

# 21<sup>st</sup> Century British Painting

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 El Castillo cave paintings in Cantabria, Spain, which were painted some 40,000 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.”*<sup>i</sup> 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.”*<sup>ii</sup> 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...*"<sup>iii</sup> 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.*"<sup>iv</sup> 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 horrors 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 who 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.*"<sup>v</sup> 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*".<sup>vi</sup>

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 veneer of human experience and peer below its surface, in an attempt to understand the nature of our fundamental 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*".<sup>vii</sup> 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.*"<sup>viii</sup> This deepening of the game of art is a challenge only a handful of painters at the time 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.

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 21<sup>st</sup> Century, practitioners who represent this newer life in the story of painting in Britain are emerging; artist like Matthew Krishanu, Ben Cove, Alison Pilkington, Sue Kennington, Dan Hays, Nathan Eastwood, Simon Carter, Ehryn Torrell and Barbara Howey. They are artists 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. They are interested in the uncanny, the slippage of the real, what Michael Peppiatt refers to as the "*dislocation of appearance*". Yet something significant has changed – something which we cannot ignore, and that is the context of the digital environment which these new painters are working in and which they relate themselves to. The age of smart phones, broadband and social media which didn't exist before the 21<sup>st</sup> century, yet which now informs, shapes and has fundamentally altered the way we work and interact with each other.

In this new digital age, after so many centuries of artistic human production, and in a time which, Post-Duchamp, appears to be at its most comfortable viewing readymades, installations, photography and time-based media, what could be left to say by artists who wish to paint? The answer appears to be a desire to return to the origins of creative practice, a desire to find again that which is original and connect with our human experience. 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, 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.

For a painter working at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the original point of departure, the moment in time that is perhaps most useful to return to is 1936, for this is the year when Walter Benjamin wrote his seminal essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. In this he argued that the "sphere of authenticity is out-side the technical" which makes the original artwork independent of the copy. He went on to argue that in the act of reproduction something is removed from the original by this change in context. This he described as the "aura" of the work which he defined by "its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be."

It was formed, Benjamin wrote, in an effort to describe a theory of art that would be “useful for the formulation of revolutionary demands in the politics of art.” Up until this point, Benjamin felt that the traditional art forms of painting and sculpture had been produced, viewed and consumed exclusively by a ruling elite. With the advent of photographic means of reproduction however, the doors were opened for the democratization of art, and what was lost in the facsimile of the original was more than compensated for in a new egalitarianism. John Berger expanded on these ideas in his 1972 essay and television series *Ways of Seeing*, in which he outlined a theory that modern means of production have destroyed the authority of art, that “For the first time ever, images of art have become ephemeral, ubiquitous, insubstantial, available, valueless, free.”

And so perhaps we can see that the demise of painting as a significant art form in Britain post 1987 really has its seeds in 1972 with Berger’s assertion of the value of the ephemeral to ‘all’ over a perceived exclusivity of paintings by a ‘bourgeois’ few, for a ‘bourgeois’ few.

This has appeared to become increasingly true with the rise of the digital age in the 21st century. However, what Benjamin and Berger couldn’t foresee was the adoption of the mass media by advertisers, multi-national businesses and political parties as a means to manipulate and present their key messages for the promotion of free-market capitalism. These messages are presented to us through broadcasting and publishing channels and appear to offer up conflicting views on the economy, war on terror, celebrity culture and the celebration of wealth in a time of mass unemployment, food banks and social poverty. In doing this, the mass media stimulates a sense of unease; a feeling of anomie. This appears to be resulting in a fragmentation of collective identity and a perception of social alienation amongst many groups and individuals. This sense of individual isolation shares much in common with the feelings of post-war existentialism which Michael Peppiatt observed in the ‘School of London’ painters, yet it has not been brought on by a collapse of faith in the integrity of our large social structures and their inability to serve us in the wake of world war, but has instead been induced by a feeling of alienation centred around a proliferation of choice and contradictory messages offered up by the mass media. It is a theory that was first illustrated by the French sociologist Émile Durkheim in his influential book *Suicide* (1897).

It is within this context that an increasing number of artists are returning to the “aura” of the authentic art object and claiming it as their own. In doing this they are utilising many traditional genres which we might broadly see as falling into three loose categories: New Realism, Surrealism and Abstraction. Predominantly we are finding that the ‘New Realists’ are commandeering images they find on the internet, in newspapers, magazines and from their mobile phones. They are then reflecting the mass-media back on itself. In painting what they see in the mass media these artists are choosing to slow down the speed of engagement, in order that they can develop a deeper understanding on the nature of the subject and how they themselves ‘feel’ about it. In fact this is what all the painters today are engaged in because painting is, by its very nature, a labour intensive undertaking. This time-consuming act makes a painting by turns an act of meditation which yields a sense of consideration

upon the completed art object which re-processes the ephemeral throw-away ideas prevalent today, into an item of profound contemplation.

In this context, we can begin to see that painting is now no longer the voice of the bourgeois speaking to itself as Benjamin once saw it. It has instead been requisitioned for the 21st century by artists like Katherine Russell, Wayne Clough and Nicholas Middleton who draw source material directly from the news media in order to create paintings which carry a social commentary. It is as if the landscape they see and picture is no longer the physical environment of earth, sea and sky, beloved of Turner and Constable, but is instead a world of digital noise and confusion which they wish to put the brakes on, in the hope that we might gain a real insight into what we are all looking at as a society. We see this in the work of Barbara Howey who sources images from the internet so that she can re-connect to her own personal history or Nathan Eastwood who uses his mobile phone to surreptitiously photograph people in working class environments in order to conceive paintings which for him represent a socialist solidarity.

As well as this resurgent fascination in realism we are also witnessing a significant rise of interest in the narratives of abstraction and surrealism. Here we see the creation of 'pure' art objects which don't wish to engage directly with the mass media at all, but instead wish to stand apart from it. Artists like Pen Dalton, Terry Greene, Sue Kennington, Julian Brown and Susan Gunn are absorbing themselves with the conversations laid down in 20<sup>th</sup> century abstraction and creating new ideas and physical expressions which broadly revolve around 'process driven', 'gestural' and 'structural' painting. In doing so they are finding new ways to take the dialogue of painting forward, whilst new surrealists who include Simon Burton, Paul Galyer, Iain Andrews, Monica Metsers and Alison Pilkington are all pursuing highly individualistic and idiosyncratic approaches to their work which 'deepen the game' painters like Bacon, Nash and Penrose began mid last century. And somehow all these painters - realists, abstractionists and surrealist - as diverse as they are, share something in common; they compose paintings which meditate on the nature of what it is to be human in a complex world. They occupy a place in opposition to the aesthetics of advertising, designer labels and the politics of 'spin' and instead create art for a meditation on the reality of what is significant and sacred in shared human experience. They often work modestly from their garden sheds, garages and spare bedroom studios - and they are the very painters who Ron Kitaj, if he were alive today, would have sort out for a new 'Human Clay' exhibition. These artists and the many more who are working across the country now are beginning to act as the "*agents of a newer life to come*". They are the artists who are moving forward with what painting can do and what it can represent, and they are doing it by creating real objects for an unreal world.

Robert Priseman, June 2015

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- <sup>i</sup> Catalogue preface to *The Human Clay*, Arts Council of Great Britain, 1976
- <sup>ii</sup> Catalogue preface to *The Human Clay*, Arts Council of Great Britain, 1976
- <sup>iii</sup> Catalogue essay to *A School of London: Six Figurative Painters*, The British Council, 1987, p10
- <sup>iv</sup> Catalogue essay to *A School of London: Six Figurative Painters*, The British Council, 1987, p8
- <sup>v</sup> Catalogue essay to *A School of London: Six Figurative Painters*, The British Council, 1987, p11-12
- <sup>vi</sup> Catalogue essay to *A School of London: Six Figurative Painters*, The British Council, 1987, p 12
- <sup>vii</sup> Catalogue essay to *A School of London: Six Figurative Painters*, The British Council, 1987, p7
- <sup>viii</sup> David Sylvester, *Interviews with Francis Bacon*, Thames and Hudson, First published 1975, 2002 edition, p. 29