

Painting in a Digital Forest

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Abstract

Painting in a Digital Forest

This PhD 'by practice' aims to understand ways in which painting confronts the experience of living in a digital age. The objective was to produce a body of paintings at a time of a shifting visual regime in order to reflect on the ways technology affects our temporal and historical relationship with the environment of the landscape and its inhabitants.

Painting was used in the study to develop 'felt knowledge' – a form of artistic knowledge acquired through sensory and emotional perception.¹

Using 'felt knowledge', I develop an analogy between the Internet surfer and a particular notion of the hunter in nature. The locus of the hunt is a liminal space that provides opportunities where various forms of natural and unnatural adventures can arise. The forest is seen as a place where one might experience a terrifying or enchanting loss of normal boundaries or understanding of the rules of engagement.

The study uses a number of critical perspectives to explore questions of the closing temporal gap between events, analysis, production and absorption. A key concept is that of viewing nature as '*Otherness*'. The essential core of *Otherness* is inevitably nameless. Merleau-Ponty (2002), suggested that this experience

¹ See Klein, 2010.

comes about through a momentary loss of self-consciousness leading us to encounter otherness directly and with astonishment:

*“ In order to see the world and grasp it as paradoxical, we must break with our familiar acceptance of it and, also, from the fact that from this break we can learn nothing but the unmotivated upsurge of the world.”*²

Imagination is not possible without that radical otherness; it is this oddness, this uncertainty that forms the direction of my studio practice and my written reflections on where and how we live today.

McLuhan’s work and his thoughts on the impact of media, particularly technological and digital media, contribute to my current concerns about the place and use of painting today. McLuhan suggests we snap out of our numbness, which is induced by the over dominance of a particular media or pattern. One possible solution to the anaesthetic effect of a particular medium is to use another medium that has an antidote effect.

As a PhD by practice, the making of paintings has been the dominant mode of enquiry, with the accompanying text acting as a supporting device. In the written text, I reflect on the problematic relationship between painting and writing, following Matisse’s articulation of the difficulties and often-unnecessary demands made by writing.

My approach to painting and the relationship that writing has to it is an explication of my methodology, which recognises the need to maintain an iterative movement between proximity/immersion and distance/reflection. The methods both acknowledge the need to make practical knowledge explicit, and a

² Merleau-Ponty, 2002, p.15.

reverse movement whereby the painterly procedure becomes a way to physically test the possibilities and limits of language in articulating this.

Against exaggerated claims of the death of painting in the face of technological and other developments, the proposition of this thesis is that painting's continuation and relevance at this historical moment is determined in part by a unwillingness of painters themselves to see it extinguished; and that furthermore, the practice of painting *utilizes* its marginalized position to its advantage.

My contribution to knowledge lies in the consideration, fused into the paintings, of how the transformation of paint can convey an awareness of the affects of the closing temporal gap between events, analysis, production and absorption and the demonstration and articulation of how painting's 'moribund' position has itself become its ability to communicate effectively from the margins.

PAINTING IN A DIGITAL FOREST

Table of Contents

List of illustrations

p.6

Introductory note: Parallel Occurrences

p.7

Aims of research and point of departure

p.8

A reflection on the problematic relationship between painting and writing

p.9-11

The context for this research in terms of my current practice

p.11-13

How to make an approach?

p.13-18

The locus of the hunt

p.18-21

The quest

p.21-23

The 'outsider' perspective

p.23-26

Towards the mediated image

p.26-28

Lost in the forest

p.28-30

Postmodern regurgitation

p.31-33

Methodologies

p.33-40

Painted dioramas

p.41-45

Ruination

p.45-49

On disorientation

p.49-52

Conclusion

How can painting convey an experience of living in a digital age?

p.52-57

Appendix: Larger illustrations of the practical submission

p.58-67

References

p.68-69

List of Illustrations

1. Casper D. Friedrich, *'Two Men Contemplating the Moon'* Oil on canvas 1825

p.29

2. Ian Hartshorne, *'No Time to Think'* Oil on canvas 2014

p.30

3. Ian Hartshorne, *'A Foreign Room'* Oil on canvas 2012

p.31

4. John Currin, '*Woman in a Red Shoe*' Oil on canvas 2016
p.32.
5. Ian Hartshorne, '*The Bliss of Barthes*' Oil on canvas 2016
p.35
6. Ian Hartshorne, '*Come to Your Senses*' Oil on canvas 2016
p.36
7. Ian Hartshorne, '*Ontology of Sight*' Oil on canvas 2016
p.37
8. Ian Hartshorne, '*Beginning to End*' Oil on canvas 2014
p.40
9. Ian Hartshorne, '*Autopsy of a Painting*' Oil on canvas 2015
p.41
10. Ian Hartshorne, '*People Like Us Do Things Like This*' Oil on canvas 2014
p.43
11. J.M.W. Turner, '*Interior of Tintern Abbey*' Oil on canvas 1794
p.46
12. Ian Hartshorne, '*Dying Lite*' Oil on canvas 2014
p.46
13. Ian Hartshorne, '*Three People Working*' Oil on canvas 2015
p.47
14. Ian Hartshorne, '*Reversal of Fortune*' Oil on canvas 2015
p.49

Introductory Note: Parallel Occurrences

In the written part of the thesis I consciously enact a particular kind of relationship between painting and writing. I write in a way that I experience as similar to how the paintings are made, which is a method that reveals itself iteratively, elastically and tangentially. I want the written exegesis to be fluid in the way that painting is fluid. I deliberately avoid an academic form of writing or mode of address because the writing feels much more real or authentic when it is concurrent to the painting, rather than codifying it, or simply describing what I have done.

I have produced a written document that one might say functions the way in which an anagram functions. By saying the same thing in two different ways, each aspect relates to, but is not the same as the other. In this way, writing can act as a form of equivalence to the painting through a reconfiguration that reveals the same thing but from different perspectives. In this sense, painting is less a form of language, though together it and the writing might be thought about as a kind of text, an attempt on my part to intertwine the visual and the verbal.

Similarly, the titles of the paintings operate not as an explanatory note on the pictures, but like another colour or additional ingredient. They are not descriptive, as I want to avoid labels that tell you what you are looking at. This is because I want to foreground vision, not undercut it. As a painter, I am very aware that we can see things but not necessarily make sense of them, and in this writing, as much as in the paintings, I want to encourage that. The viewer is therefore free to engage with the work in his or her own terms, rather than the images being redefined or pinned down by my exegesis.

However, writing does allow me to confront some of those things I have done within the painting. I can't escape from what I have done when writing as I can perhaps do when painting. Writing is a way of confronting myself in the work; but painting is a way of confronting the world I live in.

Painting in a Digital Forest

Aims of Research and Point of Departure

This written text forms part of my PhD 'by practice' thesis submission. As a whole, the thesis presents my practice and analyses it with particular reference to the impact of digital processes upon current painting practices and debates.³

The research question that initiated this doctoral research was concerned with the way in which my paintings were a method of confronting an experience of living in a digital age. I was interested in navigating, through my painting practice, the significant developments and transformations that have occurred in the relations between art and technology. Specifically, I was interested in how our use of technology affects our temporal and historical relationship with the environment of the landscape and its inhabitants. The landscape in other words,

³ This thesis has two components, a body of paintings and this text. Paintings from the practice element of the PhD are presented as images throughout the thesis and again, at a larger scale, in an appendix. An exhibition, comprising these works was made available to the examiners at the time of the viva voce of this thesis held at Rogue Artist studios, 21th Dec 2016 – 10th Jan 2017.

became the frame through which I approached experiences of negotiating the digital age as a painter.

This text stands as an accompaniment to the paintings that were the primary mode of knowing by experiencing. In it I will describe some of the current theoretical concerns surrounding contemporary western painting and argue for its ongoing vitality. In particular, I will argue in relation to this, that the continuation of painting and its relevance is determined in part by an unwillingness of painters themselves to see it extinguished; and I will suggest that the practice of painting in the current climate utilizes its marginalized position to its advantage.

A reflection on the problematic relationship between painting and writing

“A painter who addresses the public not just in order to present his works, but to reveal some of his ideas on the art of painting, exposes himself to several dangers. In the first place, knowing that many people like to think of painting as an appendage of literature and therefore want it to express not general ideas suited to pictorial means, but specifically literary ideas, I fear that one will look with astonishment upon the painter who ventures to invade the domain of the literary man. As a matter of fact, I am fully aware that a painter’s best spokesman is his work.”⁴

Matisse articulates a commonly felt awkwardness amongst artists generally, but painters specifically concerning the difficulties and often unnecessary demands, especially those coming from, but not limited to a viewing public, to ‘tell all’ in a non-codified way, just how to look and think about art. This view is of particular interest since Matisse has actually (and possibly contradictorily) provided some of the most illuminating and insightful reflections on his painting through his

⁴ From *Notes on a Painter*, Matisse’s first published essay, quoted in Flam (1995), p.37.

writing. It is also interesting in the context of this text, to note how Matisse's writing was in essence, an attempt to convey, in very clear terms, what kinds of visual and physical decisions are being made when constructing a painting.

Even in an academic context, where an exegesis of the research is required – articulating the knowledge gained from making paintings as a way of asking questions - the writing must function differently to the paintings' own self-description. This is perhaps of especial concern to me because my painting is primarily visual. I use painting to develop 'felt knowledge' - a form of artistic knowledge acquired through sensory and emotional perception.

Klein's (2010) work on what is artistic research is helpful here:

*"Ultimately it [artistic knowledge] has to be acquired through sensory and emotional perception, precisely through artistic experience, from which it cannot be separated. Whether silent or verbal, declarative or procedural, implicit or explicit - in any case, artistic knowledge is sensual and physical, 'embodied knowledge'. The knowledge that artistic research strives for is a felt knowledge."*⁵

I am chiefly concerned with the visual and aesthetic aspects of the painted surface. I engage with the perceptual condition of the medium, attempting to foreground colour, shape and form, movement and tension, and the belief that painting operates in part as a continued dialogue between these qualities, functioning as a sophisticated system of vision.

This research is an examination, through practice, of the sensorial possibilities of paint and how this is affected by the impact of digital media. I hope to draw attention to an aspect of making which emphasizes the materiality of paint itself.

⁵ Klein, 2010, n.p.

In this sense, writing can certainly be visual but does not operate materially in the same way as the making of a painting.

The initial decisions regarding making my paintings are usually arrived at in response to, or often a rejection of, previous work. Colour and mark making decisions are thought about at the time and are intuitive, or come from first person knowledge rather than being separately and objectively thought *through*.

The subsequent changes to the painting - and I emphasize changes rather than developments - are revealed in response to something made. Making is iterative, and *writing* about this process is only needed if one wants to describe it in a way that is external to it. I consider this unnecessary when thinking about painting outwith an academic context, as in a sense, the painting describes itself.

At the same time though, I *have* arrived at an understanding of my own painting through the practice of writing (not necessarily through writing *about* the paintings), an understanding that was previously disguised or veiled by an emphasis on making. My approach to painting, and the relationship that writing has to it, is an explication of my methodology. This is the case precisely *because* the process of making/painting is distinguishable from writing in several ways.

One can begin a painting and modify/develop it in an attempt to resolve it and then usefully reflect upon those 'making decisions' through writing.

Nevertheless, it is important to emphasise that, to achieve resolution, this writerly reflection is largely done in situ - at the time of making - and the actual painterly decisions are arrived at through visual rather than textual adjustments.

From another perspective, I think about the visual as an approach to the textual; in the sense that the painted object might *be* textual, that one could think about

painting as a system of signs capable of being read.⁶ But there is considerable difficulty attached to arguing unequivocally about this. And so in what follows I take the approach towards the textual that I have described above – as a reflective practice in situ, rather than arguing that there is a middle ground where the visuality of writing and the textuality of painting overlap.

The context for this research in terms of my current practice

In general, the formation of my paintings has developed from an initial relationship to the history of painting and associated critical debates. Latterly, a time shortly before I began this research, this relationship came to be shaped by an affection for the landscape and a preoccupation with how we inhabit our natural environment; this carried on through to an investigation of artificially constructed interior spaces, and how these might relate to psychological states. However, I should add that there has been no '*post hoc ergo propter hoc*' employed within these shifts and changes.⁷

A combination of sources such as my previous work, printed matter, Internet based images, and photography is often used in my work to provide bearings or coordinates - to be transcribed by paint. By using these particular sources I am attempting to add weight and meaning to mechanised surfaces, seeing this as a representation of industrialised processes, which have been utilized and played out in various ways from Andy Warhol to Wade Guyton. As if to suggest a view into

⁶ See for example Peirce, 2007, p.216.

⁷ The *post hoc ergo propter hoc* (after this therefore because of this) fallacy is based upon the mistaken notion that simply because one thing happens after another, the first event was a cause of the second event. Post hoc reasoning is the basis for many superstitions and erroneous beliefs.

another reality, I want my paintings to oscillate within a territory of uncertainty, to fluctuate between representation and abstraction, as this, for me, represents painting at its most dynamic, difficult and problematic. I want to allude to a narrative, possibly something akin to a filmic quality - where images slowly resonate. I see painting as a conduit for the transmission or evocation of painting's own history. The elastic nature of paint allows my practice to also remain fluid.

The making of paintings led the investigation, and this thesis, which supports it, is structured similar to the way in which the paintings themselves are constructed. It is presented in the form of an extended essay, composed of subsections, each with headings that mutate through a free floating associative process. This fluidity navigates questions of landscape, analogue and digital media, and painting. It also presents ideas of the Hunt and of Ruins, getting lost and disorientation, and concludes by offering an approach where the possibilities of the medium, can be enlarged to open up new modes of representation.

How to make an approach?

I do not believe that we are 'home' in the landscape; very few people in the post-industrial world are, perhaps unlike the people who still work in and on the land. From a European perspective, we do not dwell in the landscape - we tend to visit it. But although the landscape may not necessarily be a permanent fixture in our lives today, it does still serve a function for us.

For the majority part, most of us encounter nature by secondary means; through paintings, photographs in magazines, nature programmes on TV, film and advertising. Some portion of a natural scene is viewed as if it were a painting or

photograph. In viewing and experiencing nature in this way we appear to rely on predetermined 'filters'. In experiencing the real thing our aesthetic approach toward nature has been filtered through pictures – a cavernous forest, rolling countryside, a spectacular waterfall, silhouettes of trees against misty mountains. This approach is taken as a given, seeking certain content in nature and consciously or subconsciously omitting other unnecessary, unsightly elements. To some degree we praise the majestic sunset or mountain peak over other scenes. The more the environment becomes spectacle, the more value nature holds for us. However, thinking of nature chiefly as only an aesthetic scene is unnecessarily limiting.

As a painter, I am interested in how viewing nature purely as a spectacle might lead us to domesticate even as we look, and in doing so deny the possibility of more mysterious aspects of nature, for instance, things that exist beyond the categorizing 'gaze' of rationality. These characteristics that lie beyond our pragmatic understanding of the world are often referred to as '*Otherness*'.⁸

The essential core of Otherness is inevitably nameless. Phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty suggested that this experience comes about through a momentary loss of self-consciousness leading us to encounter otherness directly and with astonishment. A celebration of animate being can only be fleetingly encountered, and never understood. Merleau-Ponty stressed the importance of "being filled with wonder"⁹ at the world, and claimed:

⁸ For a fuller understanding of these ideas see Drenthen, 2010, pp.17-23.

⁹ Schama, 2004, p.6.

“In order to see the world and grasp it as paradoxical, we must break with our familiar acceptance of it and, also, from the fact that from this break we can learn nothing but the unmotivated upsurge of the world.”¹⁰

Neither wonder nor imagination is possible without that radical otherness which is so often obscured by explanation and classification. It is this oddness, this uncertainty, that forms the direction of my studio practice and my written reflections on where and how we live.

In what follows I attempt to highlight the development and consciousness of a mediated landscape idea in relation to my studio-based practice and in the context of our digital age. My ambition for this research is to explore the historical and cultural contexts of my interests, and in doing so provide me with further entry points to extend my artistic expression of how the landscape and its inhabitants might be envisioned in painting in the 21st century.

The starting point for this work was a realisation that my relationship to the landscape allowed me to understand Marshall McLuhan’s observation that our senses are changed through digital technologies. This gave me a platform from which to further my practice by allowing me to give attention to the credibility gap increasingly apparent in visual language usage and its declining power.

McLuhan’s work and his thoughts on the impact of media, particularly technological and digital media also contribute to my current concerns about the place and use of painting today.

According to McLuhan, to communicate coherently and vividly in an increasingly technologically digitized society is to change the operation of our senses:

¹⁰ Merleau-Ponty, 2002, p.14.

*"...If a new technology extends one or more of our senses outside us into the social world, then new ratios among all of our senses will occur in that particular culture. It is comparable to what happens when a new note is added to a melody. And when the sense ratios alter in any culture then what had appeared lucid before may suddenly become opaque, and what had been vague or opaque will become translucent."*¹¹

With our senses shifted then, or the balance of them altered, new regimes appear. Douglas Fogal describes something similar in *'Painting at the Edge of the World'*: how the investment in digital media, whether it be cultural, financial or institutional, can undermine and subvert critical relationships in contemporary art production; he adds that these relationships, which form the backbone of critical debate, may further erode a framework that is already weakened.¹²

This weakening can be thought of and has been written about as a kind of crisis, and one that often seems to focus on, but is not necessarily limited to painting.¹³

This 'crisis' in painting and the critical responses to it may be in part explained or brought about by pluralism: a heterogeneity of approaches with no defining narrative - and this unidirectional approach would seem to encapsulate my practice. Within my paintings there is a sort of deliberate tired pluralism, which comments on the relationship between (amongst other things) art and commerce and the role of art in an institutional context (the market, the museum, the gallery).

The temporal gap between presentation of art in the gallery and its absorption into mass culture seems to get quicker and art is becoming or has become

¹¹ McLuhan, 2011, p.47.

¹² Fogal, 2001, p.23.

¹³ See Smith, 2013.

inseparable from real life. This may be partly explained by the influence of a theory of deconstruction, which is a meta-critical discipline, one whose function is to undermine the notion of an artwork's intrinsic value and meaning. And it may also be explained by the 'institutional theory of art,'¹⁴ which has to continually loosen its definitions of what constitutes art's intrinsic character in order to allow ordinary or real objects into the category of art, otherwise there could be no further 'testing the boundaries and possibilities' which is a common approach taught within art schools. This testing and pushing is a trajectory built into the logic of the avant-garde; that art needs to constantly surpass itself. Has the status of art generally or painting specifically therefore possibly become redundant? This possibility - of the redundancy of painting - has itself become the subject of my painting. And I want my painting to critique a culture of regurgitation, redundancy and revival, which seems to have become common currency within painting practices generally.

And for many artists in the 20th Century redundancy has increasingly become the material, and within art in particular, redundancy itself is becoming recontextualised to make art. This current state of art as a recontextualisation of its own redundancy or death within a contemporary transition from analogue to digital questions not only our language based construct of the 'real' but also the analogue structure of language itself. The analogue view of the world comes from the Greek idea that life is made of separate building blocks. What would the indivisibility of art and life mean within the transition from a divisible

¹⁴ See Dickie, 1974 and 1997.

analogue to an indivisible digital one? What could a digital construct of the world look like and could this possibly be the start of a new paradigm?

Recent critical debate regarding painting, particularly representational painting, refers to the act as 'necrophilic'.¹⁵ This obviously refers to the 'death of painting' and the so-called indulgent pursuit of it in the face of new media and digital technology. A quote by Stephen Parrino is perhaps helpful here:

*"When I started making paintings, the word on painting was "PAINTING IS DEAD." I saw this, as an interesting place, for painting death can be refreshing, so I started engaging in necrophilia... Approaching history in the same way that Dr. Frankenstein approaches body parts..."*¹⁶

The idea of painting as 'necrophilic' is paradoxical – it is simultaneously a way to continue painting whilst acknowledging little can be done to contribute new forms¹⁷. I suppose if painters are aware of this debate they may feel like sentimental luddites, who hound a defunct medium in an attempt at artificial respiration. But in this research I want to suggest the idea of painting as an act of defiance, a kind of resistance in a world dominated by easily consumable, and ultimately dismissible images.

I want to investigate if it represents a kind of dissatisfaction with modernity and the unquestioned belief in perpetual upgrading? We might understand this as a form of nostalgia, one that may relate more to a mental or emotional state of

¹⁵ See Peakman, 2013, p.242.

¹⁶ See press release <https://www.gagosian.com/exhibitions/september-25-2007--steven-parrino>.

¹⁷ A full discussion of this can be found here: <http://www.brooklynrail.org/2012/12/artseen/the-four-corners-of-painting>.

comfort. Painting is for me therefore, a refuge (and possibly, as we will see, one in a forest).

There is an aspect of consumerism that seems to teach us to express our distaste for things, through our things. A couple of manifestations of this can be found in examples such as buying a brand new copy, with authentic 'burn marks', of a Jimmy Hendrix Stratocaster or in the homes and gardens' section of (Sunday) papers that teaches you how to massacre a Habitat coffee table with shoe polish and a hammer in order to make it look 'quaint'.

These double codings may be symptomatic of an aspect of postmodernism that speaks of the commodification of nostalgia, which might create a yearning for a simpler past, even if it's a past we have not experienced for ourselves. In this respect, the aesthetics of nostalgia constitutes an idealized history, which is merged with despondency in relation to the present. Maybe this is more acutely felt these days, given the current economic upheavals.

The Locus of the Hunt

Essentially, the paintings I make are made in relation to living in the world at large; and it is the impact of the digital that interests me in several ways. It strikes me that Internet 'surfers' actually behave in ways akin to a hunter. They search cyber space and the digital realm for images in a territory too large to navigate effectively or efficiently. The 'cyber hunter' needs tools and devices to enable the productive rounding up of images. The search engine is a kind of compass. It allows one to travel, guided by parameters that can be as vague or as specific as determined in the search bar.

The paintings that form this research investigate relationships between facture (surface) and temporal and spatial relationships. The Internet search engine, the subjects of vision, looking, and the visual technologies that informs our perception of space is central to my subject matter. In order to explore these ideas and their interconnections I have taken the following approach.

I suggest that the idea of 'the quest' undertaken by the symbolic figure of the hunter and its historical counterparts - the 'wild man', and the 'knight-errant' - are human representations of the liminal aspects of nature: neither being part of civilized society or wholly outside of it. These cultish figures act as a vehicle by which I am able to explore the divisions and crossover points of wilderness and civilization. The idea of the hunt is a metaphorical activity where man and nature intersect in the landscape and provides a symbolic and rich ground to explore my subject matter of how digital technologies have affected painting in general - and in particular my own approach to landscape painting. I use the analogy of the hunter to suggest that the Internet is an increasingly popular territory in providing possibilities to search for and generate meaning. The forest I suggest is a liminal place where notions of classifications and absolutes become confused; the forest becomes an allegorical and imaginative realm of contradictions and in this sense I consider painting itself a kind of forest.

I outline my interest in the way in which painting continues and reimagines itself - and as a consequence how my own commitment to painting might continue in the face of technological advancement. I describe how painting works through tradition, takes an established scheme, methodology, philosophy, modus operandi and so on, and then proceeds to reinvent or reinterpret these. My

understanding is that tradition is reworked to generate a new system of looking and perceiving; on that model, painting is in a constant process of renewal. The development of visualization tools has possibly brought about this crisis in contemporary painting's ability to continue against the speed of technological development and our continued investment in it as a means to view our environment. To avoid reciting what has and is being done within painting it becomes necessary to ask: how can one continue painting, and in what direction will this take place? This demands another more self-reflexive question: why is it deemed necessary to even ask these questions especially within our 'heads down' screen based experience? How can painting contribute to a culture or society increasingly infatuated with 'switching on' to media driven, digitally produced forms of (re) presentation?

The text is structured by the way in which we view the landscape and project images and ideas onto it. I infer that the existing parallel to the on-going evolution of the 'landscape idea' is the development of visual technology, which characterizes our perspective on space and promotes particular 'ways of seeing', that have been established in Western culture since the Renaissance period. This point of view continues to shape and influence our idea of nature in the current postmodern context. I attempt to highlight the development and consciousness of the landscape idea in relation to my studio-based practice.

In doing so, my research aims to provide me with an historical and cultural exploration of the themes that inform my work and at the same time generate further entry points to extend my practice. I have approached and visualized these themes through the medium of oil paint. Using this particular medium

allows me to exploit its inherent material qualities, but also allows me to combine multiple representations of various depictions of 'reality' in a dialectical configuration.

Oil painting for me is a medium that can incorporate contemporary means of image making, for example the use of computer-aided imagery, projection, and so on, as well as allowing a margin for intuitive mark-making that is associated with the artist's touch. This way of working allows me to reference traditional and contemporary modes of representing nature in a complex series of dialogues that explore the links, contrasts and shifting boundaries between nature and artifice.

In many of my works I explore the interiorization and domestication of nature, for example works which include trees as wallpaper, ornaments of birds, which for me signify the manner in which the environment has been 'framed' and made portable and purchasable. I underline this experience of nature as an element in contemporary society; consumed and portable, nature is not only filtered and packaged by the media, it is confused with the real, rendered user-friendly and made portable for a culture dominated by the urban experience. I am interested in how the notion of being lost in the forest relates to losing one's sense of boundaries in the postmodern era where we are confronted by a confounding amount of visual information and technologies that disorientate and distort our understanding of space and reality. For me the crucial question is, how can one make art, and painting in particular, in the 21st Century? In what follows I will attempt to outline the context for this situation by utilising the locus of the 'hunt'

as a methodology to provide possibilities of how my painting practice might unravel.

The Quest

The image of the errant-knight on an epic quest is as an extension of my current interest in the explorer or hunter, who symbolize the liminal but also form links with ancient forest mythologies, and how we relate to these themes in the contemporary era.

For me, the hunter is a liminal figure traversing opposing worlds of wilderness and civilization, able to participate in both and yet not fully belonging to either. The locus of the hunt - the forest - is another in-between space that provides a setting where natural and supernatural adventures can take place. The forest is also seen as an asocial place, where one might experience a terrifying or enchanting loss of normal boundaries. The hunter and the forest become symbols of individuality and transience as well as acting as a conduit to explore our inner-wilderness. As our lives become increasingly ordered and urbanised there exists a subconscious desire to seek and engage with mystery and adventure. The search for the picturesque is analogous to the sport of hunting. The picturesque tourist is increasingly driven to extreme remote landscapes in search of the trophy picture/photograph, often encountering untamed landscapes, and recording them as a kind of pictorial trophy. The 'sportsman' pursues the animal whereas the aesthete pursues the beauties of nature. The camera replaces the gun.

These days for the large part, most of us don't live in the landscape: we visit it.

Landscape is not necessarily a permanent feature in our lives but it does still have a function for us. Contemporary social theorist John Urry, explains:

“Visiting the landscape is like stepping out into an experience of liminality in which the codes of normal social experience were reversed.”¹⁸

What is sought for in the landscape is an inversion of the everyday. It is a place to escape, relax and alleviate the pressures of everyday existence. In essence the trip to nature is a fantasy. This fantasy is not purely an individual activity; it is socially organized, particularly through television, advertising, literature, video games, cinema, photography and so on. When we think of landscape we often have a predetermined image constructed from the media, so we are used to experiencing landscape as a secondary image. In a sense this creates a distance to the actuality of nature. We often perceive the landscape filtered through a variety of media. As a consequence our perception of landscape and authenticity is based on an idealized image that to a large extent is unrealistic.

What remains valuable to the urbanite is the image of untamed nature. What is often omitted in people's view of landscape are the typical additions of humankind's recent intervention in nature; motorways, electricity pylons, rubbish bins, conservation paths etc., all appear to have no value for the citizen today. Viewers are pre-programmed for traditionally determined content in a landscape image. This image refers to the nineteenth century tradition of painting connected with Romanticism and the search for the sublime.

¹⁸ Urry, 2002, p.11.

The 'outsider' perspective

I understand that from a critical point of view, it is necessary to separate and distinguish between the terms of nature/land and landscape and see them as totally different concepts. The land could be categorized as something we work or walk upon, something upon which livelihoods are made, or distances travelled, while the landscape is essentially a passive one, a walk in the landscape is essentially a romantic fantasy.

The notion of landscape emerged as a practise during the period of the transformation to capitalism, one important aspect of which was the commodification of land. Under this new situation, the human relationship to land is characterised by estrangement which at the same time, turns out to be the condition possible of a landscape as an aesthetic object. The enjoyment of nature and the aesthetic appreciation of nature assume, generally speaking, social dominion over nature.

Another important aspect in the emergence of landscape was the rise of the modern city. Increasing urbanity produced the necessary freedom and distance from nature. Only the self-conscious bourgeois, freed from both feudal bonds of serfdom and the daily struggle with a stubborn nature were able to view and value the land as a landscape. The pre-modern land worker whose perspective of landscape was that of the 'insider' has been replaced, at least among the landowning classes, by someone who stands outside the scene and in doing so, exercises a previously unavailable degree of control. The cultural geographer Denis Cosgrove in his book 'Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape' 1998,

argues that the concept of 'place', which is a more enveloping notion, is antithetical to the "landscape idea" as it does not hold the implication of control.

Landscape appears at the historical moment (16th Century Italy) which also saw the development of the theory of linear perspective, this being the technical parallel of the estranged view: both the conventions of landscape and perspective as Cosgrove claims:

*"... reinforce ideas of individualism, subjective control of an objective environment, and the separation of personal experience from the flux of collective historical experience."*¹⁹

With this account, the arts of landscape can be seen as a mode of representing land and nature as a view from above, both literally and socially. A view that hides those who work on the land and who cannot own it, while at the same time erasing its own specificity. In this spectator-landscape relationship, what is pictured is tamed and domesticated. Its raw state (nature) is brought into form and made consumable through perspectival and 'framing' devices.

Cosgrove discusses the 'outsider' perspective as follows:

*"To speak of the properties of a landscape, of its beauty or quality is to adopt the role of observer rather than participant. The painter's use of landscape implies specifically the observation of an individual, who in a critical sense is removed from it. The landscape drawn, painted or photographed, placed on a wall or reproduced in a book is addressed to an individual viewer who responds in a personal way, and can elect to remain before the scene or to turn away."*²⁰

As Cosgrove goes on to say, this is also true of the relationship we have with the real world once we perceive it as landscape.

¹⁹ Cosgrove, 1998, p.27.

²⁰ Ibid, p.18.

“Another way of putting it is that in landscape we are offered an important element of personal control over the external world.”²¹

With the assumption that the experience of landscape is that of an individual perception and response to an individual scene comes that of the ‘outsider’ who enjoys the advantage of being able to walk away from the scene as we do from a framed picture or from a scenic viewpoint. The divisions between nature and culture have largely become indivisible. Nowhere in England, and perhaps only in some remote corners of the world, is pure nature, or what we consider wilderness to be found. Indeed, for most of the world, pure nature no longer exists; therefore the distinction between nature and culture has largely lost its function. Culture is omnipresent.

However, Erwin Panofsky argues in ‘Perspective as Symbolic Form’²² that

“The perceptual schema of each historical culture or epoch is different, and each gives rise to a different but equally full vision of the world...demonstrating their particular coherence and compatibility with the modes of knowledge, belief, and exchange that characterized the cultures in which they arose.”

For the Western vision of the world he identifies linear perspective as the dominant perceptual schema: the disregard of the blurred human vision in favour of the precise concept of a finite mathematical spatial system where every point is defined. Not only through its use in Western painting, but also through the existence of that system in every image that is taken from our environment through photography or film; what Panofsky calls the ‘geometrical sharp vision’ has influenced our perception of the world, so that the

²¹ Ibid, p.18.

²² Panofsky, p.21.

understanding of our reality is illustrated and equated with a precise defined sharp form of visualisation.

Towards the Mediated Image

In the pivotal book 'Remediation - Understanding New Media'²³, the new-media specialists Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin define 'transparent immediacy' as one of the most important aspects of Western visual culture. It is a concept that is based on geometrical perspective and in this sense is in accordance with the thoughts of Panofsky. Transparent immediacy longs for a medium whose purpose is to disappear, a visual experience without mediation. They explain that virtual reality and three-dimensional graphics, along with graphic interface designs 'are all seeking to make digital technology transparent'.²⁴ Bolter and Grusin note that the user moves through the space 'naturally' and interacts as though 'in a physical world', and that a transparent interface is one that deletes itself, so that the user is not aware of being engaged with a medium, but is nevertheless in a relationship with that medium.

They go on to explain that 'the desire for immediacy itself has a 'history that is not easily overcome'²⁵ and say that at least since the Renaissance, it has been a defining feature of Western visual representation.²⁶

"To understand immediacy in computer graphics, it is important to keep in mind the ways in which painting, photography, film, and television have sought to satisfy this same desire. These earlier media sought immediacy through the

²³ Bolter and Grusin, 1999.

²⁴ Bolter and Grusin, 2002, p.4.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Set out in 'On Painting' by Leon Alberti, (trans. Martin Kemp and Cecil Grayson) 1991.

interplay of the aesthetic value of transparency with techniques of linear perspective, erasure, and automaticity, all of which are strategies also at work in digital technology.” (Bolter and Grusin, 2001. p 4)

The Cartesian perspective reinforced ideas of individualism and the subjective control of an objective environment.²⁷ The seventeenth century fascination with vision created the impetus for further technical innovations in the field of vision and the eighteenth century was typified as the era of the spectacle, adopted widely in the West since the Renaissance.

In a paper, delivered at the EVA conference in 2008, Christin Bolowski proposes that ‘imaging software is constrained by the laws of linear perspective and the Cartesian Grid. The integration of different viewpoints can often only be achieved with a compositing tool where various views and perspectives can be knitted together as a collage through the layering of separate images. 3D software is designed towards creating artefacts corresponding with ‘real’ space rather than imaginative space, serving the Western preoccupation’.²⁸ This was evident, and illustrated in the limitations of David Hockney’s Royal Academy exhibition ‘A Bigger Picture’ where the presentation of his multi-screen video installations merely provided an experience of looking at the same scene (a hedgerow filmed from a slow moving car) from different angles, rather than ‘processing’ that view and presenting an imaginative or physiological space (view) for further reflection- what Claire Bishop describes and complains about when she notes;

²⁷ For further discussion on this see ‘Aesthetics and Painting’ by Jason Gaiger, pp 22-23.

²⁸ http://www.bcs.org/upload/pdf/ewic_eva08_paper_4.pdf

“Artists have been unable to ‘thematize’ this use of technology.”²⁹

There are many examples of commercial and creative platforms, virtual settings and realities existing today. In most of them the user will navigate virtual space and interact with the objects ‘naturally’ as they would do in the physical world. Bolter and Grusin note that the desire for transparent immediacy is also apparent in the digital compositing of film, sometimes called ‘Second Life’, which is a 3D virtual world where users can socialize and connect lots of individual created little virtual ‘worlds’. But even here we find the emphasis on creating environments, which appear and behave like ‘real space’, even if some of them are supposed to be fantasy worlds.

There is a relationship to my current paintings here. Often the scenes, spaces and places in my work are articulated in ways that negate a fixed reading of the painting. This reflects the contemporary fragmented interaction with nature where we experience nature often indirectly and through a variety of visual interpretations. The paradox of approaching the natural through artificial processes is at the fore of my approach to painting. In ‘entering’ these places one shares this feeling of disorientation rooted in the protagonist as hunter, but also rooted in the Internet surfer.

Lost in the Forest

I will focus here on an analytical approach to the work I have made and describe a methodology which is used to generate starting points for paintings.

²⁹ Bishop, 2012.

The lesson of the famous 'Walden' by Thoreau lies in an essential rift, reminding us of our estrangement from nature.³⁰ To a large extent the idea of the forest is an imagined forest full of enigmas and paradoxes.



1. Casper David Friedrich *'Two Men Contemplating the Moon'* Oil on canvas 1825

³⁰ Bennett, 2002, xviii.



2. Ian Hartshorne *'No Time to Think'* Oil on canvas 2014

The forest can be seen as a place where perceptions become indistinct, disclosing hidden dimensions of time and consciousness. In the forest the inanimate may suddenly come to life, the gods turn into beasts, or the ordinary gives way to the magical. When I began these paintings, such as *'No Time to Think'*, above, about 2 years ago, Thoreau and Friedrich provided a combined textual and visual starting point, and I began to reflect on how forests supply potent symbols of life, death, regeneration, and collective identity. The forest can serve as a fitting symbol of transience, a malleable, interchangeable arena to reflect on society's relationship to nature whilst simultaneously allowing me to indulge in a formal sense with the dynamic and rich visual possibilities that are inherent in this theme.

Postmodern regurgitation

I frequently utilise references and material to suggest an indeterminate place, which may lead to disorientation. More often than not, this results in loss of reason as chaos, and confusion replaces what might otherwise be familiar. I sometimes take photos from films and fuse narratives with images from the Internet and my own imagery. The representations are essentially snippets of a reconfigured reality. I frequently repeat motifs and tropes in other paintings as a way to continue what I have done, and therefore provide my own references, rather than endlessly appropriating other found images – often I take previously used objects, colour schemes and structural devices and reposition them in new work which is a kind of dot-joining activity. Particular tropes and visual cues appear and reappear in different paintings. In *'No time to think'* (Fig 2) the striped armchair is a repeated motif, which can also be found in a painting from 2012 called *'A Foreign Room'* (Fig 3).



3. Ian Hartshorne 'A Foreign Room' Oil on canvas 2012

The chair is essentially a metaphorical device to suggest the inclusion of, though not necessarily the engagement or involvement of a human figure, (chairs having backs, legs, feet and arms). Other chairs frequently appear across the body of work to suggest human presence, such as my painting '*Beginning to end*' (Fig 8). And the chairs are often a way of *thinking* about a figure, rather than depicting one, my way of trying to come to terms with the fact that the paintings are usually unpeopled.

There is an aspect of Postmodernism which employs a form of regurgitation; though I consciously avoid redeploying known images, scenes or other aspects from paintings' past, I do however appropriate myself. I 'regurgitate' my own work and this creates a system of endless reimagining, a generative system where my work can continue and be tested under different scenarios. I play out or construct geometric sequences, which do not generally appear in contemporary painting, possibly with a very few exceptions, such as the work of John Currin.

Currin continues some of the traditions of painting with which I am also concerned. A good example is 'Woman with a red shoe' (below).



4. John Currin 'Woman in a red shoe' Oil on canvas 2016

The strong diamond shape created by the arrangement of the woman's arms, parallel lines of the standing left leg and right upper arm, the sequence of rhythmical circles – beginning at the top of the painting with the milk jug (perhaps a reference to Vermeer's painting 'The Milkmaid', which itself contains a strong sequence of circular shapes, spreading diagonally) - continuing below with the head, breasts and to the slightly inflated lower stomach, all create a powerful sequential dynamic arrangement of shape relationships formally employed in countless paintings by (amongst others) Caravaggio and Rubens.

Methodologies

When I begin a new painting, I feed images into the computer or search for images with visual potential and then project them straight onto the canvas - to utilise the various distortions and irregular compositions that occur. This makes the image problematic, and provides something for me to rail against. Things

begin to over- and under- lap; this makes the initial painting very discordant.

Other images are subsequently projected, layered up, gridded on or applied free hand and then knitted together. I use devices such as repetition, inversions of logic or time/style clashes, rearranging the characteristics of the initial decisions to provide me with the conditions where a chaotic situation can be worked out, or worked from.

Through this approach I am trying to exploit the limitations of my body and visual sensibility so that I can make something 'other' happen, something that isn't happening in the source image – trying to create or imagine something, which was not there initially. This gives me more to respond to and then further adjust when I am moving around the canvas and applying colour. This method is very speculative and undermines the clarity of the scenario whilst also creating a tangential feel to the work.

Within my practice, the works are a combination of analogue and digital visual information, synthesising artifice and natural process. Having selected the imagery, I then condense these diverse media interests into a single pictorial moment. Sometimes my sources are drawn from art traditions; in my painting *'People like us do Things Like This'* (Fig 10), I reemploy the structural dynamic of Picasso's *'Guernica'* which is built around a centrally positioned triangulated armature.

I also borrow from a broad range of popular culture and from electronic imagery, including the technological malfunctions and electronic mistakes that may form an aspect of them. The image of a photocopy may gradually degenerate with

speckles of dust, interference, scratches and errors in the print that I then incorporate into the projected image.

This lack of coherence in the painting is a mirror to the lack of coherence within digital media – there is a kind of (personal) irritation I try to reveal, about the current heterogeneity within painting practises and the attendant issue of a lack of governance in relation to image proliferation within society. There does not appear to be a system by which this mass of stuff is organised or theoretically agreed on, there are no arbiters, and in my view there is something pornographic and relentless about this, and this is *revealed* through my approach to painting, rather than through my taking an approach that might attempt to overcome this.



5. Ian Hartshorne *'The Bliss of Barthes'* Oil on canvas 2016

These distortions occasionally give the image the appearance of a screen with image interference, a technique I refer to as 'organic pixcellation' - a convergence of natural occurrence and technical errors. This system creates a sensory and psychological impact and evokes confusion or alternatively a new space for contemplation of a technological sublime. Visual interference, misaligned collage elements, and the physical substance of the paintwork fuse together in an amalgamation of representations that oscillate between nature and artifice. There is a direct relationship between the way unexpected results are thrown up by Internet search engines and the way in which the printed matter is combined with photographs, cut up magazine pages and physically reconfigured. The methodology allows opportunities to arise through speculation, uncertainty and surprise. The computer and Internet are a significant influence on my methodology. The references in many of the works reflect the disparate subjects that can occur in the elusive realm of cyberspace and the 'Google search'. Like the forest, the Internet offers infinite variability and novelty, and a loss of temporal logic. However, the interface with the buzzing screen offers only limited sensory experience. Most of the time the Google-search and data hunting works quite efficiently, but sometimes there are irregularities and confounding mismatches whose logic and reasons remain obscure, and hence produce something mysterious and unexpected and can open windows (in both senses) and a space for new ideas.



6. Ian Hartshorne *'Come to Your Senses'* Oil on canvas 2016



7. Ian Hartshorne *'Ontology of Sight'* Oil on canvas 2016

'The Bliss of Barthes' (Fig 5), 'Come to your Senses' (previous page) and 'Ontology of Sight' (this page) are paintings that deal in part with the process of image searching - how we perceive images via the Internet and other such secondary sources.

When searching/hunting the Internet for images an occasional rogue 'pop-up' image appears which creates an anachronism. These 'interruptions' sabotage the stream of source images and generates a new trail of enquiry. Taking an outside view of this process I became conscious of its relevance to my subject matter and potential for exploration in painting. These are essentially collages of inter-related themes configured within the frame of the computer screen and then reconfigured once again on the painted canvas.

The paintings can be viewed as an image of an image search with its inherent unpredictability and anomalies. As a reference to this experience of the 'Google search' the painting veers increasingly towards the unlikely, fantastic and oblique as it works in conjunction with the excesses of imagination. The references become increasingly far-fetched as information becomes more readily available on almost any subject. This condition in turn forces the limits of imagination in an attempt to compete with a force that makes the distant mysteries and inexplicable elements in our lives to an increasing extent more unequivocal.

The invented shallow space of '*Come to Your Senses*' (Fig 6) present related but also many disconnected narratives. Much is left out, unconnected and makes little or no sense. The construction of the painting is an experimental scenario, conceived to pose specific questions; what is nature, painting, reproduction, surface, style, fashion, time? The paintings are a hybrid of information with a

sense that wholeness is provisional– the fragmented surfaces and evident brushstrokes suggest that paint and image are an interchangeable construction, suggesting temporal dislocation, like being lost in the forest. Approaching the historical genre of interiors in the present day is a composite of digital information, creative imagination and painterly abstraction combined with a specific aesthetic sensibility. This layering of nature themes and scenes within scenes refers to the multifarious way we perceive nature via the various technological filters of the contemporary and the framed landscapes of nineteenth century Romanticism. Flat pack furniture, cheap furnishings, models of plastic indigenous birds and so on, can simultaneously be enjoyed as a piece of kitsch, a socially revealing artefact that outlines the interiorization and domestication of nature and signifies the manner in which the environment has been made portable and commodified. Nature is not only filtered and packaged by the media; it is confused with the real. These trophies evoke the necessary essence of the wild and its connotations whilst at the same time being a user-friendly, portable nature for a culture dominated by urbanized experience.

In many of the Interior paintings series I have taken images and reproduced them and merged them with notional domestic spaces alongside elements of foliage and forest. The inclusion of fake birds in 'Beginning to End' (Fig 8) in part refers to the cultural phenomena of how in the postmodern era the simulacra stands in for the real. English social philosopher John Urry refers to the world of the simulacra in the example of the picturesque tourist. He highlights this concept as having these features:

*“The picturesque tourist does not have to leave the house in order to see many of the typical objects of the tourist gaze (wild nature, exotic lands/ cultures) with TV, video and the internet, all sorts of places can be gazed upon, compared, contextualized and gazed upon again.... one can imagine oneself ‘really’ there, seeing the sunset, the mountain range or the turquoise-coloured sea.”*³¹

Writing in 2002 he goes on to say that the tourist gaze sees ‘scenes through a frame, such as the hotel window, the car windscreen, or window of the coach.

But this is increasingly experienced in one’s own living room at the flick of a

switch’³². What one loses in the sense of the authentic, unique gaze, does one

also gain in the ‘endless availability of gazes through a frame’³³ of the computer

screen? This gaze is irreducibly part of postmodern popular culture and I

interpret this in my work with the themes of nature trophies.

³¹ Urry, 2002, p.90.

³² Ibid, p.192.

³³ Ibid, p.32.



8. Ian Hartshorne *'Beginning to End'* Oil on canvas 2014

The point indicated in the world of the simulacra is that the image of something idealizes the reality; the idea of nature represented in an idealized form substitutes nature. The Romantic landscape picture/photograph, the diorama, plastic bird etc., are sufficient in inducing the releasing effects inherent on the visit to the landscape without having to leave one's living room. I merge these elements constructing an unfamiliar world where contrasts between inside/outside, an archaic past and digital cyberspace are played out in the arena of ornamental, stylistic landscapes and horrific (tasteless) interiors.

Painted Dioramas

The word diorama originated from the French in 1822 and literally means, 'through that which is seen', from the Greek di - 'through' + orama 'that which is seen, a sight'.³⁴



9. Ian Hartshorne *'Autopsy of a Painting'* Oil on canvas 2015

The body of work produced throughout my research period usually contains a passage which employs the use of open windows and doors; often something

³⁴ <https://www.coursehero.com/file/p3mo5tm/Dioramas-The-word-diorama-originated-in-1823-as-a-type-of-picture-viewing/>

optimistic appears which is green, warm and growing – an invitation provided in the background as a potential way out of a difficult or claustrophobic room.

Things are often implausible; various types of spaces are constructed in a temporary, notional manner, or lack architectural logic, yet often something difficult appears inside, to create visual tension. In *'Autopsy of a Painting'* (Fig 9), an autopsy table, library, living space and office are all pulled together - amalgamated from different sources. They contain different colour saturation and light values, things jump and are dislocated to provide a feeling that the sources of these places are sometimes co-opted from my previous paintings, the internet, or sourced from my collection of magazine images and personal photographs. This painting is an example of how I sometimes combine the romantic woodland aesthetic with an interior - suggestive of a library with an operating table - as a metaphor for the way in which the painting is (de)constructed. My interest was to explore how the digital camera, projector, computer software and recent technologies work in relation to the picturesque. By doing this I am attempting to look at how the observers of nature represent their relationship to landscape and the constructed world and show its creative potential in painting. The dominant way of seeing since the nineteenth century is what Martin Jay calls 'Cartesian perspectivalism, a method of perception that represents space and the subjects and objects in that space according to the rules of Euclidean geometry'³⁵ seeing nature as a machine. Further expanding the relationship between optics, the picturesque, painterly abstraction, the

³⁵ Jay, 1994, p.69.

camera and manipulating visual technologies is for me an attempt to deconstruct Cartesian ocular-centric culture. By disturbing the relationship between sight and cognizance, my work seeks to develop other modes of representing place and experience, with nature playing a shifting role.



10. Ian Hartshorne *'People Like Us Do Things Like This'* Oil on canvas 2014

The theme of the picturesque gaze in my work alludes to the phenomenological critique of the way of seeing the world established in the eighteenth & nineteenth centuries and at the same time looking at how in the present culture new media is becoming the dominant way of seeing in the 21st Century.

I am also interested in how these technologies have reconfigured our representations of space. For example, digitized reality flattens and homogenizes spatial reality, a sense of horizon depth and perspective. The slippage of pictorial space and distortion of colours, and the ability to manipulate and duplicate, detaches the image from other forms of lived experience. My work suggests a visual critique of the picturesque and offering a view that is not dictated by

technology of the day or by romantic doctrines, it develops a view towards another way of offering a 'feel' of space/nature/place. I am attempting to achieve this by the combining of disparate references: stylistic formal juxtapositions serve to develop a new dimension to understanding representations of space and place. Elements of intuition, spontaneity and obscurity work alongside the visual references to the picturesque. These works are a personal attempt to engage in the problem of constructing representational spaces in a culture where the visual is omnipotent.

The fragmentary aesthetic attempts to convey a visually complex and conceptually rich space, in the same way that the Romantics would make text notes and poems accompanying the drawings on their tour guides, attempting to re order or reposition what they saw into an idealised vision. This uses the logic of the image search and the way images, clichés and natural archetypes carry with them associations and provide portals to other aspects of landscape.

Abstract passages help to defamiliarize the act of 'reading' the painting and rely to an extent on subjective intuition and imagination to create a space. This strategy allows for a new interpretive way of perceiving. My vision of the world is simultaneously utopian and sceptical, viewed with suspicion, seeing visual representation as absurd. These are meditations on the mediated ways (in paint or digital) in which we regard how these forms of representation of place create a 'virtual' world.

By painting like this I am exploring the dialogues between romantic culture of the 1800's and the digital era of the 21st Century. Romantic representation becomes

not simply a historic moment of seeing but also provides an opportunity to investigate on going concerns relevant to us today.

I am interested in, and remotely associate myself with recent contemporary painting especially from the Dresden and Leipzig schools, in particular, Neo Rauch, Matthias Weischer and Suzanne Kuhn, who all represent in part, a return to a much more hands-off approach to figuration, in contrast to the hands-on version which appeared in the 1980s – a period referred to as Neo-Expressionism, exemplified by (amongst others) Baselitz and Clemente. But I simultaneously refer to and am affected by, some older paintings, out of which the tradition of painting was learnt and continued until a schism appeared in the early 20th Century. Cezanne arguably initiated this rupture and Picasso took on the project of undermining in earnest, which has continued ever since. The Modernist period is a key moment to refer to, as things that had been inherited were beginning to be questioned, and subsequently lost. This loss I interpret not as paintings' death per se, but the end of painting traditions. As such, I want to ground my paintings in history but not be a hostage to that past. I want to acknowledge the times in which we live and painting has usually tried to do that, possibly until very recently, when the post-modern project, exemplified by copy and appropriation gained momentum and undercut the modernist logic of a progressive, linear, developmental path. Because of this, I am trying to knit the past with the present and suggest a possible future. I don't want to be seduced by the technological possibilities within the digital realm, but working within this realm is important; in some ways it is necessary because we cannot escape it, though we do not have to succumb to it entirely. The historical contributions to

painting no longer seem important, or worse, are not known, and this puts painting in its current perilous position.

Ruination

Postmodernism and socio-cultural theories often define the present day as being the era of deconstruction, epitomized by globalization and the homogeneity of culture. Deterioration is a guiding principle and metaphor in my work. This theme has its historical legitimacy in the British romantic theme of the ruin. The allegorical architecture of ruins, dilapidated vaults and frameworks, overgrown temples, fragments of form, crumbling pillars resembling the forest canopy allude to an in-between state that is connected with the notion of becoming. The ruin is a romantic metaphor, half-formed, half-imagined, succumbed to the forces of entropy and changing its status. The sight of ruins positions us in a state of temporal dislocation, the past is synchronised by being both present and absent. 'Tintern Abbey' painted by Turner is perhaps one of the best-known architectural examples of the aesthetic of deterioration and continuity. This in-between state is an inherently formal approach to my work.



11. Turner, J.M.W. '*Interior of Tintern Abbey*' Oil on canvas 1794



12. Ian Hartshorne '*Dying Lite*' Oil on canvas 2014

My interest in re-examining the theme of the ruin is in the in-between character that can be applied to the visual and cultural codes of the contemporary. In 'Dying Lite' (Fig 12) flimsy fake wood boards, anomalous spatial intersections,

discoloured, washed-out hues, the collapse of representational elements all attribute to this aesthetic.

'Three people working' (below) also supports this sense of a ruin with a feeling of temporality. The brushed marks create an overall handmade quality, this coupled with discordant elements in the work, extraneous figurative elements and visual anachronisms break down the initial homogenous scene and results in an alternative reality where contrasts are played out between recognition and abstraction, reality and dream, nature and artifice.



13. Ian Hartshorne *'Three People Working'* Oil on canvas 2015

Out of the visual obscurity things emerge. The paintings are deliberately difficult to discern with a cursory glance. The synthesis of obscurity, muddiness and clarity and brightness is developed on the canvas physically and also conceptually. The constant shifting towards or away from deterioration is a constant theme. The detail invites a close up examination of the painting's

surface, which reveal flicks, spits, splodges and an overall application of thick and thin paint. The material/painterly quality of the work affirms faithfulness to painting, which overrides the media and digital influences in the work by emphasizing the link to traditional painting genres.

These works push the qualities of contradiction and ambiguity as an aesthetic convention. The description of the painting is enshrouded in subtle filters, which disguise one narrative and slowly reveal others. There is a lack of formal hierarchy; an abstract passage has as much significance as recognizable figurative elements, simultaneously referencing a bright dynamic sense of light and colour associated with technological apparatus alongside the dim hues associated with an obscure nature. For instance, fantastic hues of graduated colours suggesting the horizons of cyberspace against earthy siennas and ochres, browns and olive greens that might be found in unearthing a rock or log in the forest.

Pictorial fragmentation pertains to the failures, mishaps, syntax errors that occur in our daily use of technologies and are paired with free flowing marks that can only be truly created with the visceral physical qualities inherent in oil paint – an attempted synthesis of the ancient and the modern in subject and mode of representation. The paintings promote the natural material quality of painting, which is ostensibly crude: cloth, oil and pigment. The materials are not far removed from their original state, the organic earthy qualities that are intrinsic to oil painting are rich in texture and create a tactile sensation, diametrically opposed to the slick, pristine, refined quality of many contemporary images or synthetic processes. I am less concerned with a purity of image and more with leaving the image open to corrosion and contamination of ‘painterly’

interventions, which provide an expansion of sensory information. Through obfuscation and detail, I encourage an intimate inspection of the surface, the feeling of wanting to touch, to smell, to become affectionate with the paintings.

On Disorientation

A formal strategy of disorientation underlies works such as 'Reversal of Fortune' (Fig 14) I intend that the work becomes a disorientating experience with constant shifting of perspectives, navigating multiple terrains and surfaces; locations shift and re-occur within the same frame. The tension in these works lies in the in-between status of retaining a semblance of the motif and undermining it completely.

There is an implication of 'getting lost' or absorbed in the details and textures of the painting. The heightened visual register suggests a psychedelic experience, looking at things in a different way, losing oneself in reverie. The jarring shapes and forms attempt to induce a tension between colour and its light value. There is another tendency in much of the work to reflect or duplicate a subject; this opens up another world with a transformation of a recognisable reality to something more mysterious, like a mirage or an optical deception.



14. Ian Hartshorne *'Reversal of Fortune'* Oil on canvas 2015

In my practice as research, I have attempted to address issues of natural and technological dislocation by using several layers of fragmented representation, various visual sensations and viewpoints, which coexist within the frame. Areas of 'painterliness' are fused with mechanical precision associated with computer software imagery. Forms break down, substance becomes insubstantial, figurative elements lose their clarity or are repeated. The scene becomes suspended in an unspecified middle ground, and this provides the liminal space that gives me a margin to explore a wider range of themes.

One of the things I have discovered in the course of this research is that my method of painting has actually very little relationship to the broader theoretical

debates which seem to preoccupy academics - who however interestingly, often develop notions concerned with the conceptual effect of painting on the intellect, but that infrequently have very little to do with the kinds of visual and physical decisions that a painter makes in the course of the daily practice of painting and the accompanying inherent stupidity of wanting to do so.

*"Now that we do not have priests and philosophers anymore, artists are the most important people in the world . . . Art is wretched, cynical, stupid, helpless, confusing."*³⁶

In previous work I attempted an examination of such approaches and was involved in various painterly strategies to investigate the border between digital and analogue production methods. The development of that enquiry formed the starting point for this current research project. This gave me a platform from which to further my research by giving attention to the credibility gap increasingly apparent in visual language usage and its declining power to communicate coherently and vividly in an increasingly technologically digitized society.³⁷

What I discovered was that painting now occupies a simultaneously privileged and castigated position and this arguably has a direct relationship to critical debates regarding valid and invalid modes of painting within the current plural climate. However, through an investigation into painting's current theoretical concerns, one can argue for a reading of painting based on its indifference

³⁶ Richter, 1995, p.171.

³⁷ See McLuhan, 1964, for a comprehensive discussion on this.

towards such debates, (the majority of which are largely constructed by art historians and critics), and perceive painting as utilizing its marginalized position – weaving it into the fabric of its production and fuelling its ongoing vitality.

When immersed in the act of painting, we are primarily concerned with the perceptual, sensorial aspects - the making, touching, smelling and seeing. We attempt to foreground such sensorial things as surface, colour, shape and tension, which define painting within uncertainty as an exploratory, dynamic and problematic practice. Such debates, it seems, can and should take place in the studios of painters, where they can themselves construct their own narratives and histories.

But the debates surrounding painting are not likely to cease, as ultimately painting no longer fits into the progressive ladder-like narrative of visual culture. Many still regard it as outdated and irrelevant—a fundamentally antiquated practice, struggling with the weight of its complex and problematic history. Yet – artists are drawn to the medium. Painting still endures. Franz Klein's famous remark of painting as 'Like hands stuck in a mattress' seems profoundly fitting here.

Painting may be illogical - possibly irrational. Like all forms of life, it ends at some point - maybe it is time to stop? But to continue within the current orthodoxy is transgressive and therefore attractive, a bit like insisting on having a relationship with someone you have fallen in love with whilst your parents continually berate you for defying them.

After postmodernism's successful demolition of authorship, the issue for artists now seems to be recontextualisation – not only from analogue to digital but the recontextualisation of art's own history and its (dys) function within a contemporary context. How then, can predominately analogue activities such as painting function with this context?

As early as 1912, Marcel Duchamp tested presuppositions about painting's involvement in art and more recently Daniel Buren destroyed assumptions about the context in which painting should be seen. Its historical baggage has encumbered painting; can it continue as a contemporary art practice with the complexity and contradiction of the swiftly changing context of a redundant, and continuously re contextualised twenty first century modernism?

CONCLUSION

How can painting convey an experience of living in a digital age?

My initial question was in relation to the increasing impact of digital media on the production of painting. Painting has an important history of being able to refer to particular contemporary moments. Painters can absorb, reflect and visually articulate pertinent societal issues. But given the contemplative character that has in the past characterised the production and consumption of painting, I am interested in the temporal and other shifts involved in the sheer volume and speed of images, sounds and shapes that are recorded largely in digital form and in how my own painting might be able to respond to these. It has been claimed that the relentless pursuit and 'investment' in digital means of production could potentially bring about a collapse in aesthetic sensory ability,

and may have the potential to subvert and undermine relationships in contemporary art production. The impact then of digital media on painting can be seen to be deploying interdisciplinary and digital approaches, where painting refers to or sometimes repels against its own myths and history, and simultaneously enlarge the possibilities of the medium, opening up new modes of representation.

To give a reliable account of the contemporary conditions and surroundings that we now inhabit it is important to resist outright nostalgia. I want to consciously avoid an overt relation to a 'golden age' of the history of landscape by removing a concrete depiction of space but to fuse together a constructed amalgam of historical and contemporary motifs. When I reference the past it is not to evoke 'the good old days' but to use it to form a critical dialogue with the present.

The subject of this thesis has concentrated on the realms of nature and human perception, and I propose as Schama outlines in 'Landscape and Memory' that the two are inextricably bound and feed into the other. This personal response presents the varied contexts and academic frames of reference and reveals the way my practical studio work relates to it.

Landscape in the West appears to be a tradition and product of a collective culture. It is a tradition constructed from a rich tradition of memories, myths, stories and preoccupations. The allure and fascination with seeking other native or exotic cultures, for instance, of the primitive forest, or the sacred mountain etc., are in fact as Schama notes:

"...Alive and well and all about us, we only know where to look for them. It's a problem of looking." ³⁸

This is what my subject matter endeavours to examine: a way of rediscovering what already exists in proximity to us, but which slips our ability to recognise and appreciate. Instead of being a lamentation of what we have lost or stand to lose, my work explores the possibility of new discoveries. In offering an alternative way of looking, for example the fragmentations of diverse nature/culture imagery fused with a painterly approach is not meant to be a critique of modern existence or to contest an environmental crisis, but simply to reveal the richness, antiquity and complexity of the landscape tradition and the ways in which we perceive it. In my paintings I present a dynamic situation where opposites and seemingly opposed themes are merged into a whole in order to stimulate a diversity of experience and prompt an alternative way to perceive. I want to suggest the value of the links that bind nature and artifice together. The strength of these links is often obscured by that which is common, or found at the fringes of existence.

As Michel de Certeau suggests in *'The Practice of Everyday Life'*:

"The everyday has a strangeness that does not surface, or whose surface is only its upper limit, outlining itself against the visible." ³⁹

In attempting to escape the totalizations and generalizations produced by the eye, he suggests locating practices that are in opposition to the 'geometrical or geographical space of visual, panoptic or theatrical constructions that generally

³⁸ Schama, 2004, p.62.

³⁹ De Certeau, 1984, p.93.

make up the urban experience'.⁴⁰ De Certeau calls for a different way of 'operating' to 'another spatiality'⁴¹ the solution to which he sees in 'an anthropological, poetic and mythic experience of space'.⁴² This way of operating or encountering space counters the opaque and blind mobility characterized by the bustling city. I construct a visual excavation below and outside of our obvious awareness, to expose the traces of myth and memory and extraordinary elements in culture in the arena of landscape.

The variety and variability of life is a wonder of infinite complexity. For me there is no more curious and uncanny topic (though perhaps not entirely natural) than the nature that surrounds us. In my paintings, I am trying to provoke a feeling of dislocation, confounding the distinctions between nature and artifice. An underlying theme is to explore a mental topography, using the clichés and ready-made categories that often provide a frame for our daily experience of the world. Placing an emphasis on the subjective responses - sending mixed signals inducing a kind of contradictory sensation. On one hand the paintings make it possible to take the work in from a single viewpoint conveying a sense of physicality and realism, then often mystifying space evokes a mental image rather than a real place. This spatial disorientation attempts to trigger an intuitive component. In order to fully appreciate the delights of discovery we must first allow ourselves to become lost. Too much knowledge supposedly takes away the capacity to wonder. There is often a feeling of disenchantment when

⁴⁰ *ibid.*

⁴¹ *ibid.*

⁴² *ibid.*

things are explained; we cease to marvel at the spectacle when we understand the process. I connect images of the real and unreal which is an attempt to generate a feeling of confusion and wonder in the viewer.

*Wonder: "to think about something and try to decide what is true, what will happen, what you should do etc."*⁴³

The idea of wonder, which I first mentioned when discussing Merleau-Ponty, is induced by the blurring of boundaries between the familiar and unfamiliar, between the intersection of culture and nature, by the adjacency of what is conceivable and real and of what is not. I navigate this indistinction and tension through my paintings.

When I ponder upon these debates, I think of a country that has had a long history of occupation. Various ideologies, political systems and cultural identities are established only to be dismantled by the next, and it can never feel secure from future attacks. How does this country begin to function when at last it is liberated? How does it regain its identity - or did it even have one?

For me painting is this country - attempting to develop an identity for itself, or rather find its essence in the wake of its troubled history, within a climate of uncertainty. Uncertainty is what makes painting the doubt-ridden, enraging and problematic medium that it is, and it is for this reason that painting is such an exciting territory to approach.

The aim of the research was to produce a body of paintings at a time of a shifting visual regime which consider how the transformation of paint can convey an

⁴³ Oxford English Dictionary.

awareness of the affects of the closing temporal gap between events, analysis, production and absorption and develop uses for painting's 'moribund' position and its ability to communicate effectively, thus testing Marx's assertion that our senses carry/construct our memories and form conscious knowledge of our physical experience.⁴⁴

Javier Panera crystallised this as 'Painting in the era of the promiscuous circulation of images', where painting has less to do with 'the history of painting' and more with 'the history of the media'. Painting is a state of mind that relates to what it means, and also how it is made.⁴⁵

My enquiry has been underpinned by a methodology that recognises the need to maintain an iterative movement between proximity/immersion and distance/reflection. That is to say, the methods both acknowledge the need to make practical knowledge explicit, but also recognises a reverse movement whereby the painterly procedure becomes a way to physically test the possibilities and limits of language in articulating this.

Developing my studio investigation through experimentation I employed a range of digital and analogue production methods, strategies and techniques using projection, print, digital cameras, paint, to discover what painting can do, and what I as a painter could come to know given my involvement through my working environment (technologically, aesthetically and economically) in a digital landscape. The key mode of my investigation was about painting and through or

⁴⁴ Howes, 2005, p.59.

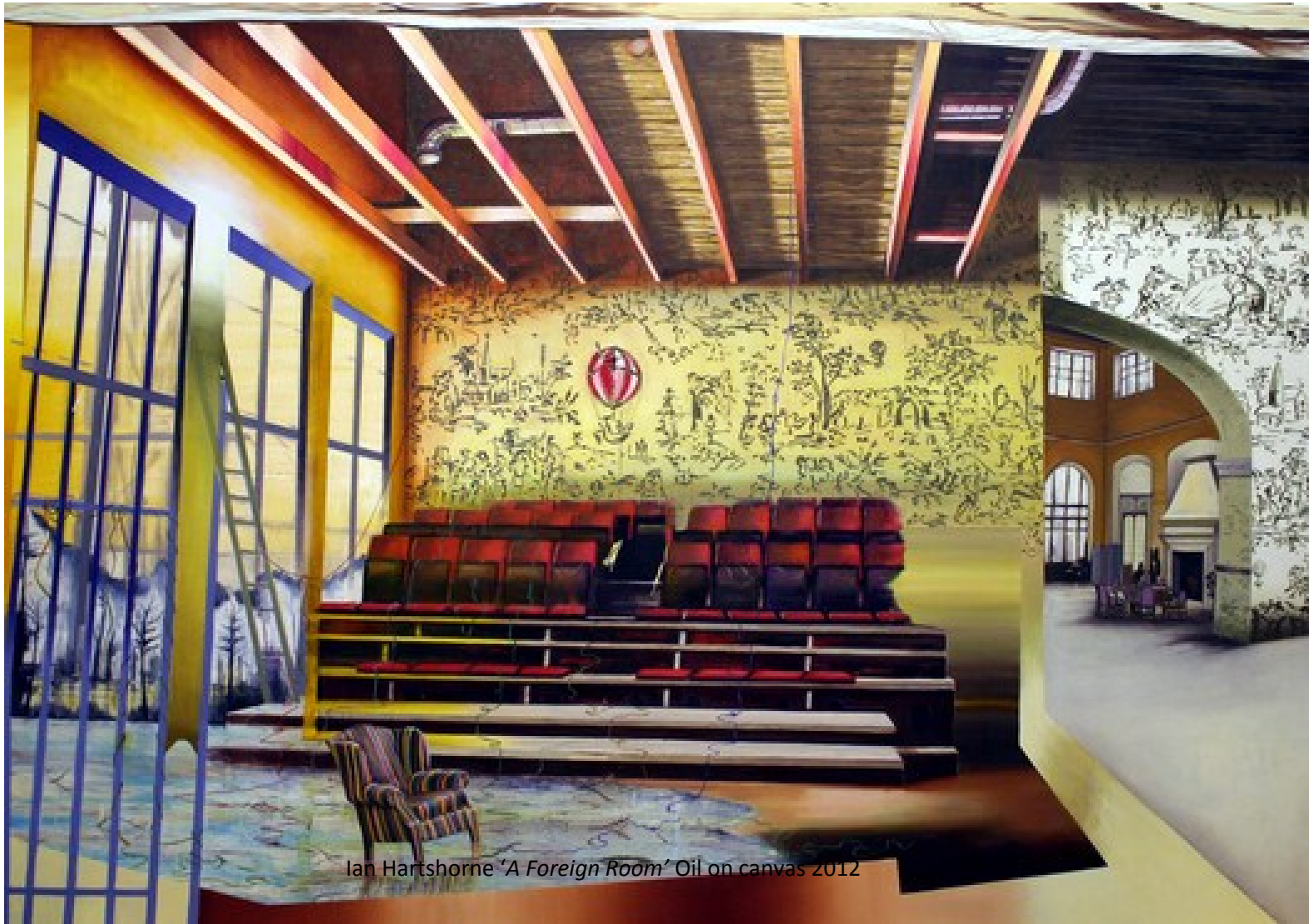
⁴⁵ Panera, 2005, p.12.

'of' painting and the emphasis on making, on vision, and was intended to counter the feeling that because and not despite living in an image saturated world, we may in fact be experiencing a form of anti - ocular centrism.

The text represents the provisional sum of parts of my research to date. It is ultimately a revealing of the processes and subjects that form my vision of how painting may be motivated to continue.

Appendix: Larger illustrations of the practical submission





Ian Hartshorne 'A Foreign Room' Oil on canvas 2012



Ian Hartshorne *'The Bliss of Barthes'* Oil on canvas 2016



Ian Hartshorne 'Come to Your Senses' Oil on canvas 2016



Ian Hartshorne *'Ontology of Sight'* Oil on canvas 2016



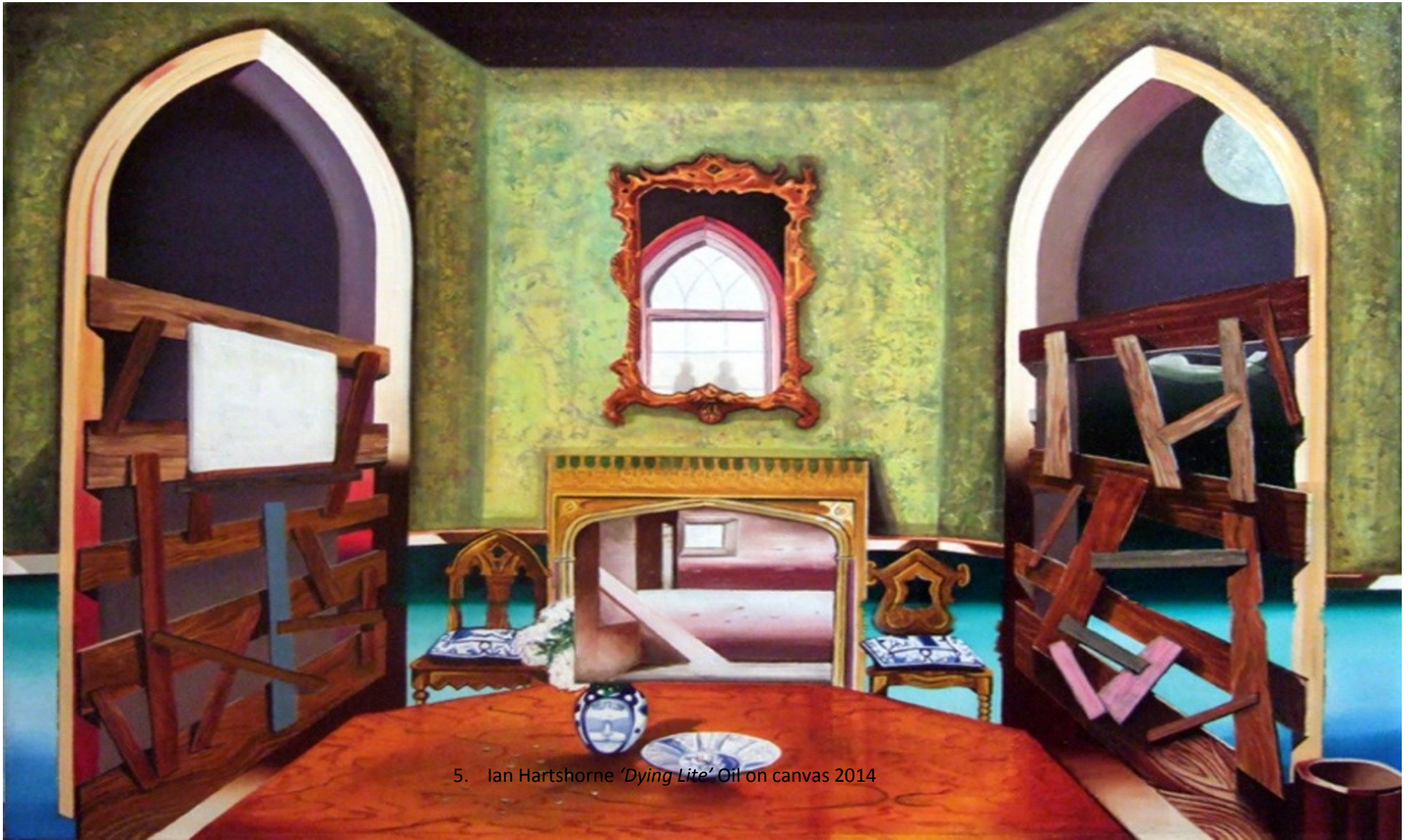
Ian Hartshorne *'Beginning to End'* Oil on canvas 2014



Ian Hartshorne *'Autopsy of a Painting'* Oil on canvas 2015



Ian Hartshorne *'People Like Us Do Things Like This'* Oil on canvas 2014



5. Ian Hartshorne 'Dying Lite' Oil on canvas 2014



Ian Hartshorne *'Reversal of Fortune'* Oil on canvas 2015

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