

*Summer Ark and Viaduct*



*Summer Ark* is a large painting from an on-going series labelled “garden paintings” because they all began with events at home and in the garden. As these paintings transcend conventional boundaries that separate inside from out, they are more akin to the expansiveness of landscape painting. These paintings also return me to a particular interest in the rural English countryside and, more than that, they have a space that is centred on the organic nature of the figure. This places them at odds with my reputation as a painter of the city.

To begin to paint from our experience of people, friends and loved ones demands an entirely new way of conceiving form and space. The garden (and landscape that lies beyond) may be over there, but I can only experience it as an immediate vehicle for Romanticism, not as a tawdry piece of earth. And our experience of people is never limited to a dispassionate visual scrutiny, but calls on all our senses and thoughts. If, at first glance, *Summer Ark* doesn't appear to look like a realist painting, that might be to do with the simple realisation that the familiar modalities of realist art are insufficient when considering these subjects.

*Viaduct* is a smaller painting which returns me to the urban landscape, but not a return to a seamless realism of earlier work which was often mistaken for photorealism. It is not just an urban landscape. As the painting falls away from the top, the figure dominates; a multiple form of folded muscle, flesh and limbs, not as a carcass but as a living and sensual subject. The painting began with a visit to an artist's studio in Manchester, and belongs to another new series of paintings. The figures in this painting are the artist, Neil Douglas, and his model, Elena.

Attributing this development away from a more familiar style of realist painting to a change in subject matter would logically suggest that my motivation is to find a means *to illustrate* the subject. Different subjects require different visual means to represent them. For example, the layered and multiple forms might equate to a desire to depict movement. A reasonable deduction perhaps, but, in actuality, there are other forces at work.

The problem here is that my painting has never been a simple manifestation of theory, so it is not possible to account for why the paintings appear as they do. The paintings themselves are the only true account of their being. At best, we can discuss some of the framework in which they have been created.

We can think about the *beginnings* of a painting, acknowledging that the beginning (and the question of how to initially depict my experience of the world) may not be that helpful in explaining the final outcome. For this end point is the moment when all the stuff that has contributed to the making of a work of art falls away and it stands as something distinctive, different and autonomous. It is the point at which all that *I* might have desired to say ceases to be relevant, and any attempt to deconstruct its contents into signs and signifiers of social and political meaning becomes fruitless. In fact we might say that we can be more certain that a painting finally arrives at a point of being a work of art when it has nothing to say about our mundane world in terms that we can readily understand. Instead, it has the potential to generate new meanings but only in accordance with the terms of its renaissance. It is this that distinguishes painting from illustration and renders Marxist art history as a sideshow distraction.

But I do respect the desire of others to understand the role of the artist.

Above anything else, I desire to make paintings.

This is manifest in both these projects in simple terms. Clearly their full on richness and unashamed celebration of colour and form, through the articulation of dense oil paint is revealing of this intent

even if these material features do not actually define painting as art. Similarly, there is a common narrative beginning of the painter herself.

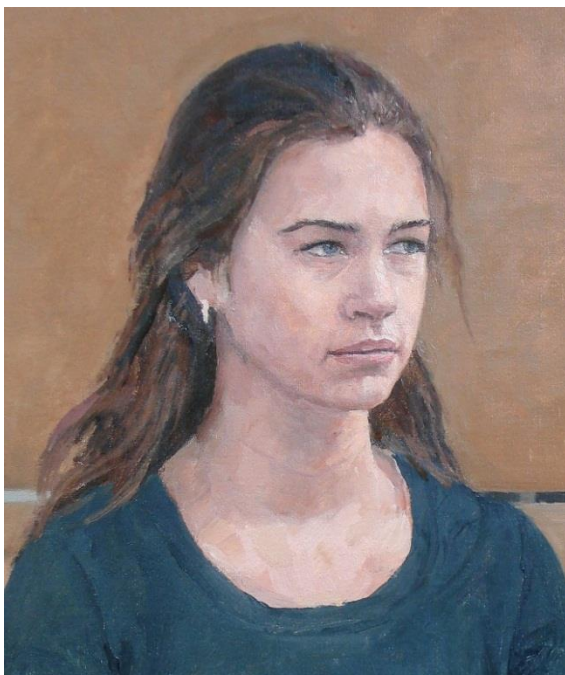
*Summer Ark* betrays this in the figure(s) on the right. This began with observing my eldest daughter Rachel painting in her bedroom which overlooks our wonderful garden. On the patio below, her friends wait for her, drinking orange juice as she continues to paint. Later she joined them. It is an everyday scenario in a home of painters and their patient friends and family. In *Viaduct* the painter is visible on the left side of the painting, though he has become consumed by a much larger profile of his model. The pots of liquid paint are still identifiable.

But these are just traces of the event, and it is perhaps more telling of how far the process of painting itself displaces this subject. And, how far the process of painting displaces the materiality of painting itself for an alternative reality. Because, although obviously made of paint, these paintings reject the modernist dictum of truth to materials as an end in itself. These are places and spaces, not like our world but occupiable nonetheless. The totality of *Summer Ark* is a mysterious world, not a slab of paint on canvas. It is an idyll, yet not one based on a formula of previous idylls, but the consequence of a long process of observation and invention. This mythic transition is alluded to in the title. Perhaps too, *Viaduct* suggests a material conduit for taking us somewhere else.

Where such painting is distinctive from fantasy art is that it is grounded in the everyday. In the studio is a mass of ordinary information, in the form of photographs, written observations, drawings and just thoughts, not just from the initial events but all that is happening throughout the time the paintings are being worked on and all that has happened before.

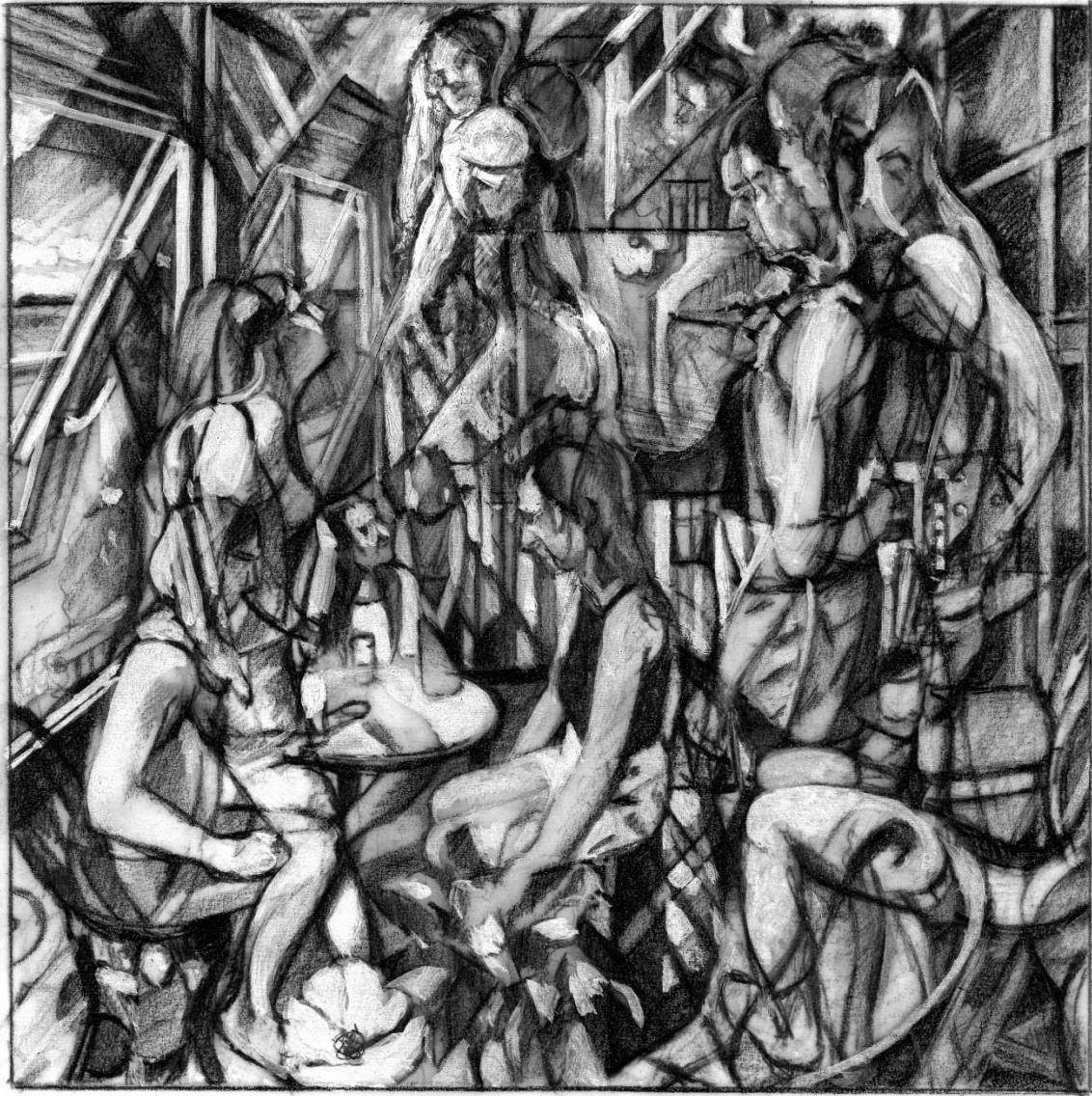
I have painted Rachel many times and this history fed into the origins of *Summer Ark*. I spent a morning with her and her friends, taking lots of photographs and making quick drawings. So when I first start in the studio to think about some kind of creative response, no matter how slight, I have an enormous quantity of information. None of this information though gives me any notion of an artwork, as it is only a reminder of what has happened, subservient to reality itself.

One of those starting points was a small unfinished portrait study made some time before that lives in my studio.



Painting and drawing directly from life has a place in my assimilation of experience but I can only find a way forward by plunging such conventional formats into disarray. The first drawings for *Summer Ark* attempt to leave behind all that is known and coherent. I am not consciously thinking about making a work of art but every drawing is as complete a response as I can make, and only can be seen as part of a chain in hindsight. Drawing and painting is not for me, a linear task to an end result but it always absolute and in the moment.





In this drawing I had carried forward the idea of Rachel's portrait of head and upper body as dominating the structure of the painting, though as a figurative reference it is almost concealed. Not that I ever intentionally conceal anything. It is simply that the drawing develops and envelops as image becomes form. In art, image has a problematic status because it belongs to something outside of itself, and outside of the artwork. It is why I have learnt not to attempt to conceive of the *appearance* of an art work. What an artwork looks like and what it is are fundamentally different.

At least I try not to visualise how a painting might look. But having made this drawing I attended the opening of an exhibition where I was showing two recent paintings in the company of many of the leading British figurative painters from the past 50 years. These are opportunities to consider my work in the context of others which is not something that I do very often. During that opening I was impressed by the scale of the work of painters like Jenny Saville and speculated what it would be like if I could bring my complexity and draughtsmanship to work on that scale. Anticipating what such a painting would look like, I thought this might offer new way forward. So when I returned to the studio the next day I made another drawing with more height and began to think of it as a large painting with figures much greater than life size, and a flow of movement cascading down the canvas.



Now set to transfer this drawing to a large canvas and begin to draw again, I forgot about this ambition and returned to focussing entirely on the process. This is so important because to conceive of the appearance of an artwork prior to its actual appearance destroys the open ended means to realising a true work of art. It anticipates a product, which will only ever be a conceptual cliché as the creative journey has been negated. Far from anticipating anything refreshing for the future such planning keeps painting within an all too familiar critical framework of being preconceived and then executed within a rehearsed system either by the artist or assistant. The only way to escape this is to follow an open ended process and commit entirely to every aspect of this process in the moment. What happens will then be a true consequence of this creative commitment.

It is this commitment too which necessitates a very careful selection of tools and materials in the studio. They must have the plastic potential to be shaped as I intend (and the work demands) and not impose a pre-existing language. There is no place for computer modelling or any earlier forms of mechanical intervention, and the careless description of such programming as simply a tool has proven to be very detrimental. Painting is primarily the act of establishing unique space and form, not the emulation of a means to establish form which already exists. That is obvious in the case of digital programming or photorealism but it is more challenging to understand how the learnt skills of

painting itself shape the outcome. This alone must keep the painter on her perpetual guard, recognising and questioning the tension between that which has been passed down from history and that which is invented. *Summer Ark* alludes to this weight of cultural baggage.

So there is doubt, risk and ultimately faith that are essential to the activity of painting.

It might also be worth reiterating Braque's comparison between painting and gardening, where things bloom over time and the gardener prunes and tenders in the present and later enjoys the emergent form, structure and vista. The analogy seems particularly apt to this series.

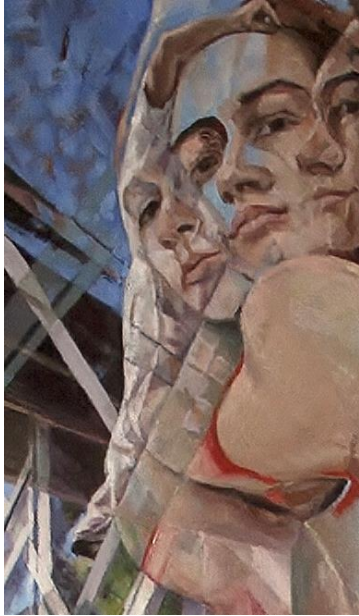
The first garden painting was completed at the end of 2014 and finally titled *Wash Day with Actaeon*. Initially begun when my wife, Gaynor discussed the need for a blind at the window of the bathroom, it extended into a possible narrative on private space, open space and voyeurism. So the introduction of Actaeon had a particular logic to this emerging play. When Actaeon spied the goddess Diana bathing, she turned him into a deer to be hunted. This could be one account of this complex painting. But perhaps this too illustrative because it would appear at times that the observer and the observed share a single identity. Just as we cannot be certain of what is inside and what is outside (rendering that distinction somewhat fruitless) so we are left in doubt as to who is doing what to whom. Perhaps then we are better to think about the second part of the Actaeon story, not the mundane act of an illicit glance of a bathing woman, but his subsequent transformation into a new creature, for that is what is happening in abundance in this and all the garden paintings.

To return to the act of painting, it is this that repositions the subject into a world which folds time and defines a space at odds with our own. The figure becomes a sequence of coloured patches in a concrete relationship to each other. These relationships are always utterly unique and highly complex, (completely different for example to the relationship between coloured pixels on a digital photograph), and that complexity allows for a myriad of possibilities. *Summer Ark* is defined by its open and closed structures where figures are created and dissolved only to be created at a different scale and position in space. It is these transformations that tie *Wash Day* to Ovidian metamorphosis and *Summer Ark* to a mythic idyll. It is not that such an arcadia *looks* different but it *is structurally* different. So when we consider this as being occupiable space, it is not the trompe l'oeil space that we find at the cinema, but one where our mind wanders freely though we are denied as easy foothold.



All this shape-shifting allows for much mischief and humour, just through allowing subjects to surface without censorship or prejudice. Nothing happens by design.

On the day, a house painter was painting the window frame of a bedroom at the far end of the house, and so, naturally, this was registered as part of the event. In the final painting the decorator appears on his ladder at the top of the painting, but is also part of a sequence of figure(s).



The painting is teeming with such transformations in which we can only be certain of a stasis defined by flux.



It seemed apt to develop this subject further in a third painting, and, as this decision was taken in the winter months, a winter painting was begun. In comparison to the open climbing structure of the summer painting, the winter piece wraps in on itself around a central figure(s). Shown here, it is under painted, whereas the *Summer Ark* has a density of layers and colour. The winter painting is still in progress today.

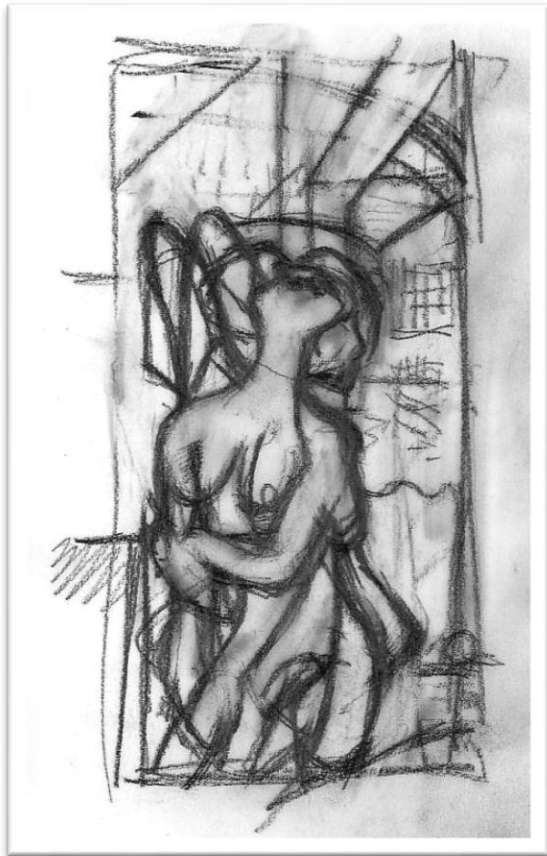
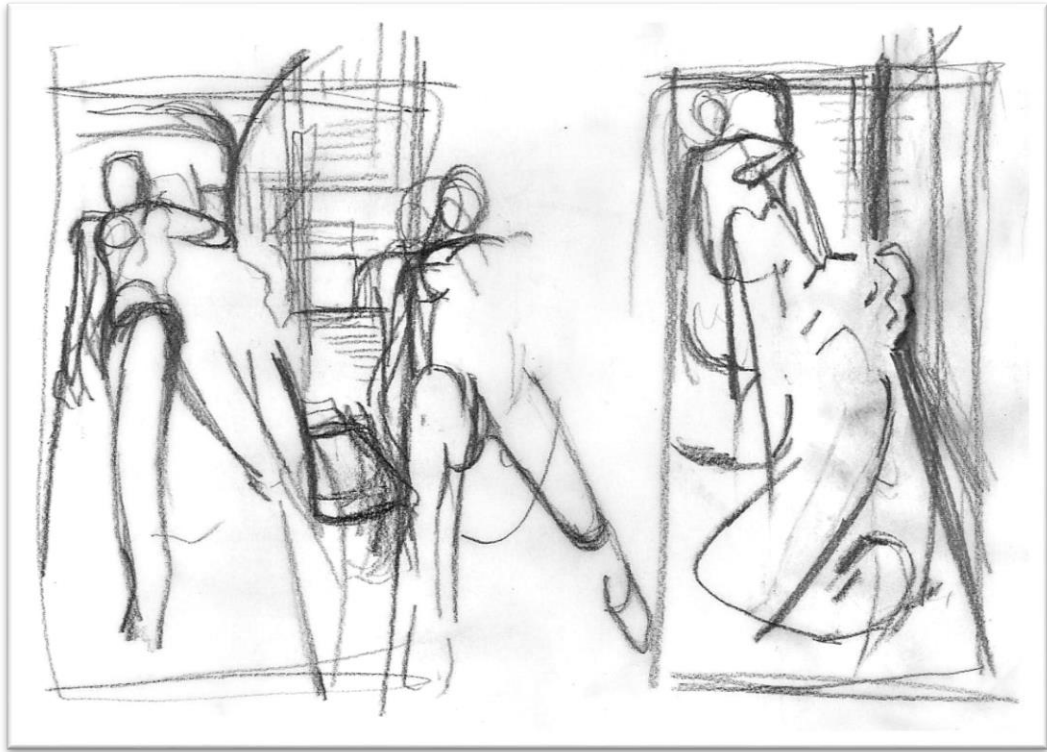




In a recent essay on the painting *Leda and the Bridgewater Swan* I discussed in some detail my association with the painter Neil Douglas and how this led to two new paintings. A third is now likely as I begin to make new drawings, but the first of these paintings is *Viaduct*.



From an initial period of drawing, I isolated a figure sequence which began a new series of drawings that finally lead to this painting.





In the final drawing the central head is well established and this became my initial starting point in making the painting. As can be seen in the detail, this head has a curious aspect where only one profile can be seen at any one time. We either accept the figure looking up to the left, or up to the right, the nose functioning as the eye and vice versa, yet both realities are dependent on the concrete existence of the other.



The larger head to the right of this was a later formation, discovered through the painting process and resulting in the totality of a single dominant figure. This then gives way to a further figure that leans forward and off towards the right edge of the painting. In fact there are numerous further figures, some of which, once they have suggested themselves, I have further enhanced, and others

which are reinforced as I develop other parts of the painting. It is not fanciful to suggest that at a certain tipping point this painting had the capacity to generate figures and remarkably, each with a distinctive character. The modernist cyphers which at times appear in the drawings have been replaced with tangible people and for a while I toyed with titles that reflected this near Pygmalion theme.

If *Summer Ark* references my affection for the English landscape, and its mythic character whether that is in Lewis Carroll, the Ancients or Stanley Spencer, the painting of Manchester is no less to do with my memories and nostalgia. I can't recall whether Manchester still has orange buses though there is such a bus in this painting. I lived in this city for a year in my early twenties and rarely go back now, so the city streets that find themselves in this painting necessarily have more to do with my memories than what I witnessed on a single day this summer. The concrete underpass is an invention grounded in more distant memories and the colourful hard-edge abstractions of the billboards have more to do with the culture of a modern English city of the 1970s, than the synthetic city that I find today. This too is my wife's Manchester; Gaynor was brought up in its work-a-day suburbs in the Sixties and Seventies.

I paint from our lives. The garden of the *Summer Ark* is her preferred environment today, where she spends all her free time whilst I paint in the studio. But these are not biographical paintings nor parochial in intent. They are rooted in the particularities of experience in order to discover a unique particularity that distinguishes them from what has come before, whether from my own history or the broader cultural history of painting. In this they are hugely ambitious.