



Blue Galatea (From Fear of the OX)

Painting is primarily an act of creation. Inert pigment is pushed around on the surface of the canvas to establish original patterns. These patterns give rise to new happenings, spaces and rhythms. These patterns are the DNA of pictorial life. The ancient myth of Pygmalion's sculpture becoming a living subject remains a poignant metaphor for the contemporary artist driven to create. It is perhaps hopelessly romantic to pursue a creative agenda in this post-modern era, but the dream of finding Galatea remains the only true reason for becoming an artist.

My Galatea is cobalt blue, and fills the central section of this new painting. It did not exist in the studies and drawings, nor could it. It was born from the process, the act of making. Perhaps she needs a new name; after all, Pygmalion's Galatea was so named for her milky whiteness. As with all morphological imagery throughout Western Art, she only reveals herself to those who do not just look but actively see and understand that the building blocks of painting invariably can construct multiple images.



20 years ago I was Chair of a small department of Fine Art in the seaside town of Scarborough on the North Yorkshire coast. I still live in this area. The college was affiliated to the University of York. I had founded the department, written the degree courses and split my time between teaching in the studios and art history. Throughout this time I continued to paint. In teaching and painting, then and now, I pursued my own agenda, irrespective of the fashions of the day. Many of my students shared my love of painting and were restless in their pursuit of finding new and meaningful directions against a backdrop of an art-world too eager to declare not just painting as dead, but any belief in creativity as fallacious.

Then and now, I rejected such nihilism, without having any definitive answers as to what I, or anyone else, should be making. When marking student work, if the submission just seemed purposeless, without any serious attempt to propose an answer, we had a particular grade, zero X, written as OX.

The OX has become part of my private mythology in the studio. To fear the OX is not just to fear failure but to resist complicity with a cultural mainstream that accepts non-creative outcomes as works of art, to resist the cynical and the nihilistic. Equally though, it is not a fear of avant-gardism, experimentation and anarchism.

For the OX is also a beast of burden, weighed down by the trappings of other people.

When I was teaching, and considering best practice for my own students, I visited the New York Academy. It was established to offer training in the traditional methods of the academic Salon. What struck me was a very different kind of cultural complicity. The acquisition of skills was quantifiable, measurable and conventional, and although of some value if transcended, the overwhelming result was an historic (and false) narrative on serious art, no more creative than the conventions of post-modern appropriation that it pretended to counter.

Of course the conventionalism of the Salon had become a target for the early Modernists over a century ago. The danger of conformity was recognised then, as it must be today. The particulars of those conventions may change, (academic drawing then, perhaps the pixels of the computer screen today) but the capitulation of the artist to adopt wholesale, known methods and languages continues to disable any serious creative pursuit.

Creativity resides not in having something interesting to say, but in the unique structural patterns that determine an alternative reality. Painting has the malleability to allow this uniqueness, but the history of academic painting can also deny it.

I stopped teaching in 2000, but I remain in touch with some of my students. Nathan Walsh was a post-graduate painting student and he now lives in York. We have remained friends and I often visit him in his studio. He exhibits with the photorealist dealers in New York who showed my work over a decade ago, Lou Meisel and Frank Bernarducci.

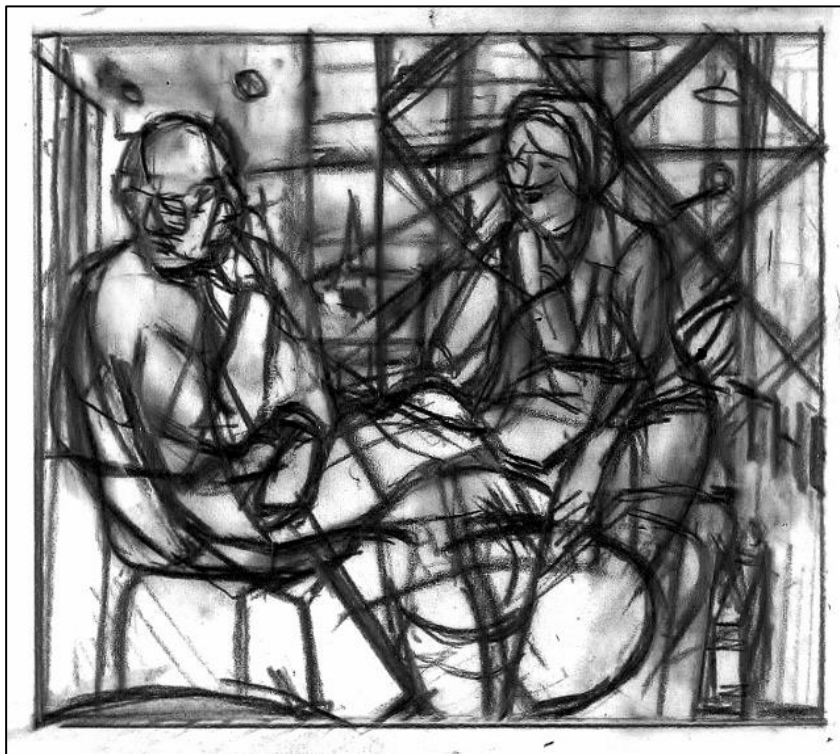
Blue Galatea began with a visit to York with my wife Gaynor. We had morning coffee and lunch with Nathan and spent time in his studio. He was painting two large urban panoramas of New York. They reminded me of my realist paintings of New York that I had made many years ago, my exhibitions in Soho and on 57th Street, and my regular visits to the US at that time.

Next to Nathan's studio is a café called "The Bike Shed". It is frequented by cycling enthusiasts and has bikes hanging on the walls and over the windows.

Without any known painting in mind, I photographed us having coffee in a nearby hotel, and then at lunch surrounded by cycling paraphernalia and then recorded Nathan in the studio.

The artist in his studio is a common theme throughout art history. My painting might have emerged as a manifesto about painting, it can be regarded as such, but it did not begin in this way. The simple reality is that I always begin with the normal events of my life, and that has become a life frequented in studios and talking about painting.

The events of that day are configured as a panoramic space though the first drawings just placed Nathan and Gaynor in conversation. Between them is a view of an urban landscape, the spire suggests a memory of York.



In the second drawing the two figures are in a different relationship. Nathan, on the left, contemplates the figure on the right, as if it is a subject of his creation, and one that re-configures as a giant head looking outwards. Nathan's dialogue with the people around him synthesises with the confrontation of his own creativity in the studio. The view of York has been replaced by the black doorway of his studio building; the figure of Gaynor has acquired rectangular butterfly wings from the mirrored wall behind her in the hotel.



He is a friend in dialogue with us, but then becomes an artist in the special space of the studio.

The subject of Nathan's creation, a realistic depiction of New York, proposes a particularly taxing problem. How can a painting that is seemingly so like a documentary record of a place, constructed with all the graphic rules of perspective become an autonomous work of art? What defines it as not just a well-crafted illustration, and what separates it from all those photorealist representations of New York that have become a staple of the art market?

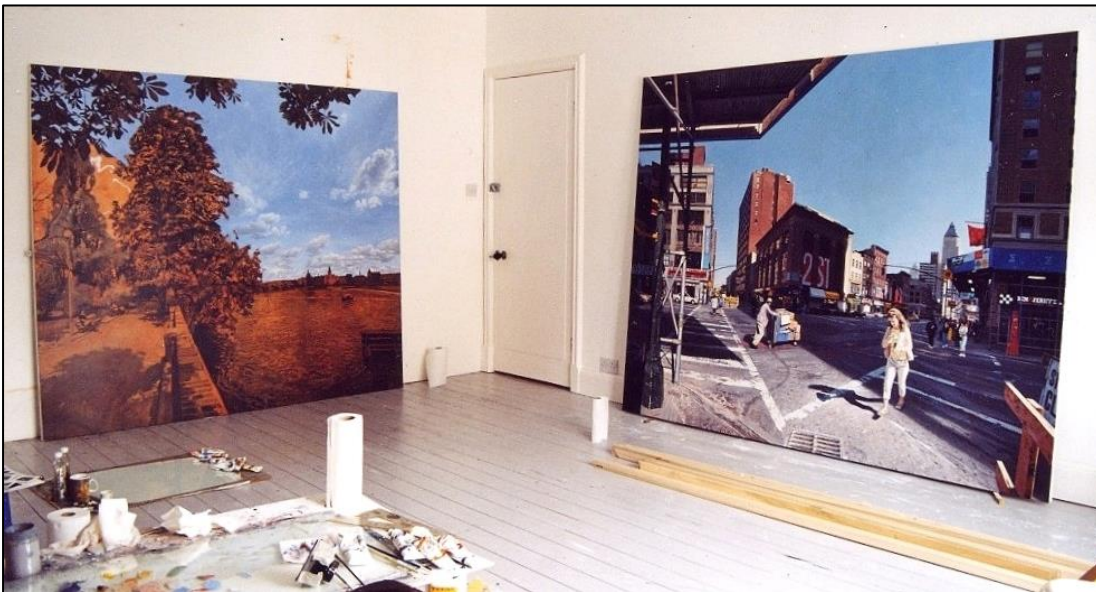
That Nathan is aware of the futility of pursuing just a naturalistic agenda would, on the face of it, appear to make his project perverse. Yet he holds on to a faith that through the intensity of working, a mundane imitation will be displaced by an extraordinary vision. In part, this endeavour has its roots in my own paintings from several years ago.

So Nathan's struggle to escape the mundane and in fear of making something of no more consequence than an illustration, is parallel to my own struggles, both as a realist painter back then, and still as a painter in free-fall now. Indeed my own rejection of an imitative realism is a consequence of this struggle.

The artist painting the contemporary urban landscape in forensic detail is not just a metaphor for the challenge of being a painter in the modern world but is a real chapter from my own history. And my recollections of that chapter are marked not just by a nostalgia and fondness for the subject but an existential crisis that inevitably lead to its abandonment. In short, it is a confrontation with my own doubts and fears.

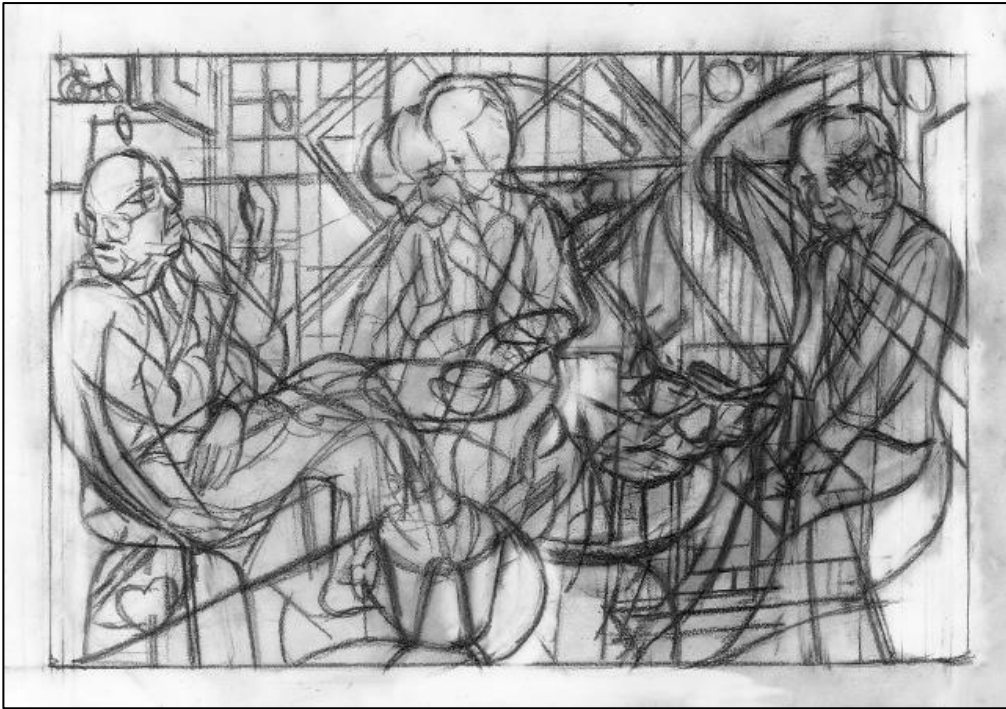


Nathan Walsh in his studio 2016



Clive Head's Studio 2003

The urban landscape of New York finally emerged in the next drawing but it doesn't dominate. The will to relevance is founded not in the modernity of the subject but the compulsion to find new life in the form of a huge head to the right of the central figure. Is it significant that this is constructed in part from a landscape of New York? The orthogonal lines of perspective on the right depict a footbridge in Brooklyn under which a road curves into a distant horizon of a Manhattan skyline. Beneath this head is a street viewed from above. Both motifs are carried through to the final drawing, the twisting hand rail on the bridge cutting through the figure on the far right.





The exaggerated form of this hand rail, skewering the figure, re-positions the typically diminishing nature of perspective as pictorially insistent and interfering. Both the artist on the left and the projected head of his creation evaluate this structure. It is as if not just the perspective of the painting but the convention of establishing space set down since the Renaissance are being challenged.

In the final painting this conforming structure and the view of New York have both been banished.



Blue Galatea (From Fear of the OX) 2016 47½ x 71½ inches

There are glimpses of conventional perspectives of York; the figure on the right turns to view the street outside the café, pushed to the far corner of this new pictorial reality, but across the lower half of this painting orthogonals revert to being diagonals. In the centre of this field, a green topped triangle parades across this panorama. Such independent triangles are remnants of perspectival structures no longer functioning to affirm all that is known but conjure something unexpected and unaccountable.

Of course this might be seen as just tipping up the picture plane, a familiar trope in modernist painting, and my use of *passage* (spatial faceting), multiple view points, and the duration of events over time could well suggest an affinity to Cubism. This may be true, but I do not set out to make a Cubist painting nor is the outcome any closer to sharing the aesthetic of a Cubist painting than a work by Frank Auerbach or Jasper Johns despite having similar allegiances. But it is important that the modern painter confronts his actual relationship with the history of painting in a post-Marxist era quick to dismiss all painting as simply the appropriation of learnt conventions. Some painting is, and some, when it is worthy of being described as art, is not, irrespective of borrowings from other painters.

As a singular manifestation of shared pictorial convention, Cubist painting did not exist. The outspoken art collector Douglas Cooper fell into the trap of assuming that Cubism could be defined by a set of rules and objectives, namely those that he deduced from his hero Picasso. All other painters are measured against this absolute, failing in varying degrees. At a more sophisticated level,

the same problem shrouds Kahnweiler's classifications of *analytic* and *synthetic* Cubism derived from Kantian absolutes. Only when we scrutinise the divergence of practice can we see a collective more bound by a desire to escape and uncover the unexpected, and in every case, that outcome is different. The importance of intuition and liberation from convention emphasised by Bergson seems more apt, for this is necessary for all significant painting.

The painting made in parallel to *Blue Galatea* titled *The Synoptical Cubist Orders for Two*, makes reference to this open relationship with Cubism. *Synoptical* is an absurd hybrid of analytical and synthetic but also suggests a greater emphasis on mental connectivity rather than the spatial or temporal.



The Synoptical Cubist Orders for Two 2016 54 x 59 1/2 inches

At work here is a stream of consciousness fed by line and shape. The consequence of drawing one motif over another is less to do with the simulation of reality perceived from different angles over time than the chance occurrence of a third motif that didn't previously exist. At every stage, the work is filtered through me. All drawing is freehand and without recourse to Euclidian geometry. Sometimes I have a motif that is known, and sometimes unknown. The painting is a medley of things that happened and things that happened only in my mind. If nothing occurs it would be a creative failure. The emergence of Galatea is testimony to the artist's ability to create without recourse to conceptual plotting. She is a direct outpouring.

But of course I have allowed her to become a metaphor for this creativity by naming her here. Perhaps there are other metaphors. Painting can be a messy synthesis of language and pictorial actualities outside of language. For the most part though, we reach the limits of linguistic analysis (verbal description and explanation) when thinking about painting. Even a hard-nosed theorist rooted in linguistics like Roland Barthes acknowledges this state of the unknown found at the edge of language in his concept of *mise en abyme*. The painter must find himself on the edge of the abyss, staring into the void.



The surviving view of New York in this painting perhaps then appropriately is a view of 57th Street from the roof top of the gallery building where I used to show and where Nathan now exhibits. Back in 2004, I spent time drawing and photographing the city from this vantage point, balancing precariously on a ledge to record the vertical perspectives of the buildings as they tapered to a nadir below. At the time I was interested in the potential dramas that perspective could still offer and the viewer becoming freed from the station point, literally freed from a stationary anchor so they could fly freely above the space of the city. The reality of making these studies on location was to put myself in danger at the edge of a precipice.

The workmen on the gallery building had taken this danger to new heights, dangling over the side on a gantry suspended by ropes. They feature on a diminutive scale in the centre of the painting.



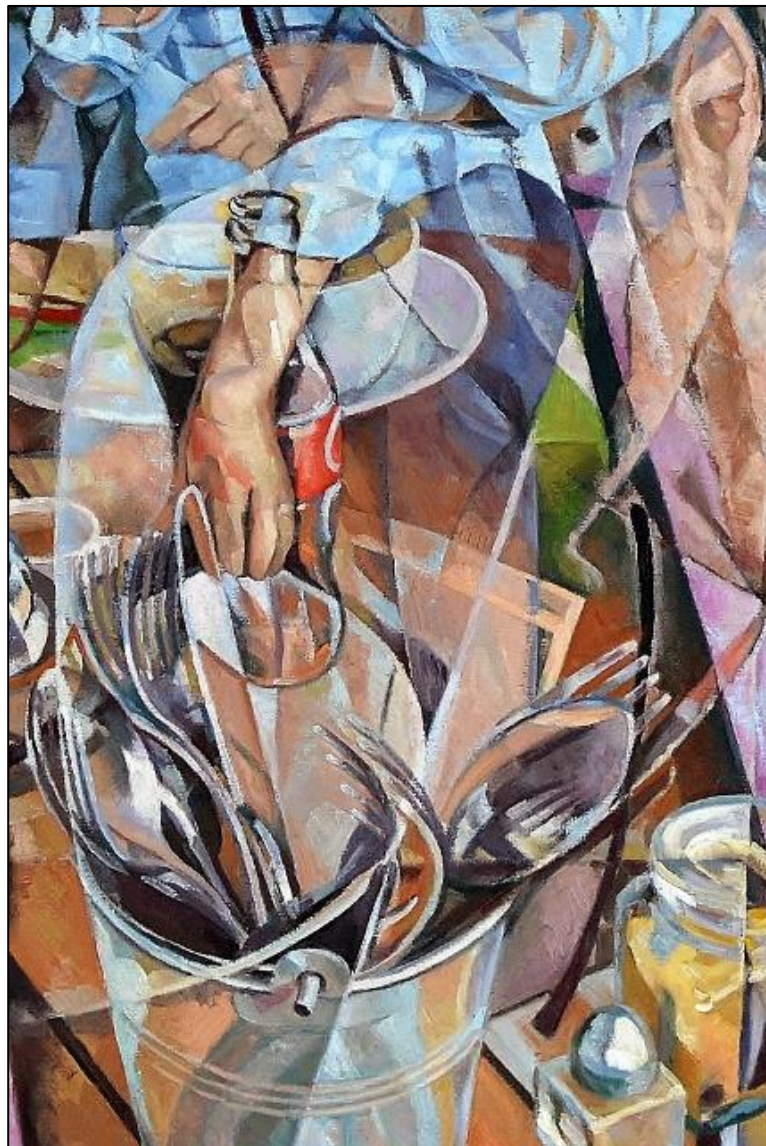
(a)



(b)

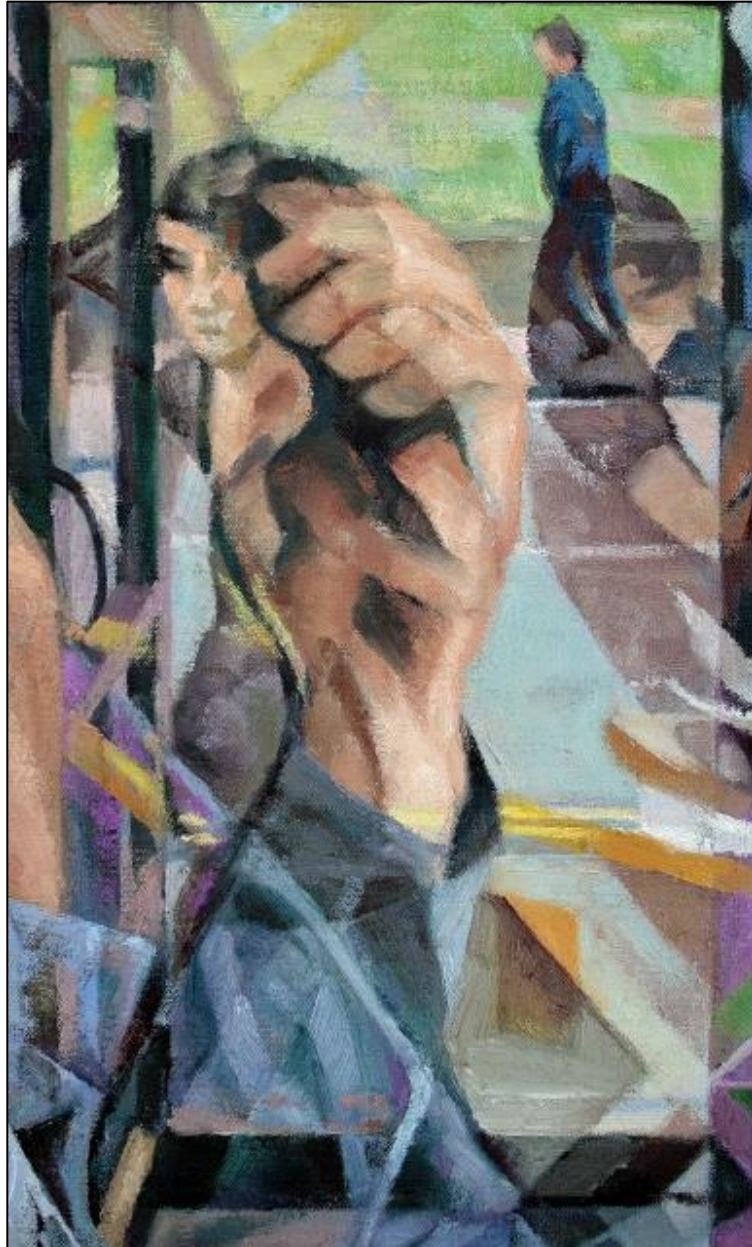
These figures have become integrated into several new motifs, most notably the large head of Nathan at the front of the painting looking down and across as he works on his painting. The figure leaning over the gantry (a) is repeated to his right (b), without a platform, which also establishes Nathan's nose, eye and glasses as he looks to the right, and a further large head looking back into the painting. (The arching line of his back just shows the profile of his nose in detail b)

To the left of these figures on the gantry is another workman, arms raised above his head and striding towards the edge, constructed from Nathan's ear and neck. This more stylised figure relates to the shape, scale and colouring of the coke bottle on the table further to the left, its own phallic design connecting to the figure above.



Such leaps in scale become credible within the flow and rhythm of the painting. This might accord with the liberal space of Modernism but it is also a feature of early Christian and Eastern traditions where the artist determines scale in accordance with significance and roles in the narrative. There is an Indian miniature happening at the heart of this painting.

I have also given Nathan that power to arbitrate on scale and positioning according to what he deems to be significant. In his raised hand he forms and holds the young waitress, echoed twice to the right. She in turn, also creates a further profile in him. Perhaps the artist is not in control after all? The painting answers the artist, giving him new possibilities.



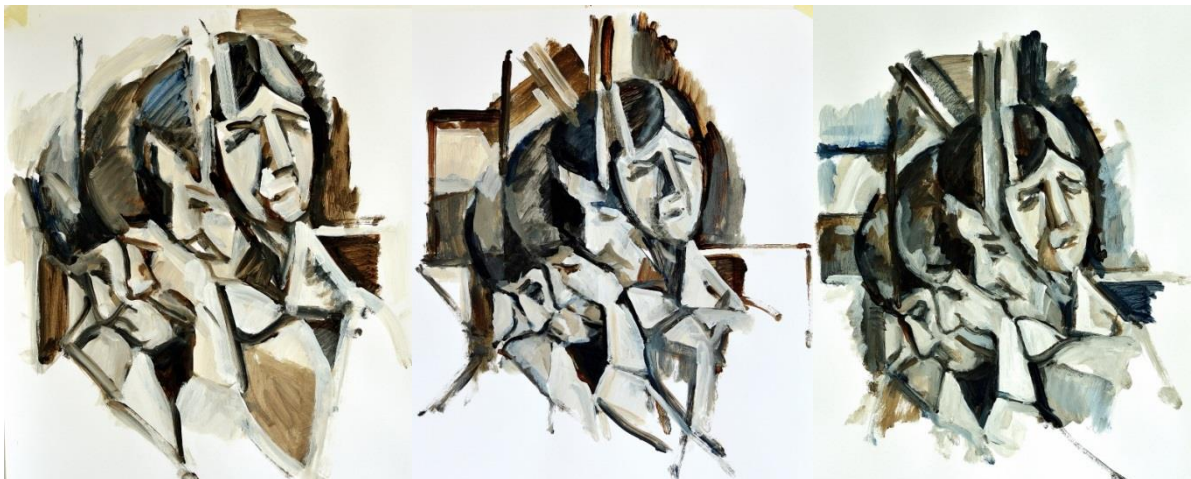
So the artist can only adopt a framework in which pictorial events might happen. As I painted Nathan's portrait a faced appeared that dissected his head. He (or perhaps she) has a calming nature. On the far side, whilst painting Gaynor, a very different character appeared, in profile, looking up and off to the right, wide eyed and open mouthed. She could be from a theatrical painting by Bronzino.



Where these found characters differ from those in a classical painting is that they are the consequence of the process. They are not conceived at the outset for the purpose of communicating a narrative. If a narrative emerges it is because the painting has become a subject that can form new legends.

Our energies are better spent understanding the events that inform a painting.

By way of example the figure of Gaynor in the centre of the painting was explored through a series of acrylic studies. The notion that these were founded on a sequence of Muybridge styled photographs recording Gaynor in motion is inconsistent with them being taken at different times of the day and in different locations, some from lunch in the "Bike Shed" and some from coffee at the hotel.



So the similarity with Futurist paintings intended to capture movement is questionable, although of course much Futurist painting embraced a more complex idea of *duree* than just rendering a stop-motion sequence.

I was not interested in the reality of depicting her movement which is at odds with the natural stasis of all painting. I *am* interested in a multiplicity of spatial events, each so dependent on the other that one has to dissolve to fully realise the other. This is a spatial flux consistent with stasis. The pictorial units must remain fixed to afford these opportunities. There is no actual movement or time as defined in our own rational existence, nor is there an illusion or impression of movement. Our active disturbance when looking at such painting resides in the difference in the way this pictorial reality operates to our own. Its in another dimension whilst existing on a 2 dimensional surface.

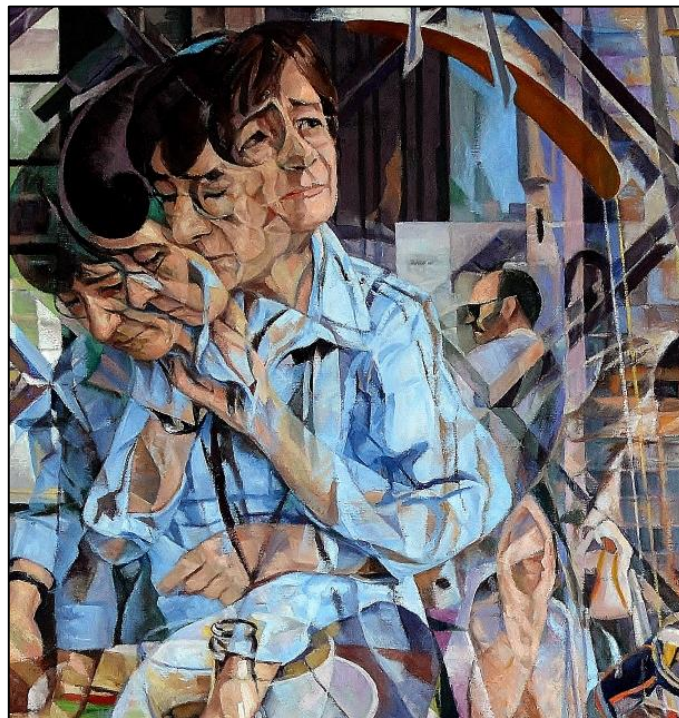
Within these studies each head retains its character whilst also contributing to a wider reality. Only in the final painting is this entire section subordinate to a further motif, that of Galatea. In particular it suggests her curling hair. The dominant black comma shape begins a sequence of facets that runs through this entire section, each face constructed with overlapping curves. Gaynor is reconstituted as Galalean hair.



In giving the painting a title and writing about a few of its aspects inevitably invites a dialogue between painting and viewer. But that is not my intention when I go into the studio. The titles are in parallel to the painting and not intended as a full explanation. As with the act of evaluating the integrity of the painting, the title must be truthful irrespective of its ease at being understood. In this instance I resisted changing it for a third time to *Winged Galatea* which is how I came to think of it in its final weeks of making, the white ellipses of the tables in the background to the left of the central figure, and patterns of white light beyond beginning a sequence that was developed into wings. Galatea became an angel.

Nor did she gain this title when she first appeared. Again it is worth returning to the events that surround the making of the painting.

I was reading Hilary Spurling's biography on Matisse,



The young girl, with thick curly hair, looking back at me had come, unbeknown to me, from the pages of that book. It was Marguerite, Matisse's daughter, who was his carer, model and muse; fundamental to his art. As a child she had an emergency tracheotomy that saved her life, but left her with a scar on her throat. Its there, as a black dot just below her chin.

Marguerite is also its title.

So the title *Blue Galatea* is just from a moment in the paintings development and has become a handle offered to the viewer, a possible point of access, nothing more.

There is a challenge in understanding what is meant by symbolism in Modernist painting and it applies equally to my work. We might think of symbolism in an archaic sense, as with Bronzino, or the more fashionable reading of signifiers associated with post-modern theory. Stripped back, they are in effect, the same operation. The artwork is configured to be read by the viewer. But symbolism within the context of the Modern painting may not be inviting any such reading. What is presented may not have been conceived to communicate, but the final outcome in resolving a pictorial

challenge. The symbol then is conclusive and true to the investigation that has happened prior to its ultimate state.

It may well be indecipherable, just as the foundation elements that have culminated in a particular sequence may have become buried. Every brush mark and colour that I lay down has a connectivity to something . Nothing is abstract. I start with the artist in the studio and this painting testafies to all that I have seen and thought about. In its precise visual articulation it might be seen as *of* the subject, and is only truly meaningful in its absolute state. It is what it is.

It doesn't warrant interpretation. In fact, the act of interpretation would sacrifice the actuality of its material and spatial reality for a narrative dependent on the viewer's partial knowledge and fallability. In conclusion, I do not ask the viewer to read this painting, nor to recognise all its transformations. They are integral to its reality and are not in an open book for the viewer's consumption.

But this conclusion sits precariously with the evidence from this project of my own role as an educator and a desire to make explicit the nature of painting. I am constantly returning to the irreconcilable struggle of making known the unknown without demystifying its essence.

It's not easy.

Clive Head
September 2016