

Jamming with the Double Yellow



*Jamming with the Double Yellow* 2015 oil on canvas 41 x 41 ½"

In the summer of 2015, *Reality*, an exhibition of British figurative art from the past 70 years arrived at its second and final destination, The Walker Art Gallery in Liverpool. This show included two of my recent paintings of a café in London, and so Gaynor (my wife) and I went to Liverpool for the opening and renew friendships with many of the other contemporary artists included in the show.

Before the opening, we visited the Liverpool Tate, where there were a handful of paintings by the “Salon” Cubists, which I have long enjoyed. Metzinger and Gleizes, for all their philosophical pontificating never achieved the profundity of Picasso or Braque. They just weren’t great painters in mind-set or articulation, (which amounts to the same thing), but their paintings are full of joy, and visual games worthy of plunder.

Outside the Tate, moored in the Albert Dock, there was a reconstruction of a “dazzle” ship. I think it was offered as an art installation, though it was indistinguishable from those real dazzle ships developed in the war to avoid easy recognition. An artist could do something with that notion of dazzle, not just to reiterate what it was actually used for, but something else.

It was good to renew my acquaintance with the two café paintings of London. For the past few months I had been painting my home and garden in the Yorkshire countryside. *Les Souvenirs du Café Anglais* had been given a central position, and was the centre of a discussion that evening of where figurative painting could go next. *It* obviously wasn’t just a reconstruction of the actual café.



*Les Souvenirs du Café Anglais* 2013 oil on canvas 78 x 83”

The following morning, we had breakfast in a fake American Diner called Ed's Diner. We chose it because our youngest son is an Edward, Ed to everyone else apart from us. Sitting in the window booth, we looked out on the main shopping mall dominated by multinational retailers. I had my camera with me, an old medium-format film camera, and when Gaynor's eggs arrived, looking as good as they did in the touched-up picture in the super-sized menu, I started taking photographs.

I never compose when I am taking photographs. As a painter with the freedom to place anything, anywhere and on any scale on a canvas, I have never understood the point of composition in relation to photography, limited as it is to aligning objects and framing the view. So I just point the camera at anything that I want to document. This activity continued after breakfast, as I walked the back streets of old Liverpool whilst Gaynor went shopping.

And that was some of the beginnings that lead to *Jamming with the Double Yellow*. But I do not want to illustrate any of these events, nor limit the input into its making to my recollections of that overnight trip. We returned to Liverpool a few months later and there is a partial representation of a second diner in the foreground that might refer to our lunch with Jennifer Landau on that occasion. Equally though, this painting draws upon other events and thoughts, whilst not being *about* any of this. In discussing the nature of painting we reach the limits of language and reasoning designed for other purposes. Painting is not either/ or in a binary sense. Manipulating language to better describe painting, I am comfortable that *Jamming with the Double Yellow* is a *not*-portrait of Gaynor in Liverpool.

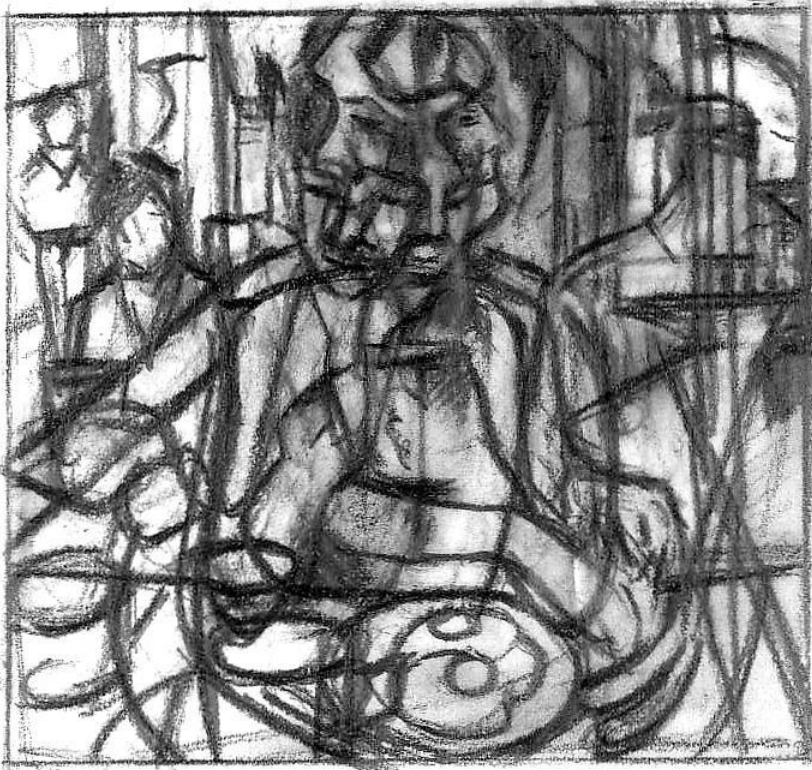
*It dazzles not to obfuscate.*

Tiny drawings on tracing paper are the first manifestations of material thought, so slight that they seem to be resisting art as a concrete product. Not that art is primarily a product, to the painter, art is an action, (*arting* might be more apt), where experience mutates into something else. This places an emphasis on process, where everything that happens in the realisation of the painting has intrinsic importance; though the original experience of being in Liverpool is of least importance. After all, at that point I was not an artist, nor was I thinking about an art work. I was firmly on the side of just being an ordinary person on an ordinary day doing ordinary things; and taking ordinary photographs.



Had I not gone to Liverpool I would still have made a painting. It would have been a *not-painting* of something else, but it would have been of equal importance.





I first make drawings to find a formal dimension to that which has form (easy enough) and that which does not (impossible). As the painting developed the tension of this challenge might best be illustrated with the description of the fried eggs (easy to paint) and the complexity of the central figure/street corner.

The drawings are not pragmatic exercises in working out problems in preparation for the painting. Everything I do is as if it is the last thing that I will do in the studio, and in retrospect, it is obvious that each state has its own presence. But most of what I do is erased, painted over or thrown away, not because it has served its useful function in realising the next step, but because it is enough that it happened, just as a musician has no need to record all that is played.

This painting was made of the central head. It is typical of works on paper that never leave the studio.



Parallels between painting and music are fraught with difficulties. I stumbled into the title of this painting because it seemed to say something about the process of finding through play. How apt also, that when musicians jam in the recording studio, we know that it is the music making that is being *recorded*, not chunks of the real world. For a painting is also a record of all that making.

But it has to be more than this. If the title implies play, it is not because the pursuit of making a painting is trivial. Quite the opposite. Whether the artist begins with a plate of fried eggs, or the holocaust, the subject is always mundane in that it belongs to our world. If art is the act of commenting on all this, the noise of so many pronouncements would be deafening and indecipherable. But of course art is silent because it is not about saying anything about our world. That is illustration. Rather it is about *becoming*, it is about *being*, and arting is a purging of the artist's voice to allow something else to take over.

*I paint not to find but to lose my voice.*

The difficulty of painting resides partly in the mundaneness of its methods. All I can do is try to find a way to transcend the mundane through whatever I know about painting. And of course most of that is just ordinary skill of description, formal balance, colour harmonies etc. To ask of a painting to cease being ordinary through the very means of making which are ordinary, would seem to be perverse. Yet I believe it is possible, and is the defining feature that distinguishes certain paintings as being works of art rather than cultural objects.

But this is not a belief widely shared by my generation of British artists. After all, I am the same age as most of the YBAs, now middle-aging, and as a student I was assaulted with converts to continental art theory who dismissed any notion of art being beyond the mundane as romantic folly.

Far from dismissing this counter-view, I believe it is a very valuable default position. For painting to become a work of art it has to become resistant to deconstruction into its mundane parts. These might be recognisable, but the totality must over reach this analysis. It must be more. It is folly to assume that all paintings inherently have a transcending quality; most fall away to nothing when they are accounted to other discourses.

I jam with the double yellow to find something more; otherwise I might as well just paint Gaynor eating her breakfast, or present one of the photographs that I took on the day. There is a very fine line between a work of art and a painting of an event, irrespective of the style and elegance in which it is depicted.

Returning again to those fried eggs, this could be a reference to the current fashion in hyperrealism for meticulously described items of food. Fried eggs are particularly popular. A few years ago it was ketchup bottles, and drinking glasses continue to be a favourite.

Hyperrealist paintings of comfort food also reminds us that descriptive painting which just sets out to record chunks of our world in an overtly mechanical style, whilst being nihilistic, can also be celebratory and joyful. And for all the remembered grimness of the YBA, not all of its art was joyless. The playfulness of Hirst's spin paintings comes to mind; popular, nostalgic and without any pretence of transcendence. They may mock my idealism, but the whimsical nature of *Jamming with the Double Yellow* contains within its own make-up a degree of self-mockery. Superficially, it has nothing to announce an agenda of Ovidian metamorphosis.

It also seems to be too realistic and too Pop to be identified with the morphological painting of Picasso (though the painted head study might be closer), and too concerned with minutiae (and the historic means to describe this) to be a truly modernist aesthetic. Perhaps it is modernist in spirit, but coming from a painter on the far side of a hyperrealism, with a deep-seated fear of illustration.

In all this, it seems to be on a knife-edge, and dallies dangerously close to all that needs to be overturned. But it is not easy to find a new direction. If hyperrealism is problematic, there is also a need to reject the guttural naivety of so much modernist painting. Equally, the pre-planned

commodification of an idea is not an option. Perhaps the painting is most successful in the manner in which it realises the morphing of objects. For this is discovered through the painting process; through the age-old dance of painter with canvas as she catches him unaware and demands that it should be this way, not that. And of course this is not to do with correcting the painter on matters of form, but new subjects, born from within the painting. Most of what is evident at the end was not suggested from the experience, nor the source material but by the painting itself. What ultimately separates this painting from any kind of post-modern image-making then is this jam, *the jamming that is reciprocated by the painting itself*.

The analogy with child's play has a further dimension than just joyful exuberance, because often at the heart of play is a reciprocal relationship where the scenario created by the child, or the inanimate object on which the play is centred, emits the status of a unique subject. It becomes real, so the child is in a real dialogue with something that is perceived by the onlooker as just a material object, and nothing more. To the child, the toy is invested with such a will to be real, that it becomes so, but this can only happen in a suspended time and space where the actual materiality of the toy can be disregarded.

And so it is with the dialogue between painter and painting, or it must become so in order for the painting to cease being just paint on canvas, and just another image that returns us to the world. From this then it is clear that the familiar teachings in art school of painting as formalism, later replaced by a Marxist accountability to issues of the day, are equally deficient. If art is made in ivory towers then they are not towers of academia, and theoretical argument; they are more like towers of a child's fairy castle in which anything can happen, apart from a mundane rationale that insists that the art work is just another cultural artefact belonging to our world.

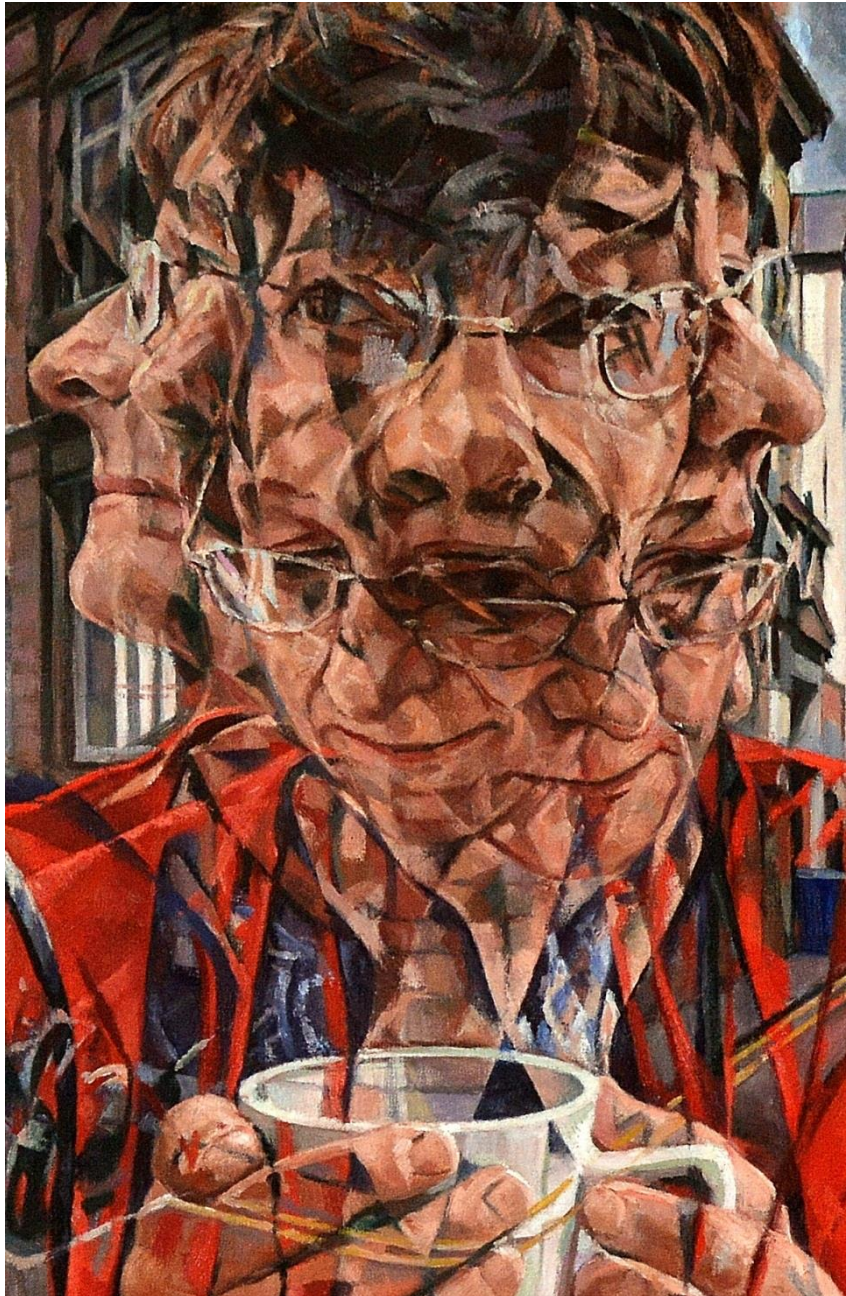
It is important then to emphasize that the jamming process is working in two directions. Coupled to the activity of play is that will to make real; *the will to relevance*. But that will must be manifest through the making. It can't just be one of declaration. The artist has no pre-given mandate that magically transcends the material reality of the subject into an artwork. There's no Midas touch. It is only through becoming embedded in the making process that the painting *might* become its own autonomous subject.

The table top still-lives of all these café paintings must become something else, and that alternative state is not predetermined by me; it is a consequence of being in the studio, pushing the paint around and listening to what is required next. So the glass of water that I have seen in the café is not a work of art, neither is the photograph of the glass of water that I have taken, nor is a photorealist painting of glass of water, nor is a glass of water relabelled by an artist as something else (Michael Craig-Martin famously declared it to be an oak tree). It only becomes something else when the painting itself consumes and transcends its original identity. If it fails to do so, it just becomes yet another object to be played with in later works. The painter, (and the art world), generates far more stuff to be resolved than resolutions.

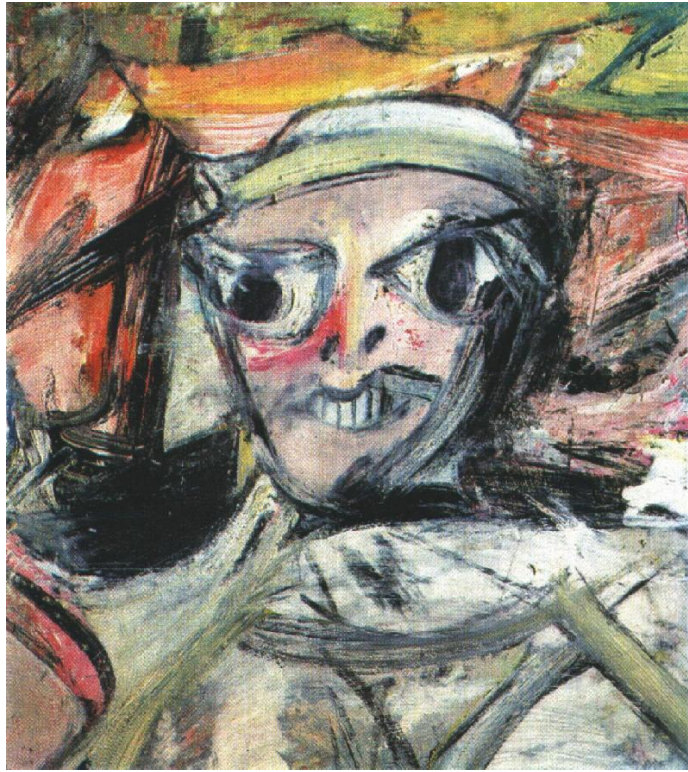




If the glass of water in the corner of the painting has a troublesome status of being too similar to a glass of water, then perhaps it anchors the painting, in part at least, to our world. Formally (being in the corner and on the edge) and ideologically, it has something of the status of a repoussoir, leading to something that really dazzles. More than this, many of the mundane features of a glass of water are anything but mundane in establishing a different subject. Transparency, reflection, refraction, ellipticality, floating, sinking, crystal brilliance and brittleness are all features of the central figure.



The figure can only have these features in the space of this painting, and, in this condition it would be foolish to regard it as a reliable commentator on what might have passed in Liverpool. But it is yearning to have a voice. The eye becomes a mouth, open as if eating or speaking. Of course it cannot speak, and I, the painter, have long moved on from saying anything. But in a recent lecture entitled *Aesthetics after Post-Modernism*, I compared the image above with a De Kooning, focusing attention on his obsession with painting the mouth. I could also have made this comparison with Bacon.



Common to all these paintings is the very organ that has the potential to communicate and create meaning. But before we rush down the semiologist's route and adopt the common view that we must *read* this meaning as a narrative, it is important to reflect on what is actually happening. For what is in evidence are not linguistic meanings of any kind, but the birth of a subject that *has the potential to generate meaning*. In this respect, the painting is not a mass of signifiers, but a real subject, like you and me, which has the potential to assert a unique perspective. *Cogito, ergo sum*, painting has meaning, but not as linguistic discourse.

The mouth equally has the capacity to bite, to chew, to spit and to consume.

*Jamming with the Double Yellow* is the smallest oil painting that I have made for a few years, and shared studio time with much larger canvases. But each painting helps inform its colleagues and paintings to come. I am currently working on a new *breakfast-painting*;



*The Synoptical Cubist Orders for Two.*