

‘What if...’

Moving to new ways of being with making art

Concepts can never be presented to me merely, they must be knitted into the structure of my being, and this can only be done through my own activity.

Follett (xi)

Be true to your art and also, keep working.

Henson

Consideration of my artistic style has been an active and specific process for me since joining the Master of Fine Art program. Indeed, the reason I enrolled was to help facilitate a change in my painting style. This is a journey of researching my ‘artistic truth’.

Amongst the shelves in my Brunswick studio I keep a small collection of favourite books from my childhood, all of them laden with images which are vibrant for me to this day. Recently I took one down from the shelf, an often-referred-to edition of the Hans Christian Andersen fairytales illustrated by Czech artist Jiri Trnka and found myself pausing, the long-familiar cover a sudden source of interest, as a spark of memory re-kindled. My rage upon discovering that my baby brother had scribbled on the front cover of my book! This ugly and horrible thing that he had done to my precious book! And how I then found myself, Mr Squiggle-like, taking the same pen and with it beginning a process of retrieval, so that the offending marks were transformed into a beautiful ballerina.



Ballerina pen on book cover circa 1970

What struck me, looking at the ballerina afresh over forty years later, was she could easily step from – or into – many of the paintings I have done in the intervening years. There is a definite style about her that I recognise as my own. What is it that I see? And does this say anything about what my art-making can become?

For more than 20 years now I have been a figurative painter. Like many of the figures in my paintings, the ballerina is a single figure, with a large head, and large eyes, child-like. She has gesture, that is, her body is organised in a form of doing something. My paintings have tended to be inhabited by characters, quirky dream-like creatures, all just a little bit clumsy, not quite ‘right’ – or in the words of Thelma John, curator at Fremantle Arts Centre, ‘beautiful-ugly’.

The Ballerina has also evolved from something else, a motivation or an inspiration from an outside source. My long-term studio practice has been to initiate a work by finding images (eg on-line, in books, personal scrap-books) that inspire me, or engage some feeling-state in myself that I want to elaborate. I then grid-up and trace those images onto prepared canvas (frequently one that may contain a number of already covered-over images) and embark on a long journey of relationship, one that will see

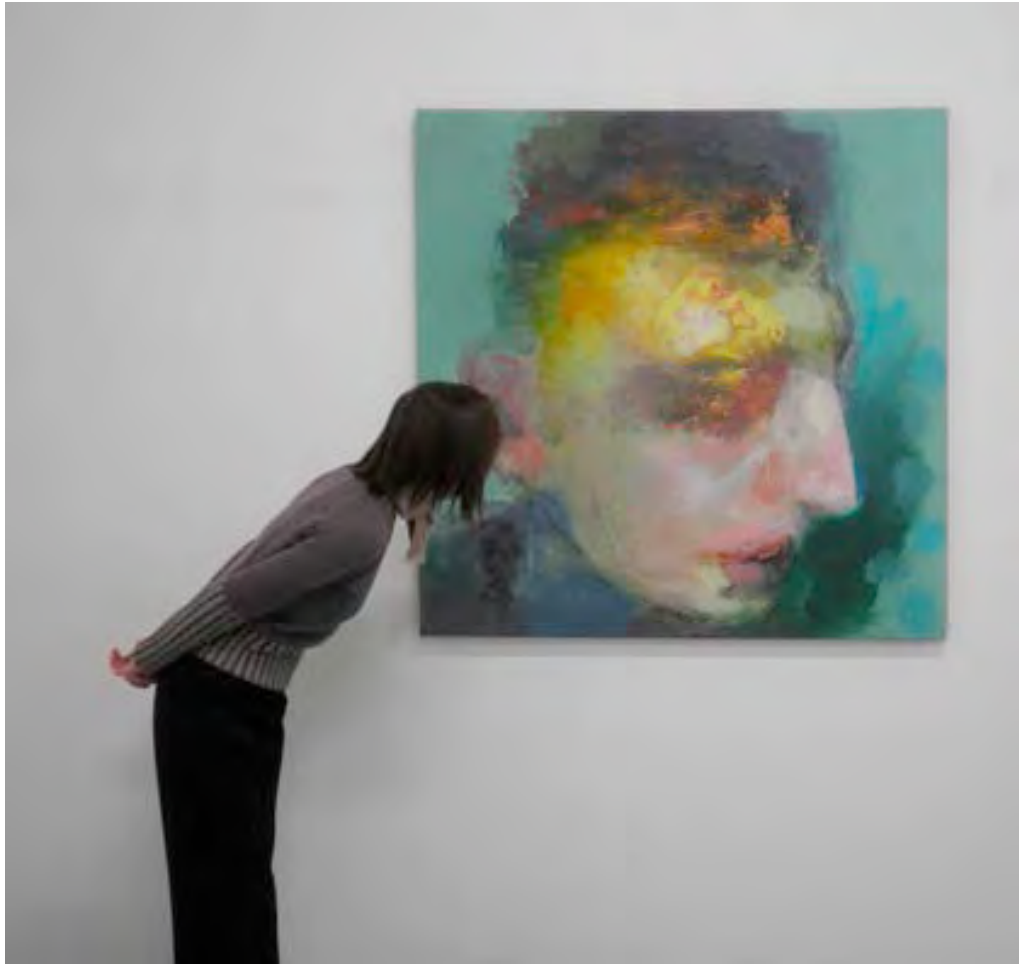
the original figure metamorphose many times until the painting reaches a state of resolution for me, where I am satisfied that the ‘feeling’ has been ‘painted’, and I like, or have a deep sense of connection and affinity with the character that has taken form.

In this mode of working I feel an affinity with Gordon’s assessment: “In painting one of the prime sources of inspiration is the queer feeling that the subject is ‘yours’. You have enclosed it in your mind, you have absorbed it spiritually and are going to transform it into art. This sense of your spirit enveloping the subject comes naturally and instinctively.” (p.125) However, my mode of working has had a tendency to be intensely time-consuming and often exhausting – mixing paint, painting and painting, waiting for an image to appear, not liking it when it did, covering it, repainting, covering, repainting, changing, changing, covering, repainting ... knowing I was over-working the process but not feeling able to make another way of being with it.

I described in my ‘MFA Projects A’ presentation my attraction to exploring abstract painting styles in an attempt to recover a sense of play and possibility for myself and my art, and the difficulties I experienced in finding a way of resolving my abstract experiments to a sense of ‘completion’ for the work. Ultimately, through frustration, I resorted to seeking a figure in the paintwork, an image that I could work into something ‘pleasing’, and then developed it in my usual technique and style, covering the abstract experiments. A ballerina-habit stepping in to save me?

“It is essential to learn to be freely imperfect” (Thomas) The extract from *Thirteen Ways to Look at a Blackbird* handed out at the beginning of the course offered a revelation with stunning implications for my artmaking: the way I make and critique my ‘art’ doesn’t have to be about whether I like its resolutions. With this idea in mind I revisited an older work on canvas that was heavy with a two-year build-up of paint, wax, spray paint, enamel, artline texta and frustration. In a dramatic departure from my usual style, I completely rearranged the surface of the painting by tipping paint stripper onto it, thus revealing some of the original colours and marks. I was inspired by the new information and saw a face emerge from the chaos. I let go of my agenda for abstraction and developed the face, however the way I developed it was different to my regular approach. I was exploring recovering rather than covering, and so refrained from painting areas that I really wanted to clean up. I was able to resolve the painting by letting myself leave it in a state that felt raw and unfinished, with the conscious intention of challenging my habitual criteria for assessing a ‘finished work’. *“Upset the whimsical with elements of unease”* (Hastie)

The painting, *Psychscape*, was presented for a group tutorial. Feedback included descriptors such as ‘violence’, ‘impolite’, ‘psychoscape’, ‘remnants’, ‘existential process’, and “you can’t fake painting like that.” (Simenko) This was not a painting that would ‘please my market’. *“Your struggle to realise something provides the audience with empathy”* (Graeve)



Observing the painting *Psychscape* oil on canvas 120cm x 120cm 2011

This work represents a transition moment for me, an engagement with the past through a radical re-inventing of process, offering nuanced ways of being with some of my past processes while clearing the way for new explorations.

I deeply appreciated the tutorial comment regarding the work as an ‘existential process’. I linked it to the insights and sense of support I was gaining in reading Marion Milner’s *On Not Being Able to Paint*. Milner offers a way into considering the psychology of making art. Her work has encouraged me to welcome my psychological states as dynamic and creative contribution to the process of making and changing my art. Milner affirms the need for an alchemical process to “imbue the common-sense world with one's personal sense of meaning”. This requires “a sacrifice of the old self and a plunge into emptiness, from which one develops a trust that, out of the unconscious, something new and valuable can grow”. (Brearly)

For me, this is part of the ‘what if...’ of my research journey. In this vein I am further buoyed by artist Lou Hubbard’s understanding of herself as being “as ordinary as everyone else”, with life-experiences in common, or as she suggests “parallel lines in other people’s lives; it is worth pursuing the nature of ‘me’ to find patterns in what gets dredged up and to see if it may be of interest to everyone else”. (Hubbard. RMIT, MFA Advanced Seminars Program 2010)

My long-term technique employs layers of ‘dredged up’ images that I believe reflect universal or common parallels and patterns of thinking. I usually approach a painting without any specific ideas. As I described above, I find images that draw me, trace them to the canvas, and then begin the process of engagement by applying paint to see what arrives via ‘happenstance’ (Hastie). To accept and be comfortable with the abject narrative that arrives (sadness, searching, alone-ness, loneliness, fear, hope, anger, love, embarrassment) has been a challenge for me. This has been an ongoing theme in my tutorials, but the research is exciting and richly rewarding for me. There are new and promising openings, if “A test of success in a work, in the mind of the artist who has created it, is that it feels strange.” (Schjeldahl 107)

While I am currently still uncomfortable that there is so much of the abject in the nature of my figurative images I am coming to accept that this may be part of the ‘artistic truth’ of what I do. Rather than learning more about the language of abstraction in an effort to move out of discomfort, I am seeking now instead to find a new relationship with the imagery. There’s plenty of ways for a ballerina to dance. It doesn’t even have to be ballet. I am discovering that accepting rather than rejecting can bring new approaches, styles and skills to what it is that I do. *“Honesty in what you find pleasure in”* (Graeve)

Reflecting on the most recent work I brought to tutorial has generated an epiphanous ‘what if...’ moment, giving me two significant new options to explore. The painting was based on a quick tracing of an image grabbed randomly from my ‘inspiration 2010 folder’. It was painted onto a background developed some weeks earlier when I painted over one of my Hastie-style abstract experiments. The first realisation I had was that I regretted the loss of the earlier experiment, that I would have found it interesting if some of that could have been showing through the new figure. The original covering over had been so automatic I hadn’t even documented the shift. I feel that I encountered the creative implications of my habitual methods in a new way, and that this offers me a different motivation for future approaches. *“Keep a sense of time, don’t cover all the time”* (Thomas)

The second realisation came in response to my supervisor Laresa Kosloff’s question, “Is it finished?” My first response was “Of course not, this is an under-painting.” My second thought was “Well, why not? Everything that needs to be there to communicate the theme is there.” My third thought was “But if I left it like that, so close to the original image, it would be tantamount to plagiarism.” My next thought was “What would it be like to create my own images?”

I am now planning to develop a model in 3D, a deliberately rough, clunky kind of figure, possibly using plasticine. I will light it, and photograph it from a number of perspectives. My intention then is to bring it to canvas with the application of paint using the approaches I have been exploring, but also bringing in what for me is a whole new area of consideration: the perspective of the viewer.

What do you want people to feel around your work? ... “Allow people to display generosity when viewing your work.” (Graeve) Laresa is suggesting that developing a consciousness of the viewer’s perspective might help prevent quagmires in my personal process. My process can still be based in intuitive imagination, can still be without pre-determined outcomes, but threaded through it would be a relational engagement with the viewer, so that I am not limited to only my own ways of making, looking, and resolving. I am curious as to how I will go about this. This is not the same as ‘painting for a market’. I have a sense that it might make it easier for me to leave things that appear to me raw or missing their integration, because someone else might in fact find that interesting, or useful. It might open me to other ways of being with those elements myself, and it might *“Let the work become itself, it’s complete when it is in the process of being”*. (Thomas)



The Lone Prince oil on canvas 90cm x 90cm 2010

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