

## PRAXIS, MEMORY, THINGS AND THE NEARBY: PAINTING REPRESENTATION

Michael Greaves

*Painting is like thinking: it ends only in an arbitrary, artificial sense, in the way that a thought reaches its fulfilment only to lead to another thought in formation. A completed verbal statement entails a subsequent one.*

Richard Shiff<sup>1</sup>

The distinction between objects and things, and between words and objects, is inherent to painting discourse, as is the method by which those objects and things are realised in the medium of paint. When a viewer of a painting is presented with something that is unknown, they quickly generate a plausible association or memory to accommodate the strangeness of the experience. In this process, the viewer draws the unknown into themselves, into their history of experiences, in order to legitimate it. In doing so, they re-order the hierarchy of sight to include resemblances or associations, that in some sense exist nearby to what it is that they are viewing. This 'nearby thing' might or might not be there at the same time. It might be a memory, a colour, an impression, but it is certain that in this process the viewer becomes an active agent in the imaginative process that is painting.

I have always found the kind of painting that presents a projected, realisable space full of the world to be wanting, slightly askew of what it is trying to present – and for the longest time I would find myself feeling quite let down, trying to understand the importance of such a picture. For me, this 'window to the world' idea of painting, a mode so similar to the ubiquitous photograph, does not accurately present the position that painting occupies, although it was the pathway and the projected road to a successful painting promoted during my early years, emphasising correctness to the representation of sight. Painting for me was always a kind of conversation between what is there and what is intended to be there.

Thomas Scheibitz (b. 1968) presents associations and resemblances, or the double, the second nature of things, in his paintings and sculpture. Scheibitz often uses both found materials and images not as a direct copy or facsimile, but as an informant or as a bridge to something else. He collates and investigates these elements, bringing them together or laying them side by side or on top of one another to inform the process of his painting. This approach represents a consideration of the relationships between objects and things and their transposition into paint or material; it unfolds the connections between word and thing and object and thing. Scheibitz defines his collected information and motivations as being "necessary to working;" he asserts that he can never use one thing one hundred percent, that he needs, "three, four, five things, images that are nearby (close to each other in more than physical ways), and then I have to translate the number five and six ... to be nearby an invention."<sup>2</sup> Scheibitz puts this another way in explaining that his "point of departure has always been that he can only make a painting by placing it in an artificial world."<sup>3</sup>

The term "artificial world," a second or parallel world to what we experience as "nature," is crucial to understanding painting. Artificial worlds seem somehow contained within the frame that is painting. The frame is an important element in painting, whether it is obviously employed or is just the edge of the support, as it marks the disjuncture

between the painting and the world outside of it. What this kind of process foregrounds is an exuberantly faked semiosis in which individual signs, rather than taking their place within an intelligible sign-system, seem 'orphaned' and unstable. Beate Söntgen<sup>4</sup> describes this as a kind of opacity that negates the object of painting to become like a window on the world; it "denies its own mediatory achievement and makes itself transparent for the world which comes into view within its frame."<sup>5</sup> It also identifies the material aspects of painting, so that these are not confused with a projected space. It also draws attention to the idea that in painting many memories and experiences are in play, in bricolagic play, unravelling, asserting, forming, relating and describing things which are at once familiar and unreadable.

In Scheibitz's work *90 Elements* (2007),<sup>6</sup> he proposes a question relating to the relationship between the thing and the object and the frame of the painting. The work presents a collection of disordered, box-like shapes placed one atop another. They number much less than the 90 alluded to in the title. The box-like shapes are rendered in a shallow pictorial space and, although there is an attempt at a perspectival registration, the objects seem to evade a literal reading.

This dysfunction, and a concomitant visual breakdown, are often used in Scheibitz's studio outputs. He wilfully orders objects in a way which is anti-hierarchical and discordant to draw attention to the fragmented elements of a work and its relations to how it is experienced. *90 Elements* references a collection of associated (but disassociated) elemental materials that make up the stuff that we have in the world, the building blocks of our physical reality. Essentially there are 118 such elements, the known periodic table. Such compartmentalisation, and the component nature of the construction of a painting and of the world, is key to my own research. The creating of a process of nearness is key to this uncertainty. Scheibitz collects and presents relatable elements of discrete objects in an exploded way, in which each object attends to its usual presentation, in part, but proposes a kind of close resemblance that also evades recognition.

In his work *Essay* (2008),<sup>7</sup> the title also alludes to a format for finding a solution to a problem that is not particularised. Is this an essay on the ways in which planes coalesce to form an object that has the use of containing something, or is this a way of dictating separate elements in order to find a symbiosis of understanding in their connections to form a paragraph of sorts, a moment in how we order the world around us to make sense of it?

The painting of Mark Grotjahn (b. 1968) also oscillates between sculpture and paint, and he is another artist who regularly mines the tropes of visual representation to deploy shifts and rearticulations in how things are presented, drawing attention to the significances of relationship, context and value in pictorial means. Grotjahn identifies his position in the history of painting not as a way of referring to his authority or relevance, but to draw attention to a state of continuous movement, the things that have come before and process the present.<sup>8</sup> In defining his historical position, he draws on the interplay and dialogue between the subject and the object, the viewer and the domain of pictorial representation. Grotjahn's output since the late 1990s and early 2000s forks into two distinct bodies of work. One group is the 'butterfly' paintings, that open up ideas around pictorial language and bi-optic perspective-like shifts. The second group is the 'face' paintings which propose relationships with the 'primitive' and the gestural.



Figure 1. Michael Greaves, 2017, *Target Space*, oil on linen, 37 x 31 cm.

In Grotjahn's butterfly paintings,<sup>9</sup> a series of works that oscillate around a central theme of fan-like forms extending from a central reflective axis which is not symmetrical, the pictorial space that operates, along with the signal to the image in the title, suggests that one is observing something that has an object status in the world. The object is similar to a butterfly, wings outstretched and seen from above. After this initial realisation has passed, it becomes clear that there is an aberration in the way the wing shapes fit together in the context of pictorial space, and that there is a divergence in the single vanishing point which is multiplied into a second, one for each wing. The painting becomes both an investigation of the formal methodology of painting and an investigation of the bi-optic nature of vision. Via the symmetrical and decorative object that we know and have named 'butterfly,' Grotjahn calls into question a simple apprehension of this object via the unstable act of vision. The figurative dimension of the painting and its application act as a foil to the more pressing notion of both the recognisability and rightness of the pictorial presentation. We are forced to use memory to enact the presentation before us, and this leads to unexpected folds in the pictorial space.

Grotjahn often uses this strategy in his paintings, one of possessing a relation to something else in order to lay bare the object of looking. In his 'face' paintings, another series that repeats a certain motif, a representation of a face and facial features associated with non-Western representations of face,<sup>10</sup> attention is drawn to the materiality of the construction. Referring to the layers of code in which the human is represented to the world outside, Grotjahn builds a cardboard relief structure, which is then completed with paint. This process embodies and presents the gesture and its representation in simultaneous contrast. Almond shapes reference the eye and the mouth, features which are relatable but in their superficial make-up become part mark and part object at the same time. This duality of the represented and the position of what it is both identifies a separation and calls for a unitary reading. In his book about TS Eliot, *Words Alone*, Denis Donoghue addresses the ambiguity of the "voice" or "point of view" of Eliot's early poems – the question of "who is speaking this poem?" – by referring to surrealist and symbolist painting, and what Marshall McLuhan called the "juxtaposition without copula:" the establishing on a single canvas of "two or more points of force."<sup>11</sup>

A canvas is to be interpreted as "a field of force without official syntax, a closed system, a closed system resistant to translation."<sup>12</sup> The question of who is speaking within a painting, and then of who is being spoken to and in what language, has always interested me in terms of my approach to the pictorial subject of painting. The painting as the pictorial image references a number of things outside of the actuality of painting. This 'outside' has shifted and changed states, continents and languages over the years, decades and centuries after the Quattrocento.

In my most recent body of work, "Excessive Memory," I have investigated the relationships between the momentary, un-connected glimpse of objects, the things nearby,<sup>13</sup> the component things that coalesce to form an object, be they ideas about perspective, colour, or impasses between structure and form. These are the voices inherent in painting, the voices which Schebitz and Grotjahn use, among others, to make sense of the ways in which they negotiate the visual world. I collapse these fragments, the nearby associations, onto the same surface with their more realised forms, the objects that form in this world. This



Figure 2. Michael Greaves, *Untitled*, 2017, oil on linen, 182 x 137 cm.

collapse presents both the referent and the nearby in a conversation, one which unsettles the predicted order of recognition and identifies the kind of bricolage play that is always in operation to make sense of the world.

In her novel *The Biographer's Tale*, AS Byatt negotiates this same impasse of the object and the thing, or the nearby. "Fed up with Lacan as with deconstructions of the Wolf-Man, a doctoral student looks up at a filthy window and epiphanically thinks, I must have things. He relinquishes theory to relish the world at hand: A real, very dirty window, shutting out the sun, a thing!"<sup>14</sup> Byatt suggests a simple idea, an opening to understand the oddness of the idea of the painting.

In his book *Things*, Bill Brown uses the same differential window metaphor to probe the state change status of this window, from object to thing, and proposes a position for thinking on painting. We normally do not identify the windowpane as a 'thing' in its own right; it is there to shield us from the wind and the rain, while allowing light through and, for all intents and purposes, it must have a large degree of transparency – although tinted windows are now more common than not for other reasons. The window fulfils its function by being largely unknown to the viewer; it is transparent, we only notice it as a 'thing,' in Brown's articulation, when it becomes dirty, or its function is disturbed. Dirt draws our attention to the concrete nature of the material and the space that it occupies in the natural world. In the window, both object and thing occupy the very same space, and identifying the glass in this way defines it as an object. But what use does it have, now that it cannot perform its intended function? The thing shadows the object.<sup>15</sup> Both are made of the same material, yet only one operates according to our codes of representation. The same happens in painting when the painter presents a description of an object but in an unexpected format.



Figure 3. Michael Greaves, *Excessive Memory*, 2016, oil on linen, 93 x 80 cm.

We often overlook the 'thing' of painting, paint, when we are considering the image that the paint brings to our vision. When the painted image is disturbed, and we are forced to encounter the thing – paint, also – the way in which we comprehend the relations between the difference draws a fresh bow on the idea of painting. Cornelius Castoriadis explains that there is a need to abandon our image of representation as a "projection screen which, unfortunately, separates us the 'subject' and the 'thing,'"<sup>16</sup> as this kind of representation implies a static observance of the world. During the late modernist period of the 1950s and the 1960s in America, the voice and the language of the painter lay in the residue of their action on the field of painting, the mark that left a trace. This trace was not, as Mark Prince relates, a direct "contingent, indexical link back to the catalyst of the hand,"<sup>17</sup> but a dismissal of the usual narrative voice of painting in a pictorial form.

## A CARAFE, THAT IS A BLIND GLASS

*A kind in glass and a cousin, a spectacle and nothing strange a single hurt color and an arrangement in a system to pointing. All this and not ordinary, not unordered in not resembling. The difference is spreading.<sup>18</sup>*

In Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons* we find many examples where a word puzzle brings the signifier and the signified into an uncommon union. The connective tissue is the experience of the subject. In the instance of painting, this relationship draws significant attention to the temporality of memory in the process of making. Michael Riffaterre describes this in terms of a "word kernel,"<sup>19</sup> where a word is dry out of context, without referent – where the paint is not in the form of the object that it is trying to identify, but, as a part of the language of the medium, is nonetheless approached in this way. When the object's thingness is identified in itself, it moves into play and into the world as something else. In painting, when the modulation of colour reveals a form which becomes recognisable in itself, the mark comes into play on the same ontological level as the object.

In *Tender Buttons*, Stein is identifying the tenuous relationships between the object and the subject, the thing in the world and the ways in which we as the subject enact them. She is attempting to use the normal words used to describe something, but putting them in a different order to the one in which one might usually describe something to someone. She is problematising the order of the world via the importance of the parts. Rather than a comprehensible, complete presentation in the manner considered 'right,' Stein is taking the window, dirtying it and then trying to describe it as a piece of glass. She explains her intent in creating confusion, and her subsequent realisation of her failure to present her utterance as complete: "I made innumerable efforts to make words write without sense and found it impossible. Any human being putting down words had to make sense out of them."<sup>20</sup>

She is, in effect, collapsing the way in which the words operate in their singularity and then how they combine together in various ways to suggest complex ideas and a narrative of the thing at hand in relation to other things. She is drawing the reader into applying a filter on the presentation of information. She is asking the reader to re-organise their interactions with the words, out of the frame. Just as the painter deals with the form, or the material, both form a complex union to create the artificial world of painting, open to association and narrative.

What Stein has encountered and described are the ways in which the human subject tries to make sense of the world – the world of fractal descriptions – forming it into a cohesive whole, which can then be responded to in some kind of rational way. This has an analogy in the practice of painting, as the individual marks begin to inform an idea and realise it as image. The individual marks or passages are in this instance similar to Stein's structureless sentence, rising and falling according to the conventional word order; until the reader applies a predetermined filter to produce a realisation of the code. Scheibitz, Grotjahn and others play out Stein's locus in painting. Their strategies set out to destabilise the viewer's expectation of a system of order. While the elements are coherent in themselves, once arranged they are both unfamiliar and familiar at the same time. When the presentation of something that is familiar is not recounted in expected ways, a schism occurs, a rupture which for a brief moment leaves one in a state of wanting.



Figure 4. Michael Greaves, *Measure*, 2017, acrylic and oil on linen, 71 x 61 cm.

**Michael Greaves** is a lecturer in painting at the Dunedin School of Art. His partially abstract paintings locate a frame of vision that multiplies, to be read as something that is attempting to locate a fluctuating position of assemblage as opposed to static vision. At play in his practice are the relationships that link the object, the translations of the object and thing, and the possible ways of representing these. Michael has completed a Master of Fine Arts degree (with Distinction), due to be awarded in December 2017.

- 1 Richard Shiff, *Markus Lüpertz: Highways and Byways: A Retrospective. Painting and Sculptures from 1963 until 2009*, exhibition catalogue (Köln: Snoeck, 2009), 214.
- 2 *Salon | Thomas Scheibitz and Martin Eder: Figuration and Abstraction, 2012*, <https://youtu.be/qp2fVeff8cE> (accessed 15 Sept. 2015).
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Beate Söntgen, "Layering: On the Paintings of Thomas Scheibitz," in *Thomas Scheibitz: ONE – Time Pad*, exhibition catalogue (Köln: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2013), 249-52.
- 5 Ibid., 251.
- 6 See <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/scheibitz-90-elements-t12848>.
- 7 See [http://www.thomasscheibitz.de/index.php?cat\\_id=3](http://www.thomasscheibitz.de/index.php?cat_id=3).
- 8 Caroline Käding, "The Trapeze Artist," in *Mark Grotjahn: Circus Circus*, exhibition catalogue (Berlin: Distanz Verlag, 2014), 17.
- 9 See <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/mark-grotjahn-untitled-brown-red-purple-blue-butterfly-45-dot-64>; see also <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/mark-grotjahn-untitled-crimson-red-and-canary-yellow-butterfly-798>.
- 10 See [http://www.saatchigallery.com/artists/artpages/mark\\_grotjahn\\_face.htm](http://www.saatchigallery.com/artists/artpages/mark_grotjahn_face.htm); see also <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/mark-grotjahn-untitled-yellow-face-774>.
- 11 Mark Prince, "The Divided Self: Mark Grotjahn's 'Circus' Series," in *Mark Grotjahn: Circus Circus*, (Berlin: Distanz Verlag, 2014), 24.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 The term 'nearby' is used in this context to position an idea of a thing existing in relation to, but not quite a part of, something else, usually referring to a context of that thing/object. Scheibitz uses the term in explanation of the relations between the object and the image of the object in a photographic or similar format. His usage conjures up connotative relations between things and objects, which happen instantaneously and often shape the way that we read/see the world around us as a multitude of instances.
- 14 AS Byatt *The Biographer's Tale* (New York: Vintage 2001), 2.
- 15 Peter Schwenger, *The Tears of Things: Melancholy and Physical Objects* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 23.
- 16 Cornelius Castoriadis, cited in Bill Brown, "Thing Theory," in *Things*, ed. Bill Brown (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 6.
- 17 Prince, "The Divided Self," 24.
- 18 Gertrude Stein, *Tender Buttons: Objects, Food, Rooms* (Mineola, New York: Dover 1997), 3.
- 19 Michael Riffaterre, cited in Brown (ed.), *Things*, 3.
- 20 Gertrude Stein, "Transatlantic Interview, 1946, with Robert Bartlett Haas," in *A Primer for the Gradual Understanding of Gertrude Stein*, ed. Robert Bartlett Haas (Los Angeles: Black Sparrow, 1971), 11-35.