PROCESS, FREUD AND I

Steev Peyroux

Figure 1. Steev Peyroux, *Haze,* 2016, oil on canvas, 1370 x 760mm.

I sit in my studio with a coffee, take a deep breath and exhale slowly. I surrender to a sense of timelessness and consider the problems of the canvas before me. Taking up a brush, I smear, smudge and blur thick paint in subtle tonal shifts, building on chance effects that present themselves. I'm attempting to represent a particular atmospheric moment, a felt experience, which explores the indescribable relationship between visual perceptions and feelings.

An artist's process is a highly individual thing. In his 2010 book *Man with a Blue Scarf*, Martin Gayford examines the process of veteran artist Lucian Freud in great depth. As I read the book, then go to my studio and paint, I discover that I identify strongly with the figurative and material approaches of Freud's working methods. In order to articulate the ways in which this book helps me with my work, I have juxtaposed my own writing with quotes from the book, reflecting on the deep insights of an artist long considered by Gayford to be "the real thing: a truly great painter living among us."[1] Starting in November 2003, Gayford, a respected critic, writer, curator and long-time friend of Freud's, modelled for Freud, aged 81, for seven months, experiencing extended time in his studio as he worked:

> "I always thought," says LF, "that an artist's was the hardest life of all." Its rigour – not always apparent to an outside observer – is that an artist has to navigate forward into the unknown guided only by an internal sense of direction, keep up a set of standards which are imposed entirely from within, meanwhile maintaining faith that the task he or she has set him or herself is worth struggling constantly to achieve. …[2]

Back in my own studio, the bodies of water and vapour that I'm painting exert a primordial pull on the way I feel. I'm

interested in how these feelings change according to what I am looking at. I observe the same section of sea from the window of my home every day. It is in constant flux, changing utterly according to the sometimes epic play of light. These changes evoke subtle or strong responses in me, alter my mental state and, when I'm out at sea surfing, even shift my chemical balance. In fact, surfing is integral to the way I experience the subject I represent in my work. Surfing also acts as a mental cleansing, helping to maintain the quality of my consciousness in much the same way that meditation or yoga does, thus having a moderating effect in the studio on the mood swings that seem to be an unavoidable element in my process.

In Freud's studio, during a pause in work, Gayford asks Freud what the difficulties are, from his point of view, of painting a picture:

> His answer is unexpected. "One thing I have never got used to, is not feeling the same from one day to the next, although I try to control it as much as possible by working absolutely all the time. I just feel so different every day that it is a wonder that any of my pictures ever work out at all."[3]

When I take in the scale of the ocean I often contemplate how amazing it is to be human; to feel my body and hear the sounds around me and to be conscious of the mystery of my own temporary existence, of all that can't be known. As a person who is immersed in the sea on a daily basis, I explore my own experience, how I interpret what my senses tell me. I observe particular optical phenomena closely, filtering my perceptions through my hand into painted marks on the canvas. I am able to see because my eyes have focusing lenses with transparent corneas, irises that regulate light and, at the back of my eyes, retinas to convert light to neural signals that can be processed in the brain. I feel attuned to light the way that sailors are to weather, or carvers to wood. Light is what I'm working with. In my part of the world, coastal Otago, the light is changeable, sunny for ten minutes then quickly changing, constantly fluctuating – rising, setting, obscured by overcast sky, often theatrical in scale and drama.

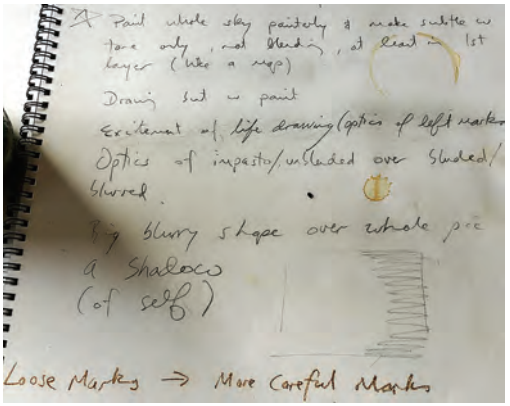
> … the painter – or a painter such as LF who spends hours, months, even years observing his subject – quite naturally records vastly more information than a camera lens can see. It is thus a matter of accumulated experience: that is, memory. The reason why everybody sees differently is that each of us perceives a given sight from the vantage point of their own past thoughts and feelings.[4]

Like all humans, I live in two worlds – the physical world and the world of human thought. The world of human thought, both conscious and unconscious, is the lens through which I see and understand the physical world. My painting of the sea shows not the sea, but the sea being looked at by me. The sight of the sea – the image my brain reads from my retina – is registered almost immediately, whereas the representation of the sight of the sea – the act of painting it – takes hours or days and refers back to many previous experiences of looking. The finished work is the result of many glances which can be seen all at once.[5]

> LF looks very closely at me, making a measuring gesture, then he turns to the canvas and puts in a mark – or, just as possibly, stops at the last moment, reconsiders and observes again. …There is an interval, however short, between the observation and the act of painting. …This process is repeated hundreds, indeed thousands, of times. Thus a painted image, certainly one by Freud, is different in nature from an instantaneous image such as a photograph. David Hockney puts it like this: the painting of him by Freud has over a hundred hours "layered into it," and with them innumerable visual sensations and thoughts.[6]

Because the faculty of sight is continuous, and colours and shapes remain relatively constant, it is easy to forget that the visual is always a result of a fleeting experience in time. A painting which represents that temporary experience presents a different view of time; it is a stationary moment in the relentless progression of life.[7] By making an instant in time static, I get to closely examine the form of the sea's appearance, which in real life is fluid and quite formless. Cézanne once put it like this: "One minute in the life of the world is going by. Paint it as it is."[8]

At some point while I'm working, I realise that I'm failing to paint the moment as it is. So I rub back all the work I've just done. Anxiety threatens to overwhelm me. Yesterday I was feeling elated at the way certain passages of paint were going on, but today those passages don't look good anymore. The painting hasn't changed; it's obvious I'm



Figures 2 & 3. Page from workbook and work in progress.

feeling differently about it, but which feeling is right, yesterday's or today's? I wonder what Lucian Freud's grandfather, Sigmund Freud, that great explorer in the world of the unconscious, would have said about how dependent my mood is on how I perceive my painting to be going, swinging from elation to despair and back again, alone in my studio.

The way I see changes. Objectivity vanishes as I become more familiar with the work, and mental stamina is required to keep going after the first excitement, through periods of low productivity, where I forget the initial impulse which started me on a particular painting. I know that I will see my work with less self-criticism and more clarity a month or two after finishing it, when it is in the context of other work in an exhibition space, rather than looking at it in my studio after working solidly on it for months. Getting feedback from viewers who tell me they have an emotional response to the work also helps me to see with more perspective, but I'm never going to see my own picture with as much objectivity as I see another artist's work. It is part of the act of creation that my psyche becomes completely entwined with my creation, and a swathe of unconscious forces influences the way that I see.

In order to trick my brain into seeing my painting as an entity with its own inner laws, rather than fixating on those elements in the picture where I didn't quite achieve what I intended, and to short-circuit the investment my ego has in the work being 'good,' I look at my painting in the mirror, turn it upside down, or hang it inside the house for a while. The German artist, Gerhardt Richter, trains his assistants not to make comments about his work which may influence the way he sees it, and hangs his paintings in his private gallery for three months before deciding if they are good enough to exhibit publicly.[9]

Freud talks about needing to find the courage to simply keep on trying. When Gayford asks him how, Freud replies

> "Not painting in a stale or predictable way…if one didn't vary from day to day one could not be what one always wants to be – exceptionally daring."[10]

I'm still feeling despondent about my painting – but then I remember, being on the edge of control is often when I do my best work; when I am exploring a new technique or trying an idea out, not knowing whether it will work or not, and using particular methods to solve issues which get in the way of realising the idea. It feels like walking in the dark, often feeling clumsy, but then chancing upon something magic and new to me. This feeling of not knowing what I'm doing is counterbalanced against the things I do know. Super-controlled marks are contrasted against chance effects. An interplay is set up between my intuition and my logical mind, allowing space in between for my imagination.

The uncertainty of being on unfamiliar ground can create anxiety; however, it is this uncomfortable feeling that

Figure 4. Steev Peyroux, *Alchemy,* 2016, oil on canvas, 1200 x 1200mm.

Figure 5. Steev Peyroux, *Formation,* 2015, oil on canvas, 1200 x 1200mm.

opens the possibility of discovering something new. I don't always like feeling uncomfortable, but it seems to be a necessary part of my endeavours. My ideal state of mind when painting would be a Zen-like calm. I aim for that state and sometimes manage to achieve it for blissful periods. A Chinese mantra from the Dao Di Ching says, "By letting go it all gets done."[11] I start on the painting again, allowing things to emerge out of the faint tones on the canvas, looking for that first little sign of presence.

> I tell LF that I met Damien Hirst the other day. … Hirst is musing about paint just at the moment, and has told me his reflections on this perennial medium. "I decided that a layer of paint on the surface of a canvas is just the same as an object in the room. You know, the deliciousness of it, the thing that makes you love the painting, is a physical thing, the building up of layers. You want to eat it, as if it were ice cream or something."[12]

I decide to make my painting about the act of applying paint, to fashion it in ways that can only be accomplished with paint and loaded brush, to explore the material effects of particular processes, leaving evidence of the work's creation.

> … the picture is – like any work of art, in words, paint, stone or any other medium – an entity that follows its own inner laws. … "You are here," he says firmly, "to help it." The implication, surely correct, is that the portrait and its needs come first.
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> In 1954 LF wrote that "the picture in order to move us must never merely remind us of life, but must acquire a life of its own, precisely in order to reflect life."[13]

In my studio I have a startled moment where I realise that, in focusing on the material effects of the paint, what I've done feels right, and suddenly my painting feels effortless, easy. I have discovered that I can treat my subject as if it were abstract, thus setting up an interplay between the abstract elements and the representational content. From further away the work represents familiar images of sea and sky, whereas up close the marks lose their meaning and dissolve into the abstractness of colour and geometry and, like the sea, become formless; nature in its greatest state of potential. I examine the atmospheric moment with a musical attention to mood and movement, following my instincts to allow things to happen that I didn't consciously intend, or wouldn't normally leave, thus encouraging my unconscious to come through. I feel like I am painting space itself, painting almost nothing, so that the way I apply the paint becomes even more important.

> Cautiously, at the end of the sitting, I edge towards the question of how LF feels the picture is going. … LF explains that, for him, each painting is an exploration into unknown territory. … "Personally, I can only regard any enquiry about how a picture is coming on as a particularly irritating sort of humorous remark."[14]

Throughout my life I have worked hard on my technical skills, particularly life drawing, printmaking and, more recently, on developing the ability to paint in many different ways. I feel more powerful when I have many methods at my disposal. Earlier in life, when I was a dancer, I liked having command of many different movement techniques: contemporary, classical, Indian and many other forms. I used to dare myself to risk losing balance on stage; this had the effect of freeing me up to try things out, sometimes spontaneously, and to take risks with my work. Freud too has a device in his working methods which he uses to challenge himself:

> I ask about his habit of leaving the white patches of bare canvas, which could easily be filled in. "It makes it more difficult to get the tones, which somehow helps me. I like to think that everything in the picture is changeable, removable and provisional. Leaving the white patches helps me to feel that."[15]

The intensity of attention I pay to my subject is a result of my desire to make a picture that is in some way concerned with truth; that contains a certain quality of reality, whether the form it takes is semi-abstract or not. The painted marks I make are always functional, always recording information. I paint something loosely, then more carefully, striving to represent my subject with a forceful sense of believability, of 'truthiness,' thus placing the image into an equilibrial tension with the physical presence of the paint layers on the canvas's surface. I try to be aware of the individuality of everything; the most ubiquitous things, such as foam patterns on a sea's surface, have their own characteristics and do not need to be stylised, idealised or generalised. In this way I try never to invent anything – the subject, as it is, is the drama in my pictures.

> Nearly half a century ago, in his 1954 Encounter article, LF wrote some words that suggest an exact likeness is not and cannot be the point of portraiture. "The artist who tries to serve nature is only an executive artist. And, since the model he so faithfully copies is not going to be hung up next to the picture, since the picture is going to be there on its own, it is of no interest whether it is an accurate copy of the model."[16]

I like to think of a gallery exhibition as a testing ground, not a final point. This focuses me on the act and the experience of painting, as opposed to a finished product. Occasionally a picture is finished abruptly, but more often I keep working the painting, pushing it further and further. Telling whether a painting is finished is a tricky business because there is no agreed standard of what counts as completed. The way I leave a painting is what the viewer sees, at once and always, and not the process that it went through. Gayford proposes that

> finished means something like "complete as a work of art according to its own internal laws," and that is a difficult matter to judge. … I ask if he is pleased or sorry when a picture is finished, since for him, too, it must constitute an era in his life. "I don't think I have either response. I'm more worried in case it isn't really finished."[17]

Alone, painting in my studio, there is just a faint shuffling in my ears, the rushing of my blood, as I work at peak intensity. What I'm doing on the canvas is the trace of my self; of how I experience the subject; of my visual sensations; of time. The picture feels like a reflection of my mind. It's a powerful drug, and suddenly I'm light-headed and deeply satisfied with my work. And then the process starts again.

The son of Canterbury artist Ann Wilson, **Steev Peyroux** was involved in art from an early age. After graduating from the Dunedin School of Art in 1987, he studied dance in Melbourne and toured worldwide with the Meryl Tankard Australian Dance Theatre. Peyroux then returned to Dunedin, and to visual art, taking up a technician position at the art school. He is drawn strongly to the powerful geography of Otago's coastline. He exhibits annually in Dunedin at The Artist's Room, and shows nationally and internationally in various art awards and exhibitions.

1 Martin Gayford, *Man with a Blue Scarf: On Sitting for a Portrait by Lucian Freud* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2010), 7.

2 Ibid., 130-131.

3 Ibid., 72.

4 Ibid., 116.

5 See John Berger, "Drawn to that Moment," in *John Berger: Selected Essays*, ed. Geoff Dyer (London: Bloomsbury, 2001), 419-23. Originally pub. in *New Society* magazine, 1976.

6 Gayford, *Man with a Blue Scarf*, 145.

7 Berger, "Drawn to that Moment."

8 Ibid., 41.

9 Joshua Namdev Hardisty, *How to Paint Like Gerhard Richter*, 2014, www.youtube.com/watch?v=3ZWis1o9yhc.

10 Gayford, *Man with a Blue Scarf*, 72-3.

11 Mantra from the Dao Di Ching, Donna D'Cruz, *New Year, New You – Letting Go*, guided meditation audio, 2014, https://soundcloud.com/rasa_music/letting-go-meditation-alpha.

12 Gayford, *Man with a Blue Scarf*, 95-6.

13 Ibid., 107-8.

14 Ibid., 64-5.

15 Ibid., 199.

16 Ibid., 48.

17 Ibid., 141-2.