

I have just finished writing and editing a book on contemporary figurative painting. But, while being excited by what is a rather unusual privilege these days, I couldn't avoid asking myself questions such as 'Why do we still have painting?' and 'Does painting still have a role to play in contemporary culture?'

Those were not rhetorical questions. Only a decade ago, it would have been natural to think, and most people did think (this writer included), that with the advent of the digital age, with its powers of instant recall and infinite reproduction, such an archaic technique would progressively fade into insignificance. We had far more slick and sophisticated ways of producing images! Why would you be wasting your time still applying paint onto a more or less flat or smooth surface when you could be using scanners, digital cameras and Macs, playing with latest image-making software or plundering Google Images – not to mention, more recently, printing your images in three dimensions?

But maybe that was completely missing the point of what a painting is and what it does. The resurgence of interest in painting in the past few years (from the point of view of practitioners, collectors and the general public) demonstrates that, the more digitalized and infinitely reproducible images become, the more unique a painting becomes – and the more crucial the role of the painter. In fact, my conclusion at the end of the process of making this book was that the primary role of painters has remained largely unchanged: like their Renaissance counterparts, painters today are still responsible for creating unique images.

Rescuing Subjects from the Flood

The world has never been so full of images: on our mobile phones and computer screens, on newsstands and ads, in films and on TV, on packaging and billboards and in shop windows. We walk, work and relax amid throngs of vivid, avidly attention-seeking images, every space and every moment of our lives crammed full of them. One couldn't conceive of a more different environment from the one in which the tradition of Western painting emerged in the Middle Ages. Images were rare then: the average medieval (and early Renaissance) individual would be exposed to fewer images in a whole lifetime than we are in a few minutes online. The very medium allowing us to see them – light – was severely rationed. Every night, the world would be plunged into long periods of darkness. Imagine, as Johan Huizinga suggested in *The Autumn of the Middle Ages*, the effect of a candlelit window on the weary traveller as he made his way through an almost pitch-black landscape. Now imagine the effect of a fresco in a chapel on that same traveller. In those days, images didn't have to work so hard to portray miraculous deeds: every image was in and of itself already a small miracle.

This naturally miraculous quality is something paintings have progressively lost in the face of increased competition from other images and formats (from the first illustrated brochures and prints to posters, photographs and films). But today, in our digital world – a world where everything is being instantly, infinitely and indefinitely reproduced, a world of low-quality images, a world in which a blurry snapshot can find itself on millions of screens – painting has rediscovered its own uniqueness.

Part of a new wave of painters working firmly within a realist tradition, artist Caroline Walker spoke of how her generation lives in 'an image-saturated culture where we consume and discard images with little pause for thought. This seems to have given painting a new agency as a slower medium. It can ask a viewer to reassess how they look at the world in a very direct and personal way.' Faced with what artist Andy Denzler called 'the hegemony and the aesthetic of the jpeg, which we now almost exclusively read as source' and which



Caroline Walker, *The Masquerade*, 2012,
oil on linen, 180 x 240 cm

he describes as 'a compromised image that is reduced to a hand-held format', painting has recovered its almost supernatural status, its wow factor.

Videos, photographs and graphic images tend to fade in the white noise of mass culture, whereas a carefully chosen image, an image made out of accurate, thoughtful brushstrokes (or any other carefully considered technique for that matter), an image that carries the weight of human touch – of human presence, of repeated analysis, of intense gazing – a full-resolution image, life-size and in real time – can be just as miraculous today as that fresco in the remote late medieval chapel.

Painter and graffiti artist Dan Witz told me how, in his lifetime (Witz was born in 1957), 'there's been a revolution in representational capabilities comparable to the switch from tempera to oil paint in the fifteenth century. The opportunities today are just unbelievably exciting' – only to add that painting is still the 'perfect antidote to that kind of noise [image proliferation]... paintings are handmade, one-of-a-kind, extremely fragile objects. They're absurd. Extravagant. Intrinsically worthless. And seeing paintings is an experience you absolutely must have in person – in real life. Direct human contact is the point.'

When first encountering Toshimitsu Baba's paintings on the screen of my computer, I mistook them for vector graphics. But I was intrigued by the fact that they had so much art history in them. I couldn't help noticing how subtle the shading was and how odd and unexpected certain shapes were. They were so visually sophisticated they just couldn't be graphics... When I asked the painter about it, he described in detail how he had developed his personal working methods through many years of studying and mastering traditional Japanese techniques. 'Painting can still play an important role when it comes to transmitting an accurate and precise image,' he told me, describing how 'drawing with a computer means that the image is first input, then the informa-

tion is transferred to the printer, and the image is printed out on the support medium. During this process the images fall apart. In order for me to carry down the image directly, from my mind to the support (I wish I could do that with technology!), I have to rely on my hand skills.' For Toshimitsu Baba and others like him, painting is still ahead of technology in translating the artist's vision in two dimensions.

But if Baba's works are smooth and seemingly two-dimensional, that very flatness and two-dimensionality is a key element in what is essentially a three-dimensional medium. And this brings one to the question of *touch*. No digital technique (certainly no 3D printer) can equal the range of subtle and yet direct effects, from chance accidents to carefully developed and skilled movements, produced by the chemical and alchemical mixing of colours, their infinite variety of forms and textures and rhythms.

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As it happens, the camera, the scanner and the computer have been comfortably assimilated into the practices of most contemporary painters. They no longer represent either threat or obsession. Liberated by image-making technologies from affectations such as those of Pop and Op, the tricks of hyperrealism and Colour Field painting (that kind of thing now looks as if it had come out of a computer, an iPad or even an iPhone), artists are again free to develop this ample and supple medium to its full, natural potential. Through its physicality and its malleability, it is surprisingly well suited to capturing the complexity and intensity of contemporary life. When asked about the appeal of painting, Dan Witz explained: 'Back in my early twenties, as my brief career as a punk rocker was closing down, I knew that I'd really miss the physical intensity of performing. But I began to discover in my museum wanderings that painting actually had plenty of potential for the intensity I needed.'

Real-res

Not an artist prone to theorizing, in many ways a 'natural painter', Wilhelm Sasnal told me that 'there are so many images around these days, but most of them are not "real", as in they only exist on the internet... On the other hand, painting is based on a very primal technique (you're almost back to the Lascaux caves). You have these real tools there in your hands and you are trying to depict something.'

The 'slow' images created through painting have assumed a new meaning for the jpeg generation. A painter known for her historical re-enactments, Sigrid Holmwood likened her 'Slow Painting' to the 'Slow Food' movement, highlighting contemporary 'anxieties about the alienated existence of post-industrial life'.

Before the seventeenth century, painting was not even considered a 'liberal art' and the status of painters was the same as that of craftsmen (albeit with a posh clientele, possibly the equivalent today of someone well known for making bespoke furniture or tailor-made shoes). Painting was then reluctantly accepted as part of the liberal arts, alongside literature and music and science, and this process continued all through the nineteenth and then the twentieth century, up to the point that painting almost lost its original meaning amidst the orgy of concepts that populated the later part of that century. But



for painters today, recapturing the craft (the 'making') aspect of painting is one way of evading the clutches of certain clichés and the trappings of the art world – and its often heavy-handed conceptual marketing.

But is it still appropriate for someone to sit down in front of an easel and paint something? Is this basically late medieval method still capable of producing interesting results in a world in constant acceleration and in which images are endlessly being captured and stored away? The answer to that question is, unquestionably, more than ever! In a world in which most image-capturing and storing is indiscriminate, inattentive and even automated, the painter's intent and minute attention to life and the rhythms of life has become a radical position.

Painting has offered an option – it is almost a lifestyle option – to the contemporary artist. Its slower rhythms allow for a more intimate connection to human perception (which is true both from the point of view of the artist and the viewer). For example, the need for models connects paintings to the intricacy of human relationships. It was interesting the way expressions such as 'baby sitting' and 'cat or dog sitting' kept recurring in the interviews we conducted with painters for the book.

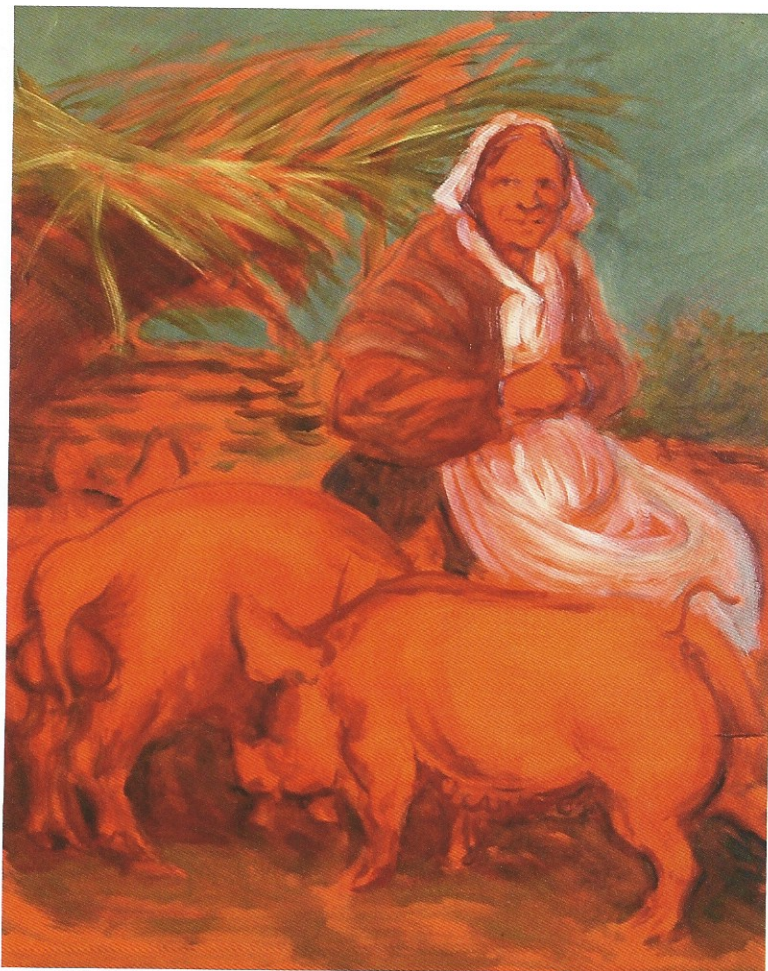
If the environment in which painters live and work today could not be more different from that of their early Renaissance counterparts, surprisingly, the way in which they practise their trade (an over-reliance on Google Images aside) is not so different: handpicked paints, well-tried tools, meticulously primed surfaces, carefully chosen and attentively studied subjects – not to mention rich patrons, with the museum having replaced the church as the awe-inspiring institution of choice.

There is still something incontrovertibly fertile and wholesome in the relationship between a painter and a canvas on an easel (or any other similar method). Eduardo Berliner moved from being a professional graphic designer and typographer to become a painter because painting provided a space where he could combine all his interests: 'I am interested in the vigour of the brushstroke: patches of colour that can be evaluated in an autonomous way as a pictorial event, which at the same time describe a very sophisticated visual experience on the surface of the canvas, as though by way of our sense of sight we could understand the change in temperature from a patch of shade to a sunlit area, the humidity of the air on an overcast day, or the glimmer in an animal's eyes.'

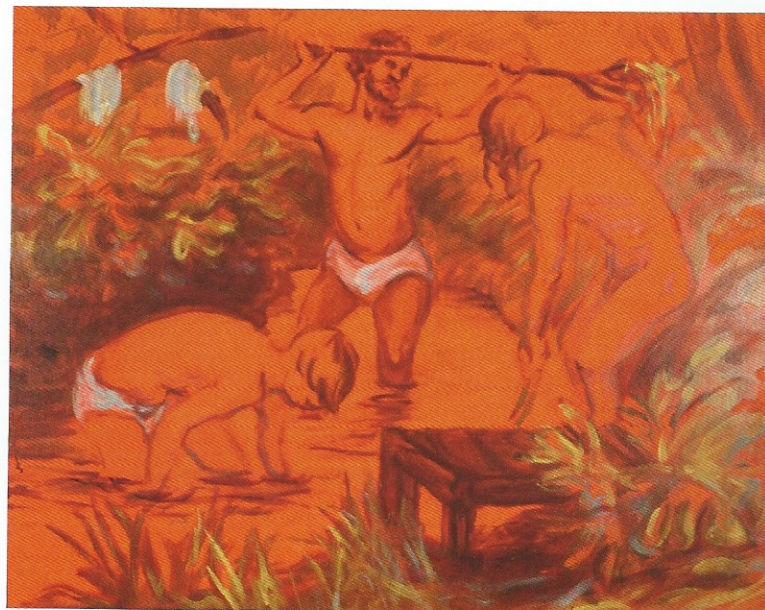
In the *Guardian* newspaper recently, artist Simon Ling described painting in a street and being accosted by a student who exclaimed: 'that's live...' The painter then added that: 'So you make a solid mark which then becomes solid. That gesture you made to place that mark is held, as is the observation and the thought that prompted it.'

In fact, a painting is always 'live'. Amidst the empty white cubes of museums and art galleries I believe that painting is continually and incongruously defying performance (call it 'über-slow-motion-performance'). Paint still has this uncanny ability to capture gesture, the gesture of the painter at the exact moment of creation, of an encounter with a subject (and not the exhibitionist gesture of the performance artist in front of an audience), more convincingly, more poignantly, than a motion- or image-capture device could.

At this point, let us return to Johan Huizinga, writing in 1919: 'the modern city hardly knows pure darkness or true silence... Painting still does.' And it knows many things more – things that remain invisible to lenses and software.



Sigrd Holmwood, *Swineherd*, 2009, fluorescent orange egg/oil emulsion; burnt sienna, cochineal, yellow ochre, lead antimonate, lead white, smalt, indigo, vermilion in oils on board, 75 x 60 cm



Sigrd Holmwood, *Clearing the Stream*, 2009, fluorescent red egg/oil emulsion; burnt sienna, cochineal, vermilion, lead antimonate, yellow ochre, lead white, smalt in oils on board, 73 x 92 cm



Painting knows texture. It can still render the idea of touch, whereas the world of digital and virtual imaging has been completely desensitized to these, becoming a sort of 'textural wasteland' [see Nicola Bozzi's piece in *Elephant* 14].

Painters entertain an intimate relationship with accident, without having to give up on purposeful action and method. Like great writing, painting is not indifferent to meaning, yet it is equally attentive to singularity. From Velázquez's portraits of King Philip IV of Spain to Josephine King's self-portraits, painting has an almost unique ability to represent mental states. In the same way that a painter can be deeply aware of anatomy without having to dissect its subject on canvas, it can also render the pathos associated with human suffering and emotion without having to dive into complex and often questionable psychological analysis.

The DNA of an Image

I have already touched upon the fact that painting has proved to be incredibly adept at adapting itself to new times and new techniques, from the first mechanically reproducible images to the challenge of photography, film, etc., managing each time to adapt and stand up to the challenge of new socio-cultural and technological environments, from the re-discovery of the laws of perspective in the Renaissance to the great aesthetic revolutions of the second half of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth – not to mention the great leaps into abstraction and mass culture which took place after that. It continues to do so today.

While images are constantly flying around, being digitalized, re-used, cropped, intercut, blown, shrunk, lit, printed, projected, edited, Photoshopped, etc., and are all the time fading, losing their original meaning, poignancy and context – painters keep going back to their studios and slowly, patiently, trying to hold back the flood, brushstroke by brushstroke, working with their hands and their eyes as much as with their brains, avoiding making big conceptual statements, focusing on small decisions, often on almost imperceptible shifts and slides, rhythms and textures, stepping backwards and forwards, like a chef tasting 'slow food', helping it on its way, spicing it up every now and then. The daily practice of their art allows painters to give their creative impulses both time and space.

Painting is continually and incongruously defying performance (call it 'über-slow-motion-performance')

When a painter like Ulrich Lamsfuss selects an image from a magazine or newspaper clipping and works on it for weeks, if not months, he is like a scientist studying the DNA of that image, tracking back the convoluted story of that image, its path through the world of mass media, from the original event to the position it occupies in our consciousness, re-examining the intensity of the original moment or act, as well as the incongruity of the whole situation. 'I am more interested in subtext than in the story and in the end everything is media.' Ulrich told us, 'The zeitgeist is defined by attention deficit disorder and that really makes me want to move slowly and with exactitude. So I slow it down to a maximum of ten images a year – in the end, my dream would be to keep on painting just one image over and over again.' Anna Bjerger, who paints almost exclusively from found photographs, described this process as 'deciphering an image'.



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Artists working with appropriation employ images taken from the media maelstrom to try to understand how the contemporary world works, how the contemporary psyche functions (or dysfunctions), holding up their ingrained codes for analysis, exploring the ambiguity at the heart of human nature and the contemporary experience. When Marcin Maciejowski appropriated images from the old film programmes he found at his parents' home (in rural Poland) for his paintings – making use of their genre descriptions ('comedy', 'thriller', 'romantic comedy') and even the screening times – his thought process was not so dissimilar from what Renaissance painters did when they chose mythological or sacred subjects. The painter examines the myths that envelop our lives, questioning their reality, both for us (the mortals living in small Polish villages, for example) and their protagonists (existing up in the Hollywood pantheon).

Like archaeologists analyzing the remains of an ancient civilization, these appropriation masters (such as Sasnal and Maciejowski) re-interpret and re-imagine discarded printed matter (from old snapshots to book covers), reconstructing, piece by piece, the belief systems and lifestyles of those ancient worlds of only a few years (or months, or days) ago, while at the same time making poignant existential statements about the contemporary condition.

Deeds Not Signs

Now, more than ever, paintings have something to offer us: we, the digitally, distractedly desperate; we, the culturally shipwrecked, adrift in a sea of information. Paintings don't flash, they don't glow, they aren't backlit, they don't move. Stubbornly, they resist taking their place in modern mass media's daily line-up, standing out as anomalies when they do so. To take just one example, despite being reproduced endlessly, and despite the fact that his work has been amongst the most influential in the twentieth century, the paintings of Lucian Freud never fail to look odd and out of place, his obstinate brushstrokes refusing to conform or blend into the general media landscape. One cannot help being struck by the differences when comparing the paintings of Lucian Freud with the depictions of contemporary human life in advertising, fashion, photography, television and film.

To quote Philippe Sollers (writing about Cézanne in *Eloge de l'infini*, Gallimard, 2001), a 'painting is not an image'. A painting is a fact. I would add that it is also a deed. We are not just in the presence of signs or thoughts (though of course paintings contain plenty of those), we are also in the presence of the consequences of intent and assertive action. These deeds, these facts, exist and we go to meet them; and in doing so, share in the miracle of presence, of meaning, of touch, of communion with another human being through the same physical medium. And that is why, despite the exponential growth in the number of images and ways in which they can be produced and reproduced, paintings will continue to fascinate, intrigue and enthral viewers across generations, dragging them away from their screens to stare at those incongruous, time-defying deeds that stand against our walls.



Anna Bierger, *Quilt*, 2012, oil on aluminium, 120 x 90 cm, courtesy of the artist and Paradise Row Gallery, London