

Surface and the Becoming-Body of Painting; A short essay about the recent work of Sean Penlington

The visitor walks into the Gallery and the body of the painted surface immediately invites the body of the viewer to occupy that same space; to come up close and inspect the ins and outs of the material surfaces, to move around and take in the installation at a distance, looking across, looking down, catching sight of a fragment here and another there out of the corner of the eye and then round again – building up a picture of each work from a series of perspectives; a picture revealed through the physicality of looking.

Take, for example, *Problem Painting #4*; on closer inspection a painted scrap of paper is attached in a seemingly impromptu and temporary fashion across the discontinuous surface of a timber frame. The body of ‘painting’ is opened up; literally as the boundary of the surface becomes permeable to the gaze which looks through its gaps and tries to grasp it from behind - and imaginatively, for it is as if the fact of a once-viscous material adhering to a surface (after all, the limit of paintings’ technology) is figured by the stickiness of the tape precariously attaching one painted surface to another.

The sticking of notes or fragments of images/writing is characteristic of other recent works whose surfaces mimic the noticeboard where seemingly unrelated things come together, not in acts of composition, but as instances of temporary visibility which compete with one another for attention. After certain material limitations have been established (conscious decisions about size, scale, materials and support) it is as if everything was made up on the spot; an impulsive, hands-on approach which juxtaposes motifs made from ready-made collage elements as well as from crude and rapidly applied paint, with humour and ambiguity; slight events rather than monumental triumphs.

In other works such as *Q...Z* (2013) and *Droop* (2013) the inclusion of extraneous material is extended. The physical line of the beads or rope transgress the physical boundary of paintings’ edges, no longer collaged planes that obliterate/double the picture’s surface but instead physical objects that invite a reciprocal hands-on response in the viewer who is (almost, but not quite) invited to catch hold of the painting; an illusory sensation not so much for the eye but an invitation to the body.

These more recent works address the viewer in the space of looking, as a mobile body; an idea explored in recent exhibitions, notably the Chelsea MA Graduate Show (2013) and in the mixed show *Embrace* at Fort Gallery (2014). Documentation of the latter installation shows the work *Unbelievably Free* (2014) somewhat “out of reach” high up near the ceiling; out of reach, not because the viewer wants to stand in front of it and inspect its surface square on but because the painting feels physically out of reach; as if the hand wants to touch the object in an act of verification.

This play with physical installation and encounter as an element of the work is witnessed in the example of *56...7* (2013) which was displayed on the wall at the Chelsea MA Show but moved to the floor in its more recent display at International 3. This horizontal orientation of the painted surface reinforces the idea that these works seek to engage with a mode of vision that includes the ‘carnal’ (the space that our bodies occupy); to accommodate ‘...the impossible caesura between the visible (vertical) and the bodily (horizontal)...’ as Rosalind Krauss puts it.¹

¹ Y-A Bois & R *Formless: A User’s Guide* (New York, 1997) p 26-27

A preoccupation with the body is not new in Penlington's work. Paintings such as *Carnival (after Bruegal)* (2011), *Mr C* (2010), *Fools Feast* (2011) and *Comedy Inferno* (2010), rather than inviting the body of the viewer into the space of the painting, depict the body variously fragmented, masked, ridiculed. These works explicitly refer to Bakhtinian notions of the Carnavalesque and the imagery of the grotesque body.

'The grotesque body...is a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body. Moreover, the body swallows the world and is itself swallowed by the world...' ²

It is as if concepts associated with carnival are used as a means of engendering a specific relation between painting and artist, painting and viewer. In these earlier works ambiguous and fragmented images of the grotesque body are inscribed into the roughly painted surface. This is the body depicted as becoming other than itself: becoming a fragmented inanimate object in *Pink on Grey* (2011) and *Comedy Inferno* (2010)) and becoming animal in *Carnival (after Bruegal)* (2011).

However, the strategy of depiction is transformed in later works such as *Q...Z* into one that experiments the idea of transformation at the level of the actual fragmented body of the painting. In this example the painting not only dissolves its boundaries with the world outside to become other than itself (becoming 'swallowed by the world') but the 'ready-made' element repeats this in the other direction (as it were); ceasing to be what it once was to become an anarchic act by which the painting inversely 'swallows the world'.

If the importance of the notion of carnival for creative practice lies in its powers of renewal and regeneration, which can only happen through the suspension of hierarchy, rank and order, then what is at stake for the artist is to create and operate in such a 'second world' (as Bakhtin calls carnival). In other words to create a chaotic space in which 'all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract'³ is lowered to the material level (exemplified by the image of the grotesque body). By 'breaking ranks' with an established order the conditions of possibility are created for the act of betrayal and 'for a journey into the unknown'⁴.

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Images of Sean Penlington's paintings can be seen at: www.seanpenlington.com

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² Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Indiana, 1984) p317

³ *Ibid* p19

⁴ Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* ((London, 1985) p87