

Merge Visible: Contemporary British Painting through a Virtual Window.

The window is an opening, an aperture for light and ventilation. It opens, it closes; it separates the spaces of here and there, inside and outside, in front of and behind. The window opens onto a three-dimensional world beyond: it is a membrane where surface meets depth, where transparency meets its barriers. The window is also a frame, a proscenium: its edges hold a view in place. The window reduces the outside to a two-dimensional surface; the window becomes a screen. Like the window, the screen is at once a surface and a frame – a reflective plane onto which an image is cast and a frame that limits its view. The screen is a component piece of architecture, rendering a wall permeable to ventilation in new ways: a “virtual window” that changes the materiality of built space, adding new apertures that dramatically alter our conception of space and (even more radically) of time.¹ (Friedberg)

Traditionally painting in the west has been defined by its concerns with the picture plane - the translucent partition between the fictive internal space of the painting and the real space outside, where the viewer is positioned. In 'De pictura' Alberti used the metaphor of picture plane as an open window [aperta finestra] through which the artist sees the visible three-dimensional world and can translate it onto the two-dimensional surface of the painting. As a metaphor for the painted surface, Alberti's window infers a representational experience for the viewer, whose position in relation to the painting is fixed and subjective; Alberti's viewer is involved with an illusionistic space that recedes with perspectival logic into a defined pictorial background. Centuries after Alberti positioned the picture's viewer behind a static window, painting's audience and its experience of the image has become more visually complex. We are now used to seeing multiple 'windows' at the same time – on computer screens, smart phones and digital tablets – and through them we fluidly experience a stream of pixelated, disconnected images. We are living at a time when the virtual space of the digital screen is the prevailing means by which we view and understand the world – often seeing several windows at once full of images, icons and texts which can all have their own individual temporal, spatial, and aesthetic registers. Within the scope of our vision these disparate components are given meaning in relation to each other, coming together into a perceptual meta-logic.

'Merge Visible' is an action in the image manipulation software Adobe Photoshop whereby separate layers are compressed together to make one unified image. This flattening of pictorial elements into a consolidated viewpoint is symptomatic of our everyday experiences in the contemporary image world, in which a constant stream of rapidly shared simulacra enter our consciousness hundreds of times each day on digital screens. Merge Visible brings together a group of British painters who combine multiple visual elements or processes, enabling many fragments of information to be seen simultaneously in one assimilated painted image. They engage with techniques of layering and juxtaposition as a means of exploring the materiality of paint, creating new meaning from disparate forms and disrupting the syntax of pictorial composition, bringing traditional painterly tropes into

dialogue with our experiences of reading space, material and subject in the contemporary image world.

Encouraged by recent technologies of surveillance and mapping, our sense of spatial orientation has considerably shifted in recent years. Linear perspective, whose single viewpoint has long dominated our vision of space, has lost its significance in favour of the aerial views we routinely experience on satellite imagery and Google Maps displays. On the computer desktop too, linear perspective has been superseded. Texts and images shown within one window will be seen next to other windows on the same screen. Elements that are above, below, in front and behind each other are seen simultaneously, consequently not only transforming linear space, but also disrupting the logic of linear time.

The rejection of linear perspective in painting, is, of course, nothing new. Pollock, Rothko and Newman, for example, all applied paint in a way that did not draw viewers' eyes to any particular central point on the canvas – instead, they offered multiple perspectives through one flat surface of painterly space. Their work, in turn, was in the tradition of their Cubist predecessors' Picasso and Braque, in which numerous perspectives of the same subject were achieved on a two-dimensional surface. Although breaking from the conventions of linear perspective and natural representation, these works still considered the picture plane in terms of its verticality in relation to the human form of the viewer. More radically, in the 1950s Rauschenberg's Combine paintings shifted pictorial space from the vertical to the horizontal, making a move from the painting as a window overlooking nature, to a painting as a flatbed of visual process (through their surface) and document of contemporary culture (through their subject). Rauschenberg's aesthetic of the screen was one of screenprinting; what is more apparent in the work of the painters selected for *Merge Visible* is the influence of the spatial relations of the digital screen, and especially the impact of an online image world in perpetual flux.

Ian Goncharov makes paintings that, like Rauschenberg, borrow data from the outside world. He refers to mass and popular culture as seen through a filter of social media – narratives are forced together like scrolling through a Facebook feed, painted in flat, disrupted planes. Each pictorial element exists in its own shallow optical depth, seemingly disconnected from each other in free floating layers. Since the early twentieth century artists have used collage techniques to piece together disparate visual materials to make something new, this practice being made possible by the emergence of technologies that augmented the production and circulation of images. One century later, through the emergence of new media – and the democratisation of these technologies through home computing, smart phones and portable tech – there has been an exponential growth of images, sounds, words and objects generated or disseminated through digital means. Goncharov's compositions suggest the principles of copy, cut and paste that underpin the transfer of knowledge and visual matter in the Information Age, merging images and cultural genres. Goncharov makes comparisons between his process as a painter and the DJ in Hip Hop, whereby he 'samples' images from mass culture and 'mixes' them in paintings. We experience the distinct graphic elements not as

one holistic image, but as detached compilations of layered subjects and surfaces.

The array of layered images entering the screens of our laptops and phones every day is multitudinous yet transient, forms that appear on the screen disappear at a click of a mouse or a swipe of the finger. This transience is not just temporal, it is also qualitative: the computer makes no distinction between different texts, images or sounds, all content is ephemeral and literally virtual (i.e. not really there at all). The impermanence of anything digital – which can with ease be modified or deleted altogether - has its paradoxical equivalent in the ceaseless accessibility and speed of locating images. The transitory nature of the image of the digital age is destabilised further by our acceptance that many images we see have been manipulated digitally before they reach the viewer, such that the word 'Photoshop' has now become a verb, as in 'to Photoshop an image'. Playpaint makes paintings through sequential processes of logic, the methodology of which is familiar through the layered space and editing facilities of Photoshop. The work is manifest through the application of methodically worked layers whereby each successive treatment of the painted surface obscures part of the layer beneath – a progressive procedure of editing or deleting painted information. Through the process of their making Playpaint's paintings exist through several states of being until they either fail or succeed as finished works. Failed paintings continue to be developed as hybrids, reclaimed towards new paintings and edited into something new in a cycle of image regeneration and circulation.

Lee Marshall paints explorations of space, form, surface texture and volume, influenced by the processes of image editing, 3d modelling software and the aesthetic of computer generated imagery. His compositions are realised instinctively in initial drawings or collages, then worked into meticulous painted renderings of both derived and invented forms. Informed by the visual language of digital space, Marshall's paintings start with the creation of a boundless background – a flat colour or gradient – which provides a ground onto which compositional elements are placed. These forms appear vectorised and constructed, often displaying illusory textures and synthetic lighting effects. Although referencing in part a series of objects sited in a landscape, the pictorial space that is implied is virtual. Objects hang weightlessly within a slight depth of field, there is a strong separation between background and foreground; similar to how objects exist in real space but also not wholly 'realistic'. Digital media have the capability to disconcert our understanding of spatial experience; texture mapping and 3d computer modelling can present as exaggerated or other-worldly – an uncanny or strangely familiar rendition of the real, but not the real itself.

The immediate and expansive directory of visual material offered by the internet has enabled a temporal state in which the past and the future have become available simultaneously. In what painter Matt Connors refers to as a 'redirection of artistic inquiry from strictly forward moving into a kind of super-branched-out questioning', artists' relationship to the history of art has been extended by the online catalogue of accessible images. This functions as a non-linear archive; a limitless flat space with vistas in each direction, similar to a computer desktop, from which artists can pick and choose their references to art history through reasons of critique, nostalgia or irony. Lisa Denyer juxtaposes the

hard edges of geometric abstraction with the gestural brush strokes of abstract expressionism. The handling of paint and the interaction between the multiple layers of medium and the raw surface upon which it is applied – handmade supports made from wood, hardboard or plywood – is a primary consideration of the work. Taking inspiration from ideas around modernity, traditional landscape art forms, and formal investigations of pictorial space, Denyer explores the capacity that paintings have to be substantial and self-reflexive in an over-saturated image world. Such fusions of painterly style, technique and historical reference points, which can also be seen in the work of Goncharov and Marshall, characterise how painting has become interactive by forming connections between different fields of activity. In short, the internet allows the history of art to be used by contemporary artists as a user-friendly archive in which material can be quickly accessed so that it might be manipulated and reassembled as something new.

Texture is a material property of paint that cannot be experienced via a screen. The delicate, flawed surfaces created by Sarah Longworth-West suggest the transience of the contemporary image. The paintings start with found source material, which Longworth-West manipulates through drawing to create edited and abstracted forms. These images are then recontextualised over a surface of traditional handmade gesso ground, which is pigmented and applied in layers. Sanded to a smooth finish, colour is fused in between the overlaid gesso to produce an unpredictable and inconsistent surface. Longworth-West exploits the incidental qualities of the materiality of paint while also exploring the limits of the recognisable image. Showing both the surface and the picture simultaneously, the traditional painting techniques that Longworth-West employs are a means of emphasising the material quality of the painted surface, and also an intimation of the many disconnected images we see, click, swipe and share each day. The physical nature of painting is considered further through Longworth-West's presentation of her work on custom-made shelves, tables or as floor pieces, exploring the dimensional space that painting can occupy.

The material qualities of painting and its tangible elements, such as line, plane, gesture, spatial configuration, process and surface are evidenced throughout the work of each artist in *Merge Visible*. This may appear to be a response to the virtuality of the digital age. However, physical touch and gesture are now synonymous with the digital - the Latin root word *digitus* means 'finger or toe' – so perhaps tactility and layered texture in contemporary painting is less of a reaction to the immaterial image world and more of a logical extension of the lineage of mark making from hand-applied pigment on cave walls to gestural swipes of fingers on touch screens. Laurence Noga's paintings are developed from hand cut collages made from printed material collected from magazines and exhibition invitation cards, overlaid in vertical strips in a panoramic format. When larger paintings are made from these, Noga introduces elements of chance into the work. Using materials that include enamel, acrylic, and powder pigment applied in successive vertical bands by brush, roller or pouring, Noga creates planes of highly-saturated, optically vibrating colour. The paintings' surface records the making of the work: poured paint bleeds onto matt rolled acrylic; open expanses of flat colour lie next to fluid, bubbled enamel; hard-edged areas of paint are juxtaposed with dispersed pigment. Noga uses a systematic

process to create his paintings, but the system is interrupted and transformed by the material, uncontrollable qualities of paint and the physical means by which it is applied.

The materials of painting allow Phil Illingworth to challenge what contemporary painting could be. Often working in three dimensions, he nevertheless approaches his work as a 'painter', the history and visual syntax of painting providing him with a field of enquiry through which to explore the conventions of both painter and viewer. Illingworth's works are created with the intention that they have no projected signifiers other than the physical realisation of the work, its material components and the language used to describe it. Contesting that art cannot be progressive if it is contextualised by viewer self-reference, Illingworth rejects notions of image association with personal experience as a means of interpreting or explaining painting – a position at odds with the ease at which images can be accessed, repurposed and recirculated online, for example, the internet meme. A contemporary, populist model of self-referencing, the internet meme is digital image that has been interpreted by an individual, re-captioned and released on social media to be shared. A viral trend, memes spread cultural ideas and symbols online in a digital space that allows both image and meaning to be remixed according to the interpretation of the viewer. Illingworth's paintings, however, are conversely intended to be read as pure material and form and not as subjectively interpreted 'meaning'.

The bodily materiality of paint is at the centre of Clare Price's paintings, in which dramatic gestural elements are layered with translucent geometric forms. Price is concerned with the notion that 'art comes through the body' and her paintings employ the 'realness' of paint to record the relationship between the physical being of the painter and her materials in the studio – what the artist describes as a 'hidden performance'. As discussed earlier in this essay, our contemporary bodies now exist in a (virtual) environment in which traditional understandings of temporal and spatial contexts have been reformed. Our experiences of the corporeal self as a separate entity to technology has shifted as the majority of us are, in the Western world at least, connected by smartphones, reliant on plastic cards and under surveillance every day. Price's paintings are a document of the rare time in which we can be disconnected from technology and free from being watched; her canvases manifesting the traces of painterly material encountering surface in the privacy of her studio. As much as the work is a record of Price's activity in the studio, her paintings also continue a dialogue with art history. The fluid marks and poured paint onto raw canvas are redolent of Abstract Expressionism – Price cites Joan Mitchell and Helen Frankenthaler as influences – these gestural elements are restrained on the canvas by geometric shapes derived from modernist forms and digital drawing tools. As such Price's work embodies a new, layered temporality, simultaneously presenting the momentary present with the historical past.

Painters today habitually look, think and work in ways that are influenced by technology. The digital environment has influenced how we understand pictorial conventions; the layered logic of programmes such as Adobe Photoshop and Adobe Illustrator has affected our comprehension of colour, depth and volume, its painting tools our recognition of a distinct quality of line, and the

multitude of windows visible on our computer screens at one time has normalised fragmented spatial composition - all of these elements relate to the formal considerations that lead to an artist's application of paint to surface. In our cut-and-paste culture the combination of numerous painterly elements is both symbolic of an ever-generating visual environment and simultaneously transcends it, reinforcing the physical textures and haptic qualities of the painted surface as a contrast to the dematerialised space of the screen. Painting has developed into a more interactive discipline by forming relationships between genres, using existing art histories as a catalogue from which to generate new material. The paintings included in *Merge Visible* are at once suggestive of our vast yet disembodied relationships with the image in the digital age, yet they all remain manifestly 'painterly' in nature.

Charley Peters

¹ Friedberg, Anne. *The Virtual Window*. 1st ed. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2009, p.1