

To the Silence of Tiresias

A few days after the Paris attacks in November, Gaynor and I drove to London, staying over in a budget hotel next to the railway tracks at Vauxhall.

On the journey down, there was a minute silence to remember all those who had suffered in Paris. But in London, the atmosphere was far less pensive than was the case after 9/11. We have come to accept the risk of atrocities in our capital as normal. Though we live to affect our future, we can only be certain of the present and the past. There is no role for prophecy in our secular world.

Tiresias was a blind a prophet from the ancient world.

For this trip, I had decided to take my medium-format film camera, with a view to recording some of my observations and experiences. On waking next to Gaynor in the hotel room, I quickly loaded the first roll of film and began taking photographs before she, or I, were fully awake. As she sat up in bed and then wandered over to the window to look out over the railway station on an overcast day, I continued to take several rolls of film, and went on to record the commuters on the railway platforms below.

We then walked to a local work-a-day café for breakfast, sitting in a large bay window and watching the pedestrians and traffic out on the street. Two men were seated at the next table, reading tabloid papers and watching the world go past too. Throughout this breakfast, I continued to take photographs, occasionally changing seats with Gaynor and wandering around the café.

After breakfast, we walked back towards Vauxhall bus terminus. Gaynor went for a coffee whilst I took photographs from an old and functional metal footbridge running parallel to the Victorian brick viaduct that dominates this area. The night before, we had dinner in a restaurant that occupied one of the railway arches, the exterior space of the viaduct becoming a large vaulted interior.

Beyond the bus terminus runs Vauxhall Bridge which crosses the Thames into Pimlico. I had painted a view of the Thames from this area before, many years ago, from the penthouse apartment of the writer Jeffrey Archer.



Now standing on Vauxhall Bridge, and taking photographs by panning around to document a 180 degree panorama, I was reminded of the photography that informed my earlier paintings.

As it became gloomier and began to rain, I put the camera away and returned to the coffee shop to find Gaynor. It was about midday. We took the underground across London to Farringdon, where there is a lab which still develops film. After dropping it off, we went to see the Goya portraits at the National Gallery, before starting the long drive home.



To the Silence of Tiresias 2016 oil on canvas 63 ¼" x 57 ¼"

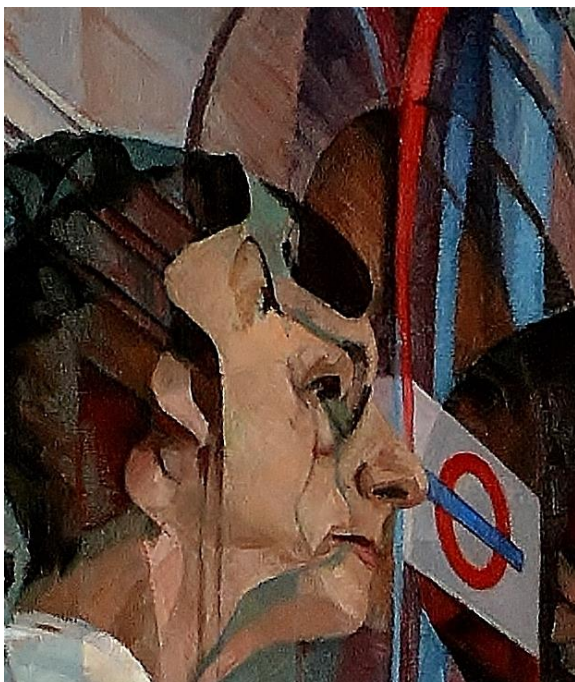
“To the Silence of Tiresias” bears witness to this morning in London, but its purpose is not to illustrate these mundane episodes, nor would it be of any interest if it did. To ask what a painting means has become concomitant to ask what it tells us about our world. Perhaps to show us the appearance of things or the narratives of our lives or our socio-political outlook on the world. But an artist has no remarkable insight into the ways of our world, and the mandate that we credit certain individuals (artists?) to comment on our lives is given arbitrarily. This is not to suggest that art cannot be meaningful and purposeful, but it is never didactic or socially and politically instructive. That would be to confuse art with dialogue, and the gallery, a forum for social interaction.

In actuality, we all have an equal role to play in the dialogue of and about our lives, but in the studio there is no-one to talk to, no need to express an opinion, and no need to recount events and memories. Such a recollection would, in any case, be a poor surrogate for the real experience. But life, no matter how exciting, is never art, which renders an imitation of life, however convincing, as neither art nor life. So all those devices that we have for recording our world, whether they be digital, analogue (120 roll film), or manual (Brunelleschi’s perspective) are just means to humanly document our experiences. They are tools of the illustrator.

I want to build a painting, just like as a child, I always dreamed of building boats. I want *to make*. It never occurs to me in the studio that I want *to say*, and as the momentum of that desire to make takes some of kind of material shape, the needs of that new subject have total precedence. I am unimportant and leave my ego at the door. Art is always a material subject, over there, whether anyone looks at it or not.

“To the Silence of Tiresias” is built from experiences of that morning, which help to shape the patches of lead-based paint laid on to canvas with stiff bristle brushes. I use whatever I have found in order to find something new. That newness cannot be known until it becomes real, so painting is always an act of working blind until something comes into being.

Often, all I can do as a painter is to play with patterns or describe something that I have seen. That might be a face or a landscape. Knowing that painting is always a concrete relationship between one thing and the next, the juxtaposition and overlay of different observations *might* become revealing.



In this detail, two profiles of Gaynor overlap, the eye of the lower profile doubles as a nostril for the higher one, looking up. (This nostril is also an eye for a shadowy face looking straight out). These two profiles are set against an arch from the viaduct and blue and red curtains at the bedroom window and underground sign. But the total yields a new figure that was unknown at the outset. With dark eyes (blinded perhaps), a large head looks up towards the left. This could be Tiresias, discovered from the oceans that exist between what we know and what we don't know, and the infinitely complex spatial ambiguities of all those patches of colour. Unlike our world, in the painted world we cannot know what is behind and what is in front. The space of the painting is quite unlike the illusionistic space with which the illustrator deceives us. Here there is no deception, just a multiplicity of differing spatial relationships happening simultaneously.

But this new creative realm can only happen when the painting ceases to have a certainty that what we are looking at approximates our world. Crucial to this isn't just that one thing can look like something else, but that the structure of the painting is fundamentally at odds with the way that we understand our world. Time and space operate differently to the extent that these terms are no longer reliable in their meaning. Coupled to this is a kind of slippage where identities are continuously shifting, just as Tiresias changed from a man to woman and then back into a man.

Goya was a genius. For many "This noun, genius, as we are all too conscious, makes us squirm. And so it has for a long time" (Derrida). I use the term warily but out of necessity. For, as in so many matters concerning art, Derrida adds further weight to a mass of continental theory that has done little to further our understanding. Rather it has negated the primary desire of astonishing individuals have to establish a unique alternative. This is neither outmoded nor fallacious.

Goya is largely misunderstood by those who do not recognise the marked slippage in his work. The urge to see his work as realist; that is, having a spatial function which is like our world, invariably leads to an oversight of the multiple imagery which interlaces everything that he made. In Robert Hughes biography on Goya, Hughes rightly ascribes the term genius to this remarkable painter without once ever discussing this multiple imagery, which displaces any socio-political interpretation with a more powerful and unique perspective. Once understood, we can no longer see his art just in the context of history, any more than "To the Silence of Tiresias" is reliably about my morning in London. It is not that a great Goya portrait shows us more than what first might catch our attention, but that the structural mechanics of the portrait are so wildly different that *its reality is at odds with our world* or the conventions of 18thC portraiture. Not that anyone else seems to recognise this.

So compelling is the desire to read paintings as representations of our world that it is not surprising that terms such as genius appear to be unfounded. But truly, Goya rifts on space, landscapes unfold into figures, figures into demons. My afternoon at the National Gallery was an extraordinary experience.

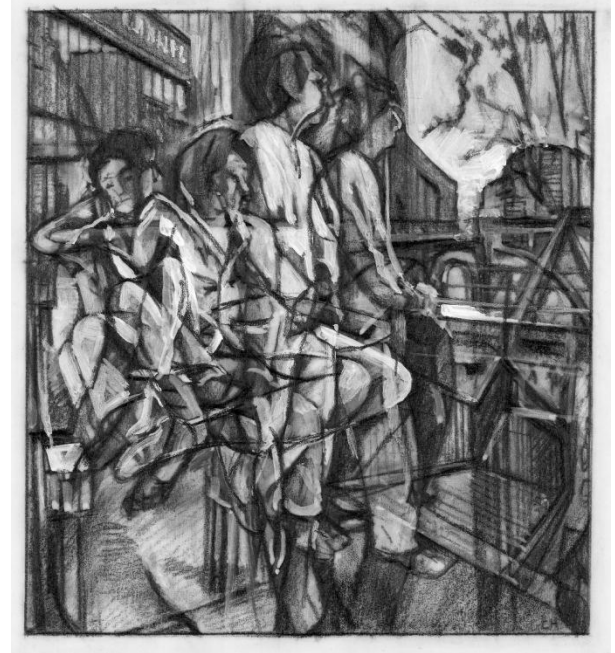
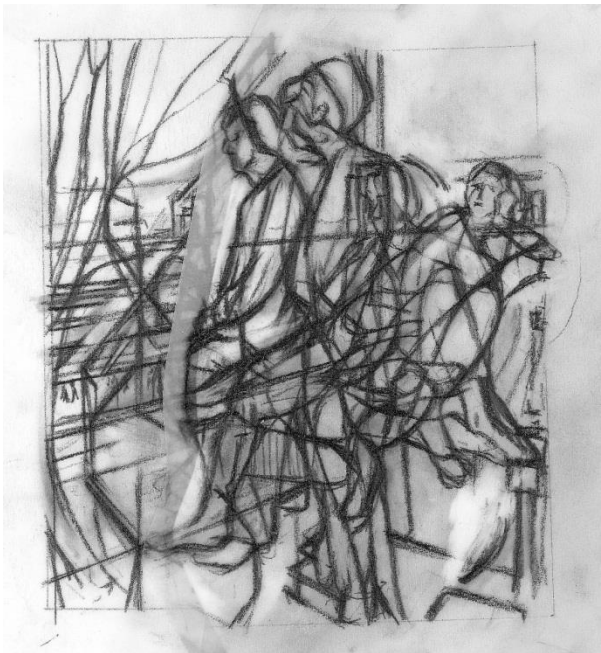
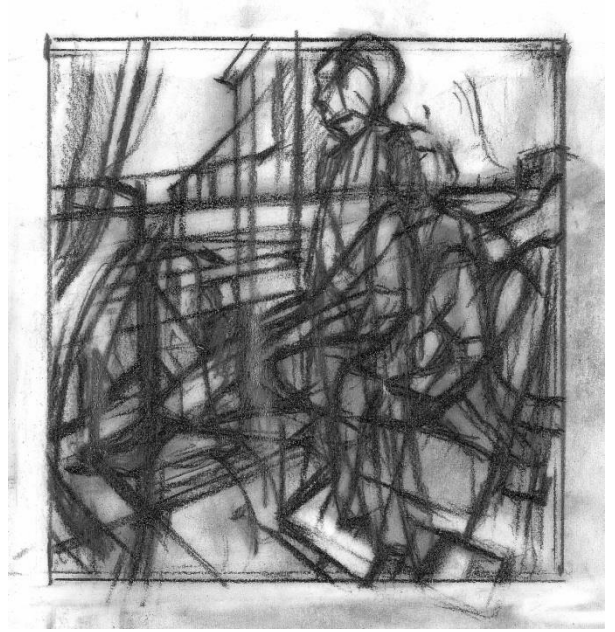
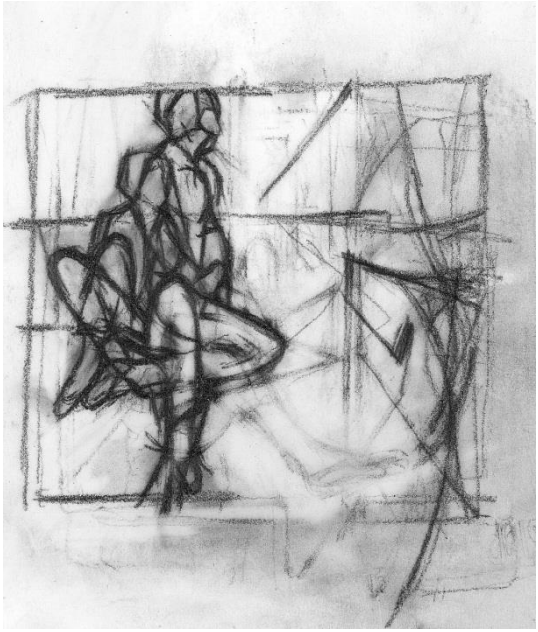
In the centre of "To the Silence of Tiresias" there is a sequence of heads which finally revealed a three-quarter profile of a figure with her head covered in a fulsome scarf. Orientated to the left, she has well defined and perhaps naked breasts, and is reminiscent of Goya's *majas*, with a black curl of hair and beauty mark on the left cheek. As with the figure of Tiresias discussed earlier, this portrait was not planned and happened solely through the manipulations of the paint (and the observed portraits of Gaynor).



On the day we arrived in London, having checked into the hotel, we walked across Vauxhall Bridge to visit Tate Britain. The Tate appears on a horizon line of buildings on the far side of a river basin which collars the "Spanish" figure. This view of London is in reverse, as if seen in an imaginary mirror, below which the river bed becomes synonymous with the bed in the hotel room.

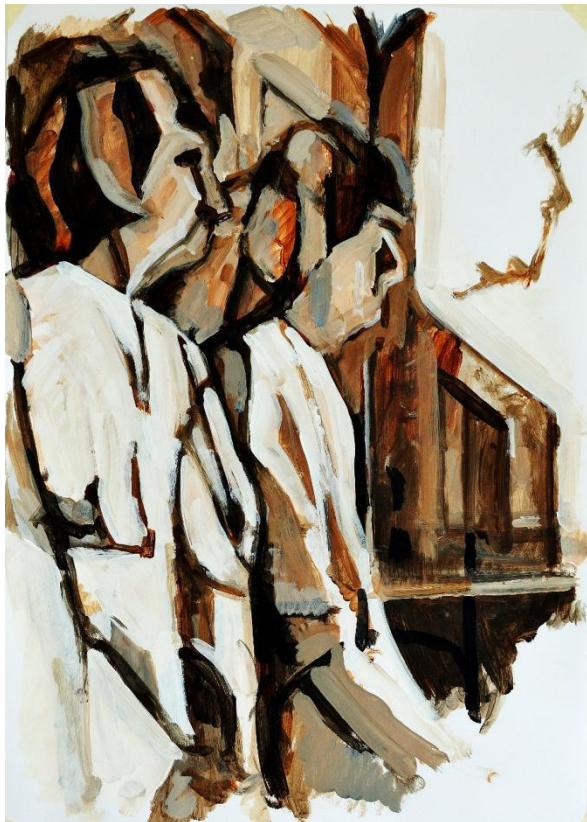
Viewing the 20thC displays at the Tate we were left with a distinct impression of British painting being largely devoid of intense colour and light. But my return to painting London (since I completed a prolonged series of café paintings at South Kensington) seemed to be equally marked by a sombre palette. Gaynor's white pyjamas reflected the cool light of a winter's day. But this lighting also offered intense blues which could be answered by vivid yellows and reds. As with the imagery, these colour harmonies emerge as the painting develops, the first studies are just in pencil and then tonal works in acrylic on paper. The process is additive, beginning with a compost of experience out of which something might grow.

In the sequence of drawings, my first thoughts were to have a main figure on the left but this was reversed in the second and third drawing with the figure(s) on the right and urban landscape on the left. This was reversed again in the final drawing. Note also in the third drawing how it has been cut to overlap the figure with the viaduct.

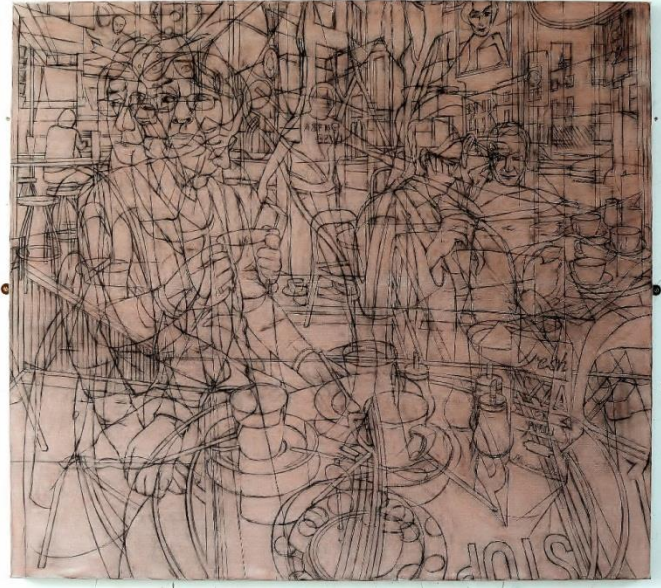


Before ordering the canvas, a number of rapidly made works on paper helped to establish an approximate scale. In this study, the idea of the branches of the trees inferring a head in the sky is marked by a few sketchy marks. As the painting evolved this became at least two further head formations, one adjoining the final profile looking to the right, which then became the largest full figure, facing us, as if reaching the top of the stairs. This figure was born entirely from the spatial juxtapositions of the painting. The second figure just disrupts the certainty that we have sky and trees in the right corner of the painting.

Like everything else, this finally arrives at being not-sky, not-trees and not-figure.



A new set of drawings was developed when this canvas was started, with an emphasis on the material collected from our breakfast in the café in Vauxhall. This second painting, now with the title “The Synaptical Cubist Orders for Two” is being worked on, carrying forth the metal footbridge, winter trees and bus terminus to proffer new configurations and a very different reality.



It is shown here in progression from drawing, to line-drawing on canvas and finally as an under painting with thin washes of oil colour. At the heart of this painting as both verb and noun, I am the *synaptical* cubist; a player of synthetic and analytical strategies. Perhaps more importantly it is indicative that this painting, like "To the Silence of Tiresias" is a framework of mental connectivity:

thoughts, memories and fantasies finding a concrete resolution as much as the differing vantage points and sequencing that we normally associate with cubo-futurism.

Clive Head 03/06/2016