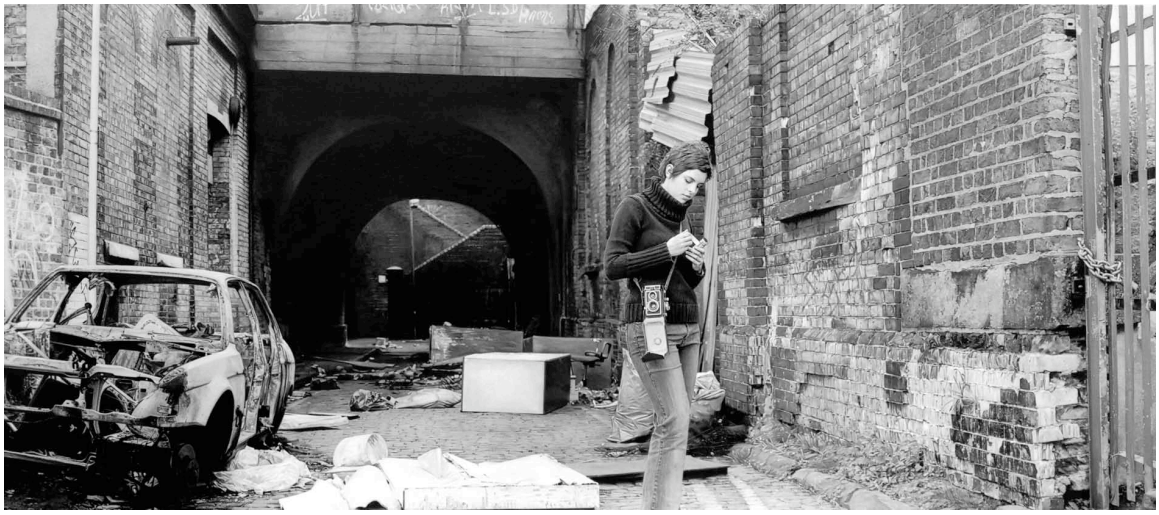
Scene From A Contemporary Novel

A version of this text was given as a talk at the Walker Art Gallery as part of the education programme for the John Moores 24 Exhibition of Contemporary Painting 2006



Scene From A Contemporary Novel, Oil on canvas, 101.5x234cm

One of the first things most people will do when they look at a painting in an art gallery, after an initial glance, will be to read the caption on the wall. Invariably, the caption will give the artist's name and the title of the artwork. A title is an opportunity for an artist to add something more, something external to the work of art as an object. A good title can provide a way in to the understanding of an artwork, if it is more than purely descriptive. On the other hand, a purely descriptive title can be a warning against over interpretation.

The title for my painting here is 'Scene From a Contemporary Novel', which is more than just purely descriptive. The picture is a contrived tableau, a scene staged rather than witnessed, showing a woman with a camera, at the mouth of an alley crossed by a railway bridge, with a burnt out car. The title is itself disingenuous: the painting does not depict a scene from a contemporary novel, there is no actual novel to which the title refers. Why then have I chosen 'Scene From a Contemporary Novel' as a title? My statement in the John Moores 24 Exhibition catalogue reads: "I once had ambitions to be a writer. However, I soon

realised that I was a better painter than I was a novelist.[1]" It's somewhat tongue-in-cheek, whilst not giving much away, so this talk is given in apology for that.

One of my main influences for this painting is the work of Jeff Wall, a Canadian artist who produces large-scale photographic light-boxes. His works, like my painting here, are generally figurative tableaux. Jeff Wall has made two pictures that are explicitly narrative or 'literary', one being based on a short story by Kafka ('Troubles of A Householder'), and the other on Ralph Ellison's novel 'Invisible Man' (this is fairly unusual in contemporary art, to base a work firmly on a literary source, and risk charges of illustration).

I'd like to use 'narrative' as a more general term as regards visual art. By 'narrative' I mean that there is a contrived depiction of a 'scene' with characters playing roles, without necessarily referring to a fiction that exists outside of the work of art. The distinction is clearer and easier to understand with regards to photography, more than painting, as we can define narrative photography in opposition to reportage or documentary photography. Documentary photography explicitly precludes the photographer's intervention, it is something witnessed, something that has happened in front of the photographer's camera, without the photographer occasioning it to happen. In the narrative mode, the artist directs the action, sets the scene, dresses the set, and usually has someone in the role of a character, as in my painting.[2]

In using the word 'scene' in my title, I imply that this point in time shown is merely one of many such scenes from the putative novel, and that this points to the notion that this character has a past, and a future. I chose the word 'novel' in the title to explicitly make an association with written fiction, again to emphasise the fictional nature of my picture, without wanting to make it specific. In aligning my painting with a literary, fictional mode of representation, I suppose one could make a parallel with much of Victorian painting, which drew strongly on literary sources for its subject matter. The Walker Art Gallery has some great examples,

one of my favourites being John Everett Millais' 'Isabella and Lorenzo', which is based on Keats' poem 'Isabella, or the Pot of Basil'. The painting shows a group of people in mediaeval clothes eating a meal. Without knowing the source for the picture, the casual viewer can still recognise there is a story to be told through the gestures and expressions of the figures. We can ask ourselves why the man in the foreground is kicking the dog, and why the servant is looking so shifty. Within the art world, or, perhaps more succinctly, within the world of art theorists, I suspect that Victorian narrative painting has been deeply unpopular for many years. Often it's seen as being trite and sentimental, which I admit it can well be, though I think that this isn't a problem with narrative art itself, I think it's rather more to do with the mores and morals of its time, the hypocrisy and sentimentality of the Victorian age. The development of photography helped to free painting from the necessity of representing the world in an illusory, descriptive way, and a linear art history would show this as a path leading away from representation to abstraction. By the middle of the twentieth century, this drive to abstraction lead to the disavowal of anything extraneous to the essence of an art-form, i.e. that a painting should be about the physicality of paint on a flat surface, and not refer to anything outside of itself. To look at this in simpler terms, it's hard to attach a story to a Jackson Pollock drip painting, which does not represent anything, apart from perhaps the very process of its being made. Since then of course, through movements such as Pop Art and Photorealism, there has been a return to figuration and representation, and the possibility of a 'narrative' has crept back in to the realms of acceptability. This has also been the case with photography over the last couple of decades, which, more than the literary traditions of painting, it has been influenced by the great narrative form of the twentieth century, the cinema[3].

Why 'contemporary' novel though? The word contemporary has many associations, ones I hoped people looking at my painting might draw on. Primarily for me, it is the fact that the scene is set in an urban street. There is an aspect of the contemporary that is located within the urban context, a familiar

context as most of the population of Britain now lives in urban areas (as an opposition, the rural has a symbolic function as a repository of timelessness). At the same time as being 'contemporary', our city centres are often seen as 'dysfunctional' and in need of regeneration. The scene here shows crumbling brick walls, fly-tipping, a burnt out car, and some graffiti. I think also that the use of black and white adds to these associations (no doubt there is an opening for the use of the word 'gritty' somewhere). Is there though a tension between the painting's denominated contemporaneousness and the actual setting shown? What we see in the background of the painting is a railway arch, a cobbled alleyway. We can reasonably suppose these to be Victorian. If I had wanted to emphasise the contemporary in my painting, would it not have been easier to use some glass and steel high-tech modern architecture? Amongst all the new buildings frantically going up around Liverpool, much of the city is still dominated by nineteenth century architecture. It's interesting to consider how much of our twenty-first century lives are led against a largely Victorian urban infrastructure. In the last Liverpool Biennial, the film-maker Patrick Keiller showed material from his project 'The City of The Future' at the FACT centre.[4] This consisted of a number of short films shot in cities, mostly in the first decade of moving images, so from around 1895 to 1905, and amongst them were eight films of Liverpool from 1897. His thesis was that the cities shown in these films from a century ago were to become the cities of the future in a very literal way: the roads and buildings are still easily recognisable to us today[5].

I was flattered to find that my painting was included in the Walker's handout for Key Stage 3 & 4, entitled 'Landscapes: Old and New'.[6] A couple of points made in this leaflet are quite perspicacious. There seems be a healthy strain of landscape painting in the current John Moores Exhibition, some paintings being more conventional than others. I'd probably include my painting in the category of being a less conventional landscape: it is a picture of an exterior location, certainly, though I feel perhaps a claustrophobic one. One of the visual pleasures of traditional landscape painting is that the viewer's eye is able to roam over the

scenery, describing a route into the picture that one might theoretically wander if this was real. Compared to Martin Greenland's painting, 'Before Vermeer's Clouds' where this is possible, the scene here is closely hemmed in by walls on either side. On the left is a building with bricked up windows, on the right there is a tantalising sliver of sky behind a locked gate. In my painting the perspective leads the eye back to the railway arch, but rather than open out here, the view is frustrated, ending abruptly with the angles of a staircase. At the time of taking the photographs for this painting, I didn't realise how familiar the location would become. I think some of the judges recognised where it was, and then the alleyway in the background has turned up in the new film 'Children of Men'[7], giving it some coincidental and unintentional associations, but also apposite ones. The film is set twenty years in the future, and is striking for how familiar it is, as much as what has changed. In the film, two of the main characters walk through the space from the stairs in the background, with the camera behind them, so we see this scene from the other side, before the viewpoint swings around, to a similar position as to how I photographed it for my painting. These are all layers of associations that go into making up our reading of the picture, but I think had I known how often I'd see this location used elsewhere, I wouldn't have chosen it.

The last question on the 'Landscapes: Old and New' sheet relating to my painting is: "The young woman is using a camera. Do you think that the artist painted this picture from a photograph?" [8]

For this painting, rather than a photograph, numerous photographs, possibly about twelve or thirteen, were combined into one image, which I then painted from. I evolved this way of working from an earlier series of purely photographic works. These were never intended to be painted from. This series began with a couple of transcription pieces. By 'transcription' I mean creating compositions based on existing works of art, something many artists do, for a variety of reasons. I started by looking at paintings by Vermeer and Edward Hopper, and

attempted to reinterpret them with contemporary figures in a contemporary setting. In these earlier photographic pieces I used a technique of constructing the image by seamlessly compositing many different photographs digitally to create a unified whole. This enabled me to work (as a photographer) more like a painter, giving me greater control over the end result, being able to manipulate the picture post-production.

In the current painting, working from many photographs, again I had greater control over the finished picture. The most notable advantage of working in this way, was to be able to insert the burnt out car, which I actually photographed somewhere else, entirely separate from the rest of the background. A more subtle use was to exaggerate the background perspective, by the stitching together of different photographs, and changing the relationship of the figure to it. I imagine that what I spent hours doing on the computer could have been quite instinctual had I been working direct from the motif onto the canvas. Of course it would have been massively impractical to work on a canvas this size, with the model, outside, for several weeks. Digitally montaging the separate elements, I could deliberate over the precise placing of the car, for example, or how close the figure was to the picture plane, elements which didn't need to be fixed until I was convinced that the composition worked, both aesthetically, but also as a convincing reality. Translating the whole image into paint helps to unify the picture with an even, uninterrupted surface, and helps to convince the viewer of its seamlessness. I was therefore able to build a composition which wasn't confined to a single viewpoint (if you were to construct a perspective diagram of the painting, I'm sure that there would be several vanishing points), or point in time, as would have been the case had I worked from a single photograph. Using numerous photographs is my way to pre-empt the reduction that working from two-dimensional images brings.

The two painters whose influence I've mentioned earlier, Vermeer and Edward Hopper, are both known for paintings in which solitary figures, often women, are

caught in an absorptive moment, observed as if unawares, and often in a momentary pause in activity. I think that rather than (or as much as) the enjoyment of voyeurism, the viewer is supposed to identify with such figures, to empathise with how they feel to be in this particular moment, in this particular place (which perhaps echoes back to my use of the word 'contemporary' in the title). The figure in my painting is depicted in just such a moment of reflection, of absorption. Perhaps there is a tension between the confidence of the female figure, and the fact of her solitary presence in her somewhat abject surroundings, and perhaps this reflects or is some part of her character. What, though, is she actually doing that commands her attention? Her action may not be entirely clear, but she is sticking down the self-adhesive tab on a roll of medium format film, having removed this from the camera slung over her shoulder. This fairly implies that she has just taken some photographs, of what we cannot be sure, but in the depiction of this moment, this character is already imbued with a past.

In conclusion I'd like to go back to go back to Key Stage 3 & 4. The questions might perhaps seem simplistic, but often important questions are left unanswered because they seem simple, and therefore obvious, whereas in fact there can sometimes be a great truth in them. The second question on the leaflet asks: "There is a saying that 'every picture tells a story' but what sort of story might this tell?"[9] The title of my painting opens up the field of the painting itself to interpretation, and is an invitation to the viewer to ask, to speculate and to imagine something like this.

Notes

[1] Bukantas, Ann, editor, *John Moores 24 Exhibition of Contemporary Painting*, National Museums Liverpool 2006, p.86.

[2] "My practice has been to reject the role of witness or journalist, of 'photographer' which in my view objectifies the subject of the picture by masking the impulses and feelings of the picture-maker." Wall. Jeff, *Jeff Wall*, Phaidon, 2002, p.17.

This is a justification for approaching photography in a cinematic manner, rather than in a documentary or journalistic way, to create rather than record a scene. Wall's statement implies that in photographing a subject in the documentary mode appears to absolve the photographer of responsibility for the image.

[3] Wall has described his lightboxes as being the most appropriate way in contemporary culture to use the forms of address that Modernist painting left behind, along with the insistence on versimilitude and illusionism. Ibid.

[4] *The City of the Future* is a Arts and Humanities Research Council research project at the Royal College of Art, London. Patrick Keiller is an AHRC Fellow in the Creative and Performing Arts at the Royal College of Art. See http://vads.ahds.ac.uk/collections/CF.html

[5] "Viewing film of, say, London in the 1900s, the immediate post-war period or even the 1970s, one is struck by the contrast between the familiarity of many of the spaces glimpsed and our distance from the lives of those who once inhabited them. At the beginning of another century, we experience many new and unanticipated phenomena, but we do so often in spaces that have changed in only relatively subtle ways in the last 100 years." Ibid.

[6] National Museums Liverpool, 2006.

[7] UK/USA 2006, written and directed by Alfonso Cuarón, based on the novel by P.D. James.

[8] National Museums Liverpool, 2006.

[9] Ibid.