

Sun Setting Over Victoria

The following essay is based on a lecture given at Northampton University in March 2011 to an audience of art students and lecturers. This looked back on my recent activities, notably my exhibition at the National Gallery, and the completion of a new painting.

Any account of my activities is going to be centred on me, so it seems imperative to state at the outset that I define an artist as someone who understands that art is autonomous. It has an absolute state and is not simply whatever an artist claims it to be. My responsibility is to understand the nature of art and how it functions and to use this knowledge to develop new possibilities within the framework of art.

This centres art on its material manifestation, notably paintings, drawings and sculptures which exist independent of their makers. The state of being an artist is only applicable when the individual is engaged in the process of making a work of art, and only deserving if that work of art is believable.

This art-centric practice may well be at odds with the ego-centric practice of much contemporary activity inside the art world. But if our attentions are focussed on the artist and not the extraordinary nature of art itself, art inevitably results in servicing the artist as a performer, a personality and a politician. In this state, art loses its independence, importance and objective quality. Too often we are left with inert things particularly when they are removed from the circus that surrounds the artist. In failing to understand the relationship between art and the artist we fail to understand the nature of art.

On this basis, the invitation to exhibit my work at the National Gallery last year was all the more challenging. My paintings must hold their own. There could be no extraneous agendas to account for their deviation from being credible; no conceptualism outside of the framework of art to hide behind. The remarkable paintings of the National Gallery simply don't work in this way; they are clear and absolute and asked to be judged on their visual merit.

As a collection the National Gallery has effectively determined my understanding of art, as I have been looking at it from my youth. Whereas the Tate often falters, confusing illustration with art, in the National Gallery, I rarely descend into thinking about social narratives, the ego of the maker or even the visual traits associated with the narrow ideological concerns of an art movement. There is a shared understanding across the centuries that, irrespective of its social, religious or political beginnings, art must assert a credible reality that takes us out of our mundane world, and there is always the fascination for me to see how this has been created. Recognising that art *functions* to create such extraordinary worlds and understanding how it functions defines the mechanics of its framework.

Whereas this might reject particular agendas from the notion of art (notably art as social history and the more invidious import of semiotics into art history) I do not regard this as being restrictive. Clouding our minds with an expectation that art can offer us a narrative on our world often leads to a failure to recognise the astonishing alternative reality that the artist has invented. To engage with art at this profound level requires us to let go of the narrative ties that can hold us back, and understand art as existing not in the social space of our world but offering us a unique psychic space for our refuge. This puts an aesthetic and not a conceptual framework at the forefront of our understanding. I am not advocating a return to a modernist formal appreciation of art, which tends to reduce art to its aesthetic components, but a more holistic contemplation of how art transforms from everyday experience to creating an entire universe. In this, we are discussing infinite

possibilities rooted in a faith in the existence of these worlds. This is a faith in art which is not to confuse art as an adjunct to other faiths. What is being offered on the walls of the National Gallery and all our major museums from the Rijksmuseum to the Prado is an extraordinary array of experiences and a tool box for the development of painting in the future. Rejecting this understanding is truly limiting and has become a real danger in our modern world.

So it was important for me to stage an exhibition of works which highlighted the journey from experiencing our reality to the creation of alternative realities. To do this I made paintings which were based on busy, noisy and mundane locations in London which, if successful, would offer a richness of space worthy of attracting the viewer's interest, drawing them in and delighting them. This establishes that art does not mimic our world, even though the subject may be familiar to us, but offers us its resolution, fixing the chaos, flux and uncertainty. In short, if the viewer elects to engage with the painting and takes comfort from this experience, the painting has made palatable all that is normally difficult to tolerate. The beginning of my journey may be in that which is ugly but through painting I seek not to echo that ugliness but find a beauty. Beauty is at the heart of all art. To make something which is ugly is merely to reiterate the ugliness of our world.

Artists have confronted the ugly since the inception of art. It would be unnatural for me to resolve the horror of a massacre of the innocents, or a martyrdom, as so many artists have done in the past. Mercifully I have not witnessed horrors of this kind and I can only paint from what I have experienced. I share this anchor to everyday life with the Realists of the nineteenth century and Courbet's declaration that he could not paint an angel because he had never seen one is very apt. Just as the Realists (and the Impressionists) were firmly rooted in the experience of being in the modern world, I also find my subjects in the cafes and streets, railway stations and passageways of our world. The experience of being in the city is one that we can all relate to and continues to define modernity. For many it is the normalcy of life and a reality from which at times we wish to escape. Central to understanding 19th century realist painters is their adherence to the power of art to offer this escape within representations of the very subject which might be regarded as ugly and mundane. Manet may well have one foot firmly on the ground, but his art is steeped in the aesthetics of past art. Ruskin similarly advocated that artists should go to nature but only as a source from which to draw. His criticism of artists like John Brett was their failure to reconcile the real world to the invented world of art. Illustration is always passive and not art. If realism is an appropriate description of art from this period and is applicable to my endeavours it must be understood as describing the point of departure for the making of art. This is very different from how realism tends to be regarded later into the 20th century where the rawness of the actual world is left to speak for itself, and art is stripped of its authority to resolve the ugly. This is the case whether it is in the facsimiles offered by photorealist paintings and super-realist sculptures or the abandonment of the artwork entirely for the photograph or the found object. To understand realism as an art movement we have to acknowledge its *difference* from reality; that is, its idealism and faith in a higher order.

With the installation of the show in place it felt necessary for me to engage in the activity of being an artist once again, and to make a painting whilst exhibiting at the National. This took place in the privacy of the studio where indifference to everything apart from the demands of art is a necessary condition. But the painting must be rooted in raw experience, a physical and sensory engagement with the world. The point at which this experience begins and ceases and the artwork begins is difficult to pin down.

There were beginnings in my many visits to the area outside the entrances to Victoria Underground Station. I like its configuration of spaces, its mix of textures, its worn elegance, the people who run the shops and sell bus tour tickets and the ceaseless flow of people just passing through. I like all its colours and lights. I like the still-lives in the windows, chequerboard floor and arches which put me

in mind of so many paintings. But it is also a place that I happen to find myself in and at times I wish I didn't have to be there. It is an area where I have a history.

Before thinking about a painting, I need to experience a place without pre-conceiving how it could be painted. To seek a "view" at the outset is to overlay a conceptual framework (the concept of a view) which would compromise the integrity of the raw sensory engagement. I may make some visual notes to deepen the engagement, not to distance myself from it. At this point it is essential that I am *not* being an artist, just a human being. Being in a place involves my movement around it and over a period of time. I look at and touch different objects and surfaces, the relationship between which is determined by my presence within the space. Even at the point when I try to record some of this with a camera, there is no *pictorial* connection between all the different spaces, objects and people that have been witnessed.

The photography is fraught with problems, and I seem to be alighting on increasingly more difficult places and times of the day to attempt this documentary process. This is partly because of an on-going commitment to making paintings which seek *explicitly* a resolution to the chaotic flux of the city. It is also partly a desire to deal with situations that are largely outside of what can successfully be recorded through a camera. But the greatest motivation is to elicit a sensory overload, the kind of which is at odds with the contemplative process essential to making art. Being pushed around and confronted by people, being blocked by traffic, cautioned by police and in all this mayhem trying to record everything I see around me, above me, and in all directions as I move around, coupled with the technical difficulties of changing many films, dealing with depths of field, exposure and focus, there is no opportunity to be an artist and make art. This is an adrenalin fuelled experience after which I just have hundreds of transparencies. The action has taken place on the need to make art in the future. There isn't a predetermined pictorial concept. It is not a creative act, nor the actions of an artist. My presence, standing on the steps of a busy underground station in the rush hour adds to the chaos. The action of being an artist must happen later under very different conditions.

I use a medium format camera with a lens that is as near to being wide angle without getting too much barrel distortion. Maybe this goes back to when I cared a little about the nature of camera vision. I have used the same equipment for over a decade. The point here is that my photographs are not conventional close-ups. They are moderately wide-angled and are on the limits of photographic vision before it all gets very distorted. The photographs reproduced in this essay are shown full frame, and yet they refer to small sections of the final painting. All my recent paintings are outside of the remit of photography and photomontages (either manually cut and paste or stitched by a computer).

Standing in the arcade opposite the Tube entrance and turning to the right, I took this photograph. It was taken before the day light began to fade and the lights came on in the buildings at the far side of the road.





Looking straight ahead, a shop window was to the side and in front of me. At this stage there is no view to paint, just looking at everything that surrounds me. But the necessary outcome in the studio and the necessary state of painting is that all will become a view. That is, a view contained within a rectangle placed in front of a viewer. But this view is an artificial construction of space. Its success is dependent on all its components yielding any other orientation apart from their placement within a spatial configuration. It is important not to confuse the views that art give us with the physical views in our world. To blur the boundary between life and art, is the beginning of the end of art, a state where art has no unique existence and in this pitiful condition will never truly compete with the excesses of life itself.

When I returned to observing viewers of my work in Room 1 at the National Gallery, as I began to plan a new painting, I was reminded again of how, at the moment at which art achieves its autonomy and its refuge from our world, my political engagement with the metropolis out on the street must be transformed into an aesthetic one. The people I have captured in the photographs have a history and a future which will determine their meaning in our world. Looking at the painting we can guess their destiny and assume an understanding in accordance to our experience. But this is problematic and to suppose that the viewer completes the meaning relative to their knowledge is to deny that the painting has an absolute truth.

The opportunity to read the painting as a reference back to our world remains open to us, but as we do so we deny its validity as art, and regard the painting no differently from the way in which we regard a photograph. But whereas the photograph can only function in this way, it has no unique status, the painting has been created to go beyond a narrative meaning, in which the world is not frozen, like a film-still, but achieves a stasis. In this state, there is no time-frame for narrative, but an ideal which perpetually asserts itself to the viewer (who is in a perpetual state of change). In this condition all that was political becomes visual. The people in the painting are out of our time and continue to assert their human *presence*. Just as Vermeer's milkmaid will continue to pour the milk for ever, the people in my painting will be defined for ever in their condition of spatial being, unthreatened by change and an unknown future. The only alternative to this stasis that art offers us is death itself, which is why art is so necessary to the human condition. I was fascinated by the comment of a very elderly lady who told me that all the people in my paintings were in a perpetual

state of waiting. She enjoyed the exhibition hugely.

The English have the term still-life, which is far more life affirming than the French *nature-morte*.

The photographs taken at Victoria do not constitute any kind of template for a painting. They are not stitched together, traced or transferred to the canvas. In this, there is a clear break with photorealism and related activities, much of which fails to find the uniqueness of art, typically existing either as a referent back to photography (and by extension back to our world) or the peculiar manifestation of a non-art process.

In the studio, drawing becomes the necessary means to construct art. This is always the case. Drawing is integral to the mechanics of art. This seems a simple but now a very important statement. In an art world centred on the artist and not art, the facility to draw has come to be used to define an artist, but this is not enough. The artist must recognise *the necessity* to draw in order to make a work of art, and that to truly draw is neither a mimetic activity (copying life) nor a graphic one (where the artist asserts their existence through a notation of mark-making) but a constructive one which facilitates the invention of credible space. This is the creative challenge.

As art is dependent on drawing, my attentions are first to establish a tentative pictorial solution through small drawings. The solution invariably comes not from the location but is rooted in previously found solutions.

A month before the exhibition at the National Gallery and my return visits to Victoria, I saw the realist exhibition at the Kunsthall in Rotterdam. In a survey of realist art since Courbet, I was represented by my first painting of Victoria made a few years ago.



Victoria 2008 oil on canvas 169 x 302.3cm

I watched the way that visitors to this exhibition viewed my painting, which confirmed my own thoughts and I knew what I needed to do in future works.

The painting is long, and the spatial configuration is stretched laterally, so viewers tend to look at the painting in sections as they move along it. It was a panorama of three spaces which just about held together but the energy of the work was being dissipated. It was too simple a solution to a highly complex experience. It reminded me a little of the way we laterally view a Pollock or the rather grander pictures of Charles le Brun in the Louvre. I needed to find a spatial solution which centred the diverse spaces, a tension which this painting largely failed to achieve.

I had found this in the second painting of Victoria, "Leaving the Underground" but that was less concerned with a lateral arrangement of different spaces. The solution I hoped lay in the preparatory drawing.



From the outset, I had planned to show the narrow edge of a curving shop window beyond the foreground window on the left, which could only be seen as I stepped to the right, and the view through the middle arch to the distant buildings and street beyond, which could be seen by moving forward and to the left. This began to build a more active central passage and the initial orthogonals were designed to focus the viewer primarily into the centre of the painting.

The term "orthogonal" refers to a diagonal line receding into space to a vanishing point and is part of the nomenclature of perspective. I have now come to doubt the appropriateness of using the term perspective in discussing the construction of my paintings. It may well have become a corrupted term, referring solely to the simple geometric formulation of space which adheres to rules laid down in the Renaissance and reiterated through the mechanics of the camera and the algorithms of computer programs. This regards perspective as an existing formula which the painter uses to plot space. This would seem to be at odds with the necessity for each unique painting to determine its own mathematical configuration to achieve functionality. It also implies that to differ from the given rules of perspective is a deviancy as opposed to being crucial to the truth of the painting. In short, perspective has come to mean the space plotted by the fixed camera lens and that is of no use to me as a painter and probably has no use to any ambitious painter.

We only have to look at the sheer invention within the territory of perspective prior to its fixing by Fox Talbot to see how painters used it with such creativity. In this state I am happy to discuss it but now perhaps I should just talk of the mathematics of the space.

When Delaroche declared, on seeing the first photographs, that “from now painting is dead” he might as well have been talking about how so much representational art made from then to the present day would be ensnared by the seductive space of the photograph. Prior to the fixing of the image, artists by necessity had to invent space and this spirit of invention led to the hyper-complex strategies of Western art. But photography offered a template for pictorial space, and realist painting particularly in more recent times has adopted its spatial algorithm without question. Of course we have had the remarkable invention of Cubism, born out of experiencing the world as an active, participatory human being, but this was exactly the motivation for Titian, for Rembrandt, for Canaletto, for Rubens, for Tiepolo and so many others.

In order to develop strategies for representational art in the future, the most fruitful source for artists to plunder is in painting made prior to the invention of photography. Here we may find artists using optical devices, but painting is always an act of creation from experience and simple beginnings and never a reduction from a pre-existing image. The depth and variety of human creativity on display at the National Gallery continues to make it the most relevant place for art students to study in the UK. But they must be equipped at the outset with the fundamental understanding that the purpose of art is to create alternative realities and the means to do this resides in the invention of space.

Now that “Sun Setting Over Victoria” is complete, I have begun to recognise the influences of two paintings at the National Gallery which I was looking at whilst my show was on. They are paintings I thought I had understood before but they continue to surprise me.

Canaletto’s “S.Simeone Piccolo” was the subject of my impromptu presentation at the colloquium hosted at the beginning of the Canaletto exhibition, and the beginnings of my painting. Central to my comments was the way in which it rejects the fixed geometry of perspective for a space that is elliptical. That is, instead of drawing the viewer’s attention solely into the centre and the far distance, Canaletto counters this by employing orthogonals to different vanishing points which keep the eye moving around and across the painting. He finds a solution to the difficulty of a narrowing perspective that focuses the eye on a single point on the horizon which would result in the painting faltering into a stilted and motionless state. When we talk of the painting functioning, we are talking of its life force, energy and atmosphere. Canaletto creates this with a structure which is characteristically elliptical, lifting the viewer from outside the painting into and across a vast arena of space, the perimeter of which is marked by the buildings. Recognising this structure is how I would always recognise a Canaletto and although we find elliptical space elsewhere throughout Western painting, Canaletto's orchestration is very distinctive. Seeing Canaletto against his rivals amply demonstrated this.



Canaletto *Venice: The Upper Reaches of the Grand Canal with S. Simeone Piccolo* 1738



Sun Setting Over Victoria 2011 134.8 x 213.9cm

In my own work I use many vanishing points, some of which cluster into “vanishing zones”. What is extraordinary is how the type of rhythm of orthogonals which delineate the profile of the city against the sky in the Canaletto finds itself running through my painting made when I was thinking about the Canaletto. That is, the profile of the buildings on the far side of the street and their reflection in the shop window create a gentle curve through the painting, which is very different from a conventional perspective that would rush the eye into the centre.

Despite the obvious formal parallels and even an echo of the domes, this is not to suggest a literal overlay of form from one painting to another. That would be at odds with the creative desire to make something original. More importantly the systemic nature of all paintings means that every part contributes to the function of the whole (which is why it is difficult to import predetermined

formulas of any kind) and it simply makes no sense to attempt to base the composition of one painting on a few formal attributes isolated from another. But it seems that in seeking a solution to my problem I have been inspired to use a kind of extraordinary spatial construction particular to Canaletto. Perhaps it was more a shared realisation. As I understood Canaletto, I intuitively understood what I should do, but I only recognised this when I finished the painting.

Alongside the frantic experience of being on location at Victoria was the contemplation of a number of great paintings which have informed my painting. The second notable example being Poussin's "The Adoration of the Golden Calf".



Poussin *The Adoration of the Golden Calf* before 1634

The massing and rhythm of the figures have a similar relationship to my painting as that discussed with the Canaletto. It was not a conscious decision to emulate any of the groupings, nor is this really in evidence but there is some of its presence through the centre of my painting and the arrangement of figures against the rectilinear certainty of the monument/ shop placed behind which stabilises both paintings.

Poussin's importance is his revelatory display of the construction of form and space. From him I have gained an understanding of the "pervading light" of a painting which is at odds with the light of our world. I have set a light in "Sun Setting Over Victoria" which is neither from the afternoon or the evening light that I experienced. It is a preternatural light particular to the stasis of the painting, not the passing of time, though it is rooted in several hours spent on location.

From Poussin, I have also developed a spatial construction that begins in the shadow of the picture plane. This sets the alternative reality well back from our world. This is not a trompe l'oeil painting, where the viewer is invited to physically enter the painting. Such paintings are curious extensions of our world, and like the more recent fashions for ready-mades and ready-made modes of representation like photography and video, demonstrate a lack of faith in the unique existence of art itself. Such activity falters as being art because meaning is based on functionality in our world, not

its alternative. In painting, the point of such faltering is the surface of the canvas which is the boundary between the two states of existence. If the substance of a painting, its colour and tone are understood in their inert, absolute state and not in their position within the painted space, they have failed to be transformed from reality to art and are outside of art, no different from the existence of paint on the artist's palette. This is a collapse in the faith in art that we find in modernist formalism, where the mantra of truth to materials often leads to paintings as objects only in our world. But if we return to Poussin, it is so clear that colour and tone, for all their vividness, establish and sit within the space of the painting, and become its extraordinary light. His careful adjustments ensure that nothing sits on the picture plane and claims meaning by intruding into our world. I have described this as Poussin beginning his painting on a plane that sits behind the surface of the canvas, in effect, in its shadow.

In my painting "Sun Setting Over Victoria", this principle underpins the tone and colour, where every patch of colour becomes a patch of light. The temptation in a painting of extreme darks and lights such as this is to use the full weight of colour and tone available to the painter: black, white and colour straight from the tube. We would undoubtedly find this in a painting made by a realist who believed that art must mimic reality. But the realisation of an alternative credible reality render these absolutes largely irrelevant, as the atmosphere that will breathe life into this world can only be found *within* the parameters established by such absolutes. There are no blacks or whites in my painting nor colours that have not been adjusted (and by default neutralised) to the pervading light. The visual field for painting is, in our reality, incredibly narrow. It is a narrow window through which we can create astonishing worlds. We are fortunate to have artists like Poussin to help show us this opening.

From the outset of making "Sun Setting Over Victoria" I was conscious of drawing, through a single line, the form of an object *and* the space it occupies and demarcates. What is meant by such a simple statement can only be appreciated when looking again at Poussin, because here it is operating at a level that empowers the space. His lines are not passive edges of description but are revelatory. I liken his linear construction to the tectonic plate boundaries that make up our world, formed with such energy and pulling apart to reveal new territories. His space has an amazing generosity. In Poussin's world, although objects might be regarded as conventionally overlapping one another, nothing feels that it is being obscured by that which is in front. That which is not shown simply does not exist and we accept this reality in a way that we would never do in our own world or in images of our world. And through his linear construction he opens up unique spaces, which then open up again revealing ever more pockets in which we can escape.

That spirit of opening and then opening again through the firmness of the drawn line is something that I am trying to achieve in my new paintings, orchestrating ever more different spaces. In the past I might have compared this to Cubism, and its attempt to show us more and more, peering around corners. This still remains apt, but we see this kind of invention reaching extraordinary heights in much earlier works.

All this now seems a very long journey from my activity outside the entrance to Victoria Underground, but if the sensory (or aesthetic) engagement with the place is a fundamental beginning, a new kind of aesthetic engagement in the studio is fundamental to the making process. Drawing is both a mental and physical activity. It has a relationship to the body in space. This is the calm space of the studio in which each decision is given a physical and material form and judged on its presence on the canvas in this space. Drawing should be distinguished from draughting which has none of this physical interaction, and tends to be governed by known rules outside of the intuitive judgement of the artist. The computer is an appropriate tool for draughting, drawing can only happen in a real space.

The contemplation that we talk of in the studio is one where thought is given material form. The

end goal is to realise a unique material work of art and for this to happen the artist must explore through the interaction with materials in space. To make sense of all that has been experienced I prefer to be at a distance from the locations that provide my subject-matter. The flimsiness of the transparencies and my flawed memories of the location compared with the permanence of the canvas fixed to the studio wall coupled with the solidity of the heavy drawn marks and weight of paint, encourage me to be more inventive and less contrite in making radical changes to the subject.

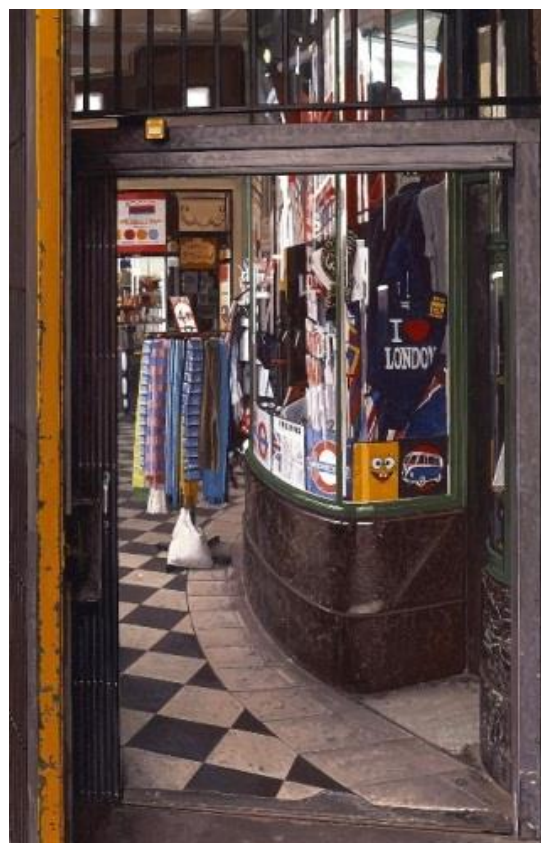


And all this takes place in the peacefulness of a rural retreat which could not be more different from the chaos and transience of the city. To find the resolution to the flux of the city I chose to leave it behind. Paradoxically, I am reminded of the way that Constable found the resolution to the flux of nature through painting his greatest landscapes in the city. This is a strategy for realist art quite separate from holding a mirror up to life.

Drawing activity is replaced by painting. Dealing with mass, tone, colour, and structural marks puts me more in mind of the physicist, the engineer and the builder. There is no place in this process for the semiologist and although at times I might even become a sign-writer, the significance of the words is their size, shape and position in space. The subject-matter is all that I have witnessed and *as an artist* I must not make decisions about the content based on narrative. However, I am highly selective. I reinforce the weight of each object through finding its essential structure and much is omitted that might clutter this certainty. I will choose and re-configure into a single space a density of activity which actually occurred over a period of time. In my painting, the same person can

appear twice as it is outside of time, and the reflection of a building can be in daylight, whereas in its appearance on the opposite side of the painting it can be lit with artificial lights. None of these things occur as a narrative on time, but are solely based on the optimum visual solution. For the most part I am not even aware of such things until they are pointed out by others. They would only be anomalies if the painting is read as a referent back to our world.

In progress, the painting begins to establish its credibility from the first few brush-marks. The authority of directional marks to create form and space remains the most vital tool for representation, far more so than all kinds of lens-based media that are trapped by the homogeneity of a dull lifeless surface. Whether it be pixels or the grain of a photograph, there is little means to create space in such technologies, just a reminder of the space of the real world which is being documented. Against such flatness, the spatial assertion that is possible in painting (though by no means in evidence in all paintings) necessitates remarkable control if the final work is to be harmonious. Art is an exacting human pursuit where mechanisation has little relevance. It is an elitist activity. The establishment of a space that is far deeper than the photograph defines the intelligence of the artist and in this pursuit painting is always an original invention. It is never a craft, irrespective of all that has been shared from one artist to the next. Coupled to the creation of space comes a challenging responsibility to create a unity through and around all that is presented. It is one thing to balance the arrangement of shapes across the surface, a totally different challenge to orchestrate forms in deep space. My love of Vermeer is not because he used the camera-lucida and it is demeaning to regard him as a forerunner to the surface harmonies of photorealism. Rather, he twists and turns planes back into and around the space of the painting in a manner which is staggering in complexity and simplicity. In short, he subverts a rectilinear pictorial construction without recourse to wild Baroque rhythms. Vermeer transcends the flatness of the lens-based image and in this he could not be more different from photorealist painting. It is no coincidence that I attempt to flip simple shapes articulating them back into the space or even latch onto a chequerboard floor to help establish figures and objects within the architecture of the larger spaces. I remain as indebted to Vermeer as I do Poussin or Canaletto.



Victoria Underground (Detail)

The camera is a useful tool, and the use of photographs in making paintings will always influence the outcome. Whereas the relationship of photorealist painting to the photograph is omnivorously dependent, it is possible to develop a hyper-realist agenda outside of photorealism which places the unique invention of space and form at its centre, and at the same time recognises new pictorial possibilities thrown up by the camera's filtering. Again we might look to Vermeer's obvious excitement in seeing the beads of light through the camera-lucida, and I would attribute some of the sequences in "Sun Setting Over Victoria" to curious visual effects in the transparencies, but to borrow from photography is not the same as being dependent upon it and working in its shadow.

For a painting as complex as this sourced on a library of photographs which although large was of lousy quality, the process of painting is not made any *easier* because of the camera, it is just made *feasible*. Other processes are open to me and the painter Antonio Lopez-Garcia continues to show us that it is possible to make hyper-realist paintings directly from life. But I choose to use the camera. I prefer to use photographs to remind me of how the objects would look if they were in front of me, and at the same time feel at liberty to simplify them and make them more solid because they are not. But at times I do paint from life, or just make things up as the needs of the painting demand.

The distance from the photography is shown in the comparison of the painted teapot in the lower corner with one of the source photos. The configuration of the objects in this part of the painting has changed from how it appeared through the lens of the camera.



The shifts in scale and the angles of the orthogonals are determined by the invented space of the total painting. From its beginnings the painting establishes control and I must follow its lead. Partly mathematical but always judged by their material existence on the canvas and viewed in the studio as I pace around its space, each decision contributes to the functionality of the painting. In mundane terms this might be regarded as the establishment of form and space, but the consequence of this is the creation of a new reality and that remains the shared ambition of all true painters. The potential for this is always within the core of the painting and the skill of the artist is to make it a reality. The display of skill for any other purpose is outside of the remit of art.

Compared with the photograph, the painting of this area shows greater clarity and certainty. This is always the objective. The alla-prima technique reveals that the means of representation is founded on the forthright application of colour through a directional mark resulting from a human gesture. From very small marks of this kind in evidence in Van Eyck to a more open and larger manifestation in Manet (which verges on the anarchic), this is the language of painting, but within this there is an extraordinary range of technique.

I have learnt to keep the surface of the painting varied and allow layers of colour to break through. The overlapping of marks is the simplest means to fix things in space. A drawn line may well be a boundary between forms and spaces but painted marks rarely abut, they are in front or behind. In my painting, this is reinforced by the use of a heavy lead white which gives a greater density (a greater materiality) to each decision. In painting, it would seem that the creation of an alternative reality in which we can only mentally escape is brought into existence through a very deliberate physical and material interaction with our world both on location and in the studio.

From considering Poussin I discussed the purpose of his drawn line; the description of both form and the establishment of unique space. We can find a parallel duality in the painted mark, which must be locally descriptive but also be part of the rhythm of the painting as a whole. In my painting "Sun Setting Over Victoria" its realism, or more aptly, its credibility, is not founded on a mimetic rendering of details using the smallest of brushes and brush-marks. Instead the painted marks must be part of a pattern across the painting. There is no place for tiny marks that would have no presence in this context. The units for this rhythmic pattern are varied in size but they must co-exist in a relationship which is as carefully determined as the juxtaposition of colours and tones. The credibility of the painting then does not reside in the details but the tension between marks, the scale of which relate to the human gesture (and the body in actual space) and the overall dimensions of the canvas.

For this painting I not only wished to centre its energy, having recognised this as an issue in the first painting of Victoria, but also to crank up its intensity, painting on a smaller canvas and establishing a pattern of mark-making which was denser than in previous paintings. In this pursuit my painted surfaces tend to reconcile the brush-marks of artists such as Gilman and Caillebotte with the exactitude of Ingres or Verspronck. At no point do I see a role for overt blending which would negate the painted surface altogether.

The new painting was made as I was still coming to terms with its immediate predecessor “Victoria Underground”.



Victoria Underground 2010 149.9 x 240 cm

Based on the same location, but looking in the opposite direction, this painting also dealt with three distinctive spaces. Each of these spaces was marked with a predominance of a different primary colour; red then yellow and blue. The coherence of its totality seemed to be rooted in a very classical, modernist framework. Colin Wiggins' comparison with Mondrian may well be appropriate, though the web of influences touch equally on more distant Northern and Italian traditions.

It is always part of the decision making process to allow primary colour sequences to exist within the more neutral passages, all of which is held together with a pervading coloured light established from the outset. But the character of these sequences in “Sun Setting Over Victoria” could not be more different from the solidity of the earlier work.

The weighty masses of the new painting are in the darker shapes, the rectangle along the top edge, down the side of the column on the right and in the reflection in the shop window. There is a heaviness too in the arches, which reinforces a conventional classical space, not dissimilar to the Panini of St. Peters in the National Gallery. The primary colours, that is those that exist on the primary circumference of the colour wheel, the vivid reds, greens, oranges and most importantly, yellows dance across the painting in smaller, more varied shapes. There is a tension between what these little patches of colour represent locally and how they are liberated from mundane description and in turn liberate the rigidity of the painting. I am reminded of Dali's fragmented renditions of people and landscapes as he sought to illustrate the openness of atomic structures, but this is too simplistic. We can really find this kind of open rhythm in much earlier works, such as in Titian, where the whole is held together in a structure of coloured marks and shapes arranged across the painting. No less authoritative, this kind of structure breaks with the heaviness of more overtly architectonic solutions and in the work of such a master creates an amazing fluidity.



The central passage in the painting demonstrates some of this arrangement of primary yellows. The beginning of each of these shapes is founded in the source material but the photographs offer no such arrangement. Each patch of colour must describe but not be fixed too securely to the object. It is a careful balance and apart from the intensity of the colour and tone, there also needs to be an editing of information to allow the colour to find a level of autonomy, so the resulting form transcends simple description. Looking back again to past art we might see this distinction if we compare a Vermeer against the more literal rendering of Gerrit Dou.

It is as if the journey that was set out at the beginning of this essay from experiencing our real world to creating an alternative reality is being echoed within this invented reality, wrestling an independent reality for the painted shapes from within the painting itself. Not only does the delicate rhythm of these shapes remind me of the fractals that scientists describe in the natural world, existing in harmonies which defy simple formal analysis, there is also a layering of visual constructions which reveal themselves as we go further and further into the reality of painting, down to the level of the arrangement of the brush marks. It is the means by which art sets up its dynamic stasis, as opposed to the classical formulas which formalists from the last century were so keen to overlay.

The success of my display of pictures at the National Gallery cannot be measured by attendance figures or by re-assuring the viewer that artists still have the skills to make realistic images. The greater purpose is to attempt some insight into the nature of painting and the relevance of the historic collection. That is more difficult to measure and it needs to be an on-going pursuit in art education. It is a new aesthetic agenda which questions both the value of formalism and the misdirection of semiotics.

Painting is a life-long pursuit, and with a little maturity comes the realisation that art is far more profound and, for all its variety, far more certain of its purpose than the chronology of “isms” and

issue-based agendas would have us think. They belong to adolescence as we try on conceptual frameworks because the real truth of art just won't reveal itself. Great art is indifferent to anything outside of itself, and that includes the audience. We *look*, but it can take time to *see* art and only when we understand its reality can we develop the appropriate frameworks in which to discuss and preserve it. But of course there is the risk that we do not understand. The social failure to recognise art can and may well be having dangerous consequences. The mainstream contemporary view would be to see art as an activity within and about our mundane reality, irrespective of the novelties that masquerade as art which may well lead us to believe that the mundane can at times be rather shocking or exotic. But it just remains the stuff of the flux of our lives. I believe that all this is rooted in a failure to *see* art, which is not a collective responsibility but for each and every individual to make the decision to engage and then persevere.

As I continue to look at great paintings it is remarkable how they help me to develop my work in a relationship that simply didn't seem possible even ten years ago. There is a point where an artist begins to understand painting and perhaps is in a position to share a little of this understanding with others. This is an exciting stage in my development because of the sheer joy experienced in viewing great works of art and the revelations that surface in my own endeavours in the studio. It is also a point of recognising that the factionalization of art into historic and contemporary is unhelpful.

Collectively we need to acknowledge this situation and find ways to connect the vitality of art from the past to the present. Modernist reductivism and the chaos of post-modernism should not render an aesthetic understanding of art to the past. It seems imperative to learn from the past in order to develop a new aestheticism for the present and the future. Working with and within a great art collection such as the National Gallery, (which must mean connecting with its aesthetic form and not simply appropriating some of the narratives) is a very powerful way of altering our orientation towards contemporary art. This can engender an audience to seek art of a higher order in which to lose and find ourselves.



Drawing for *Terminus Place* 2011 (indebted to Bassano *The Purification in the Temple*)