Tom Palin: Elegies in Grey

Leeds Arts University

9th March – 17th May 2018
Elegies in Grey attests to an exploration of concerns pertinent to Palin’s recent practice, including the relationship between the object-aspect and picture-aspect of painting. This series of works was developed over eight years. The project was a collaboration with Dr Catriona McAra and Matt Wheeldon.

**Research process**

The process of reconfiguring paintings – as units whose meaning is to be determined – permitted Palin to test formal and narrative solutions in respect of issues of display. The exhibition operated across two rooms. Palin separated the framed works from the unframed, with the latter, much larger group of paintings, displayed on an inverse rotunda wall. In adopting the Salon-style hang for the smaller paintings, he was able to present something of considerable scale, and yet retain an intimacy of connection between the works themselves, and between the spectator and the works.

**Research insights**

Central to Palin’s practice is the notion of a duality between paint and picture, meaning the illusionistic and material aspects of painted objects. The nature of the display pointed to a clearer delineation of the role of the near and far in painting. This oscillation invites the spectator to remain attentive to material and narrative considerations, in so far as one’s experience of the near and far can be mapped onto the here and there. To connect, disconnect, pull apart and draw close is not, then, merely the curator’s privilege.

**Dissemination**

Tom Palin

Tom Palin is a Subject Leader in Fine Art at Leeds Arts University, and is currently completing his doctoral research at the Royal College of Art in London. He has exhibited widely, and recently chaired the panel discussion for the launch of the Journal of Contemporary Painting at the RCA. Forthcoming publications include The White Paintings of Maurice Urlich for Turps Banana.

Palin’s research re-considers medium specifically against the backdrop of an endament that haunts painting. His practice emerges from a concern for the interrelationship of material and linguistic structure in respect of the object, process and history of painting.

This exhibition will explore some of his current research questions through a series of small paintings ranging from representational to abstract.

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ELEGIES IN GREY
PAINTINGS BY TOM PALIN

Michael Belshaw (Independent Scholar)

Walking into the exhibition, we can see at a glance the consistency of style, and in its broad outlines and unflattering the paintings belong together. They are in their own company. Compositions, ocher surface texture and subject matter amount to a recognizable pictorial language, maintained from one painting to the next. The overall effect is one of subduction, though that is more a matter for the spectator than the artist. Frequently a strong vertical or horizontal division establishes the composition. The subdued palette draws on a seemingly endless range of accented greens, and the surface texture has a suggestibility we want to touch with our eyes. Strong as they are in themselves, these elements are animated by similar subjects—portrait, landscape, still-life—such that a central

The White, now a gillie, 2004, oil on canvas

By Dr Michael Belshaw
ELEGIES IN GREY
PAINTINGS BY TOM PALIN
MICHAEL BELSHAW (INDEPENDENT SCHOLAR)

Walking into the exhibition, we can see at a glance that Tom Palin’s work has a consistency of style that is both intimate and unfashionable. The paintings belong together: They are in their own company. Composition, colour, surface texture and subject matter amount to a recognisable pictorial language, maintained from one painting to the next. The overall effect is one of subjectivity, though that is more a matter for the spectator than the artist. Frequently a strong vertical or horizontal division establishes the composition. The colour palette draws on a seemingly endless range of accented greys, and the surface texture has a physicality we want to touch with our eyes. Strong as they are in themselves, these elements are animated by familiar subjects - portrait, landscape, still life - such that a central

2. Matisse identifies an important distinction between paintings that illustrate movement and those that signify duration. By removing oneself from the literal representation of movement one attains greater beauty and grandeur. Look at an Egyptian statue: it looks rigid to us yet we admire it as a body capable of movement and which, despite its rigidity, is animated. Matisse, Notes of a Painter (1912) in Jack D. Flam: Matisse on Art (University of California Press, 1995).

3. See Clement Greenberg: Modernist Painting’ in Harrison and Wood, Art in Theory, 1900-1990 (Blackwell, 1999). Where the Old Masters created an illusion of space into which one could imagine walking, the illusion created by a Modernist is one into which one can look, but cannot if one enters it. In short, such compositions can be consistently distinguished from pictorial art at large, not for any actual appreciation of their pictorial purpose, but simply by virtue of the fact that they are not pictorial art.

4. I notice that I’ve lost my own line: the impression that drawing can be defined more or less as such is, explicitly, linear. This might fit in the short run, but not in the long run. As if I said earlier: drawing can’t be satisfactorily distinguished from pictorial art at large, still for actual appreciation for the same fact: this is a consequence of Clement Greenberg: Drawing, Synecdoche: Scholar, vol. 6, no. 2 (1985).

5. The question of orthodoxy can be understood as the taste taken to logical conclusion. Whether painting can or should be seen as objects was much debated in the 1960s. Two texts mark out the scope of these debates: Donald Judd’s essay ‘Specific Objects’ and Michael Fried’s response to Judd’s views in ‘Art and Objecthood’. Both can be found in Harrison and Wood, Art in Theory, 1900-1990.

In an interview in 1963 Jasper Johns addressed the problem from a painter’s perspective: ‘My use of objects comes out of a sort of thinking of the painting as an object and considering the materialistic aspect of painting, seeing that painting was paint on a canvas, and then by extension seeing that it occupied a space that sat on a wall. As a certain point I exaggerated it by putting frames on the paintings which brought out the paintings out of the wall and began to use that depth by including cabinets and doors that could be opened. Later on, at the fat things I took off, because I could see it anyway; it didn’t seem important to stress it.’ Jasper Johns interview with Bill Kluz, 1963, in K. Vandoedero, ed. Jasper Johns. Writings. Sketchbook Notes. Interviews (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2003).

5. The practice of displaying works in clusters yields reflection on the concept of the frame - is the way in which a picture can be isolated from, or connected to its surroundings. See for example Alan McCullum’s Poster Surfaces (1962), Art & Language’s Hands from Hands (1982), and Joseph Kosuth’s Play of the Unmentionable (1989).

Tom Palin would like to thank Michael Belshaw, Harry Griffiths, Paul Kelly, John McCann, Geralline Rambury, Polly Timmerman.

Dr Michael Belshaw has written on topics in the Helen and Lyle Theory of Art and Visual Culture in international journals. His key interests are autobiography, the teaching studio, and the end of art. Topics variously understood through the writings of Nietzsche, Heidegger and Derrida.

The Monk, oil on papier 201 x 10.5 x 142 cm
figure gives its context meaning. For example, the warm grey behind the goose in Goose (2011) has a look of foreboding that the creature projects in the backward turn of its head.

Something like foreboding is expressed in a number of works (The Parasol, 2010, The Cock, 2011), but the feeling also seems arrested by the inertia of the laden paint surface. Like the subjects of a daguerreotype, the figures in these paintings seem to have slowed down just short of stopping altogether. The temporal dimension of photography also suggests something about a painting's facture, in that a vigorous brushstroke, usually connoting energy or force, can also signify stasis, merely because its dynamism is arrested as the paint dries. In this way we might think that Pain's tactile surface goes against the grain of gestural painting in depriving the scene of movement. All but the most recent paintings are on wood, and the resistance it gives as the painting's support also adds to the stasis effect.

This would be harder to pull off on a bigger scale, where bold gestures seem more fluid, and it may also spell the difference between works on wood and recent works on aluminium. There, brush strokes race along the metallic surface that offers no resistance. Moreover, these strokes lift free from the swathes of modulated colour that define the space. Where the previous works have a materiality that weighs the subjects down, the aluminium paintings have a 'lightness of being' the spectator can drift into. The effect is akin to a vaulted ceiling and it may be this association that puts us in mind not only of the space in Tiepolo's paintings, but the way the drawing sets off the ground according to the disposition of the figure — a point worth exploring.

If one wanted to fake an earlier 'Pain' dividing the support with textured slabs of grey, set off here and there with an accent of colour would be a good way to begin. These, appropriately enough, are matters to do with the procedures of painting but our fake would be far from complete without the element of drawing that quietly dominates the picture question. What we call drawing in a painting is rarely manifested in line. Rather, it is the dividing edge between two adjacent colours — hence an aspect of painting. Or if we attend to those edges exclusively it may seem that painting is an aspect of drawing. In The Monk (2011) the deft handling of paint gives the picture scale and space through draughtsmanship. The orientation of the figure in the widening perspective of the landscape is achieved as drawing, and it is this element that is much harder to imitate convincingly.

But composition too is a matter of drawing according to the principle of disegno — i.e. design. The broad divisions of space in these works serve pictorial ends. Here a vertical establishes a curtain. There a horizontal marks the distant edge of a desolate terrain. But look again at the latter and see how the dividing edge between the mountain and terrain is the abutment of two panels. All of the works in the mountain series use this device, which draws attention to the physicality of painting without straying into the area of objecthood. The
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