

The Nuances of Human Stories and the Language of Paint

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Embedded within both the process and the finished works is the notion of the everyday. These paintings are painted in the garage and constructed from things left over from everyday life or within reach of the subject matter, i.e. available to someone experiencing the early stages of motherhood. The effect is that the paintings begin to operate as an extension to daily life rather than being separate from it. To imply meaning within these basic assemblages is to apply meaning to daily life.

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Because the Pleasure Bird Whistles 2004

Echoes

Historically, before commencing this research project, I had exhibited four solo shows. In these works there had been a strong progression towards telling stories, or a desire to do so. The first show was abstraction, large free-flowing works in which the autonomy of the brush mark was held paramount. Then, with the desire to have a voice through painting and to describe life more directly, realism was introduced. Sometimes the work would start with an idea that would follow through into the finished work and sometimes it wouldn't. Predominantly, the work adhered to a prescribed compositional framework. This practice

is evident in the 2004 work shown above, where the composition was derived from a Turner painting of a swilling ocean. In the later 2006 work, where perspective had been introduced, the imagery was caught up in an eye swirling composition. The methodology was driven by the intention of directing the eye around the canvas. The subject matter was always beholden to this objective. It was a sort of trap the working practice was in. With the rules around formal issues dominating, external meaning was being put in but was resulting essentially in the same outcome. Constantly replicating a swirling chaos; one aspect of life amongst many.



Horses in a Backyard 2006

A strong influence over the forming of the research question came from two paintings I had seen in preceding years. These images had stuck, while so many others faded away. One was Julia Ciccarone's painting, *The Flood*, below. This painting was seen in her *When you Write on Water* 2007 exhibition. I was impressed by the seamless way this painting presents an allegory, interpreted as her struggles with painting. Here was a painting which was at once beautiful to look at while also conveying a narrative. Technically, the painting was so eloquently put together that it left no clues as to how its parts were combined to form a unified scene.

"Julia Ciccarone calls upon friends and family to be subjects in carefully constructed super-realist dreamscapes that deploy the exacting technique of painters like Jeffery Smart and infuses them with the fantasies of the subconscious." (Copeland)

The second influence was a painting titled *Woman with Multiple Targets* (over the page) by Mexican painter Roberto Marquez. Marquez's approach to narrative in this painting was of a literal nature; a direct illustration of the title. The painting is of the black shape of a woman's body covered in white target symbols, lying below a stand of trees. What resonated from this work was the poetics of the idea he was illustrating. Evidenced was the potential for translating the poetics of language into image.

"they are traditional, have subject matter and titles, are architecturally precise and anatomically correct, are figurative ...sophisticated, multi-layered in meaning and often with literary references, while still being autobiographical, Mexican and European. They are metaphors of life whose central character is often the artist himself." (Crumlin 3)

The Flood, Julia Ciccarone 2007





Drawing copy of a Roberto Marques Painting 2006

There were several factors present in the work of these two painters that became central to forming the objectives for this research project. These painters showed the possibility of narrative in pictures; how a literal idea could be made into a still image. Evidenced too was a certain control, the brush marks were not wild and exuberant as I was used to utilising. Instead, the control and high level of skill utilised in the creation of these works translated calmness to the viewer, a coherent mood.

The project began with an already established understanding of a certain working practice. The objective of the question was to introduce a new control over the way subject

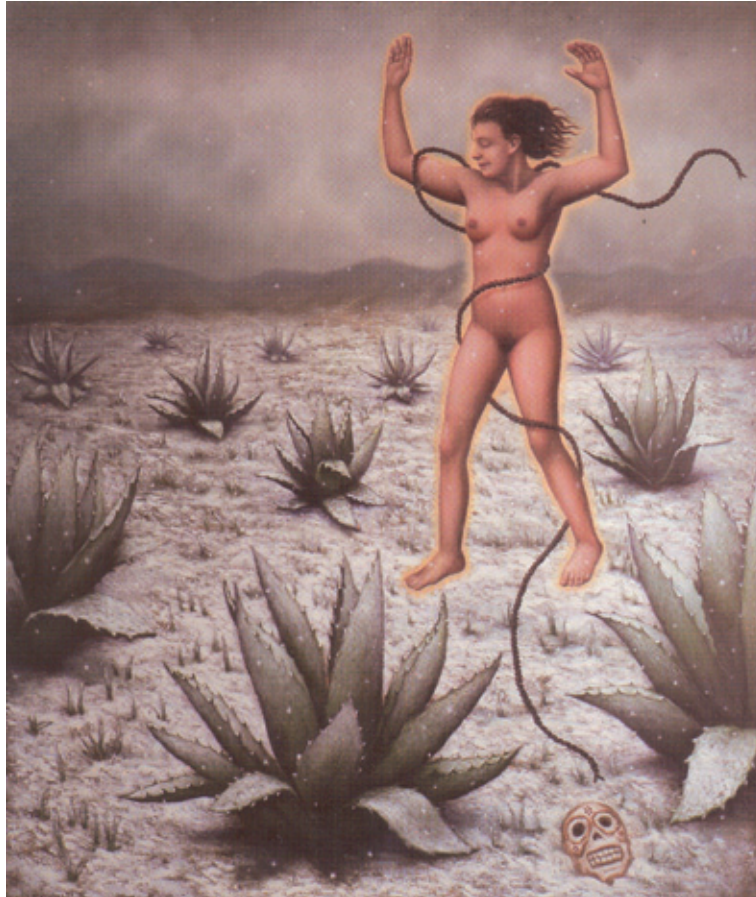
matter was being communicated. The question also expressed the desire to retain the attributes of formal painterly techniques that were evident within the past practice.

RESEARCH QUESTION: How can a painting effectively describe the nuances of daily life through formal painterly concerns?

"This project starts from a position within a post-modern world of pluralism and fragmentation, a world where history and uniformity have given way to individualism and certain isolation. Where painting has separated itself from any constraints and as a result seems concerned mostly with small bites of non moralistic experience. The actual paint has asserted itself to be the measurement of a paintings success. I begin with an interest in paint but also an interest in the stories of people. From these two junctions I find my momentum, the language of paint and the nuances of human stories." (original research proposal)

In terms of subject matter the objective was to convey a meaning that was taken from everyday life rather than the art world. The research was to look for ways that a painting could describe daily life, with a desire to have a voice through painting. The theme chosen for the project was centered around early motherhood. This theme was a personal one, something that I was experiencing alongside completing the research project.

The inherent drive throughout this project was to investigate a way to bring painting and life together. There was a frustration with a plethora of representational painters devoted to stylistic assaults on image; observed in this approach to working was a distance between the spectator and the painting. There seemed a lack of purpose to working in this way; as though meaning was considered too confrontational, too earnest and naive to be utilised in representational painting. The work



Saint Kilda in the Desert, Roberto Marquez 2005

in this project was to reconfigure ways that a painting can operate to connect with its audience. Ultimately to deliver a celebration of everyday life, to spark within the viewer either a recognition or an empathy for the depicted experience.

The Exegesis consists of four sections. The initial three sections are a linear guide to how issues were resolved as the project progressed through various phases. The main section, and fourth chapter, begins with an extrapolation of ideas leading to the final methodology. The methodology is explained and evidenced in images and discussed in terms of outcomes. The conclusion examines the close links between the final body of work and theories on art of the everyday.

Rumble Rumble

ORIGINAL VERSION OF RESEARCH QUESTION: How can a painting be produced with an adherence to the interrelationship between multiple subjective narratives and a homage to the integrity of the painted surface?

To explain how this question was understood it will be necessary to first divide and define its two parts. The first part of the question refers to the subject matter. There was a desire to address subject matter that was independent from painting, so that the subject matter referred to the outside world rather than the art world. The external matter chosen for this project was around the early stages of parenthood. Initially, the objective was to describe subjective experience from multiple angles or perspectives. From within the triangular family unit there are three players, each with their own roles and specific experiences, and in any given situation there is a variety of ways to decipher or understand the story. *“There are the outside influences of societal pressures or prescribed ideas, there is the external action of the scene and there is the internal subjective experience of each subject. So in a sense it is this notion of external versus the internal that I am interested in, that and how the worlds of each player connect or collide to form narratives.”* (original research proposal)

The second part of the question refers to the integrity of the painted surface and a desire to pay homage to this within the painting. What this refers to is the 20th century idea of a painting being about the paint itself; the notion that the materiality of a painting is autonomous and subject matter arbitrary. It is the abstract concerns, the attention paid to brush mark and compositional devices that drive the construction of the work. (Ferguson chapter 1)

Paying homage to the integrity of the painted surface in my own practice has meant compositions are designed with the intention of moving the eye around and in and out of

the picture. Visual devices with colour, variety, strength and direction of mark are employed to create an interactive space for the spectator's eyes.

The intention with the research question was to bring together subject matter and the attitude to painting defined by abstract concerns; to a point where both are retained and available to the viewer in the final work. Initially, the idea was to create narratives in much the same way as a painting was created. By translating subjective realities into representational marks then placing the images onto the canvas in relation to the other subjective realities (in paint). It would be the formal painterly relationships within the painting which would determine the narrative. So the way each reality would butt up against the others would give the clues to meaning. The challenge in this concept was how to adequately describe the subjective realities within the attitude of brush marks. The initial painting was an attempt to do that.

The gathering of subject matter was of a highly personal nature. I took things from my own recent experience and gathered themes around this. The concerns were inherently subjective, things that I found intriguing within the lived experience of early motherhood. In turn, these ideas were then positioned to include the perspectives of the two other players in the family unit. I was fascinated with ideas of digestion – how a mother's mind is always thinking of how the baby is digesting food and how in turn the baby must too be experiencing strong sensations around the whole experience. Breastfeeding, such a shared experience and so unusual in a way to



Study of breastfeeding baby 2008



Study of intestines 2008

be feeding someone else from your own body; and from the baby's point of view a lesson in intimacy. Another emerging theme was around roles and how with the birth of a baby, male and female roles become so much more encompassing. So, somehow I wanted to show this diagrammatically. Also a recurrent concern was the natural world, how birth and babies bring us to nature and wake us up to the animal. The way little babies are so instinctual, like tiny wild creatures. There was a general air of overwhelmed isolation to my experience but also a sense of wonder.

Visual material was gathered from a variety of sources, from anatomical drawings, photographs and medical diagrams. From life drawings, drawings of domestic space, drawings of babies and drawings of my own face in the mirror. The idea was to describe these things through brush marks. The baby's face was painted to show the luminous skin, to show the absolute beauty of babies to their mothers. Expressive marks were put into the breast to



Study of breast 2008



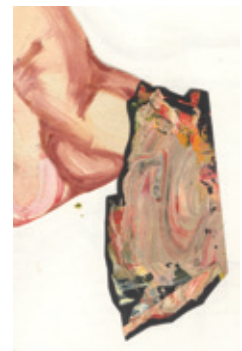
Study of baby face 2008



Study of breastfeeding baby 2008



Study of babies skin 2008



Study of inner workings 2008



Study of sleeping baby 2008



Study of inner workings of brain to show spark of new experience 2008



Breastfeeding 2008

describe the life flow of milk and point to the experiencing of it. My own face was painted with the aim of capturing emotion.

These studies were brought together in the painting shown above. Here the initial intention of combining expressive imagery relating to various perspectives of the breastfeeding experience is executed. The intent was to depict both the external action and the internal sensation through a variety of painterly marks. In evaluation of this work it was evident that too much was being expected of one painting. There was so much happening that paying

adequate attention during the construction phase to every part of the painting was proving difficult. Understanding the ways this painting conveyed meaning was hard also, as the jumbled nature of the composition provided too many avenues of possible meaning. The final effect was a bombardment of visual information, unruly, both in reality and in effect.

In an attempt to bring more deliberation into the composition the process moved to working in series. The hope was to gain more awareness and control over the various elements. The



Woman as clock series i 2008



Woman as clock series ii 2008

strategy was to extrapolate elements of the big work into a series of smaller works where parts could be slowly, individually adjusted – thus allowing more insight into the operation of the painting in regards to the aims.

Two artists of influence were Dana Schutz and Neo Rauch. They were chosen as influences because they use expressive painterly techniques to portray narratives in their work. There were links also between the aesthetics in their work and the aesthetics in my own paintings. The aspect of Neo Rauch's work of particular relevance was the way he combines an indulgence in painterly display with scenes of action. He never lets go of the reality that this is a painting, while at the same time depicting narratives that refer to the world at large.

"Rauch's narratives are lures and labyrinths and, in an important sense, red herrings. Why? Because his art is really all about the paint. Many of his commentators just don't get this. The curious leeches, larvae, serpents and slugs that appear and reappear in his paintings are about procedural issues, but, most of all, pure paint. They always represent the iconic triumph of the physical materiality of pigment

over what is represented there, haunting as it may be. Indeed, it might be suggested that the slug is a mnemonic lure, which leads us through the labyrinth of narratives to the Minotaur at its core, the paint itself."(Campbell 80)

Dana Schutz was of interest for the way she uses painterly brush mark to describe the subjective realities of her subjects. Her knowing use of colour fields to counteract the flatness of the picture plane demonstrates an inclusion of abstract concerns in the building of her paintings. There is a bold, in a sense rock-and-roll, aesthetic to her work. The narratives she depicts are contemporary, showing the modern self as obsessed and destructive. Sometimes alarming, often humorous, her energetic paintings convey a powerful understanding of both paint and society.

"Schutz's fascination with beginnings and endings and her complicated understanding of them, is apparent on the individual as well as the social level. From the start, she has depicted subjects trapped in their subjectivities, at once destroying and trying to make something of themselves."(Siegel qtd in Platow 11)



trees as support matrix i 2011

Clang Clang Clang

This stage can be defined by the influence of language over imagery. Symbolism was now the chosen method of communication. Symbolism was understood within the practice through the choosing of images that carry inherent meaning. For instance, a baby wrapped up and sleeping (such as the one above) will always symbolise such qualities as sweetness and vulnerability. It was this project's aim to exploit the inherent symbolic meaning within the chosen images to create a story.

With the intention of strengthening or confirming the subject matter, psychoanalytic

theories concerning early childhood experiences were sourced. From the writings of D.W. Winnicott, Daniel Stern and Jessica Benjamin, definitions of experiences were collated. The effect of this reading was to broaden my own subjective experience to a more general one including the experiences of the father and the child. The fact that my observation of my own experience could be located and described within psychoanalytic theories pointed to the truth in my observations, thus validating the subject matter.

Another way the reading led to influence in

the work was lifted from the literature itself, the way things were worded. For example, here Winnicott writes a description of the imminent mother: “*the directions of her interest’s turn from outwards to inwards. She slowly but surely comes to believe that the centre of the world is in her own body.*” (Winnicott 19) From these words visual images were interpreted. Poetic and descriptive language was where the new series of paintings began. Each painting began with a title. These titles were poetic descriptions which provided the initial stimulus for conceiving the imagery. The effort was to illustrate these titles.

trees as support matrix was an elaboration on Daniel Stern’s psychoanalytic idea of the ‘support matrix’ (Stern chapter 11) that new mothers surround themselves with. A matrix of older or more experienced women. In my idea the matrix turned into trees. Trees with their branches all interconnected and their trunks strong and straight would act as a metaphor within the picture to symbolise the qualities of strength and support.

breastfeeding in an underground car park was a literal interpretation of that experience. An intersection of two very different realities yet something that most mothers experience regularly. The strangeness of this intersection, the total incompatibility of these two things would be illustrated in the painting. The way it feels to be sitting there in the eery light feeding a tiny baby from the front seat.

With *when you come home* the intention was to show the separation of experience between the working father and the stay-at-home mother. The mother and the baby sitting on a raft in a swamp as the father comes home, symbolising the isolation from society that a new baby can create for its mother.

The notion was to turn these literary poetics into pictures by using symbolic images as players on the picture surface. The meaning-implying imagery was organised in abstract ways on the picture plane. The relationships of these symbols were positioned to convey more meaning.



trees as support matrix i 2011



breastfeeding in an underground car park i 2011



when you come home i 2011



trees as support matrix ii 2011

The images were sourced from a variety of places. For example, in *trees as support matrix* the baby came from a photo, the trees from life and the house shape from a previous painting that was found to be effective. The black house with white stripes was to represent the caged effect new babies have on their mothers. The trees, as in life—strong, indifferent, calm—and the baby a beautiful, soft thing inside the cage.

The limitations in connecting painting so closely to language were caused by the fact that painting is something other than language. There are fundamental differences in the way language operates and the way painting does. There is no time in a painting, no one thing in front of another, everything must be seen at once. Hence the meaning connected to words due to their placement is lost with their visual correspondents.

“Even today, to call a work of visual art “literary” is usually meant as a negative assessment. It is a somewhat backhanded way of acknowledging an important truth: that painting embodies an inherent resistance to linguistic models. The negative connotation of the term is there because we are reluctant to admit more directly how much of what we write about – and think about – painting is in fact thoroughly informed by language.” (Ferguson 64)

The problem was that the meaning desired in the paintings was derived from conscious thoughts. Conscious thoughts are embedded in language. There is a sense that the work was being too clinical, as though a word could conjure up an image and then the image could conjure up a word so that the meaning was directly transferred from one form to the other. From the painter, to the painting, to the viewer. The gaps between language and painting were too wide for the meaning to effectively translate.



breastfeeding in an underground car park ii 2011



Study for *when you come home i* 2011



when you come home i 2011

The paintings produced were garish, the imagery jumped out at the viewer. There was a struggle to combine all the elements sourced as they were from various places, different light sources, different perspectives – all this adding to a lack of unity within the pictures. A lack of depth in the picture plane created a flatness, leaving the viewer with no way into the work. As though pictorial depth resulted in a lack of psychological depth. Perhaps too much was being controlled before the act of painting, leaving the paintings too contrived with not enough weight given to painterly values. In effect the meaning wasn't clear. The viewer was left on the outside without the inclination to look for more.



Whatipu Rd Bach series 2010

The Sound Of Birds

I had running a parallel series of work, of baches painted on site from life. Painted onto a flat background colour, the brush marks were quick and neat; quick in the sense that only one layer of paint was used, so that each mark played its part in defining the picture. These paintings were a lot stronger than the

symbolic series. They were more enticing to look at. The brush marks were confident, the appeal to the viewer greater. Although there was no deep subject matter aimed for with these works, people went looking for it. Intrigued by the mystery of small details for instance, reading meaning into the pink



breastfeeding in an underground car park iii, without baby 2011



breastfeeding in an underground car park iiiii 2011

background colour or the black windows in the back. The narrative the work held wasn't obvious or even intended but people wanted to find it. This difference is quite subtle – between an explicit message shutting down the viewer and the hint of meaning awakening them. The difference rests in an adhoc assemblage of symbolic images and the memory evoking power of a recognisable scene.

The Bach series instigated some changes in the research work. Predominantly, the idea that painting from life would promote a more delicate aesthetic where the images could be imbued with the same attention to mark as the bach paintings had received. The effort was now to paint all images from life; to recreate the three titles from the symbolic stage with a greater cohesion in regards to how the images were operating within them.

Plein-air painting was created in the Pac'n'Save car park. Hours were spent with the painting propped between the seat and the steering wheel. The idea with *breastfeeding in an underground car park* was to depict the incongruity of these things existing together. As an action it is something that a lot of breastfeeding mothers will experience, but is not something that readily occurs to the imagination, until you are sitting there in the eery light with a tiny wriggly baby and the steering wheel. The objective of the painting was to capture this experience from the mother's eye, her literal view.

The feeding baby was added to the painted car park later, also from life. With the aim of placing the baby into the car from the right angle, the scene was painted onto the canvas from a position behind the model. An awkwardness exists in regards to how the two images fit together; the image of the baby being out of perspective to the rest of the painting. Brush marks are strained with all areas of the picture plane devoted to representation. No space is left for variance of mark or abstract compositional concerns. In comparison with the second painting, also painted in the car park, it became apparent that the painting was more



First study for *trees as support matrix* 2011



Second study for *trees as support matrix* 2011



Third study for *trees as support matrix* 2011



trees as support matrix iii 2011

evocative without the baby. There remained the problem however that if the baby was removed, there would be no link to the idea of breastfeeding. It would just be a car park.

In '*trees as support matrix*' the main conflict was that the baby when combined with the trees would always imply abandonment. The intention was to show a tangle of trees, with a tiny vulnerable baby in a clearing of light with a sense of protection around it. In actuality the trees painted on their own could look quite beautiful but when combined with the baby they became menacing. It was hard to control

the symbolic meaning of the images. In an attempt to overcome this problem a house interior was added around the baby with the walls dissolving into trees. The baby no longer looked abandoned. The picture presents a surreal moment; the problem was that the meaning intended was being over-run by the more lucid nature of the image. The desired qualities of actual experience and conscious thought were not being communicated. Instead a slightly garish idealisation of experience was occurring in the work.

From the conundrum present in this painting

a new direction was chosen; the idea that metaphor would be a better approach than literal translations. Perhaps something else could stand in for the baby, thus leaving the symbol with fewer connotations. The baby as an image was so loaded with meaning already it was corrupting the picture. By replacing the baby with something else that would for instance represent vulnerability or softness, meaning might actually start to be clearer.

Ultimately, painting from life wasn't a big enough change in practice to solve the issues within the work. There still remained a

difficulty in piecing together all the images necessary to convey meaning, while maintaining a unity in the picture as a whole. The conditions that the paintings were made in were not conducive to a considered approach. Instead, the pressure of having to paint babies while they slept or trying to capture a car park from the front seat of a car, meant that there was no time to bring to the work more abstract concerns around composition and spatiality. However, the hours spent painting in this way were of benefit to my skill, sharpening up the hand and eye to a higher level of control.

Study for *when you come home here being painted on site* 2011



Ker Ching

How meaning can be communicated through painting was considered through research, looking and reading particularly on Luc Tuymans. Tuymans utilises sophisticated devices to communicate meaning from his paintings. Without appearing to say much at all within his works he creates incredibly powerful resonant images. Narratives are not explicit but hover around the pictures. There are various ways that his work achieves this effect.

“The meaning lies not in the work itself, but in the cinematic, virtual space between the works. The moment that Tuymans chooses to portray seems usually to be a moment before or, particularly, after the event. The real subject, rather than portrayed directly, is always implied within a system of cinematic triggers and/or chronotopic perspectives.” (Vermeiren 24)

Another way that his images work is by appealing to memory, it seems as though his aesthetic is closely linked to the aesthetics of memory. So, in effect, the power of the work is not recognised at the first viewing but rather becomes apparent later in memory. A resistance is achieved. The fact that he can paint anything from Mickey Mouse to a gas chamber points to the fact that the meaning lies not within the subject so much as in the space between what is depicted and its depiction. The action of painting thus aligns a new, more complex meaning to the one already inherent within the original image.

“When the viewers have finally become the victims of their own power of association, of pre and after-images of which they cannot be sure who instigated them (the painter or they themselves?); when the meaning is suspended between the urgency of repetitive yet simple media images, the progression of a cinematic narrative and the highly fallible, trauma-laden memory; when the image is in transit between the propulsion of the matter and the suction

of painterliness; when the painting is pertinent precisely because it is made with a deep sense of the powerlessness and the insufficiency of such an image or object, because it is not, in other words, naïve - then the image emerges from its virtuality to turn back to reality. Not the images themselves, but the meanings of them then become an almost generic principle or at least something that usurps.” (Vermeiren 25)

The intention with this project was never to replicate the aesthetics or even the themes of Luc Tuymans. The relevance of his work to this project lay in the way he opens up the possibilities of meaning within painting. His work shows ways of communicating meaning through paint that are not literary but are instead owned exclusively by painting.

“This is no cosmic void, no feeling allied to the Kantian notion of the sublime or to a sentiment that Casper David Fredrich gives pictorial form in a rather anecdotal fashion. Tuymans’ ‘Nothing’ is much closer to everyday banality, although it can take on hallucinatory proportions.” (Vermeiren 21)

The subject matter of this project lies more in the density of everyday experience. The concerns here are more earnest, more about igniting a sense of importance or worth, in everyday experiences. The subject matter within these works is a psychic experience of the everyday rather than its simple literal evocation. The interest is in the conscious but hidden feelings that we all experience but don't speak of.

“Thus the daily always sends us back to that inapparent, nonetheless unhidden part of existence: insignificant because always before what signifies it; silent, but with a silence already dissipated as soon as we keep still in order to hear it, and that we hear better in that unspeaking speech that is the soft human murmuring in us and around us.” (Blanchot qtd. in Johnstone 38)

It is a desire to give solace to these moments of loneliness or happiness, in the recognition of that space where the work locates its moral driver. This is one of the points raised by the editor of 'the Everyday' – a collection of essays and musings discussing the art of the everyday – brought together by Stephen Johnstone. He asks in his introduction:

“[why] should we want to investigate the everyday in the first place? Is it simply to see what remains hidden in our lives, to identify what we take for granted? Or do works about the everyday in some way show us how to look more critically and in so doing ‘train attention on our own experience, so that ultimately pragmatic or performative in character? And finally, what of the injunction that to bring the every day into view is to change it?” (Johnstone 12)

The intention in this project is not to depict the real but to glorify it. In the act of painting certain aspects of daily life are chosen and ritualised. Through the shrine-like nature of the imagery, the ceremony of daily life is emphasised and held up for contemplation. Ultimately the intention is to state 'Here is Value' (Johnstone 12) right here, now in our lives.

Through examining the idea of narrative, significant suggestions arise. How is it possible for a painting to hold a narrative? Is a narrative defined by the presence of a beginning, a middle and an end? Can a painting follow a linear narrative structure? To do that, somehow time has to be flattened into space. It becomes tricky. To include an element of time you have to appeal to memory. Another way to position narrative is to imply it rather than literally show it. Ultimately, within each of these works is an idea pertaining to the larger narrative of early motherhood. A narrative hovers around each painting without being enacted within it.

It seems that in painting there is a characteristic lack of a speaking subject, a lack of narrator. (Dr Morgan, Catalogue essay) So in effect, within these paintings, events narrate themselves. In reference to this, what seems most

fundamental is the experience of the viewer. Within these works the events, although obviously subjective, are depicted in such a way as to leave space for the viewer to decipher them. The narrative then is created by the viewer in response to the work. To heighten this effect there are no figures in the paintings, thus the subjective qualities cannot be attributed to anyone in particular. The effective effacement of the narrator is part of the magic of painting, encouraging the contract with the viewer.

An obvious influence in a practical sense for this work was Paula Rego. In her more recent work, Rego has relied more heavily on a process of creating sculptures and setting up scenes. She does this in a large warehouse space that resembles the back stage of a theatre. Having a scene to observe continually through the process of making has freed her from both a reliance on human models and the need for preliminary drawings.

“Paula’s studio is a beach, where she plays and explores, making new discoveries and recycling old favorites from the flotsam and jetsam of her past life and pictures.” (McEwen 140)

She is able to tell stories. Her pictures hold narratives. The use of props and models gives her imagery the breath of realism. There is determination in the representational marks and an adherence to perspectival space. The nature of her particular technique, the way she translates her scenes onto the picture, adds gravity to her meaning. Through the obvious skill of her depiction she draws the viewer in. Her pictures are at once real and set up. They operate on the viewer evoking narratives, through the interactions of the various characters pictured in the scenes.

“What I think she’s doing is creating a kind of ghost, a version, a memory in making these models, so that she can draw the people that she knows, that she remembers, from the past. Ghosts that she forms out of all sorts of things – memories, warmed up life.” (Willing the artists son qtd. in McEwan 176)

Trumpet Solo

Building Meaning



every three hours 2012

The new methodology was to utilise the inherent qualities of objects by combining them in constructions, set up to be painted in the garage. Each construction would hold clues to the prescribed meaning, through the metaphorical nature of the display. The intent was that the natural perspectival relationships within the set up tableau would result in a sense of unity within the picture. Having everything there in front of the canvas at once ensured that attention was freed to consider more thoroughly the formal painterly aspects.

Embedded within both the process and the finished works is the notion of the everyday.

These paintings are painted in the garage. With the constructions made from things that are left over from everyday life or within reach of the subject matter, i.e. available to someone experiencing the early stages of motherhood. The effect is that the paintings begin to operate as an extension to daily life rather than as separate from it. To imply meaning within these basic assemblages is to apply meaning to daily life.

“[When] artists and curators allude to the everyday it is almost always to suggest that what is at stake in such a gesture is the extent to which an artist is able to get close to things, to be immersed in the world, as



Construction for
reorganising
principle 2012



reorganising principle 2012

opposed to observing and judging from afar. And finally, running through many of these examples is the sometimes unstated but always implicit notion that a turn to the everyday will bring art and life closer together.” (Johnstone 13)

Objects are collected from the actual lived experience that is operating alongside the painting practice. As the lived experience of early motherhood imposes undisputed restraints on time, the need for scrutiny over the collection process is removed. There can be the assumption made that whatever is used in construction of the tableau is at once

available within this environment and probably something common to it.

Here, for *when you come home*, the idea was to depict the subjective reality of the mother, to show that after so many sleepless nights and days spent alone with a tiny baby the world outside becomes something apart. As though you are alone, out at sea, anchored only by the obligations to your child. The front of a dingy was fashioned from wire and papier-mâché, old stockings were used to represent an umbilical cord and all this was attached to an armchair, the very one that I had spent



Part of the construction used to make *when you come home* 2011



when you come home 2011

hours in nursing a new baby. A mirror was placed on the floor to reflect a sense of water. A sheet hung from the window as a compositional device and finally, the washing brought in subtly at the side of the tableau.

The bound nature of the methodology and the subject matter ensure the aesthetics of the painting operate in regards to the quotidian. However, this is not simply a depiction of everyday objects. The individual quality of the constructions, their inherent oddness, conveys a very subjective view of the everyday. It is from this uniqueness that the painting can

assert a validity of experience. Thus, addressing the problem, “*how often is the particularity of the everyday lost as it is transferred in the process of description and interpretation.*” (Highmore qtd. in Johnstone 82)

A key part of this methodology is to utilise metaphor as a means to convey the chosen idea within the paintings. Here in *support matrix* the baby from earlier versions has been removed. The metaphor it has been replaced with *the babies shoes* operates more effectively to suggest vulnerability than the literal image ever did. Metaphor obscures obvious meaning from the viewer while at the same time adding a descriptive element to its parts. Through the subtlety of this approach the viewer is drawn into the picture, nothing is blatantly stated but the painting is highly suggestively, charged with meaning. By tracking this title’s evolution through the various stages of this project it is possible to appreciate the advantages of utilising metaphor in this way.

Within the pram painting series, *onward*, a sparing use of paint and the quick-drawn quality of the brush marks give the image a sense of immediacy and familiarity. There is no sense of a struggle to depict within the brush marks; they are applied once and then left. The response to the painting in the viewer was very close to the response incited by the Bach paintings. The formless space left within the picture achieves the effect of drawing people in. In both cases it was the formal painterly aspects that attracted the spectator. This is important to note as it may seem a frivolous attraction but it is a fundamental



support matrix (final version) 2011



trees as support matrix i 2011



trees as support matrix iii 2011



onward i (final painting) 2011



fear (example of unsuccessful work) 2011

consideration. When aiming to communicate meaning, the viewer must be attracted at the outset to want to spend time deciphering the content.

The opposite effect occurred in an earlier painting (60). Within this painting the effect is a sort of 'squeezed-out' feeling. The intention with the bath painting was to show fear through the image of a rock sunk in a bath. The idea that, with a baby, there is a lurking fear of something horrible happening. It is hard subject matter. When one viewer read it as an attempt at humour, a sort of tragic comic

element, it was evident this painting wasn't working. Most people read the rock as some sort of bath sponge and the whole picture as simply a still life. The inherent problem with the way the painting operates is that the formal aspects in the picture are tied to a traditional understanding of realism. The composition acts in these terms without any adherence or suggestion of abstraction in the way it is constructed. Each part relates to its surroundings, referencing its place in a perspectival, realistic picture; the parts are not constructed with the intention of activating space within the picture plane.



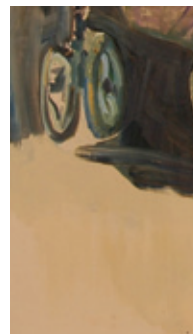
Construction for *onward* paintings 2011



Construction for *the hours after* 2012

Continuity in the working practice is achieved through working with constructions; once set up they can be returned to at any time. The painting picked up from where it left off. Time can be utilised well in actual painting as many of the decisions are already made within the construction phase. Having the direct relationship between the real and the painted, being able to sit and simply paint what you are looking at, provides the space to really indulge the marks of each of the objects, which in turn is moving the compositional possibilities within them. Instead of a whole object operating within the painting, it is the marks within the objects operating on the overall composition. This practice complicates the repertoire; you have the choice to paint what is in the assemblage or to follow the demands of the composition.

The areas that aren't depicting anything real, or aren't obvious representational marks, have proven to be vitally important to the meaning within the paintings. They are the silence and the body language within the conversation of the painting. The more these non-representational marks can be used in the representational drawing within the work, the more skewed the indexical meanings of the images become, thus leading to a greater space between what is shown and what is meant. This allows the metaphoric nature of the chosen images to be revealed. Ultimately, to show that when I am painting washing piled up on a pram, I am aiming to communicate a wider notion of the



Section taken from final painting *every three hours* 2012



Section taken from final painting *when you come home* 2011



reorganising principle, Jean Stewart, 2012, oil on board, 122 x 90cm



every three hours 2012

tiresome domestic work that reveals itself when presented with the role of mother. Or that in a representational depiction of the treasures of childhood, I can also point to an undercurrent of fear that these treasures might not be enough.

.....

When the scale of works was increased, a new complexity was required. This complexity was thought of in various ways, in some cases two different ideas were combined in one painting so that the subject matter became more complicated. If this device was found inappropriate, a stronger attention was paid to the variance of brush mark and the spatiality within the picture plane. Increasing the scale also brought a final shift to the methodology. To utilise compositional devices, the practice of using only one permanent model was dropped in favor of multiple assemblages brought in or created where necessary to fit the picture's requirements. This practice reignited the use of the formal painterly techniques that the original research question had called for and provided a way to use known painterly strategies of composition and mark to direct the work. With these two paintings you can readily see the shift. The first was painted from one assemblage whereas the second is derived from various models.

In the second painting the abstract concerns operate to convey a sense of spatiality. Objects are positioned in the foreground and cut off by the edge of the picture; thus creating a space in front of the picture and a depth behind it. Colour too is utilised as a spatial device; the complementary nature of the blue and orange backgrounds push and pull the eye. Ultimately, the spatiality of the second painting creates a more stimulating and engaging encounter for the viewer. The importance of this element is expressed in the following quote describing Vermeer's *Milkmaid* painting.

"Advanced paintings-Vermeer's Milkmaid, for instance – become extremely abstract on a higher level of visual and intellectual interpretation; a

virtuality arises that largely becomes independent of the subject of the painting. Something that could be described in terms of spatiality, although it is perhaps too claustrophobic for that. There is a 'pictorial void' that drowns out the subject a point that in all its abstraction holds our attention and continues to fascinate, the point at which a painting becomes a successful painting. The Milkmaid is perhaps one of the purest examples of this, a painting in which almost didactically illustrates his consciousness of the pictorial void with the literally black hole of the jug's mouth. A black hole from which, rather than milk 'white' is poured. It is such a quality (a quality which was, among others, the lifelong and continually misunderstood fascination of Dali) that ensures that the painting can rise above its subject and be meaningful without involving semiotics, psychology or poetry. It is this quality that makes Vermeer's domestic and petit-bourgeois kitchen scene more hallucinatory and less anecdotal than Friedrich's Monk by the Sea, despite the more general subject and the more general stab at the sublime in the latter work." (Vermeiren 22)

Another way to recognise the differences between these two works is in reference to the *Cartesian theatre*. (Doy chapter 1) Based on Descartes' founding concept of "disembodied self rather than an embodied subjectivity" (Doy 2) the notion 'I think therefore I am' was embodied in the concept of the Cartesian theatre, "where a sound-and-light show is presented to a solitary but powerful audience, the Ego or

Central Executive." (Dennet qtd. in Doy 90) This vision of the site of consciousness still resonates today, although scientifically outmoded.

Within the first painting the scene depicts a notion of self very much contained in this tradition. The viewer is invited to decipher meaning or experience as though looking at a theatre set from the outside. Something is being played out in front of them but they are not participating. There is a vulnerability to this display of self, emphasised by the way the tableau shrinks away from the edges of the picture frame.

In the second example the 'Cartesian theatre' effect is lessened. The spatial movement in the painting, the way parts come forward while others recede, has the effect of absorption on the spectator. They are no longer required to pass judgment over the ideas. Instead, the active role of the participant encourages empathy towards the subjective self. The consideration given to abstract concerns within the picture fractures the image. This more fractured nature is closer to the modern day understanding of consciousness. This is a side issue, but interesting to ponder that perhaps as we search for how to present meaning in art forms we are also mirroring the scientific search to understand how our minds and bodies interpret conscious meaning.

Finale

"Sometime in 1946, the French philosopher Henri Lefebvre discovered the quotidian. He discovered it, that is, in the sense that he proclaimed that most insignificant of categories, the everyday, to be worthy of theoretical attention."(Ross qtd in Johnstone 42)

Lefebvre's work was to link the small events that form everyday life to the social; to locate the whole in the part. Attention paid to the small parts of humble daily life was to potentially transform society as a whole. In 1980, writer Michel de Certeau reinvented the quotidian. His response was to a postmodern world, where the whole no longer existed. Instead, a complexity too dense to ever reference in part constituted notions of society. (Papastergiadis qtd in Johnstone 68)

"Everyday life for Certeau was a 'complex geography of social ruses' played out on the interstices of bureaucratic surveillance by the relatively powerless, a group that had given up any hope for a change in their circumstances. In his work, the everyday coincides with the actual order of things, which is precisely what 'popular' tactics turn to their own ends, without any illusion that it is about to change."(Ross qtd in Johnstone 46)

The position of this work in relation to these two paradigms is flexible. These paintings are strange concoctions built around private, subjective experience, created initially from odd poetic ideas and triggered by the circumstances of early motherhood. These ideas are then transformed through metaphor into constructions of everyday things, to be transformed, once again, through the rigours of a painting practice interested in engaging the viewer through spatiality and formal, painterly techniques. Can the whole be located in the finished work? Given that this particular 'part', (the highly subjective perspective of the new mother), is already so disguised.

Paradoxically the power of the work lies in these guises. The almost obsessive way that such ideas as the support matrix of older women around a new mother are treated, gives weight to an 'idea' that in wider society might seem in a way irrelevant. Or the procession of prams leading off into the unknown, the way this could only come from someone so engrossed in a particular world that they could envisage the future as a procession of prams. The isolation of this world view is evidenced in the strange and unique qualities of the finished paintings. It is through this evidence of the somewhat removed world of a new mother that the work addresses the social.

"Given the restless dynamic of modernity, the modality of the everyday is particularly well-suited to grasping the experience of displacement and rupture that are symptomatic to our age. The concept of the everyday in critical theory is closely linked to the tension between freedom and alienation in modernity. Henry Lefebvre emphasized that the concept of everyday life is a supplement to Marx's concept of alienation. In positing that capitalism creates social relations which alienate subjects from their 'species being' and from others, Lefebvre stressed that the concept of everyday life can illuminate the complex ways in which subjects exercise their potential to be emancipatory and critical. Thus, in the Marxist tradition, the significance of the concept of the everyday lies in the way it points to the overcoming of alienation."(Papastergiadis qtd in Johnstone 70)

The construction stage of the methodology ensures that the conditions of the everyday are embedded within the paintings. The act of painting doesn't create a distance between art and life, but incorporates the objects of daily life into its making. Through the hokey or the homemade nature of the models there is the sense that real life is not far away.

These are visually rich paintings. There is a

lush painterly quality to the rendering of images. Brush marks are carefully interwoven to stimulate the eye, and the composition is considered in terms of spatiality and absorption, as well as representation. Through exploiting these variations, of fixing paint to board, the joy of painting is actualised. Here is not a depiction of life but a shrine to life; a ritualising of hidden conscious thoughts through a ceremony of paint. In effect, the work holds a resignation to the social construct it references, while at the same time bears witness to it. Ultimately, the paintings operate in terms of meaning to state there is value here. In this experience, lonely or happy, are the moments of our lives.

The final methodology allows paintings to be created that hold meaning, while also indulging in formal painterly concerns. Through practice this methodology has created highly original paintings and provided a way to bring art and life closer together. Meaning is conveyed on many levels through the work, with the viewer's participation in creating meaning recognised. The hope for the future is to apply this methodology to new themes, with the world around providing endless stimulus for the practice. I would like to utilise this methodology to depict other everyday lives instead of my own. Next, I intend to base a series of paintings on the workers in dirt, the gardeners who are fighting a subjective war against the dying of the planet.

Final Paintings



when you come home, oil on board 2011



support matrix, oil on board 2011



onward i, oil on board 2011



onward ii, oil on board 2011



onward iii, oil on board 2012



reorganising principle, oil on board 2012



every three hours, oil on board 2012



the hours after, oil on board 2012



all the old wonders, oil on board 2012

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