

STILL LIFE Ambiguous Practices

Group exhibition, Aberystwyth University

Curated by Frances Woodley

Conversation with ALEX HANNA

Correspondence

FW Alex, I'd like to start this conversation by asking you what it is you paint?

AH I paint objects from my immediate surroundings. These objects are frequently selected for their qualities of colour and tone. Subjects are important in that they help to connect ideas so many of the same motifs are repeated and reworked. I like to paint materials and surfaces that present a degree of visual paradox or that offer unexpected questions regarding structure and form, size and scale. I am interested in the pattern of shapes hidden within an area of fabric or plastic packaging and how its structure may or may not reveal itself. I frequently paint within a shallow pictorial space and find this to be an important part of my work.

FW Having talked with you recently, and from what you write here, I am aware that the tension between representation and trompe l'oeil exists for you at every stage of the process of the painting, and not solely in its perception by a viewer. Your paintings seem to be what remains of this tension. You confine yourself to a predominantly white palette and consequently to a minimal use of colour. Though barely there, it is a curious feature of the objects, surfaces and spaces in your paintings that they are all represented as being equally material. By this I mean that they all seem to exert a substantial presence in your paintings.

AH The paint is applied as a deliberate layer of colour. It is fairly thick and solid. It has its own material qualities separate from the things depicted. I suppose it's not trying to be anything other than paint. Ultimately it has to read as paint. Because of the heavy and solid nature of the material (the paint) and things like its oil/lead content it produces a matt and unreflective layer. However it is not opaque and allows for some passage of light through the layers. The layers are very much part of the process of development which goes on when I paint and also determine the end result. Although they don't stand out as layers. It's the build of the paint that seems to inform some of the decisions.

In terms of how information is depicted, to some extent I try to give substance to all aspects of my field of vision. So spaces, shadows and other similar phenomena exist as objects in a way.

FW Could you tell me more about the material, and visual, qualities of these shallow pictorial spaces and how they speak of ideas.

AH In terms of ideas I think that our conversation in my studio brought to light a number of interesting ideas. I particularly liked the notion of *trompe l'oeil* having a role in the development and also the presentation of the work. This emerged through our discussion about the shallow space and my attempt to recreate a parallel kind of space within the pictorial space. Also, the concept of painting objects actual size through the use of accurate measurement. Further to this we discussed the notion of painting a painting and how this could work.

FW *When spaces and supporting surfaces in a painting also become the subject of painting rather than mere object of it, when they become affective rather than passive, that seems to be operating at the boundaries of representation. When painting represents space as solid, and objects as drained of colour and qualities, does the subject of painting then become ambiguity itself rather than the things depicted. Where do you think trompe l'oeil fits in to all this? Incidentally I have been reading a good article: 'Ambiguities and Conventions in the Perception of Visual Art' by Pascal Mamassian, I think you might find it interesting.ⁱ*

AH Near the start of the article there is a revealing quote from Gombrich. It refers to the history of representation and the inability of the artist to escape from convention. Perhaps this is significant.

Going back a bit, I think that giving substance and a degree of form to spaces such as shadows tends to rely upon the coexistence of the inevitable positive forms as a stabilizing, or a reference, point against which these sometimes undefined areas can be discovered and given presence. Having carried out several paintings that have as their theme 'the shadow', I still needed to include at least two planes in each to enable them to be read as shadows. Conventions keep making their appearances to either assist the notion of ambiguity or to remove it. To some extent when you start a painting you sign up to some of the terms and conditions that are part and parcel of it. *Trompe l'oeil* in painting might find itself at the service of these conditions. But it can also be at odds with them. Or, perhaps, painting is at odds with *trompe l'oeil*.

FW *Thinking back to Gombrich, maybe you already know his Shadows: The Depiction of Cast Shadows in Western Art, Michael Baxandall's Shadows and Enlightenment, Victor Stoichita's A Short History of the Shadow, and Francesca Fiorani's article 'The Colours of Leonardo's Shadows' each of which take different critical positions regarding the shadow.ⁱⁱ*

AH I have recently been working on a painting of the shadows cast from an object onto a wall in daylight. The object is only slightly revealed and the shadow has become the focus. However the painting is far from being resolved. Regarding the boundary between representation and *trompe l'oeil*. This has become a perplexing venture into interpretation, boundaries and classification.

FW *You seem to be interested in this double ambiguity: the representation of air, light and shadow as substantial and material, whilst at the same time unsettling viewing by playing at the boundary between material representation and trompe l'oeil?*

AH Regarding the boundary between representation and *trompe l'oeil*, this has become a perplexing venture into interpretation, boundaries and classification. In order to attempt to find some answers I have embarked upon a painting which tries to get closer to this representation/*trompe l'oeil* boundary.

FW *Your writing about the solidity of space reminded me of what Sontag wrote in her essay 'On Photography' (1977): 'Photographs are perhaps the most mysterious of all the objects that make up, and thicken, the environment we recognize as modern.'ⁱⁱⁱ Your paintings might challenge that claim?*

AH If you are referring to the giving of substance to the visual field through paint, then there might be a sort of challenge. Perhaps this does lead on to the painter Morandi (1890–1964), and certainly when one refers to the representation of shallow space and the way that space operates almost as a form. In fact I can think of a number of Morandi's paintings in which spatial ambiguities are the result of the substance of paint. By this I mean that the paint in some cases brings an area of the composition forward or flattens a space between two objects. Some of these ambiguities may be responsible for the strange interplay between the objects depicted in his paintings.

In terms of the solidity of space, I think I have been trying to give equality to space, shadows and other passive phenomena. From this point of view does the 'object' really exist? Using solid flat paint could be my way of compensating for the many ambiguities observed or implied. By doing so it makes the painting more of a real thing, an object.

FW *Are there other paintings that you look at to help you with substance and shadows?*

AH In terms of gaining assistance from other paintings I must confess to being particularly un-loyal in terms of who I rely upon. I have a steady stream of paintings and artists that I think about when painting. However tangible evidence is sometimes hard to identify in the resultant work. I have on a number of occasions made reference to Vermeer, particularly when trying to organize arrangements of objects. In one case I based an arrangement on a Vermeer composition, which featured a map of Delft. In this, I replaced the map with a piece of bubble wrap. The composition like the Vermeer is lit from the left and both paintings rely upon an illuminated interior. However, they are different in that the 'Vermeer' is a composition with a figure in a room, and the other (my work) has become a still life. The painting depends upon an area of detail made big as the starting point. The renaissance painters of both the north and south of Europe have always been important as reference material. I have observed how they tackled spatial issues through the use of perspective and applied these to open up areas within the composition—Piero della Francesca (1415-92) springs to mind.^{iv} At times these perspective tricks can become very illusionistic.

FW *As you know I am interested in how contemporary artists make use of historical art, so I am interested in your use of Vermeer, and the way in which you transposed a composition of Vermeer's so that his structuring of space underpinned your own painting. Your implementation of Vermeer's scheme must have made you particularly aware of the logic of his painted illusions. But ambiguity and visual disorder are never far away either. I'm thinking of Vermeer's fragmentation of light on a loaf of bread, and also of della Francesca's inversion of the main action in the Flagellation of Christ (1455-60) where the narrative is subsumed by the mathematical system he imposes on it. Fragmentation and inversion are strategies of ambiguity I think?*

AH Yes, *The Flagellation* is a painting that provokes many questions.

With the *camera obscura* the reversal of the image occurs through the technology of the camera and then becomes rectified when transcribed onto the canvas. Yes it could be to do with the structuring of the paintings. I think when I used the Vermeer idea I was looking for a way of painting an almost flat subject. How could this be developed? In Vermeer the maps in his works form part of a subtext. They are part of the background but have an active presence. I didn't want to lose the space entirely in my painting and needed the indication of some shadows to assist with this illusion. I also felt that I needed the object to be real size. To some extent this works against the idea that it is a still life painting of an object in a shallow space in a room, because it shares some real qualities with the real thing. *Trompe l'oeil* makes something of a return.

FW *I sent you a postcard of Adriaen Coorte's Still Life with Asparagus (1697) from the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam as I thought you might be intrigued by the representation of translucency of a natural white object rather than a fabricated one. The representation of the asparagus against a black background is no doubt partly responsible for this effect. In Zbigniew Herbert's Still Life with a Bridle (1993) he writes about a very ambiguous still life painting Emblematic Still life with Flagon, Glass, Jug and Bridle (1614) by Johannes Torrentius (1589-1664) that also hangs in the Rijksmuseum. It is assumed that Torrentius used a camera obscura because of the angle and presentation of the objects depicted. Herbert writes: 'The background was the most fascinating of all: black, deep as a precipice and at the same time flat as a mirror, palpable and disappearing in perspectives of infinity. A transparent cover over the abyss.'^v Of course, the lack of an attached or cast shadow on a black background also makes for an ambiguous spatial representation.*

AH In the Coorte painting the translucent nature of the asparagus is interesting. In fact it is remarkable. It seems to be something of a focus. I now need to pick this image up and look at it further. *Still Life with Flagon* I have only encountered through online images, so scale and the nuances of the surface are something of a mystery. Through the black abyss he has certainly created a powerful sense of uncertainty and the suggestion of form emerging from the black seem indicative of the use of an optical aid.

FW Could you tell me a little more about the actual objects that you use as models for your paintings, and the qualities you seek in them. They change little from painting to painting, though they do seem to fall into categories: disposable clear plastic boxes, bubble wrap, radiators, pill packs, forms of comfort, storage or making secure, and there are recurrent themes such as ubiquity and disposability.

AH I do like to experiment to some extent with subjects and to see what happens when a particular object is placed in front of me, moved about and removed, or when it becomes part of a series of paintings. Disposable objects are also useful because they rarely have much history behind them, or symbolism, other than their references to consumerism.

FW You tape a sheet of bubble wrap to the wall, or paint a radiator in situ, or prop a pillow against the skirting, or position pill packets, shampoo and the like at the far edge of the table to steady them in readiness for painting. And when you have painted them, you title these works descriptively. They are what they are, except of course they're not; they have also become something else in their painted form. Your painting challenges my assumptions and enriches my perceptions of such objects, the spaces they occupy and the negative spaces they create. Yet you title them with the words by which they are generally known. When it comes to the paintings of fruit containers however, you present the viewer with a dilemma. These paintings have become ambiguous in a quite different way to the other paintings that I have seen, and the ambiguity lies in your titling: Incubator 1, Incubator 2 and so forth. Your titles do not describe or categorize the objects. Instead these titles bring with them poetic and empathetic associations that expand my understanding both of the disposable, ubiquitous objects themselves, and of your painting of them. So, with your descriptive titles you set us up for a surprise – I get more than I expected and this persuades me how much more painting can be than mere description. With the suggestive titles, you ask me to meet you half way — I must bring my prior understanding of another object in the world, the incubator, to your depicted object. This process creates a painted paradox, a magical protective container of a cheap, insubstantial structure into which I am able to imaginatively project myself.

AH Yes, I wanted to transform the object with the incubator paintings and make them appear different from their actual function as plastic disposable containers. It allows one to look at the structure of the object as separate from the function and make clear, to some extent, that the object's role in this instance is a secondary consideration. The other point, and perhaps motive, for this is that the container itself only performs a marginal role. It might have been to suggest that the object is the vehicle for the painting here. It's the 'thing' that enables the painting to be made. But it's painting that becomes the subject. In addition it can allow a dialogue to occur between object and painting.

ⁱ Mammassian, Pascal, 2008, Ambiguities and Conventions in the Perception of Visual Art, Vision Research. Available from: www.sciencedirect.com/science/article. [2 April 2015].

ⁱⁱ Gombrich, Ernst, 1995, *Shadows: The Depiction of Cast Shadows in Western Art*, London: National Gallery. Baxandall, Michael, 1995, *Shadows and Enlightenment*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

Stoichita, Victor, 1997, *A Short History of the Shadow*, London: Reaktion.

Fiorani, Francesca, 2008, The Colours of Leonardo's Shadows, MIT Press Journals, 41(3). pp. 271-278.

ⁱⁱⁱ Sontag, Susan, 1979, *On Photography*, London: Penguin.

^{iv} Della Francesca, Piero, *On Perspective for Painting (De Prospectiva Pingendi)*, first published 1480.

^v Herbert, Zbigniew, 1993, trans. Carpenter, John, *Still Life with a Bridle*, London, Jonathan Cape. p.83.