

The Show is in two parts.

I will begin with very recent work.

I've been thinking about the activity of painting, and how it continues for me and as a tradition, for a long time. A painting has to start somewhere. To even think of making a painting is to be already within a certain tradition. Material choices must be made but a painting begins with a motivation somewhere else in the imagination, within the context of an on-going practice but also within the context of a life lived.

The title for the Show is very specific and expresses a current focus. Some of Caravaggio's paintings were shown at the National Gallery at the end of last year. I was interested in his paintings for reasons too various too mention. For other reasons (equally as various) there has been an emerging feeling that I wanted to make paintings differently.

How does admiration work itself into one's own painting?

What does it mean to make painting in direct relation to the work of someone else?

I chose one painting by Caravaggio that is in the Contarelli Chapel in the church of San Luigi dei Francesi in Rome which is of Saint Matthew and the Angel – *The Inspiration of St Matthew* - on either side there are two others and a lot of Baroque interior. It's a relatively simple composition by Caravaggio's standards. There is an angel that defies gravity at the top, a moment of interruption as Matthew writes in his book and an instability in relation to the ground as Matthew leaps up in astonishment. That's a basic narrative description. I've never been to this Chapel to stand in front of the painting. It is not an easel painting but was made for a specific place. Different from those shown at the National Gallery which were painted with a less certain future.

The work in the front Gallery was made in relation to that image. The paintings speak of relation between an image of a painting by one artist and my own activity of picture making. That relation I have described as a process of diagramming.

A Diagram

Here the diagram is a generative device. The process of diagramming gives visibility to the unseen, the unnoticed – not objects/identities but forces. Before I began this work in the front gallery I did many drawings, paintings and collage in response to the image of Saint Matthew. Relationships and forces unfolded through a working process, different materials discovering different, latent structures. I had ideas for possible diagrams: of invisible gravitational forces, of the shadows as spaces of the unseen, of the gaze and of touch, of the time of the event (shock, chaos, movement), of drama and the movement of desire, of the painting in the space of the chapel (or rather how I imagine that to be from my reproduction), of the socio-economic-cultural context, which I have begun to learn something about – forces which complicate the division between the heavenly (spiritual), the intellectual and the bodily (the earth).

The functioning of forms become threads pulled out and rewoven. Verbs rather than nouns. The angel is a mediator, a messenger uttering words defying gravity, articulating the light and space of the heavens. Saint Matthew is a figure who connects the earth and heaven – twisting – *through a metonymic connection this becomes a dance and a memory of Andy Warhol's dance diagram*. A walk across the surface.

The more I drew and gained familiarity with the image the more I felt the sensation of the different zones. Perhaps it's a map of my own body – a head in the clouds, the event of the art work as an encounter that shocks because it can never be expected as it appears. The impossibility of writing in the face of such an event and the unsettling, precarious state that knocks off balance the stability of certainty. Saint Matthew as a diagram of the artist. But this is to play with the narrative as if it were a metaphor – one thread or line of flight that finds its path in new materials, new concepts and vocabularies of art practice. There are many more threads or foldings to be unfolded and refolded with other forces not through any logical justification but only through the desire to do something. The diagram as performative (using my body) rather than representational. A process of repetition that produces difference.

To catch a rhythm seems enough to set things in motion. A desire to develop a personal vocabulary of signs (notations that remind me of a space I have occupied imaginatively through previous works/workings). Metonymic associations, contiguity without censorship. A proliferation of perspectives; what would a diagram of Saint Matthew look like if it were created from the point of view of the stool, for example? (that is, the precarious moment of imbalance in respect of the ground)

A white soiled ground that began the small paintings becomes an informal, barely primed surface in the large paintings. A strong desire throughout not to be precious – as if that would prevent me from have an earthy, messy, material, fragmented, material relation to the image – a desire for the diagram to be a tool for open-ended exploration. But, of course the paradox is that this only becomes a feeling of freedom when something is at stake – the creation of a new system that is internal to the new work.

Decisions

As the process progressed it became clear that what was needed was some sort of conceptual breakthrough – a leap into a space to come.

As I worked on these paintings I was also making a copy (*G/A An Homage*) of a painting by Juan Usle (*La Garganta de Albers, Las Muelas de Gaudi, 2002*) which is in the larger, back gallery. This is a painting which I have also never seen but which has fascinated me for a long time; which I have made many paintings in relation to (which you can see in the gallery) and which I have explored in writing.

As the copy developed I came to the realisation that the diagram implies the creation of an underlying conceptual structure; a different, coded, systematic “language” which allows decision-making to work free from the constraints of the representational. In effect I think I superimposed the structure of Usle’s painting onto the surface of the three large aluminium paintings. What does that mean? I am not sure that I can communicate that to you in any meaningful way. It may be that I replaced the horizontal perspectival grid of Caravaggio’s figurative painting with the vertical grid. The grid, with its vertical and horizontal axes, is implicit and often explicit all abstract painting but is also the condition of possibility for the spatial illusion of figurative painting. A new freedom emerged once I grasped this which allowed me to imagine forces across the surface mediated by the beat/rhythm of the grid – sometimes a longer note, sometimes an interval, complicated by the sensation of colour which exceeds the binary structure of the chequerboard.

If No. 1 took a rhythm that came out of the twist – a dance or movement across the surface then No. 2 began with the rhythm of writing and enunciation – the rhythm of its messengers. I let go of that thought as the painting developed but it is interesting that it feels more narrative than the others.

Catherine Ferguson – Diagramming Caravaggio and Other Baroque Facades – Gallery Talk - April 2017

(But that may be just because it began with a whiter surface which concealed the materiality/truth of the metal.)

No 3. Was the last to be completed and is perhaps the most conceptual of all. The trope of a control panel was a thought I had. The grid is inherently fragmentary for it brings into question the contour, the closed form. It establishes a different kind of space – and, perhaps, the challenge it sets is to overcome the mathematical. What is interesting about Caravaggio's surfaces is their fragmentation that paradoxically works through the logic of a depiction of whole bodies.

Relations between zones, conduits and passages – a different mediation from chiaroscuro and perspective. Not a structure of objects but one of passages – a diagram of movement, perhaps. This may be all that evidently connects my work to Caravaggio's.