

SMOKE AND MIRRORS: PAINTING, ISOLATION AND TRADITION: EUROPE 2010

Michael Greaves



Figure 1. Michael Greaves, *Monumental Hoxton* (2010), oil on canvas, 74.6 x 71.6 cm.

In the cold month of July 2010 I boarded a small aircraft early in the morning at Dunedin Airport, embarking on what one might liken to a contemporary version of the 'Grand Tour,' part of the cultural 'lore' of New Zealanders' right of passage or 'OE.' I had a huge sense of anticipation. Every aspect of the trip had been considered and planned, but in that all-too-virtual way where the interface between accounts from friends, images, ideas, collections of words seem somewhat magnificent and inadequate at the same time. All of this, all the planning fades in a millisecond like the illusion of smoke and mirrors at a cheap magic show when you are confronted with the actual experience.

As the now much larger plane descended to land at Frankfurt International Airport some time early in the morning of Wednesday 14 July 2010, I saw my first European monument. It was a defining structure of the power of the twentieth century. It seemed to be breathing, belching actually. Vapour rose under power, in a very unnatural way, from the cooling towers of a nuclear power plant some 200 metres to my left; the red and white checkers of a geometrically challenged building attached to this gigantic thrown pot seemed most alien to me, just the tip of the blurring sensation of history I would encounter in the next six weeks.

What impressed me most about this introduction to Europe, reflected in its people and in its art, was exposed right then in a strange way. In this case a nuclear reactor; which would ignite historical tropes of devotion and remembrance encountered in less industrial corners of Europe. This fascinated me.

This very public and civic monument, both utilitarian and invisibly threatening, expressing a gargantuan form of fear, really reflected some of the histories of the continent. Upon reflection, I have never encountered so many expressions of implicit and explicit violence as in the galleries of Europe, and here I was considering the imposing threat of a 'thrown pot.' These contradictions engaged me more than I expected and became real considerations in the work I was going to make in Europe for a show titled "Smoke and Mirrors: Painting, Isolation and Tradition" planned for my return. Following this short introduction to Germany in transit, I began my 'Grand Tour' in London; first stop was the National Gallery.

At the National Gallery I made an effort to find *The Baptism of Christ* by Piero della Francesca. I had never seen a painting made by the godfather of perspective and I was eagerly anticipating my first 'hair-standing-on-the-back-of-my-neck-moment.'



Figure 3. Michael Greaves, "Smoke and Mirrors," installation, September 2010.



Figure 2. Michael Greaves, *What Now? What Next?* (2010), watercolour on paper; unframed, 20 x 12 cm.

The painting didn't disappoint, but it was so unlike what I had expected. It was hidden away in a dimly lit room, curated into a mini show that included the *The Arnolfini Portrait*, another incredible moment. To see these works as they are, without text, out of the page of a book, is a strangely surreal experience. The surfaces were seductive, unlike the reproductions. The painter's 'hand' was visible, even in the deft brushstrokes of the van Eyck. This was and is an important part of my engagement with painting, one that I find challenged in much New Zealand painting where the surfaces are almost 'too' pure.

Piero's work was much larger than I imagined, even though I knew and had measured out the dimensions many times, 168 x 116 cm, tempera on panel It seemed so collaged, so constructed, so unnatural. I understood Piero's method, his mathematical numerations on proportion; I just expected these to be more fluid. The real surprise of this painting, however, was constructed from Piero's over-rationalisation of the painting's application and scale. There was monumentality in this painting, an architectural order

and an iconographic status. Regardless of my geographical environment – London, Paris, Dresden, Leipzig, Prague or Berlin – the elements of Piero's painting were revisited over and over in all that I saw.

I began to see this painting reflected everywhere, in the city environs of Europe, in the spaghetti-like arterial routes entering Prague. The way Paris was ordered post-Hausmann. The way that everything is seemingly rational and proportional, based upon some invisible rule. In life, the monuments, reflecting civic ideals, are also in proportion to their place, but not to the public who observe them. There is a disproportionate scaling in the civic architecture and art objects of Europe, either greatly enlarged or small and minutely detailed. As in painting, these objects/monuments project a kind of imaginative space, contained in connectivity with narrative, history and a visual discourse. The narrative, though, is ever-changing with the interpretations and interactions the viewing public/tourists bring and reinvent daily. These spaces are both contained and reflected, in terms of what comes before in relation to what is added after, as the city space changes and shifts through time, a layering of present sensibility and devotional formulations of space. I found a connection here between the geometry of Piero and the intention of these public monuments – the connection being a collaging of elements, ordered by a rational plan, but altered in physical space that was legitimised in the imagination.

The gold and bronze architecture was static, while an ever-changing cultural and colourful collection of people somehow managed to navigate, maneuvering without seemingly even noticing or acknowledging it. The monumental, static sculptural elements of the city acted as ambivalent traffic lights and geographical place markers. Touchstones like the statues that span the Charles Bridge in Prague, the elephants at the entrance to the Berlin Zoo, and of course the Albert Memorial in London – all of which created crossing zones of cultural significance to me in my wanderings.

The work that I made for a show to be held in the Dunedin School of Art Gallery upon my return in September, was made either in response to Piero's work or in a projection of some other kind of space that I was encountering in both the painted image or the European terra firma. A strange kind of geometric space began to realise itself. There was less of a concern with the relationships and proportionalities of the objects that I was considering in the work, more of an overpainting of a kind of geometry, a connective intangible element associated with painting and painting's history. It was apparent to me after seeing Piero's work up close that his painting was a nexus of problems that on graph paper may be rationalised and pure, but in fact are far from pure – much like painting in general.

Impurities realised in seeing the Piero up close – scale, mistake in application or line, problematic colour value or disproportionate importance of object – became for me the most important considerations, above anything else. I set about painting/drawing/erasing every day, either in situ or upon reflection. I did not make preparatory studies; whatever was made during the day was important. The work existed as a single act, both a reflection and a construction, using simple and quick materials on simple and cheap media. I was concerned primarily with the



Figure 4. Michael Greaves, *The world around here is made of gold*, gold, graphite and glitter on paper; unframed, 20 x 12 cm.

relationship between the value of what I was making to that of what I was observing. The cheapness of the souvenirs I had brought back with me and the decorative embellishments that I could propose were important, while at the same time trying to render an idea of 'impossibility' in the painted works.

These works are a record of my relationships with the valued and constructed masters of Europe isolated from their tradition – a mere apparition of smoke in my view.

"Smoke and Mirrors: Painting, Isolation and Tradition" is only a beginning, a first entrance into the impurities of painting for me, illustrating the ruse inherent in the monumentality of the medium.



Figure 5. Michael Greaves, "Smoke and Mirrors," installation, September 2010.

Michael Greaves is a painter and lecturer in Painting at the Dunedin School of Art at Otago Polytechnic / Te Kura Matatini ki Otago, in Dunedin, New Zealand. His own work and research is driven by the seemingly contradictory world of the maker and the object, isolation and irrelevance, common memories and collective histories, failed utopias and relationships between seemingly uncooperative imagery. Michael holds a BA in Art History and Theory, a BFA in Painting and a postgraduate degree in teaching.