

# Blurred visions

Gabriel Coxhead

William Blake famously hated blurring in art. More than merely hated, in fact – for him, the blurred or blotted line was a symptom of everything that was wrong with art. As he wrote in his *Descriptive Catalogue* of 1809, ‘The great and golden rule of art, as well as of life, is this: That the more distinct, sharp and wirey the bounding line, the more perfect the work of art; and the less keen and sharp, the greater is the evidence of weak imitation, plagiarism, and bungling.’<sup>1</sup> And while much of Blake’s rancour stemmed from his rivalry with Sir Joshua Reynolds – ‘Sir Sploshua’, as the Royal Academician’s unctuous style led him to be known – Blake’s denunciation of blurring also contained a spiritual, even moral dimension. Without an outline, without a sense of definition and precision, Blake argued, how was one thing in the world ever to be distinguished from another? How could the great scientific or ethical truths of the universe be discerned? How could a person discriminate between right and wrong? In Blake’s philosophy, to blur or to smudge thus became more than merely aesthetic crimes – they were marks of chaos and corruption, smears against everything that was correct and honest, blemishes on the face of God’s creation.

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Blurring and blotting; smudging and smearing; staining and splotching – it is hard to think of a more apt vocabulary to describe the paintings of Gideon Rubin. His work *Tree* (2013), for example, appears to be nothing but one entire blur, a wispy sideways shimmer of muddy dabs and hazy streaks. And in another, untitled painting of the same year (page 49), the blurring is so extreme as to seem virtually abstract: the quick slicks of grey and green perhaps decipherable as the view of a distant forest or a roadside hedge. ‘Slapdash’ might be another good descriptive term: not in its sense of carelessness, because Rubin’s work is anything but disorganized or uncomposed, but as a way of conjuring up the slurpy, slapping sound of wet paint being dragged across canvas or cardboard; the dashing, darting, fidgety brushwork; the openness to chance marks and stains.

Even when Rubin’s imagery is more recognizably figurative, as in most of his works, they always carry a sense of wetness and instability, a feeling of slippy, sloppy liquidity. His muted colour scheme conveys something mouldy, dank, soiled. And viewing his paintings, particularly his larger pieces on canvas or linen, you often get the feeling of peering through a kind of veil, a sort of teary miasma, straining to focus until your eyes seem to pucker and your vision goes bleary (a cognate word, indeed, with ‘blurry’).

Matters of technique and effect aside, the concept of blurriness also applies to Rubin's work in a much more fundamental way. While the primary meaning of 'blur', according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is 'a smear which partially obscures', the connotations soon move into more Blakean, pejorative territory: 'to stain, sully, blot, or blemish the purity, beauty, or truth of (anything); to disfigure, befoul, defile'. And it is this seamy aspect of blotting and blemishing, this idea of disfigurement, that characterizes Rubin's very methodology – that, indeed, describes the most immediately recognizable aspect of his work: the way that his figures, when orientated towards the viewer, have often literally been defaced – have had their faces obliterated, their features reduced to a sort of blurry absence, a blank, silken smear.

It is, to be sure, a supremely unpleasant, squirmingly uncanny effect, like something from a dream or nightmare. The figures in Rubin's paintings appear to go about their normal business, quaintly experiencing their daily lives: a young boy lying on wet sand, in *On the Beach* (2010); what looks like a scene from a wedding, in *White Bouquet* (2011; page 38); two identically dressed girls standing by a hedge of poppies in *The Twins* (2007; page 31) – all of them, in every case, seemingly unaware of their appalling transformation. But then, of course, how could they be aware, without eyes to see it? How could they ever communicate their loss, how could they ever cry out their pain, without the use of mouths or voices? Instead they merely face you – or rather, of course, they are **unable** to literally face you at all. They gaze out at you, yet with **something** less than a gaze. The usual language of looking, the certainty of the visual field, is insufficient in this situation.

There is a kind of yearning in Rubin's paintings, a sense of mute imploring, as if you, the viewer, might be able to provide some sense of clarity, some kind of delineation. Instead, lacking identity, lacking personality, the figures in his paintings barely seem like people at all – without faces to distinguish them, they appear more like ghosts, impermanent and insubstantial (there is an echo of this idea, perhaps, in his 2011 portrait of Mexican Day of the Dead dolls – the only figures, tellingly, to **retain** their faces). And this lack of substance, this missing definition, seeps into the rest of the picture too, so that the environments where the figures are situated – or even works such as *Interior* (2013; page 79) where figures are entirely absent – take on this feeling of being somehow unfixed, untethered, in some way out of time. Although it is only the figures' faces that have become obscure, their blurred visages stand in for the unknowableness, the obscurity, of the scene as a whole.

It is tempting, then, to see Rubin as a sort of anti-Blake, as epitomizing an opposite tendency towards blurring, smudging, and ambiguity in art. Such a view misses the point, however. The reason that Blake provides such a useful lens through which to view Rubin's practice is due to the common concerns they both share. Ultimately, the central themes of Rubin's work are the same sorts of anxieties to do with blurring and blotting that plagued Blake: the threat of obscurity; a perpetual yearning for definition. And as with Blake, there is the sense that Rubin's concerns, too, reach beyond mere aesthetics, or that they contain some kind of moral imperative – that some sort of grand truth is at stake, and that the outlines of that truth are at risk of being rendered invisible, or even washed away completely.

The difference between the artists, of course, lies in their response to these anxieties. Blake's was to emphasize precision and delineation as a sort of article of faith, seeking to shore up the boundaries of divine truth by removing doubt and vagueness from his own art. Rubin moves in completely the opposite direction. For him, blurring is the very argument that drives his paintings forward. It is not a matter of making his paintings more comfortable for the viewer, a way of easing you into the picture – the 'vegetative eye' that Blake spoke of, when disparaging Reynolds's luxuriant shading. Rather, Rubin's art presents a kind of challenge to the viewer: an invitation to accept a world full of doubt and ambiguity, where easy certainties have become unsettled, where distinctions between things have become impossible to draw.

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Specifically, much of this doubt in Rubin's work centres around the issue of photography and the monolithic role that photographs play within contemporary culture. In that sense, Rubin belongs to several generations of painters who have sought to deconstruct and undermine photography's claims to truth. Yet his method of blurring is different from, say, the photorealistic haziness of artists such as Gerhard Richter or Luc Tuymans and their deft mimicry of the effects of photography. Rejecting this sort of covert approach, Rubin turns to more blatant acts of metamorphosis: taking a photographic image and transforming it in an explicitly painterly – indeed, one might say nostalgically painterly – manner. In short, rather than what might be called a transcription of photographic effects, Rubin's aim is a more radical kind of translation. And, like all acts of translation, it is characterized by a strange combination of reverence for the source material with an attitude of reinterpretation, corruption, even violence towards the original.

Different series of works perform these translations in several ways, concentrating on various modes and idioms of photography. Rubin's most recent pieces focus on photographic images as a form of storytelling, taking the entire contents of popular newspapers and entertainment magazines and overpainting certain figures and pages – implicitly making an argument that photographs are as much aesthetic objects, and therefore subject to artifice and manipulation, as they are factual records. The fact that the magazines are Israeli and Chinese publications lends his vast arrays of altered pages an overtly political edge, the blurred outlines acting as a subtle rebuke to the attempts of such regimes to regulate and control their own national narratives.

Magazine photographs are also the starting point for his small, individual works on cardboard, featuring depictions of models, film and pop stars, religious and political figures – all of whom, with their smudged features, become reduced to a sort of generic equivalence, a blank-faced interchangeability. The cardboard support serves as a comment on the disposability of such celebrity images, and their endless circulation within an industry that manufactures and recycles spectacle. Even a few images from art history are included: Velázquez's Pope Innocent, Rembrandt's bather (interestingly, Rembrandt was one of the artists whose melting, shadowy style Blake most railed against). Yet you never get the sense that it is the original works whose imagery Rubin is appropriating so much as popular reproductions: catalogue and magazine images, postcards and other photographic media. In that sense, it also feels as if Rubin is somehow redeeming these debased images, returning them to their rightful status as paintings.

The most extreme metamorphoses, the most profound translations, though, take place in Rubin's mid-sized pieces on linen and canvas – works that can be viewed as more traditional, in terms of medium and technique, but which are also tied more directly to their photographic origins. The result is a kind of complicated, concentrated ambivalence. Some paintings stem, again, from contemporary sources, from the bank of photographic images already in circulation – including several instances of pornography, a genre on which current anxieties about image-making often fixate (connotations of 'blur' that carry a moral charge, such as ideas of sullyng or soiling, are particularly relevant here; 'smut', after all, is simply another cognate for 'smudge'). And yet for the most part the images in the paintings are not contemporary but derive instead from old albums that Rubin finds in flea markets and junk stores. Hence the vague sense of old-fashionedness to a lot of the scenes, the occasionally dated clothing or otherwise incongruous elements such as gas masks.

The works thus convey a kind of double anonymity. Not only do figures have their facial features blurred out or otherwise obscured, but even prior to that they somehow embody a sense of lost or obscured identity – from the pornographic model whose body has become merely a vessel for viewers' fantasies, to the forgotten subjects found in faded old photographs, their lives undiscernible, the contours of their characters subsumed by history. Only the occasional, accidental photograph remains as evidence of their existence – like some strange after-effect, some residue of their vitality. And it is this sentiment, amplified by the process of painting, that accounts for the haunting, ghostlike atmosphere of much of Rubin's work. Even when a piece's title relays some specific information – *Class of '47* (2011; page 85), for instance, which clearly comes from some sort of school yearbook – the feeling is that some deeper meaning, the true texture of lived experience, has been leached away, ungraspable and unresolved.

Not just unresolved, but fundamentally irresolvable. That, ultimately, is the larger point that Rubin's paintings make about history, about the way events are remembered or the meanings they attain. His work does not deal with the solid facts of history, the certain categories and delineations; rather, it captures a sense of history as something mutable, as uncertain and shifting terrain. Blake's dream of precision and permanence, these paintings seem to argue, is an impossible one. Memory is never certain, never complete – which is why Rubin's figures remain, quite literally, only partially re-membered; that is to say, not quite fully put back together, not completely whole, having lost their most salient features. Nor is meaning itself something that stays stable, photographically fixed in place: rather, it shifts and flows, draining and ebbing; or else new meanings accrue and collect – a process of flux and slippage. It is impossible, for instance, to look at a work such as Rubin's untitled depiction of a solitary train wagon from 2010 without thinking of a host of other images and associations to do with the Holocaust.

It is no coincidence, indeed, that the Second World War should feature as a trope **within** Rubin's paintings – even though the subject is rarely addressed openly but rather felt as a sort of obscene, background **presence**. In **one** key work from 2011, however, it is directly portrayed: *Cologne 1945*. The image comes from a famous historical photograph of the half-obliterated city, its landscape pockmarked by Allied bombings. In Rubin's version, it is possible to pick out the city's cathedral, the **dark sweep** of the river, as well as various shapes that might suggest a **factory** or a smattering of buildings. The majority of the space, however, is taken **up** by thick, scrubby splats of paint – so that the devastated, obliterated areas of the city, rather than being formally represented **within** the scene, are instead literally realized, presented as an equivalent, **painterly form** of obliteration on the surface of the canvas.

In a work like this, the act of painting comes to stand for the traumas of history – for the damaging actions of the past, those incidents that are experienced as a kind of rupture in the historical consciousness; but also, by extension, for the notion of history, all history, as a form of ongoing trauma. The uniquely painterly language of blurring, blotting, and smudging becomes a kind of code for the way that history carries within itself irreparable marks and stigmas, for the way that shifting events and currents constantly bleed into each other. History, Rubin's paintings assert, is not like a photograph, is not fixed or instantaneous. Instead, it is something that builds up, layer upon layer, with every gesture leaving some sort of irrevocable trace – the passages of time like passages of paint. Episodes may become obscure, may be smoothed over, but they are always there, folded into the fabric of history – permanent, yet losing definition as they recede into the past.

All of which is not to say that Rubin's paintings are entirely melancholy, by any means. While there is certainly an emphasis on themes of trauma and obliteration, his works are more nuanced, more paradoxical than that – as you would expect for an artist whose tendency is towards blurring and ambivalence as against hard-and-fast delineation. It is crucial to note that even as his work expresses the corruptions of time and memory, it also, on a very basic level, rescues from oblivion lost or degraded images, brings to light those remnants of lives that had been buried inside anonymous albums – albeit by translating them into another medium. And there is a sense, too, in which even his blurring of faces can be read as an act of beneficence – particularly in the case of his small cardboard paintings of celebrities and figures culled from magazines, where their obscured faces can be read like a sort of blessing, as well as a blemish: their anonymous blankness becoming a kind of talisman, deflecting the glare of publicity, protecting against a culture of endless exposure.

Yet beyond this, there is a soft, almost hesitant feeling of hopefulness to much of Rubin's work – a minor note of optimism. It stems, again, from the process of painting itself – from the fact that painting is a slower, more gradual medium than the instantaneity of photography. Rubin's translations from photography into paint thus become a way of slowing an image down, of materializing it, making it dwell longer in the eyes and linger in the mind. And while that may seem like an inversion of the usual meaning of blurring – when an object moves too fast to be discerned – it makes perfect sense. In Rubin's paintings, photography itself is the subject. It is photography that is moving too fast – and with it, our sense of existing in the world: that familiar yet profound complaint about the accelerated pace of contemporary life. What that really means, of course, is an acceleration in the production of images, our constant bombardment by photographic media – with each new photograph somehow seeming to emphasize the outlines, to demarcate the boundaries of an ever-expanding present.

In this context, the trauma and hauntingness of Rubin's work functions as a strange kind of respite. His translations from photograph to paint are a true form of revision – literally allowing us a second look: a slower, more careful form of looking. They impart a sort of dignity to images, reminding us that an image has the capacity to be something magical and terrible, something powerful, not simply something cheap and immaterial. Above all, his work gives back to images a sense of history, the weight of passing time – drawing forgotten images ineluctably out of the past, loosing images in the present from their bounds, and allowing them their peculiar, halfway, indelibly blurred status as something never fully lost, nor fully remembered.