James O'Connell is a young artist studying Fine Art at Wimbledon College of Art. In 2013 he contacted Clive Head, intrigued by his work and ideas about contemporary art. He is one of a growing number of young painters who have contacted Head over the past few years. Often from a background which has prioritised drawing and painting but wanting to develop a forward looking approach in their work, they visit Head to share ideas and view his latest work.

These visits have coincided with an intense period of painting through which Head has made a new series of large works that have redefined his practice. As this series comes to an end, O'Connell discusses this work and emerging ideas with Head in his studio.

JO'C: To begin, how can we discuss painting in accordance to *pluralism*?

CH: **I am not sure that we can. Art has become pluralistic, but I can only really discuss painting within a certain framework. That is not to limit it, quite the opposite, because the more that I read about painting and the more that I look at paintings and the more that I paint, the more that I understand its limitless possibilities. But that is only because it has particular parameters that enable this freedom. Postmodern pluralism can be dismantling.**

JO'C: *Pluralism* also causes confusion due to its stance of *relativity*. We can use this stance in an attempt to rewrite art history by including previously omitted cultural artefacts, exposing racial/sexual inequalities in historical art and expelling outmoded precepts of modernism.

CH: **Previous versions of art history were far from perfect. I think that the general perception is that the study of art has become more theoretical but that is only partly true. Generic postmodern theory seems to have replaced a great deal of art historical scholarship. To really understand painting it is essential to understand its history.**
It is important to remember that, just as there are artists who find the theory that you are talking about incompatible with the reality of the creative process, there are art historians who don't sign up to either.

JO'C: But postmodernism is, as Frédéric Jameson stated, *'the cultural logic of late capitalism in advanced societies'.*

CH: **How do you want me to respond? I'll fall back on Herbert Read's declaration *'To Hell with Culture'* as a beginning for art. Art and culture are not the same thing. Culture is how society defines, uses and abuses art but how does that relate to what actually goes on in the studio?**

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JO'C: Here we have four paintings before us. One is currently in progress. Could you take me through their titles?

CH: **The painting that began first was *Thinking About Georges Braque,* then *Black Glove,* followed by *Looking Glass, Les Souvenirs du Café Anglais and finally the work-in-progress, Table Dance as the Network Stops.***

JO'C: When did the series begin, about a year ago, when I last visited your studio?

CH: **About 18 months ago.**

JO'C: When I first saw the painting *Thinking About Georges Braque,* it was in its drawing stage. It had an appearance that was markedly different to your earlier work. What occurred prior to that pivotal point in your studio practice?

CH: **There were several factors that came together. I've never worked in a way which would envisage a large body of paintings like this. What I tend to do is make a painting, and let that painting inform the next. That way of working allows for a more rapid development. The previous painting to *Thinking About Georges Braque* was a painting of figures standing at the top of a staircase. The space in that painting was so open that you could see the activity at both the top and bottom of the stairs. An impossible scenario was made to appear real but I had arrived at a point where this exploration of space needed to depart from the presentation of a seamless, continuous space. That painting allowed you to float around all of these different pockets of space, but at first glance, it looked like a realist painting in the traditional sense. I wanted to break this, so the eye could move around different types of spaces but the painting didn't have the kind of unity that we associate with conventional means of imaging our world. Furthermore, as the title implies, I was thinking about Modernist strategies in painting as a way of challenging my history as a realist.**

I had done what I had wanted to do within the realist/hyperrealist agenda. I have a real fear of repeating myself so I needed to take on new challenges and see what I was capable of.

Finally there was a certain disconnection with the audience. Those realist paintings were being seen as documentary paintings of our world, in quite a straightforward manner, when in fact they were inventions. They were spaces that had been created in the studio, from my experiences of the world. You couldn't actually be in those locations and see the spaces that were depicted in the paintings, but from an audience's point of view, they often failed to discern the difference between the spaces that I had invented and the kind of spaces that are illustrated through photography and Photorealist painting. Much as I don't think it is relevant for me as an artist to follow an audiences' lead, if there is a fundamental discrepancy between what you are doing and the way your work is understood, you're not beholden to stick with it. It gives you the freedom to move on.

JO'C: So you mentioned space. Could you explain that further? Are you referring to pictorial space Hans Hoffman speaks of (that the painting has a *depth* which goes beyond perspective depth), or something different?

CH: **We are talking about pictorial space, but I am reluctant to discuss it as a formal construct, because I think that implies a very limited and restricted way of thinking about painting. When I think about space, I have two notions. One is the rendition of tangible form, whilst the other is space as a universe: a notion of unlimited expansiveness. It is either the space of and between objects, or it is space where an astronaut travels in an extraordinary way to realms which are untravelled. So I think when painters think about pictorial space, they can be very extravagant in their expectations of what that means.**

JO'C: Unrealistic or extravagant?

CH: **Both, because the space of the painting is not the space of our world. The space of the painting is a unique construction. It conforms to rules that belong to the painted world. As an artist, I choose to paint because of the potential that painting has to create spaces that are unique. But that requires a great deal of knowledge about painting. It's not easy. For example I see no point in me making a painting which conforms to the laws of perspective because that's a known structure. Because it's known, artistic space, if you like, has become cultural space – it has passed from a strategy invented by the artist to a cultural standard for representation. It becomes transferable, teachable and tamed by our world. But an alternative to perspective that is credible is very challenging to invent.**

Most of the means of representing our world in conventional terms are tied to a Euclidean notion of perspective.

JO'C: Known formulas?

CH: **Yes, algorithms and formulas. No matter how inventive a photographer or 'traditional' academic painter is in terms of their subject, they will always be tied to those algorithms, so the outcome will always be culturally rather than individually formed. The key thing in painting is to get to a point where you're free to invent the very terms that will establish form and space.**

JO'C: Your previous work used multiple vanishing points and horizon lines. Did you feel that that alone wasn't surpassing *'known formulas'*?

CH: **No, in this sense the current work builds on the former work. Although it appears to be very different, my earlier methods weren't obeying fixed laws. The rules of perspective dictate that you would use a single horizon line, a fixed station point and so on. If you are using a hundred vanishing points for lines that would converge to one point in accordance with perspective, you're not using *'perspective'* as we know it. Therefore the mathematics for building my realities are not known outside of the painting.**

For years I have been breaking these rules and conventions. That was the thing that separated my paintings from Photorealist painting. Photorealist painting, by its nature, is painting which is tied to photographic perspective, which is tied to a known formula.

But there is always a tension between the known and the unknown. We become aware of the spatial invention partly because it is contained by the rigidity of the rectangular canvas, which I have decided to adopt, at least up to this point. All these paintings are of a similar large, squarish format based on my height when standing.

JO'C: Going back to the series, what is visible? A café scene with particular figures? This is something that has been recurrent in your work?

CH: **Yes, the café motif began with *Coffee at the Cottage Delight* which I showed at the National Gallery.**

JO'C: That was the exhibition which positioned your work in dialogue with Canaletto's?

CH: **Yes. I decided to use that subject as the starting point for *Thinking about Georges Braque* and four subsequent paintings. However, I did not plan five paintings with the same café scene at the outset. It simply seemed a point of contact with our world that I found stimulating, as well as one that I got to know incredibly well.**

This is also true of the figures – they are people who I am very familiar with. In all the paintings Gaynor, my wife is present. Plus the art historians Michael Paraskos and Ben Read, Geoffrey Parton and Sam Breuer from Marlborough Gallery and of course, my four children. These are people I can recall and understand. I am comfortable with painting them in a way that doesn't have to present them as conventionally agreeable. I feel confident enough to change them.

Simultaneously, I am exploring them as individuals, their characters and personalities. That's something that has become a feature in the new work which wasn't in the former paintings.

JO'C: Something that does seem to still be a feature present in your paintings is *verisimilitude*, the semblance of reality. Although they have taken the appearance of something fragmented, do they still have roots in everyday visual experiences? You said that you are familiar with the café and the people residing in it but there is also a feeling of the unknown and unfamiliar – a presence of Bacon-esque disfiguration.

CH: **I think one of the hardest challenges for painters in our era is to understand the difference between an art that connects with our experiences, and an art that illustrates our experiences. Certainly it was a poignant question throughout Modernism, and maybe one that we have drifted away from. We've almost accepted a notion of art that serves our political and social engagement in a very direct, documentary way. Illustration has become a dominant feature of contemporary art. That has always troubled me. Rather than making paintings that illustrate our world, I much prefer the idea of making paintings that begin with**

experiences from our world, but their destination, the point at which they arrive, is something else – they no longer illustrate that experience. They become something else.

JO'C: So you feel they surpass daily experiences?

CH: **I think that's the challenge. To paint something that transcends our experiences. You can't really begin outside of our experience, as human beings. That process of engaging with our world is the only legitimate process that we have. You can't experience other realities – we can only draw upon the space around us. That seems to be the natural beginning.**

JO'C: An analogy I see resides in literature – novels particularly. It reminds me of the addition of prefaces or factual events to fictional texts. The novel becomes a semi-fictional world where the author is able to embed his/her own laws. As a result, the integrity of the text is not reliant on the external world of the reader; rather, it resides in its own internal logic. Is this a correct comparison?

CH: **Yes, that is a reasonable parallel. The logic of the painting belongs to the painting and evolves over the course of the construction of the painting. It's constantly evolving through the act of painting. I think that's why painting for me can never be an activity that is fully envisioned at the beginning and then executed. I can only elect a starting point from which the painting develops. There's no place in my method for a studio assistant to follow my guide, because I don't work that way. The whole thing is dependent upon the act of painting, which is a continuous act of resolving experience.**

JO'C: I think that many Modernist artists who positioned themselves against figurative painting would have argued the point that where their paintings end up (or even where they begin) is *beyond* our everyday experiences. This was seen in early 20th Century theories of Theosophy at the conception of abstraction. Straight-forwardly: realist painting derives from materialism and abstraction derives from divinity and 'higher thoughts'.

CH: **Possibly, though it could be argued that where an abstract painter begins *cannot* be outside an engagement with our reality. I'm not only referring to visual perception when I talk about the nature of engaging. The way that we experience and make sense of our reality is very complex. You mention theosophy, but whether it is an aesthetic or an intellectual beginning, that beginning will always pertain to our reality.**

The act of painting itself is a physical activity within our world.

I don't think it's healthy to factionalise painting into abstract and figurative. An *'abstract'* painter for example, can put down a chaotic shape to begin inventing a pictorial structure. He or she isn't doing anything fundamentally different from me when I select a motif from our world. They are both concrete realities and if we stopped there I am not sure that we would be really *painting*. Because those realities are waiting to be resolved.

What is finally constructed is not a reality altered by appearance. It's a reality that has difference in every way. It's not just that it looks different, but that it *is* different. Whether it is a cup of coffee, a platonic division, or a literary text, the point at which these things become art is the point when they are no longer any of these things.

JO'C: And looking at your paintings you like to use all those motifs at the outset. There are objects, writing and a diversity of abstract shapes.

CH: **Yes, but it all becomes as one, hopefully and we accept a reality of all these elements. I don't see any fundamental distinction between them. The words, shapes, objects and people all function to define space. They are in a relationship that is markedly different from how they function in our world.**

JO'C: Last year your painting consisted of a complex array of graphite lines. In conversation we spoke about the physicality in the drawing phase and how much your canvas can endure without tearing. We were obviously speaking about limits in a literal sense. How much further do you feel you can push your abilities and artistic exploration?

CH: **I always try to overreach my comfort zone of understanding and ability. I find both drawing and painting incredibly difficult because what I am trying to do is incredibly difficult. Simply by setting a challenge of beginning a painting with a visual experience derived from multiple viewpoints as in *Looking Glass*, which began by me standing out on the street and also me sitting inside the café, poses the problem of constructing a space that was about both experiences simultaneously. It was an impossible problem that needed to be resolved. The resolution doesn't come easily.**

As for how far this can be pushed, I think it comes from how far I can push myself. What I can do to find the astonishing, the visually compelling, and also find something that is intrinsically unique and within my interests and concerns. It has to be important to me.

JO'C: Where does this title come from?

CH: ***Looking Glass;*** **lots of thoughts. Eric Neimenen was really taken with this painting as I think it was helping him in his own paintings of reflections. It was so neat when he said that I had placed the viewer *in* the plate glass window, and that helped me to think about the whole surface of the painting as a possible window too. So there are motifs floating on the surface.**

And I was also thinking about Lewis Carol, and that escapism into a magical world. The young girl in the centre is my daughter, Annabel, and I was thinking about her as an Alice character. She is relatively normal where everyone else has multiple features, Mad Hatters. It's very English: Lewis Carol, Prog-Rock, Monty Python.

JO C: Simply, would you call this group of paintings a series?

CH: **I would. And I have come to use the title of one of the paintings, *Les Souvenirs du Café Anglais,* for the whole series. I was taken with the French word for memories, *souvenirs*, being the same as our word for the concrete artefacts that we collect to mark our memories. The paintings are to do with this, but the actual painting that has this title emerged with narratives about Gaynor as a mother. The whole structure has this womb-like space that cocoons the central figures, and then there is this kindergarten colour scheme of cerulean blue and lemon yellow.**

This is probably the first time that I have worked in a series that has taken the structure of painting as an evolving challenge, leaving the motif as a constant. The first painting is very different to the last; you can trace my thinking.

JO'C: Looking at *Thinking About Georges Braque* - what were you thinking about in particular?

CH: **I distinctly remember that when I walked into the café and began drawing for that painting I was thinking about Braque's paintings. Maybe that led me to look very closely at the figure in the foreground, and down onto the table. The compression of space, the tipping up of the floor, probably came from those initial thoughts on that day. So the title is trying to tell the viewer about my thoughts, experience and preoccupations at the time. I don't think it is as enigmatic as it appears. Previously I might have titled a painting *Victoria Arcade*, as it would have indicated that I went to that place at the beginning. I guess what I am trying to do is tell the viewer that I went to the café, and at the time I was thinking about Braque.**

I think all the paintings are testimonies of my thoughts and preoccupations. But they remain open; by which I mean; being in a café on a particular day, and making a painting beginning with it as a subject doesn't stop me adding in a patch of light I see on the studio wall months later. It doesn't stop me painting the form of a bird that I see on the hedge outside my studio window or utilising a colour sequence that I saw in the flower beds whilst walking around the garden one evening. The painting is a receiver of experience. All of those experiences can be resolved through the painting. If a painting goes on for a year, there's a year of experience in that painting.

JO'C**:** Where is the bird?

CH: **In *Black Glove.* There is a sequence where I am shown taking a photograph, which shifts to an image of a bird which then shifts to a black mask of Gaynor. There are a lot of dark, sexual motifs in this painting which came, at least in part, from Matisse.**

I have spent a lot of time trying to figure out Matisse. He was a really smart artist. You get these points in his work which squeak, and you think it might just be a naïve quirk but in fact he is signalling a secondary image. They are not easy for us to see, but why should he care about us? He wants to build all kinds of sexual fantasies into his work. Odd that we see him as polite against Picasso!

JO'C: As was mentioned earlier, the subject matter of these paintings is fragmented and multi-facetted. We can very plainly simplify and explain the Cubist's motive of presenting the subject from many different perspectives as an attempt to depict such subject matter in a richer context. Does your recent method of painting allow you to be more engaged and connected with your subject? Is it therefore *'richer'*?

CH: **I think it opens up more channels and possibilities for that connection, yes.**

JO'C: And what are the possibilities within contemporary painting?

CH: **I think that every aspect of experience must find a pictorial resolution. This of course brings about the question of 'how'. The nature of that solution is going to be visual, material, spatial, and of course as it becomes spatial, it also becomes immaterial. I don't think anything is off-limits, and that's the fascination when you look at artists like Francis Bacon. He's dealing with experiences that, at first glance, can't be visually resolved, and yet he finds that resolution. That's the challenge of painting – perhaps not dealing with that which is within the comfort of painting, such as the appearance of things in a mimetic way. I think that is where I have shifted my position. I have arrived at a point within my painting career where I have the facility to paint any tangible form in a realistic way. I'm not going to grow if I continue in this vein.**

So I think art is about stepping outside of all that is known, to pose questions that address all that doesn't seem to have an easy answer. But that doesn't stop me indulging any interest that I have in the visual appearance of things. Nothing is off-limits.

JO'C: Tell me about *Table Dance as the Network Stops.* The painting seems to be as enigmatic as its title.

CH: **Yes, that painting has many enigmatic elements. The figure in the doorway is also repeated in the corner on the right hand side. She appears to be standing on the table – dancing. I thought it was strangely witty. As I manipulate the subject, I create these strange juxtapositions which inadvertently appear to create narratives. I didn't aim to create a narrative of a figure dancing on a table.**

JO'C: It occurs though the process of painting?

CH: **Yes. I also became fascinated by the blue shoes of the central figure, Sam. That seemed to be one of my lasting impressions from her visit to the café. These are very simple points of engagement with the world. It doesn't appear that I am dealing with the big issues but these things are important to me - memories – what happens to us as we pass through the world. Perhaps those are the things that really define our experience, rather than grand, political concerns. It also becomes a starting point for a very human engagement.**

JO'C: You've spoken before about Marcel Duchamp's *Network of Stoppages*?

CH: **Yes, there is a sideways glance to that in the title. The café is a railway café. It looks as if the figures on the left hand side are seated on a tube train. We used the Underground to get to the café. It was part of the subject. The title refers to the network of railways, and also the end of this series of paintings.**

However, the theoretical underpinning of the painting is to do with the abandonment of set rules. The mathematics are scrambled, a dance with the mathematical tables of Euclidean pictorial rules. The reference to *'Network Stops'* is a reference to Duchamp's *Network of Stoppages*. Duchamp's work is particularly concerned with abandoning fixed notions of measuring space through working with random occurrences and chance. It is a conceptual piece that is philosophically fascinating. Duchamp challenges painters to construct paintings outside of cultural convention. Quite literally, you could use a chaotically divided tape measure and liberate pictorial space.

JO'C: Duchamp's writings were commonly abstruse, as was characteristic for many texts of that era. How relevant is the acknowledgement of Duchamp's abandonment of painting in the latter part of his career, as well as his possible endorsement of that which abandons the conventional?

CH: **It is an incredibly complex chapter of art history. Duchamp was a very intelligent artist, and in the former part of his life, committed to painting. Perhaps his flaw was that he was unable to continue a painting practice integral to intellectual thought. However, even at that point, his conceptualism was concerned with the nature of painting and challenging the Euclidean conventions from the past. His investigations into time and the fourth dimension remain important to the future of painting.**

As for the relegation of painting to mere craft, this has been a commonly held view. I picked up on it when I was a student; that pre-modernist painting was simply illustration that conformed to a simple set of rules. Yet if you pick through those Modernist greats, from Matisse to Picasso to de Kooning, they might have rejected realist conventions but didn't conform to the cliché that all past art is a form of simplistic illustration. From where I am standing, I can see a very distinct connection between artists from all centuries who are taking what Duchamp is proposing as a challenge to formal conventions. There is a history of unique, eccentric invention that begins with Giotto, all the way up to de Kooning that cannot be culturally assimilated and remains mysterious to this day.

JO'C: Can you give any examples of painters (preceding the 20th Century) who rejected conventions such as Euclidean geometry?

CH: **Funnily enough, there are probably more examples of inventive painting prior to the 20th Century than there are in our contemporary era. Although superficially, if we glance around the National Gallery, it looks as if there is conformity, this is not the case. If you think about the nature of painting as an additive rather than a reductive activity, where you begin with**

nothing and build, you will be much more in the mind-set of the old masters. The possibility of departing from Euclidean convention becomes more likely the more additive and more creative the approach to painting and the grander the task undertaken. If you imagine figurative painting without photographs, we have a method with no source material fixed by Euclidean geometry. I can find examples of unfathomable pictorial invention throughout art history but I struggle to find examples in more recent times because painting is less complex and artists more willing to accept the rigid formulas given to them by technology. The greatest painters of all time, Veronese, Titian, Rembrandt are extraordinary not because of their craftsmanship, but because they transcend that craft to make astonishing works of art.

JO'C: Euclid was the first to propose how these geometric theorems could be applied to comprehensive, logical systems. Would you therefore say your latest work is illogical?

CH: **We have to be careful when discussing art of assuming the semantic constructs that belong to other disciplines. It would be reasonable to say that the work is illogical but I am not sure how that sits with the work being functional. To be functional it has to have a systemic base. It simply is not one that we can reduce to a known structure. That has echoes of chaos theory, doesn't it?**

JO'C: It's a form of anarchism, yes.

CH: **Anarchistic, as opposed to anarchic.**

JO'C: In what way?

CH: **Well anarchic, I believe, is the abandonment of all logical, rational thought. Whereas I think anarchistic emphasises the individual over the convention. The individual has the right to determine their own behaviour as opposed to conforming to social norms. I tend to call these paintings *'transrational'*, as opposed to irrational. It is a term borrowed from Malevich. It seems to reference the transcendence of rational thought.**

I believe art is really a process of transcending that which is known. I don't think its destination is irrational, because that would mean it is the opposite of rational. I don't think painting is in opposition - it is simply different.

JO'C: Are you alluding to your work being reactionary? If so, is it opposed to contemporary culture? Or structuralist methods? If not, it's not a polemic, it is naturally unique and unopposed?

CH: **Yes, I don't think art operates particularly well as a polemic. I don't think it needs to serve anything outside of itself. In fact, to do so can be compromising. Having said that, it would be fair to say that as an artist I am influenced by all that is going on in terms of contemporary culture. I think sometimes even if there's a currency that I don't agree with, it can focus attention. I am very aware of what I see as art struggling under structuralist thinking. Perhaps the paintings do respond to that. Perhaps…**

JO'C: Perhaps there is a counterbalance?

CH: **A counterbalance. In the same way that I want to find a pictorial resolution to Sam's blue shoes, I want to find a pictorial resolution to the post-Marxist challenge of structuralism. But I don't set out with this as an agenda. It's been a very long journey to get to this point which began with an ability to draw as a small child. Being a painter, being able to paint and dedicating my life to that is who I am. It's never easy to know how to respond when someone who doesn't have that background starts proposing that all I believe in is a fallacy. You can't really unpick that.**

JO'C: You referred to the phrase *transrationality*, as coined by Malevich. Drawing appears to be the most pivotal phase in the creation of your work. Unlike historical painters' restraint in the colour that overlaid their grisaille underpaintings, your latest paintings have an apparent liberty residing in the application of hue. You speak of the importance of *transrationality in your paintings* - does this include the application of colour and paint?

CH: **In short, yes. My method allows me to be very focussed on the possibilities of both drawing and painting. Although it seems perverse to split it into drawing, underpainting and overpainting, it does give me an opportunity to think about how far I can stretch the possibilities of line and then tone and then colour. Perverse, because I know that as I apply colour, it will affect the linear aspect which in turn, has to be rethought and reworked. I don't seem to be able to paint or draw at the same time onto a blank canvas. It just seems to be too difficult, but I'm in good company there because there are many painters in the past that weren't simply colouring in but had quite protracted methods. Look at Titian. The application of paint and colour creates light and space which changes the entire linear structure. It would then be revised and revisited. Painting is very, very difficult and you have to find a method that enables you to negotiate its many aspects.**

JO'C: It is important to note that what you have created is entirely different to what I, as a painter myself, envisioned the result of the drawing I saw on the canvas last year to be. It is clear that there have been drastic changes to the composition since the drawing was finalised. It wasn't as simple as colour being laid on top of the drawing, almost as an afterthought or in imitation of everyday reality. How do you respond to the use of colour as a form of decoration or beautification – in short, a reinforcement of drawing?

CH: **I can't envision the painting from the drawing either! I have to have something to work with in the beginning. I have some reference material: drawings and photos but nothing that constitutes a version of the painting. Even the sort of pencil drawings that result after days and days of work, don't give me that much. They're a beginning. I need to put something down that I can respond to and change. I need the painting to be telling me what to do. Spending four weeks drawing onto the canvas gives me a lot to think about when I come to paint. It's not a question of filling in areas of the drawing; it's about hanging a layer of thought over all that has been set down. It is a constant process of replacement.**

When I come to painting, I have a large range of vivid colours and I am always trying to reinvent space in terms of colour relationships. My colour is as liberated as the linear construction of space. It's not decorative in a superficial sense because it is facilitating a new reality not prettifying our world, but that's also the case with Matisse. I am finding out if I am much of a colourist.

Drawing for Table Dance, 2014, pencil on tracing paper, 6 ½ x 7"

JO'C: Looking at a particular passage of the painting here, there is the illusion of translucency. I don't want to call it a portrait… perhaps 'an impression' is more suitable. An impression of Gaynor. You can *almost* see through her hair. However, it is clear that you have not used translucent paint. You haven't painted her hair using translucent paint over what appears to be 'beneath' it. It's reminiscent of John Singer Sargent's handling of translucent subject matter. To imply the black lace in '*Lady with the Rose'*, he didn't glaze a bluish layer of paint over the figure's skin tone. Instead, he mixes the *exact* colour of black lace laid atop of skin and applied it in one opaque application of paint. It is neither lace nor skin, portrait nor background; it is both simultaneously.

When I view a namely Cubist painting, my eyes appreciate the harmony in the elements of the painting. However with these paintings there is something much more discordant, much more fragmented. It feels as if the painting is flickering. There are several images that the eyes are being confronted with at once. The brain is wrestling with the pareidolia of the figures and recognisable shapes hidden within the negative spaces.

CH: **What really interests me in painting is duality and metamorphosis. A lot of these aspects are coming from the idea that the painting, and paint can transcend itself. Simply, things can be many different things at the same time. There are aspects of multiple images, but I think the point that you pick up with translucency – it appears that the paint has been glazed, but actually it is a thick, physical material layer of paint, is one way of me finding an answer to transcending the materiality of paint. It can become more than paint. It is thick flake-white swathes of paint and it is also of such thinness that we can pass through it. It is not that I am representing an object that is transparent. In my painted world, Gaynor's head is material**

and immaterial. It is all very unstable. In *Thinking About Georges Braque* the blue sky is green paint or green paint is blue sky. Every aspect of the painting must have that multiplicity.

The connection with the cubo-futurist chapter of art is interesting as there's an aspect of my work which comes from that, but there's also something that's happening in the paintings which refers to my previous interest in realism. There's a pictorial playfulness which comes from an awareness of Modernism as opposed to being entrenched within it. As a student, I was very interested in American realist paintings. Large scale paintings like those made by James Valerio, Richard Estes and Gregory Gillespie. They were countering the Modernist American mainstream painting of the 60s. What I liked about those realist painters is that they seemed to want to make a spectacle from grabbing the contemporary world in a very forthright way. It didn't seem to be too elitist or overtly theoretical. I think they were very refreshing. That was the kind of painting that I started making. I started out by showing with Nick Treadwell, whose gallery was more of a circus. Part of that legacy is still with me today. I now want to make paintings that are very open to all Modernist possibilities, but in a spirit that believes in painting without perhaps taking itself too seriously.

JO'C: I think a common symptom of postmodern painting is what I mentioned earlier – a lack of essence. Or even, a lack of faith in there being an essence. We often hear *'the death of painting'*, *'the end of painting',* or at least: *'everything's been done before'*. These topics are counter-intuitive to the act of building upon Modernism and progressing through any historically stagnant points with painting.

CH: **My work is probably *post-Modern,* truly, in the sense that it has grown out of earlier Modernism without being imitative of its appearance, but without being postmodern in the sense of not believing in the possibilities of painting – denouncing that faith in painting as an alternative reality. You said earlier that you thought that my painting looked very different to Futurist and Cubist painting. You could see some of the influences but the sum was far greater than these references. Their existence is proof that there are many things that we can still achieve and do.**

The way we struggle to talk about good painting is indicative of its originality and uniqueness. If we cannot quantify it through language, if we cannot articulate it through cultural references, it indicates that we still have art. It results in the audience being flummoxed by the spectacle. 9

JO'C: When talking of the spectacle, do you mean that in regards to the dystopian situation of spectacular culture, as coined by Guy Debord, or that of a unique phenomenon; a show?

CH: **A spectacle as one of showmanship. I think it's straightforward. Something that is visually rich which wears its skill on its sleeve. Something extravagant. This has been integral to the**

survival of the painting throughout history. It's the reason why we had Rubens, Turner, Picasso.

JO'C: You have mentioned that Modernism is one of the main inspirations for your latest work. The typical acclaim of the early Modernist lineage falls upon the lap of Cezanne, progressing to Picasso with Cubism and then the partisans of Futurism etc. However, Matisse belongs to an alternate line of 20th Century enquiry, inspired by Orientalism and the utility of personal pictorial signs. The issue resides in the particular way we confront Modernism's truly non-linear history. Are you an exponent to this particular lineage, thus employing a personal vocabulary and other methods which epitomise early 20th Century art? A modernist painter within postmodern times, if you like?

CH: **I don't really think so, no. Besides, there are modernist painters within postmodern times. Artists like Frank Auerbach who is undeniably important. I don't see myself quite in that light. If I'm involved in a lineage, I'd be more in keeping with Balthus, or Stanley Spencer. Arguably Modernists who are really on the aesthetic fringe of Modernism.**

One of the qualities that distinguish Matisse and Picasso from Cezanne is the tendency in their work towards inventing Modernist pictograms. Particularly Picasso, where there are these symbols which we can learn and then almost *'read'* the paintings. In this respect, they were aware of constructing painting in quite a linguistic way, employing signs and symbols to communicate. That is something that doesn't fit so neatly with the way I think. I am not trying to come up with symbols that represent anything. I am trying to build a construction, like a carpenter makes a table, or a gardener who plants flowers and nurtures them. There is pictorial notation, of course, but I see painting less as a language for communication and more as a means to fabricate reality. I am not interested in pictorial shorthand to communicate. Perhaps, that is one of the things that differentiates my work from some of the Cubists. I am always looking for an arrangement of form, line, colours that in some way builds something new. I am interested in how something is in our world, and what it can become.

The work is surrounded with messages; we talked about my titles, but at the same time I am not really interested in the idea of painting as communication any more than the gardener who creates a garden is setting out to communicate anything. There is another nod to Braque there. But none of these things are without purpose. We can tell that a gardener loves nature and I guess you can tell I love painting.

JO'C: After mentioning *transrationality* and Malevich earlier, I immediately thought of Minimalism. Art being reduced down to its most essential elements. Is that the possible future of your enquiry?

CH: **If anything I'm going the other way.**

JO'C: Complexity?

CH: **Complexity. Speculating on what a maximalist painting might look like. In our modern era we have never had it. The notion that hyperrealism is maximalist might need reviewing. Essentially hyper-real painting is a monoculture of rational engagement repeated an enormous amount of times. We don't actually see a great deal of painting which has an attention to the details of painting in a single canvas. It's an unsual position to take. That's where I suspect the paintings will move towards.**

JO'C: Is there any importance whether or not the objects will be as recognisable as they are now?

CH: **Often if I'm painting a figure, I'll paint it several ways. Often if it's getting too realistic, it'll get scraped back. Sometimes if it's too simplistic, I'll make it more individualistic. I don't really think I'm in control of what the painting needs. All I can do is try to seek a solution to the problem and that may require many different conditions. I don't really have the answers. The paintings are really many different paintings, layer upon layer. I struggle to find the right answer to these problems. The figures must be credible without being imitative.**

JO'C: We were looking at the figures in the far right hand corner yesterday and noted the simplification of most details. The faces are suggested through blocks of paint, almost like the opaque dots you see for the heads of figures present in the furthest backgrounds of a Canaletto. What relevance is the inclusion, or exclusion of such information in painting?

CH: **When a broad audience use the term detail, they are referring to the amount of information that the painting has. That information is to do with our world. So they are using the term 'detail' as lots and lots of illustrated information. But detail in painting is not the presence of a huge amount of information; detail is the *attention* to the possibilities of painting per se. The accuracy and quality of the edge, the shapes, individual brush marks; the celebration of the detail of painting that we can see in Cezanne and Vermeer. That's really where detail resides for me. Not in information. Information belongs to the world out there, not to the painting. So decisions about a small block of colour as a figure are crucial. How does this block of colour become a form in space and a space in form? How does this block of colour facilitate different forms and spaces simultaneously? How does it relate to all the other blocks of colour around it? Every physical characteristic of the painting is part of its dynamic that has to be considered. That's what I think about when I am painting, and it's the painter's ability to make these judgements, intuitively, intellectually and creatively that really distinguishes a great painting from a mediocre one.**

JO'C: It is difficult to judge the conventions of one painter by the conventions of another. So how can we quantify and discuss the quality of your work?

CH: **An art historian friend, who is at the top of his profession, was intrigued by my analysis of Matisse, but I told him that it had taken me thirty years to see what was happening. He**

retorted that if it had taken me all this time, and I knew painting inside out, then there was no chance for an observer like himself.

So it is very difficult for the viewer to discuss quality. I suppose I regard the role of the viewer as bearing witness to the creative act as opposed to being invited into a dialogue. For the most part, I don't see works of art as a means for cultural dialogue although of course it happens and can be a healthy way of discerning and discussing ideas. However, principally, I think that the artist creates a unique construction that is put out into the world to exist and be witnessed. That's as far as it needs to go.

JO'C: What do you feel it takes to be an important artist?

CH: **The problem with discussing this is that it sounds so frighteningly elitist. We have no problem in recognising the extraordinarily gifted musician, writer and actor in the contemporary world. I think we have to be prepared not to shy away from the simple fact that there are artists who have a natural inclination to think about the world in a very visual way. They can draw, they can paint. They bring a creative imagination to those skills to make astonishing artwork. When I was teaching I could identify those individuals straight away, but they are very, very rare….maybe one every five years, and they are not those who are going to conform necessarily to the cultural expectations of an important artist.**

JO'C: The 'faux naïve' is a style that is common in the visual arts. It is interesting that faux naivety isn't occurring elsewhere.

CH: **It appears to be an intellectual and theoretical position within the visual arts. Of course the history of art shows us that it can be a very valid and articulate position. But the question is really, whether it's becoming not a decision but a default. And then there is the counter emphasis on craft and skill with the apparent solution of reintroducing the kind of atelier education system.**

JO'C: Where formal painting is taught?

CH: **Yes. That certainly is happening. The problem with it is that what is really being taught is an ultra-conventional way of making art which sits very uncomfortably with any of the modernist aspirations to break conventions.**

JO'C: You believe it's projecting the student painter back into the 18th Century?

CH: **Perhaps the 19th Century salon tradition. As a result these artists can produce a very convincing image, but its only convincing because of its systemic normality. I would extend that to the proliferation of photorealism which is doing the same thing. We are not being offered unique artworks – oddly enough we are being offered very predictable cultural artefacts much more in line with postmodern thinking. So I'm not really sure where the answer lies. Back in the 1980s we had the new expressionist movement in America and Germany. There was a general consensus that the reason why most of this painting was as**

you described, 'faux naïve' and thought of as 'bad painting', was because artists simply didn't have the training to make anything that wasn't naïve. It was accepted as such. That was where we were. To a certain extent, the reintroduction of classical training programmes now produces artists that can make something which doesn't suffer from that naivety, but clearly isn't the answer either.

JO'C: By that notion, we have a schism in contemporary art. One faction would be the faux naïve group whilst the other would be as Malevich phrased it, *"thieves who like to take things and claim them as their own"* (referring to the classical painter who 'steals' nature). The latter often lean very heavily on computer based imagery such as photorealism, or the digital.

CH: **However there is not a great deal of liberated painting in the middle which is inventive, complex and celebratory of painting.**

JO'C: Is that what we are talking about with your work? Something that opposes the scepticism of postmodernism?

CH: **As I believe in art, some might see it as opposing that scepticism. I was never sceptical any more than my musician friends would be sceptical about the certainty of music. If you want to understand art, figure out how an artist thinks.**

JO'C: You spoke of the responsibility of artists to articulate about their work for young artists to engage with. This is in contrast to the alternative scenario of young artists engaging with the writings of non-artists, such as Clement Greenberg, Hal Foster, Roland Barthes, Griselda Pollock. How can one learn from studying practioners' work without simply adopting and imitating their aesthetic? Rather, following their own line of enquiry whilst understating the findings of a mid-career artist.

CH: **It's very difficult. There does need to be a greater awareness of how significant artworks interconnect but also a connection with the artists themselves and future generations. We have the traditional academic system of the past and, prior to that, apprentices who worked under an esteemed painter. As a result, artists naturally learnt from other artists. More important than simply the imparting of knowledge about the craft of painting, was an insight into what an artist is: how they work, what they say in conjunction with what they do. That unfortunately has been broken in contemporary art . Far too much emphasis is placed on art students taking their lead from the theory of art, which, for the most part, is a cultural interpretation of what an artist has done, rather than an enabler of what to do. So we do need to find channels for improving a direct dialogue.**

We also have to be realistic about the timescales that it takes for an artist to develop. From the stage of assimilating and understanding simple conventions, to perhaps imitating more avant-garde strategies to finally attempting to contribute something unique. The history of art shows us that the process of development is extremely lengthy. Whether it's Arshile Gorky or Matisse, they all had very long educations (under apprenticeships or not). It can

take perhaps 20 or 30 years for an artist to make some kind of contribution. Gorky is a good example of an artist who appropriated almost every Modernist style but eventually found his own voice.

You can't start making avant-garde painting until you really understand the conventions of painting, and all those deviations from the norm that suggest possible new pathways. You don't get this from reading theory, but really, really looking.

JO'C: What we're really talking about here is indicative of the future of painting. Its future existence is thought to be uncertain at best. Alternatively, painting is as Nicholas Serota seems to believe –I paraphrase- irrelevant in our media-orientated contemporary society. Furthermore, it is commonly perceived as not promising in comparison to digital artforms (such as video) which thrive in the limelight of recent exhibitions, biennales and awards.

CH: ***Common*** **perception is not informed perception.**

JO'C: There's a lot of reactionary art which seems to deem painting conservative by its very nature and counterproductive to engaging with contemporary art and progressing.

CH: **Of course we live in an era of modern technology. Video, photography and digital media. I see the role of an artist as transcending their cultural normality, not to be complicit.**

It's been useful for my development to distinguish between artist's materials and artist's media, particularly as new technologies are casually spoken of in the same light as painting.

J'OC: Painting and video are both currently common systems for making art?

CH: **In some respects that is true. But video is not a malleable *material*, it's a system. The artist can work within it but ultimately that system is defined by an algorithm that is given, not invented. Video cannot escape this algorithm without ceasing to exist so it really sustains many postmodern beliefs that artists do not create, but rearrange what is already known. The digital photographer can't work outside the pixel, so the unit that determines reality is culturally known.**

Where painting differs is that the painter can determine any configuration of building blocks of his or her own invention. It is not just a matter of adopting a means to articulate an idea, but to create the very means to define a new reality. The system has to be invented, not just utilised.

JO'C: So how do you see the role of photography in contemporary art?

CH: **I have worked with photography for decades. Perhaps really getting inside photorealism has helped me to understand where photography stops and painting begins. My conclusion at this point is that photography doesn't offer the possibility to resolve experience in the way painting can. It can document, it can be very lyrical and very beautiful but it will always be**

tied to our world through its systemic normality. It's not free, so it can't resolve our world through fabricating an alternative. And that for me is really the crux of how I define art. The means to build afresh from all that we have experienced, and not just to be in the shadow of our world.

So the camera remains a useful tool, but I do not accept my photographs as works of art. Of course I have taken many thousands over the years, but the very means through which they offer me a version of reality has to be challenged. Pushing the paint around takes me into new territories. The resolution of our world, which I so often speak about, is the point at which that new reality begins to function and stand alone from all that belongs to our world. So the rigid technology that defines photography becomes a subject in need of resolution.

JO'C: And do you feel this can happen through Photorealism?

CH: **I don't think it does any more, but if you go back to the Seventies and look at the paintings of some of the original Photorealists I think they were trying to find difference through painting, rather than duplicate the image. But I think we now have to go much, much further, and that is probably why I have been thinking about the possibilities of Modernism again. Not to appropriate, but to open up new explorations. Maybe for me, history is repeating itself. The proliferation of lens-based art; the challenge of the camera of over a century ago, has returned, perhaps let through the backdoor of Modernism's own existential crisis. It has heightened my awareness to use the malleability rather than the traditions of painting. I think you can see that in this new work.**

It is interesting to think that a lot of early Modernists anticipated art being made with gas for its ultimate malleability and yet we have ended up with art being made with the rigidity of a binary digital system.

JO'C: We see that production orientated work in constructivism, de stijl, purism. Simply, it was responding to that of the machine aesthetic. We are now in the midst of a new era of industrialism and technology. It is one of the most familiar elements of first world society today. Painting is analogue and entirely contradictory to the digital.

CH: **The great thing with painting is that it can be flexible. It can take on the machine aesthetic and then depart from it. Painting isn't at odds with our modern world any more than a writer using words, or a musician using musical notation is at odds with the technology around us. Again, it is one of those absurdities. Painting seems to be oversimplified down to an antiquated means to represent the world and therefore not relevant because a camera or video camera does that much better. It is the conventions of painting that are restrictive, in the same way that the perspective offered by the camera lens is limiting. Painting offers the possibility to transcend its own systemic normality so remains a viable way forward. Ironically, that is why painting has such a long history which superficially might deem it as old fashioned**.

JO'C: The latest drawings of yours here are indicative of a new series that departs from the café scene we see in these paintings. Could you explain what you may arrive at from these drawings?

CH: **Well if I knew the destination of what I was going to do, I'd already be there. However, I've become increasingly more interested in the figures in the painting. So at the beginning of a painting, I'd like to emphasise the figure instead of an urban landscape. The subject will therefore be more figures in whatever settings. I also wanted to root the work more in the world around where I live, rather than London.**

JO'C: Here in Gristhorpe?

CH: **Yes. I enjoy the idea of beginning with quite intimate subjects which you wouldn't normally think of in terms of painting. One of the developments of my urban landscape painting was a point at which I stopped looking for views and started to paint the environment in which I was centred. I wasn't actually looking through a camera or drawing what was in front of me in a sketchbook. I was thinking about constructing a view of an environment that offered no obvious view. The 'view' is a conceit in its own terms. Similarly with this new subject, I'm interested in beginning with things that you wouldn't make into a painting in a public way. Very quiet, intimate moments.**

JO'C: Knowingly introspective, you might say?

CH: **Quite introspective. But I don't expect the paintings to be sentimental. That's something that I would try to avoid. I'm not interested in filtering out emotions and realities that we might find disagreeable. So that's where the work is going, but currently it is just a sequence of drawings.**

Drawing for She/Rose, pencil on tracing paper
5 x 5 ½"

JO'C: One of the last things to mention is that a colleague of yours recently exclaimed "I like this portrait" whilst gesturing to one of the figures in the painting. As we can see, every element of the painting is either reasonably or extremely fragmented. Facial recognition software would not register what he was referring to as a face. Can we discuss the figures as such? Or have they become something else?

CH: **What is curious about the figures, or portraits, as was implied, is that quite a few people who have seen them have thought of them as being far more alive than a conventional portrait. Far more alike. I don't set out to make portraits. I find it particularly interesting how the more I push things around, and the further they shift away from the subject they seem to be more true to it rather than being a weak imitation. That is very compelling and very mysterious.**

JO'C: When you try to focus on eyes on specific elements, they seem to be flickering. I described it earlier in terms of pareidolia – recognising shapes and faces in cloud formations, burnt toast and so on. When we are looking at the painting, we are trying to recognise something recognisable, but it's not what we expect to be confronted with. Strangely, every painter could find a passage in these paintings which appeals to them due to the way we can view them. Up close, formations of paint become unrecognisable: not representing anything else other than what it is: paint. I am hesitant about using the term 'abstract', however some of the passages of the painting are what Greenberg's colour field painters in the 60s were pursuing in terms of objectivity or liberation from objectivity and pure abstraction.

CH: **Pure painting. When I started this new work I wanted to define myself as a 'painter', not a realist painter. To really paint is to be free from a realist dogma without falling into other dogmas.**

The flux that you speak of is important to me. 'Flicking' between one image and another keeps the work alive, active, yet I often speak about the stasis of painting.

JO'C: Hypostasis?

CH: **Yes. The fact that painting is not a still like a movie still. It is fixed and forever. The nature of a painting is that it is forever going to be constant and in that sense, is outside of time. In the new paintings, that stasis must be evident because it is a condition of painting itself. Yet the ambiguity of images flicking in and out seems to contradict that stasis.**

JO'C: Is there a similarity here to the Futurists' fascination with movement and speed?

CH: **Yes, they were aware of that. They took moving through the world as their starting point. The Cubists, and I am simplifying here, took seeing something from different angles. Moving through the world is time-based whereas the perception of an object from different angles is spatially based. Of course, when that is in conjunction with the stasis of painting, it's no longer about movement and no longer about the diverse nature of our perception of the**

world. I think that's the extraordinary thing: most Futurist painting had very unexpected outcomes because they confronted the problem of conjoining movement to the framework of painting. Again, I believe this is another reason for the continuation of painting. The framework of painting, like the framework of writing or music, brings its own condition and magic to whatever issues or problems the artist faces.

JO'C: It brings its own problems too though doesn't it?

CH: **True. Insurmountable problems. For those who continue to believe, it will always be extraordinary.**
