



**This is a Leeds Arts University Repository copy of:**  
**Aspirational beauty: painting class ...the importance  
of personal narrative in painting**

---

**Author:** Sarah Taylor

**Output type:** Book chapter

**License:** CC BY

**Link to Leeds Arts University Record:** <https://lau.repository.guildhe.ac.uk/id/eprint/17345>

**Citation:** Taylor, S. (2017). Aspirational beauty: painting class ...the importance of personal narrative in painting. In: Teaching Painting: How Can Painting be Taught in Art Schools? Black Dog publishing, London. ISBN 9781911164104

---

**Abstract**

"Painting is an attempt to come to terms with life. There are as many solutions as there are human beings." George Tooker (1920-2011), contemporary American painter.

Informed by my identity as a female working class painter and educator, the paper will introduce the concept of Aspirational Beauty, to raise awareness of and celebrate the endeavour of working class painting, often excluded from academic writing. I will also advocate for an egalitarian approach to recruiting for and teaching painting in higher education. Art historian John Golding referred to painting as the "most aristocratic of art forms". Artist Grayson Perry has cautioned that art schools are turning into posh white ghettos. So how can an education in painting practice be accessible to and have contemporary relevance for all interested students?

I will argue that one way is through Life Writing. In my research I use Life Writing as a method to explore and articulate my class background and to inform my painting. Combining perspectives from history, sociology and English literature, Life Writing supports interpretation of the consequences of class as felt and lived beyond the personal, bringing the realisation that what we refer to as autobiographical is largely historically and culturally determined. Significantly, the introduction of life writing within the art academy indicates that institutions are listening to and acknowledging the personal voice. I will present insights into my role as Lecturer teaching studio painting practice to argue that a medium specific course is a timely means for enabling the material, imaginative and cognitive processes involved in painting by facilitating subjective discovery and bringing about both personal clarity and material beauty.

---

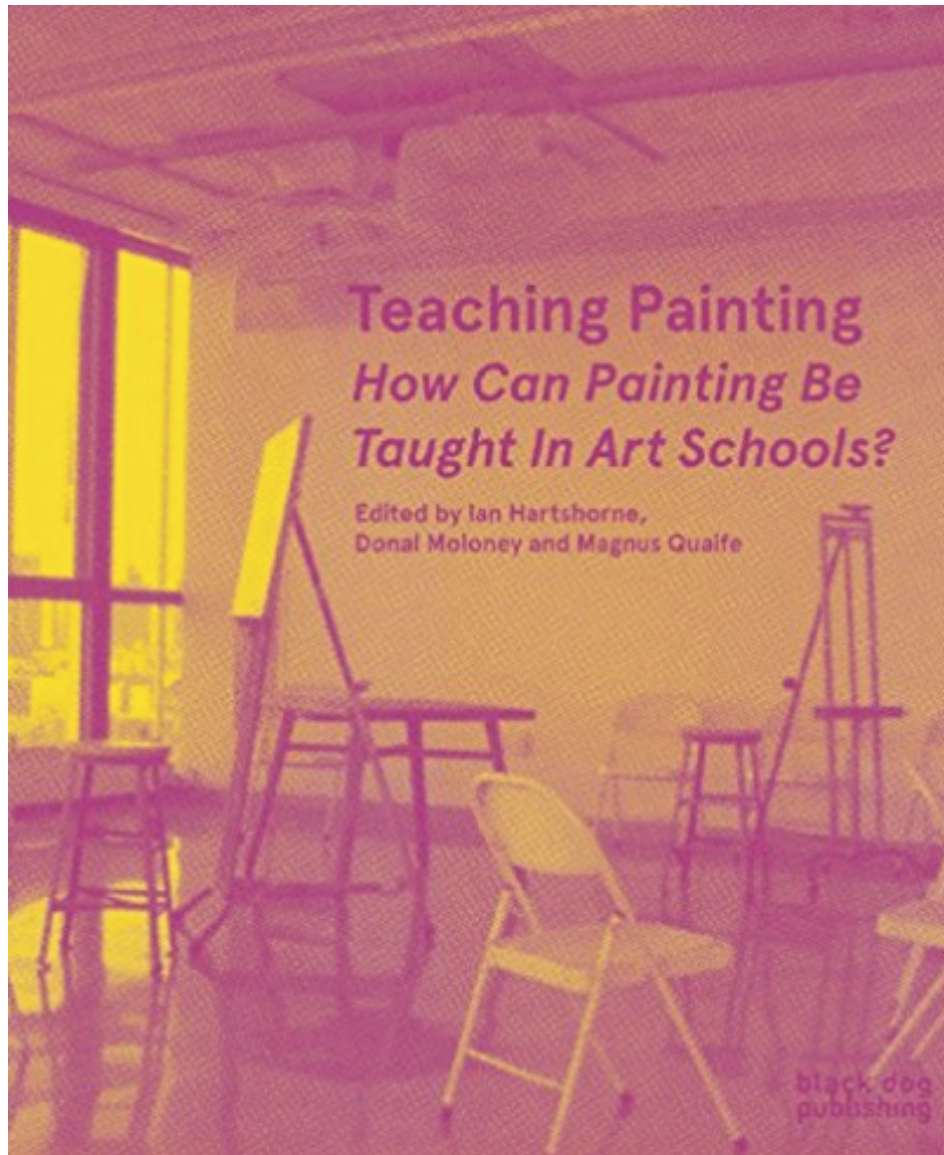
**Reuse**

The author of this document has applied a **CC BY** Creative Commons license to the work herein. Further details about this license can be found here: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/>. Any reuse or citation of this work must comply with the tenants of the author's chosen license.

**Takedown**

If you are the author or publisher of this output and you wish for it to be taken down from our Institutional Repository, please [contact us](#) and we will investigate any issues on a case-by-case basis.

**Book Chapter:** Taylor, S, 2016, *Aspirational Beauty: Painting Class ...the Importance of Personal Narrative in Painting.* ed. Hartshorne I. Moloney, D. Quaife, M. Teaching Painting How Can Painting Be Taught in Art Schools? Black Dog, London.



The ways in which painting is taught within art schools and academies has, in recent years, undergone several significant changes. As the barriers between media eroded into more fluid borders, art schools have responded by adapting and evolving. Many painting departments have been absorbed into general Fine Art courses but specialist painting courses and pathways still continue to be developed. How have these courses defined and redefined themselves to reflect the current artistic landscape and how can painting maintain an identity within non-specialist approaches? 'Teaching Painting' addresses the historical, theoretical, pedagogical and continually shifting methods of how the medium is taught. It asks how and why approaches to teaching painting have changed and developed

and offers a platform through which practices and experience can be shared. The book includes contributions by: Maggie Ayliffe and Christian Mieves, Gordon Brennan, Ian Gonczarow, Sarah Horton and Sarah Longworth-West, Sean Kaye, John McClenaghan, Dougal McKenzie, Alistair Payne, David Rayson, Craig Staff, Daniel Sturgis, **Sarah Taylor**, Joseph Wright and Stuart MacKenzie.

The chapter is an edited version of a Conference presentation:

Taylor, S. 2015, *Aspirational Beauty: Painting Class ...the Importance of Personal Narrative in Painting*. Paper presented: Teaching Painting, Whitworth Museum, Manchester.



Conference | Teaching Painting | The Whitworth Museum, Manchester, 2015



## ABSTRACT

“Painting is an attempt to come to terms with life. There are as many solutions as there are human beings.” George Tooker (1920-2011), contemporary American painter

Informed by my identity as a female working class painter and educator, the paper will introduce the concept of *Aspirational Beauty*, to raise awareness of and celebrate the endeavour of working class painting, often excluded from academic writing. I will also advocate for an egalitarian approach to recruiting for and teaching painting in higher education.

Art historian John Golding referred to painting as the “most aristocratic of art forms”. Artist Grayson Perry has cautioned that art schools are turning into posh white ghettos. So how can an education in painting practice be accessible to and have contemporary relevance for all interested students?

I will argue that one way is through Life Writing. In my research I use Life Writing as a method to explore and articulate my class background and to inform my painting. Combining perspectives from history, sociology and English literature, Life Writing supports interpretation of the consequences of class as felt and lived beyond the personal, bringing the realisation that what we refer to as *autobiographical* is largely historically and culturally determined. Significantly, the introduction of life writing within the art academy indicates that institutions are listening to and acknowledging the personal voice.

I will present insights into my role as Principal Lecturer teaching studio painting practice to argue that a medium specific course is a timely means for enabling the material, imaginative and cognitive processes involved in painting by facilitating subjective discovery and bringing about both personal clarity and material beauty.



Text:

*Painting is an attempt to come to terms with life. There are as many solutions as there are human beings.* George Tooker (1920-2011), contemporary American painter.

Informed by my identity as a female working class painter and educator, the paper will introduce the concept of *Aspirational Beauty*. Art historian John Golding referred to painting as the “most aristocratic of art forms”<sup>1</sup>. Artist Grayson Perry, has cautioned that art schools are turning into posh white ghettos. So my question is...how can an education in painting practice be accessible to and have contemporary relevance for all interested students?

I will argue that one way is through Life Writing. In my research I use Life Writing as a method to explore and articulate my class background and to inform my practice. Combining perspectives from history, sociology and English literature, Life Writing supports an interpretation of the consequences of class, as felt and lived beyond the personal, bringing the realisation that what we refer to as autobiographical is largely historically and culturally determined. Significantly, the introduction of life writing within the art academy indicates that institutions are listening to and acknowledging the personal voice.

My concept of Aspirational Beauty helps us to understand creative endeavors and practices that are outside of, or marginalized by, established theoretical conventions and definitions. *Aspirational Beauty* is, I argue, a creative resistance to conforming to socially inscribed ideals of respectability. My paper considers *Aspirational Beauty* as an aesthetic resistance to class shame and a reaction to ascribed and legitimate routes of attaining cultural capital, personified by painting.

The conjunction of the words aspirational and beauty arose as a consequence of my own struggle to articulate and make sense of what happens in my studio practice. I attempt to articulate this by reviewing one particular work from my art practice & the Object Paintings of Lisa Milroy. I introduce the methodology of life writing and attempt to illuminate the relevance of this method by reference to the work of undergraduate painting students.

---

<sup>1</sup> Recalled by Richard Cork in *Breaking Down the Barriers: Art in the 1990s*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003, p. 61.



Taylor. S / *Un-Made* | oil on canvas | 179 x 197 cm x 9 cm

In 1997 I made *Un-Made* a large-scale painting that tries to make sense, in material form, of the consequences of the social environment that shaped me.

Making the large oil painting involved the use of a discarded, 2nd hand, pink, double, candlewick bedspread similar to the one that as a child had been a source of comfort, used as a tent to play in, and as a cover to disguise untidy heaps of this and that in a bedroom shared by sisters. The process made primitive use of the transformative magic of offset printing, with me pressing the bedspread into wet paint on prepared canvas with boards laid across its surface using the weight of my own body. When the bedspread was peeled away its impression was a revelation:<sup>2</sup>

My candlewick representation of a design of a fancy plaster ceiling from a stately home... not quite right. The painting is the materialization of what I am trying to describe with the notion of aspirational beauty.<sup>2</sup> *Un-made* transforms aesthetically an aspiration that could only emerge in an art form.

---

<sup>2</sup>A, Rowley, *Aspirational Beauty*, Crescent Arts, Scarborough, Yorkshire, 2013.

### **Life Writing**

The present tense of the verb *to be* refers only to the present: but nevertheless with the first person singular in front of it, it absorbs the past which is inseparable from it. 'I am' includes all that has made me so. It is more than a statement of immediate fact: it is already biographical.

J, Berger, 'About Looking', *Writers and Readers*, 1972, pp. 370-1, cited in C, Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman*, London, Virago, 1986, p. 3.

Life writing supports my investigation into the significance that may be drawn from my own history in relation to aesthetic decisions that have, and continue to inform my practice as an artist. Life writing was the method I used to begin the process of unravelling the complexities of political aesthetic hierarchy's in relation to painting and gender. Life writing initially provides a structure, a way into writing and a method of articulating and constructing a parallel narrative that supports my visual practice, and provides a framework for considering it critically.

The foundation and development of life writing emerged from oral history, often utilised in the recording of working class, previously lost or hidden life stories. This is underpinned by feminist theoretical writing that understands the personal as political. Life writing considers and incorporates positions of authorship, subjectivity, myth making, and memory. In her paper, *But The Author is Dead: Life Writing in English Studies*, Margareta Jolly accounts for the proliferation of life writing within the academy as an indication that universities and institutions of learning are becoming more democratic. She considers that the personal voice is both significant and necessary to providing opportunities for the voices of women, the working class, older people, immigrants and students.<sup>3</sup> Jolly asserts that 'life writing can open up a dialectic between the particular and the general, experience and theory',<sup>4</sup> arguing that, 'in today's pluralist culture, individuals assert that knowledge is, by definition, conditioned by its context and standpoint, and that head, heart and body are all of its sources.'<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> M, Jolly, *But the Author is Dead! Life Writing in English Studies*, Council of College and University English News, Exeter, 2005, p. 4, accessed, 04 April 2011, < <http://www.uel.ac.uk/cnr/documents/CCUENewsJollyonLifeWriting-Feb05.doc>.>.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*

The sociologist Beverly Skeggs argues that class is a 'major feature of subjectivity'<sup>6</sup> and that:

Without understanding the significance of class positioning many of...women's movements through social space, through education, families ... and in particular in the production of their subjectivity [can] not be understood.<sup>7</sup>

In the introduction to *Feminism and Autobiography*, the editors introduce the perception that 'autobiography makes trouble ... on the borderline between fact and fiction, the personal and the social, the popular and the academic, the everyday and the literary'.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, they consider that the feminist project has also challenged and collapsed more traditional boundaries and definitions; the importance of autobiography is that it can accommodate a diverse multi-disciplinary range of various feminist approaches. The claim that autobiography makes trouble is pertinent to questions of social history, and specifically in relation to the working class subject. Life writing may well be seen as problematic as the subjective self is written into history through the articulation of fact, the individual example. Once written, this is hard to refute.



---

<sup>6</sup> Skeggs, op. cit., *Formations of Class and Gender: Becoming Respectable*, p. 7.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> T. Cosslett, C. Lury & P. Summerfield (eds.), *Feminism and Autobiography: Texts, Theories, Methods*, Routledge, London & New York, 2000, p. 1.



In 1986 the historian Carolyn Steedman wrote, *Landscape for a Good Woman*. Contained within the slim volume is a complex interweaving of historic details, precise locations, disclosed family secrets, fantasies, and a sense of impossible longing; a **longing** for something that was invariably materially lacking, or perceived to be withheld. In the specific case of Steedman's mother, 'when the world didn't deliver the goods, she held the world to blame'.

Steedman questions the assumed origins of the autobiography as belonging to the enlightened, white, male middle class subject. She retraces a working class origin for the genre of life stories, which were 'extorted from the poor by officialdom'.<sup>9</sup> Historic records reveal that it was not a consequence of a spontaneous or creative impulse that the poor produced life stories, but legal obligation necessitated by law and most often in relation to claims of settlement.<sup>10</sup> Illuminated again by female servants in relation not only to working entitlements but also to narrations of 'seduction and betrayal.' Evidence from eighteenth century literature claims that life stories from the poor were plundered for the self-articulation of the 'suffering bourgeois self'.<sup>11</sup>

The John Moore's painting prize is arguably the most important exhibition for painters in the UK.<sup>12</sup> In 1989 Lisa Milroy's painting *Handles* won first prize.

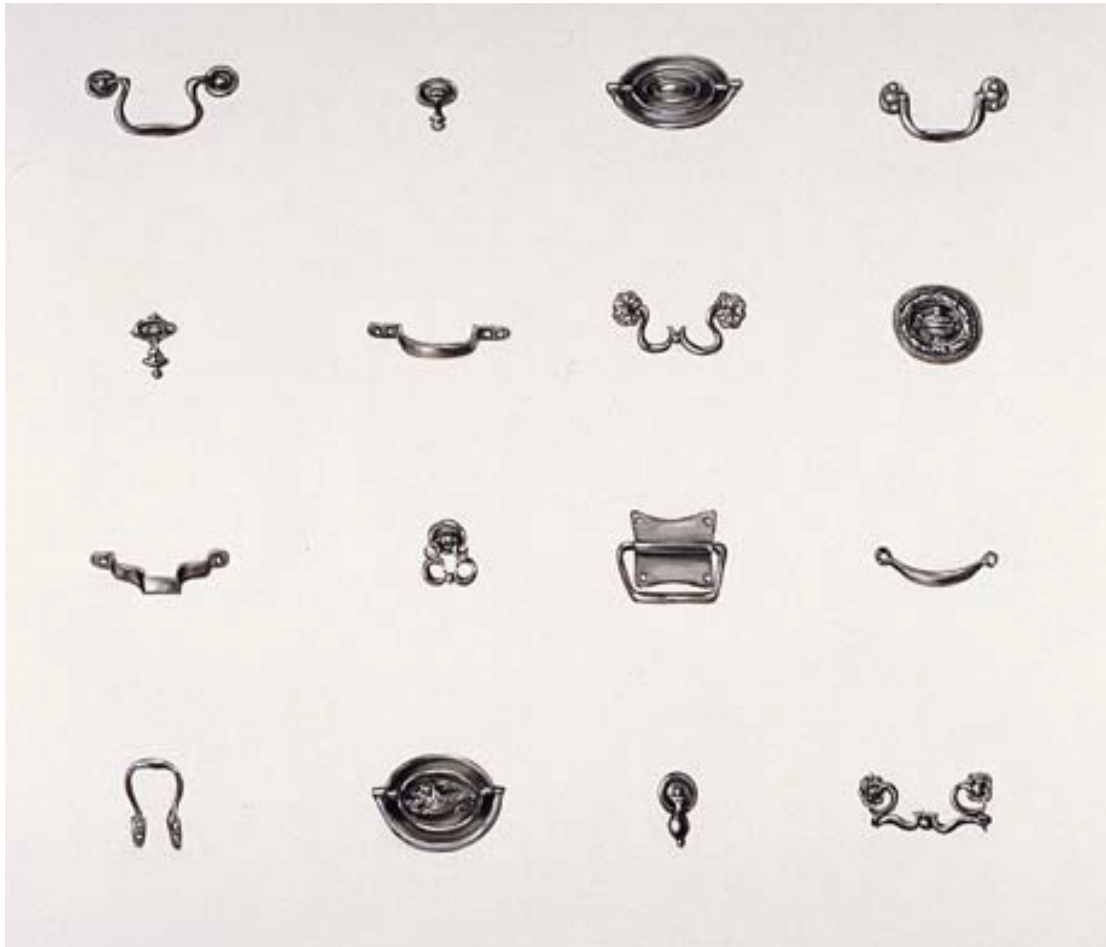
---

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>10</sup> The law of Settlement was inaugurated by an act of parliament in 1662 and was one of the most important pieces of legislation. Settlement, 'belonging to a place' needed to be proved in order to obtain relief or welfare. For women the most common means of acquiring settlement was to earn it by domestic service of at least 365 days. C. Steedman, *Labours lost, Domestic Service and the Making of Modern England*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2009, p. 106.

<sup>11</sup> C. Steedman, 'Enforced Narratives: Stories of another self' in T. Cosslett, C. Lury, & P. Summerfield, (eds.), *Feminism and Autobiography: Texts, theories, methods*, Routledge, 2000, p. 36. Steedman unpacks the novels Mary Wollstonecraft's, *Maria*, or *The Wrongs of Women* (1798) and Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* (1722).

<sup>12</sup> "[The John Moores Painting Prize is] the Oscar of the British painting world" - Sir Norman Rosenthal, curator and former exhibitions secretary at the Royal Academy.



Lisa Milroy | *Handles* | oil on canvas | 190.5 cm x 221 cm. | 1989.

When I first saw Lisa Milroy's paintings I remember how very fresh and almost gleaming they were. The use of bright un-sullied paint reinforced the appeal of the well-managed paintings. The term sullied is a painter's term, to refer to the appearance of over mixed, dirty paint, the remnants of a days painting, paint that resembles mud or clay, all the colours of the earth. Milroy's use of paint in contrast is clean, it could have come straight out of the tube, and it retains a purity of colour. Milroy employs the same consideration to her choice and application of paint as to her selection of objects; they both appear to be uncontaminated.



Lisa Milroy | *Melons*, | oil on canvas | 70 x 106 cm. | 1986 Southampton City Art Gallery

The paintings depict collections of supposedly ordinary objects but the repetitive nature of representing the same or similar objects en masse make the chosen items, such as black patent shiny shoes, dresses, crisp coloured shirts and honeydew melons seem almost magical. The most striking aspect of Milroy's paintings of this period is the use of a white background, used consistently in her *Object* paintings. By placing familiar objects in formal categories they become in themselves formal rather than domestic, the white ground removes their real-world context as useful objects

Of the painting *Handles* Milroy states that 'despite the fact that the handles are figurative objects, their arrangement and the way they are painted is abstract.'<sup>13</sup> The common objects that she paints are rendered in such a way that they appear to be brand new.

---

<sup>13</sup> Biggs, op. cit., p. 7.



Lisa Milroy | *Shoes* | oil on canvas | 840 x 112 cm | 1987

The shoes and clothes that she paints have no trace or evidence of having been worn; the painted objects can tell us nothing of the previous owner; the objects bear no baggage of history, of hers or any others. It is the appeal of the newness and the abundance of the depicted objects that perhaps distinguishes her painting as reflective of the late 1980s consumerist period.<sup>14</sup> Milroy claims that the objects depicted function for her only as a structure, to enable her to make abstract paintings. My feelings on viewing her paintings are however...quite the opposite.

---

<sup>14</sup> 'In his famous study of consumption during the Gilded Age, Veblen (1899) speculated that, for the particular individuals he studied, "Consumption is evidence of wealth, and thus becomes honorific, and ... failure to consume a mark of demerit." This notion that an aim of consumption was to demonstrate one's economic position to observers Veblen dubbed "conspicuous consumption".' K, K, Charles, E, Hurst & N, Roussanov, *Conspicuous Consumption and Race*, University of Chicago, University of Pennsylvania, USA, 2007, accessed 30/4/2011, . <[http://faculty.chicagobooth.edu/erik.hurst/research/race\\_consumption\\_qje\\_submission.pdf](http://faculty.chicagobooth.edu/erik.hurst/research/race_consumption_qje_submission.pdf)>.





Lisa Milroy | *Dresses* | oil on canvas | 840 x 489 cm | 1985.

I pay great attention and give great regard for the objects that she portrays. The new and abundant feminine goods, I **desire** with 'a proper envy' as identified by the historian Carolyn Steedman. The term is Steedman's attempt to understand her mother's desire for consumer goods, for the latest fashion of a 'New Look' coat the desire, as Steedman puts it, 'of people for the things of the earth'.<sup>15</sup> Steedman acknowledges that 'there is no language of desire that can present what [her] mother wanted as anything but supremely trivial'<sup>16</sup> But as she asserts, 'exclusion is the promoter of envy, the social and subjective sense of the impossible unfairness of things'<sup>17</sup> Steedman considers that 'a proper envy' is the rightful inheritance of the poor.

For me there is duality to my 'proper envy', it encompasses both the desire for the material aspects of the things in Milroy's paintings and the practice of painting that I value inexplicably. I envy the success of Milroy the proper painter that I admire but could never be. I envy the depicted objects that are ordered, unsullied, and free of historical baggage. I desire to possess the sheer volume of the new pristine shoes...

---

<sup>15</sup> Steedman, loc. cit., *Landscape for a Good Woman*.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*, p. 113.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*, p. 111.

Steedman's insightful point about the role of envy is that:

By allowing this envy into political struggles, of people in a state of disposition to gain their inheritance, might be seen, not as sordid and mindless greed for the things of the market place, but attempts to alter in them states of unfulfilled desire'.<sup>18</sup>

Milroy presents the pristine newness of the objects as the central concern of the paintings. She remarks that they function as formal objects in order to produce abstracted images.

Within my practice, the inverse of Milroy applies. The objects I select to form 'proper paintings' acknowledge the previous lives of the objects, the value of objects burnished with use and toil...

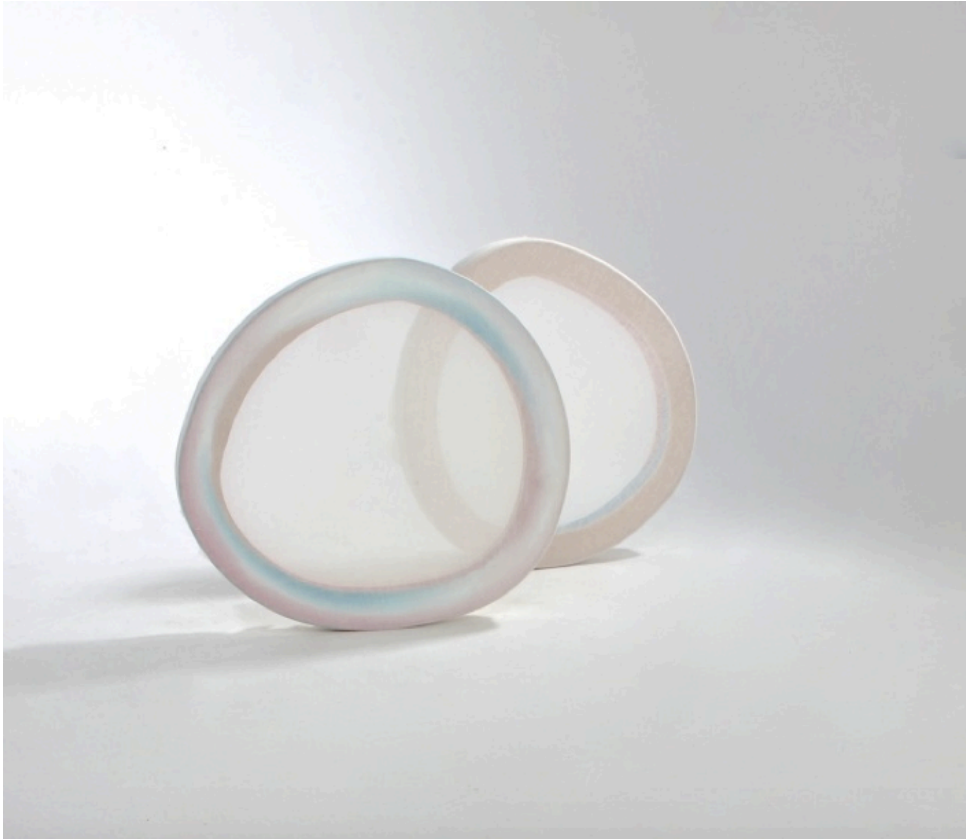
#### Case study

Joseph Gibney

<http://www.josephgibneyartist.co.uk>

---

<sup>18</sup> C. Steedman, 'The Decolonizing Vision' in G. Grewal, *Circles of Sorrow, Lives of Struggle: The Novels of Toni Morrison*, LSU Press, USA, 2000, p. 18.



Joe Gibney | *Painted Frames*, Oil and Cotton Muslin on Shaped M.D.F Frames, 2014.

The painting student Joe Gibney graduated from Leeds College of Art in 2015 the context to his painting practice provides a fluid and informed set of ideas that offers up the importance of family experience and nurture as a site for reflecting on the drives developed in his work. He writes that:

Material engagement is central to my Fine Art practice; from an early age my inquisitive nature has driven me to explore, investigate and learn about the way things operate in the world around me. Both my heritage and life experiences have provided me with an identity as an individual and fine artist. I am from a family of skilled labourers who all create value through the work performed and this has influenced the inclusion of craft within my practice. My work does not however directly address or make statement about the position or the conditions of the working class; painting for me is about discovery and the chance to understand the world around me through the act of making.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> J, Gibney, COP 3 Critical Dialogue. *A disregard for materiality: deconstructing the picture plane; presenting the pictorial fact*, 2015.



Joe Gibney, *End of Year Show*, 2015.

Joe's work is insightful and poignant. It is so because it provides the incentive to investigate the interaction between maker, object, image and audience, which seems to be at the heart of his practice. Joe explores the importance of the installation of the painted image and the wider context of image and staging. There is an attempt to consider the white cube gallery as different from historical architectural spaces that is useful. Joe is obsessive about the painting materials themselves and the painting specific course was extremely important in relation to how he thought about his materials and position as a painter. Joe clearly positions the importance of his materials, stating that:

As an artist I am interested in the potential and capabilities of materials to create interaction through both visual and physical participation. Commonly I feel there is misinterpretation towards the way in which paintings are viewed; often the viewer disregards the physical materiality, fabrication and structural components of the painting in favour of traditional pictorial illusion; paint is a catalyst for representation and is therefore rarely viewed as its own entity.





Joe Gibney, cardboard model of final degree show exhibition. 2015

## Case study

## Mikkel Ullah

Mikkel is currently a fine art student at Leeds; she works in the painting strand. Mikkel is a mature student, she is extremely energetic, passionate & entrepreneurial. After initial clashes with the 'authorities' of the institution of the art college, she has been a pleasure to work with. As she states herself, she is interested in all forms of popular culture but not particularly that of "dead fella's".

Her interpretation of painting incorporates street art, fashion, fashion as art/art as fashion- she is interested in 'clothes which look like art' she collaborates extensively with other creative's and is currently working on the production of a cross gendered clothing label 'No-Gender'.



Mikkel Ullah | *Angel* | 2015





Mikkel Ullah | *SHOES* | Acrylic paint | spray paint | 2015

Mikkel often presents her work in the form of a pre recorded blog or video. Mikkel is a natural communicator and her use of video is inspired and manages to capture the essence and excitement of her practice, which is at the intersection of painting, fashion and street art culture. A needs-must approach has dictated some of her most recent work, having to 'work small' because of a recent illness'. Mikkel is interested in exploring and referencing a 'physical material regeneration' as she states herself, the physical body is a material used and discussed in her practice. Mikkel considers art as an important social force and initiates and contributes to a wide range of very successful creative projects with young people. Her current painting work utilises selected second hand items of clothing.

These items form the new canvas; her approach, establishes uniformity across objects associated with different class aspirations. In Mikkel's practice her embellishment of the selected items of clothing is democratic, with no hierarchies, Prada handbags get the same graffiti spray job as shoes from new Look. On completion of the works, these repositioned objects are resold back to high-end retailers, for example Harvey Nichols. Mikkel considers her self as a modern day robin Hood.

### **A Space for Painting.**

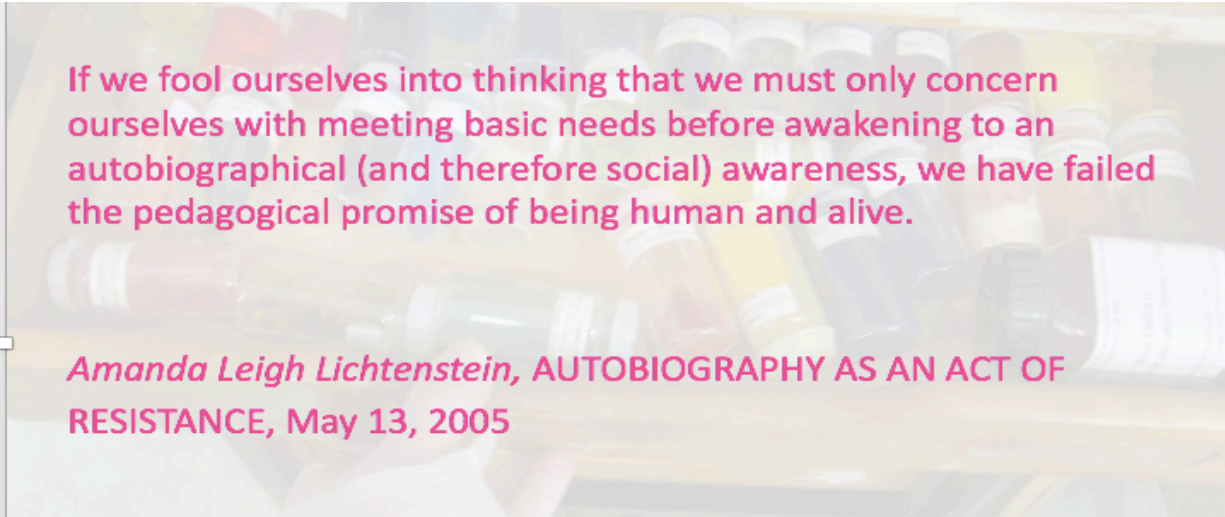
When I started teaching at Leeds College of Art I came with a set of ideas that I'd been working on.... and thinking about... for 10-15 or so years. It is these insights that I have shared today... The method of using life writing has been more recent, however it has provided an important strategy for me in unraveling the complexity of making artwork.

It has been an unexpected delight to observe that such a method has facilitated a wide range of students that I work with to gain confidence in the use of personal narratives and personal voice. In relation to teaching painting it allows students to be involved in the understating of painting from their own perspective, articulating ideas and concerns that are inventive in joining the routes of thinking through and about painting.

On reflection of reviewing the range of work that current painting students are engaged in, my observation is that a discreet painting course allows students not just to consider conceptually driven or subject led work but to investigate the materials themselves as subject.

As the artist Phyllida Barlow states in an interview for *Frieze* magazine 'There is a surge of interest in making work in order to discover a subject.'<sup>20</sup> In the work of the two students that I have used as case studies, in addition to the importance within their practice of the use of personal narratives, I am aware that they are both also totally consumed with the importance of how their work functions in the space that it occupies outside of the studio environment. They both question the importance of display and space.

*Aspirational Beauty* considers the importance of claiming and accepting subject-hood, which I argue can subsequently allow for a transformation of the abject and the chaotic, particularly relevant to the messy material practice of painting. By articulating the concept of *Aspirational Beauty*, particular forms of creativity are reclaimed and named, as an alternative and authentic position of creative resistance.



If we fool ourselves into thinking that we must only concern ourselves with meeting basic needs before awakening to an autobiographical (and therefore social) awareness, we have failed the pedagogical promise of being human and alive.

*Amanda Leigh Lichtenstein, AUTOBIOGRAPHY AS AN ACT OF RESISTANCE, May 13, 2005*

Life writing considers that the personal voice is both significant and necessary to providing a **range of voices** within the student body.

---

<sup>20</sup> [http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/learning\\_experience/](http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/learning_experience/)





