

Clive Head

Painting as Morphing

The following notes were given as a lecture to an audience of artists, curators and academics at the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Art in February 2015.

Space

For me, painting has always been a preoccupation with creating space. For many years that was manifest as a realism which ran parallel to my physical engagement with the urban landscape. From my journey through real space I sought a fictive but believable equivalent. Often confused with photorealism, these paintings allowed an expanse of vision, looking around corners, and into different spaces. But the overall presentation was as a seamless totality and formal certainty.



Clive Head/Nicolas Poussin at Dulwich Picture Gallery 2012

Such painting always exists on a knife edge. The ease of its acceptance results from the invention of the space, not the imitation of our world. Extend that invention in any one direction and that ease is replaced with a reality at odds with our own.

My work has always been rooted in experimental drawing. Towards the end of 2012 I allowed the fragmentation of that drawing to characterise the resultant paintings more directly. It was a step away from an apparent ease towards a greater uncertainty, although works from earlier projects had proved to be disconcerting. My exhibition at the National Gallery, London in 2010 not only broke attendance records, but the gallery was permanently crowded as the audience were compelled by a palpable alternative to their experience of the real world. Something strange was going on. This wasn't a reality familiar to our lens-based culture after-all.

My drawings are a palimpsest of space, which destabilises any single clear image. The structure of the new paintings confronts the notion of painting as straight- forward imaging. Certainty resides with the physical building blocks of painting per se, not how they configure to reveal any one identifiable form. That would imply an abstract agenda (I was trained as an abstract painter), but my inclination is to tackle the specifics of the world around me, and to find landscapes, objects and people. The stasis that inherently defines painting as unmoving now conflicts with constantly shifting images. Motifs are established and disestablished.

Labels such as *realist* are less helpful than recognising the challenge of reality. As a painter, I am free to use anything within its vast framework.



Drawing for *Well Beings*



Drawing for *Summer Ark*

The Medium is the Message

This old modernist dictum still has a lot to offer the contemporary painter, and takes on a new importance in light of digital media. The last and indefatigable feature that validates painting is that the structural units on which it is built are always unique and determined by the individual in the studio. Painting might remain for all kinds of reasons but it is only this feature that *necessitates* its continuing existence for being at odds with the homogeneity of the pixelated image.

Every painted block of colour is different, *and must become explicitly so*. Form is revealed by the concrete relationship between each and every block. This defines painting. I pay homage to Braque's explicit understanding of this and it remains true whether the painting is abstract or figurative.



Thinking About Georges Braque 75" x 96"

In a more recent painting based on my home near the coast in North Yorkshire, the narrative of *Summer Ark* is of and about a painter, but the layering of possible meanings extrapolates through the near infinite combinations of painted marks.



Work in progress *Summer Ark* 87" x 77"



Detail *Summer Ark*

Transrationalism (after Malevich)

A collector recently commented about the painting *Wash Day with Actaeon* that he was convinced that I didn't know what or how I was going to paint at the outset, nor could account for much that resulted.

I envisage my activity in the studio as being in free-fall. It is less reasoned and rational as I have developed. In pushing around the paint and playing with patches of colour, I do not seek form but find it. The primary objective is to paint, beyond that little else matters. The near infinite assemblage of both figurative and abstract forms is largely the outcome of the process, not its rehearsal. Painting must excite not just the viewer but the maker and what I end up stumbling into is always more vital than anything that I could have preconceived.

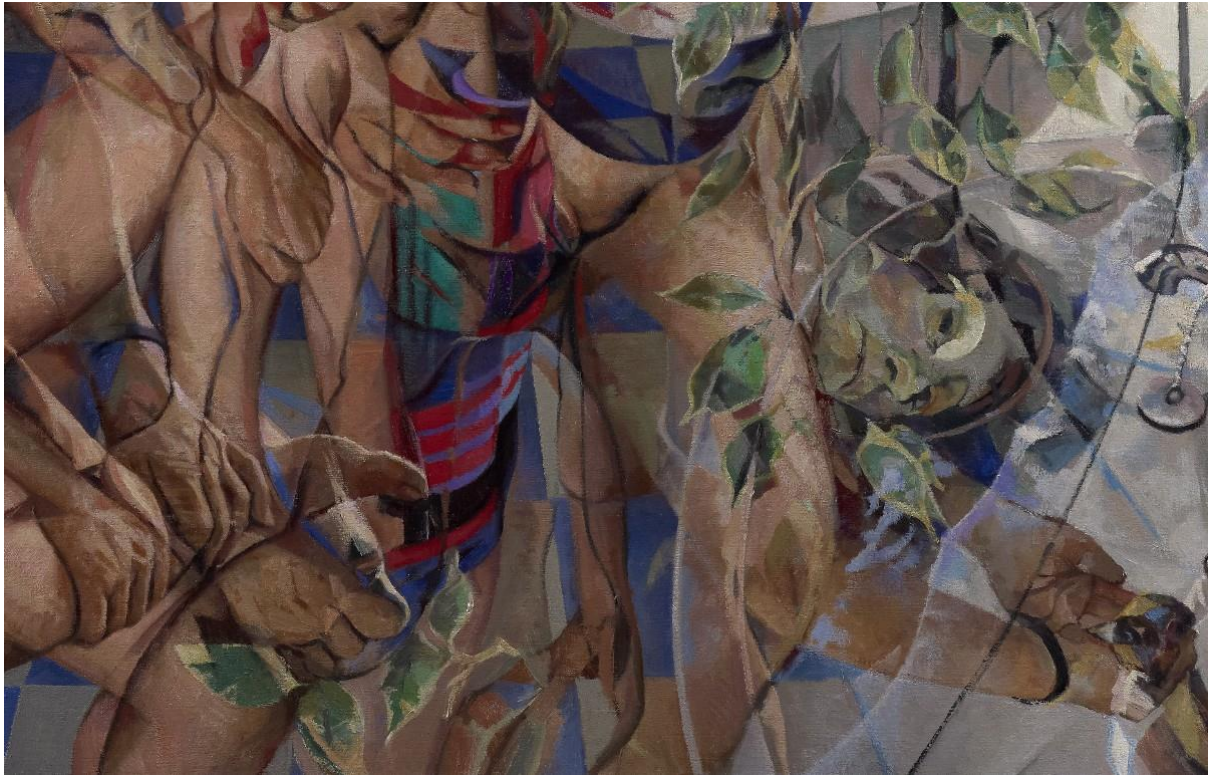


Wash Day with Actaeon 62"x 67"

I use my knowledge of art history and theory to be certain that I take tentative steps into the unknown. What Barthes described as *mise en abyme*, the point at which language and reason falter, is a modern way to discuss the painter's timeless pursuit to uncover the astonishing.

Often I find the paintings touch on mythic stories, quite unintentionally. Actaeon emerged in the latter stages of the painting, and the female figure(s) are integral to three twisting serpents from the legend of Laocoon. The lower section seems more akin to a Rousseau jungle.

Whatever I alight upon to paint and however I finally resolve it, I have always single-mindedly pursued my own creative agenda. My work always comes from an instinctive response in the studio, and an ambition to set the bar higher than I can imagine. The consequence of this is that my painting changes and improves, every year that passes.



Detail *Wash Day with Actaeon*

Maximal Painting

If each painting is a palimpsest of space, it is like a musical symphony or an extended novel. As they are worked on over many months they become more dense, layered and packed. I am influenced by everything that is happening in my life. The beginning is typically an event in our world that happens to be occurring when I decide to start a new work. That event is never something that can be documented as a single view, which necessitates invention from the start. It is likely to be a series of occurrences (my daughter's birthday, a re-union with friends). Nothing is off-limits.

I now define painting principally as an activity in which the process is a perpetual attempt to resolve my unique interaction with the world (my world) through both the material and the immaterial; paint and the space that it establishes. Each canvas is then a testimony to what has been achieved, acknowledging that it is only the final layers of paint that will offer any insight. The painting itself is a time capsule which remains permanently sealed. Paintings are mysterious. I am neither willing nor able to offer much explanation.

We can talk about beginnings, before the subject-matter finds an autonomy which denotes a work of art. At that point subject-matter becomes a *subject* in its own terms.



Les Souvenirs du Café Anglais 78" x 84"

This is a memory of an English café or a concrete artefact (a souvenir) of all that is remembered. Time and space conflate; the panorama of earlier work becomes a concertina, challenging the linearity of time. From this folding of space and time, strange beings emerge. Perhaps this re-engages with that Modernist quest to speculate on the fourth dimension as a cross-section of the third?



The Painted Child, at the centre of the painting, is born out of pictorial origami. I remain indebted to Picasso and Ingres, both masters of discovering new beings from painting what they first encounter.

The process is open ended, transgressing qualifiers such as realist, cubist, and surrealist. Painting has become an auto-corrective activity which excludes nothing, (necessarily not excluding the absurd, the tongue-in-cheek and the comedic). Once set in motion the painting tells me where it needs to go next. This is more than a formal discourse. The work may begin with the everyday but reveals much that is un-nerving, sexually charged and disturbing.

Anarchistic theory and Non-Euclidean geometry

In the studio, the act of painting is at one with its contemplation, so there is little room for theoretical beginnings which would separate mind from body. But my approach has been substantiated by anarchistic theory, which places the onus of invention on me, rather than learnt conventions. This inevitably extends in pictorial terms to moving away from the Euclidean to more random and chaotic impulses and structures (I do not use perspective, measured drawing, images determined by mathematical algorithms etc).

The destination is so different from the point of departure that it is difficult to see the paintings as a dialogue about our world. That alternative is determined not by the illustration of a fantasy but the displacement of a systemic norm with the chaotic and unmappable. Yet it must still be authoritative

and these new paintings are even more precariously balanced on a knife edge, though I have become more aware of that edge rather than what it divides. The paintings are continually being scraped back and re-painted.

The titles of my paintings are indicative of some of my concerns.

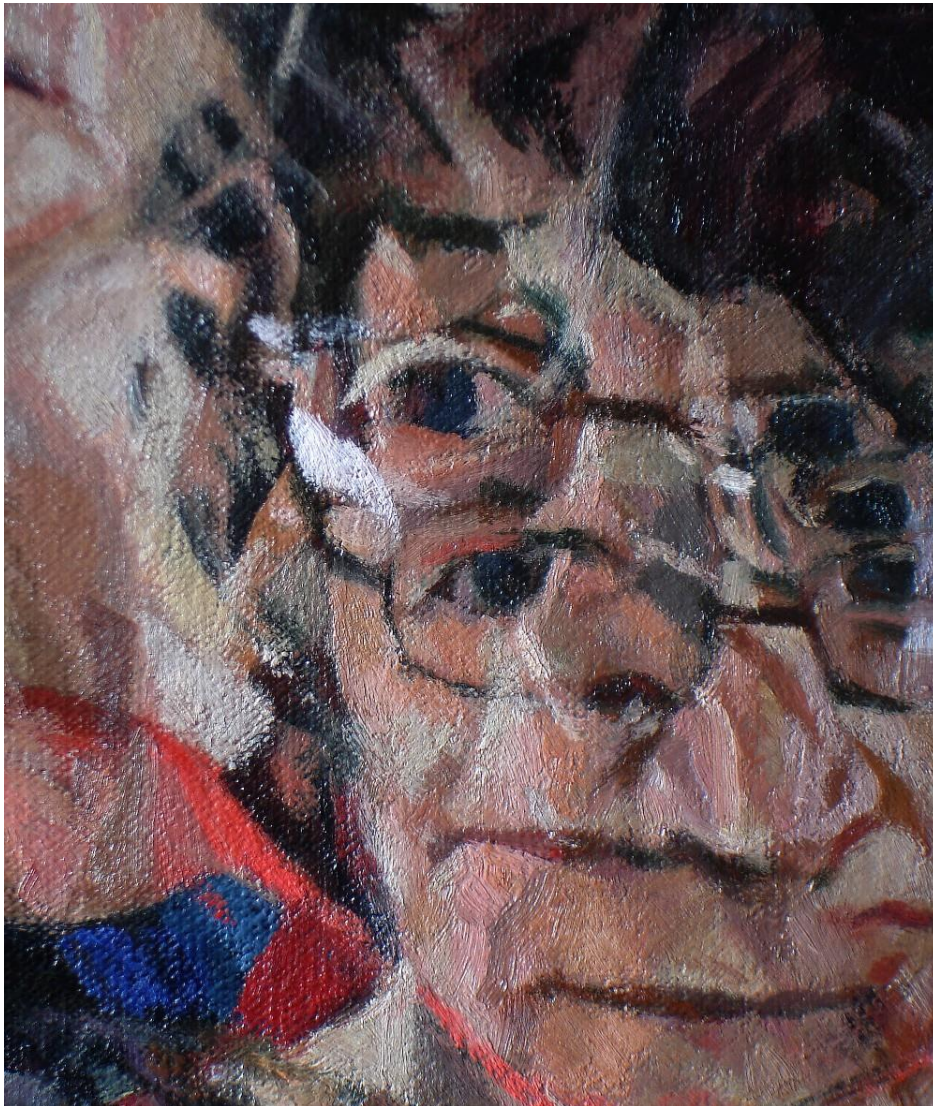


Working on *Table Dance as the Network Stops*

Conceived as a dance with the mathematical tables of pictorial space (which frees the figure on the extreme right to table dance); in part, it also proposes a structure rooted in the chance measurements of Duchamp's *Network of Stoppages*.

It is not that the rules that govern the pictorial world are simply different, but at times, there are no rules. This can only come about by deliberately upsetting conventions. There seems to be a place for different approaches within the same canvas. Maximal painting has to be defined as much by variance and dissonance as the overwhelming density of discrete events.

But for the most part, each patch of colour functions as a negative and a positive space, a solid and translucent plane, and a fixture in space and on the surface.

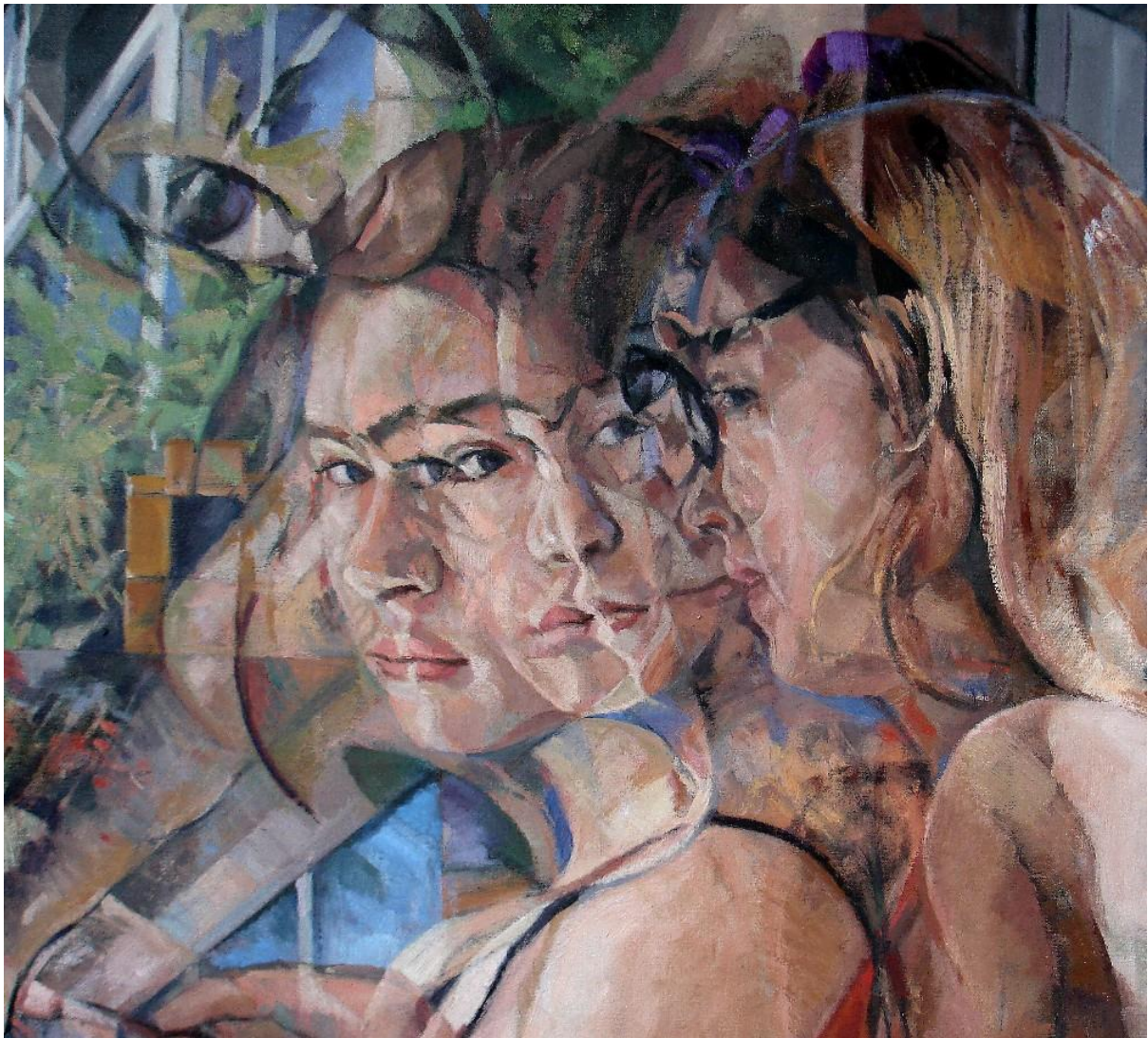


Detail Table Dance as the Network Stops

The pursuit of an English Wunderkammer has become the basis for many of the new maximal paintings. The spaces of my immediate environment have become polyhedral rooms with indeterminate boundaries and uncertain narratives. I now embrace the countryside more than the city. There is undoubtedly an English eccentricity going on, and a history that includes Stanley Spencer, Richard Dadd, Lewis Carroll, Lucian Freud. But equally my painting has always been large in scale, and willing to engage with the excitement of modern painting.

The architecture of the wunderkammer is planar, angular, orthogonal, but its contents often soft, organic, human and biomorphic. The reach and implosions of the body establish a morphing very different from the cubo-futurist fragmentation that also surfaces. Perhaps a glimpse of the unknown is possible in this human folding. A panorama of architectural landscape can be envisaged

through the extrapolation of perspective but to envisage a panorama of body space, more appropriately mapped by an aesthetic engagement that is not exclusively visual, opens a new territory. Painting is as much to do with touch and proximity, as it is with sight and distance.



Detail *Summer Ark*

At the outset, I have no clear idea of how a painting will evolve. I trust my skills in drawing to establish a material beginning that distances my work from reality. I draw copiously on scraps of tracing paper and then on the canvas, always in the studio and away from the subject. The intersection of line gives me the first route of escape.

It is astonishing to think of how that first tiny drawing can become a vast canvas of hyper-complexity. To start with so little, and build, has always defined my practice. That building has to become open-ended, with unlimited ambition, to find new forms of painting that defy classification. The direction that I now find myself taking is full of extraordinary possibilities, made possible by all the exhaustive painting that has come before. And it marks my presence in the contemporary landscape.
