

Leda and the Bridgewater Swan



Oil on canvas 50 ¾" x 43 ¼"

Painted in the summer of 2015, "Leda and the Bridgewater Swan" was one of two easel paintings that resulted from a visit to see the painter Neil Douglas and his model Elena in his studio in Manchester. The process through which it was made is a practical demonstration of my current thinking and life as an artist.

Neil has long been regarded as a photorealist painter, regularly exhibiting in London. Like a number of artists of his generation (Neil is in his thirties), he had come to the conclusion that photorealism had become too ubiquitous in the art world and, if it was critical at all, was re-running questions about photography and authenticity from a previous era. Moreover, its continuation and proliferation amongst more mainstream art was evidence that there was little real critical agenda in the wider scene. For Neil to move on, he recognised the need to stand outside of jaded theories offered by post-modernism and ask much broader questions. The challenges that he faced were much greater than the value of copying photographs as a means to making paintings. It was tantamount to returning to the challenges that faced artists prior to this current era in which post-Marxist teachings continue to legitimise art as simply a learnt means to communicate within society, and dismiss the notion of art as a unique act of creativity where the artwork exists as an autonomous subject irrespective of its social surroundings. Put in this context, the sustainability of the pre-given mechanical language offered by photography is clearly questionable, but then so is any text based or learnt academic process. The form of art had to originate from within the self, or from within the creative process.

Neil approached me a few years ago to help him with this challenge. Clearly my role in such a relationship cannot be to offer a stylistic root out of this dilemma, but to help clarify what is true and what is fallacious, often cutting through a lot of theoretical dogma that undermines the possibility of creating art. If anything can be established through dialogue with other painters, it is a framework in which art could occur. My relationship with Neil is typical of a number of similar associations where artists gravitate towards my ideas and work as a way to liberate their own entrapment. And, in turn, I learn from their investigations. After all, art is not a conceptual activity, nor is it the illustration of ideas. Art is outside of language and can only be found at a point beyond illustration. We can say a great deal about the nature of art but art itself is created when the artist finally has nothing to say. So the simple dissemination of ideas through discussion only takes us so far. That doesn't negate the value of learning or question the possibility of quantifiable development, but it does mean that the means through which art and artists can inform each other is far more difficult to pin down. We have to be interested in what artists do, their activities in and outside of the studio. To conflate this with the making of art itself seems to be an inevitable stream within Modernism (the subject of the artist and his model is an obvious example). That the creation of art as the subject of art is largely absent from more recent mainstream offerings is equally telling.

This discussion on Neil Douglas has, on the face of it, nothing to do with Leda and the Swan. But to discuss art, we have to abandon familiar rational frameworks if we are to get anywhere near recognising a creative pathway. I have learnt that such an apparent disconnect might be more pertinent.

Neil had decided to paint directly from the model and had contacted a modelling agency to send him "older" models as he wanted to avoid any gratuitous titillation in his paintings of the female nude. My decision was to visit him, not knowing who he had selected to paint, or how he was painting them, and use that experience as the beginning for something in my own studio practice. Though it might be as reasoned to say that the motivation to visit Neil in his studio to make a work of art occurred long before I even knew of his existence. Life is a continuum of events which we arbitrarily divide into that which is significant and that which is not. It is not that I would dismiss the importance of life events as influencing what I do as an artist, but simply recognise that it is not

possible to know the weight of any one thing as being important. This renders the kind of Marxist's writings by John Berger, with which every art student is familiar, as unhelpful. I decided to visit Neil but that was part of a chain of events and thoughts far too complex for me to fathom, so much so that I cannot account for my actions or lay claim to my work "dealing" with this or that issue. To make art that is true, we can't distil it into discreet projects.

If this seems to be an abdication of responsibility towards meaning, then it is worth considering what this stance permits rather than denies. Neil was associating age with decay, presumably from his previous paintings of autumn leaves and weathered concrete buildings. He had determined that an older model would not just place his paintings outside of the familiar eroticism of so many paintings of the female nude, but that he could continue his dialogue about aging as a dismal process of decay. He said as much. But to not adopt such an agenda, to not really have an agenda that is scripted, permits a real sensory engagement (which returns us to the origins of aesthetics). The model is a human being, with emotion and character. Posing nude in front of a male artist, Elena was undoubtedly sensuous. Witnessing this event, I have a responsibility to be honest and open. The clumsy tools of the camera and the sketchbook are used by me to try to prolong, intensify and document this event. I cannot be certain of all that I felt and thought, nor can any of us objectify experience to any great extent. Part of any aesthetic engagement will always be a mystery to our rational selves, and we must allow for a framework to make art that recognises this.

In contrast to Neil, the painter, standing at a distance from the model to enable the painting of a picture of his subject, I walked around her, seeing her from every possible angle, up-close and within the setting of the room. The drawings are little more than diagrammatic scribbling. I took about 15 rolls of medium format film, making hundreds of transparencies.

And I extended this process to the details of the studio, the painter, visitors to the studio, the landscape visible through the windows and skylights, and the changing patterns of light and shadows. As the model moved, I followed her activity. In all this, nothing is off-limits, and I try not to make judgements on what is and is not appropriate. The only criteria that I have for such judgements are socio-political and cultural which are of little use. Increasingly, I have come to share an anarchist's outlook to understand the truth that underpins art. We can't borrow the values and morality that guide our ordinary lives in this pursuit.

Neil's studio is in a Victorian tenement type building, in area of Manchester close to the city centre. When I was a student I painted a number of urban landscapes of this area, with its characteristic railways arches and canals. Although now it is more gentrified, it still has something of Manchester's grit as a Northern city, once significant over a century ago. Through its heart run the railways and the Bridgewater Canal from the Industrial revolution.



"We always remember whose money it is" Acrylic on paper 1988

After spending a few hours with Elena and Neil in his studio, I walked around the neighbourhood, and up onto the viaducts, continuing to observe and document. On the train journey home, I recollected the day's events, drew in my sketchbook, just as I had done on the outward journey, and photographed the interior of the train and some of the railway stations as the train passed through.

There is, I would admit, something peculiar about taking photographs and drawing on these selected occasions. I do not, after all, go through life permanently with a camera, pencil and paper (not quite anyway). So this day trip is different in that I am bearing witness, through these tools, to my normal activity of bearing witness. Such artifice must impact on my observation but it does not change its nature fundamentally. I do not, as I might have once done, ask the world to stand still as I frame a view and record it for a fraction of a section, nor do I attempt, in any way to make a photograph or a drawing as a work of art when confronted with the subject. Pictorial concerns such as composition must result from a new reality finding its form, not rearranging our world as an agreeable design. Nevertheless, given the artifice of my activities whilst on location, I know that it would be flawed to try and recreate this experience based on the documentary evidence that I take back to the studio. Nor should I consider suspending my sensory experience of the world as I dedicate weeks and months to this one day.

I cannot make a painting of Neil in the studio with his model if that requires me to exist only for that one day, or as a photorealist might, to exist for only a fraction of a second. Art must keep pace with life, accommodating what it will without rational determination from the artist. Perhaps I cannot claim that the day trip to visit Neil is any more important than any other day in the studio to make this painting. He doesn't feature much in the painting, though the challenges that he faces would often feature in my thoughts about him as I worked.

Life in the studio is as sensory, as physical and as active as it is on the street. Where it differs is that the artist is subservient to another being, the art work. In this instance, I first made a drawing looking at all the material that I had gathered on the day. The drawing is not of this material, but feeds off it. This drawing turns into new drawings and is then erased and replaced with something else. I have no predetermined image, but as one image is formed it informs the next.



The conclusion of this process was this drawing on tracing paper. The notion of a conclusion is problematic in that it also serves as a beginning, but the process of making art is not a continuity without landmarks. These might best be described as points where the art has a coherency, not to the world out there, but to itself, and in parallel to what theologians would describe as a hypostasis, in which the mundane becomes a portal into something else. It is why making art is always an act of faith. This little drawing is not of Neil and his model. It is from that day, and from every day before and since. It becomes a subject, and all subjects are figurative. In art there is no actual place for mimesis or abstraction though art can take any stylistic form. But on this, I have learnt that thinking about style is just a distraction from making art and is more likely to end in a cultural product that addresses a minor pictorial concern. I do not regard any of my recent work as conforming to a style and am always surprised at their appearance when I finally put down my pencils and brushes. They could look differently.

This drawing might have led to a large painting. Instead it led to further drawings, one of which led to the painting that is the subject of this essay. Though obviously this is a forced history, given all the unknowns that coloured this painting, it is possible to trace some of its broader formal developments through a sequence of drawings.

From the lower left side of the initial drawing, this new drawing finally emerged.



Several drawings later and this was made.



The final drawing, after many changes;





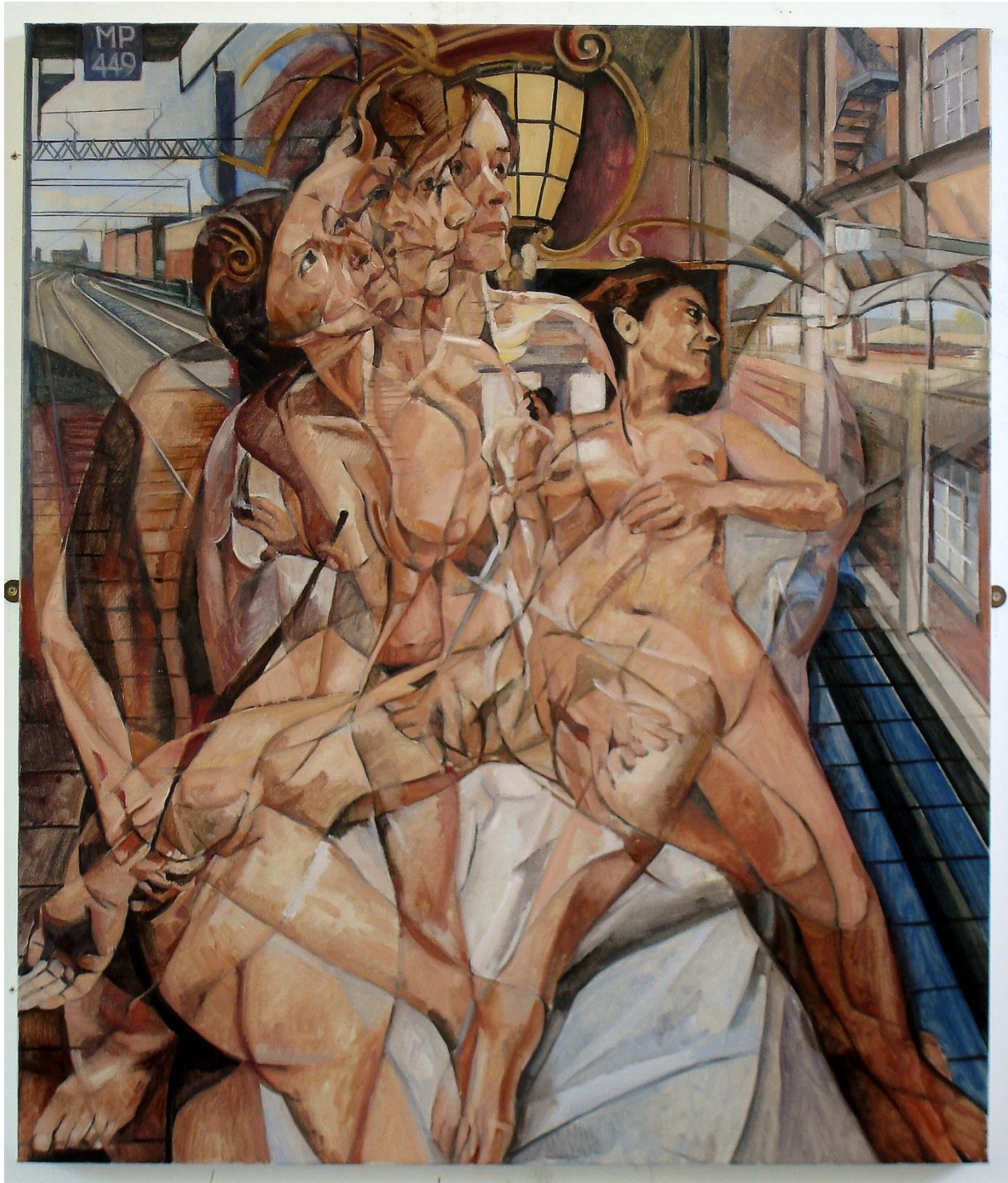
The title of this drawing is a "Long Way from Home". As the drawings and paintings develop they find their own identity and narrative. These narratives interest me enough to record them through different titles. Each painting goes through dozens of titles. As the painting shifts, it becomes a fundamentally new subject. And we name subjects, from our children to our pets. It is a sure sign that they own an identity and are not just an extension of ourselves. If an art work does not demand a title it is probably just an object, a signifier of meaning, but not something which has the capacity to create meanings. It is that capacity that distinguishes an art work from just a cultural artefact.

It is important that these narratives are not the same as the actual narrative of Neil in his studio. Why repeat what has already occurred? Each state must embrace all that I am, but also reach beyond the self. Art is not akin to a confessional. In the end, the artist is actually unimportant. Perhaps that is why Neil barely features in this painting.

It is worth noting that at this stage there is no mention of Leda and the Swan. This narrative had not yet been born.

The transition from the last pencil drawing to a painting on canvas is a pragmatic procedure, when the paper can no longer offer any more states and there is a yearning for scale. Up to this point the process has been carried out without any thought for a material object of any real substance. Although I know, from experience that a drawing could become a painting, perhaps a very large painting, at no point from visiting Neil, through dozens of drawings, could I envisage a painting of any size or appearance. I do not work/live to any known ends. There is only the process which demands points of stasis, but these can only be determined through a commitment to the process. It can't be forced. Obviously there is no space for studio assistants or the delegation of any aspects of the process to mechanical methods. I cannot know what is relevant when I play/investigate with and through the paint, so I must just commit to this activity. That is all there is.

The canvas progresses through a period of drawing where all previous thoughts are elaborated, condensed, erased and replaced, and this is then developed into paint. At first, this takes the form of a thin under painting in a limited palette. Where this description is problematic is that it anticipates an over painting, because such a state cannot be envisaged. It is a hard won battle to establish anything in paint, and the pursuit through a limited palette and diluted paint is the best means for me to find a reality. It is not conceived as something to be replaced, but it always is. And subsequent palettes are highly elaborate, paint layers built up with lead white and metallic blacks.



In this photograph the painting is developed beyond the under painted stage and for the first time the overlapping arrangement of arms in the centre of the painting is beginning to morph into swan shaped forms. The process of painting is marked by change, from one day to the next it must always be different, new and exciting. Change has also become a characteristic feature of the painting as it exists at any one point. By this I mean that the stasis of my painting is marked by an elusive shifting of imagery, space and form where nothing is certain. Though we can relate to a narrative, that narrative is not a reliable dialogue on anything that we can regard as real, and, what is more, it has been generated by the unique and concrete pictorial relationships between the different parts of the

painting. These have been found, not placed, and in our world, such concrete relationships are not responsible for the foundation of meaning. So it would be foolish to regard this painting (probably any painting) as a direct narrative on our ordinary lives. We must leave that to the illustrator.

Where this painting differs from earlier paintings of mine like "Coffee at the Cottage Delight" is a greater recognition that pictorial space is not just different from real space, (that art is not just part of life), but that difference *must be explicit*. A painting from 2010 would have its origins in much the same process as this new work, but arrived at a state of seamlessness where it might be confused as a realistic painting of an actual view. That it is fictive was often overlooked. But recent developments in my work are founded on more than just demonstrating ideological intent. It has been a necessary evolution, through series of large café paintings, of garden paintings and now these paintings of Neil and Elena, which permits a more comprehensive response to (and development away from) my experience of the everyday. It is a further shift away from being an illustrator.

There is also a greater certainty that pictorial complexity and unity, the point at which the painting functions, is not confused with a different kind of certainty that a painting is complete because it faithfully imitates our life (looks like what it is meant to represent). This may seem too naïve to even mention but it is a very real danger in a secular age where so much is valued against our own mundane existence, and art is deemed significant if it directly relates to the physicality and politics of our day. There is some irony in recognising that realist painting can only exist as art in an ideological age which gives it a space to be in parallel to our world rather than be of it. That is a sophistication which has largely been squeezed out by our current ego-centric obsessions. A painting may well have nothing to do with what the viewer has seen, what the viewer knows to be true, or regards as important. But to be certain that it offers an alternative it must appear to be different and deny the ease of being too much like our world.

We are more familiar with painting being different from the modernist era, than from more recent times, (best explained by a seriousness of intent finally capitulating in the 1960s to an easy acceptance that art doesn't exist at all as a unique phenomenon). Clearly modernist strategies offer the painter possible ways to move forward. But there is equally a danger of reiterating modalities that lead only to modernist cyphers, and we see this in the work of many painters who preserve its heritage. Rarely does such work assert its own identity. In a painting like "Leda and the Bridgewater Swan" I remain committed to realising its idiosyncratic personality. It must be believable, with a rounded character. Though it functions in a space that folds time, this cannot be conveyed as just a geometric exercise. Similarly, there is an attempt to have the material density of paint and colour to be a spatial reality rather than inert pigment. What is sought then is not an illusion, but equally, not a physical mass of paint on canvas that needs deciphering. It is a reality, though not a realist painting.

But this painting mocks my attempts at contemporaneous. Its character has something of the 1920s, and cannot resist an English playfulness that questions the earnestness of its creation. Either side of the reclining/standing figure(s) there are vignettes of the railways, and on the left, the railway tracks converge to a vanishing point in the manner of a school-book diagram on perspective, though the painting rejects such conventions. And on these tracks the row of buildings on the far side doubles as a toy train, complete with funnel. There is a quaint humour in this painting, as there is in all of my works, which gradually emerges. It is never planned.



Painting is not easy, and as the painting develops each state is harder to find and resolve. Every patch of colour affects every other patch of colour. In the centre of this painting, the slicing of pieces of white (bed sheet) had established a movement that was working but out of synch with the morphing heads at the top. Though working well on its own terms, this head sequence was too round in feel. Only after a week of trying different ideas did I stumble into an additional profile within this sequence, which enabled it to talk to the rest of the painting and link to the centre.



As the painting develops, the parts of different figures begin to form new figures which become ever larger in size. In its concluding hours the dominant figure of a seated nude, solid legs parted to either bottom corner and head made from the mirror and lamp at the top, became both more certain and replaced by an even larger standing figure from the white bed sheet. These are figures that are within the very structure of the painting. They are real, whether seen or not, and have little to do with me or the viewer. Such painting is founded on the belief that the death of the painter (author) is not the birth of the viewer (reader) but the birth of the art work.

At the heart then of this painting is a commitment to the creative act. I set out only to follow a process and see where it goes. It doesn't illustrate any one event, nor does it illustrate the myth of Leda and the Swan, and it would be unhelpful to fall into the trap of interpreting anything in this painting, (or any painting). Such ekphrasis belongs to forces apart from the art work and deflects us from asking not what it means, but fundamentally, what it is? Perhaps, the only interpretation that has any validity is that special relationship that the artist has with the painting *whilst it is being made*. It demands to be heard, but how that is understood will affect the process.

The morphology of this and any painting is the most mysterious aspect of this relationship. I will paint for hours, trying out different patterns and sequences, colours and textures. For the most part, this feels like self-indulgent play. Direct realist transcription is an easy sideshow trick, but remove that basic discipline and painting often seems pointless. However, only through engaging with this pointlessness is it possible to find something new. And it is always a surprise when the parts of the painting, the patches of paint, begin to orchestrate something which could not have been envisaged. Crucially then, such forms result out of painting, not conceptual intent. The S shapes of the swans happened by chance, as did the white bulk of the main swan which the figure(s) appear to be riding. It is a real metamorphosis that makes life in the studio extraordinary. This is only one example.

If Neil makes a figurative appearance perhaps it is in the profile cut by the dark hair of the small figure in the centre, herself made from other body parts, and becoming part of sequence of figures.



Such transformations go all the way back to Ovid, but in painting, shape shifting occurs without the need for time and movement. It is the unique plasticity of paint, in the hands of the individual that offers such possibilities which makes painting more relevant now, in an era dominated by so much banal and literal imaging.