

A conversation between Machiko Edmondson and Daniel Sturgis

11th May, Kensal Green, London

DS Is this painting Doublespeak finished?

ME I would say it is, but I can't say for sure because I've been tweaking a lot. And this is new for me – to have paintings around and unpacked in the studio like this – I find myself tweaking things and adding things. I had never done this before because paintings would have left the studio soon after I completed them in the past.

DS Is this the same with these other works, these six or seven large paintings? You have been slowly re-working or working on them?

ME What happens is that I basically finish a painting within a certain set of months – but now I see them hanging around and end up picking at them again.

DS And what would be some of the adjustments that you might make? ME Well, that depends on the painting, but it tends to be the eyes.

DS I wondered that, as thinking back on your earlier work, the eyes in your new paintings have become much more powerful.

ME Years ago, with the paintings from the 1990s I was often working from my own photographs of actual people which I shot with a large format camera on films. In those paintings the eyes were much more natural looking, realistically and subtly painted.

DS So, within the more recent work the eyes have become more central?

ME Yes, and more exaggerated and stylised. They have pattern-like and abstract qualities.

DS They are otherworldly. We can talk about if there is any realism in the painting later, but the eyes are definitely fictional. They are always – and again this is a change and development in the work – staring directly at you.

ME Pretty much. And also, in my recent paintings, other features are altered and adjusted significantly.

DS And in some of the earlier works you had people looking to the side, or at three-quarters. Now we are looking at full-frontal faces with these very magical eyes.

ME Some of those earlier paintings used to have more of a 'portraiture' quality to them. In that sense, yes, so they contained something 'to be gazed at'. Even the faces that were looking straight at you had a blank stare and an unthreatening look to them. Also, those paintings were definitely more carefully and subtly rendered. Whereas the more recent ones are in-your-face and stylised. The new paintings may even be more akin to 3D animations than portraiture paintings. When someone says these works are realistic or even photo real, I find that to be problematic because they really are not 'real' or 'photo-real' at all! At least that's not what I am not aiming to achieve anyway.

DS With photorealism you begin with a photographic image and explore through painting a relationship between that photograph and the depiction of it on the painted canvas. Here you are exploring a similar parallel relationship between a painting and the digital, virtual and animated worlds.

ME Yes, I am conscious of this, but I see them as more like convincing lies... 'Lies people want to believe' if you like. With a big question-mark of course!

DS The surface of the painting is very carefully made. It is a blended in a seamless way.

ME The surface making is the first stage. I used to do this much more thoroughly. It's really now a different process. Previously, when I was making more portrait-like paintings, they were far too time consuming – six months to a year to complete a work – I used to create layers upon layers of glazes, for months on end. Features didn't appear until the later stages. I was slowly sculpting the face through paint. Really bad for one's studio morale! When I look at those paintings now, I get so exhausted just looking at them! Now I have a kind of 'shorthand' for all that. But even then, it still takes three months plus, because of the drying process of oil.

DS The new paintings are less polished, but they have a more mysterious quality to their making and to the image. They are not really people. There is more of a perfection in how you are treating the image and surfaces.

ME My painting process itself is like an Instagram/photo filter, that people use to beautify and manipulate themselves into how they wish to be seen. I think, Dan, in one of your talks you were talking about your paintings and your approach, and you said you were interested in making paintings that can be seen from more than one point of view.

DS Yes, I would have said that. I am interested in how paintings can use ambiguity, and how you can have more than one reading – possibly very contradictory readings – in one work. So, I sometimes think of my paintings speaking with more than one voice.

ME Yes, when I heard that, I thought that was exactly what I was trying to do as well. I am always interested in having some sort of 'polysemy'. They are faces – but they are not really about faces – they allude to something other than what is there and in front of you. As to what they are pointing at, that is not always so obvious.

DS In a sense they are paintings of real people, but they are also fictional as they are manipulated to mimic digital manipulation but through paint. And of course, with a lot of digital manipulation you are using tools which derive from past painting techniques. In one sense your paintings are about these painterly concerns and how they are used in culture, from the early work mimicking the perfected fashion photograph, which may have historically been physically air-brushed and corrected. And now with digital filters.

ME Before, as you know, I was using my own heavy-duty medium-format camera – to create a high-definition image which mimicked fashion-industry photographs. But now I just 'borrow' images from internet, and these are very likely to be filtered or Photoshopped. I search for them on-line from a standpoint of 'what is perceived to be desirable?' When I start painting, I project this image to position it roughly on the canvas. But after that I further manipulate the proportions and features, particularly the eyes.

DS As the painting develops you leave that original image behind?

ME Yes, sometimes earlier, other times later... It becomes much freer as I go on though.

DS And the eyes in the new works are not in the original photograph from the internet?

ME They are not. I often use images of an ocular iris – and close-up photos for reference images. And then I end up creating some patterns of my own.

DS So although one automatically sees a person in the painting – the reality of that person collapses. The eyes and that gaze, which is very piercing and strange, draw you in, but then you notice the strangeness of the actual face itself – the features – you seem to be playing with ideas of truth. The painting is asking - is this true, is this not true? But of course, the painting is itself true and actual....

DS It is interesting that with these new paintings you seem to be questioning this through photographs from the internet or Instagram. Images where many of the people who have been photographed, or photographed themselves, have used digital filters of various sorts before you find the image.

ME Yes, this is very likely to be so. And also, I see myself as an additional human filter which emphasises certain features and creates additional fictions so they look more like A.I. rather than a person. As an artist, I am neither glorifying nor condemning merely posing a question that these images create.

DS Yes, they seem to acknowledge the biases within digital filters – which may manipulate skin and emphasise eyes – so they remove the individual from being a real-lived person into something which is much more an inhabitant of a screen or a virtual world than some sort of lived experience. And one of the intriguing things to think about is that many of the people who are the subjects of these images, will have had the signifiers of their age or race and actual appearance removed to inhabit this virtual state.

ME Yes, perhaps. But I'd say when I found them online, they do still somewhat resemble the original people. They just rather tweak themselves, to present themselves to how they wanted to look. But I extend that further. They become even less real through my painting process. So they are not portraits in any way whatsoever.

DS It is one of their powers that they are not portraits, because they have this unsettling feeling in the way they are looking at you. And also, they give you an armature to manipulate the surface – the skin of paint – on the canvas and the softness of the painting itself. The painting has this soft vulnerability which is at odds with that tough stare.

ME It is the blatantness of the eyes. I see the paintings clearly having two opposed sides: one is about supposed 'allure and desire'; and the other is about disconcertment and anxiety – something that does not sit that comfortably. Balancing those qualities is something I see as very important in my work.

DS Would that idea of the paintings having these two sides be as visible in your earlier work in the 1990s?

ME No I don't think so. The intention was still there but it was not so obvious. The recent shift has emphasised this. And I sometimes title them to indicate there is something else to see if you care to see it. For example, this one is called Doublespeak and that one is Dichotomy.

DS Over the lockdown period you worked on paintings that were perhaps closer to portraits.

ME In a sense yes, due to the limitation of working in my living room. For the eighteen months during the lockdown, I was making quick one-a-day drawings. They are completely opposite to my paintings because of the nature of the materials, which were oil on mylar, or aluminium. They really had to be finished then and there whilst wet. The theme was 'Fandom'. Fandom is a familiar territory for me, as you know, and to which I have returned now and then in the past. They are of (you know, the usual) Nick Cave, PJ Harvey, Bret Anderson, Buffy etc. But this time I called those drawings 'Impersonator/Doppelgänger series' and kept their identity slightly ambiguous. Making those gave me some sort of sense of purpose daily during the weirdest of times but also I felt they were strangely autobiographical. In that sense I felt they were my, oddly enough, 'self-portrait' as a whole. Also they were an antidote to being Machiko Edmondson, as I made them with my other name Cyan Dee.

DS You were painting a lexicon of musicians and TV actors. Real people, who are perhaps in our imagination slightly fictitious themselves.

ME Yes, icons...

DS It's interesting that you use the word icon. The large paintings are almost like icon paintings as well. If you think about Russian orthodox icon paintings - there is the slow manipulation of paint within a tradition. The vision of a face that is a signifier for another world. That was a nice slippage you made between the two uses of the word icon – in painting and fan-culture more generally.

ME ... that, brings us back nicely to 'speaking with more than one voice'.