

Sustained Reality: From Francis Bacon to Paula Rego

The Human Clay

Our desire to express and record the reality of our being through the creation of objects stretches back with photography to the invention of the daguerreotype in 1837 and in written literature to the Mesopotamian 'Epic of Gilgamesh' some 2,500 years earlier. Painting has an even longer history, whose evidence we find preserved in the 'Cave of Swimmers' of the Gilf Kebir plateau in the Libyan Desert, which dates back 10,000 years, to the Wandjina figure paintings of Kimberley in Western Australia which are 17,000 years old and to the Lascaux cave paintings which were painted some 20,000 years ago.

The American painter R. B. Kitaj, who lived and worked in London between 1959 and 1997, believed the human figure created the foundation on which all great art is formed, and argued that art's core mission lay in unearthing the reality of significant and sacred human experience. Based upon this principle, Kitaj was approached by the Arts Council of Great Britain in 1977 to put together a selection of works by British artists for an exhibition which he titled 'The Human Clay'. Kitaj stated his criteria for selection quite simply: "*I was looking mostly for pictures of the single human form as if they could be breathed on, whereupon they would glow like beacons of where art has been and like agents of a newer life to come.*"¹ In total Kitaj selected one-hundred and five artworks by forty-eight painters for his survey; including Michael Andrews, Frank Auerbach, Francis Bacon, Adrian Berg, William Coldstream, Lucian Freud, David Hockney, Howard Hodgkin, Leon Kossoff, William Turnbull and Euan Uglow.

'The Human Clay' opened at a time when abstract painting was the fashionable and dominant trend in the art world. Abstraction was predominantly seen as an American art movement which had been championed by the New York art critic Clement Greenberg. With the emergence of painters like Willem de Kooning, Hans Hofmann, Barnett Newman, Jackson Pollock and Clyfford Still, Greenberg made a case that, after the war, the new avant-garde in art was emerging away from Europe and flourishing in the USA. Yet among many of his contemporaries, Kitaj came to see in the United Kingdom "*...artistic personalities in this small island more unique and strong and I think more numerous than anywhere in the world outside America's jolting artistic vigour. There are ten or more people in this town, or not far away, of world class, including my friends of the abstract persuasion. In fact, I think there is a substantial School of London.*"² It was this small group, and most specifically the figurative artists within it, namely, Michael Andrews, Frank Auerbach, Francis Bacon, Lucian Freud, R.

B. Kitaj and Leon Kossoff, which the art critic Michael Peppiatt came to focus on when he further distilled the essence of 'The Human Clay' exhibition by curating the 1987 show 'A School of London: Six Figurative Painters'.

Of the six 'School of London' artists, four - Auerbach, Freud, Kitaj and Kossoff - were Jewish, with only Kossoff having been actually born in London. Freud and Auerbach had moved to England from Berlin, while Bacon came from Dublin, Kitaj from Cleveland, Ohio and Andrews from Norfolk. Whilst at first appearance these six artists seem to have little in common other than a residence in London, they were all united in friendship, the exchange of ideas and a preoccupation with painting. Peppiatt describes them as holding a "*disdain for art-world vogues...*"³ whilst observing in their work a common philosophical underpinning, writing how "*...the atmosphere of guilt and human vulnerability that rises from their pictures constantly recalls the existentialist mood.*"⁴ This philosophy is one which emphasizes the uniqueness and isolation of individual experience in a godless world. It places an emphasis on the freedom of individual choice and a responsibility for the consequences of one's own action. This 'existentialist mood' appears to stem from a sense of individual alienation felt in the direct aftermath of the Second World War.

It is perhaps not surprising that the work of the post-war London figurative painters was seen at the time as unfashionable, because what comes into fashion must by definition go out of fashion. The defining agenda of this group was a wish to unearth and express in paint something of the fundamental emotional undercurrent which helps define our common human experience. In this way painting acts as a means to meditate on our feelings about a subject rather than merely describe it. It is a slow and absorbing process which enables paint to function as a metaphor for our subconscious, allowing it the capacity to make visible a world we sense inside ourselves yet cannot easily see. The result when we look at the output of the 'School of London' is a body of work which has stood the test of time, an art which endures.

The School of London painters mediated their differing views of reality either through the use of photographic source material which acted as a starting point for accessing the emotional or by direct observation from life. Where Andrews and Bacon made extensive use of photographs, the paintings of Auerbach, Freud and Kossoff are born from direct observation. The thick use of impasto by Auerbach for example, appears to be the polar opposite to the delicate and near photo-realistic handling of paint by Andrews, an artist whom he greatly admires. Peppiatt wrote of Andrews that he "*...maintains a hair's breadth between the reality and its translation into acrylic or watercolour. Within that narrow, enigmatic area, he captures appearances so accurately while subjecting them to a kind of astonished scrutiny, which conveys the mystery inherent in the very act of seeing.*"⁵ This 'astonished scrutiny' is a phrase which could easily be applied to the work of Freud, whose intense visual gaze seems to pierce the surface of observed human flesh in what Peppiatt refers to as "*...the dislocation of appearance*".⁶

Auerbach and Kossoff created a visual architecture rooted in the real world upon which they lay the stuff of paint. Andrews, Freud and Kitaj on the other-hand convey “*a sense of mystery which lies inherent in the very act of seeing.*” What unites these different approaches is a desire to prize open the shell of the human figure and peer below its surface, in an attempt to understand the nature of our fundamental human existence. This coherent act led Michael Peppiatt to write of them that “*...over the past thirty-five years a body of work has evolved in London which possesses a power and a relevance to the future of painting that would be hard to make anywhere else in the world.*”⁷

Yet British painting almost appears to have come to an end in 1987. In the years following ‘A School of London: Six Figurative Painters’, it is not only figurative painting which appears to be operating against the vogues of artistic fashion, but painting itself. In an interview with David Sylvester in October 1962, Francis Bacon had said “*...what is fascinating now is that it’s going to become much more difficult for the artist, because he must really deepen the game to be any good at all.*”⁸ This deepening of the game of art is a challenge only a handful of figurative painters appear to have developed a wish to fully engage with, painters like Tony Bevan, Christopher Le Brun, and Paula Rego, who emerged as significant artists working in the United Kingdom during the 1980’s.

A Sustained Reality

When we look at these artists we find common threads of interest with the ‘School of London’ painters. Bevan’s works for example are often concerned with the structure of the human head alone. The art critic Marco Livingstone described how “*The human head, and specifically his own, has been Tony Bevan’s most obsessive subject during the 90’s, endlessly rephrased and reinvented on a colossal scale that allows the viewer no escape from the confrontation. Of all the images at the disposal of a figurative artist it is the one with the greatest potential of speaking of the human spirit and the full range of emotions.*”⁹ This inquiry beautifully explores and develops the world of the painters who have gone before him.

Christopher Le Brun’s paintings are more romantic than Bevan’s, and appear influenced by Delacroix and early Guston. They recall the fairy tales told to us in our childhood and reconnect us with a sense of internal poetry. Bryan Robertson describes how “*Le Brun is not offering us pastiche, or a contrived neo-romanticism, but a re-definition of the past in terms of the present: the objects, events and presences of an ancient and legendary world caught up and transformed by the imaginative urgency of a painter working in the late twentieth century.*”¹⁰ He goes on to say that, “*Le Brun’s painting is often nocturnal, elegiac or valedictory; sunset or late afternoon rather than morning or sunrise; farewell and passion spent rather than physical engagement or direct encounter.*”¹¹ The paintings of Paula Rego

also contain a sense of folk tale narrative, viewed through a surrealist eye and dislocated from reality. Her figures are wrapped up in their own thoughts, contained within their own universe.

These three artists don't appear as part of an art movement or school, but represent a desire to continue an engagement with the human form through painting which Kitaj laid out in 'The Human Clay', as a means to unearth the reality of significant and sacred human experience.

By engaging in the process of painting, painters move beyond description and use paint as a means to explore and express the emotional undercurrent of human existence, this is almost always their own and makes the act of painting a deeply autobiographical process. To engage in this process requires a degree of personal removal by the artist and is where photography sometimes aids the production of contemporary work, because it offers an emotional distance from a subject. This means photographs can provide the artist with a safe starting point for returning to the source, which in turn allows the emotional response to be explored .

Kitaj wrote of this when he said "*The consequences of a detached art are very seductive ... a very high act indeed is said to transpire there, an ultimate act or moment or feeling, so independent of anything else but its paint or shape, for instance, as to give that art its very value, an incredible purity. The idea took root in Mondrian's concept of art as a 'life substitute', something apart, detached from a life out of balance.*"¹² This highlights a seeming contradiction at the heart of painting; it is attempting to be both emotionally engaged and intellectually relevant. For painters, this delicate balancing act is achieved when emotional sensitivity leads the way to the subject, and then an intellectual detachment from feelings and absorption in the process occurs when the work of painting begins.

A New Reality

Part of Kitaj's original criteria for 'The Human Clay' was to find artists who would act as "*agents of a newer life to come*". At the beginning of the 21st Century, practitioners who represent this newer life in the story of painting in Britain are emerging. They are engaged with the issues that painters have always concerned themselves with: the plasticity of paint, the balance between the rational and the intuitive and the mystery of human existence. Like the School of London painters they are highly individualistic in their approach to work, yet where the School of London artists were primarily concerned with representations of the human form, these new painters have moved their focus away from direct depictions of the figure, while the mystery of human experience remains central to their concerns. They are interested in the uncanny, the slippage of the real, what Michael Peppiatt refers to as the "*dislocation of appearance*". Through painting the non-portrait, as we may recall in Van Gogh's paintings of his empty bedroom, the human presence can be felt through its absence.

The artists who seem to be working in this new direction are artist like Gillian Carnegie, Simon Carter, Monica Metsers, Nicholas Middleton, Carol Rhodes and George Shaw.

Shaw's paintings are, like those of Carter, Metsers and Rhodes, empty of the living, and autobiographical. Shaw records the mundane and overlooked and finds poetry in the everyday landscapes of his own suburban surroundings. Some of his most famous images depict the two square miles of Coventry which constitute the Tile Hill housing estate where he grew up. This loving obsession for a limited geographical area recalls Constable's paintings of the Dedham Vale, Kossoff's representations of London and Monet's paintings of his gardens at Giverny. Like Shaw, Simon Carter limits most of his paintings to a seven mile stretch of coast in his native Essex which lies between Holland on Sea and Walton on the Naze. This physical constraint is itself part of the narrative which forms his meditations on our material presence within the physical world and highlights the idea that what is most personal is also that which is most universal.

The youngest artist featured in this exhibition is Monica Metsers who was born in 1981. Metsers geography is even more restricted than Shaw's and Carter's, as she never has to leave her studio. Metsers enigmatic paintings begin when she remodels children's toys. Broken and then re-fashioned into peculiar landscapes, she photographs the results and paints from the photographs. This return to childhood through an act of destructive manipulation has an unsettling and compelling effect which recalls in some way the paintings of Max Ernst. In her work, Metsers draws out the idea explored by psychoanalysts like D. W. Winnicott and Marion Milner that play is the birth place for creative acts, a place where a mirror world to the real one is made and controlled, a safe world which represents the real but is not of it.

After so many years of artistic human production, and in an age which, Post-Duchamp, is comfortable viewing readymades, installations, photography and time-based media, what could be left to say by the artist who wishes to paint a picture? The answer appears to be a desire to return to the origins of creative practice, a desire to find again that which is original. Where photography has the ability to freeze a fleeting moment with dispassion, and film create the illusion of capturing the essence of time itself to hold it prisoner like a bird in a cage, painting distils time into object. For the painter, time is substance, felt both fast and slow, an element we experience through our emotions. In this way, paint has the capacity to make visible a world we sense inside ourselves yet cannot see, to act as a metaphor for our subconscious selves.

Robert Priseman, 2012

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- ¹ Catalogue preface to *The Human Clay*, Arts Council of Great Britain, 1976
- ² Catalogue preface to *The Human Clay*, Arts Council of Great Britain, 1976
- ³ Catalogue essay to *A School of London: Six Figurative Painters*, The British Council, 1987, p10
- ⁴ Catalogue essay to *A School of London: Six Figurative Painters*, The British Council, 1987, p8
- ⁵ Catalogue essay to *A School of London: Six Figurative Painters*, The British Council, 1987, p11-12
- ⁶ Catalogue essay to *A School of London: Six Figurative Painters*, The British Council, 1987, p 12
- ⁷ Catalogue essay to *A School of London: Six Figurative Painters*, The British Council, 1987, p7
- ⁸ David Sylvester, *Interviews with Francis Bacon*, Thames and Hudson, First published 1975, 2002 edition, p. 29
- ⁹ Marco Livingstone, *In the Spirit Beneath the Skin*,
http://tonybevan.com/Tony_Bevan_Marco_Livingstone_essay.html, 1998
- ¹⁰ Bryan Robertson, Catalogue Introduction, Marlborough Fine Art,
http://www.christopherlebrun.co.uk/newsite/texts/bryan_robertson/, 1994
- ¹¹ Bryan Robertson, Catalogue Introduction, Marlborough Fine Art,
http://www.christopherlebrun.co.uk/newsite/texts/bryan_robertson/, 1994
- ¹² Catalogue preface to *The Human Clay*, Arts Council of Great Britain, 1976