

Melissa O'Faherty at Ashford Gallery, Jan. 2022

*“True painting, always attempts to include all aspects, the impossible addition of the present, past and future”*

*Nicolas de Stael*

*“Painting is like an illusion though isn't it? You only have to turn it over to find the truth of it.”*

*Melissa O'Faherty*

Ambitious painting is a strange paradox in that truly ambitious contemporary painting has a tendency to disappear. That is to say that painting at its most desiring seems to sit as a background or ground for more exciting artistic activities, its longing acts as a basis or foundation for other claims to attention. This wallflower effect, this hanging back, might well be a defining feature of painting's ability to act, a somewhat fugitive, unconscious power. √

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The first paintings that I saw by Melissa O'Faherty approached painting in a figurative idiom, but like Magritte, she did so in a reflexive, presentational way that puts painting itself in question. She literally poked holes in the very nature of figure-ground conventions for example. Put simply her figures had holes in them, we are able to look through them. This device clearly foregrounds the illusory nature of the figures but, more than this, it also integrates each holed figure into the overall nature of each painting. All this in a deliberately 'retro' surrealist idiom, taking on and participating in the way that surrealism itself exploited arcane and outdated aesthetics. The strange paintings of Dorothea Tanning create one such horizon. And of course figures with holes in them can't help but bring to mind the generic modern art nature of Henry Moore's holey figures. The mustiness of old art became integrated into O'Faherty's paintings and along with it the uncanny and somewhat disturbing lurks. This forgotten old quality persists in her recent paintings.

Painting holes in figures is a form of disfiguration, opening individual represented forms to the picture as a whole, and so in that way uniting figure and ground into a new form. It has been a logical step then for O'Faherty to step back and look at this form of disfigured picture and to present it to us. Conventionally we might describe these new works as abstract paintings but this, I think, would be to fall into a usual trap common to contemporary art's basic disavowal of the tragic context in which it was born and staggers on.

The wallflower effect is compounded by the fact that ambitious painting embodies something that we don't want to look at or think about. This realization takes on board and is informed by the philosopher Paul Virilio's intervention in which he pointed out that contemporary art appreciation is actually based on an avoidance of the visceral tragedy of war, it is he who insists that rather than

comforting abstraction what is at stake in abstract painting is horrible disfiguration.

Following O’Faherty’s trajectory from figuration to abstraction, it is salutary to look at classic artists, or rather to look at them again in the light of a new sense of difficulty.

Thinking about what is going on in her work reinvigorates looking and thinking about older works. The ‘retro’ sensibility retrospectively infects our experience of painting in general. Jean Dubuffet’s ‘Hourloupe’ series, which I was reading about yesterday and am now looking at, turning over in my mind, becoming freshly relevant. Dubuffet understood his drawings to be outside signification, a language but a meaningless one.

*« As figure and background become connected in an all-over net of lines any hierarchical or representational differences between them are levelled out ... Insides and outsides often became connected as if to suggest a flattening of all differences between states of consciousness and their bodily containers. »*

*Ann-Cathrin Drews*

In her new paintings, Melissa O’Faherty disfigures painting itself by means of ‘the splodge’. Using a basic action of mono-printing we are left with the impression of surfaces pressed together, of an implicit nature of bodies meeting. The integrity of the surfaces of her new paintings are disfigured and doubled, their uniqueness put into doubt in a very matter of fact and blunt way that literally actualizes ‘turning over’. This doubling or sense of impression also actualizes something else. That is the feeling that her work is a kind of ‘blotted’ impression of ‘modern art’ and that within that ‘impression’ an uncanny new life can begin to flourish. It is a life connected to the way that we respond to Rorschach blot tests and so has a kind of ongoing sense of possibility and openness at odds with the retro frame and seductive old paint quality. These paintings are an act. Literally.

The action of pressing one surface onto another, of a simple printing technique, fulfills another drive, that of the impulse to multiply and print. It speaks to unlimited reproduction right there on the face of the unique paradigm of painting. It evokes the machine, the press, it includes interruption and break as constitutive action, as with film the cut rules. Monoprinting interrupts our vision, it must have got in the way of the painter's own looking. Andy Warhol, of course, is the signifier here and this is painting like a machine ... a machinic activity in the sense that the French writers Deleuze and Guattari developed in which such an artistic and desiring activity is made up of machines that create their own breakdown in order to continue their production.

Art and anti-art, painting and anti-painting now exist pressed up against each other and this is where O’Faherty lead us, into the fertile ground of a situational Dadaism, at the heart of what ambitious

painting can do. This inbuilt sense of 'at odds with' is made freshly visceral even as it sits decoratively on a wall in the background. For this is painting's true power. Unlike cinema, or novels, or all the forms that are engineered out of them, painting does not currently command our attention in a straightforward 'you have to look at me and concentrate' way. It does not demand that we follow it. For sure, here, now, writing this, I have to attempt to spool out some kind of linear argument both for readers to follow but that is itself fully aware that the paintings themselves interrupt its rhetoric. At their best, they throw tomatoes at it.

Are these violent paintings then? We don't as a rule talk about violence in painting. Art surely must speak to peaceful ideals and hopes. And yet looking at the body of modern painting there is no doubt that Virilio is wholly right and it fully includes the violence of 20th century life. Indeed, it isn't just modern art, any trip to a classical art museum can feel like a horror show. But we don't tend to articulate that sense of threat because it is so sublimated and framed. Contained in huge bunker-like buildings or normalised into formal appreciation. George Braque, who Virilio knew, was and maybe is, conventionally celebrated for his classical lucidity and calm but his friend the art historian Carl Einstein told another story, one in which Braque's paintings are hallucinatory sublimations of violent forces.

O'Faherty has spoken of her interest in Willem DeKooning and indeed we can find this sharp aspect of modern art fully laid out in his work. Queasily it there can become identified as a form of misogyny, his women paintings as a defiguring attack on female presence in which they have to survive the onslaught of abstract art. Those awful paintings embody clashing forces and the lost and found interplay between figure and ground. I wonder how O'Faherty feels about Niki de Saint Phalle's neo-Dada gun paintings in which that artist shot up paint-filled vessels so that they exploded on the surface of her works. There is no way that that direct violence can be disavowed and yet it feels as if the more actualised and visceral violence is the older and dustier the results can appear. Part of the interest of those DePhalle's is how dated they now appear. How art historical.

O'Faherty's new works slipstream into contemporary painting, their outrage is beautifully integrated into what feels like the mainstream of current painting. As compelling contemporary painting machines they appear to tick along nicely, it lies to us to turn them around and get to their deeper, more difficult, ambitions. To choose to experience awkwardness and underlying tragedy and unresolved conflict. Looked at and thought about in this way Precedents multiply and tumble; Joan Mitchell's spikiness jumps out as does Gerard Richter's unbearable mournfulness. Like Asger Jorn's oeuvre, they spin revolution. Usually, normally, it is safer in a de facto uncritical art market led paradigm to simply not go there. Vast sums are deployed to muffle the fact of war and contradiction in art and to keep art as merely a vehicle for the comforting acting out of known and knowable political solutions. Artist's current role is to embody perfect, reconciled utopian beings to

whom we lesser mortals must aspire. But these are murderously polite art world lifestyles without basic desire and the art itself, as always, is doing something else, something fundamentally unnoticeable and intransigent, something darker and truly unsettling. Damien Hirst bluntly played with that and so arguably broke out of the art world into something like the entertainment industry before becoming yet another cheerfully superficial marketing ploy. Death sells.

Meanwhile, a new fertile grounding out of which new figures emerge begins to redefine contemporary painting against itself. Melissa O’Faherty, for one, exemplifies how to elegantly touch on unmentionable facts that are apparently insignificant and imminent and yet are all the more powerful for being outside of meaningful language.

*Références:*

*Nicolas de Stael In a letter to Douglas Cooper in January 1955*

*The artist in correspondence.*

*Painting Machines, “Metallic Suicide” and Raw Objects: Deleuze and Guattari’s Anti-Oedipus in the context of French Post-War Art by Ann-Cathrin Drews.*