



Figure 1: Michael Greaves, *Stadium*, oil on linen, 137 x 130cm, 2006 (courtesy of the author).

## PAINTING AFTER PAINTING: LOSING FAITH IN THE HISTORY OF PAINTING

Michael Greaves

"Painting now seems always in crisis, always in need of some appeal to a higher power to keep it alive, yet always somehow able in the end to summon up one more breath, to keep going like Vladimir and Estragon, if not Lazarus."<sup>1</sup>

As an artist who has studied the history of painting, but who is also a painter today, I wonder: How might one come to begin to make sense of painting? The painted image belies what the surface holds; bubbling underneath is a cauldron of derision, enlightenment and subversion, but most of all a lie. Painting can never be what it intends. It is always mediated, always constructed, always comes with baggage. How then can you even begin to approach painting without faltering at the first step? If I were to construct a history of painting, the movements, the 'triumphs', I might find cursory threads that seem to tie some of it together in a digestible way. What is more than likely to happen, though, is a continual refocusing, an overhauling at nearly every moment, a plethora of opinions leading to a continual 'kicking against the pricks', a definitive 'word-jam', that in turn denies and undermines any history that may possibly be written. Sure, there are moments of lucidity in the 'description' of what painting might mean to a particular audience at a particular time, but as Suzi Gablick has pointed out, "everything is empty at the centre."<sup>2</sup>

I often read about the futility of painting, its 'holes', and its problems. I feel painting's limitations, its containment and concealment of the 'truth', its lack of possibility in providing something other than a 'surface'. What truth is there in painting if there is no explicit correlation between the visual experience and the painted image? There may be a relationship to the form or impression of the visual, but it is always a construction. I have felt that in many cases the writer(s) of articles/treatises on painting – from the earliest attempts at defining the painter's craft<sup>3</sup> to more sustained attacks on the particularities of painting so common in the 1970s – were and are correct in their descriptions of painting as a practice, as a process, but only in terms of its comparative relationship to a defined history.

Painting in this sense as a medium has developed a self-styled jacket, reminiscent of Jasper Johns's *Target Paintings*, a claim of superiority, of rightness, of hierarchy and anti-democratic process, a fetishisation of skill, *col cervello* (of the mind). The arguments for and against painting have staked out a claim; have set painting itself aside and apart from other forms of art making. Painting has been seen as an 'end' and not a process, and throughout history this distinction has 'acted' on painting in a less than favourable manner. British artist Damien Hirst, for example, has commented on his fear of the "VOID"<sup>4</sup> of painting. His stance echoes a long-held notion that the authorship of painting and of the painted image is somehow separate from other art-making processes, somehow more elevated. Contemporary writers on painting, however, find the unstable position of painting's history one of power and not of fear. In the essay titled *Painting in the Interrogative Mode*, Barry Schwabsky addresses how painting's foreseen limitations and shortcomings can in fact open the possibility for the painter to articulate what the image cannot. Today, the definition of painting is being less focused on in favour of consideration of painters' relationships with their own interpretation of 'history'.

Schwabsky makes special reference to a lecture that Frank Stella gave at the Pratt Institute in 1960. Stella spoke of two distinct concerns that in Schwabsky's view are central to the approach and practice of contemporary painting: what is a painting, and how does one make a painting?<sup>5</sup> These concerns, although raised more than forty years ago, have had a profound impact on the way in which contemporary painting practice has continually, but not necessarily purposefully, distanced itself from the progressive and linear narrative for painting championed by Clement Greenberg in the 1940s.<sup>6</sup>

Stella spoke of the direction that a painter should take, about the act of imitation, of learning “about painting by looking at and imitating other painters.”<sup>17</sup> In a sense Stella was advocating the act of copying, of repeating from another source, which I read as ‘looking for models, for images’. Although Stella is largely concerned here with the technical and formal problems that need to be solved by individuals considering painting, his discussion opens a dialogue that inextricably ties the act of image-making with its sources, most notably with the mediated and often photographic image. I entered into Stella’s game via a different route as I interpreted him from a somewhat biased angle to begin the process of legitimising my practice, a process which has provided me with a welcome release from the history of painting.

Within my own practice I began by taking Stella’s advice and imitating painters who I considered were involved in the constant struggle to continue within a medium that at any stage might breathe its last. I found paintings that I wished I had made, and I re-made them. One of the first paintings that I chose to ‘re-paint’ was of a small portable record player that had originally been painted by Gerhard Richter as part of the series of paintings called *October 18, 1977* (1988).

Richter could be considered as purposefully sidestepping the impossibility of rendering a painting as a photograph. He has spoken of photography as “void”<sup>18</sup>, and while Richter credits photography with the ultimate art historical Excalibur to render painting unusable, he in turn affords painting the ability to utilise photography as a genuine possibility towards answering a question. What Richter is describing is a procedural usage. Photography should never act as a surrogate for painting, and it should never define its parameters. Painting’s use of photography can only be another possible route towards the inevitable, the act of painting.

What Richter’s approach reinforced was the falseness of a claim that painting could somehow be indexical to the object/subject it depicted; that the painted image could stand in for a kind of reality, or have a direct relationship to the physical world. This would be absurd. A painting can never represent reality, and it can only act as a representation of experience, if that. Painting can never be an indexical image. It can never represent what it intends, be this an attempt to render visual sensation passed off as a type of ‘reality’ (for this is impossible) or an articulation of a spiritual or philosophical notion (equally absurd). Painting can only act as a manifestation of a substantive act.

In Richter’s work *Untitled* (1964) his obsessive over-painting of a photographic image of a little girl’s face can be read both as an expression of the futility of painting and of its persistence. The thick and directly applied paint over a printed photographic image points out the unmistakable materiality of paint. Paint can be nothing more than paint; it is the viewer who projects their desire for paint to become something else, to transcend itself. Richter’s continuing use of photography as a source for his painting creates a kind of distance from the act of representation – as this is the role of the photograph – and allows him the possibility of exploring other promises that painting may hold up its sleeve.

In making the painting of the record player from a photographic reproduction of Richter’s painting I acted on an intentional decision to play with paradox. Richter had gathered the source imagery from a photograph published in a newspaper. This photograph had a considerable history attached to it, yet as I approached it via the painting I was looking for something other than homage to Richter. I wanted to ‘use’ the image without using the meaning that the image brought with it. My intention was to make a painting, to reaffirm my role as a painter, to suggest what I think painting is all about.

The resultant work, titled *Record Player and Little Owls* (2006, Figure 2), a diptych, concentrates its focus on the quiet observation of both an event that has been (Richter’s painting of a record player), and on the ‘impossibility’ of my own personal response to the image’s ‘original’ status. The jarring juxtaposition of the little owls with the record player questions any possible relationship with Richter, yet it establishes a connection: between a young painter and a giant.

The second painting that I chose to repaint was a work by Belgian painter Luc Tuymans. *Chalk* (2000) was part of the series titled *Mwana Kitoko* shown at the Venice Biennale in 2001. Both Richter and Tuymans were attempting to relocate their experience of history through painting. The story behind Tuymans’s *Chalk* is an anecdote of the



Figure 2 (top): Michael Greaves, *Record Player and Little Owls*, oil on canvas, 35x46cm, 2006 (courtesy of the author).

Figure 3 (middle left): 5: Michael Greaves, *My Name is Takashi. I am 23, and I am a Painter*, 33 x 27cm, 2008 (courtesy of the author).

Figure 4 (middle right): Michael Greaves, *All I Can Offer*, oil on jute, 40.5x40.5cm, 2006 (courtesy of the author).

Figure 5 (below): Michael Greaves, *The Ethnography of an Image*, charcoal on paper, framed in re-used art gallery frames, each 64 x 54cm, 2006. From left to right: *The Representation of a Kitchen Chair*, *And I'll Die When I'm Done*, *The Pioneer*, *Double Portrait* (courtesy of the author).



involvement of Belgium in the murder of Patrice Lumumba, the first democratically elected prime minister of the Congo. The story read that the colonial police officer who made Lumumba and his cabinet ministers 'disappear' removed two of his teeth and later threw them into the North Sea before he himself died.<sup>9</sup> I found this image – of hands outstretched and holding two incandescent white objects – very profound, and in some ways innocent. In repainting this work my intention was to re-present the possibility of the process of painting to contain a narrative action of my own direction, to suggest the inability of painting to comprehend the anecdote behind the image.

I entitled my work *All I can Offer* (2006, Figure 4) in an attempt to reaffirm the commitment, often physical, I find myself making in attempting to continue to paint. The relationship sounds quite trite, but in order to consider painting one must approach the image in painting as if it were open, as if it can be used as a possible answer to a question and not just as an assimilation of a set of visual experiences. I was trying to render my own physical struggles with the impossibility of painting an image that seems already to have an ethnographical lineage. Are these possibilities – painting and ethnography – mutually exclusive?

In discussing these paintings, I find myself substituting writing for the physical position of the artist. That is, when writing, the painting not only acts as an image but as a passage in which justifications about the validity of the painter's process are questioned. A painting then no longer acts as a reference point to something that 'actually' exists, or can 'actually' be related to, but as a kind of encoding of its own media. Painting is then no longer a total self-referential exegesis of something pure and essentialist. In a sense the painted image acts in terms of its relationship to a mediated construct, whether photograph, text, or moving image (as when Tuymans includes a painting as one item within a sequence of multiple frames).

In a series of drawings titled *The Ethnography of an Image* (2006, Figure 5) I sought to consider the possibility of a group of images that question my belief in the act of painting. These images can no longer merely act as a reflection of the subject matter. Any recollection of a motif is subsumed through prior experience on behalf of the audience, not intertwined with any form of 'reality', or a kind of "superficial representation."<sup>10</sup> The works are charcoal representations of Gerhard Richter's *Kitchen Chair*.<sup>11</sup> A New Zealand falcon, a Pioneer turntable and a neo-lith skull and one of modern man have been sourced by me from the internet. Richter's kitchen chair is included and all the images are placed in 'museumic' frames recycled from a public art gallery where they had been continually re-used for the display of 'artefacts'. Each of the drawings is intended to be paintings, yet each painted image is unrealised. The works are suspended in time and refer to the possibility of an ethnographical collection that can never be complete and thus can never represent the promise of a pioneering 'expedition' aimed at establishing a kind of 'Western truth'.

The fundamental premise of the representational image that has dogged painting since the Renaissance can shift sideways, thus allowing the painting process to exist in its own right. By removing a particular way of 'decoding' the painted image, painting today then acts without an overreaching commandment, namely that the work 'must' refer back to something, the subject matter or its own history. Rather, source material is taken for what it is, and repositioned or transposed to signal painting's superficiality to the viewer. Painting then begins to act as if it is a 'monument' to its own history rather than playing into that history. In Michel Foucault's view, it becomes a "motionless trace...[an] object without a context...[not a] symbol of something else...something that ought to be transparent, but whose bothersome opaqueness we often have to traverse in order to[...]reach the profundity of the essential[...]"<sup>12</sup>

Painting becomes a speculation, and not a fact. The multiplicity of engagements with the visual image that the painter now has access to defines the painter's current historical position. Russell Ferguson strongly affirms this multiplicity of painterly access to and intervention into the realm of the image. He refers to painting as unmistakably PAINT in the text accompanying his 2004 exhibition entitled *The Undiscovered Country*. He continues to define painting as representation but insists that "at the point where the represented image meets the materiality of the painted surface, representation *always* breaks down."<sup>13</sup> For Ferguson, the physicality of the painting and the process that goes into the construction of a painting need to be asserted so that the painting continues to assert its own integrity as a particular act.

What becomes apparent in considering recent shifts and claims as to the nature and status of painting and its

position is the inability of painting to be a sustainable and viable means of representing human experience, whether visual, emotional or conceptual. There always seems to be another means which is more logical, more 'truthful' and more exciting. Painting does what it can; it has no higher position in any hierarchy anymore, and a certain freedom and release from expectations accompany an acceptance of this.

I continue to struggle with the history of painting that has come before me, but I try to do so in a way that retains a certainty of painting's possibilities as an act and of its formal challenges, as well as of the performative action that is associated with its making. The images I use may still have links to the history of painting, but not so much with its history of representation as rather with its consciousness of itself. "Painting can combine representation with the tactile and the formal in ways still unavailable to other media... The word 'painting' implies both a finished object and an ongoing activity"<sup>14</sup>, an activity far from being only associated with its own history, its own past.

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- 1 Russell Ferguson, *The Undiscovered Country* (Los Angeles: Hammer Museum, 2004), 32.
- 2 Suzi Gablick, *Has Modernism Failed?* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1984), 17.
- 3 Alberti's work *De Pictura* (1435) in Latin and *Della Pittura* (1436) translated into Italian was an attempt at rationalising painting and the problems facing a painter in representing visual experience. Alberti arguably began a period of rationalisation of the picture plane to more accurately represent human visual experience, a journey that was to define painting for almost 400 years. This treatise can be seen as an early painters' handbook.
- 4 Damien Hirst, unattributed 2004 "Originally I wanted to be a painter. But I could never do it because of the idea of PAINTING BEING LIKE A VOID. I could never decide what to put in the picture or where, given the infinite mass of possibilities and places." The challenges that Hirst finds in painting are common. The image, he notes, is a constructed thing and needs an active engagement from the maker. The idea or concept is tied up in this process but is not initially the main problem.
- 5 Bary Schwabsky, "Painting in the Interrogative Mode", in *Vitamin P: New Perspectives in Painting* (New York: Phaidon, 2003).
- 6 Clement Greenberg, "Towards a New Laocoön" (1940), in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (eds), *Art in Theory 1900-1990: A Critical Anthology of Changing Ideas* (London: Blackwell, 1992), 554-560.
- 7 Frank Stella, "The Pratt Lecture", in *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), 113.
- 8 "There's almost nothing left to say about photography because it is so obvious that photography has taken away one important part of painting: the function of portraying, depicting." Gerhard Richter, *The Daily Practice of Painting* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), 227.
- 9 Yasmine Van Pee, "Un-Natural Resources: Luc Tuymans on Fighting the Literal and Mistrusting Images.", *Modern Painters: The International Contemporary Art Magazine*, October 2007: 72-73.
- 10 Knut Ebling, "The Painting of the Men from Mars", in *Painting Pictures: Painting and Media in the Digital Age*, (eds) Annelie Lutgens, Frank Reijnders, Walter Seitter and Gijs van Tuyl (Bielefeld: Kerber Verlag, 2003), 36.
- 11 Gerhard Richter. *Kitchen Chair*, 1965, oil on canvas, 100 x 80cm, Kunsthalle, Recklinghausen, Germany.
- 12 Michael Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 1972), 147.
- 13 Russell Ferguson, *The Undiscovered Country* (Los Angeles: Hammer Museum, 2004), 23.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 114.