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“From the surface of the image to the surface of the psyche: A practice-based research into the ontology of painting onto photographs.”

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INTRODUCTION

Gaston Bachelard’s phrase “The poetic image is a sudden salience on the surface of the psyche”¹ perfectly captures the sensation I experienced on first seeing Richard Hamilton’s artwork *Portrait of a woman as an Artist* (2007). Encountering this image created a sudden salience on *my* psyche due to the unexpected combination of media employed, where Hamilton had painted the central figure of an otherwise completely digital photographic print. As I reflected on why one would paint in a representational manner onto a photograph, a potential research question began to form, which has become the locus of my practice-based PhD of painting on photographs: ‘To what degree can an art practice of painting onto digital photographic prints illuminate the ontological relationship between representational painting and photography in the digital age’? This paper touches on the beginnings of this research and briefly looks at one recently completed artwork constituted in this manner.

Why paint in a representational manner onto a photograph? I believe that studying this specific question can provide answers to the more fundamental question why paint? Or rather, why paint in an age saturated in technological visual media?

¹ Gaston Bachelard, M. Jolas, and John R. Stilgoe introduction to *The Poetics of Space* (Beacon Press, 1994), xv.

The early stages of my painting in a representational manner onto photographs have already unpacked some understandings related to this question.

Painting mimetically onto digital photographic prints brings about an *intellectualisation* in the creation, and reception, of the artwork. This intellectualization occurs through conceptual challenges created in bringing together two closely linked, yet ultimately separate, mediums physically in the same work. There is a challenge for the artist in attempting to physically, and visually, connect painting and photography into a single unified picture, and a challenge for the viewer in attempting to unravel this connection. These challenges revolve around how the different components of the picture are seen, and perceived, and the self-conscious engagement of this activity. This echoes Hamilton's conceptualisation of artistic practice, both with regard to his interest in perception, and with his concern for placing art historical traditions within a contemporary art context.² Hamilton's theorising of practice links to Marcel Duchamp's desire for developing artwork in an 'ideatic' manner, which is an antidote to 'retinal' art; that is making art which does not simply 'incite a "visual euphoria"' but one that deals with ideas.³ As I reflect on the beginnings of my practice within the framework of PhD research it is clear that for me "art is primarily the record of an intellectual process rather than a visual experience."⁴ Dalia Judovich notes:

² See, for example Richard Yeomans "The Pedagogy of Victor Pasmore and Richard Hamilton" www.henry-moore.org/docs/yeomans_basic_design_0.pdf and Tate Modern <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/hamilton-four-self-portraits-05-3-81-ar00141>

³ Dalia Judovitz, and Marcel Duchamp. *Unpacking Duchamp: Art in Transit*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 78.

⁴ Theodore Reff, 'Duchamp & Leonardo : L.H.O.O.Q.-alikes', in *Art in America* 65, no. 1 (1977): 85 quoted in Dalia Judovitz, and Marcel Duchamp. *Unpacking Duchamp: Art in Transit*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 79.

Duchamp's commitment to "intelligence" that he associates with poets and writers reflects his effort to redefine pictorial language in new terms... At issue is the question of rethinking the concept of innovation in terms that amount to new ways of drawing on pictorial traditions, thus enabling the rediscovery of art's conceptual potential.⁵

For me, painting onto digital photographic prints draws on 'pictorial traditions', in both the taking of photographic images and manipulation of paint media, that embrace western European conventions of form and subject matter in picture making. It is the simple physical combination of these mediums that moves this research into new and unexplored areas, which is vital in terms of developing innovative art practices, and essential within the framework of higher-level research. I find the conjunction of representational painting and contemporary modes of digital image production conceptually revitalizes the act of painting. Hal Foster notes that for Hamilton the use of photography and other new media within his fine art practice brought pressure to bear on painting in order that this medium would be 'renovated.' He states that, for Hamilton:

If painting could assimilate these various modalities [of photography and new media] then not only might its traditional genres be retained (...the portrait, the landscape, and so on), but also its "ancient purpose" [Hamilton, *Collected Words*, 42] might be preserved (...the holding together of the ephemeral and the eternal, the everyday and the epic).⁶

Hamilton therefore may have deployed new media in order to 'test' painting, as a means of reaffirming its unique position amongst photography, print and the digital. I however aim to investigate not only what happens to painting when combined with photography, but also wish to explicate the intellectual challenges this

⁵ Dalia Judovitz, and Marcel Duchamp. *Unpacking Duchamp: Art in Transit*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 78 – 79.

⁶ Hal Foster, "The Hamilton Test," in *Richard Hamilton* (Tate Modern, London: Tate Publishing, 2014), 169 – 178.

relationship brings to the photographic process I engage in. As one example, at the point of taking the photograph I must see beyond the immediacy of the given subject and conceptualise the future visual possibilities of the image, which will become painted-onto works at a later date.

As part of this intellectual framework mimetically painting onto digital photographic prints tests the boundaries between painting and photography. Such testing is bound up in the historically intertwined relationship between these mediums, and modes of digital photographic reproduction now present new avenues of investigation of this relationship, which Hamilton had just begun to explore. Painting onto a photograph not only brings a heightened awareness of the mode of painting in this context, it also raises questions at the edges of digital photography where its representational qualities in printed form moves toward a type of painting. Gerhard Richter has been a key figure amongst those investigating relationships between painting and photography as his vast output of over-painted photographs, or paintings from photographs, demonstrates. Yet in 2011 he said that it was for others to now push the boundaries of these two mediums.⁷

Further to this, painting onto the digital photographic print reinforces the materiality of the physical photographic image, which is important in a culture saturated with intangible digital images that forms our view of the world and sense of place within it. A number of photographers such as Matthew Brandt explore the physicality of the printed medium as part of its aesthetic makeup. As Edward Dimsdale notes:

⁷ Gerhard Richter press conference for *Gerhard Richter: Panorama* retrospective. Tate Modern, 2011. <http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/blogs/tate-debate-whats-next-painting>

The increasing visibility of such operations, ones that stress the haptic sense of touch, should not be surprising perhaps, given we live in technological times that are productive of values of disembodiment; indices of imperfection are a necessary counterpoint in an age of frictionless imagery and smooth, glass screens.⁸

This consciousness of the objectness of the artwork makes for a heightened viewer engagement with it making a ‘reflective experience that is more embodied.’⁹

Added to this, the highly mimetic nature of the painted element on the photographic print slows down the process of viewing, encouraging yet a greater reflective self-consciousness of what is being perceived. It takes time for the viewer to assimilate the subtleties of the painted component of the picture in itself whilst attempting to grasp this in contrast to, and relation with, the photographic elements. This combination demands a particular viewing experience; one that is about differentiated seeing. This differentiation lies with the eye, (and mind), either moving back and forth between that which is painted and that which is photographic, or containing the painted and photographic elements as a single whole. From my first-hand experience of making the work I believe that it is only possible to engage with one of these modes of perception at a time although this question will be explored through viewer engagement later in the research.

Painting as trompe l’oeil in relation to the photograph, and the reflective self-consciousness this brings in the act of viewing, will now be briefly explored in reference to a recent work.¹⁰

⁸ Edward Dimsdale, “Matthew Brandt: Wai’Anae,” *Hotshoe* 194 (2015): 75.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 75.

¹⁰ Trompe-l’oeil is French for “Deceive the Eye”.

ART STUDENTS IN THE STUDIO – ALEK

One of the first artworks I have produced for my research, *Art Students in the Studio – Alek*, shows a young man squatting on a studio floor drawing a large-scale image of a male figure on a board. The overall picture presents itself as one that is about *looking*; the artist looking at the photographic images from which to work, (which are of himself), and the viewer looking at him engaged in this activity within the picture. There is a visual irony at work, which reveals itself through sustained viewing. The young artist squats on the floor, working from a photograph on a large drawing of a nude, (a self portrait), which brings with it western art historical associations. There are other photographs of the figure around him. Consequently we see the young artist creating a mediated image of a figure from a set of (seemingly unmediated) photographs. The photographic picture we look at appears to contain unmediated photographs of the figure, at least one mediated image of a large drawn figure, and the unmediated figure of the artist at work. On first viewing the only ‘real’ figure in the picture appears to be the young artist himself as he engages with his artwork. He is positioned in such a way as to command attention, laying at the cross-point of the golden section, and the eye is drawn to this centrality of the subject. This positioning is purposeful in order to make the viewer focus on this point so that there will be a heightened surprise on discovering that the young man in the image is in fact painted. We then understand that the ‘real’ figure (of the young artist at work) is in fact mediated ‘outside’ of the photograph by another hand, another real artist at work. The mediator of the picture within the photograph is himself mediated by another mediator. This echoes Hamilton’s *Portrait of a woman as an artist* where the artist within the picture, (Hamilton’s wife and artist Rita Donagh), is mediated by Hamilton

himself. Paradoxically the drawing of the full length figure that the young artist works on within the photograph, which is a mediation by the young artist, is 'true' in terms of the photographic image we look at from outside, in the same way that everything else within the photograph is 'true'. Tom Gunning asserts that our understanding of the truth of the photograph comes about in two ways: Through the indexical nature of the medium,¹¹ that is the physical relationship between the object photographed and the image, and that the image is 'legible in order to be likened to its subject.'¹² In the terms of the photograph everything within the image is 'true' in this respect except for the element that draws our attention as the picture's centre, the young man himself, which is 'untrue' in photographic terms.

THE WORK AS TROMPE L'OEIL

Great care was taken in making the paint surface of the figure within the work as flat and detailed as possible in order to tie in with the surface of the digital photographic print as a means of increasing the ambiguity between the two. My intention is to surprise the viewer through a trompe l'oeil revelation; a 'jolt' that is a 'sudden salience on the surface of the psyche' so that, when this 'deception' reveals itself, it may bring about a closer engagement for the viewer with the work and heighten the sense of *difference* between the two mediums whilst at the same time reinforcing *representational similarities*. It is anticipated that through this heightened awareness in the act of viewing a greater engagement with both the historical dimension of the work *in its making* and the present dimension of the work's *formal qualities* is made. That is, that there is an awareness of the construction of the artwork

¹¹ See, for example Lefebvre, Martin. "The Art of Pointing. On Peirce, Indexicality, and Photographic Images." https://www.academia.edu/192769/The_Art_of_Pointing_On_Peirce_Indexicality_and_Photographic_Images

¹² Tom Gunning "What's the point of an index? Of, Faking photographs" (PDF). *NORDICOM Review* 5 (2004). (1/2): 41.

and, from this, a sense of the artwork as object as a means of understanding an aspect of its ontology. Caroline Levine states:

in the case of trompe l'oeil art, painting proclaims not only that it is a being-for-another, but that it is also a being-in-itself, an object in its own right that differentiates itself from nature. By flaunting the skill of the artist, parading its capacity to imitate the real, the picture, while looking very much like the reality it represents, actually compels us to recognize its status as painting.¹³

I agree with Levine that trompe l'oeil 'prompts a particular narrative of spectatorial experience' in that here the splitting of paint and photograph creates a reflective experience for the viewer bound up in a set of responses between image, or possibly in the case of *Art Student in the Studio – Alek*, images, (the photographic and painted), and self.¹⁴ I would argue this reinforces for the viewer the performative nature of looking and perceiving. For Levine, "The self-reflexive character of ... trompe l'oeil urges us to reflect on the production of representation and trompe l'oeil is, therefore, the *critical art par excellence*."¹⁵

I aim to continue investigating aspects of trompe l'oeil throughout the research in order to discover more about the relationship between mimetic painting and digital photography through a self-reflective criticality, both for myself in the creation of the work and the viewer when engaging with it.

¹³ Caroline Levine, "Seductive Reflexivity: Ruskin's Dreaded trompe l'oeil," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 56, no. 4 (1998): 368.

¹⁴ Caroline Levine, "Seductive Reflexivity: Ruskin's Dreaded trompe l'oeil," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 56, no. 4 (1998): 373.

¹⁵ Ibid.

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