

# *The Honest Truth*

## by Paul Haworth

In my application to art school some years ago I wrote: *Painting today has the potential to be truly innovative. We are a generation which sees differently to those before us. When it comes to reading and interpreting images we have a completely new visual literacy. It is through these eyes therefore that we see, as well as make, paintings. Consequently our generation has the capacity and opportunity to herald a new and important era of painting.*

Youth! Indomitable youth. Just how wrong, how distressingly off the mark I was, I would soon learn. The good ship New Era of Painting ran aground one day at a school computer.

I was searching for an image to use in a painting and a past search appeared. Pain, suffering. There it was. Pain. Suffering. Today's expressionism, born of Google Image Search. Geryon sighted was now all I could see: at the photocopier, enlarging their printouts, studio wallpaper of printouts, printed acetates piled on OHP's, and every time I saw someone on a computer they were at that page. Of course, of course, we are all Google Image Artists, we know that now, but in 2002 it hit me hard. I think every artist had the same, let's call it epiphany, but my fear, resigned opinion, one that I know will be derided as antiquated, is that for most people...this is not a bad thing.

Zeitgeist! Contemporary Culture! You can't stand in the way of progress. But our Contemporary Culture, God willing, will one day be history and when the paintings of our age are studied there will

be the same images. From different artists in different countries, there will be the same painted cat...motorbike...palm tree...space rocket...reason enough to be panicked, feel some shame, regret for our generation...but I know, from my own pubescent experience, should they go on, should those erudite Art Historians of the future feel compelled to dig deeper, they will discover that most, nearly all of these recurring images came from page one of that Google Image Search.

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I don't suggest painting hasn't been heading this way for some time, merely that we are at its apex. It seems inevitable, history always does, that we should reach this point. The development of painting we know is one of survival, self-justification, developing so that it always defines its relevance to its age. Proving *itself*. Its necessity.

This process is by no means every painter's subject, nor is it always addressed consciously, it's just something you do... like watering a plant, I guess...yet for so long have we shirked this responsibility... it's like it never existed. Freedom! But it is this responsibility (and I use that word specifically) that is the one thing which stands between painting and image-making.

There are Internet services by which you can email your digital photos to Chinese craftsmen and 3-4 weeks later they come back to you by postal mail as a painting. An oil painting on canvas. Take a walk through

any British art school, however, and you'll be heartened to see the kids are doing it for themselves. Take that, Rising Dragon!

Image-making, image-making! Who would have thought painting would die at the hands of Visual Arts? And to surrender so willingly...I don't get it...how did this state of apathy and atrophy in painting occur? Was it because painting, declared dead all those times in the last century, we ended up believing it, the line was broken, living history died and all the painters that followed were unburdened of the weight of history – the responsibility...

I am talking specifically about figurative painting. Someone told me recently that there is little abstract painting made these days and even less that is good...with the grit and brains that made abstraction great in the first place...because the times we live in are too interesting to make abstract art. Artists have something to say and are going to say it.

Before making a painting one must ask "Why?" and "Why paint?" Let's imagine you are a tutor in an art school, visiting a young painter who makes paintings from Google Images and newspaper cutouts. You ask "Why?" and "Why paint?" and they tell you:

*With the advent of digital media, the already significant growth of images has exploded. Through painting we can slow an image down. We can separate it from the pack, so to speak, affording space and quiet for contemplation it would otherwise not receive. The act of painting something makes it more flesh and blood. These things lend an image the gravitas and emphasis of which it is often worthy. Most images used in the media, from news reporting to on-line photo sharing, feel transitory and are, in a literal sense, low quality. Painting is permanent and physical. Adding to this, painting an image suggests ownership. Whether the image is well known*

*or obscure, through painting it the artist claims it as his/her own; its associations mixing to create a cumulative narrative of which the artist is the author.*

Is this alright? I wonder...I mean, it ticks boxes, right? No! This is not alright, not for me, not for the painter. The painter knows...

Because, to put it bluntly, painters and painting today are lazy. All the chatter in the world does not disguise the fact that the growth and acceptance of the use of images in painting stems from laziness. An intellectual and physical laziness.

Like I say, it's been heading this way for some time. The romantic, the adventurer, had his/her piles of *National Geographic* in the studio. Pop artists had *Vogue* for the glory, *OK* for the trash. The classicist leaving the antique book store carrying armfuls of dusty books filled with pictures of birds. Creepy birds, Victorian patterns and mythological figures!

And with Google it became easier, faster and cheaper. Is this enough? Yes, the images are frequently interesting but I need, I demand something more of a painter. Something that wasn't there before. And not some Havekostian discourse about painting images, please! It's all well and good but we need to accept that words are not the only currency of intellect.

The ability of decision, invention and imagination in painters, long in decline, has become terminal with the advent of this digital age. Van Gogh, self-flagellating genius, once wrote: *I exaggerate, I sometimes change a motif, but in the end I don't invent the whole painting. Instead I find it ready-made in nature, though I still have to extract it.* He was wrong of course though his words may have been a prophecy for today's painters. I wouldn't dare propose some Return to Nature – along with the death penalty and life drawing – I simply demand that

we have ambitions for painting, that will involve struggle and inevitable failure but will move painting forwards and out of the comforting realm of the expected.

WE ARE SHIPS AT SEA NOT DUCKS ON A POND. Weiner said that. (Evergreen master, I know a poet when I see one.) So to 18-year-old me I say, “No!” Yes we are a generation which sees differently. But our eyes, our minds, they have not evolved, they have grown flabby and weak with underuse; we have been homogenised, until we are in the predicament that we can not separate painting from...everything else.

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I once visited a friend in his studio; he'd been in Berlin visiting the biennial and I found him sat at his computer viewing photos he had taken of the work he had just seen. He told me that he was visiting the biennial. That only now, as digital photos on his flat computer screen, could he really look at the work. Ludicrous, lamentable, laughable.

But this...*this is it*...this is what we have become. What folly it is to talk of today's visual literacy. As if comprehending the layout of a MySpace profile is literacy. It's like calling a wino a connoisseur. It's nothing new to look at art via photography but it has reached such an epidemic level – art is seen, traded and studied exclusively via digital images – that I believe painting has become a means to an end. It is being *made* to be *documented*.

The one constant in art school, drilled into students from day one, is GET GOOD DOCUMENTATION. After all, this is what lasts, this is what most people will see. Think of performance art. Always it takes place with crowds of photographers and filmmakers, and you can't help feeling you are there as an extra, to lend the documentation some authenticity. Sure, artists like

Meese exploit the involvement of people recording the performance, but most of the time it is an imposition which destroys the moment, the tension, that friction of experiencing something there and then... and all too often the performance becomes directed to getting the best documentation. What you might remember as flawed and mediocre becomes a DVD people watch and say, “I wish I was there!”

I'll stick with painting. I suspect painting is becoming...symbolic...like the gold your banknote represents, something we know is there but don't really believe in. Of course, truly great painting cannot be photographed. Certain details, certain flaws and strengths, nuances of technique are never photographable. I've seen it in my own work; stuff which I know is plain bad painting has disappeared. Great! So why bother? We're getting to the point where seeing a work becomes an anti-climactic experience. Even when the painting is a good one! “It doesn't look like it did in the photograph,” is now spoken as an insult – because the photograph...*that*... that has become the truth! “You Looked Better On MySpace” reads the T-shirt. Of course! We manipulate these images to their perceived best and we paint to assure such manipulation is most effective. It's Photoshop-compatible painting! Talk about painting eating its tail.

Okay, so photo-sharing pages, YouTube, networking sites, the content is not what interests me, rather what it means for our ability to see. YouTube is bad sound, bad pictures, so all you really get is the information. The knowledge of what it's “about”. It is symptomatic of the lack of confidence in our own eyes and mind – our unique ability to see and remember – that limitless digital photos are taken, capturing the information of every event and experience in our lives. For what? So that we don't use

up the memory space remembering them? And it's no great revelation to say that our awareness, consciousness itself, is altered whether we experience something photographing or watching it. We watch films on our laptops. All that grandeur and sensory stimulation of cinema, channeled through our laptop. Digital, digital, cheaper, easier, faster. MP3's, worse sound quality than CD's – technology going backwards – we don't care. We can't hear the difference anyway and even if we do we are willing to forsake it for convenience. All that matters is the information. Content is everything. The medium is irrelevant, it all ends up the same anyway. Yes, sure, it takes us a while to adapt. We know that there is no justification for printing digital photos...it's technologically screwy...so we email them or dump them on Flickr... Have you seen a Ryan McGinley exhibition? The merits of his work hold no meaning on a wall in a museum. All you see is heavily pixelated prints in expensive frames. You get nothing, perhaps less, than you would if you were seeing his work in a book or magazine: an accordant medium for digital photography. With analogue photography, it made sense, photography is light, the record of that light on a film, light through that film onto paper...there was technical, material sense to it...but now...now...oh stupid humans, forever killing the things we love... because we have an innate need for the real thing. Materiality is love! Love I tell you! Cherishable, two-handed, tangible love! Now when you look at digital photos – the beloved c-print, so sexy, a lost generation of photographers in search of the fabled no-pixels print – you know that the spark is gone.

But not for painters. Painters know how to keep the love alive!

The problem is they do nothing. With their blunted eyes and today's anything-

goes approach to painting (always a front to unprogressive conservatism) they do nothing to the images. They paint pictures. Maybe loosely, badly, realistically, change the colours a bit, combine images. Call me demanding but again this is not enough. Let us wake up and accept that this is not art. Lest we herald the Chinese craftsmen or hobbyist reproducing holiday snaps also artists. It is all too easy. Am I fetishising hard work just as our image-makers fetishise paint? Yes and no. I do require some thought from artists. Not afterthought – I don't want to hear some inherited discourse, something about means of representation, something about painting a painting of a painting – these are excuses. Excuses masquerading as theory. For instance, I commonly hear painters say that painting bad things, political things, stupid things, makes them more beautiful so that we really think about the subjects. Charlatans, liars, snakes. It's moron painting. And since when did painting, all painting, need this? Need the heaps of references. Sure, I'm in dangerous territory here, anti-theory is anti-progress I know, I risk being clubbed to death with Richter and Kiefer tomes, but I've spent the best part of this century in artist lectures and it's incredible. The very idea that if you heap enough references on top of each other you get art. All these artists are doing is surrendering to writers and curators who want to have their hand held every step of the way when it comes to looking at and thinking about art. The Simon Starling School of Art has conquered the world.

This is bad for painting because the painting becomes a prop to the other stuff. And so long as you can talk about this stuff...the gritty subject, the personal anecdotes...it deflects attention from the painting. And the actual choices made in the painting become barely significant.

I sometimes think painting has developed self-hatred...or at least low self-esteem... like it's an anachronistic commodity... grubby with money...not smart enough... you know, anti-intellectual. Cor blimey! Anti-intellectual! (Think about it: colour alone! What a vast subject!) There are many forms of intellect and when somebody throws that disgraceful term around they are undoubtedly deluded enough to believe there is one: theirs.

Talking is so much easier than painting. And you know what, I'm guilty myself for writing this but I feel compelled to do so. It's a case of speak or be spoken for. But here's the kicker: I'll be asked to explain, expand upon and justify these words. It never ends. Nobody wants to accept that art comes with an exquisite dissatisfaction. Instead of cherishing this we go on... tell me more...tell me more...director's commentaries...Wikipedia bios...onwards deep into the Internet, a pornography of answers, filling those gaps, spaces where I feel the imagination – or at least some independent thought – might flourish, until we are gorged on our lukewarm platter.

But talk is all you can do in art schools ...I mean, does the creation of art not need time, space, quiet...what art school affords any of those? Furthermore, art teaching is in a wholly risible state. At best a student is likely to encounter the omniscient “opposites” tutor. So learned, he/she will face the student's work and ask them to do the opposite of whatever they're doing. “Have you thought about working...on a larger scale...monochrome...abstract...figurative?” Minds are blown every day in art schools across the globe with teaching this perceptive and rigorous. But why? There are so, so many paintings I see, and I can't grasp, I can't understand why. Why paint?

Does it come down, simply, innocently

to people (not artists) enjoying painting? I get it, I do, you kick back, it's In Rainbows o'clock, you've a few beers and an OHP. Painting is a joy. Whether it's a photo of Britney Spears or a Talking Heads cover you're working from, it's all there: the subject, the composition, the colours. To be fair, I've heard some painters say they like to work from low resolution, heavily pixelated images or photos taken from the TV as it lends their technique some looseness... space for invention. Brother beyond! It's a hierarchy of losers. Many painters are even basing the proportions of their canvas on the image they use! Surely I am not blowing the lid on Our Secret. Everyone knows that painting today is Google Images and overhead projectors, don't they?

Let's stick in art school and pay a visit to the library to have a look at our heroes, our modern masters. Tuymans, naturally. Yes, if you're so loaded on coke that you can't concentrate on a painting for more than one day, here's your man. Undoubtedly, there was once grit in his paintings but how fey, how half-assed they have become. Dumas paints issues. Painful issues. Currin I refuse to discuss as he is not a serious artist. Henning. Let me tell you something about this man. A few years ago he visited my art school for a couple of days of tutorials. The whole time he was taking pictures of students' work. I was sharing a studio at the time with a painter who had made a cube out of six paintings. It was a great work. Did any of you see Henning's last show at Haunch of Venison? Filled with cube paintings. I refuse to respect any one who steals from young children. Rauch is addition, addition, addition. Havekost is Mr Photoshop. At no stage in the production of a painting does he strive for anything remotely spunky or unexpected. He takes a photo, Photoshops it (i.e. reverses the colours) and paints it in his laboured

way. Everything about his painting equates to a tired sigh. The arrogance, absolute arrogance of all German painters. Every one, young and old, thinks they are right. That they hold the torch of vital contemporary painting, when as far as I can tell there are three current schools of painting in Germany: muddy colours, conceptual abstraction and Neo Rauch. Sheep, sheep, a nation of very serious sheep, churning the same painting out over and over again, and yes, occasionally Germany does produce a painter with a spark of freshness, but seemingly terrified by their own independence they run to the nearest academy to become Professor Fossil. What's more, this nation of God's Own Painters has the temerity to suggest painting in England does not exist. That – with the exception of Bacon, how they love Bacon – we have not produced any significant modern painters. Do not think of accusing me of racism as I can assure you if any German painters read this they will do so gravely nodding to themselves in grave agreement. Sasnal. Sasnal is heralded as the future of painting by scared septuagenarians who presumably relate to his weary colours and arthritic handling of paint. Woe, woe, that heavy impasto, one can almost feel his withered wrist buckling under the weight of the paint, straining as it drags the brush across the canvas' rough surface. And one only has to watch his films – which succeed brilliantly in making rock and roll tedious – to know that this man must not be trusted. I would, however, take Sasnal any day – ANY DAY – as My Most Important Painter Working Today over Lisa Yuskavage. Horror! Which century, millennia are we in? That we should even consider this as vital painting is symptomatic of the monstrous state of painting. But these, these are our masters. Killing the daddy, it could be so easy, and these would be mercy killings.

Our masters are devils. Offering up an apple of ease, of effortlessness, of comfort: Painting has gone as far as it's going to go so just refine a style and run with it, and if it ever feels like it's not enough, like you want something more, don't worry, try not to think about it, try not to think about it.

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I recognise that, in writing this, I'm finished; my wrathful peers in the happy land of unambitious art with bad paintings hung on their walls will label me naive and conservative, and I would expect no less (blackballing and namecalling are constants for the truthseeker) so let me conclude with that fitting nail in the coffin: an Oscar Wilde quotation.

*All bad art comes from returning to Life and Nature, and elevating them into ideals. Life and Nature may sometimes be used as part of Art's rough material, but before they are of any real service to Art they must be translated into artistic conventions. The moment art surrenders its imaginative medium it surrenders everything.*

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