fig. 1.8. John Spiteri, *The Evening of the Day*, 2003

JN:

It was from the calendars you used to keep, the same series of calendars that your family re-use. The Mediterranean calendars.

JS:

The paintings relied on the photos, whereas the later [pink sky paintings] don't.

JN:

The later paintings are freehand or with the cartoons. What happened?

JS:

I didn't want to go on with it. A friend – you wouldn't know her – said to me, you don't need the photos, or something.

JN:

That was an artist friend?

JS:

Yes. Because before that, I was probably using photos a lot.

JN:

You just thought, I don't need the photos any more.

JS:

Relying on the photos. Yes.

...

JN:

You were quite aware that at Sarah Cottier's you were a minority if you like?

JS:

I had a guest show there in 2000, then the gallery shut in 2002.

JN:

Yes. You were with Kaliman for a little bit, one or two shows.

JS:

Yes. When you were there.

JN:

Yes.

JS:

After two shows there, I was available in 2005. Sarah Cottier was starting to re-form in 2006 and reopened in 2007 when I joined.

JN:

I'm just trying to manoeuvre around this diagram that I've made up. I have you sliding down the history side, the non-readymade side, the non-abstract game plan, which we have already discussed. I want to discuss a biographical narrative.

JS:

Yes. Possibly, yes. What about the more recent abstracted work? Do you still see them as figurative?

JN:

I'm generally disinclined to call anything abstract. It looks abstracted when you look at it I suppose. I've learned to descriptively call abstraction "abstract" for ease of reference. Personally, though, I would always look at your work as figurative. I respond to them as figures.

JS:

Another person said this.

JN:

I think in fact we've over-learned the usage of abstraction as a word. For me it was very time-specific in the way that American painting in a certain era was demonstrably abstract and non-representational. But at base, at the kernel if you like, I still don't go with it. Abstraction is abstract only in the sense that such painting sits within the genre and different sub-branches of art history's designation of abstraction. I think it's better to understand painting as a figurative machine. We talked about that last week a little bit. I'm not intending that other people have to buy into it, but I just think the methodology is wrong.

JS:

No, it's fine.

JN:

I think we've all got used to different ways to explain these things. But I think the motives behind painting are not arbitrary.

JS:

You mean it's disingenuous of artists that hold to objective abstraction – [they] are being naive or something?

JN:

I think if too many abstract painters are just playing it off and still thinking they're somehow within the bounds of historical abstraction,

that's a really big struggle to try and pull off right now. It makes little sense and I would just describe motivations in another way.

JS:

I don't know what I think of it when they're being ironic or something.

JN:

Too much painting in Sydney used to play out that way. But I like very much paintings by Stephen Bram for instance. He would speak still about abstraction. And Karl Wiebke is very clear too. There are others who are just good at what they do. I really don't care if something is looking abstract but I just can't use that rhetoric for it these days. Raoul de Keyser's work kind of looks like it's abstract but I don't see it that way at all and thankfully he didn't either.

...

JN:

Can we go back to biography in that same sense of something figurative? In that it burns off the idiosyncratic qualities of subjects and people. I'm not so interested in aggregating cultural meaning, but a subjective biography. Something gets resuscitated in painting at this point, or in the painterly way it comes together. It's not just purely accidental or entirely unconscious. Your paintings are active forms, not negative constructions. They might be composed of fragments, but you're putting things together, inside painting. It's a kind of re-forming. Something historical even, that comes out of the past.

JS:

Maybe. They look a bit symbolist.

JN:

You would say symbolic, or symbolist? The later stencil works.

JS:

A little bit like that. It's that era isn't it?

JN:

Symbolism was linked to the earliest abstraction, wasn't it? In a pure sense?

JS:

I don't know specific people.

JN:

I'm thinking of someone like Vuillard.

JS:

I can't say I was looking at anyone. I don't really look at people and try and do what they do. There's a very complicated filtering.

JN:

I don't think it looks like anyone in particular but I do think when you say it like that I can see what you're saying, [it's] a kind of spirit thing which is where I think symbolism was heading. Do you think about where and how things get acquired like this, from other people and other people's painting? You said you don't look to other generations in any specific way. Is it always haphazard?

JS:

I didn't pick it up by myself. I was influenced by people. It was kind of more coincidental.

JN:

Other artists you knew.

JS:

I reckon there was that. I wanted to get away from the photo and all of that. That was the feeling. There was an artist, but the thing was, I don't know if she made me do it, but I felt it.

JN:

That's slightly strange that you remember it this way.

JS:

I think I wanted someone to say it.

JN:
Okay.

JS:
Because I was getting sick of it. I think it was that. I just think it scared me a bit. Just to try it [painting without a photographic source] out I started doing these sketches.

JN:
The figure itself, is there a model for the figure? Or is it just yourself, do you think? Or just the body shape that you've got a hand on – you've got your hands around this. It isn't more specific?

JS:
Not really, I don't think of it like that. They're more like I can only talk about one painting at a time. It's a problem when you look at them as a whole.

JN:
They drive you nuts.

JS:
Yes [*laughs*]. So, you can't – you can't really talk about them all. You can't generalise about all of them.

JN:
Pick one. The one with the pink sky.

JS:
Right. Okay, we can talk about that. What do you want to know about it?

JN:
So, if you said there was a model?

JS:
Well, actually, I might. The problem is it's prescriptive as well. When you start to give descriptions of things, you're describing a breeding. I can relate it to a personal thing.

JN:
You do.

JS:
Yes, but the problem is I don't like doing that because then it sets it up like an autobiographical store or something.

JN:
It's clumsy. So the expression has to count, not the naming.

JS:
It is quite symbolic that picture. The one with the sky. You get it, just from looking at it. You wouldn't need me to tell you.

JN:
The person you spoke to, who said you don't need the photo, it was a more senior artist?

JS:
She was just someone my age.

JN:
You trust her obviously or was the time just right, to hear that?

JS:
I think I've got two people mixed up. I think it might have been this other girl, but then it's this other one.

JN:
Okay. But it was around the time you were studying at Goldsmiths?

JS:
Yes, because when I went in 2002, I was doing these videos but then I can't remember when this was. But it was before I started this lot. It wasn't like I didn't have this idea already. It was just someone.

...

JN:
I'm thinking about where a painting is discursive or rhetorical.

JS:
Like what?

JN:

Robert Rauschenberg rubs out a de Kooning drawing. So, it's rhetorical. It's in the context of the earlier work, even to the extent that it is a direct response or competitive. You've mentioned a kind of symbolism – but is it ever more direct?

JS:

Maybe it looks like symbolism, but it doesn't mean anything like a symbol. Is that what you mean?

JN:

That's what early symbolism actually intended I think. They didn't actually have specific meanings.

JS:

Is that what they were doing?

JN:

I think so. It was kind of meant to be outside language, spirit.

JS:

They made up symbols but they were not really symbolic of anything?

JN:

Well if they meant something they didn't know what it was. That's how I remember it. That's how early abstraction starts to form as well. It was like a gap.

...

JN:

Can we talk about the tree [fig. 1.9]? We've talked a little bit about how you make decisions in your painting and even decisions about the media you use and how you transitioned into painting and the particular way you paint. But perhaps some of this is focused on art world things too closely while there are other things too. Looking at this work, the wood and the bits and pieces – it's a tree stump. If I can remember, you said you dug this up. Is that right?

JS:

I killed it, you could say. This is a bit autobiographical this one.

JN:

Is it?

JS:

Because I killed it. I accidentally killed that tree.

JN:

It's a proper tree. That's right. The stick is the tree. I'm remembering.

JS:

The stick is the sucker that killed the tree.



Fig. 1.9. John Spiteri, *Spring Fashion*, 2011, in *Learning to Leave*, Margaret Lawrence Gallery, VCA, Melbourne, 2014

JN:

Yes, tell me the story again. This comes out of the backyard or your front yard in Wentworthville.

JS:

Yes, it's a camellia, an 80-year-old camellia tree.

JN:

Wow.

JS:

I let the stupid sucker grow and kill the tree. You're supposed to cut them off. It's drained the life out of the mother and it killed it.

JN:

Seriously.

JS:

It's autobiographical, so I've made a mistake.

JN:

No, but not a lot of people would know this.

JS:

I know but I don't tell many people.

JN:

Was it in the front yard or the backyard?

JS:

I feel guilty. I felt really guilty I killed a bloody 80-year-old camellia.

JN:

Because you didn't cut off the sucker in time.

JS:

Because I let it grow and ended up killing it.

JN:

How does it work that the sucker does that?

JS:

Because if you were to lose the suckers, they grow from the base.

JN:

Yes.

JS:

They end up growing really healthy, through the sucking of the blood of the mother. Then the mother dies because she dies from all the sap she's given to the young one, and the young one dies as well, so that's the point.

JN:

Wow – and you dug it out, didn't you?

JS:

It happens with roses as well apparently.

JN:

Wow.

JS:

You're supposed to cut them off because they come up from the base and they end up sucking the main growth.

JN:

This is a story of how you're not much of a gardener, or you're not as good as you thought you were?

JS:

I didn't know.

JN:

But you spend a lot of time. You are one of the family there and you spend a lot of time.

JS:

I do a lot of gardening, yes.

JN:

Numbers of these works have little attributes of the yard, they end up on the surface and things like that.

JS:

Yes, kind of.

JN:

Do you think the pace – the timing or temper – of your painting would connect to things like that too?

JS:

I'm not sure. How do you mean?

JN:

Nothing categoric, but perhaps you can attribute the way you paint, that it is affected in ways by all those other things like the gardening you do close by. In your painting, the pace – its gait – might work in a similar way?

JS:

Yes, maybe. A gate? Like a portal or something?

JN:

No, I'm meaning the sense of time in the work. Is this too much?

JS:

Timing? How do you mean? It's not a video?

JN:

No, but some things release really quickly – they're fast. It's like the shutter button on a camera opening for only a fraction of a second. While in painting, say, the shutter stays open much, much longer. The timing works in a different way.

JS:

You're saying it's like an overexposure or something.

JN:

Yes, but we're not making a photograph. It's painting. I'm drawing an analogy across from the studio into the garden.

JS:

I know what you mean. This is a little story that I have about the tree, but it doesn't really matter. You don't really need it. It's just my little thing. I wouldn't take it further.

JN:

Where is this work now? You showed it again?

JS:

I showed it again at Sarah's [Sarah Cottier Gallery] last year.

JN:

It's a beautiful work.

JS:

Yes. I showed it in Melbourne, Brisbane and last June in Sydney, the final time.

JN:

Yes.

JS:

It's kind of the final work on glass.

JN:

Okay. Is it the last one you will make?

JS:

Yes.

¹ *There's No Time* brought together the work of John Spiteri, Mira Gojak, Bradd Westmoreland and Karl Wiebke. It was curated by Bala Starr at the Ian Potter Museum of Art, Melbourne, 2010.

² Earlier conversations with John Spiteri were not recorded at his request.

³ Isabelle Graw, "Unreconciled: De-skilling Versus Re-Skilling, a Conversation with Charline von Heyl," in *The Love of Painting: Genealogy of a Success Medium* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2018), 123.

⁴ Grunge in Sydney in the 1990s was associated with artists including Hany Armanious, Adam Cullen, Mikala Dwyer, Justene Williams and Tony Schwensen.

⁵ See, by example, Benjamin Buchloh, "A Nude in the Neo-Avant-Garde, Ema (Nude on a Staircase), 1966," in *Painting Beyond Itself, the Medium in the Post-Medium Condition*, ed. Isabelle Graw and Ewa Lajer-Burcharth (Frankfurt: Institute für Kunstkritik, Hochschule für Bildende Künste, Städelschule, 2016), 229–70.

⁶ Sarah Cottier Gallery was established in Sydney in 1993. It closed in 2003 and reopened in 2006.

⁷ "Many of the works in *Wit's End* take an ironical poke at modernism," Kay Campbell, *Wit's End*, ed. Pamela Hansford (Sydney: Barbarism and Museum of Contemporary Art), 15.

⁸ By example, Benjamin Buchloh writes that, "the emphasis on artistic skills had guaranteed the continuing primacy of mimesis as one of the most crucial criteria of artistic distinction." Buchloh, "A Nude in the Neo-Avant-Garde," 247.

Boedi Widjaja is an artist who works across media. He was born in Solo (Surakarta), Indonesia, in 1975 but left his home due to ethnic tensions, emigrating to Singapore with his elder sister at the age of nine. Widjaja completed a Bachelor of Architecture (Hons) at UNSW in 2000. Audrey Koh trained as a lawyer at the National University of Singapore and was admitted to the Singapore Bar in 1999. She has collaborated with Boedi Widjaja as an art producer for more than ten years. They have a daughter, Naomi.

This is an edited transcript of Zoom conversations in December 2020 and January 2021.

Jonathan Nichols:

Your *Rivers and lakes Tanah dan air* exhibition at ShanghART in Singapore in 2018 included a very large, suspended work [figs 2.1 and 2.2]. I remember visiting that show with you and describing the work as a painting. You found that curious but didn't take the same view. Can we revisit that conversation? It's interesting to me how this "not painting" might actually relate to painting, if it does. Other than weak or minor references to painting, which we also talked about, how would you think about what's going on with this particular work?¹ If we discount that the work is actually on canvas and we discount that it's on a frame, do you have a formal way of describing this method that you use, and how you came to adopt it? I'm trying not to use the word painting. But do you see them as particularly painterly, or drawing, methods? How did you come to a project like this, using these materials?

Boedi Widjaja:

First of all, I would use the term mark-making. Maybe next to it I would add on tracing. Because the images that were marked on the canvas were produced through a process of linear tracings of film stills. The idea is in tracing a source image. Mark-making, tracing and frottage, these were the processes we used to create the black surfaces. After using a carbon sheet to trace the film stills onto the unprimed side of the canvas, we transferred [what was left of] the carbon sheet – the carbon layer – onto the primed side of the canvas and then peeled away the paper.

JN:

The artwork has the sense of an account, of an action and its process, and this is primary. The artwork is a remnant of these activities. The undertaking of those actions drives the way you are understanding the work. Is this how you see it?

BW:

The idea of traces – the idea of echoes – was quite important. So when I trace these film stills [cartoon film images of Chinese Indonesian characters, c. 1980s], it was first of all a very deliberate way of watching a film. By tracing the stills, I felt that I had put myself into that kind of a situation of watching the film, through tracing, through drawing. It

struck me to be the most intense way of looking at something. And it was about encoding the film stills into another form, into another visual language.

JN:

Do you connect the works to yourself specifically, where you are tracing your own actions into the work?



Figs 2.1 and 2.2. Boedi Widjaja, *Rivers and lakes Tanah dan air*, ShanghART Singapore, 2018. Photos: Cher Him. Courtesy of Beautiful/Banal

BW:

Not in a symbolic or illustrative way but I reckon that the process itself already pointed to a very bodily engagement. Much of my practice seems to gravitate towards a phenomenological process. The artwork is a trace, it is a remnant of these processes that have taken place. I wasn't trying to circumscribe that process.

JN:

The process is open. While your work is process-orientated, it's open to an audience or anyone to re-interpret however they might?

BW:

I wasn't trying to give the process a name. I wasn't trying to give it a definite shape. Although it was a significant part of the conceptual dimension, each of the steps was there for a reason. In my mind at least it exists very much like a process, not something that I could put a frame around.

JN:

We might distinguish the trace and the mark separately in your work – as two separate concepts – in that they are registering in two different directions. The tracing of a symbolic association and the mark as an action of the maker or action of making. So each is kind of a different form. When it's tracing a symbolic association, it's the thing you're tracing but also it is connecting to your recollection of what this thing is. And the other one is the mark itself. It's marking your place or specific action in quite a deliberate way. So I think we can separate those two things. The body mark doesn't trace, it is not indicating a prior history or recollection. Rather it's very much within the moment of its action. Whereas the trace is actually presupposing a thing that precedes it. I think that's interesting in thinking of your work in painterly terms, and that these differences kind of cohabit but are held separately.

BW:

Am I right to say that we are trying to think about the mark as the action, and the trace as some kind of intention? Is that what you are meaning?

JN:

I think they both have intention. They are both indexes – indexical. One in real time, with the mark in real time. But the trace is a different type of attribute. The mark conducts itself in real time and there is a performative logic to it and we've talked about this relation. But the trace logic buys into a different type of action. Of remembering, of repeating something. Which is suggesting a new scope or is implicated in a different type of time. For me it operates as a different scheme of understanding from the performative mark. Together they might be co-dependent, or even perhaps slightly contradictory, or alternate to each other – however. For me though they hold each other in a kind of abeyance.

BW:

As well I think I should add in an important aspect about that work. This came in somewhat later in the process and this was the form. Really it became clearer to me once the work was installed because we didn't have the space to install it in the studio. The physical form of that work could also be an echo of the wayang screen, the shadow puppets. The fact that it had two facings. Because the wayang also has two facings. One side where you could see the puppeteer, where you could see the actual puppets. And the other side where you could only see the shadows of these puppets. The puppet screen is two-dimensional but to me it is extremely multidimensional. It becomes something else. It becomes more than a piece of fabric; it becomes a universe of some kind where the stories and culture exist. I think more importantly for me it is a very potent space where Javanese beliefs exist in time because people watch this wayang and they understand what is being said by the puppeteer, by the *dhalang*, and with the gamelan music, with the singing, it can be quite immersive and trance-like.

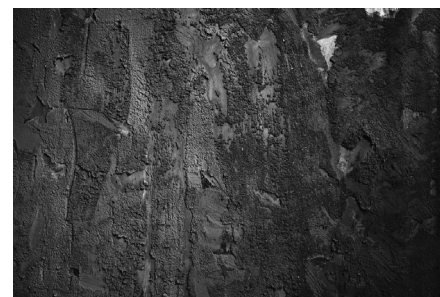
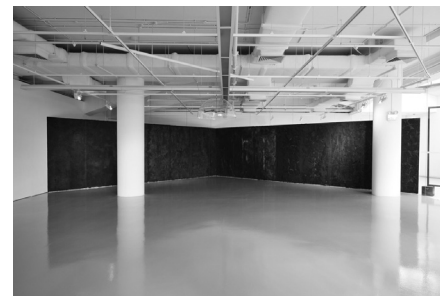
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JN:

With your work *Black—Hut* at ICA Singapore, did you intend to create a pictorial sense of concrete?

BW:

I'm not too sure about the pictorial aspect of that surface [of *Black—*



Figs 2.3 and 2.4. Boedi Widjaja, *Black—Hut*, ICA Singapore, 2016. Photos: Cher Him. Courtesy of Beautiful/Banal

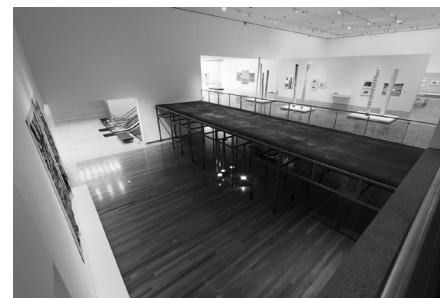


Fig. 2.5. Boedi Widjaja, *Black—Hut*, *Black—Hut*, in 9th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art, QAGOMA, Brisbane, 2018. Photo: Natasha Harth. Courtesy of QAGOMA

Hut, 2016 – figs 2.3 and 2.4 – and its second iteration in 2018 – fig. 2.5]. I never thought of making images using the concrete surface.

JN:

I'm curious about where the surface is in these marks you use in *Black—Hut*. Thinking as a painter, in my own experience of painting, you are constantly trying to build the right surface. You know, you could paint a thing a thousand ways but you choose one. What makes you choose? And in these works there is gesture in the surface and its activation is in the hand and in the mark-making.

BW:

Yes.

JN:

And the sense that they are concrete, that they are referring to the material itself. Maybe it is that both of these things are in the work. They are the image of a thing and the fact of a thing.

BW:

With the first *Black—Hut* at the ICA Singapore the trowelling techniques were really used to express the method of applying concrete. I think it was the method we chose to express the membrane-like quality of concrete. Because concrete in architecture is usually associated with something massive and thick. It's rarely expressed as almost like a veneer. That way of applying concrete was very important in *Black—Hut* because I had always wanted to – in a way – play around with a material that is so associated with the Western international style – the Le Corbusier school.

JN:

Would you extend that to the likeness of Western painting, the likeness of black paintings or field paintings?

BW:

I can see the relation to it. I can see that relation.

...

JN:

It's an interesting thing to realise the sense of a work occurring later, after the event so to speak. At what point was the intention – who knows? Do you know what I mean? Intentions are sometimes not always so clear or to the point, and to me that's a very painterly expectation. You can't presuppose you are always conscious or knowing in painting. And painting itself has a part to play. This feeling of not knowing as a painterly expectation as against where we've often talked about performative thinking, I hold these in contrast. What is painterly and what is performative are two different kinds of understanding. To know that your motivations are not necessarily conscious, and then to know and need to anticipate that this is actually part of the procedure of art-making. So this is to know your intentions are necessarily obscure and this conceptually underpins the procedure of art-making. This is a painterly or figurative understanding. But the performative in contemporary art has been used in part as a corrective or counterpoint to painterly ideas of art-making. They are conceptually distinct.

BW:

What you are saying brings to my mind my architectural training. In architecture it is very expensive to be performative. Because time that passes is money. The act of acting. Using performance. Using action in the context of building. You can call it prototyping, but it's not exactly that. I think the process that you describe – to be performative – is much more immediate. It's a feeling and thinking kind of process, the way I understand it at least. But in architecture we are conditioned to plan, to lay out a scheme in our mind, and then to execute it on site. I think I am feeling those effects in my art-making. Before I make a work I try to lay out the scheme of the work in my mind. However, what you have been pointing out is that despite that process there are still these subconscious impulses that are carried into the process without me being clear about it. Despite all the efforts to clarify, plan, conceptualise, to take everything into account. And one other thing – I don't know if this is relevant. I realise that when I make a drawing today, I find it difficult to trust that performative process that you talk about. And I think that, maybe, is something that I might want to get back towards, to re-examine. There is a beauty there.

...

JN:

Thinking about my own work and the methods I've used to make artworks, I used to trace quite a lot. The way I would do it is find images on the internet. I was very aware that there were kinds of figure images on the internet that offered something that was potentially new. I had been trained in sculpture, but since leaving art school had moved more and more towards painting. Painting to me was something I understood least about art-making, and as well I didn't think that you could learn the mechanisms of a studio in an academic context. There were other reasons too for moving towards painting. Partly it was an economy of means. I couldn't carry or hold onto [store] things. I didn't have lots of money. Sculpture was always a very physical thing in my mind and I was moving cities often. I perhaps had a pretty retrograde view of sculpture as being primarily about objects. If I was really smart maybe I should have stopped thinking about it this way. But nonetheless I was moving more and more into painting. I would take an image, copy or cut out an image – from the newspaper or from the internet, from all kinds of sources – and I would use a lightbox and watercolours and would trace these figures, to carry across something from these places into the watercolour.

Now the fact of this process was that when you trace these diversely sourced figure images you get a tracing, the first watercolour copy. This was, say, version one. But I would trace it again and have a second, and then a third and a fourth, and so on, each with the same image. And each time I felt I was looking for something. I was in a way looking past the image, searching. Each time I would begin tracing I was learning about the image anew and this would affect the outcome of the watercolour. At a point, be it the fifth version or the sixth, the watercolour would change. I would start to see a character of the figure in a way where the earlier versions were just diagrams or outlines. Or was it that I would project a personality onto the work? At some point, the work would not be a diagram or a copy. It seemed to have qualities about it that were very different, starkly different, yet it was still ostensibly the same image. If you were to show each of the watercolour images then

everyone would I'm sure agree they were the same image. But even then, you would see differences. Particular works would stand out as having something more.

When I think of your works, for instance the large drawings from NYC, the negative image artworks [fig. 2.6], I would have thought you experienced similar feelings and thoughts about the subjects you were making pictures of. The amount of time you spent on one image. Earlier you were saying your process was about a really intense way of looking at a subject. You were cohabiting with them, walking up very close to them. Do you recognise when I [say that I] have very different reactions about what appears superficially to be the same image or copies of the same thing? The way I am looking for this unusual investment of my own? Does this explanation correlate with yours? I think this description traverses the idea of the performative at one end, and something quite different happening at the other end. When the picture looks back at you. When the painting looks back at you. There is an instinctive thing that separates individual works. Is this an analogy that makes sense?

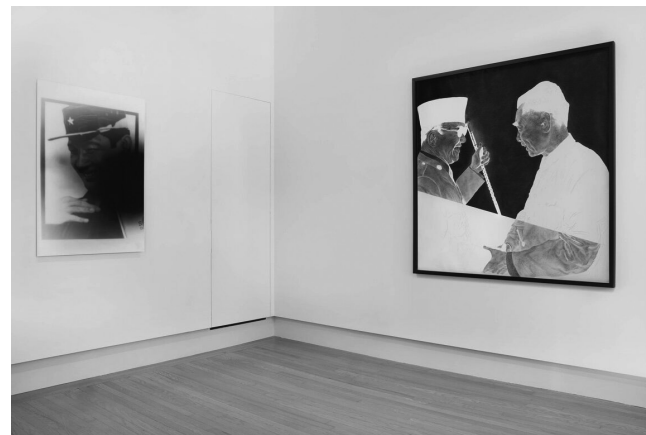


Fig. 2.6. Boedi Widjaja, *Declaration of*, Helwaser Gallery, New York, 2019

BW:

I could see that process too. Because I have been tracing these martial arts figures for some time now. The ShanghART [Gallery] work wasn't the first time. I think the first time I did a similar series [fig. 2.7] was at Peninsula [I_S_L_A_N_D_S art space in Peninsula Shopping Centre, Singapore] in 2018.



Fig. 2.7. Boedi Widjaja, *Imaginary Homeland: Kang Ouw (—), I_S_L_A_N_D_S*, Singapore, 2018

JN:

Ah yes, I remember those.

BW:

I can see an evolution in how I've traced types of images since then. I find the phrase you use very fascinating: "when an image looks back at you." I think that's a very beautiful phrase.

JN:

That's very kind. I find it's nearly like a question of why I am interested in any image. When the painting looks back, so to speak, it's this quality that grabs your whole psychology. And that's not a performative logic.

It's a subject itself, not an objective logic. It separates from associations with derived imagery or anything like that. It makes the thing that you are interested in very lively. I've always associated that sensation with your work, where you were starting with these derivative images, these secondary image sources.

BW:

I would like to add something, which is – I think – yes. I do want to get an image that looks back at me. But also at the same time there was a desire to look at that image and be involved with the process of doing it. I think that there was a double purpose.

JN:

How was that again if you can? You want to look at those images? These historical Indonesian political figures for instance. You were studying them?

BW:

Yes. To explain, I would have to talk about the mediated experience that I'd had as a very young child growing up in Singapore. Hence these images of Indonesian political figures, Chinese martial arts film stills and others. They are images to do with home and being separated. When I say that I was looking at the image, what I meant was, it was the only way that I could engage with these aspects of home, because I was not physically growing up in Indonesia. So the images and drawing became the primary sites for thinking, for experiencing and contemplating home.

JN:

It was a way of coming to know what home was?

BW:

Yes, I had to imagine home through images. They became this terrain. They are just strange spaces that I inhabited mentally, that I desired to enter into.

...

JN:

Earlier you said that drawing struck you to be the most intense way of looking at something. And then you added, “it was encoding the film still into another form, into another visual language.” I took that to suggest that there was something special in this and translating it into a new form was an important gesture in itself.

BW:

I think the primary impulse was to visually manifest the act of looking. The encoding into drawing – the tracing – was the method to show you that I have been looking at these things. To manifest the process of looking intensely at these things. But I’m also concerned with an aesthetic thinking, its reception, and I’m aware that in the Chinese tradition one’s handwriting or mark is associated with the expression of your personal character and inner being. I am aware of how, or I consider the way that, these visual outcomes are going to be interpreted.

JN:

As a kind of accountability of character? The works represent a kind of personal accountability. Audrey was saying the other day that your [spoken] Chinese wasn’t very good. So, you speak English generally.

Audrey Koh:

Yes.

JN:

Especially when you are speaking to someone from China. They can be pretty brutal I imagine and make fun of your poor Chinese. And question you in your person, in a way I suppose, because your character is somehow diminished in their eyes, because your Chinese is so terrible.

BW:

It’s true [*laughs*]!

JN:

It relates to what you are saying at a level.

BW:

I think so. I think so.

JN:

To create this thinking [these artworks] have a certain sense of accountability and justice. A kind of validity is asserted. To give validity to the thinking, to show the characterisation in its full depth. This is an interesting thought. There is a prejudice in the world which will always for instance say that the best Chinese will come from China. We all experience these kinds of prejudice. Singapore is full of these kinds of cultural hesitations. Australia as well. These are outlying places, and the centres were always somewhere else – although this is not the case any more especially with respect to Singapore. “Real” culture is elsewhere and we are derivatives removed a thousand times. You are never an original. You know the feeling. And to work in art-making and in traditions where your own mark can indicate your character and to believe that. It’s a very awkward feeling to reconcile. It’s completely right. But viewed from the centre or a better vantage point it is invariably never enough. It can’t ever be right.

AK:

Can I add, and I’m saying this for myself, not Boedi. For me, in addition to the accountability and aesthetic priority that he has, I would say that the rigour of holding a technique, or presentation, for me as audience, is extremely important. I love the improv of improvisation works, but if it is by a child I will say, oh, how charming. But if it is by an adult I would like to see it by a master.

JN:

You want to see the knowledge.

AK:

Yes. I want to see an evolved knowledge or form. Because there is an inherent beauty in developing knowledge and in developing skills. For me as the audience I prize it quite highly.

JN:

When we think of your work as mark-making and yet it can very much appear or sit within a reproduction or copying genre. There is a strong equivalence with the original source being copied, in the way that we have talked about just now. Nonetheless, this is your mark in this very

complex way. It's a mark-making that operates within the expectations of Chinese image-making and Western traditions. I totally accept that. I'm really aware in my own work when I use Chinese paper that in Singapore the reading is likely very different from the reading here [in Melbourne.] There are these extra implications and expectations that are carried along with the task of even using Chinese paper. Here [in Melbourne], those kinds of expectations are quite invisible. And my feeling is that here too, the idea of finding a character or a quality of character, within a mark or accumulations of painting marks is much less adhered to. It definitely once existed at a time.² But now, in popular culture as well as in the art world, it's nearly impossible to find seriously any more. It's an interesting dilemma.

...

JN:

I'm interested in how David Joselit introduces the idea of two lives, where times have changed and – in a global age – two or sometimes more senses of life are synchronised materially by the artist in the artwork. Artists' lives that are overlapping but are not necessarily synchronised otherwise. Therefore, for Joselit, it is the artwork that fuses these like the "figure of the fossil."³

In a related way, a friend here, Quentin Sprague, who is an art critic and writer, suggests that many contemporary artists recognise the porous boundaries of cultural contexts and sort of push into these materially with their work.⁴ It's as much that an artist can knowingly play into the material gap between cultural expectations, where things are not completely clear culturally so to speak.⁵ There is a strategic awareness of gaps or in-between spaces that might be shared rather than literally thinking that there are life experiences lived separately. Is that too much to say?

Michael Taussig is an anthropologist who discusses how identities are tested and forged by artists making artworks and activating cultural contexts.⁶ The role of the artist is special and there is a kind of training or allowance that is involved, an agency that is distributed by artists. Do you recognise this?

BW:

I do read artworks from several cultural realities as I understand them. But many times I devise meanings that are simply wrong and out of context. I'm not surprised if I misconstrue something or a particular reading. In some ways it is related to the works at Peninsula [fig. 2.7] and the work that I did at ShanghART [figs 2.1 and 2.2]. Very much what I am interested in with the Chinese martial arts figures has to do with the multicultural character of the genre. How you have a fantastical imagined sense of China – historical China – but in fact it's extremely inaccurate. And you have at the same time that Indonesian political dimension of having watched these illegal Chinese films growing up in Solo before I migrated to Singapore. I think the presence of Singaporean pop culture in the '80s and '90s is folded in as well. And I don't see much of this culture in the contemporary art world. I think you are quite right to point out that artists do look for the cultural gaps. At least I instinctively navigate towards these gaps. Because I find them to be very fertile with ideas. I think that is a very important mode of making artworks in my practice.

JN:

Quentin has worked in the past with an Aboriginal artist from the northern part of Australia, who has now passed away, her name is Ms N. Yunupingu.⁷ He has suggested that there is a kind of wry humour in her work, as I understand it, because she is aware she is producing for outside audiences, where other mysterious kinds of expectations get involved, and as likely they never quite get where she is coming from. His feeling is that her work unavoidably played into Western expectations of meaning.⁸ But there are other gaps and clichés in understanding painting. In the art world, a word like transcendence, for example, gets used to indicate a kind of summary gesture in painting, whereas I'm not really sure what transcendence actually means. It's a very agnostic thing to say in a way. I find it very difficult to measure and weigh up the more philosophically inflated descriptions of what is happening in painting. Words like transcendence, or immanence or transformation or deformation are too often used to describe what is ultimately happening in painting. They get thrown around as kinds of primary motivation. But I find these are usually derivations that are firstly very philosophically

specific and only make any sense in the philosophical contexts they come from. Even words like materialisation or externalisation, which I use a lot myself – sorry – are very blurry descriptions. I get the urgency but the usage in relation to painting can be very fuzzy. Some of my own personal favourites would be, say, Paul Klee's higher forces, or, say, Theodor Adorno's primordial shudder.

BW:

Oh. Yes.

JN:

Or Merleau-Ponty's lacuna or Bergson's primal drive. Another is Hegel's night-like pit of memory – I like that one.⁹ My point here though is trying to measure and weigh, if we can, this gesture of playing into cultural difference. Playing into the doubt or cultural gap. Is there a way we can get to closer terms, about the rightness of artworks and especially when we are actually making artworks? By example in your mind do these motives when you are working come from above, in an idealised or aspirational way? Or is it that you reach downward such as say in a primordial shudder? Do you pinpoint these movements, or motifs, however you think of them for your own part?

BW:

Okay.

AK:

For me the descriptions you suggest are associated with a sense of the sublime and it's not so popular in today's art discourse. When you talk about the sublime there is always the question of the unknown – the mysterious. And I like how you follow this with the question for the artist: are you reaching up or reaching down? Because when you talk of up and down it again reinforces that there are planes, there are spheres beyond how we are materially engaging with one another. In today's contemporary art discourse, in Singapore especially, it is very much about culture in a micro movement. Almost like a minute kind of observation, like a minute-by-minute culture. So, questions of even a helicopter view, of humanity, become very tied to minute-by-minute movement. So, I don't see the sense of pulling up or a contempla-

tion of sublime. I also observe that contemporary art discourse is very words-driven. To the point that when I read text and there is so much text surrounding a practice, when I encounter the artwork, the text becomes the artwork more than the art object.

JN:

When I think of contemporary art in the way that you're speaking of it, there is a kind of shorthand at work.

AK:

Maybe this started as a means to have a clearer orientation but it has progressed to the part where also there is a rejection, a verbal rejection, a written rejection, of the mysterious and the kinds of experiences that you have described. Yet as human beings we have an inescapable reaction, like an encounter, despite what we protest deep down. I think every one of us has a primordial shudder. And we sometimes might not recognise it because we no longer have the words to describe it. In contemporary art I very seldom come across an acknowledgement of the sublime. Of course [it is] there but it is a very small sphere.

BW:

The Singapore art world, the discourses we have here – and these are discourses that are facilitated by independent curators, institutional curators, artists, exhibitions, talks – are very much influenced by the [art world] discussions that are floating around globally and especially those that are predominant in the West. You can be circumscribed by discourse. They are what they are.

JN:

When I think of art world institutions I think of them in terms of their framing or curating gestures. They receive and try to build meaning around a thing, so as to absorb the artwork. In this sense framing and curating are the structuring devices, and in this they are external to the artwork. Whereas in my conversation about painting, both internal and external motivations are part of painting and involve the painter directly. In painting, externalisation doesn't happen via a curatorial gesture or an external summary gesture, it happens within painting itself. There is a gap or lacuna that I'm trying to find here in our conversation.

The art world's systems of materialisation, of framing and curating an artwork – to me these are [part of] a system that is external to the artworks themselves. For instance, with the example of Pierre Klossowski and Paul Klee, it is that artworks come to life, “and breathe according to their own laws.”¹⁰ The artwork takes its own course in this sense. It has its own agency and this needs to be anticipated in subsequent actions. Klee's and Klossowski's conceptions presuppose that art or painting kind of pushes itself. Painting itself, like a subject, is reflexive even in terms of the painter who is painting it. Painting is not a one-way street, but a two-way street. Painting has a collective voice that affects an artist through the making of the work.

AK:

The weight of painting's history bears on this reading.

JN:

That's true. Boedi, how do you feel about it?

BW:

I would like to try to answer your earlier question about whether I reach upward or reach downward.

AK:

[*Laughs*] I'm quite curious too.

JN:

Oh sorry. I realise these are very obscure questions.

BW:

First of all the metaphor is very interesting of one reaching up and of one reaching down. There is a spatial orientation in this suggestion and I find it very interesting. Because it is not something that is very obvious to me. And also the metaphor of inside and outside that you just now use to describe the internal rules of the artist I guess, and to some extent painting itself.

I would like to refer to something you just said earlier, where Michael Taussig talked about how an identity is formed. It goes through testing and forging before it is ever shaped. I can relate to that in the way I

conceptualise an idea for my artworks. I would first test ideas as far as I could probe them to be something intrinsic to me and to my life experiences, to my position towards the issues that are entangled. And I think the process of making the artwork is where the forging takes place. And I would like to believe that in the process of art-making there is both transcendence and shudder because I can't think of a separation between the two. With respect to internal and external motives, I do not think of these as separate either. These are embodied within a subject. It is a subjective metaphor because what is internal and what is external is always in reference to a subject. I'm curious about who are the subjects.

...

JN:

I'm sure it was Marcel Duchamp some while back who suggested that an artwork has a life of about 20 years.

BW:

An artwork needs to be animated in order to have agency. Until there is artificial intelligence in a museum then it will require human agency to animate an artwork. I think the cultural discourse coming from mainstream culture, coming from museum culture, the art world culture, this is the driving force that will determine whether a piece of art is going to be talked about and appreciated at any given time. I don't think any artwork has a lifespan on its own. If I am to refer to something that I know, such as the wayang kulit, artworks are just like puppets.

JN:

You mean they are the just the objects within the system. They can't do what a person does?

BW:

Yes. Whether or not that puppet – that character – is animated, depends on the story.

JN:

I think you are right in saying artworks are like puppets. But I also think that when an artwork seems to operate independently – popularly it might be described as timeless.¹¹ That's one way to say it. But

it's a cumbersome thing to say now – it's lost clarity in contemporary art. What I think is being referred to though is that the time value, the temporal value, is open-ended with respect to painting especially. They are not frozen in time. The artwork sits in a temporal space in the same way that people do. The artwork operates independently in that space just like people with memories and histories and relations affecting them. The idea that an external institution or profession maintains and adjudicates the validity of artworks makes no sense to me. They have no necessary access to the strange temporality enacted in painting. The liveliness of the artwork comes via the artist, it is connected to the temporal workings of artists. For the same reason I'm especially interested in other artists' reactions and expressions exactly because they subject themselves to these equivocating uneven processes of making. This makes the difference.

BW:

Can I add where artworks kind of have a force on their own, and affective action of their own. I must say at a time when I had a chance to visit MoMA in New York, when I looked at some of these abstract expressionist paintings, some of them emitted a kind of aura and I was quite captivated by these. But I guess each of us can only speak within or along the contours of this frame that we have built for ourselves and the way that we make our own meanings. Our conversation reminds me of something I read – a text by John Berger – where he says the difference between drawing and a photograph is that a photograph tells you of a moment in time, whereas a drawing draws you into its time.¹² It's such a clear and elegant way to speak about the qualities you find in a painting or a drawing.

1. American art historian Alex Bacon has suggested that painting references are often used in contemporary artworks where those artworks are not intended to be actual paintings. He describes these as “weak” painting references. Contemporary artworks can, “adopt just one [or some] of its components, rather than its totality.” Alex Bacon, “Painting’s Minor Present,” lecture presented at Painting Politics Symposium, University of Auckland, July 26–27, 2019.
2. By example, David Joselit writes that: “The painterly mark ... deserves to be placed alongside the readymade, collage, and the monochrome as one of the fundamental inventions of European historical avant-gardes.” David Joselit, “Reassembling Painting,” in *Painting 2.0: Expression in the Information Age: Gesture and Spectacle, Eccentric Figuration, Social Networks*, ed. Manuela Ammer, Achim Hochdörfer, and David Joselit (Munich: Delmonico Books/Prestel, 2015), 169.
3. David Joselit, *Heritage and Debt, Art in Globalization* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2020), 243–46.
4. See Quentin Sprague, *The Stranger Artist. Life at the Edge of Kimberley Painting* (Melbourne: Hardie Grant Books, 2020).
5. Fact-checking my own recollections, I should clarify that Quentin Sprague’s emphasis is less the artist “knowingly” pushing into these gaps, and more the artwork itself pushing (or being pushed) into the gaps between cultural expectations.
6. “The nature that culture uses to create second nature, the faculty to copy, imitate, make models, explore difference, yield into and become Other.” And further, “No understanding of mimesis is worthwhile if it lacks the ability to traverse this two-way street.” Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), xiii–xiv.
7. Ms N. Yunupijū’s full name is not being used out of respect for the Yolŋu cultural protocols for deceased people.
8. Quentin Sprague, “White Lines,” *Discipline 3* (Winter 2013): 61.
9. See Stephen H. Watson, *Crescent Moon Over the Rational: Philosophical Interpretations of Paul Klee* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).
10. “But this is not only what Klee meant: the anatomy of the picture implies that the picture is an ‘in itself’ come to life and breathing according to its own laws.” Pierre Klossowski, “The Decline of the Nude,” in *Phantasm and Simulacra. The Drawings of Pierre Klossowski*, ed. Paul Foss, Paul Taylor, and Allen S. Weiss, *Art & Text* Special Issue 18 (July 1985): 15.
11. Boris Groys describes a more precise sense of timelessness by referring to Wassily Kandinsky’s book *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, 1910. Kandinsky, he writes, understood his own artworks to be “timeless” and in this he understood that his task as an artist was to carry symbols/art across the threshold to a new era beyond – “to make transcendental art also means to make universalist, transcultural art, because crossing a temporal border is basically the same operation as crossing a cultural border.” Boris Groys, *Going Public* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2010), 111–13.
12. See John Berger, “Drawn to that Moment,” in *Berger on Drawing* (Cork: Occasional Press, 2005).

Christoph Preussmann is an artist who lives and works in Wallendbeen, a small town north-east of Cootamundra, NSW. Born in Erlangen, Bavaria, Germany, in 1961, he studied at the Kunsthochschule in Kassel and the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam and was based in Cologne during the 1990s and early 2000s. Preussmann settled in Australia with his family in 2005. He completed a Master of Fine Arts at the National Art School, Sydney, in 2012.

This is an edited transcript of Zoom conversations in February and March 2021.

Jonathan Nichols:

The type of thinking that was happening around painting in Cologne in the 1990s was very particular. I'm not meaning it was better or worse but that it was not generally the same as elsewhere. What is interesting now is that the specificities and thinking around painting in Cologne are being referenced more deliberately by art historians to recalibrate painting in a broader field and to bring forward a distinct Cologne effect or model of painting.¹ The Cologne experience during the 1980s and '90s, particularly with the influence of Martin Kippenberger, is being used to test and model what's been going on more generally in painting from an art-historical perspective. The unusual readings of many familiar with Cologne – its differences from, say, New York and elsewhere – are being used to build an understanding and meaning around recent painting. That's what we are seeing a little bit with the interest in Cologne.

These art world places don't all have the same set of capabilities or thinking with respect to painting.² What is possible in New York or what is possible in Cologne is specific. And it's clearly not what was possible or equivalent here [in Australia]. In my mind there needs to be a bit of a reality check around these different settings. Painting in these places takes on different premises and opportunities, at least in terms of its historical revision. I'm interested in specifying more carefully painterly devices or painterly ideas because it strikes me that there is a lot of missing clarity and potential in these. They introduce new kinds of perspectives on what has generally been accepted here as contemporary art. Painting is like a minor form or key, despite its pervasiveness as a popular idiom. In critical practices painterly ideas are not a common thread or way of thinking that is widely held.

Christoph Preussmann:

Well for Cologne you have to see it a little bit in the time of German history and its painting. Kunstmarkt Köln [the historical beginnings of Art Cologne], which was the first of its kind when it started in 1967, was initiated by Rudolf Zwirner. In 1970 it moved to a tent on the Neumarkt with many more galleries, and by then there was Michael Werner who had established his gallery in 1969 with his group of people [Jörg Immendorff,

Georg Baselitz and Sigmar Polke's generation], and the next generation are these guys [Martin Kippenberger's generation]. They were breaking down that earlier generation's style and appearance. Lüpertz is a good transitional figure. He kind of plays this enfant terrible and then on the other hand he is the director of a government institution, the Düsseldorf Academy. But then he uses a little *Fledermaus* [bat] for his official stamp for whatever documents [*laughs*]. Or things like his Rolls Royce. The grand artist with all his need for respect. It's very interesting to go from those generations to the younger ones. Kippenberger 1953, all between 1950 and 1955–56. And that was a very prudish, difficult time for men. All of the war thing still plays into the time when these guys grew up.

The East was the East and Prod, whereas the West was a pro-image kind of world. In that sense it was much easier to establish the art world post-war in the West. It was all along the Rhine and all those Catholics and that contradiction.

We [my generation] were clearly not part of that. I was born in 1961 and we didn't have that kind of attachment. I really liked Kippenberger. I thought he was interesting in the way that he was so self-consuming. I saw him once in the König bookstore. In came Kippenberger and then Walther König, the owner and the publisher, said, "Oh! Hi Martin!" Best friends! And that is typical Kippenberger. You couldn't only see the swollen belly, you could see he is a totally serious person. He had the most decent conversation with Walther König as if he was coming in to see his new catalogue of publications. It's a kind of very German way really.

It [Cologne] was actually a bit over the peak in the '90s.³ It had its absolute heyday in the '80s with the Neue Wilde [New Wild] and all these guys living there [Gerhard Richter, Sigmar Polke, Martin Kippenberger, Albert Oehlen, Rosemarie Trockel and Jutta Koether among others]. And we have to add Mülheimer Freiheit [Mülheim Freedom], that group.⁴ One was called Neue Wilde and among them there was this Cologne group. Walter Dahn was one. It was called Mülheimer Freiheit. Mülheim is a part of Cologne, the other side of the river. The crooked side, the poor side. They call it the crooked side – *die schiefe Seite*. Anyway, it was certainly a precursor to what followed with the time [the Kippenberger era] you're talking about.

JN:

Leaving art school in the late '80s and working in the 1990s my recollection was that we didn't do art history as such, we did art theory. French theory, feminism, post-structuralism, those were the conversations Annie [Jacobs] and I would be interested in.⁵ It was Gilles Deleuze or Roland Barthes or whomever. By contrast the art-historical writing during the 1990s was pretty non-existent. You had the art world and you had art theory. Art history seemed an anachronism, or at least it was disinterested in what we were doing.

CP:

I don't really recall. In the 1990s when I finished at Kassel there was this guy Peter Weibel. He was also a professor later in Vienna. He was leading that at Kassel while Annie and I were there but it was still around the French, from Baudelaire onwards. That was still the main talk – simulation, media – and it was all kind of exciting what they could do. That was the main conversation. The digital was already lingering in the background.

JN:

By the 2000s art theory had started to dry up as well. The idea of new theoretical writing had hit a wall maybe, but there continued to be a suspicion in critical contemporary circles towards painting. In Melbourne and Sydney it felt like there was a moratorium.

CP:

This was definitely not the same in Cologne. Because the trick was, it was basically all painting. And by painting they were able to suspend all of those ideas [of negative critical commentary towards painting]. There was always an irony around it. They were painting but not really painting. The aim was to use painting and those painters [the Kippenberger generation], they were kind of caricatures of a serious painter, so as to escape the dominant critiques, and to not be involved in that. Is painting still relevant? In Cologne no one wanted to talk about that.

You can see that in Jutta Koether's work, with all these guys. With what they are quoting, more or less seriously. Then they drift away. Kippenberger – the only paintings where he is very serious are the late

self-portraits. By then his liver problem progressed and he didn't have that much time. You can see that in the works. They are still painted like a joke and he is the caricature but they are not funny as such.

JN:

In Cologne the thinking on painting allowed them all to separate en masse. It allowed them to stand aside [from contemporary art].⁶ This is picked up with the next question. In Europe, Achim Hochdörfer, the director of the Museum Brandhorst in Munich, writes that painters and painting at this time faced a "degraded" historical narrative riddled with "cliché."⁷

CP:

That's it!

JN:

He wrote that in 2016. It's taken a long time perhaps to come out in words, in an art-historical sense. And of course – what you're saying – the new-generation Cologne artists would play the painting clichés. They would play them back into the art world, again and again if you like, getting new life out of them.

CP:

You would remember Julian Schnabel in the late 1980s. He is still around I reckon in a different form with film for sure, but anyway. In New York they couldn't be [like they were in Cologne]. They couldn't be as ironic I think. They played it a bit safer. You had Baselitz who was older. They were always seen by the Cologne crew as still very serious about their things. I would always joke about those guys. Their figuration was not really funny, but very much [*waves his hand to indicate "serious" figuration*]. If you went to their openings at Michael Werner, especially with Lüpertz, it was like Count Lüpertz had arrived. They took themselves much more seriously than the younger ones, like Albert Oehlen.

JN:

David Joselit's interpretation is that new painting in places like New York and Berlin and elsewhere through the 1990s began to build an institutional critique as a way to dispel the usual negative commentary

around painting.⁸ Where he is speaking of an institutional critique he is meaning the institution of the art world. In the sense that painters developed a critique of the art world, as an operative art world and a social system of relations. With this he uses the example of Jutta Koether especially, but the art world understood as a social system is a perspective that comes from Kippenberger. It's Kippenberger's lesson that Koether picks up on.

CP:

I've met Kippenberger. You know this guy Tobias Rehberger, he studied with Kippenberger. I was in a show with Rehberger put together by Kasper König. First of all with Kippenberger he was born in West Germany. Gerhard Richter and Sigmar Polke were from the East. Kippenberger went to West Berlin because he didn't want to go into the army.⁹ Because otherwise in the Cold War the army was a compulsory thing. Everyone I know who didn't want to join the army went and registered in West Berlin. It was just something everyone did [to avoid conscription].

JN:

Did you have to do it? Was that your generation too?

CP:

Yes, I was blind. I turned up with a certificate from the doctor and they looked at me and said, "Heil Hitler, goodbye!" [*laughs*]. But you can draw a link between Polke and Kippenberger. Polke was a more private type of Kippenberger because he didn't put himself out there all the time, getting drunk and dead. But Polke had a huge influence on the way you kind of made your statements. Very famously what Polke did – and Kippenberger copied many times – with this thing, higher being told me to paint the corner green or whatever it was [Sigmar Polke, *Higher Beings Command: Paint the Upper Right Corner Black!*, 1969 – fig. 3.1]. That's the sense of humour and Kippenberger is the caricature of all of that. He's kind of the clown and manager. He's not naive, that's the thing. He was never naive. He did what he did with great purpose. Even with SO36 in Berlin. He was part-owner of that [music] club and he did that work where he is all patched up [Martin Kippenberger, *Berlin bei Nacht (Grosse Wohnung, nie zu Hause, Dialog mit der Jugend, Deckname Hildegard)* (detail of triptych), 1981 – fig. 3.2]. It's all kind of *too perfection*, his kind of concept.

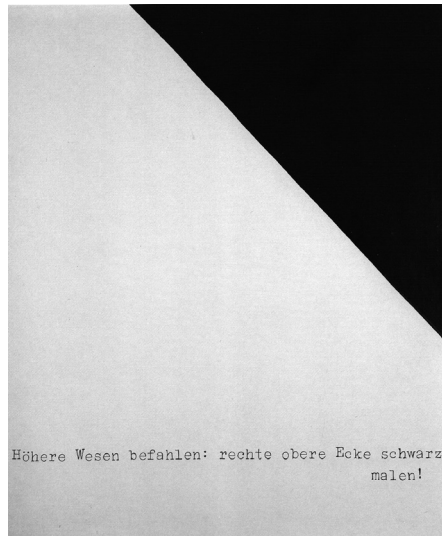


Fig. 3.1. Sigmar Polke, *Higher Beings Command: Paint the Upper Right Corner Black!*, 1969

JN:

The link between Polke and Kippenberger I can see, where Polke in the way you are describing is more than the others like the younger Cologne artists. He's the least stable of those earlier figures. I've found too that Isabelle Graw goes to the same point and makes this connect to the Polke painting *Higher Beings*. She as well writes about Jörg Immendorff's *Hört auf zu malen* (Stop painting), 1966 [fig. 3.3].¹⁰ She suggests that both of these paintings, as gestures, were important in shaping the Cologne art world. One saying stop painting ironically, and the Polke that higher beings told him to do it, so he defers to them. Do you remember the Immendorff as influential as well?

CP:

I don't remember that one but I remember many other ones. We've got a little print of that monkey with the brush. He always put a monkey in his paintings, always somewhere there with a brush in its hand, the Immendorff. It's a parody. But still I would make a difference between



Fig. 3.2. Martin Kippenberger, *Berlin bei Nacht (Grosse Wohnung, nie zu Hause, Dialog mit der Jugend, Deckname Hildegard)* (Berlin at night [Big apartment, never at home, dialogue with the youth, cover name Hildegard]) (detail of triptych), 1981. © Estate of Martin Kippenberger, Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne. Photo: Simon Vogel



Fig. 3.3. Jörg Immendorff, *Hört auf zu malen* (Stop painting), 1966

the older guys who were still more in the tradition of the painter. For instance, Markus Oehlen did that orange Hitler portrait. That is a very good example for the later generation. There is something else too: because Kippenberger was West German he had all these famous contacts. The Grässlins were best friends with him, they were big collectors. The Grässlins also had a gallery in Frankfurt, Galerie Gisela Capitain. It's all kind of top-notch contact. You know, upper middle-class to really rich guys. And he was always there. It's very interesting. So, he was kind of this *clochard* [tramp/vagrant]. And more so [with Kippenberger], the market and understanding how to enter or make a market is crucial in the art game. Yes.

...

JN:

There is a particular word I'm trying to think of for posing, in German?

CP:

Hochstapler? In English it's the pretender. But the pretender is not the *Hochstapler*. It has more nuances in the German.

JN:

Ah, another word. I was thinking of *Haltung* as it describes an attitude or a posture.¹¹ An example would be the overt posturing of a big male figure, like the way you talk of Immendorff?¹² This issue of *Haltung* plays out even in the work of Kai Althoff I think. Which has attracted a lot of criticism and anger in the German art world.¹³ But Althoff is even younger than the generations of Koether and Kippenberger. *Haltung* refers to a kind of art posturing and while we are changing generations they each are both posing or posturing. The younger generation is parodying the older, but they are also doing something distinctive. Graw argues that *Haltung* was like a cult in Cologne and she connects it with the concept of painting as it unfolds one generation to the next.¹⁴ The posture of the painter and painting became centre stage with Kippenberger's generation. And sure, Althoff takes it in a different – not so happy – direction entirely, masking the exaggeratedly male German soldier figure with a kind of sexy gay lifestyle thing.



Fig. 3.4. Kai Althoff, *Untitled*, 2001

CP:

Well they had their ways. But I think this *Haltung* thing would probably apply to more the Lüpertz–Richter generation. They were all friends in the East. And this next generation Kippenberger–Oehlen and there are many more – you had to be funny. You could not be taken seriously. In the end they all became serious. They all sold for good money. It was always the parody and I'm an idiot type thing and if you take it seriously, well, that's your problem.

JN:

This is Kai Althoff's painting [fig. 3.4]. It's a dandy image I guess. Not just schoolboys though, uniform boys. Not just gay, but sexy dark gay. A little bit of the corporal about them. I think it goes to the same way that you talked about Kippenberger's generation still under the effect of their parents' generation, and the Nazi stuff, where your generation was a little bit further along and it wasn't as impactful. But here it is again. The big criticism of Kai Althoff would be that he makes sexy this sort of semi-fascism in today's market. There is a similar *Haltung* feeling, where there is an insider thing happening. On the inside you know what is

going on, but it carries privilege and has an aestheticised subcultural quality. Did you have much to do with Althoff?

CP:

He is definitely not there, not with the others. It's much too painterly and has the look of like it's done with a certain purpose and reason.

JN:

This is interesting though. I think Kai Althoff gets into trouble with more serious critics in Germany partly because in his work the paint is so stylised. It's sexy and sweet. And it repeats pretty historical devices and adopts historical influences, say, for example, like Munch. He likes nice colours. So, the allegation if you like is that he makes acceptable a *Haltung* elitism, or poses the acceptability. It's nearly like he is gay and he likes it rough. He problematises maybe, but the criticisms come I think because more than in the Kippenberger generation the work is aesthetic and aestheticised. He aestheticises these posturings that Kippenberger treated with irony. I'm remembering Daniel Birnbaum or is it Diedrich Diederichsen?¹⁵ You get some very angry reactions towards Althoff along these lines. But there is a lot of intelligence in the way he constructs his artworks. He never went to art school. Grows up in a solo parent family with his mother and paints on the kitchen table. The scales are all domesticated early on. There is a lot of innocence about his work. And the innocence allows him to be free stylistically and aesthetically whereas a more academic artist wouldn't allow themselves to be.

CP:

[Thinking about] those people [Kippenberger's generation], Büttner is another. I worked for Taschen who was a very big supporter of them. I remember going out [to bars] and they would be just around. Sixpack was one of them, Dos Equis Xx was another. These artists had to display a certain image. You wouldn't find Gerhard Richter there. He would do his stuff. He would paint his *Uncle Rudi* [1965] and in a way he was kind of superior. Representing that kind of classic painter guy. He was also commenting and he did the Baader-Meinhof paintings at that time. I saw them in New York again. It's just absolutely incredible that stuff. In a way that was something

they [Kippenberger et al.] couldn't really grasp. It was not something where they could make a funny comment. It was a bit above their league. It's very interesting in a way that Richter categorically took everything very seriously. And they tried to make everything not serious. It's a weird thing.

JN:

One of the artists that picks up on the new rules of Kippenberger is Jutta Koether. In my mind Kippenberger rebuilds an exclusive space in the art world that is populated with insiders who are necessarily mainly the artists themselves. They write their own rules which become self-fulfilling. He re-establishes the order of painting in contemporary art and within that he is the leader or the joker as you were saying.

CP:

I think you have to make one compromise in there. It's true he had his own system. But he wasn't on his own. There were the Oehlen brothers [Albert and Markus], Werner Büttner, Georg Herold and Jutta Koether. There were others who kind of worked in a similar way just not as radically as he did. It is interesting, these guys, because they were all quite bold. They were always drinking together and out there. You name it, they went there. You could always guarantee there would be one or two of them there. Walter Dahn and the rest of them. But what is important I think is not to underestimate the calculations. People always think they didn't care and that is not true. For example, Kippenberger was absolutely instrumental in helping Max Hetzler to get a name [as a gallerist] and [get] all those artists into that gallery. Remember – in Venloer Strasse – the modern building on the top floor.

JN:

Ah yes, I think so.

CP:

And that's where the convention comes in. They are dealing with a canvas and a brush and all of that. You can't just drop that under the table. You can say, Kippenberger you are fantastic. You are such a kind of crazy guy and incredible artist. But they had a very good understanding of

the art market and how it all works. I know that also from Benedict Taschen and he has a lot of stuff from Kippenberger and Oehlen and Werner Büttner. Anyway, the thing is, it is easy to underestimate when you say, they wrote their own rules. They did, and they didn't.

JN:

Turned the rules to themselves?

CP:

Because they were so bold and out there and found the right gallery person who would go along with that. You have to look up that [Kippenberger] show at Max Hetzler's [*Hand Painted Pictures*, 1992]. It was shortly before he died [in 1997]. He showed these self-portraits. It was the first time that I thought, oh! It's dead serious here. And soon after, he died. The way they [the self-portraits] were presented was so kind of conservative. Him being in all these poses with his big liver hanging out and, you know, this funny face. You could see that he was also a human being who had to cook with water in that kind of art context.

JN:

How are you meaning, cook with water?

CP:

You know – just basic. You can't escape these things. If you hang an artwork on the wall you identify yourself with a whole lot in art history. You're not breaking a rule here. It might be what is painted and how it's painted might be a rule breaker, but not the fact that you are here and in a very conservative fashion you show how you feel yourself. So, towards the end, not very good! That show was a really kind of interesting one. As well because I think it was the last thing he did with Max Hetzler.

...

JN:

Do you remember Jutta Koether?

CP:

I saw her a couple of times but I don't associate any art with her. Because she was working as a journalist. I didn't see a show of hers in

those years. I didn't think she had a gallery in Cologne. More in the news was Isa Genzken, she was with Gerhard Richter. Charline von Heyl was married to Albert Oehlen. I think that's right.

JN:

The sense of feminism in Germany – I remember it as being less influential than it was in other places. Annie and I would talk about it.

CP:

No it wasn't [as influential], because you had the official version of feminism. A person called Alice Schwarzer was also in Cologne. She set up a magazine called *EMMA*. So that was the official way of being a feminist. No high heels, clean your potatoes yourself and that was that. But these artists [Koether et al.] would never really try to follow those classic ideals of feminism. They themselves were confident and whatever type of discrimination they experienced was business [art world] discrimination. I don't know, galleries not wanting to show women and things like that.

JN:

I'm listening to myself and realise I'm referring to new rules in painting. To be more specific I'm meaning the conceptual slippage where, just in the way you've been describing, a new subject changes the rules of the art world around themselves. Something like that. It's the way Kippenberger's generation builds a different way of painting that was self-consciously not the method of the earlier generations. That's what I'm meaning by changing the rules. It's clearly not changing the idiom but it is a rewrite at the same time. Specifically too, painting was kind of unique in Cologne. Its status in Cologne and how this is being interpreted in the context of painting more broadly now represents a change. Kippenberger causes a break with the pseudo-objectivity of Gerhard Richter's time. With Kippenberger, the social context or the social bond between painters and actual painting is heightened.¹⁶ The revision becomes more clearly that painting is more like a subject and it operates like a subject does. Paintings are affected and operate like people do in situ. This is how he changed the rules. This is the sort of mechanism of his rule rewrite.

As I understand it this is the lesson that Koether runs with and applies herself in the context of NYC in the early 1990s – specifically too in terms of drawing out feminism in the context of painting. She bends painting to feminism and bends it historically and conceptually, applying what you can call the Kippenberger model. This was different and useful for Koether. Like you say, these artists wouldn't just do the official version of feminism. She needed painting itself to describe feminism. And needed to bend the rules so this happens inside of painting. Within its rules too. There were always women who painted but in painting feminism does not have a sex. Because it doesn't have an actual body. This was a conceptual awareness Koether was obviously interested in. It's not only Richter who was at the top of the tree, but it's his art history and references and art historians and the critics and the commentators, all by asserting objective aesthetic authority. Whereas Kippenberger's rules are anti-aesthetic, or rather they are the rules of the subject. The only way to understand Kippenberger's rules would be to go and ask Kippenberger. It's not possible to stand outside and measure painting objectively, according to established rules. Otherwise you will always put Richter on top and you would have never heard about Kippenberger.

CP:

Richter has big references – the romantic movement, the history of landscape painting. He uses references but he does it a certain way. And yes he uses a lot of photography. It impresses you in a gentle but subtle way. But I think where they all meet is in the institutions. They meet in the temples of art-making. Kippenberger had an academy job in Frankfurt at the Städelschule. They all have their jobs. Richter was in Düsseldorf. Baselitz in Berlin. These guys come along, but it's all state-run in Germany and that counted. They each get €8,000 a month and they do nothing, just mush around with a few students.

...

JN:

Can you talk about your recollections of Pierre Klossowski. I remember Cologne was one of the few places Klossowski was well known outside of France.

CP:

Cologne was a very Catholic place – Klossowski had many supporters in some of the galleries. There was one specifically, Almut Gerber. He [Klossowski] was never really part of an art group, he was far too far removed from all of that. He did his own kind of private illustrations and was very active in translating. He translated *The 120 Days of Sodom*. The Marquis de Sade, that's where all of that kind of perverse knowledge was coming [from]. The female in his drawings is his wife. He was certainly more known in West Germany than recognised in the East. He was the secretary of André Gide and already had a big name in the literature world. I liked him because he was a bit outside the visual arts spectrum in that sense and he had these other influences. You have to think about Pasolini, Bertolucci, film-makers who dealt heavily with these kinds of themes, all from very Catholic countries, and all dealt with these semi-sexual pornographic ideas in their movies. And the Spanish guy – what was his name? The guy who did *Un Chien Andalou*, the thing with the eye.¹⁷ Klossowski is of that generation. That's kind of the right side of Europe really. Not politically right but the Catholic right. They all had contact with each other.

JN:

You've used colour pencil for years and that was something Klossowski begins later on. Is that something you would refer to?



Fig. 3.5. Christoph Preussmann, *Untitled (Liegende)* (Reclining), 2002

CP:

Definitely. I used colour pencil because of the space issue. I didn't have a lot of work space and I wanted to transfer photography into something. I was very naive [*laughs*]. And on it went. I like that work [by Klossowski] very much. It's now a bit difficult perhaps – and his brother. They had the idea of removing the Balthus from MoMA in New York. That's a very big misunderstanding and of course it had to happen. They didn't remove it in the end though. I was always remembering seeing various exhibitions, but it was always first of all Pierre Klossowski's work and then from there I got onto Balthus but it kind of took a while to get into that. It's kind of what you would call personal myth, when you create your own little universe and not only that it's no wonder that Pierre Klossowski illustrated in that way. He wasn't what his brother did. He was more somebody who would do a book. He would put these illustrations together. But then to have them in that big kind of size was a perfect fit, no? Not more. Really interesting I thought. Really interesting and you have to be interested in that topic. He wasn't really very much acceptable in the kind of visual arts drawing world. The how-to-draw thing, he didn't care about that.

JN:

Jutta Koether is one of the few artists I know who makes references to Klossowski in the 1990s. Can you speculate about why she looks to Klossowski?

CP:

That's interesting. Because you can look at Koether's work where you find yourself a bit reminded of Klossowski. I think the only reason is it's fragile. It's the fragility in it. That kind of sensitivity and that was what she really kind of [*notices*]. It makes them this kind of sexualisation of the human, as the deepest engine almost.

JN:

My feeling is that she would have been aware too that Klossowski was a very unfamiliar figure in the art world but very much admired by artists in Cologne particularly. He would not have been known so well in NYC for instance, where she had moved in the early 1990s. Jutta Koether would be aware of this too.

CP:

Yes. I think too that because he didn't really fit into anything, she also probably liked that. That there was someone totally out of context coming up with these drawings.

...

JN:

Going back to your conversation of painting convention and Galerie Max Hetzler, Sigmar Polke's painting *Higher Beings Command* [fig. 3.1] is a reference to the convention you're speaking of? Is that right? It's a reference to painting understood as an institution?

CP:

Yes!

JN:

It refers to painting in a collective sense. Where Paul Klee famously says it is the artwork [that] draws the picture.¹⁸ It is this concept we are meaning?

CP:

There is a big difference. I'm a bit suspicious of Paul Klee, I don't know why I never really liked his figuration. What Polke did very cleverly was that he was putting the problem there clearly. But at the same time it made it nice and free for him.

JN:

He was kind of saying, listen to painting.

CP:

Yes.

JN:

I'm thinking about a chapter title, "A Better Human Being." It's virtually a Theodor Adorno usage where he connects to the project of art-making and discusses how it operates as a collective unit.¹⁹ You could say it operates like an institution beyond even artists themselves. Not art historically, but an operability that artists and painters maintain. Maybe it's inoperable elsewhere. Is this the higher being or force that Polke is listening to?

CP:

Well, I would probably not take it too far. Polke is from this very Catholic place and certainly this is an influence, of God and other things. But I think you use that thinking as a tool to get away. You say to yourself, maybe: Oh, I'm not really responsible. I was told to do it [*laughs*].

JN:

And you would think of that in your own work? That feeling when you are making choices and making work? Following the intuition Polke inspires, with an awareness you're not the first one doing this. Is this something you recognise?

CP:

I do definitely. To use existing imagery and transferring that, gives you a nice bit of freedom. You are kind of taking it and you've got the authorisation. Because it must be good, because so many people love this! It's interesting when you talk about these things to people and they sense where the images come from. [How they respond] depends on how informed a person is. If someone has no idea about art and you reveal that bit – that it's a kind of pre-existing image – they would say, oh!, like they were [being] cheated.

JN:

That's partly why you are comfortable with the use of the word illustrate, where you refer to Klossowski's drawings as illustrations.

CP:

Yes. Once, back in Germany, my friend Christian's son came into my studio when I was working. Christian is upstairs in the other flat. And his son said, *Abmalen!*, which in German means you have got this here and now you are copying it. *Abmalen* has a kind of double edge in German. Kind of, oh you are too lazy to think for yourself.

JN:

Of course, you realise I'm thinking immediately that this is Adorno's mimetic thinking.

CP:

Yes, representation.

JN:

You laugh about learning to draw in the context of an art school environment in some artful way, or properly. Would you explain your preference for illustrating as a concept in drawing? In the sense that it is much more directly concerning a thing and that it presupposes that images are continuous and connected directly to the subject and the reason for a drawing? Sorry, does that make sense?

CP:

The weird thing when I was in Sydney at the National Art School was that the senior lecturer did not understand this process of copying, because she insisted drawing was a process of free drawing. Whenever you went there they were always sitting behind easels. I don't know what they did there. It's so kind of obvious that this is not the question any more.

JN:

Just earlier you made a distinction between Klossowski and his brother Balthus along these lines. You talked about Klossowski as illustrating, more like illustrating a book, whereas Balthus wanted to be more like a painter.

CP:

Klossowski talked about his drawing as illustrating his thinking, such as his work on the Marquis de Sade, which is why these things are the way they are. And in his writing often there is an image involved. That has a lot to do with the writing, so the straighter you can call it the better. I was reading about another French philosopher writing about drawing and suggesting drawing and writing are interrelated so well because both are kinds of writing. Using a pencil, it's a different way of interpreting writing. It suited Klossowski and it was also naive, the naivety you have in those pencil drawings. The colours are kind of gentle and everything, but the topic is quite explicit sometimes and that's fantastic. They come across as very strong things. Balthus was more a painter because he painted always.

JN:

There is a switch between those two things too, the immediacy and intimacy regarding the purpose of drawing and illustrating in the way we are talking about it. Whereas a painter tends to engage the art world, even though Balthus as well kept his distance and cultivated a personal mythology. But this idea of addressing the art world is slightly different. The project of addressing the art world that often happens in painting, and happens with Kippenberger for instance, is less interesting than the Klossowski project of pursuing this dream of his own description. In a way, the task of addressing the art world is not as high up the scale of things. When we talked about Jutta Koether, we were talking about why she hooks into Klossowski, how she probably likes the sensitivity. You also said that Koether probably likes the idea that he was so anonymous in ways and so much outside the art world. Yet for me, Jutta Koether is entirely inside the art world, much like Kippenberger [was]. Her constant address is the art world. It feels as though if the art world wasn't there, she would not do this stuff. Very unlike Klossowski in that way. When you look at Jutta Koether it's more the case that she wants to be a painter, the painter in the art world. There is a difference do you think?

CP:

That's a good observation really. I don't know her work that well to be able to place it and I'm not sure what she is doing at the moment.

JN:

I think that contrast is problematic even when I think of it in my own work. I find that with Koether and Kippenberger, where the address is the art world, this is less interesting for me, less rewarding. It's actually not the better human being Adorno was meaning. It's something I think about a lot. There is a misconnect there somewhere.

CP:

You can see it [Jutta Koether, *Starry Night II*, 1988 – fig. 3.6] as a commentary on the state of the arts. You might not call it ironic but it's definitely a statement on how to read art. It's just as valid as van Gogh.

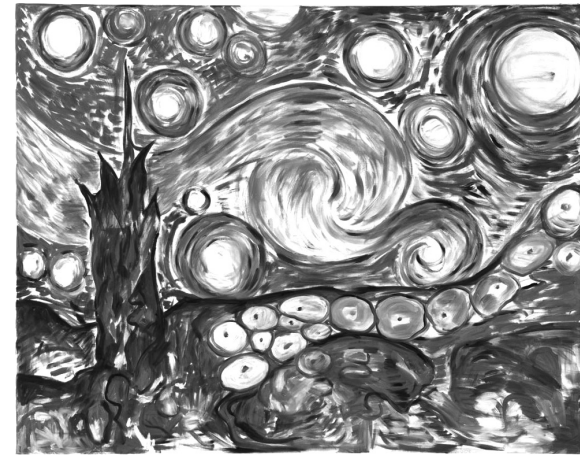


Fig. 3.6. Jutta Koether, *Starry Night II*, 1988

JN:

The challenge lies in needing or demanding a necessary amount of authenticity – these days it's innocence. I think this is where she is going with *Starry Night*. It's part of the demand she brings to feminism and painting.

When she painted *Whole (100% Painting – Nobody Is a Woman)*, 1991, she was describing painting the way Polke described painting as the business of higher beings. It's the way Klossowski says, "the picture is an 'in itself' come to life and breathing according to its own laws."²⁰ So, a painting is not bound by the laws of men and women. Again this is very like Polke's higher forces. Painting speaking as itself. So I think this is the context for *Whole (100% Painting – Nobody Is a Woman)*, where she makes plain that actually in painting literally nobody is a woman. This is the feminism Koether brings to contemporary painting. Painting is not defined essentially by women or men, by the body of the painter, nor is its history cast exclusively as male. Rather it is conceptually paint/body/subject itself. That is therefore 100% whole, 100% not ironic, 100% believing, 100% painting, 100% in painting nobody is a woman or a man. I think that is how she is driving the commentary. It's propositioning all these crazy ideas and dragging them into one conceptual position if you like.



Fig. 3.7. Jutta Koether, *Ganz (100% Malerei – Niemand ist eine Frau)* (Whole [100% painting – nobody is a woman]), 1991

CP:

Because she is also a writer and [has] written a lot around the art world. That's all fine. They are valid positions to make and statements but I don't really need it. It has a short shelf life to work like that.

JN:

It oscillates around how much the subject is the artist and how much the subject is the painting.²¹ When the subject is too closely only the subject of the artist it feels very iffy perhaps. And where painting is only painting, exclusively painting, it is awful too.

CP:

The other kind of shallowness is where a person says, oh, I couldn't solve that problem in my art, so I thought about killing myself. That's the idiotic comment some people make. But then I would prefer hers because it is honest and an original idea.

¹ See Manuela Ammer, Achim Hochdörfer, and David Joselit, eds., "Fantasy of Cologne," in *Painting 2.0: Expression in the Information Age: Gesture and Spectacle, Eccentric Figuration, Social Networks* (Munich: Delmonico Books/Prestel, 2015), 208–21.

² "Many artists in late 1980s and early '90s New York, including those generally classed as Appropriation artists, viewed painting with mounting scepticism ... The art scene in the Rhineland, an area in western Germany, didn't share this aversion to painterly practices." Isabelle Graw, *The Love of Painting: Genealogy of a Success Medium* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2018), 147–48. See also Achim Hochdörfer, "How the World Came in," in *Painting 2.0: Expression in the Information Age: Gesture and Spectacle, Eccentric Figuration, Social Networks*, ed. Manuela Ammer, Achim Hochdörfer, and David Joselit (Munich: Delmonico Books/Prestel, 2015), 15–27.

³ "With its references to simulation theory, painting's most recent crisis ... reached its high-water mark in the 1980s, when authentic painting was deemed a thing of the past." Hochdörfer, "How the World Came in," 20.

⁴ Mülheimer Freiheit as a group "which is now largely forgotten." Graw, *The Love of Painting*, 283.

⁵ Annie Jacobs and the author studied together at the ANU School of Art in Canberra in the late 1980s and were close friends over many years before she moved to Germany to study at the Kunsthochschule in Kassel where she met Christoph Preussmann. She later married Preussmann and they moved together to Cologne.

⁶ This is a point that David Joselit develops: "One of the characteristics of the Cologne art world of the 1980s and 1990s is that it is notoriously opaque for outsiders (including myself). This distancing effect ... is however an important dimension to strategies practised in Cologne." David Joselit, "Reassembling Painting," in *Painting 2.0: Expression in the Information Age: Gesture and Spectacle, Eccentric Figuration, Social Networks*, ed. Manuela Ammer, Achim Hochdörfer, and David Joselit (Munich: Delmonico Books/Prestel, 2015), 181.

⁷ Hochdörfer, "How the World Came in," 21. Hochdörfer continues, "The putative death of painting instantly eclipsed any discussion of the medium in general. Only with hindsight [in the last fifteen years] does it seem possible to reconstruct the complex and contradictory history of painting without

reigniting the same old trench warfare between it and Conceptual art, between the work and its larger context."

⁸ David Joselit, "Painting Beside Itself" (2009), in *Painting: Documents of Contemporary Art*, ed. Iwona Blazwick, Ian Farr, and Sarah Auld (London: Whitechapel Gallery; Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2011), 221.

⁹ See also the conversation with Noor Mahnun Mohamed in this publication.

¹⁰ Graw, *The Love of Painting*, 139–40.

¹¹ Jutta Koether refers to *Haltung* specifically in relation to painting: "That is what I mean by developing a certain Haltung, or attitude, of what painting is supposed to do for you, or you do with it, or this act of painting," and that mode or mood, "is at the moment a way to make painting ... and make it your thing/your platform and go full force." Jutta Koether, "Lee Lozano Paintings and Drawings," panel discussion with Jacqueline Humphries, Jutta Koether, and Bob Nickas, Hauser & Wirth, July 22, 2015, YouTube video, 1:08:51, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-_D98LUJwik.

¹² "A characteristic part of the Haltung Kippenberger and his male colleagues cultivated was an obviously overdone imitation of the forceful and brisk movements of disciplined (and trained) German soldiers ... the artist in a sense embodied their authoritarian fathers." Graw, *The Love of Painting*, 169.

¹³ "This rubble has a real history; it really stinks, and the guys swaggering around it have real fists." Diedrich Diederichsen, "Kai Althoff," *Artforum* 55, no. 5 (January 2017), <https://www.artforum.com/print/reviews/201701/kai-althoff-65396>.

¹⁴ Graw, *The Love of Painting*, 168–69.

¹⁵ Diederichsen, "Kai Althoff."

¹⁶ See Isabelle Graw, "'Hi, Here I Am, that Must Be Enough,' the Persona and the Product in Martin Kippenberger's Work," in *The Love of Painting*, 158–81.

¹⁷ Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí, *Un Chien Andalou* (An Andalusian dog), surrealist short film released 1929.

¹⁸ "One need only think of Paul Klee's celebrated statement that the eye pursues the course traced

out for it by the work, a kind of modernist credo, with which he styled himself the mere executing agent of a higher order." Isabelle Graw, "Adorno Is Among Us," in *Adorno Vol. 2: The Possibility of the Impossible*, trans. Steven Lindberg and James Gussen, ed. Nicolaus Schafhausen, Vanessa Joan Müller, and Michael Hirsch (New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2003), 13.

¹⁹ See Graw, *The Love of Painting*, 53.

²⁰ Pierre Klossowski, "The Decline of the Nude," *Phantasm and Simulacra. The Drawings of Pierre Klossowski*, ed. Paul Foss, Paul Taylor, and Allen S. Weiss, *Art & Text* Special Issue 18 (July 1985): 15.

²¹ "Painting ... doesn't stage mere subjectivity but more importantly, brings out the bonds that tie that subjectivity to external constraints." And further, "subjectivity, is more than 'pure interiority'; it is intertwined with outward existence." See Graw, *The Love of Painting*, 53.

Noor Mahnun Mohamed (Anum) is a painter who has worked in Kuala Lumpur since 1999. Born in the north-east Malaysian state of Kelantan in 1964, Anum studied art at the Hochschule für Bildende Künste (HBK) Braunschweig for seven years from 1989. She lived in Berlin from 1984 to 1997.

This is an edited transcript of Zoom conversations between March and May 2021.

Jonathan Nichols:

Christoph Preussmann, another artist I've interviewed, was likely at art school in Kassel around the time you were at HBK Braunschweig. He is now living in NSW and very happy raising free-range pigs – a crazy German thing maybe.

Noor Mahnun Mohamed:

I would say *Schweinezuchten* – pig breeding.

JN:

There are things Christoph talked about that you will be familiar with too. Your family is from Kelantan. You've spoken about the influence of Kelantan and its particular culture. Can we start there?

NMM:

In Malaysia, Kelantan is known as the cradle of culture but I think this is also because of the earlier older Langkasuka kingdom [c. 200 – 1500 CE]. Langkasuka and Kelantan are strongly connected, which is a long-term project I am working on.

JN:

That's the north-eastern coast, at the very top [of Malaysia]?

NMM:

Yes, bordering with Thailand. The assumption is that the Langkasuka kingdom was to the north of Kelantan. My father's family is from Patani but we settled down in Pasir Puteh which is south of Kota Bharu [the state capital].

JN:

Your mother is from Penang.

NMM:

My mother brought the irrational part. Kelantan side is very organised [*gestures with a straight hand*], a bit German in a way. When I look at my dad and my grandmother, they all have a very strong work ethic. Or maybe that's nonsense.

JN:

You've also talked about an uncle's influence, and bird traps in Kelantan?

NMM:

There is a book called *Spirit of Wood* involving wood carving of the Langkasuka kingdom.¹ Farish Noor and Eddin Khoo did the writing. You can't get it now because it's out of print. Angela Kasturi has several copies because Hijjas Kasturi's office was one of the sponsors in publishing, besides the Japanese Embassy. These are the quail traps I was talking about [fig. 4.1]. Quite amazing construction.

JN:

Oh wow. Quails? The little birds. It's a bird in the forest?



Fig 4.1. Quail trap, Pattani, southern Thailand, 19th century. Courtesy Akademi Nik Rashiddin

NMM:

Yes. Actually it's the ugliest bird in the forest. They go to all this trouble. Look at the wood carving. At the back it's another material from a ri-bu-ribu plant, so you kind of weave it. Then there is a net and they put a female quail inside as a bait. Male or female, I'm not too sure. Then when the other bird comes, a fence with a net – a ring construction with a net – will spring and fall and trap it.

JN:

Did we ever talk about Alfred Gell, his essay on animal traps, where he suggested that artworks are in fact like animal traps?²

NMM:

No! Send that paper to me! In this project I'm working on, where I've been asked to do a small project in Kelantan, I was thinking how could a culture design something like that? Wow, a trap for the world's ugliest bird in the jungle. Flora and fauna carving, beautiful – a lot of effort is put into just the look of it. It's like a mini-palace.

JN:

In his earlier writings, Alfred Gell develops an anthropological view that artworks are built like traps. That they are like mind-traps.

NMM:

The artwork traps an idea, do you mean?

JN:

Gell's thinking is that an artist and an artwork actually operate in a similar way to the trap-maker and the trap. They both tend to display complex ideas about what the maker thinks. The design of an animal trap copies the behaviour of the animal in particular ways; the maker mimics the animal and its home turf so to speak. An artwork models a kind of world of relations in the same way as the trap-maker models the animal's world. Something like that.

NMM:

You have to send me these links. A month ago one of my collectors came out with a catalogue and he wanted me to explain everything about a particular painting so he could write it down. I know when I was painting this work that I had these ideas. But when it was finished it didn't necessarily make the same sense any more. You don't have to know about it in that way. So when I was writing, I was a bit – not uncomfortable – not keen to tell everything. Maybe when I was painting it, it made sense. But when the painting is finished – the whole composition – it doesn't matter any more what I was thinking. I don't know, it's become something else. I kind of cater to them [collectors and viewers] because they want to have words that accompany

the painting. I said, "The painting was a kind of apology," and they are: "Oh! Who are you apologising to?"

JN:

You talked about your uncle's influence earlier.

NMM:

Ah, my father's family. My grandfather is a landowner. So half of the village belongs to us, or maybe it's the whole village. There is still kind of like a feudal system working and that my father went to school there was a big hoo-ha. My grandfather didn't like that my father wanted to go to a teachers college because all of the boys in the family are supposed to not do anything and cash in on the farm – the paddy fields they have and orchards and things like that. So my uncle is the typical head of a family who has a lot of wealth between the rice harvests. He was playing all the time, competing in all these traditional pastimes. There were kite competitions, *merbok* [bird] singing competitions, water buffalo fights, all considered by my dad as a waste of time. My uncle passed away last year. So, in the village, they do these hobbies all of the time that are like crafts in a way.

JN:

You mean the culture is a little bit feudal, and there are expectations of the head of a clan or however you would describe them. They have obligations to sponsor these cultural events around them. Is that part of it?

NMM:

A long time ago, his generation, if it was London, would be attending cafes and opera. But in Kelantan you would be going to all of the kite-flying competitions, to the *dikir barat*, which is a singing competition, spinning top competitions. These [Kelantan-style spinning tops] were quite large discs made of wood and metal. I still remember seeing [my father] cast the metal around the wood. He would go into the jungle because he would need to find a tree and get the roots of the tree. You need to do it alone. So he would go into the jungle for days and come out with his selected cut of the tree and start making the *gasing* [spinning top]. He made a *gasing* for me when I came back for my wedding. It was a wedding present for me. But now it's with my ex in Germany. I should get it back.

JN:

You should! I always understood that Hijjas Kasturi and the organisation of Rimibun Dahan had this layer of cultural architecture that was modelled on a traditional Malay social structure.³ So you have the big house, the guest houses and the artist studios, all in one complex etc.

NMM:

Hijjas just has to work hard to earn and be able to afford it all.

JN:

It's different?



Fig. 4.2. Noor Mahnun Mohamed at HBK Braunschweig, c. 1993

NMM:

He is still working. And now he is painting too, everything is painting. I was just there on Saturday for the opening of the artist in residence exhibition. Yes, and he was in the studio.

...

JN:

You studied at the art school in Braunschweig, Germany?

NMM:

It's between Berlin where I lived and Hanover. I started in 1989. The wall fell at the end of the year. I'd commute and rented a room there. Every two weeks I'd go back to Berlin or my partner would come and visit.

JN:

In an interview last year you said, "Everyone in Germany wanted to study art, especially in Berlin."

NMM:

It's true. Mostly middle class. I would think, OMG rich kids!

JN:

As I understand there are comparatively fewer art students in German academies. It was a different system. As a student you were attached to the professor I remember. Not the course or the institution. Berlin was a strange place at that time too. Christoph Preussmann would say that before the wall came down Berlin was a refuge for those not willing to be conscripted into military service. It's a story I would hear.

NMM:

Rents were cheap. Siemens doesn't have to pay tax so that's why they are there. There were a lot of perks. Kind of like sleepy town a bit.

JN:

In Cologne they would joke [that] no one works in Berlin.

NMM:

Exactly! My friends there were architects or German language students. You never graduated because as a student in Berlin it was half price for everything. You can live well with that.

JN:

It was like a bubble.

NMM:

That's the word. My Berlin bubble was burst when the wall came down. I was there 1984 to 1997.

JN:

Travelling in the 1990s we would tend to visit Cologne, where the galleries were.

NMM:

The Catholics.

JN:

That's right, the Catholics in the south. You were there from 1984 and you studied from 1989?

NMM:

That's because I needed a visa. I was actually thrown out of Germany. Every three months you needed to do a visa run and I would go to Italy because it was cheap. It's also where I could find my size in clothes [laughs]. John [my then partner] and I tried to live there. We lived in Berlin six months and said, hey why don't we try Florence? So, we went there. But Florence is not a good town to try to live in normally.

JN:

When you say that I think of your paintings and Piero della Francesca and all those Italian influences.

NMM:

When I saw the Giotto frescoes in Assisi that was where you kind of have that meltdown moment. I was in awe. Before that I was usually looking at the architecture, not the art. My first solo was in Florence. At Video Diva! On Via San Zanobi. But this is before art school. Florence was smaller, a lot of people came to the show. The young people of Florence.

JN:

Okay.

NMM:

So, I got kicked out of Germany. The letter said, "Sie müssen Deutschland innerhalb von 10 Tagen verlassen" – get out within 10 days. Very blunt. I went to London for a visit and to organise a new student visa for Germany, initially planning to study German. London was great. I was even spending time at Heaven [nightclub] and saw Leigh Bowery perform. But then I changed the application to study at the art school in Braunschweig. It was a big deal for me [to get the visa]. It felt concrete. The formal degree was five years but over the time I extended this to seven years. The longer the better as a student was the common attitude. For the foundation it was Prof. Johannes Brus. Later for the *Fachklasse* [professional specialisation] it was Arwed Gorella. Gorella

was good because I think when he was looking at my work he was telling me, look here in the library, and suggesting certain artists such as a Canadian artist Alex Colville [1920–2013]. I could latch onto that. It kind of felt awkward because around then everybody was doing conceptual art. There were only two art materials shops because nobody was painting. Everyone was in the coffee shops talking. Except for Hermann Albert and Klaus Stumpfel's *Fachklasse* studio upstairs, not many students were painting and especially not representational. The upstairs classes were super eccentric and would dress up. It was a bit fascist.⁴ Don't quote me on that.

JN:

No, I understand. The art world was pompousness around then, the German thing with people like Lüpertz. It was pretentious.

NMM:

Yes, sometimes they would come down and look at my paintings. I was alone in the studio. Everyone [else] was doing this action painting, throwing paint. Super messy.

JN:

And seven years undergrad – that's amazing.

NMM:

Once you get in, it's like, phew! I kind of realised too it's who they hire. It's politics. Do you want to be at a school that has more painters, or performance? They compare with other art schools.

JN:

The art schools had different focuses, conceptually?

NMM:

Braunschweig was quite a good school and played the middle lanes. It had quite a good film department. Later they became more experimental. They invited Marina Abramović just as I was leaving.

JN:

Neue Wilde [New Wild], that group, they would have been popular in painting at some point around then?

NMM:

No, not really somehow. I think maybe the school was closer to Hannover, with Neue Sachlichkeit [New Objectivity]. Do you know that? More tame. Not so wild.

JN:

I can see that when you think of Alex Colville.

NMM:

In retrospect it's not that I didn't understand, but why did my lecturer suggest looking at someone like Alex Colville when Neue Sachlichkeit was so much closer? Maybe because we were close it was taken for granted.

JN:

I've always thought of Neue Sachlichkeit as [being] very dispersed geographically and didn't connect it as a style. It was more the mood. I used to enjoy stories where you would read about brilliant artists who would simply at some point stop painting. Life was so uneasy and difficult an artist just stops working altogether. It was never an argument about just needing to change media.

NMM:

Under Arwed Gorella too there were Germans who loved Italy. I remember that. They even had summer houses there. Every summer they would go to Cortona. I think Baselitz had a house there too. There were all these British painters living there. I remember Carlo Carrà, there were all these metaphysical painters they would push on us. Giorgio de Chirico and all that.

...

JN:

Returning to Kuala Lumpur after 13 years. The art world in KL is not like the art world in Germany, or much here [Melbourne] at all either. You realise how starkly different art worlds can be. They are not in lock step or anything. Can we talk about these things?

NMM:

I finished art school in 1996 and the personal relationship ended. Friends wanted me to stay but I thought it was time to go home. This was at the end of 1997. You can imagine living in Germany for that long. Coming back to KL for me was similar to when I went to art school and everyone was doing conceptual work. When I came back here everyone was doing action art [performance] or painting abstract expressionist work, especially the men. Not many artists were painting otherwise. Maybe now figurative work is making a comeback, actually isn't it everywhere? So anyway, at the time I thought I would just do my thing.

I went to visit the Malaysia Institute of Architects on Jalan Tangsi; there was a gallery there called Galeri Tangsi. Tangsi is the name of nylon thread in Malay but it's also the name of the street it was on. I showed my work there and this then led to Rimbun Dahan where I met Hijjas and Angela Kasturi. They had seen my painting there and offered me the Rimbun residency. I think they bought one or two works at Tangsi. From that residency was the work [*A Song for Two* – fig. 4.3.] that resold at auction two years ago for RM200,000. Another painting, *Lanterns* [fig. 4.13], sold at RM150,000 recently. So I'm pleased it's not a one-off. Angela has the single figure of the same title.



Fig. 4.3. Noor Mahnun Mohamed, *A Song for Two*, 2000

JN:

Do painters in Malaysia build influences among themselves in a way that shapes painting? Is this ever a thing in your mind? What about the example of someone like Latiff Mohidin?⁵



Fig. 4.4. Latiff Mohidin, *Pago Pago*, 1964

NMM:

Well for me he is a very good artist but for many others he is merely a collector's painter. There is respect in a way but I don't see my students or the other art colleges emulating him. They try to follow more Syed Ahmad Jamal. Or Awang Damit Ahmad. When I see my peers Jalaini Abu Hassan and Rafiee Abdul Ghani – these are the top male artists that were his students – it's not the style but maybe the thinking is trickling down. The figure painters I would remember when I was younger were Dzulkifli Buyong [1948–2004] and Mohamad Hoessein Enas [1924–1995]. They are not Sturm und Drang, more emo. I do know too that my dad and all these hobby artists, the intellectuals in Kelantan, were emulating Hoessein Enas. I still have that in my mind. But those paintings didn't survive, because later [after 9/11] they all became anti-figurative and religious. They threw all the figure paintings away. I could salvage only one of my dad's paintings years later, a por-

trait of our [former] prime minister [fig. 4.5]. The other painter, Dzulkifli Buyong, I could relate to somehow [fig. 4.6]. Such as his paintings of kids playing with cats or a night scene before bed with mosquito nets. I find that very interesting. Some of my collectors like to see me in relation to an artist like Buyong.



Fig. 4.5. Mohamed Idris, *Tunku Abdul Rahman*, 1959. Courtesy of Noor Mahnun Mohamed



Fig. 4.6. Dzulkifli Buyong, *Kelambu (Mosquito nets)*, 1964. Courtesy of Mazni Binti Buyong

JN:

Can we talk about cultural links in a different way? For instance, when I talked to Boedi Widjaja and Audrey Koh in Singapore their conversations were more pronounced in terms of cultural differences, especially where Boedi as a Chinese Indonesian had lived away from his parents since he was eight or nine years old.⁶

NMM:

I know sisters who lived together away from the parents in Singapore. It was after the 1989 riots I think. For safety.

JN:

But with yourself, having travelled and studied away so long, the cultural settings are not easy to explain. You have had a very broad artistic training and experience that is not so apparent perhaps at first glance. For example, with Boedi, his expectation is that cultures and identities are part of the art arena. He is interested to make artwork by building on or speculating on what he feels are cultural gaps. This is the way he has described it.⁷ He looks to experiment and explore these spaces. Such as thinking about what it is to be Chinese, ethnically Chinese, whereas his own experience is Indonesian and growing up in Solo. He would say he has an imaginary vision of China or what it is to be Chinese. In these speculative gaps he sees a role for art-making.

NMM:

They [Chinese Indonesians] were also not allowed to speak Chinese.

JN:

Yes. His name is modified to sound more Indonesian. Boedi Widjaja is not a Chinese name. The interesting thing in this for me is kind of technical, how cultures collide and are fixed in artworks. For instance, with yourself, where you have trained and lived in Germany for 13 years, which is a very unusual experience. As an artist I have some sense of what that might have been like. Whereas you then returned here and very few in KL might realise what that might have been like for you, although I'm sure too there is a long experience of people leaving – or travelling – and returning. It might be unusual but anticipated for sure too. But for Boedi, and he studied architecture in Sydney for many years

as well, he feels or thinks between places, this is where he works. He looks for a gap in cultural understanding – like an overlapping zone or terrain – and then works towards these. I think cultural settings are differently construed in your work and I don't see you doing the same kind of thing. In your time in Germany and in your artwork, how did you negotiate this idea of culture gaps and different backgrounds?

NMM:

I didn't try at all. Not knowingly.

JN:

It wasn't a conversation? I suppose back then it was less so or a different kind of conversation?

NMM:

When people bring you the East/West thing I tried not to get into that.

JN:

So even now it's not an immediate thought – your references to specific cultural settings are not intended to be overt. The Bambi reference in *Lanterns*, for instance, is kind of circuitous isn't it?

NMM:

It's never so simple. To start I don't think of myself as being Malaysian, more someone from the east coast. It's narrower than that [Malaysian]. Let's put it that way. Here there are those that try to impose a national Malaysian identity. That is the pressure. At one point there was a conversation going on to impose a national cultural policy, but thankfully I was not here. I try not to get involved in that.

JN:

If you think of someone like Latiff Mohidin, as an example, how do you see him or connect with him? It's interesting too that Latiff also trained in Germany [at the Hochschule für Bildende Künste in West Berlin, 1960–64].

NMM:

I find him inspiring because his themes are nature and architecture and these are intertwined. The mountains. There are certain shapes and

forms that he relates to. I find these quite amazing. He's very consistent, where similar shapes and themes will reappear.

JN:

You would connect the more recent works of yours, the flora paintings?

NMM:

I think I like him more because it's universal not because it's flora. He is also a writer and a poet. Kind of like a one-man band.

JN:

I'm thinking of works like these [figs 4.7 and 4.8].

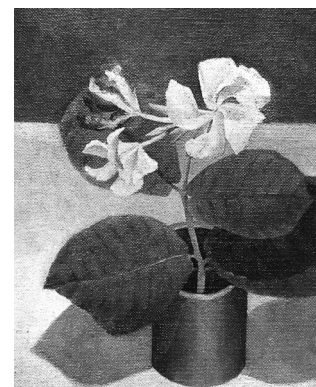


Fig. 4.7. Noor Mahnun Mohamed, *Chonemorpha Macrophylla*, 2001

NMM:

Those are from Rim bun Dahan. The hedge, near Kak Puteh's house, near the big house.

JN:

Okay. I remember Kak Puteh, up the back a little. You relate these in a way to Latiff Mohidin?



Fig. 4.8. Noor Mahnun Mohamed, *Ixora*, 2000

NMM:

Okay, not literally.

JN:

But this is a struggle that we all make. It has to be personal.

NMM:

Me. I'll show you an early work, even before Florence. I was doing flowers [figs 4.9 and 4.10]. Maybe I was looking at the early expressionists, Die Brücke and all that, in Berlin. And then I discovered Cézanne. Pre-art school I think. I was impressed when he was painting the fruits and he let it rot away. So I started doing a similar kind of thing. And my ex was a bit upset with that. I had these peaches [rotting] on the window sill. So, I think I got into art school with this portfolio. I'm painting peaches by day, peaches by night. These are in my apartment in Berlin. You can allegorise closer to these, not Mohidin, or Cézanne. Oh yes and a bit of Morandi came in somewhere. I think these are likely close to the first solo [exhibition].

JN:

Are these still about?



Fig. 4.9 Noor Mahnun Mohamed, *Windowsill (Kreuzberg)/Dried Chrysanthemums*, c. 1989



Fig. 4.10. Noor Mahnun Mohamed, *Nectarine (Day)*, c. 1989



Fig. 4.11. Noor Mahnun Mohamed, *Windowshop/Vitrine*, c. 1990



Fig. 4.12. Noor Mahnun Mohamed, *Mr and Mrs Eisel*, c. 1990

NMM:

Maybe in Berlin or burnt by the new girlfriend. She took over my room.

NMM:

These are my landlady and landlord in Braunschweig, the parents of a friend of mine a bit outside town [fig. 4.12]. The end of the S-Bahn on Schunterblick. I think that is me [sitting on the bench] I just realise.

JN:

It can seem peculiar to try and think about how painters interact and painting as a collective shape. Or is it a collective procedure? It can feel so fanciful. With these pictures you painted in Berlin, you and I might see associations, like early Balthus, perhaps, and New Objectivity, various early moderns and clearly a figurative – a classic figuration or pictorial – interest in painting rather than an American group of influences or something.

NMM:

Yes, so, figuratively bent let's put it.

JN:

Contemporary art often explains what is going on by reference to context, say where an artwork came from and its social or political background. Whereas historical motivations, or motivations that are carried indirectly in time, are less well-rehearsed. Memory carries motive over time by example. In my mind painters use these indirect associations a lot. Historical motives or expectations also speak about what an artwork is doing in reference to other contemporary art-making – other painters and other paintings. Can we untangle contextual influences, say places and specifics, from other motivations? Is a historical and contextual division sensible?⁸

NMM:

I'm not sure. I see Latiff as similar to the woodcarving project I am working on, with the Kelantan woodcarver. Is this the kind of thing you are meaning? Where Nik Rashiddin [the woodcarver] wasn't looking for his favourite form, he was looking for the Langkasuka form. He kind of found it in a way. He goes around, he collects artefacts and ma-

terials, he was making sketches. I see similarity with Latiff even though one is an artisan and one is a painter. And if somebody asked me, who is the Malaysian painter you like, I would definitely say Latiff because I couldn't actually find any other painter so easily.

JN:

Yes, I see. Connecting the woodcarver with someone like Latiff I understand. It reminds me of Michael Taussig too.⁹

...

JN:

Can we talk a bit more about the later figurative work [figs 4.3 and 4.13]?

NMM:

I kind of know why I painted them. I had entered the Malaysian art world. Earlier, in Kelantan on the east coast, after coming back from Berlin, you know, the whole world doesn't matter in the same way. For me or my mum and the studio I had. That was why I didn't paint anything in that time except a pregnant goat which was my dad's goat. I had a beautiful studio and view and every day I would sit at the window and look out. But when I came to KL and the Rimbun Dahan residency you try to put yourself in context. I thought, you are kind of playing a role just like karaoke. Pretending to sing basically. That's why I did the karaoke series. It's not pretending but it is taking up a role. Taking up the role of an artist. You put yourself on a stage. You perform.

JN:

When I look at these paintings, I can't help but think there is a likeness [between you and] the figures.

NMM:

But I didn't consciously try to paint myself. It just turned out that way. I do line drawings and then a grid system to blow it up.

JN:

You would compose it like a collage, piecing it together?

NMM:

I took photos of the early faces of the duet [fig. 4.3]. In the beginning the girl on the left was wearing a shirt like just coming from work. Like on the way home she stopped to sing karaoke. But it was just wrong. It looked temporary with a white shirt. So now she is wearing a dress.

JN:

What do you think now?

NMM:

I think I could do it better. They look like they are on an island. It's too island-like. I didn't want them to be on an island.

JN:

Lanterns [fig. 4.13] would have been painted around the same time?

NMM:

That's much later. That's the apology piece. 2013. I'd just come back from the Japan residency with the Nippon scholarship. When I came back, Nabil, my gallerist, asked me to take part in an exhibition for Nalanda, which is a Buddhist society in Puchong [south Kuala Lumpur] to raise funds. Nalanda in Bihar [a state in the north-east of India] is a place that suffers serious anti-Buddhist violence at different times. Years ago, a long time ago, a Muslim mob destroyed whole areas: a university, library, the temple complexes, villages, everything. So, I thought I would make a peace offering because it had been raided by the Muslims – I would paint a kind of peace offering. I had my niece model for me and the lanterns I'd taken a photo of in Japan. My friend had these lanterns in his studio. She is holding these like a floral arrangement. And to relate it more to Buddhism and Japan, I've included the Bambi which is a Disney ceramic character only available in Japan. I googled that. And there was the paper screen. My niece who was staying with me. Outside [the house] she wears the *tudung* [hijab] so generally I wouldn't say either that she was involved.

JN:

You call them lanterns, the flowers?

NMM:

Yes, they are Japanese lanterns. Also, Chinese lanterns if you are from China. I kind of noticed that my niece has a bum that's cute like a Bambi too. So that's a good connection.



Fig. 4.13. Noor Mahnun Mohamed, *Lanterns*, 2013

JN:

My friend Pierre Klossowski says that an artist doesn't always need to be conscious of why they do something, they just need to know how it's done.¹⁰

NMM:

I make a reason to start the painting but I don't know where it is going particularly. But I notice when a person looks at my painting the first thing they say is, oh, it looks like you. That is their first concern. I think at a certain point I stopped painting figures because of that. When I was doing the series of glasses, I was not bothered, but I was thinking – ugh – they're reading my diary.

JN:

The figures you use are often women and they are often Malay shapes and that is really particular. It's not like they are Greek, or big American bodies.

NMM:

Yes. I have always painted my world.

JN:

You are aware too that those particular bodies you paint are not often seen in paint. There is an opening there because they are less familiar in paint. They are not European figures.

NMM:

That's interesting.

JN:

Each painting leans into the next; they repeat. The figures repeat.

NMM:

I paint what is around me and at some point when there is too much attention I tend to run away. I think that is why I am going to botanical illustration. I'm taking a break. I feel there is an expectation now, everybody wants me to paint figuratively now.

JN:

Is that right?

NMM:

Yes, figurative Anum. So now I've run away and do small botanical. A5.

JN:

The last show I saw was a discotheque.

NMM:

They were all small works, paper works. But I just went recently to Ilham Gallery and saw this wonderful photographic exhibition *Bayangnya itu Timbul Tenggelam*.¹¹ I was so inspired I want to go back to the studio. Tiny photos but so many paintings I can make out of them.

JN:

Going back to our conversation about context and history.¹² Context is the more visual part I find. In terms of *Lanterns*, it's like saying, this is my niece.

NMM:

So, for the history part, give me an example.

JN:

Context is: this is my niece, she was my model. History part might be: this is Anum's niece, she is like Anum, which morphs into thinking both things at the same time. This is Anum, this is her niece etc. This is the mythology that is typical with figurative painting. A thing is not just a fact, but it absorbs or bleeds forward and backward. The typical expectation is that the painter is always painting themselves, as a starting point, and this can be a cliché. But still it carries something, and it's not necessarily like other kinds of art-making. Paintings hold onto these clichés, these mythologies.¹³

NMM:

History. There is one painting, *Am Abend* [*In the Evening* – fig. 4.14], 1993. This one was the expensive one that resold for RM250,000. It started from a sketch. I was working with the fresco from Braunschweig, the *Dance of Salome* [Braunschweig Cathedral, c. 1240]. This is I think early Renaissance in the Dom in the centre of Braunschweig. In the fresco there were a lot of tablecloths for the banquet and Salome's veils. So, I thought I would do something about seduction. In the painting the cloth is a little bit like a matador's cape. There is a sketch as well that is from earlier, a small oil of me hanging clothes [fig. 4.15]. Washing in a flat in Germany it's so cold and nothing dries – they take a whole day to dry. It's very depressing. Here of course it takes no time. There I would be waiting in the flat until quite late every day.

...

JN:

A painting is nothing without an inside. The clichés and the ordinariness of painting are important in this respect. We are stuck with these – these things about painting we actually personally believe in.



Fig. 4.14. Noor Mahnun Mohamed, *Am Abend (In the evening)*, 1993

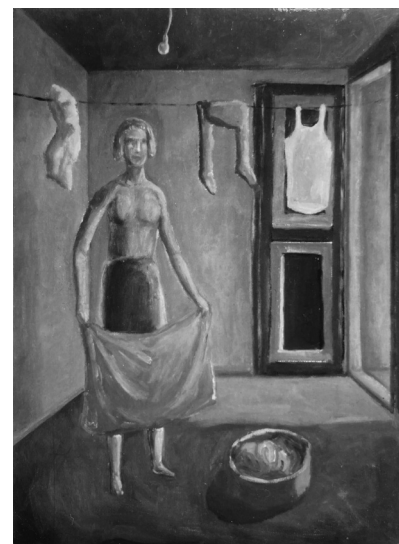


Fig. 4.15. Noor Mahnun Mohamed, *Sketch for "Am Abend" (In the evening)*, c. 1992-93

NMM:

It's chicken and egg. It's like when I talk to the woodcarvers. My botanical drawings are about pattern and some of the floral motifs relate to certain flowers. But when I talk to the woodcarvers, one of them, he says it [the actual flower] is like an afterthought. He looks at the flower but then turns away and does something else.

JN:

You mean he wouldn't look at real flowers, he would do something else?

NMM:

Yes certainly. Some you can see it's a lotus or whatever but some you couldn't see the connection. Sometimes they give the title later after the carving is done. They look for a flower that looks like the carving. It's more that way.

JN:

This is interesting I find, the clichés of painting. But we are nearly finished today. I would like to come back to you and talk more about interiority, in the way you might think about it. I realise too I am rehearsing this a little and it's the hardest thing to speak about. You can explain the structure a little but at the same time it's blind. I'm describing this to myself perhaps when I'm talking about clichés or what we believe about painting ourselves, our own basic expectations and investment in painting – even holding on too tight. Maybe this is the way into interiority. The clichés are kind of honest. Painting dies when the demon is no longer there, when there is no interiority. External parameters kind of look after themselves.

NMM:

Okay. Before we go I have these two watercolours [figs 4.16 and 4.17] I want to show you. They are just recent, from my new apartment in Ampang – you remember the balcony.

...

JN:

Anum, you might be interested that I actually began to frame my own thinking about the structure of painting while I was in Malaysia, the



Fig. 4.16. Noor Mahnun Mohamed, *Call Me*, 2021



Fig. 4.17. Noor Mahnun Mohamed, *Water Cans and Spray Bottles*, 2021

year you and I met at Rimbun. If you remember my exhibition at the end of the residency there in 2013. Right or wrong, I was worried my work wouldn't translate sensibly in Malaysia. It was a cultural thing perhaps but putting my work on Angela and Hijjas' museum walls, I just couldn't see how someone could step into my shoes to see painting the way I do. The tradition of painting in Malaysia I didn't know well. It has these distinct precedents and backgrounds but I didn't know these and

I knew that. I didn't know Malaysia well either and that seemed a problem. So, if you remember, in the end for the exhibition I built that giant structure in the gallery space. I modelled it on the frame of a painting.

NMM:

You mean the plywood panel rooms you built inside the gallery.

JN:

Yes, the walls and freestanding rooms. And then I installed my paintings inside the structure. For me it pulled the paintings out of the modern museum kind of space of Rimbun Dahan. It dropped the objectivity of the gallery's white walls and instead set up a more domestic scale and narrative. I'd constructed a corridor and sequence of smaller rooms and used raw ply sheets of timber instead of white walls. The way I said it to myself too was that in this structure, there was a clear exterior and interior to it. If you think of the Rimbun gallery as the exterior, I was building the interior. Remember the guy I worked with. The Indonesian.

NMM:

Lubis.

JN:

Yes. I'd seen him building things from scratch around the property a few times. He was very good. I watched him rebuild the kitchens in the guest house and other things and he was very quick. We had no language together so Azam Aris [my fellow artist in residence] would translate for us. I described what it would look like from the inside view, but I asked Lubis to build the structure himself. He decided on the timber framing and supports and worked out how it fitted into the gallery. It needed to be free-standing, a building within a building, but that is all. I showed him the ply sheet sizes and described how many sheets each room would have etc. That way I described how the room looked from inside but I left to Lubis what it looked like from the exterior. And then of course I installed the paintings on the inside, like hanging in a domestic house. It even looked kind of like an old local Malay house without plaster.

NMM:

A bit like the old houses Hijjas would collect at the back of Rimbun.

JN:

Yes. I always thought of the installation in the way of a painterly diagram. It unfolds as a kind of painting structure as I see it [fig. 4.18]. A painting has a frame that connects externally, and it has a surface or image, its interior. A painting needs both to work. The frame/context connects to the world and the interiority is borrowed from the painter. Having just the one part, well, that's not actually enough.

NMM:

Okay. I'm going to post that.

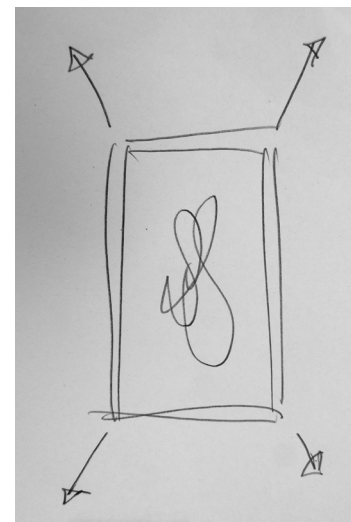


Fig. 4.18. Jonathan Nichols, diagram of a painterly structure, 2021

1. Farish A. Noor and Eddin Khoo, *Spirit of Wood: The Art of Malay Woodcarving* (Hong Kong: Periplus Editions, 2003).
2. Alfred Gell, "Vogel's Net, Traps as Artworks and Artworks as Traps," *Journal of Material Culture* 1, no. 1 (March 1996): 15–38, <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F135918359600100102>.
3. Rimbun Dahan is a cultural organisation founded and sponsored by Angela and Hijjas Kasturi on the northern outskirts of Kuala Lumpur.
4. See also the conversation with Christoph Preussmann in this publication.
5. Latiff Mohidin is arguably Malaysia's leading modernist painter-poet. He was the subject of a major exhibition originating at the Centre Pompidou in 2016.
6. See the conversation with Boedi Widjaja and Audrey Koh in this publication.
7. "I do read artworks from several cultural realities as I understand them ... you are quite right to point out that artists look for the cultural gaps. At least I instinctively navigate towards these gaps. Because I find them to be very fertile with ideas. I think that is a very important mode of making artworks in my practice." Boedi Widjaja, in conversation with the author, January 2021. See page 53 of this publication.
8. This is the kind of technical division used by Barry Schwabsky: "One paints today according to a double perspective for which one might borrow the Saussurean terms 'diachronic' and 'synchronic.' Or perhaps it would be just as well to speak of historical and contextual aspects." Barry Schwabsky, *The Observer Effect: On Contemporary Painting* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2019), 96.
9. New York-based Australian anthropologist Michael Taussig writes about interconnecting societies' cultural and custom practices with modes of contemporary art-making. See by example Michael Taussig, "Viscerality, Faith, and Scepticism: Another Theory of Magic," *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 6, no. 3 (Winter 2016): 453–83; and "Mooning Texas," in *Energies in the Arts*, ed. Douglas Kahn (Cambridge, MA/London: The MIT Press), 439–59.

10. "It is not necessary for artists to notice the coming and going of demonic forces, but they should know how to 'obtain the proper effect.'" Pierre Klossowski, "On the Collaboration of Demons in the Work of Art" (1981), *Phantasm and Simulacra. The Drawings of Pierre Klossowski*, ed. Paul Foss, Paul Taylor, and Allen S. Weiss, *Art & Text* Special Issue 18 (July 1985): 10.
11. See "Bayangnya itu Timbul Tenggelam. Photographic Cultures in Malaysia," Ilham Gallery, accessed May 1, 2021, <http://www.ilhamgallery.com/exhibitions/bayang>.
12. As well as Barry Schwabsky in *The Observer Effect*, writers Isabelle Graw, David Joselit and Boris Groys have each described in various ways how painting has a kind of dual operating system where it holds or suspends two different kinds of understanding simultaneously. For instance, Boris Groys describes a "synchronic" flow – directly one-to-one so to speak – "like a car driving down the street." A synchronic movement is a movement in space. The other, "diachronic," he suggests, is more like adding sugar to a glass of water – it is transformative. For Groys, history has transformations and is not just sequential. See Boris Groys, *Particular Cases* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016), 110.
13. Achim Hochdörfer quotes the German painter Charline von Heyl: "Everything about painting actually incorporates all the platitudes you can possibly think about. And you live with those platitudes. Platitudes that you kind of sacrifice your life for, that make you believe nothing else is important anymore." Hochdörfer writes that the painting world of the 1990s was full of clichés, full of painting mythologies. But rather than providing a basis to continue pulling down painting and debunking its history, these clichés and mythologies became the platform that the next generation of painters built on. Manuela Ammer, Achim Hochdörfer, and David Joselit, eds., *Painting 2.0: Expression in the Information Age: Gesture and Spectacle, Eccentric Figuration, Social Networks* (Munich: Delmonico Books/Prestel, 2015), 21.

Moya McKenna is a painter who has worked in Melbourne since the mid-1990s. Born in Guildford, south-west of London, in 1973, she emigrated with her family to Inverell, NSW, two years later. McKenna completed a Bachelor of Fine Art at the VCA, Melbourne, in 1998, and studied at East Sydney Technical College from 1993 to 1994.

This is an edited transcript of Zoom and in-person conversations between June and October 2021.

Jonathan Nichols:

It's been hard to assess painting – or group exhibitions of painting – in a collective way. It has struggled for validity alongside contemporary art practice.

Moya McKenna:

Well it's hard to assess because you're painting on a level that in the majority of cases is often first seen in commercial galleries, in Melbourne anyway.

JN:

It struggles to get airtime.

MM:

Yes.

JN:

I'm not meaning it struggles for its own validity, or struggles to be what it is or 100% what it wants to be. But it doesn't get airtime in the wider contexts of contemporary art. Or it just hasn't.

MM:

Yes I think so.

JN:

I think you can talk about what has changed in painting in the last 20 years. It hasn't been static. People don't make paintings now the way they did in, say, 1989, which was about the end of the last high point, when the world was looking at Richter or Baselitz or whoever else was around then. Painting in the 1980s was huge in America. In 1990 to me a lot of art-making went undercover and underground, painting especially.

MM:

Yes.

JN:

By the end of the 1990s painting had changed shape. It was different.

MM:

In what way?

JN:

It was really easy to see painters were painting in ways that didn't look like any painter before them. It seems an obvious thing to say, but the basis of practice had moved on from the narrative where it was apparently dead and there was nothing else it could do, even if contemporary criticism might not have moved on. The narrative between painters had shifted.¹

MM:

Okay.

JN:

In the same way, for me, the painters in Melbourne who were interesting around then were not painting like they did in the 1980s. You can't just clump everyone together. Narrowing down whatever happened, it should be possible to be more specific. I think that's a start. For example I've often thought scale was something that became very different between say the late 1980s and the mid-2000s.

MM:

What is the scale difference?

JN:

They became smaller. Paintings became smaller.

MM:

Oh.

JN:

That doesn't mean everyone's [work] changed scale. Painters we know like Tim McMonagle are closer to the big side of scale. Pretty big. You might be in the middle, within the range of your hands or something like that.

MM:

Okay.

JN:

You are not colour-field scale or anything like that.

MM:

No, not at all.

JN:

And I'm not meaning scale is a new idea, just thinking that scale seemed to be something that had changed collectively. And of course you might put meaning to that or rather meaning accumulates around that.² Even to the extent that you could say scale changed in Melbourne more than it did Sydney.

MM:

Okay, maybe.

JN:

Perhaps there was a minor orthodoxy that you could even tag back to the influence of Store 5 and painters like Stephen Bram.

MM:

Yes I see.

JN:

More pragmatically, you might say that painters had started to paint sitting down, at a table or desk, rather than standing up and lashing about, and it shows. Even the studio spaces in art schools became smaller. Their boxes became smaller.

MM:

Yes [*laughs*].

JN:

I'm meaning you can be analytical or tactical about these things, and I don't think contemporary commentary has followed that. I'm saying some pretty obvious things but as well I know there has not been any weighing up of these kinds of collective changes, in a critical way, or any serious institutional articulation of these kinds of shared values in painting. There have been few exhibitions in the last 20 years or so that have examined or begun to pace out these kinds of specific transitions and changes.

MM:

No, no.

JN:

It's been a long time.

MM:

Well there was the ACCA show [*Painting, More Painting*, 2016] and then there was *Shut Up and Paint* [NGV, 2016].

JN:

There were those. But I think even with these two the predicament was more like a roll call. Rather than trying to establish something more specific about what was going on between painters. Even the two titles are similar in a way, more a gesture than inquisitive.

MM:

Yes. I can see that.

...

JN:

It's kind of useful to me knowing you can disentangle the readymade from painting. To recognise it as a conceptual form that is different and distinct from painterly forms.³ You can say the same of other methods of art-making – they are not all parallel as forms and, sure, some painters do use the readymade in painting, for different reasons.⁴ But clearly a lot of painting is not like a readymade at all. So in this way, by turning it around, maybe you can get closer to looking at what is in fact painterly and what painting actually does. We can be more specific and think about what has been going on in painting all this time. We can put aside other forms and look more closely at painterly forms, and see how they work.

MM:

Well these things depend on the curating don't they? You can put anything together but as long as the curating creates a dialogue that's interesting. Then it can talk about lots of things, other than painting. Well of course it would be painting if there are paintings but surely it's going to go beyond just talking about painting.



Fig. 5.1. Moya McKenna, *A Different Melody*, 2019

JN:

There is a technical question though which is sort of interesting in itself. Given we've had this long moratorium, where these questions around painting specifically have been left unsaid or unexamined, it would be hard to have a group painting show that looks at how painting speaks to other things, beyond painting, without also asking how painting talks from one painting to the next.

MM:

With each other or with a viewer?

JN:

Painting to painting.

MM:

Okay.

JN:

The viewer is a question that can be supplementary I think. There is a drama in how paintings interconnect and what that is saying, and I'm meaning the paintings close to you and me, that we know more about ourselves. I think Isabelle Graw writes something like, to paraphrase: painting doesn't merely stage relations, it brings out the bonds of those

relations.⁵ I'm remembering what Christoph Preussmann was saying, that a painting might be a rule breaker or new or saying something about the world, but in a very basic way it identifies you first in relation to its history and ties you into this.⁶ As an extension, painting identifies its constraints and bonds at the same time as it stages what is new to painting or not seen before.

MM:

But you'd hope that it would be beyond just painting. Because there are many viewers that come to the work that wouldn't have any idea of those histories or connections.

JN:

Yes totally. But it's not exclusive.

MM:

Not at all.

JN:

It's up to a viewer really to look at it or not. But I don't think we can be bound by the viewer.

MM:

I'm not saying that, I'm just saying that once painting has moved beyond the painter, where the painter is out of the picture so to speak, the viewer is important. For instance I saw Mutlu Çerkez's paintings in a contemporary show at the Buxton gallery recently and it reminded me of your conversation, since Mutlu has been dead for some time now. Melissa Keys had curated the show and there was a self-portrait by Çerkez. Parts of the exhibition were commissioned works responding to another artist's work, but there were existing paintings too, including Mutlu's.

JN:

Where the painter is no longer involved is something few of us talk about. But first off I'm cautious of perhaps the usual conversation about the viewer's response because in the case of painting, painters probably know more about these things. That's the part I'm interested in. In order to know what has been going on in painting you might begin by talking

to painters. Their kind of knowledge is not really the same as what we call a viewer's experience. You know a lot of things about painting for instance. That's a good reason to speak.

MM:

Yes.

JN:

And I think that is a kind of evident thing that we have not put on the table for a long time. There's been an extrapolation of politics across all kinds of contemporary practice but not all artworks are operating in the same way.

MM:

You would hope so.

JN:

When you look at painting, it's doing certain things, not everything. So what is it doing and what is it not doing? I think painters themselves are central to trying to understand that.

MM:

I suppose that is what you referred to where the limitations and constraints of painting become very interesting. And it's hard to work with limitations and make them complex. I listened to a lecture David Joselit gave in Russia about painting and I get what you mean by his split between subjective and objective worlds.⁷ It reminded me of Hashim Matar reading Colm Tóibín in *The New Yorker*; he was talking about inheritors and makers.⁸ It's a similar kind of thing to what Joselit is talking about. The painter – you inherit history, but you are a maker of history. So it's an evolving, circular motion.

JN:

We accept that painters have an agency in this and have the potential to affect the course of painting. But if we circle back to the viewer, do they change the course of painting too? And I think with this you would have to say much less, or no. There is a tension of course because obviously this is very difficult in a democratic sense and in other ways. In a similar way, David Joselit is very pragmatic where he carefully stands

clear from the subjective experience of painters. He holds very distinctly to the position of an art historian. It's not like he's really addressing painters.

MM:

When I think about it, I realise maybe I'm just trying to be polite in speaking about the viewer.

JN:

Anum [Noor Mahnun Mohamed] said something like that; she feels like she is catering for the viewer without really being convinced of why.⁹

...

JN:

David Joselit wrote that in many places painters in the 1990s began to construct an institutional critique into their work in order to dislodge the predominant art world rhetoric around painting – to break the syndrome of painting being reduced to commodity objects etc.¹⁰ Amy Sillman recently wrote something similar.¹¹ Joselit uses the German painter Jutta Koether as exemplary of this in the 1990s, building an architecture and then placing painting within it so as to draw attention to its supports and cultural framing.

MM:

That's what Jutta Koether is doing isn't she?

JN:

Early on especially.

MM:

She is having a dialogue with history, that is what I see in her work. As a woman she is reclaiming things.

JN:

I don't think David Joselit talks about her feminism much at all. To understand her feminism I think you have to look at painting in Cologne early on. At one point Christoph Preussmann said to me that Jutta Koether couldn't be just a classic feminist, these artists wouldn't

do that.¹² His meaning was that she had to do it within painting and as part of the critical terms of painting, not just as a commentary.

MM:

As a part of punk?

JN:

She starts out that way, in a kind of bad painting effort, but I don't think that is the mechanism she is interested in. For instance there is a painting she painted in 1991 called *Whole (100% Painting – Nobody Is a Woman)*, 1991. There are a few of her paintings around that time in a similar vein.

MM:

What does it look like?

JN:

It's a red painting.

MM:

A red painting of her own or of someone else's painting?

JN:

It has "HALAL" written into the surface.

MM:

Is it one of the smaller paintings?

JN:

This is it [fig. 3.7].

MM:

Okay.

JN:

Christoph and I talked about this quite a bit. My reaction is more specific than his. Koether was not really a painter he saw in exhibitions. He remembered her more as a writer for magazines and things. I link it back to the models of earlier contemporary painting in Cologne – such as Sigmar Polke's text paintings. Koether in the 1990s was specifically engaging these. Later on, she extends more into the contemporary art

world. So, to me, the title *Whole (100% Painting – Nobody Is a Woman)* is indicating and drawing attention to a specific understanding that painting's body is the body of painting itself.¹³ Hence, nobody is a woman in painting because in painting there is no sex or gender in the same way as it is with corporeal bodies.¹⁴ Painters have sex and gender but painting has its own independent body and laws. It is an independent subject and has independent capabilities, beyond the painter. In theory at least the body of painting itself would have to be notionally neuter, not male or female. So it likely behaves differently.

...

MM:

Painting is hard work. Like all engagements you sometimes make a connection and other times you don't. It's the same principle with a painting. They are personalities. There are times when you are more open to something and other times you've had enough of that person, or those paintings. In the studio I'll keep changing things until something sets in and I see a connection. It only happens sometimes. The paint has to sit in a certain way or settle into itself and if it's not doing that, I find it hard to shift it. Sometimes you go on an adventure where you think you're heading somewhere and you're not. Other times the painting sort of takes over. Then it becomes a reciprocal conversation between you and the painting. You're looking to find something you haven't seen before – to be surprised.

JN:

Koether's conceptual formulation – as I read it – that in painting nobody is a woman and nobody is a man, is an old trope of painting or idea in painting that she is grappling with.

MM:

Perhaps. It feels like when I look at the work there is a lot of conceptualising that happens prior to making the paintings. I don't think they're quite –

JN:

The style is very matter of fact, expressive. It's a very blunt German thing.

MM:

Maybe. I don't know her work very much but saw a video of hers where she makes a homage to Agnes Martin. It's a performance.¹⁵ I quite like that but then I saw her in the interview with Jacqueline Humphries.¹⁶ They were discussing Lee Lozano and I don't think what she said about Lee Lozano was quite right. It was a bit naive, I don't know that naive is the right word.

JN:

It was unrealistic?



Fig. 5.2. Lee Lozano, *Untitled*, 1964. © The estate of Lee Lozano. Courtesy of Hauser & Wirth

MM:

At one point she suggested Lozano obviously had issues, and that she needed to get them worked out rather than put them into her work. Just this one remark. And Jacqueline Humphries responded, "Oh no."

JN:

I felt the two of them didn't like each other.

MM:

Probably.

JN:

I've seen these as well. Koether at one point actually suggested Lozano was too much reacting against "lady art" as a prevailing context. She said Lozano's art was super brutal, referring I think to those Lozano paintings of twisted workshop tools like clamps and hammers [fig. 5.2]. She said it was like brutal sex.

MM:

Yes that was it. I thought it was a shallow reading of Lozano's work.

JN:

I can see that. Koether thought Lozano's work showed a lack of emotional input.

MM:

Cold, you mean? Well some of it is, isn't it? I'd love to see her work in the flesh, maybe one day I'll get the chance.

JN:

It's nearly the notoriety and the story of her life that you react to.

MM:

Her mythology. That's true.

JN:

Both of them spoke about Lozano's kind of self-rule and as well that she was likely seen as a troublemaker. Some of Koether's attitude is I think about the sense that the art world is retro-packaging Lozano. She says at one point, "rediscovery has its own agenda, own purposes" and "industry to feed the need." I do like the cynicism towards the art industry. That the art industry's motives are kind of self-serving.

MM:

Well, troublemaker, outsider, awkward – those are all things. Amy Sillman talks about these kinds of attitudes and situates painting or a lot of painting in that category.¹⁷

...

JN:

David Joselit uses the phrase "painting beside itself" to explain a kind of movement of painting into the world, whereas Isabelle Graw is inclined to say "painting beyond itself."¹⁸ It seems very close but of course they are not at all. One is describing a physical movement in the proximity of painting, beside or next to, and is more an objective space, and the other is where painting is an index of painters and symbolic. Something like that.

MM:

Hilma af Klint thought that her paintings were not for the time that she was living in. That they should be kept and shown in another time, beyond her time.

JN:

Yes, exactly, how you believe in painting is key. For me there is a contest around painting now just at this point. David Joselit becomes very calculated where he argues technical "networks" of painters.¹⁹ It feels to me like his pragmatism, his scepticism, is couched in terms of an art historian standing to the side making judgements according to their rules. He holds hard to the formalities of painting and proposing his objectivity. Whereas Isabelle Graw will say painting is person-like, that it behaves like people do.²⁰ So even as a critic you can't distance yourself personally from that. The fact that painters believe and construe things in certain ways is as relevant to the actual fact of whatever is being believed or its materiality. So there is a split between the two. I'm interested in how we believe in painting.

...

JN:

I left off with Anum talking about interiority in painting, its interior as against its exterior.²¹ I realise I am rehearsing this a little, describing what interiority might be to myself. Talking about clichés or beliefs, maybe this is the way into interiority at one level. We all seem to throw off these truisms, which are as much common usages or acceptances, when it suits. Maybe a trajectory of interiority [follows] the myths, truths and clichés, the unexplained painting favourites we hold onto

and keep using in our practice. Maybe our clichés are honest at a basic level. Perhaps this is a way in. Are there typical repeated ways you make a painting? Things you go back and forth to. Say as simple as the way you mix paint at the start.

MM:

I buy pre-primed canvas these days. At the moment I've been painting the canvas a deep yellow. I start that way – it's an underpainting. It's a colour that I've always used, in my palette, in mixing. So it's been around a long time. I don't know when it came about. It's very expensive.

JN:

It's a mixed colour?

MM:

No it's bought. I don't mix it, just put it down. I read about other people who mix and mix – but I don't. I have a very limited palette so it's just what I can get out of that.

JN:

How limited?

MM:

It's predominately ultramarine blue, lamp black, titanium white. There's scarlet red, viridian green.

JN:

I'm thinking of the brown in your work?

MM:

They get mixed. I don't know if you have seen my work lately but in the past I would have used ochre. There is ochre and then I mix red into it. I'm quite big on limitations. I'm not much of a person for so many choices. Sometimes I'll buy another colour and it will get mixed in somehow. But lately it's been settling for a restrained palette.

JN:

And other repeating gestures, like a shape you recognise or return to? Formats might be another? Are there things that come to mind?

MM:

Recently there's been a circular arch in the composition or structure. Then there is repetition of line, downward line, rhythmic – and I'm thinking about the idea of strong, mostly vertical line, against the circle.

JN:

Years ago you painted a sunflower in a painting with a beautiful green [fig. 5.3].

MM:

The sunflower continued from the Dorothea Tanning paintings. But I did paint sunflowers earlier too. The green would have been a viridian for sure, with a yellow or something like that.

JN:

I remember the Dorothea Tanning pictures, your pictures. Three small paintings with the stairs and the doors and a collage of elements. Perhaps the pumpkin from Yayoi Kusama in place of the sunflower. The sunflowers I inevitably relate to Vincent van Gogh too, which is a very popular idea. A cliché, too, huh?



Fig. 5.3. Moya McKenna, *Laws of Nature*, 2007

MM:

It is and I've probably stepped into it unknowingly. I could possibly do that [use the sunflower motif again]. Sometimes I think about reintroducing them. I don't think I really have Vincent van Gogh in mind with that, but I really do love his work. The sunflower was more an obsessive compulsion. Quite unconscious. I did lots of things with them. I dried them and photographed them. They were kind of comical in some ways. Sometimes stuck up with Blu-Tack and painted, and placed in plastic bottles. Yes.

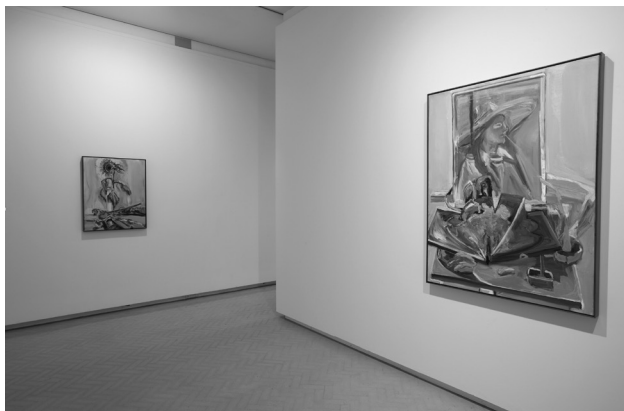


Fig. 5.4. Moya McKenna, (from left) *Spirit*, 2007, and *461 High St*, 2008, in *Primavera*, MCA, Sydney, 2008

JN:

It's interesting where content seems to pop up independently in different locations at the same time. Concepts or motifs are not attached to individual artists per se any more but tagging content can lead to a kind of hierarchy of ownership, about who might have been first to use it or however. These days it can be more fluid.

MM:

Maybe. Like I said, it's quite unconscious to me. I'm not sure how other people perceive those works. There would need to be a conversation back and forth.

JN:

Jutta Koether painted Vincent van Gogh in the 1990s as well.²² I think you might have been paralleling with your sunflower pictures. Close enough.

MM:

It would have been 2007. I know now she had but didn't connect them or know much about them. I shouldn't speak too much, I don't know her [Koether's] work so much. Her work is very self-conscious don't you think?

JN:

It is. Her work is very obvious in a lot of ways. How she uses van Gogh is not the same though. There are so many serious artists working, it's too much to just pull one reading out over everyone. To make them representative based on their access to the art world or however. David Joselit is a good one for describing artwork and paintings phenomenally, rather than [as] the invention of a specific artist. He will go there too, but much more cautiously. Perhaps for him there is more validity to an argument when something is happening more than once and in different contexts. That's really strong. It's also partly a scepticism around originality.

...

JN:

Did you always think of yourself as a painter first?

MM:

Well yes I suppose. But also people described me that way, as a painter first. Just people around me. Unfortunately I don't really play around with other mediums now as much as I did when I was in [my studio in] Beaconsfield Parade where I was making films and taking a lot of photographs.

JN:

I remember you were in Sydney at some point. Was that straight into painting?

MM:

It was a TAFE [East Sydney Technical College]. I did a lot of stuff but gravitated towards the painters like John Lambert. Wendy Sharpe was there although not one of my teachers. Aida Tomescu was there.

JN:

And you were painting before this?

MM:

A bit at school.

JN:

You recognised yourself in the space of painting in a way?

MM:

Yes I used it. I sort of gravitated towards it when my dad died, when I was 14 [1987]. So that's when I got into making art I suppose. And I was always encouraged to do it as a kid. But yes. I sometimes kind of think of myself as a painter. Other times I don't think I'm a painter.

...

JN:

Your early paintings – do you get tired of these? Does your thinking about your paintings change much? Do they become exhausted, or your reactions [to them]?

MM:

How do you mean?

JN:

There was a great interview published between David Salle and Peter Schjeldahl – a chapter called “Painting's Body” – dating from the 1980s where Schjeldahl was saying how his memory of Salle's painting can go sour.²³ They get overtaken by life is the way he suggests.

MM:

By what?

JN:

By all of the humdrum of life. This is the way Schjeldahl was remem-

bering Salle's painting. That sometimes – after Schjeldahl had initially had very positive feelings – at a later point he seemed to just think Salle's paintings were “wrong-headed.” He describes [that] life kind of bombards the existence of painting and the memories of the work get stretched and fall apart. This was Schjeldahl's sense of his memory of Salle's paintings. Does it ever happen to you this way? That the paintings you've made sour in your mind? Or other people's maybe?

MM:

I think for sure, you see them through a different lens, a different time maybe. I read something by Janet Malcolm, who interviewed David Salle in *Forty-One False Starts*.²⁴ It's quite steely and she starts the interview over and over again. It's a beautiful interview with him. But in terms of what you are asking, yes of course they change and because you change I suppose. You wouldn't want them to be stagnant, like the memory might [be]. Memories are a different kind of thing. I don't think they're the same.

JN:

Salle's reaction, his own reaction, was more along the lines that afterwards, sometimes it just feels that the works are wrong – even *were* wrong.²⁵ It's interesting to hear him say something like that. Do you ever think like that?

MM:

Some, not all. Some.

JN:

I'm just imagining Salle's work where he thinks, OMG that's terrible.

MM:

Yes. I've had groups of works where I've thought they're a bit – not shallow – brief or something. Brief can be good sometimes so it's not quite the right word. I don't really make that many works. Well I do make a lot but in the studio there's a big attrition rate.

JN:

I remember that. I remember going to your studio in Northcote once and there was a pile of unstretched paintings on one side, turned over

and it was: we are not looking at those. Just these leaning on the wall I have out. Just thinking of Salle again.

MM:

He's so ambitious, that's what I got out of the Janet Malcolm writing. He's just riddled with that fact that he didn't "make it." He's grappling, he doesn't want to be jaded but he is.

JN:

I think David Salle is a very elegant sort of fellow these days.

MM:

Right.

JN:

I think so. I was quite surprised. He comes across as very erudite, of course he would. But he seems very generous about things and other artists as well. And I think I always liked Peter Schjeldahl's take. He was always a great critic, in the direction of what he would choose to talk about. He was always close to art himself or something. But to return to this conversation about memory and the experience of painting. It's not so much only the memory of a specific painting to me, but that where an artist is painting pictures there is as well a creation of memory or a creation of the rightness of something that happens. A kind of certitude is put in place in the processes of painting. It can occur all very casually and [by] happenstance, but the process of painting creates a memory about painting as a kind of primary material. The personal input seems a huge part of the weighing up, and the execution. The process of making a painting is piggy-backing the life of the painter in this respect. Is this familiar? Is it a big part in how you paint?

MM:

It's a lot of things isn't it. It's like that Guston saying: you kind of bring everyone into the room and you have to wait for everyone to exit. Not that they ever really do. But there are some times when you feel like time is in that space of not thinking forward or back in time. It's actually right in-the-moment sort of time. And you feel very strongly connected in that moment.

JN:

I enjoy that when you're not thinking forward or backward, the strength of what you're feeling is in the specificity of that moment.

MM:

Yes but you have to go through a whole process. Because you try this and try that. There is a lot of starting and changing and moving. Not knowing. But it's settling into something. Again Guston, saying: like when the paint starts to stick. It feels like a personality or something. Something you are recognising but it's reciprocal. Letting the painting lead. And it slows down and things like that. There was a time when I did work on paintings for a longer time. But now, especially with [my son] Blaise, they usually happen over a few days.

JN:

Can we talk about remembering other people's paintings? What effect this has. By example, my memory of your work seems differently loaded. I remember instances and sensations of experiencing your work. I don't have any actual works of yours to look at directly – that would feel different. But I remember a kind of velocity or excitement in seeing your work in exhibitions, in what you were able to do in painting. This is what I remember, not always but often enough. And it seems connected a bit to how or what I understand painting can be. It is linked to the experience of rejuvenating what painting can be about. Participating in the experience of other painters – rekindling that in my own mind. So this is a different kind of memory or experience of painting from the kind of memory we use in the studio. Do you recognise this? It's closer to, say, seeing a tremendous museum show. Something like that. So this is a different kind of feeling. Perhaps that is what I'm trying to say.

MM:

Yes.

JN:

I think I'm trying to disentangle the kinds of memory and experience around painting that we use as painters. One sense is entirely personal or a private memory, and it's like primary material. You invite all those ghosts into the room etc.

MM:

They're people. Oh, yes.

JN:

You have this cacophony in the room that you whittle down or however you might think about it. But this other idea is a little different. I think of it as a sort of memory of what painting can do, or what it does.

MM:

Yes.

JN:

Maybe they're like key moments, or moments of revelation in painting and feelings of that. Of exhibition-making maybe. This is how I partly relate to your work. I don't always remember individual works but associate with the experience of your exhibitions. Does this happen with you?

MM:

I suppose so. Particularly with others' work because you try to contextualise it. That becomes annoying as you're not engaging with it on your own terms. One wants to see it with untainted eyes but we can't have it like that.

JN:

I'm wanting to understand this for myself. How this collective sense of painting – the shared sense – operates and where we each participate. One way to think about how this works might be that it is carried and maintained as a network in the everyday. It could be an interconnection of direct one-on-one points of contact, happening in real time.²⁶ This is very clean and analytical to me, with no fuzzy or awkward bits. Another way might be that painters each carry a sense of what painting is about as a collective potential. This might be individually informed by key personal memories of the experience of painting and painting exhibitions. More than remembering just the good times or the [art] scene, but when we remember instances of where painting was at its best or most insistent, in our own recollections. I'm asking really how we carry collective experiences and collective expectations along. And perhaps responding too to where Schjeldahl talks about how his own recollec-

tion of paintings can alter and sour.²⁷ We all exercise our feelings and attitudes differently to an extent and this gets loaded into our own work too.

MM:

I don't think I really hold those kinds of recollections. It's not a big thing for me. And really I don't think I was ever part of something that went sour. I've always felt I'm on the periphery of any group thing. I've always had that position, in terms of these things.



Fig. 5.5. Moya McKenna, *Sacred Tentacles*, 2008

JN:

The figure in your work is a kind of self-image at a basic level. Is this too much to say?

MM:

Which reoccurring figure?

JN:

The one that comes out of the drawers?

MM:

Oh – the arms?

JN:

Yes, the arms and the other things, the bulbous things.

MM:

That's going way back. I suppose [so] in some ways. All of my paintings are a continuum of that. I hope though that I allow space in painting so that is not the only thing.

JN:

It's not a literal self-image then, or corporeal self-image. Your own body.

MM:

No.

JN:

It's a rhetorical figure or symbolic, very different from [an] actual or real person. The image is very different in the context of art-making from a performative figure or actual corporeal self-image [which is] more directly a figure of experience. The figure in your work is one stage removed.

MM:

Yes.

JN:

But there are kinds of personas or characters in your paintings, different kinds of character information. Perhaps these are the ambiguities you mean as openings in the work. While they are self-images, they are not finite selves but open-ended?

MM:

Yes.

JN:

So are there kinds of characteristic expressions that you identify? Or kinds of expression that belong in Moya's paintings? If we understand them as figure-like and variable, generative. Is there a spectrum, a spectrum of figure-like qualities that you relate to?

MM:

The works are usually undertaken in series, so that would be one way of delineating different characterisations. Those things like the arms that I used earlier. I felt that I needed something to look at to make the paintings. They were props. So I suppose there is a degree of performativity where it's an interaction during the process of painting.

JN:

Yes. The early models were like still lifes.

MM:

I suppose so. They were fairly spontaneous, not a formal still life. I don't know really if I'm getting to the point of character or characteristic expression.

JN:

When we talk about paintings absorbing and exhibiting types of feelings, they [paintings] have a kind of personality.

MM:

Sure. But we don't recognise them as individual personas as such. I don't think so. Maybe in some ways. I'm not sure what I think.

JN:

I don't completely know what I'm asking. John Spiteri would talk about his paintings as though they were like presences, like personalities, but it was very hard to be more specific.²⁸ We would never see Peter or Greta or whomever, we only ever accepted that we associate with paintings behaviourally like we do people.

MM:

Yes I see.

JN:

If we take it one step further and talk about character then how do we do that? At one point Amy Sillman writes in *Faux Pas* that psychoanalysis is something you can relate very easily to the practice of painting.²⁹ We accept this quite easily and are familiar with it – many artists are. But she sort of tricks or flips it over and says the reason it is so familiar is because the process is the same. She explains [that] psychoanalysis is

a process and you never come to the end of psychoanalysis. It is always a working-through thing. And the two practices are procedurally very similar. Each is in the present even if it is an extended, elongated sense of present-ness – elongated by memory, for example.

MM:

Yes, that's true I think.

JN:

It's a kind of an equivalence, but psychoanalysis is still only an analogy. To privilege psychoanalysis isn't actually making our subjective experience the main thing.³⁰

...

JN:

In my mind, skill in painting is something that is not talked about openly in the art world we know. Whereas the way forward for many years was in recognising that deskilling, like bad painting, broke the rules, and so that was a way forward. Elizabeth Newman in my mind fits into the Melbourne art world in this way – as an example – in how she uses the readymade and very rudimentary elements in the context of painting. But your work is not the same. It's not premised on breaking the rules like this. Do you ever think about skill as something that is in your work?

MM:

Generally, you mean? Skills or anti-skills have seemingly endless different approaches. The conservative audience has an easy relationship to painting as photograph. This is not interesting to me. I would say my skill is to head towards a difficult place and make it work. I want to head into uncertainty where things are not sorted out. Not pre-planned; I put limitations in place to expand the uncertainty.

JN:

In a contemporary context in Melbourne, using an analysis of skill doesn't get a lot of airplay. The critical diagram, especially in relation to painting, has usually been anti-skill, hence bad painting etc.

MM:

But that's really contrived, isn't it.

JN:

It's been a real thing in constructing a contemporary narrative. Adam Cullen was brilliant at this I think. At the back of his work, or its underbelly, was a kind of fuck-you attack on the mores of painting. It was as often aimed at the art world as anyone.

MM:

It's also about what can you get away with. [Cullen's painting] still has a degree of potency about it. It still talks to you.

JN:

He is using the premise of anti-skill as a tactic to buy into an accepted contemporary narrative. Whereas painterly skill has been treated contemporaneously as though it was either static or the result of specific cultural experience or context. It's not seen as something needing to be nurtured or recuperated. It's like we have lost that necessity. Your painting is more orientated towards building up means, building up a painterly structure. The contemporary avant-garde tradition accepts the deskilling argument but finds the upskilling argument dubious and harder to justify.³¹

MM:

Okay.

JN:

Do you recognise this kind of narrative? In the Australian jurisdiction, the idea of getting better in painting – whatever that is – or revaluing painting is a harder thing in contemporary art. As a trajectory it's been a harder ask.

MM:

You would hope that would happen, but maybe not.

JN:

Do you see yourself as representing a position in the art world?

MM:

Not really, no. I quite like being on the periphery. The object of painting is not about position. And I'm not exclusive about what I look at or where I might draw sources from or anything. Some people get what I do and there are others that don't get what I do at all.

JN:

I think I need to come back to the clichés a bit more, to think through what it is we believe in painting. To build up kinds of common acceptances, which is difficult because it's not to suggest these are overt or associated with close relations between living painters.

MM:

Going back to your questions about memory and recollections, I'm just thinking in the background about other exhibitions and other painters or painting, and I have those memories. I don't just see myself alone in painterly terms. You do have these ways of interacting but it's difficult to describe how this works and it is more than simply [related to] direct references and things.

JN:

I think so. An example for me is the way many painters have stronger connections to painters and paintings from the past than they do with contemporary painting. Many painters think about dead painters just like they are still alive. Alive or dead doesn't change the painting. And that there are complex links over time in painting. I associate with this idea very much and feel its effects in my own work. I hold certain dead painters and their painting very closely. There is a sense of memory and keeping these things alive by repeating them in painting, or is it more simply [that] painting is alive in a strange way like many other things. But I don't think these senses are enacted as a sequence of real-time connections.

MM:

Yes.

JN:

You remember the smells, the intoxication and colours, all the effects, and you use these things in your own work. It's a kind of demand or expectation upon yourself. For me it could be my relationship with my brother and remembering certain things he's said to me that I still hold onto. Or my parents. And I hold these in respect to painting. You said something earlier: I was always encouraged. It's like a private motive that carries in painting. Do you relate to this kind of thing?

MM:

It's probably more in terms of potency of work, when you see it. I don't think in terms of particular people as such but certainly you can feel there is an understanding with certain paintings, with that energy an artist creates.



Fig. 5.6. André Derain, *The Black Feather Boa* (detail), 1935



Fig. 5.7. Studio of André Derain, c. 1925³²

JN:

André Derain copied the mannequin here [fig. 5.6] in place of a person or that's my reading. He introduces a very new sense of life study I think.

MM:

It's interesting he has copied the whole image of the mannequin. Whereas [in the works of] Hans Bellmer and others the mannequin is shown as fractured or is distorted more. I find it interesting that it's whole, the mannequin image is a whole image.

JN:

He has replaced the model with a mannequin. There's credit there. It carries a different kind of symbolic content. He's introduced something very different with the mannequin as a kind of proxy that is more hidden. To me it makes a lot of sense in relation to Giacometti, who he was close with, to those later negative existential figures of Giacometti, and they were so famous.

MM:

Isn't it also based on practicalities? Even if you have a model or rather it's an inanimate model, it's more about the interpretation that is filtering through the artist.

JN:

Meanings collide in painting, from all directions. *The Black Feather Boa* feels very alive, existentially too. It has to be very specific to the painting. For me this work feels very unusual. In painting mannequins I'm not so interested in showing the mannequin itself. People want to see it but I don't paint it.

MM:

It makes me think of Gunter Christmann. Have you seen his *Rubbish* pictures? They are very different but there is something about them. They are aerial perspectives of piles of debris including plastic dolls.

1. Examples of post-1990 painters whose work has signalled a reset in contemporary painting include Kai Althoff, Jutta Koether, Laura Owens, Luc Tuymans, Nicole Eisenman, Tomma Abts, Amy Sillman and Mamma Andersson.
2. Scale is specifically invoked in some kinds of contemporary painting. See Barry Schwabsky, "Zombie Formalism," in *The Observer Effect: On Contemporary Painting* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2019), 284.
3. By example, David Joselit has suggested that the readymade is as distinct a form in the modern era as the painterly mark. David Joselit, "Reassembling Painting," in *Painting 2.0: Expression in the Information Age: Gesture and Spectacle, Eccentric Figuration, Social Networks*, ed. Manuela Ammer, Achim Hochdörfer, and David Joselit (Munich: Delmonico Books/Prestel, 2015), 169–81.
4. See Benjamin Buchloh, "A Nude in the Neo-Avant-Garde, Ema (Nude on a Staircase), 1966," in *Painting Beyond Itself, the Medium in the Post-Medium Condition*, ed. Isabelle Graw and Ewa Lajer-Burchard (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016), 229–68. See also "altered readymade" in Schwabsky, "Zombie Formalism," 284.
5. "Subjectivity ... is more than 'pure interiority,' it's intertwined with outward existence. Painting, that is to say, doesn't stage mere subjectivity but, more importantly, brings out the bonds that tie that subjectivity to external constraints." Isabelle Graw, *The Love of Painting: Genealogy of a Success Medium* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2018), 53.
6. "You know, you can't escape these things. If you hang an artwork on the wall you identify yourself with a whole lot in art history. You're not breaking a rule here. It might be what is painted and how it's painted might be a rule breaker, but not the fact that you are here and in a very conservative fashion you show how you feel yourself." Christoph Preussmann, in discussion with the author, February 2021. See page 72 of this publication.
7. David Joselit, "Timing Painting, Revising History," Garage Museum of Contemporary Art and Art and Moscow Art Magazine (*Khudoshestvenny Zhurnal*), uploaded November 13, 2019, YouTube video, 51:55, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rIRW_JWkac.
8. Hisham Matar, "Hisham Matar Reads Colm Tóibín," *The New Yorker*, February 1, 2021, 1:09:07, <https://www.newyorker.com/podcast/fiction/hisham-matar-reads-corm-tobin>.
9. "I kind of cater to them [viewers] because they want to have words that accompany the painting." Noor Mahnun Mohamed, in discussion with the author, April 2021. See pages 89–90 of this publication.
10. "Painting since the 1990s has folded into itself [a] so-called 'institutional critique' without falling into the modernist trap of negation, where works on canvas are repeatedly reduced to degree zero while remaining unique objects of contemplation and market speculation." David Joselit, "Painting Beside Itself," *October*, no. 130 (Autumn 2009): 125–34.
11. "Painting was riddled with a kind of uncritical romanticism that it couldn't shake off and this was wrapped up with its financialization ... I could see that painting was a sort of no-go ... I was interested in the idea of recuperating painting." Amy Sillman, *Faux Pas. Selected Writings and Drawings* (Paris: After 8 Books, 2020), 28.
12. "You had the official version of feminism ... but these artists [Koether et al.] would never really try to follow those classic ideals of feminism." Preussmann, 73.
13. Pierre Klossowski described the idea of an independent existential or psychic body of painting as "the anatomy of painting." See Pierre Klossowski, "The Decline of the Nude," *Phantasm and Simulacra. The Drawings of Pierre Klossowski*, ed. Paul Foss, Paul Taylor, and Allen S. Weiss, *Art & Text* Special Issue 18 (July 1985): 13–21. If only as an earlier formulation and thematic, Klossowski's "anatomy of painting" also links to post-structuralist concepts such as Gilles Deleuze's "the body without organs." See Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester (London: Continuum, 2004).
14. This is an interpretation of the painterly subject that is consistent with Boris Groys' argument, where, for example, he writes that "living" and "dead" are categories that are uniquely constituted in painting. The "personae" of painting, argues Groys, are rather "living and dead," as well as "unborn." See Boris Groys, *Going Public*, ed. Julieta Aranda, Brian Kuan Wood, and Anton Vidokle (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2010), 19.

15. See "Artists on Artists Lecture Series – Jutta Koether on Agnes Martin," Dia Art Foundation, September 23, 2013, YouTube video, 1:13:13, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8bcQj1P_3zg.
16. See "Lee Lozano Paintings and Drawings," panel discussion with Jacqueline Humphries, Jutta Koether, and Bob Nickas, Hauser & Wirth, July 22, 2015, YouTube video, 1:08:51, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-_D98LUJwik.
17. Sillman, *Faux Pas*, 31.
18. See Joselit, "Painting Beside Itself," 125–34, and Graw, "Beyond Network Painting," 262–312.
19. Joselit, "Painting Beside Itself," 125–34.
20. Isabelle Graw, "The Value of Painting: Notes on Unspecificity, Indexicality, and Highly Valuable Quasi-Persons," in *Thinking Through Painting. Reflexivity and Agency Beyond the Canvas* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), 45–57.
21. See the conversation with Noor Mahnun Mohamed in this publication.
22. See Achim Hochdörfer, "Through Sun, Moon, and Stars. Jutta Koether in the 1990s," in *Jutta Koether: Tour de Madame*, ed. Suzanne Cotter, Achim Hochdörfer, and Tonio Kröner (Cologne: Walther König, 2018), 152–63.
23. Peter Schjeldahl, "An Interview with David Salle," in *Salle*, ed. Elizabeth Avedon (New York: Random House, 1987), 69–74.
24. Janet Malcolm, *Forty-One False Starts: Essays on Artists and Writers* (New York: Farrer, Straus & Giroux, 2013).
25. David Salle in Schjeldahl, "An Interview with David Salle," 69–74.
26. This is the proposition David Joselit describes as "transitive painting." See Joselit, "Painting Beside Itself," 129.
27. Schjeldahl, "An Interview with David Salle," 69.
28. Groys, *Going Public*, 19.
29. Sillman, *Faux Pas*, 15.
30. "Putting practice before theory, making subjective experience primary," Sillman, *Faux Pas*, 47, 73. See also Lynne Tillman, "Introduction," in Sillman, *Faux Pas*, 14–15.
31. See Buchloh, "A Nude in the Neo-Avant-Garde," 229–68.
32. Photograph of André Derain's studio, in Stéphane Guégan and Alain Vircondelet, *Derain, Balthus, Giacometti: une amitié artistique: musées d'art modern de la ville de Paris* (Paris: Editions Paris Musées, 2017), 188.

David Jolly has worked as a painter in Melbourne since graduating with a Bachelor of Fine Art from the VCA in 1992. He was born in Melbourne in 1972.

This is an edited transcript of Zoom conversations in April 2019.

Jonathan Nichols:

What I'm hoping for today is to talk in some detail about *sundowners*, your 1997 show at Stripp.¹ The bigger part is your perspective as the artist, as the painter of the paintings. I'm also interested in the other people around at the time and their interactions and opinions. I was there then as well of course so we can put together what we remember. I'm hoping also to talk with Sadie Chandler and David Franzke, who assisted. I'm interested in the wider social interactions and context of the exhibition, the way exhibitions used to happen in those early days and the people about. That's a start.

David Jolly:

Okay. Look, I have these slides [*begins to project on the wall behind him 35 mm slides documenting the 1997 exhibition and its installation*].

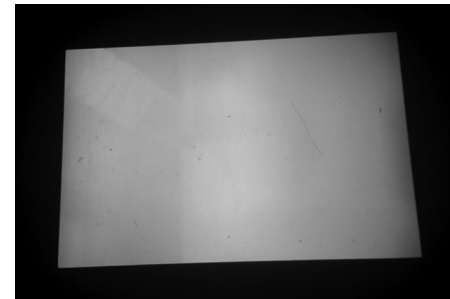


Fig. 6.1. David Jolly, *sundowners* (during installation), Stripp, Melbourne, 1997 (Zoom screenshot)

JN:

Is that a slide though [fig. 6.1]?

DJ:

They are all slides. It's a blown-out start-of-the-role slide. There are all these little water droplets across it. I don't know whether that's the age of the slide or what you can see. But it's a sort of colour noise of insidious yellow that's coming from the curtain Dave Franzke and I bought at Dimmeys [department store] and hung over the window that faced the inside wall.

JN:

I remember it. I can remember the colour. I can't see it in that image. There was one single window wasn't there?

DJ:

Yes.

JN:

And that's what you were covering. It's the light coming into the gallery from the alley there or very close to it.

DJ:

It faced back out onto Gertrude Street [*continues to rotate through the slides*].



Fig. 6.2. David Jolly, *sundowners* (during installation), Stripp, Melbourne, 1997 (Zoom screenshot)

JN:

That's the yellow from the window. Who's that?

DJ:

Tara Forrest. She was there early on, one of the cultural studies crew, at Melbourne Uni I think. Stephen Zagala was there. Lara Travis as well.

JN:

So, this is the main room isn't it?

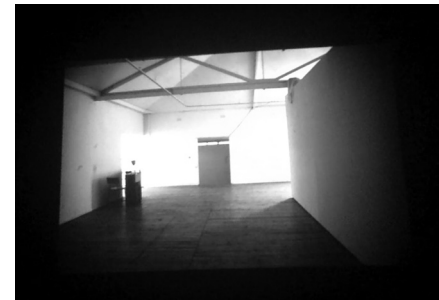


Fig. 6.3. David Jolly, *sundowners* (during installation), Stripp, Melbourne, 1997 (Zoom screenshot)

DJ:

That's looking back into the front room with the western room off to the left-hand side. The whole place is just bathed in this acidic sickly light.



Fig. 6.4. David Jolly, *sundowners* (during installation), Stripp, Melbourne, 1997 (Zoom screenshot)

JN:

That's the window you're talking about [fig. 6.4]?

DJ:

That's the window totally out of focus, which was the style.

JN:

Yes.



Fig. 6.5. David Jolly, *sundowners* (during installation), Stripp, Melbourne, 1997 (Zoom screenshot)

DJ:

This has a very nice cherry gravy feel about it.

JN:

That's out of focus too?

DJ:

Yes. It's supposed to be blown up really big, just colour washes on walls. [Here it is] with a little bit more clarity [fig. 6.3], and the interior with the wall built in the middle, which could change position.

JN:

That was terrific, wasn't it?

DJ:

Amazing. Completely terrifying. The cord that's taped up here is the power cord for the speaker.

JN:

It never broke, the wall. All pretty solid.

DJ:

No [it didn't break]. Terrifying though.

JN:

It was big – and heavy.



Fig. 6.6. David Jolly, *sundowners* (during installation), Stripp, Melbourne, 1997 (Zoom screenshot)

DJ:

Here's Stevie Zagala rocking it out like Tom Waits.

JN:

And we see the alley window in all its glory.

DJ:

And the security cameras as well. Because it used to be a commercial gallery. Wasn't it Judith Pugh Gallery?

JN:

No. It was the same space as – it was Reconnaissance.

DJ:

Reconnaissance?

JN:

Yes, Reconnaissance, which was the old Tony Oliver space. No one seemed to remember at the time.

DJ:

Makes sense of the security cameras.

JN:

What are these photos [figs 6.7 and 6.8]?



Figs 6.7 and 6.8. David Jolly, archival images, c. 1997 (Zoom screenshots)

DJ:

These were taken off the television. I was watching plane-crash documentaries.

JN:

Ah yes, I remember.

DJ:

This painting [fig. 6.10] is one from the show that went to Adelaide before the Stripp show.² There are a few works here from the Adelaide show. Then we came back and two weeks – three weeks – later did the show at Stripp.

JN:

Exactly, I remember. You were with Lyndal Walker and who was the third person exhibiting?

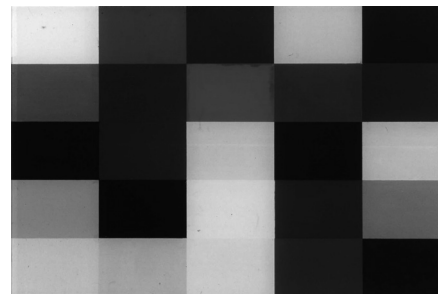


Fig. 6.9. David Jolly, *Mars 6*, 1997

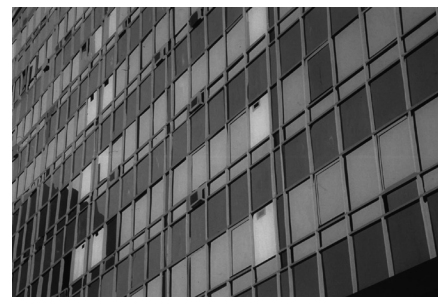


Fig. 6.10. David Jolly, *Hotel*, 1999

DJ:

She was South Australian, Sarah Minney. Dave Franzke did the sound in Adelaide as well.

JN:

I remember this [fig. 6.11]. I remember being over there.

DJ:

The painting was in the Gertrude Street show a year later though.

JN:

Okay. Right. That's just the picture of them when they're –

DJ:

That's a picture of Dave Franzke and Mila Faranov in Adelaide. We



Fig. 6.11. David Jolly, *David and Mila*, 1998

were collecting the works and taking them back and CACSA [Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia] had just installed Matthys Gerber's work, which was the next show.³ David and Mila are standing in front of one of Matthys' paintings.

JN:

The side of the building [fig. 6.10], that's an important DJ work.

DJ:

That's at Heide now – I think – that one. I'll scan these if you need better copies.

JN:

Yes, that would be good. I'm taking screenshots as we go too.

DJ:

That's a good one [fig. 6.12]. Ricky Swallow had that.

JN:

Oh good.

DJ:

And donated it to the NGV last year, or the year before. That's also the Matthys Gerber cover – the black-and-white background is the cover of *Broadsheet* that he did – published by CACSA around that time.⁴ With Franzke's DAT recorder and Discman plugged into the car stereo for the road trip home.



Fig. 6.12. David Jolly, *Passengers*, 1998



Fig. 6.13. David Jolly, *sundowners*, Stripp, Melbourne, 1997

DJ:

You know that one [fig. 6.16].

JN:

These works are from the glass paintings you included in the earlier Adelaide CACSA exhibition, a couple of weeks before the Stripp show. Have you got install shots of the Stripp works?

DJ:

Coming up.

JN:

The green wall was on one side only, wasn't it?

DJ:
No.

JN:
It was on both sides?

JN:
There we have it [fig. 6.13]. Ah that's it, the install of the timber sheets and paintings!



Fig. 6.14. David Jolly, *Richmond Abattoir*, 1997, in *sundowners*, Stripp, Melbourne, 1997



Fig. 6.15. David Jolly, *Gas*, 1996 (an earlier version of *Smoke Machine*, 1997)

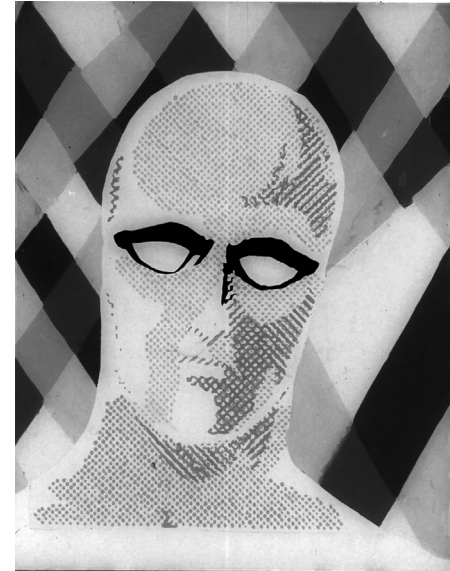


Fig. 6.16. David Jolly, *Silver Surfer*, c. 1997

DJ:
Here are a couple of examples of the paintings installed on the green [figs 6.14 and 6.17].

DJ:
Lyndal Walker has that one [fig. 6.14].

JN:
Do you have an image of *Smoke Machine*?

DJ:
Yes – never give that one away. That's what [theatre project] *Alice in Wonderland* later this year is going to kind of look like, maybe. The theoretical smoke machine. Actually, we finally get to do it. Wait – perfect.

JN:
That's nice [fig. 6.17]. Just hold on to that for a second. You can see the damage to the timber and the gaps between the sheets. We were

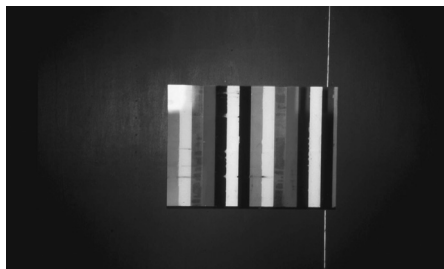


Fig. 6.17. David Jolly, *Earthquake*, 1997, in *sundowners*, Stripp, Melbourne, 1997



Fig. 6.18. David Jolly, *TWA800*, 1997



Fig. 6.19. David Jolly, *sundowners*, Stripp, Melbourne, 1997 (Zoom screenshot)

ignorant in a nice way. Remember how the sheets of timber were really damaged and we just painted straight over the top.

DJ:

That's a better one for the gaps between sheets.

JN:

Yes, the gap. It's good isn't it? I don't remember the attitude early on, about using it. But later, you remember the show at VCA?⁵

DJ:

Yes.

JN:

We used the cracks between sheets very deliberately in that exhibition too. What's the next one [fig. 6.18]? Ah, it's like the plane crash images you projected earlier.

DJ:

It's a still from the insurance photographs of the TWA plane that got shot down leaving America, leaving New York. I actually saw this painting at my framer's, about two and a half years ago. It was there and I had to go and get other things framed and Greg said, "Somebody dropped this in the other week." He opens the drawer, and we've been speaking for 10 or 15 minutes, and all of a sudden this thing pops out. Sixteen years since I've seen this picture, and it's this crumpled, kind of wreck of a plane. That was pretty crazy timing to see an old work come back.

JN:

Right.

DJ:

There are a couple of nice ones left [figs 6.19 and 6.20]. They're at the end.

JN:

Ah that's good. It [the exhibition installation] was a nice solution. I'm remembering. It's quiet – and all of the green, a lot of the green. You could only see a skerrick of it as you walked into the gallery. On the other side it looked as if it was just a big empty space. My recollection is that around that time you were occupied thinking of that show in Adelaide,

that it was a bit of a deal and you put a lot of work into it. We were in the studios and you'd spent time preparing the work and things like that. And the Stripp show came really closely after and in a funny way you didn't get a chance to think ahead. That's what I remember. It was like you got back from Adelaide and went, oh jeez, now I have to do all this again.

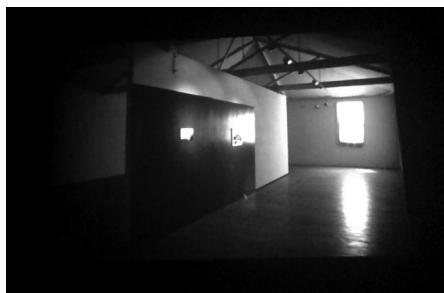


Fig. 6.20. David Jolly, *sundowners*, Stripp, Melbourne, 1997 (Zoom screenshot)

DJ:

They were different. The Stripp show wasn't a serial body of work. They were like the off-cuts and the ephemera. It was stinking hot, a really hot summer.

JN:

You were asking weirdly were there enough works and of course you had enough. There was this pitter-patter between us about how this could go, and what could happen. Using the timber sheeting came out of that.

DJ:

And David Franzke there again, this time with a more ambient mix on a Revox system, those draped speakers up high at either end and the yellow curtain.

JN:

The *Silver Surfer* image [fig. 6.16] wasn't typical either. It was the deadline thing, more that you were needing to get work done and I remem-

ber throwing you images, mags and stuff like that, along the lines of, find something in there. It was in the same vein that Sadie and I painted the green sheets all slapdash. The green was so ugly, sloppy paint and on top of the broken sheets. To me these were very close, the way things would happen.

DJ:

It was hot, it was summer and you're sort of searching for lots of different things and going, okay, well, how many were there? Seven, nine works in the show? Seven?

JN:

Ah, it's eight, just counting.

DJ:

A whole different catalogue of their own in my mind. I suppose a year later I moved into a more photographic realm and became more formal. I probably stayed in that zone for too long.

JN:

You mean like the work of the building façade – the blue work [fig. 6.10]. That's a beautiful work. It's two or three years after the Stripp show?

DJ:

The following year. It's a hotel façade in the Adelaide CBD. I think it might have been 2000 actually, like January or February 2000, in the summer.

JN:

Stripp had a problem with that giant room. It was way too big for everyone. That was my memory. We were all working in studios and there was no money, and the big gallery room was like a barn. It was a giant space. I think there was this little game or tactic with the wall and those crazy green sheets – effectively the paintings and everything were hidden. The actual exhibition was hidden from view as you came into the gallery [fig. 6.19]. The paintings themselves were hidden away at the back.

...

JN:

I'm interested in finding our own place in the way painting operated around us, to understand something of the specific ways that painting worked in the context we were familiar with in Melbourne in the 1990s and after. It's not immediately world-historical at the get-go. There is a zone of working that is crucial I think when it comes to how painting was operating closer to us – closer to home. This is my memory. And that's besides the fact that in contemporary art contexts at the time painting was a distinct minority case. Something like that.

DJ:

Okay. It was a little different early on. We had all those arguments just wanting to put a painting on the wall.

JN:

One angle that I'm aware of is that you and I both have a common connection back into Cologne through Christoph Preussmann and Annie Jacobs, and various other ways.⁶ Christoph exhibited at Stripp in 1996 too. I have this photograph [fig. 6.21].



Fig. 6.21. Hans-Jörg Mayer, *Untitled* (Charline von Heyl, Isabelle Graw, Jutta Koether and others, Cologne), 1991⁷

This is Cologne in 1991. It's interesting because the history of the Cologne art world has a particular influence in art circles these days. Wasn't 1991 roughly when you found that original glass work in Cologne, the Walter Dexel [fig. 6.22]?

DJ:

It would have been a year later, '92. Close.

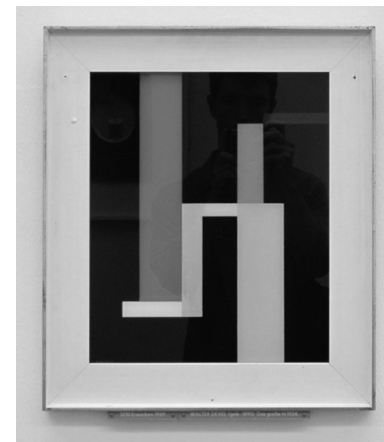


Fig. 6.22. David Jolly, photograph of a 1924 painting on glass by Walter Dexel, Cologne, 2008

JN:

If we go back to these images of your 1997 exhibition. When we spoke the other day, at one point you were talking about the projector and how you use a projector to discover aspects of an image that you might then work with. You were talking as if it was a kind of technique that you were able to use to look closely, to build up the sense of the image.

DJ:

It's kind of confounding – an analogue process. I find it interesting.

JN:

Yes, we were talking about depth of field in a similar way, where there is

a very different interpretation of depth of field in photography and it's kind of nonsensical in painting. Or in painting it can only ever be an analogy – that we've come to use because of photography.

DJ:

I think the first exhibition I did with Christoph Preussmann he called *Analogy*, or *Analogien*. Then we did *Analogy 2* back here in Melbourne in Fitzroy. That was Christoph's doing. I'm not sure if he was alluding to that.

JN:

What I'm wanting to get to is something about the surface in your work, or rather the analogy of the surface. Thank you, Christoph. I've always felt in this way your work is very ambiguous. Or that seems to be part of the point. I don't know how else to say what that is. Maybe the image/painting is only a surface – it's a kind of collision in paint. But in another way the surface is fluid and intangible. Possibly you slide across the gap between the idea of the image and the physical materials – the paint and glass. The surface of a painting is paint, but because you use the glass it kind of hides the surface. That's part of the appeal. Do you recognise any of this?

DJ:

Maybe. Let's see how we go [*begins to rotate through slides again*].

JN:

Okay. I'm just looking at a group install of the gallery [fig. 6.13]. There are – we can see seven. That's right.

DJ:

Something like that.

JN:

Seven, that's amazing. Because remember Stripp was 13 metres across, actually?

DJ:

Yes.

JN:

It would have been 13 metres deep at least.

DJ:

Or 20.

JN:

It was long and deep. These works, none of them are bigger than 45 or 50 cm in length or height, so they're tiny. That was one of the big aspects with the show, that you had these seven relatively small-scale works.

DJ:

True, yes.

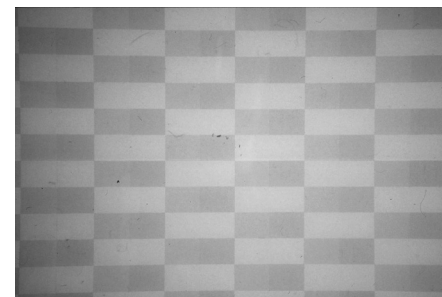


Fig. 6.23. David Jolly, *Untitled*, 1997

JN:

I worked with you, and Sadie Chandler was there and David Franzke. Was it just the three of us? Stevie Zagala never touched anything. He would never lift a brush or anything, or a hammer.

DJ:

Oh god no, just thinking out loud.

JN:

There is another image, is there?

DJ:

Yes, another one, which is the pretty one [fig. 6.23]. These are just off that file.

JN:

Oh, I can see.

DJ:

That's pretty – visual air conditioner. It was hot.

JN:

That's a much better photograph than the others I have, isn't it?

DJ:

Yes. It's a documented copy.

JN:

Can we pick up specifically on the change in scale that happened in painting back there?

DJ:

Yes okay.

JN:

The small scale in your work was always critical. Very different from your teachers and at the end of the 1980s. Somewhere between say 1993 and 2000 scale really changed – it downsized. Perhaps painting in large formats had run its course to an extent. There were still painters from generations before who continued unabashed, but it was a point of difference for sure. Can we connect that to the kinds of attitudes and explanations that painters were preoccupied with? It was not just what painters were looking at, but as well what they thought had become passé.

DJ:

I think maybe Store 5 was a bridge between with someone like Stephen Bram and John Nixon as well.

JN:

That's true I think. The downsizing isn't accidental though, in the way we understand painting – assuming it is interesting in the first place to ask what was actually happening in painting. There was a reinvestment underway, if that is what you would call it. That was part of it. There was clearly a reinvestment in the details of painting, in the knowledge of painting and how it worked – assembling paint rather than pulling it down.

DJ:

But these things were not really spoken of. There was much more material diversity. That's what I remember as influential. The conversations were not confined to painting.

JN:

There were very few actual exhibitions that tried to connect what was happening in painting in those years though. Nothing was coming from that direction. There were no exhibitions where the premise was to interconnect painters.⁸ Can we say that your 1997 install was as much an attempt to solve this issue of the big transition in scale that had happened? Is that too much to say?

DJ:

Building it into a little cabinet in the bigger chamber room of all those previous uses and histories.

JN:

Even the paint. The ugly green paint straight out of the tin slapped on with big brushes by assistants – Sadie and me – and then putting your tiny jewel-like paintings on top of that green paint. It was a joke in these terms of history and painterly scale. It was a way to build a context and then break the context at the same time.

DJ:

Maybe.

JN:

I don't really remember us saying any of that at the time. My memory is that it would have just been an implicit material – factual – problem that had to be solved as much as anything. And you were making the calls. But I do think deep down these types of problems and contexts were playing out in real time. It all rises to the surface in the exhibition.

DJ:

The colour was not out of the tin. It was roused up somehow. I wouldn't have done that. It had been 30 degrees for two weeks on end. The green had this sort of cooling [effect]. It was like looking off the end of a pier into the water.

JN:

I remember it as sort of a racing green.

DJ:

It was a bit dirtier than that.

JN:

We didn't change the colour, or did we mix it new?

DJ:

I don't know where it was found. But we had an adjustment in it, a little bit of adjustment. It wasn't the pure tin colour. I think it was a bit of red-green or something.

JN:

I remember we slapped it on badly. We didn't paint it well. It was one coat and it was broken, the surfaces broken. It's thick and thin in different parts and showing remnants of the timber sheeting. The timber was damaged timber as well, so we painted over the damage. Not so long after that, perhaps a year or two, you approached this same kind of issue of the framing or the material history of the space or the gallery, in David Noonan's dead show. What was it called?

DJ:

Exhumed [RMIT Project Space, Melbourne, 1998].

JN:

In order to get your delightful, pretty work on to the wall in that exhibition and not over concentrate on their aesthetic – in the context of the show – I think you used gaffer tape to put them up.

DJ:

That was *Garçon Garçon* [RMIT Project Space, Melbourne, 2000]. That was with Tim McMonagle and David Noonan. That one wasn't in *Exhumed*.

JN:

Okay, correction. But what's interesting is that it was in the same sense of the earlier green paint and intervening timber sheets.

DJ:

Yes.

JN:

In a way, it's again engaging with the gallery and engaging with the meaning of painting in a gallery. The frame in that instance – the gaffer tape – was doing what the green was doing in the earlier show. It's engaging materially [with] those ideas of scale and what a painting should look to and how precious painting can be, and things like that.

DJ:

It was about getting them on the wall.

JN:

Only?

DJ:

I didn't have a solution for the framing at that stage. The glass has always been a tricky one to get on the wall. It was often just a basic hanging device on the backs of the works. A piece of timber with an eyelet screwed into the top. They hung off a single nail, whereas the ones for the *Garçon Garçon* show that Noonan curated at RMIT – I just hadn't put the time and effort into making it work and they were reasonably detailed. I was travelling about then too. There was no time.

JN:

I would still argue that it's in the context of an awareness of the condition of painting or the expectations around painting.

DJ:

Yes, definitely expectations. Plenty of people sort of lost their marbles over that hang. I was like, get over it.

JN:

I can't imagine Noonan being upset by that at all.

DJ:

No. There weren't bad reactions. Just reactions I hadn't anticipated. I'm thinking, [are] you looking at [the] work or just the taped frames?

JN:

Another way we used to talk about it, remember, was that we were aware of the sitting-down-at-a-table thing going on [in painting].

DJ:

It wasn't easels.

JN:

No, but it was working into the night. It was not making a painting as a project, but making a painting that produced a possible outcome that you could then take to the next one. The object was always the next painting or artwork and the process of getting there. The smaller scale was a part of that. For me it suggests a different kind of interest or that was the case then. It wasn't about waiting for the gallery exhibition and that context.

DJ:

Yes, you could make big painting too but there was the cost, which was fine. But there's no economy there really.

...

JN:

Where did the smoke machine [see fig. 6.15] come from?

DJ:

It was after Port Arthur. The stage in the painting is a back-to-front map of Australia.

JN:

Righto, I didn't even see that.

DJ:

The smoke machine I suppose I borrowed from going out to a certain little club in town called Global Warming. Which was upstairs at Little Reata's on a Sunday night and properly got going at about 10 pm and finished at dawn in the morning on a Monday. One friend used to do the scents for it.

JN:

The what?

DJ:

One friend used to do the scents or perfumes for this club. It was really tiny but it would pack out with people. It would have been a jazz bar once.

JN:

I don't remember the name. The smoke machine –

DJ:

The smoke machine was just always there. It was like the mirror ball. There'd be a mirror ball, then there was this smoke machine. With the scents you'd be in the middle of the dance floor and it would smell like you were in a pine forest and you'd be off. The smoke machine was indicative. It was always just there and the clouds of smoke and how it changed the vision. Imi Knoebel talked about a veil. The smoke machine was this ephemeral adjustment on adjustment on adjustment. It started as a drawing from '95. You've got the hard edge and the two discs, and the silver, a metallic silver. [The discs] were supposed to be mirrors with magnets that would oppose each other. So, there are two floating mirrors above each other, and the smoke would pass through the mirrors and reflect. It was a strange composition.

JN:

It feels like a diagram of your process, being in the space of all that smoke. But this work is quite flat whereas usually your work is representational or plainly abstraction.

DJ:

I was just trying to put all the pieces together of what was going on around outside of the painting in the world as I saw it. This was the only one that became a painting. It's actually based on drawings I was making very early on. It's got a slide quality to it.

JN:

You're talking about the smoke machine work still?

DJ:

Yes.

...

JN:

You don't do bad painting. You've never been too conscious or competitive to position a bad painting. Although you might say that the gaffer tape is an instance of a competitive move or a contextual move.

DJ:

It was functional.

JN:

It was functional but it was also a slight or negative, in the sense that it's implying: yes, I understand what I'm doing and you reckon this looks bad, but you're just missing the point. It's a competitive gesture towards a protagonist, other artists or an attitude towards art or something. But you've never really adopted this idea of propositioning an anti-aesthetic or bad painting? It has always been towards something rather than against something. By example Matthys Gerber is someone in painting who propositions bad painting to a point – that is a narrative he uses.

DJ:

Yes. That choice might go to an anti-aesthetic but not necessarily bad painting.



Fig. 6.24. David Jolly, *Tullamarine*, 1997

JN:

It's never been your gig though, no more than the gaffer tape incident.

DJ:

No. I can use bad photography. And bad photography turns out to be not too bad for paintings.

JN:

How do you mean bad photography?

DJ:

I was thinking say in the sense of the airport paintings [fig. 6.24]. They were really boring, empty photographs.

JN:

The Tullamarine tarmac with line markings?

DJ:

I took them to the lab and got them back and go wow, they're really boring. There's nothing dynamic about them, but somehow, when they were painted, they changed. Well, bad photograph or boring photograph, or there was something.

JN:

There was a little rain too, which made the tarmac shiny and reflective. A beautiful mirror surface.

DJ:

But there wasn't any glamour.

JN:

Would you connect that to the building surfaces?

DJ:

Yes, although the building surfaces have more intrinsic dynamism to them anyway, they were architectural façades. The one from Germany – the pale sort of greyish white – [was] the side of a newspaper building in Berlin. It operates through boredom of the image or through the dullness of the image.

JN:

Matthys Gerber would talk about "return to order" [as a reaction to avant-gardism]. He would build that kind of context for contemporary practice.⁹ His painting is oppositional in that way. I think it would be an over-stretch though when we talk about practices in Melbourne to find a similar narrative that addresses the authority status of painting. I can't see that. Unless it's more recently with a painter like Helen Johnson, or you jump back to the 1980s with artists like Peter Tyndall.

DJ:

Our conversations [beginning in the early 1990s] were more orientated around daily practices, working every day. Things like that. It wasn't telegraphing big messages. More of an exchange of craft, ideas, what films you're watching, what magazines you're reading. What else you're reading.

JN:

Traveling among people you're with. Sideways movements.

DJ:

Yes, definitely. Definitely it wasn't [more overt]. And that was the thing. To be able to go to Sydney and see the different sort of environment that Sydney artists would be dealing with. That kind of competition between artists and "bad" might have been held a lot more privately or was a lot more guarded in Melbourne. I don't think it would have lasted more than a couple of hours. It could be kind of exasperated. But then again it made somewhere like Sydney. The practice was always different up there. It made for a curious kind of headspace to go and see these works and it still does. I think it's good.

...

JN:

The smoke machine image of the reverse Australia [fig. 6.15] is the strangest work. You know what I mean? It's quite a different kind of image from, say, the painting of the morning TV reporting of the whacked-out guy on the beach [fig. 6.25]. Most often your work is based on an image you've sourced from somewhere else first, or photographed yourself. They're mediated that way, by the camera. I guess even the "abstract" works have the same process.

DJ:

You mean the work from the *Daily Telegraph* news?

JN:

Yes.

DJ:

It was on a Sunday.



Fig. 6.25. David Jolly, 7 am Bondi 2, 1997

JN:

I remember, it was a Sunday morning early.

DJ:

Sunday morning, *Daily Telegraph*, Bondi beach. It kind of starts to emerge from there.

JN:

The painting machine kicks in. Was there ever a time when you referenced more deliberately a historical context or painters before you? Was this ever a thing for you?

DJ:

Not really. Not from anywhere close to the VCA, where I studied. My experience was to learn pretty quickly that there wasn't much to rely on. If there was a model there to follow, it wasn't going to be followed. The model was everyone for themselves.

JN:

There's not a historical or generational connect you could point to, or any distinct prior history that leads? It's been much more the idea of a lived culture and personal narrative and experience.

DJ:

I suppose. There were peers, who were all making different work from each other, that you were aware of. But no one was standing on anyone's toes. Everyone was very different from each other.

JN:

That continued with the years at Gertrude Street [1993–95].¹⁰ As you say, everyone was so different it was embarrassing.

DJ:

Yes and no. I think we all make what we make. You kind of liked the difference somehow. It didn't always make for a great-looking show perhaps.

JN:

Part of that difference though, even our work in that top space with the photocopy exhibitions, we were backing up against this sort of everyone-for-themselves logic. We would be making a frame – the photocopy.¹¹ Other than the odd show, the lack of baselines didn't seem a problem in many people's minds.

DJ:

That was the closest I suppose. Those shows, a coming together of people ostensibly all making different work, peers and friends and so forth. It was probably more about just [being] friends. I don't know – the aesthetics of putting on a really elegant group show. You were playing around with art-making, they're not brand new ideas, but about working. Maybe my glass surfaces at some level connect with an idea of a world of shiny surfaces, not much else.

JN:

You think that intuitively working on glass was something to do with a sense of distance?

DJ:

I think so. The audience was small by and large – friends and peers. You had to be happy with it in the studio and working alongside each other. It took a while sometimes for things to settle and find their place. I think you learned early on that art was a very slow game.

...

JN:

Before we wrap-up I would like to circle back a bit. I'd like to unpack something of your specific painting processes if I can – to be clear about how you actually go about making paintings and working on the glass. We've talked about how you often start with selecting an existing image, a mediated image, but clearly content and thinking accrue to the painting in other ways – through the painting processes and material history. These count. So, to be specific, when you're painting, the mechanism you use, it's actually undertaken in reverse in a way. That's right isn't it? You paint on the reverse side of the glass, so what is seen is where the paint first contacts the glass. Can you talk about how you paint this way?

DJ:

Okay. Well I usually sit at a desk with a computer screen in front of me. The image is usually on the screen. I sometimes square it up, but not always. The glass is rarely too large, so I can work with it on the desk. I can flip it around to see what is happening.

JN:

You're painting on the back side of glass. The actual front surface of the painting is hidden. You don't see it, unless you stop and turn the glass over.

DJ:

Yes. Actually I don't flip it over until quite a way in. Often never [during the making].

JN:

You don't see it immediately. What is happening is guided first by the plan you have in your head or the scheme you have for the work and by looking at the screen image. There is a delay before you see how it comes together.

DJ:

Yes, it's a process of adjustments on adjustments.

JN:

So there is a clear gap – a gap between your actual painting of the surface and then later the point of turning it over to see what happened?

DJ:

That's right. The paint takes its own lead, within reason.

JN:

You don't stare at every finished mark. There is a delay. Which I think is not the same for painters who look at a canvas directly as they paint. They see themselves and what is happening very immediately, or this is the expectation. Your process is more delayed and unusual – there is a longer break between thinking materially and seeing. It's not visually as direct inasmuch as it allows for the painting process – and the gap between painting and seeing – to influence and affect the finished work.

DJ:

I can see what you're saying.

JN:

There is another aspect related to this that is relevant. It's something that Boedi Widjaja and I talked about quite a bit in relation to his large drawing works and his other artworks.¹² What is noticeable in your work and the way you paint on glass, is that the painterly mark you're making is being hidden.¹³ The brush-marks and the hand-marks you commonly see in painting are being physically obscured by the glass surface in your work. I think this is very important to realise. I suppose in fact we are seeing the underside of these marks and so they have a less familiar appearance. It's not a matter of the painting marks being absent – they are there even where we can't see them. The overt appearance of your work is still painterly, and this is confirmed by its materials and your processes, which are much like other painters other than for the reversal you make.

When Boedi and I were talking about the painterly mark in relation to his drawings, he drew my attention to a John Berger reference, where

Berger accounts for a strong historical correlation between painting and drawing. But there was one important difference – I have it here. For Berger, “painting is unlike drawing in one way, in that they are both memetic but painting has a quality of potentially hiding things.”¹⁴ You can recognise of course that this *lack of disclosure*, sense or quality about painting has often been interpreted negatively. But I don't see it this way. In my mind it's connected rather to the aliveness of how it works and what it is doing.

DJ:

This is a long way past talking about the 1997 show?

JN:

For me it helps explain how painting works lower down in the scheme of things, in the way we were talking about at the beginning. The independence of painting actually comes in two parts. The first is a necessary independence and a kind of sovereignty for the artist, the painter. There is a zone of working that is crucial I think. The second is the parallel independence of the artwork itself – where, in painting, painting itself arrives at its own formulations and insights, where it kind of thinks itself.¹⁵ Or at least it borrows its agency from the artist. You remember Pierre Klossowski's essay about collaborating with demons where he wrote that an artist doesn't need to know how it works, they just need to know what to do. [The actual quote is, “It is not necessary for artists to notice the coming and going of demonic forces, but they should know how to ‘obtain the proper effect.’”]¹⁶ What this means to me is that independence in painting, in this plural sense of both the painter and the painting, is structural. It has to be structurally material. It's built into the bones of painting, into the machinery of painting. And I think your work, in this best way, displays this quality of structural/material independence. Something like that.

1. Stripp was an artist-run gallery organised by a group of artists including David Jolly and Jonathan Nichols between 1996 and 1998. It operated from an upstairs space at 72 Napier Street, Fitzroy.
2. *First Press (Extra Virgin): David Jolly, Sarah Minney, Lyndal Walker*, Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia, Adelaide, 1998.
3. Matthys Gerber, *Monopoly – Matthys Gerber*, Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia, Adelaide, 1998.
4. *Broadsheet: Contemporary Visual Arts and Culture* 27, no. 1 (Autumn 1998).
5. *Learning to Leave*, Trevelyan Clay, Eliza Dyball, Tim Johnson, David Jolly, Michelle Mantsio, Moya McKenna, John Spiteri, Jonathan Nichols (curator), Anca Rujoiu, Quentin Sprague and Ms N. Yunupinju, Margaret Lawrence Gallery, Victorian College of the Arts, Melbourne, 2014.
6. See the interview with Christoph Preussmann in this publication.
7. Hans-Jörg Mayer in *Painting 2.0: Expression in the Information Age: Gesture and Spectacle, Eccentric Figuration, Social Networks*, ed. Manuela Ammer, Achim Hochdörfer, and David Joselit (Munich: Delmonico Books/Prestel, 2015), 215.
8. See by example, "Whereas many monographs examined the development of individual painters, male or female, the putative death of painting instantly eclipsed any discussion of the medium in general." Achim Hochdörfer, "How the World Came in," in *Painting 2.0: Expression in the Information Age: Gesture and Spectacle, Eccentric Figuration, Social Networks*, ed. Manuela Ammer, Achim Hochdörfer, and David Joselit (Munich: Delmonico Books/Prestel, 2015), 22.
9. Regarding the question of a contemporary "return to order," see by example, "Thus our question has to be posed more succinctly: Does Richter's denigration of the doxa of the anti-aesthetic actually function within the parameters of a retour à l'ordre aesthetic ... Or is this apparent return to order instantly negated by the fact that ... [it is] derived from a photographic record, so that the technologically produced image retains its permeating presence if not its ultimate rule." Benjamin Buchloh, "A Nude in the Neo-Avant-Garde, Ema (Nude on a Staircase), 1966," in *Painting Beyond Itself, the Medium in the Post-Medium Condition*, ed.

Isabelle Graw and Ewa Lajer-Burcharth (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016), 252.

10. Known today as Gertrude Contemporary, 200 Gertrude Street Incorporating Gertrude Street Artists' Spaces was established in 1985 and located at 200 Gertrude Street, Fitzroy, until 2015.
11. David Jolly and Jonathan Nichols, curators, *High Heels or The Best Shoes in Paris*, Studio 13, 200 Gertrude Street, 1994; Jonathan Nichols, curator, *Fascination*, Studio 13, 200 Gertrude Street, 1993.
12. See the conversation with Boedi Widjaja and Audrey Koh in this publication.
13. In this respect the American critic David Joselit writes that: "The painterly mark ... deserves to be placed alongside the readymade, collage, and the monochrome as one of the fundamental inventions of European historical avant-gardes." David Joselit, "Reassembling Painting," in *Painting 2.0: Expression in the Information Age: Gesture and Spectacle, Eccentric Figuration, Social Networks*, ed. Manuela Ammer, Achim Hochdörfer, and David Joselit (Munich: Delmonico Books/Prestel, 2015), 169.
14. See John Berger, "Drawn to that Moment," in *Berger on Drawing* (Cork: Occasional Press, 2005).
15. By example, the German critic Isabelle Graw writes that: "painting is a sort of discourse producer that arrives at its own insights." See Isabelle Graw, Daniel Birnbaum, and Nikolaus Hirsh, "The Value of Painting: Notes on Unspecificity, Indexicality, and Highly Valuable Quasi-Persons," in *Thinking Through Painting, Reflexivity and Agency Beyond the Canvas*, ed. Isabelle Graw, Daniel Birnbaum, and Nikolaus Hirsch (Frankfurt: Institute für Kunstskritik, Hochschule für Bildende Künste, Städtelschule; Berlin: Sternberg Press 2012), 54.
16. Pierre Klossowski, "On the Collaboration of Demons in the Work of Art (1981)," *Phantasm and Simulacra. The Drawings of Pierre Klossowski*, ed. Paul Foss, Paul Taylor, and Allen S. Weiss, *Art & Text* Special Issue 18 (July 1985): 9–11.

Walking with Ghosts: Six Conversations about Painting

John Spiteri, Boedi Widjaja and Audrey Koh, Christoph Preussmann, Noor Mahnun Mohamed, Moya McKenna, David Jolly. Talking with Jonathan Nichols

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Back cover: John Spiteri, *Modesty Curtain*, 2018

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– Jonathan Nichols



John Spiteri
Boedi Widjaja and Audrey Koh
Christoph Preussmann
Noor Mahnun Mohamed
Moya McKenna
David Jolly
Talking with Jonathan Nichols