

## *Staying Alive: Transcendence and Immanence in Contemporary Painting* <sup>1</sup>

7,500 words

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article is initiated by the writer’s response to a criticism from an editor that they ‘cleave to the transcendent in art’, and also inspired by the discovery of James McMullan’s 1970s illustrations for a New York magazine, which formed the aesthetic and narrative basis for the ‘Saturday Night Fever’ movie. These two, seemingly unconnected factors, come together to conjure and weave a discussion of the relative qualities and values of immanence and transcendence. It uses examples drawn from art and with particular reference to a range of painters with greatly differing styles, and from different eras, but compared and considered here as con-temporary (sharing the time of the article and its writing).

### **KEYWORDS**

Immanence, transcendence, holistic, modern, painting, artist, distance, dance

Figure 1: James McMullan, *Tribal Rites*, 1976. Illustration for *Tribal Rites of the New Saturday Night* article for New York Magazine (Nick Cohn, 1976: n.pag). Copyright James McMullan. With kind permission of the artist.

**immanent, adj.**

Chiefly Philosophy and Theology. Existing or operating within; inherent; spec. (of God) permanently pervading and sustaining the universe.

**transcendent, adj. & n.**

Surpassing or excelling others of its kind; going beyond the ordinary limits; pre-eminent; superior or supreme; extraordinary.

(Oxford English Dictionary)

**Philosophical Introduction**

An editor recently excused their decision to *not* publish my art writing on the grounds that they felt that I: ‘... cleave to the transcendent in art’. In response I proceeded, keeping my ‘feet as firmly on the ground’ as I could, to write the text below. The exercise has made me newly aware of the need to clarify my relationship with the concept of transcendence, and I find myself grateful for the prompt that this accusation gave me, encouraging me to investigate this concept a little more closely than I have done hitherto.

Subsequent to the impact of my editor’s comment, and initially inspired by the coincidental discovery of James McMullan’s 1970s paintings of the New York disco scene [Figure 1], the writing that follows here became an article on ways in which art – and a range of paintings and painters in particular – might help illuminate themes of both transcendence and immanence, and perhaps thereby help position ourselves and the works in relation to these concepts. Paintings from different eras, cultures, and generations are therefore used to make and illustrate certain points, but as all of these were recently encountered, they are treated as con-temporary – at least in the sense of sharing a certain time and currency as proffered by the philosopher and theorist of aesthetics Peter Osborne (2013).

In fact, as an artist, writer, and lecturer I consider myself more interested in the implications of the term 'immanence', which is sometimes defined as the opposite of transcendence. While studying in the 90s, I came across 'immanence' repeatedly in the writings of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, but though intrigued I never felt that I fully grasped their use of the term (Deleuze 2001, Deleuze and Guattari 2004). Interestingly however, Deleuze, who claimed to hate abstractions, also claimed – perhaps as evidence of a kind of radical empiricism that allies with immanence and refuses transcendence– to prefer the statement 'a life', to the more abstract (and again, more transcendent) concept 'life'. In what follows, 'life', 'living', and 'staying alive' together provide a broadened context for any artist and thinker who might consider themselves to be primarily engaged with immanence.

Nevertheless, I have tried to avoid this article becoming an overly defensive response to the aforementioned editor's accusation and thereby allowing it to become overly biased in favour of immanence at the expense of transcendence. Immanence always suited my own, intuitively evolving view of a wholehearted immersion in the events of life, and of living, one that does not easily concede to clear-cut separations, borders, nationalities, hierarchies or other such categories, but which encourages a microcosmic and holistic approach, tending to see the 'whole in one' as it were, or – to quote the bible – 'all in all (Corinthians 15:28).

Such an approach might today be encouraged by climate change (that affects the whole and affects all), as well as by what is called the Anthropocene; by various forms of globalisation; and by the technology of the internet. All of these holisticising influences and tendencies might also lead us to a Nietzschean affirmation, a philosophical need or attempt to say 'yes' to as much as possible, while fending off dispiriting incursions of what the Romantic philosopher called 'nay-sayers'. i.e., if we can appeal to an immanent immersion in the given and in the whole, without hierarchy, categorisation or transcendence, then we might also be led to affirm as much as possible of all experience.

### **James McMullan**

I confess to being a radio addict, as well as someone who can't help conflating fine art and popular culture, and so, when a radio DJ recently drew my attention to the existence of journalist Nick Cohn's article, published in 1976 and which, illustrated by James McMullan, apparently formed the inspiration for the movie and music album *Saturday Night Fever*, I

couldn't help myself pursue this reference (Cohn 1976). If we look at the McMullan images, we can see an ebullient picture of youth, using fashion, music, and dance-moves to elevate themselves, albeit fleetingly, above and beyond (yes to 'transcend') their inauspicious, working-class *milieu*.

If you recall the movie you will remember that John Travolta's character, Tony Manero, works all week in a painting and decorating shop, until, come Saturday night, and having spent hours dressing, he is transformed into a prince of the night by means of the subculture of which he is inescapably a part, and which provides an alternative to the given, dominant culture and established styles, uniforms, and rites. In McMullan's paintings (or illustrations), a smooth shining floor reflects the dancers' forms, and seems to imply another realm as the reflections symbolise the flip side of the clubbers' difficult and degrading working-class lives, signposting a world that you can enter by dressing-up, carefully and correctly, in coded fashion, and by listening and dancing to popular music.<sup>2</sup>

It is not surprising that one of London's most famous dance clubs was named *Heaven*; a dance club is – ideally – a place to escape this exploitative world, this harsh reality, and the special fear and loneliness that can be brought on by the urban night. Nevertheless, those working behind the scenes – bar staff, managers, cleaners etc. – will also see the club during the day, when the tricks performed by lighting, props and interior design may look more moribund.<sup>3</sup> Each disco light has its safety chain attached lest it fall and break the spell it helps to cast, and drawing attention to this banal device alludes to the contrivance and potential collapse of all this fake finery and contrived fantasy.

When the club is closed, and the sun has risen, transcendence might be seen to have transposed into immanence, and thus the scene for our discussion is set. Now, in the closed club, we might find a predominance of clumsy-looking, light-absorbing black surfaces within contributing to an ugliness unseen by the previous night's dancers. Now the club's special vitality has gone, the music silenced, and a certain deadness remains. The smell of stale alcohol lingers, washrooms must be cleaned, floors swept, bars re-stocked. These things that punters rarely see are a far cry from the night's fantastic feelings. Now, a glimpsed transcendence gives on to an equivalent immanence. However, this immanence might yet be the privileged domain of any artist, writer, poet, or thinker who refuses to acknowledge a clear-cut distinction between life and art, night and day, high and low values.

Clubbers (including Manero) spend hours preparing to look right for their entrance to a club and their time on the dancefloor on Saturday night, though only to find themselves feeling slightly wretched come Sunday morning (as depicted in the movie) when their day job and associated livery beckons them back to a 'reality' that means conformity with the inexorable logic of the dominant economic regime.<sup>4</sup> Like moths that have flitted from one bright light to another, all through the night, they wake feeling somewhat brutalised and psychologically singed after getting as close as possible to an illusion of escape; or, we might say, to an escape that is genuine enough but which they come to accept is only, and always, fleeting. The modern city night is itself a grand contrivance, a manscape, artificially lit and far removed from that which we habitually think of as nature. You can see graphic and convincing evidence of it in the 19<sup>th</sup> century literature of Poe and Dickens, and then in the 24-hours in the life movie made by Walter Ruttmann of Berlin in the 1920s, titled *Symphony of a Great City*.

In '*Saturday Night Fever*', any transcendence promised to a working-class Italian diaspora family by the Catholic church is clearly crumbling, and yet, an alternative to transcendence emerges in the form of the duty and necessity to simply 'stay alive', i.e. to romantically and heroically, keep a spirit, hope, dream, and sense of trajectory alive, despite having the odds stacked against it, despite endless obstacles cast in the protagonists' path. A certain persistent hubris and bravura is teased out of bodies by technologised beats and bass lines that are both ancient and novel, fundamental and intricate. Over these are laid the variously plaintiff or joyful sounds of human voices, fused in harmonies, enhanced by reverbs, delays, and autotune. They provoke cathartic lyrical emotions or send out more abstract messages that resonate within minds and bodies that are not separated but reconciled by music. Everyone is encouraged to 'throw a shape' that transforms who and what they are, offering an embodied hieroglyph that, though lacking in coherent narrative, constitutes meaning and produces collective value through the grammar of the body's own language. Music lovers are captivated by the cult of whichever tribe currently claims their attention with its ear worming maxims promising to help us find a way to live – to 'stay alive'.

### **Walter Benjamin, Hippies, Pop, Punk and Distance**

We know we cannot transcend comprehensively or entirely, if only because we cannot cheat

death, nor can we arrest our aging (which will soon banish us from the dancefloor's youthful paradise). Human beings cannot fly unaided by noisy, dirty, unecological engines, nor can we defeat the aggressive and abusive socio-economic and militaristic regimes that hold sway over our better natures, spoiling our best laid personal, cultural, and societal plans, curbing our purest hopes, our most benign dreams and wishes.

When the cultural theorist Walter Benjamin famously wrote about 'distance' in his well-known theorisation of a modern 'aura', he played with and compared variations of this phenomena, from an aura resulting from natural and actual distance to an aura resulting from what might be called a 'cultural distance'.<sup>5</sup> This 'aura' is created not by metaphysics but by fame and popularity arising from mass, mechanical reproduction. It enhances the image of a star or icon of popular culture. This could be a Charlie Chaplin, or later a Marilyn Monroe, or (to pursue a Warholian legacy) a brand like Apple or Coca Cola. Fame, reputation, elevation, either of the real and natural kind, the spiritual and metaphysical kind, or of the cultural kind, creates the phenomenon of a distance (as Benjamin says) 'even when our object is close to hand' (1968: 220 – 221).<sup>6 7 8</sup>

Another form of 'cultural distance', in which distance comes to stand-in for transcendence, might be gleaned by comparing the post WW2 'baby boom' and hippie generation's transcendent vision with the more immanent Neo-Dadaism of Pop art, or the Punk, Disco and Hip-Hop movements that followed. Hippies seemed to believe in accessing some form of transcendence that had been unavailable to their parents. They could attempt this partly through experimentation with drugs, partly by 'dropping out' of societal norms, partly by engagement with Eastern philosophies, partly through an enduring belief in revolution, and partly through a vision of a better, more peaceful, sharing, loving and caring society. Meanwhile, the Neo-Dadaism of Pop art, far from seeking transcendence through alternatives, gleefully celebrated a cynical acknowledgement of the inescapability of the dominant regime. Later Punk used 'No Future' (and thus no distance, no transcendence) as one of its maxims, while purposefully disassociating itself from a failing and fading hippie idealism.

Punk's willingness to immerse itself in the inescapable givens of late 20<sup>th</sup> century capitalist consumerism might today be regarded as an exemplary deployment of an immanent interpretation of experience by the artist. In fact, for Punk, Glam Rock, Hip Hop and Disco –

all emerging in the early 70s rather than the 60s – the task seems to be, not so much to achieve transcendence or reach a distant horizon but simply to ‘stay alive’, or at least to keep alive the post WW2 sense of youth providing alternatives and possibilities to keep society progressing and innovating (all of which would of course be further challenged by the cynical might of Reaganomics and Thatcherism in the 1980s).

### **Akira Kurosawa and Definitions**

Master movie maker Akira Kurosawa begins his 1963 movie *High & Low* with a meeting of hard-nosed, smartly suited businessmen, discussing the merits of various women’s shoe designs, most of which involve some form or level of elevation. Meanwhile the film’s title refers to a duel between a rich man who lives in a luxurious modernist apartment with a lofty view from on high over a city where, in one of its squalid backstreets far below, lives a man who expresses his contempt for his affluent counterpart by kidnapping the rich man’s child. Here, one person’s transcendence might become another’s immanence, or one person’s ‘high’ cause another’s ‘low’.

But can we think of transcendence as ‘high’ and of immanence as ‘low’? And just what is the difference? Transcendence suggests that in some ways, and to some extent, we can, with the help of art or through an adjusted approach to life, perceive alternatives above and beyond this world, and perhaps rise above and go beyond worldly and human, physical and material limitations. Meanwhile, immanence suggests that if we accept and immerse ourselves in our limited means and givens, we can nevertheless experience something ‘divine’ therein, perhaps via this very eschewing of transcendence. It might be helpful to digest the dictionary definitions provided above. Such preliminary searches also emphasise the use of the term ‘immanence’ in religious contexts. i.e., we can think of our god as transcendent, over, above and beyond us and the world or universe, but we can also think of that god as immanent, i.e., ‘indwelling’ residing within all.

Immanence points to something positive, and even ‘divine’ within immersion in an unstriated life. In dialogue with immanence, we always need to contend with what, at any particular moment is the ‘given’, which is also the whole, rather than hankering for something else, something other, something beyond our reach and ken (and in this way transcendent).

The reward for accepting an immanent paradigm is ‘a life’ that is fully and constantly charged with value (perhaps pre-Socratic), rather than a (perhaps more Christian) life which has a superior corollary or alternative, e.g., a heavenly realm or afterlife.<sup>9</sup>

### **Lewis MacAdams**

Some sense of the potential divinity in immanence can come to us, and just as rapidly go, in the form of an epiphany, a short-lived high of one kind or another, the inspiration for a haiku, a moment of un-self-conscious forgetfulness while dancing. It might be glimpsed within the ‘three-minute opera’ of a pop song or captured in a poem.<sup>10</sup> Once glimpsed, it is not easily forgotten but can be folded-in to our measuring and understanding the parameters of all that is granted us, what crumbs of excellence and ecstasy are left to us in an aggressive and competitive society where all seem to be reaching and grasping, and where so many are hanging on by their fingernails.

A favourite poem, stumbled over in a collection found in a used bookstore, is titled *The Dazzling Day* and written by the lesser-known New York School poet Lewis MacAdams.<sup>11</sup>

The shopping cart clatters out of the Safeway, a young man with a black tie, loose at the collar but tucked in to his long white apron tilts the cart up to ease it over a curb. A small pamphlet is stuck behind the windshield wiper in front of the driver’s side. The metal light pole is fiery to touch except for the shards of an old political sign. Someone has been in the car, the glove compartment is open, a box of kleenex on the dashboard, the chrome end of the steering wheel is hot.

The groceries, in thick brown paper sacks lean against each other in the back seat. I tip the boy and get in the car. The ice cream bars are melting. I must turn on the air conditioner and drive back towards the house. (MacAdams 1970: p. 189)

Here, the poet shares with the reader a highly conscious immersion in the givens of their daily life, including American, late 20<sup>th</sup> century capitalist consumerism, the predominance of the automobile, an environment made for cars, as well as a climate mitigated and attenuated by air-cons and ice cream.<sup>12</sup> Nothing moving or dramatic occurs here, there is no sense of escape, and yet the poem transmits a strong sense of being at the centre of a certain universe. This in turn, potentially marks every event, for all of us, as a microcosm of the entirety of



experience (Kauffman 1976: 42-46).<sup>13</sup> The ordinary becomes ‘cosmic’ (both in a scientific and a more mythological manner) as the everyday becomes paradoxically exceptional. So, should we call this an image of ‘transcendence’ or ‘immanence’? To me, the poem is clearly an illustration of the latter. However, this poem might make us want to ask: can transcendence be attained through and by means of immanence? Given this example I would tend to say no. What is compelling to me about MacAdams’ description of experience is that tendencies to, or possibilities of transcendence are unavailable or denied, but are also not required, as immanence becomes a valuable aesthetic experience and philosophical understanding.

### **Mohammed Sami**

For the painter, or indeed the writer, caught up in the intense concentration of their process, our world might become a canvas or a page. If we look at a recent London exhibition by Mohammed Sami at Camden Arts Centre, London, we find a repeated gesture of filling the canvas to bursting with its content.<sup>14</sup> When a painter so assiduously attends to the limits of the space that they have allocated for the painting, they seem to express a sense of confinement, excess and overload. The world may not in fact be full, but it can sometimes feel as if it is bursting at the seams, and not just in the crowded city, but anywhere that human aspiration comes up against limits.

One of Sami’s paintings depicts what looks like an institution, on a high horizon that offers little sense of distance. The building is bathed in the golden light of a rising or setting sun. We seem to bathe in that glow and enjoy the effects of the image, only to discover, on glancing at the title – *Refugee Camp* (2022) [Figure 2] – that the painting represents a refugee processing centre. This may bring our initial, elevated interpretation ‘down to earth’. Now, the way in which the composition is jammed into the canvas’s limits or parameters might even make us think of the confined spaces hidden behind those strong looking walls and small windows, through which sunlight might – we now reflect – shine only for short periods of the day.

Figure 2: Mohammed Sami, *Refugee Camp*, 2022. Mixed media on linen. 290 x 590 cm. Courtesy of the artist, Camden art Centre London, Modern Art London and Luhring Augustine New York.

Figure 3: Mohammed Sami, *The Point 0*, 2020. Acrylic on linen. 170 x 120 cm. Courtesy of the artist, Camden art Centre London, and Modern Art London.

In Sami's *The Point 0* (2020) [Figure 3], another kind of window features and gives on to another kind of golden, illuminated area, though one that might now just be desert. We recognise it as a view from an aeroplane, though now this refers not just to any remaining promise and glamour associated with air travel but to other forms of confinement. Sami reminds us that, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, even if we are travelling somewhere novel or exotic, perhaps on a holiday that sets us free from work, unless we are flying first or business class, we may well experience the kind of carefully calibrated discomfort that precisely calculates profitability at our expense.

We all know, and all too well, the cramped conditions in which we are likely to make much of our journey. Furthermore, given our previous references, the bleak view from Sami's aeroplane window might also suggest deportations and repatriation flights which are part of a violent and punitive judicial process. The result is a paradoxical 21<sup>st</sup> century image, in which flying – which might still symbolise some sense of transcendence – is also and always a burdensome and ugly experience. For human beings to fly, unlike birds and baroque angels, requires noise, dirt, and damaging pollution, contributing to climate change and the eventual desertification of a once verdant planet, and perhaps this is what we now see through Sami's window, if, that is, we see anything at all.

The artist, in attending to such subject matter, nevertheless draws something of value out of its potential bleakness, offering our mind a space, at least, of paradox and of contradiction; a space in which to think through an ambiguous image. It becomes an image of both incarceration and escape, both abstract form and recognisable figuration. But again, is it immanent or transcendent? We might read it either way. Perhaps it is in the space of ambiguity that we find a kind of respite from any craving we might have for such a reassuringly simplistic polarity, or for the satisfaction of a search for certainty.

### **Giorgio Morandi**

Giorgio Morandi, a selection of whose works were recently exhibited at London's Estorick Collection, is regarded by many contemporary painters as a master to revere.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, he often depicted small, humble, domestic objects, huddled together on a tabletop – even

though they seem to have had sufficient space in which to be spread out or organised more elegantly [Figure 4]. Morandi seems to have been interested in that huddle, that proximity that could be interpreted, once, again, as akin to the crowded and cramped condition of refugees, though here perhaps referring, sub- or semi-consciously to Morandi's own generation and the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Italian diaspora (which, coincidentally, is also the focus of *Saturday Night Fever's* urban *milieu*).<sup>16</sup>

However, the crowd is a phenomenon familiar to all modern people, one of the phenomena that perhaps defines modernity. Intense modern proximity can be found among the strap hangers who cling to every crowded tram, train or bus in the modern world.<sup>17</sup> Meanwhile, 21<sup>st</sup> century cities are more than ever crowded and contained by the ever-increasing construction of highly profitable middle class apartment towers. Lofty apartments (once the dubious privilege of the relatively poor) are today bought as investments, stacked like poker chips, or collected as buy-to-rent portfolios. Despite the personal profits they make for a few, they rob the entire city of its horizon and sense of distance – always associated with hope and imagination, the city's own transcendence perhaps.

Again, as in Kurosawa's *High and Low*, one person's transcendence becomes another's immanence, as one person's 'high' causes another's 'low'. Lofty towers interrupt the spectacle of sunrise and sunset for the city's inhabitants, rich and poor alike. Meanwhile, as can be easily seen when wandering through our modern city centres, the massed ranks of new towers, containing tens of thousands of new apartments, do nothing to alleviate the horrific proliferation of homeless people who camp out on, or sleep face-down against, cold, filthy pavements, onto which they seem to have fallen from a great height.

A sense of modern immersion and density, and the difficult search for an exit or escape, for space and air to breathe, might all be more associated with the concept of immanence than with that of transcendence. Nevertheless, the artist, in a Nietzschean manner, may be willing to create an affirmation or retrieve some value from the given scenario.<sup>18</sup> And so Morandi – like Sami, Macadams, McMullan and Kurosawa – expresses an interest in the given amount of space allocated him as a painter, in terms of studio, tabletop, canvas, and of time too.

The artist shows that they are reliant upon and tethered to certain limits, often self-imposed, and which can also inspire, not by increasing freedom but by imposing limitations.<sup>19</sup> If a

musician's role is to divide, stretch, bend, shape, and order time through sound, the painter's role is to use hues, tones, and forms to invest a given, defined and delimited amount of time and space with meaning, while contending or empathising with certain, given proportions.

Figure 4: Giorgio Morandi, *Natura morta (Still Life)*, 1949. Oil on canvas, 12 x 17 15/16 inches. 19 3/16 x 25 3/16 x 2 3/8 inches (framed). Copyright holder Bridgeman Images, Licensed by DACS.

Morandi is renowned not just for the modesty of his objects or theme, but also for the awkwardly small size of, and access to his studio. At times, he almost humorously pushes his objects, not just to the edge of the painting, but even to the edge of the table on which they stand. These spatial gestures might allude to life and death, as if the painting is a world that only contains so much air for us to breathe before its possibilities are exhausted. A painting, as well as being so much space, also represents or stages, just so much time, before the painting is done, or the sitting, the session, or the artist's life, is over.

### **On Kawara and Lee Ufan**

Again, art is not always a matter of achieving or suggesting transcendence but can always be a more immanent matter of simply 'staying alive'.<sup>20</sup> Lee Ufan, the Korean/Japanese Dansaekhwa painter, developed a technique of matching each of his brush strokes to the length of his breath, thus closely symbolising the connection between life and art in an unexpected way. Meanwhile, On Kawara famously made paintings that refuted the 70s mantra that 'painting is dead' by meticulously painting the date of every day that the painter remained alive, and by sending postcards that stated, again, that even if 'painting' was dead, On Kawara, and *his* painting at least were still alive. So, if we are looking for a valuable and valued form of immanence, perhaps we need look no further than On Kawara's practices, they seem to ooze immanence and deal directly with the limits of the given possibilities of life, and of painting in its late 20<sup>th</sup> century context. They seem to refuse all gestures of transcendence and allusion, yet produce and retain value, both for the audience who encounters and interprets their meaning, and for the market and the prestigious institutions that now, following the artist's death, love to invest in and be associated with his work; work that ironically, due to its meticulous construction, remains 'alive and well'.

### **Francesco Poiana**

The emerging Italian painter Francesco Poiana refers, in conversation, to Giorgio Morandi simply as ‘the master’. Poiana has exhibited at Messums’ London West End galleries over the past few years and enthusiastically painted his Northeast Italian homeland, full of lush greenery and gorgeous golden light (that might itself be described as ‘transcendent’) falling on pale plastered houses and baking roofs [Figure 5]. And yet, recently Poiana has also referred in his paintings to the geological and volcanic roots and origins of that same landscape [Figure 6].<sup>21</sup> It is an interesting move, one that we might think of as current, contemporary and also as post- or neo-Cezannean. Cezanne provided us with a landscape that came to be categorised as ‘post-impressionist’ by Roger Fry, perhaps because it seemed to be made of something more than the dazzling and charming Impressionist light effects.<sup>22</sup>

Cezanne’s landscape was also informed by his sense of the substantial geological material, on and of which the surface of the landscape is built. Cezanne seemed to be seeing through and beyond the eye’s celebratory survey of illuminated surfaces, as if drawing back the landscape’s skin and drawing out the land’s underlying muscles and bones. Poiana could be said to follow in those footsteps as he allows himself to imagine the much-loved landscape, either preceding or following the Anthropocene era, splitting, and boiling and returning us to a sense of geological time, asking us to consider huge swathes of time and periods of glacial formation – a subject referred to by Robert Smithson, as influenced by George Kubler and his work *The Shape of Time, Remarks on the History of Time* (1962).

Figure 5: Francesco Poiana, *Untitled (Terra di Dio)*, 2021. Oil on linen. 35 x 50 cm. Copyright the artist. With kind permission of the artist.

Figure 6: Francesco Poiana, *Local landscape*, 2020. Oil on board. 36 x 28 cm. Copyright the artist. With kind permission of the artist.

Poiana’s volcanic landscapes implicate the audience, and the painter himself, as living in, through and with a volatile and unreliable *mise-en-scene*, one that now includes and implicates us in a way that a more purely optical painting might not. We could argue that technologically glorifying the human eye – as Western painting has done since at least the Italian Renaissance, and on through the age of Impressionism – might today be superseded by a more imaginative, immanent, and post-human approach to painting, one that even supports

artists Jake and Dinos Chapman's claim (derived from Georges Bataille) to be 'tired of seeing'.<sup>23</sup>

If Cezanne no longer simply saw, but absorbed in some more osmotic (immanent) manner the multi-dimensionality of the land he depicted (possibly leading to the revolution of Cubism), Poiana – who sometimes paints his molten mountains in a night-time or dusk illuminated not by glorious sun but by threatening crimson fire – also explores a kind of immanence that eschews a well-worn tendency for painting, in a conspiratorial nexus with the eye and with nature, to celebrate a certain optical 'solarity' (*sic*) that proffers a transcendent experience.

Climate change and other globalising influences, including air travel, television, and the advent of the internet have gradually brought us to think and feel more holistically, less anthropocentrically, and less perspectively about art and the world. The consequent demotion of the vainglorious human eye, that has so long encouraged a sense of being as a self at the centre of a universe, and which has reigned so presumptuously over that modern world, that it had played such a large part in creating, might today allow us to value the paintings of our perilous times according to a model of immanence that refutes a correspondingly outmoded model of transcendence.

Meanwhile, nature and landscape no longer seem to reference light, beauty, and/or any escape from modernity (as per the Romantics, Impressionists *et al*), but rather lead us quickly into considerations of threatened nature and of nature as something disruptive and disturbed, even animistically resentful of a dying human presence that has carelessly unbalanced that nature's optimum or preferred condition.

## **Tess Jaray**

Figure 7: Tess Jaray, *Still Point*, 1982. Acrylic on canvas. 168 x 244 cm. Copyright the artist. With kind permission of the artist.

Towards the end of an exhaustive tour of the 2023 Gwangju biennale in South Korea, I found that a special kind of inclusivity, guiding the choices of the curator, meant that, as well as many references to 'indigenous' artists and traditional processes (including, e.g., Inuit drawings and woven textiles) space remained within their remit for the inclusion of what we might think of as a persistent modernism.<sup>24</sup> E.g., In *Still Point* (1982) by Tess Jaray [Figure

7] (noting the reference to high modernist T.S. Eliot in the painting's title) we seem to find an invitation to transcend, and, furthermore, a call from the artist to ask their materials (canvas, stretcher, paint and image) to also transcend their literal, physical reality and conditions.<sup>25</sup>

Coming to Jaray's paintings, following a long, broad and deep trawl through the unusually eclectic biennale, we might see them as also 'indigenous', as also 'local', as also part of a certain tradition, albeit an apparently paradoxical or oxymoronic tradition of 'progress'. This is then a tradition peculiar to a certain 'tribe' of modern people, their beliefs, their art and their artists. They emerged from a particular culture, economy, reasoning, and geography, at a particular moment, illustrating their belief system, including its necessarily transcendental elements and the emblems of that tribe, through appropriate images.

Confronted by paintings like these we are likely to experience a certain pleasure, a certain alleviation of weight, and a certain willingness to be pleased by the momentary illusion of seeing and being beyond our own, as well as beyond the painting's own, physical and material conditions, limitations, and parameters.<sup>26</sup>

In the image '*The Point 0*' by Mohammed Sami above [Figure 3], we saw one kind of 'flight', apparently a view out of the window of an aeroplane. But that 'flight' was tempered and grounded by other allusions that we also found there. James McMullan's disco dancers also seemed to float in an uncertain realm, albeit between the hell of their day jobs and the heaven of their Saturday night dancing. In Jaray however, another kind of 'flight' is achieved, albeit an optical one that is as much illusion as allusion. The careful choice of tone and hue, combined with the precise mapping of perspectival effects (which might be traceable to Italian Renaissance draughtsmanship or earlier Islamic design) is carefully situated within the pure, blank, monochrome space of the remaining canvas – an anticipation of the sepulchral, modern, white-cube exhibition space in which these paintings are designed and destined to be viewed. It all adds up to an insistence upon the possibility for art to provide us with a form of escape, a transcendent and transformative experience, if only momentary, fleeting, and illusory.

Painters of 17<sup>th</sup> century baroque church ceilings might have utilised their own florid, painterly tricks, conspiring with curvaceous baroque architecture, to give neck-craning audiences a sense of accessing infinity and eternity. However, paintings like those by Jaray

also offer something similar to a modern, more scientifically grounded and secular audience. Both examples artfully produce and provide an illusory sense of distance from an unyielding ground; a distance that is not any actual and particular distance (as might be found upon leaving the gallery or church), but a conveniently contrived or ‘potted’ distance, an abstracted, idealised and essentialised distance that might even be able to move us more than its authentic counterpart in the outside world.

If, in a secular, modern society, a painting like Jaray’s stands in for and provides the aerial and spatial illusion once conjured by a baroque painter; and continues to render a sense of infinity and eternity by means of brush pencil and paint, perhaps then modernism or modern art is not, after all, the art of a secular society but rather the appropriate imagery for the belief system of a particular tribe – the tribe of transcendental modernists perhaps. And for that tribe, a fleeting glimpse of a transcendence, one that is knowingly contrived (like a magic trick that we know is a trick but which nevertheless thrills us) may be all the transcendence it needs.<sup>27</sup>

If seeing is believing, then each belief system relies upon its visual art to manifest the unseen, the invisible, and the essential on which that belief relies, and which inspires or causes that belief system to exist.<sup>28</sup> Surely here then, in Jaray’s painting, we can find the kind of transcendence, or aspiration to transcendence that long guided and governed modernist art. Those who followed, and who might still follow that creed, had the relative (perhaps dubious) luxury of being able to work within certain cultural and aesthetic parameters, evolved, then established, by a modernist canon, through the art of Cezanne, Kandinsky, then perhaps on through Johannes Itten to the likes of Frank Stella, Ellsworth Kelly etc., always aided (‘given wings’) by articulators, theorists, critics and curators like Roger Fry, Clement Greenberg, Alfred H. Barr etc. – or so a certain canonical, patriarchal, and Euro-centric story goes.<sup>29</sup>

### **Sigrid Holmwood**

Figure 8: Sigrid Holmwood, *En förskräckelig oc sand beskrivelse (A terrible and true description)*, 2022. Madder, caput mortuum, Maya blue, green earth, weld, red ochre, indigo in egg tempera on calico mordant printed with madder, 120 × 130 cm. © the artist. Courtesy Annely Juda Fine Art, London.

While researching for a recently published Routledge book on *History in Contemporary Art & Culture* (2023) I renewed an encounter I had made some years before with the artist Sigrid



Holmwood.<sup>30</sup> Holmwood is truly extraordinary for the way that she seeks to immerse herself in her own processes (grounded in painting) and in their – often ancient – historical provenance. Holmwood researches and remakes, not only her own history of art and culture but all of the pigments, paints and brushes that she needs, often reviving centuries-old processes side-tracked by our consumerist proclivity for that which is convenient and easy to obtain. She even grows plants and flowers from which colours (of a particular kind) can be derived. She then connects all this history (often medieval) to a history of women, their abuse by patriarchy (she refers to witch trials, burnings etc.), and to obscured and repressed historical examples and moments of matriarchal power.<sup>31</sup>

Holmwood is both a painter and a thorough historical, technical, and academic researcher, who (as the English say) ‘wouldn’t be seen dead in’ an art materials shop. Consumerism and its vivid, upbeat, high-tech spectacle have no voice here and yet from within the grim, often monochrome imagery, and dense levels of historical research cultivated by this artist, there is still room for bleak, or black humour. We see it in images of the artist wearing medieval clothes in a modern setting, and even standing astride a huge hand-made paintbrush, as if to challenge and cajole the continuing elements of murderous misogyny and pathological patriarchy that persist in 21<sup>st</sup> century society.

Here, the word ‘transcendent’ doesn’t seem appropriate, while ‘immanent’ may well fit the bill, after all, Holmwood isn’t trying to escape or go beyond our physical and philosophical limitations, as Jaray seems to do (purposefully or not), rather she seems intent on weighing herself down, and slowing both herself and her audience down, with history, with material process, almost hobbling her own progress while perhaps critiquing progress *per se* (even seeming to reverse it). Holmwood brings out of her carefully researched, ancient processes, values, ideas, vocabulary, and perspectives that might otherwise remain lost or hidden in the folds of a murkily recorded patriarchal history, that is also all too present and current.

All this weight is then transferred to and shared with the artist’s audience, who are compelled to address the seriousness of Holmwood’s issues precisely because they are grounded (literally) in the undeniable gravity of the artist’s earthy processes. As we have said, there is little in the way of transcendence for us here, but rather an immanent immersion in something given, a given that presents itself as a dense, inescapable, and undeniable materiality.

Holmwood therefore delivers us into an uncompromising immanence wherein inescapable monstrosities of history, such as witch-burning, arise from within a process that insists upon its inescapable materiality. Here, each cloth and canvas speaks of its every weave; each hue and tone is evidence of an ancient hand-made process; while any possible transcendence promised by modernity seems to have been pressed and rubbed out of this unusually 'hands-on' practice.

## **Conclusions**

Having explored transcendence and immanence with this handful of painters (made 'contemporary' by means of this exercise) and with reference to some theorists, should I now concede and agree with my ex-editor that I do, after all: '... cleave to the transcendent in art'? And if so, should I desist from this disagreeable tendency? In truth, despite my attempt here to unravel it, I remain slightly confused by the initial accusation and continue to see myself as an artist, writer and lecturer unfettered by any overarching concept that might curtail the possibilities of my own art, writing, and lecturing. It is, after all, that very sense of possibility and its production that I cherish above all the gifts that art and art writing allow me and invite me to explore, enjoy and share. Having said that, if this production of possibility is itself somehow reprehensibly transcendent then I stand guilty as charged.

The brief adventure in ideas pursued above hopefully shows that both transcendence and immanence retain valuable potential, and so, at times while writing the above, their differentiation seems almost meaningless. Immanence will always require us to reconcile ourselves to the given, and yet, both immanence and transcendence have positive and promising gifts for us.

Defining the potentially 'divine' aspect of immanence is perhaps something that only artists, working in a secular context can reveal. However, if we are forced to renounce transcendence but still able to choose an immanent interpretation of experience as a model, there is surely room for positive, ecstatic, and even divine experiences within both paradigms (recalling here, e.g., Lewis MacAdams' poem above). Surely, the greatest value comes from entertaining both, while considering the possibilities of rejecting both and dismissing neither, meanwhile retaining the freedom to compare and investigate all.

It's also worth noting that I come away from this exercise feeling slightly clearer about the relationships between modernism and postmodernism and transcendence and immanence. It seems clearer to me now that modernism is and was always perceived to be transcendent or have transcendent tendencies, in that it believed in a kind of aspirant 'afterlife' or other world of progress and futurity which justified its aims, actions and trajectories, and constituted an important part of its belief system. Meanwhile, postmodernism, by comparison, acknowledges life, experience, the multiverse etc. as givens (or as a given) with no 'outside', no other worlds, progress, or futurity that can confidently be believed in, pursued or accounted for (though admittedly, this area of interest deserves expansion or development in a subsequent article).

Ultimately, I come away from this exercise more convinced that the main task and challenge of my (or our) life in art might simply be to 'stay alive' as a relevant, current and contemporary artist, thinker, writer and lecturer; to remain valid and to continue generously and conscientiously contributing and sharing. But to contribute and share means and requires being part of a community, and that is why any sense of rejection (as I experienced as the impetus for this work) can be so painful and even debilitating. We need to 'stay alive' both physically and, yes, in a more meta-physical manner too, i.e. keeping alive both individual and collective dreams, hopes and wishes, and exchanging these with the wider world, despite its apparent obliviousness; despite the bleakness of the times we live through; despite the looming shadow of death and disability that inevitably haunt us; despite the 'nay saying' obstacles and blocks laid, sometimes inexplicably, in our path, as we, nevertheless, pursue our own, barely illuminated paths and visions.<sup>32</sup>

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> This article is related to a longer and contemporary ‘sister’ article published contemporaneously in *The Journal of Writing in Contemporary Practice*. That article is titled *The Secret Life of Objects in the Immanent Art of Morandi*

*Or: How art shows us how to write about art if we only let it*.

<sup>2</sup> McMullan’s profile is mostly as an illustrator but the distinction between illustrator and painter is one that might be interesting to explore in terms of hierarchy, class, culture, media etc.

<sup>3</sup> We could unroll this history of associations back to the 1880s and Manet’s famous depiction of an exhausted looking barmaid, serving the night-clubbing bourgeoisie at ‘*A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*’.

<sup>4</sup> We might consider Walter Benjamin’s reference to: “... Godforsaken Sunday afternoons in the proletarian quarters of the great cities, ...” from ‘Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia’, in the collection *One Way Street* (Benjamin 2000: 229).

<sup>5</sup> See (Benjamin 1968: 220-1).

<sup>6</sup> See also the behaviour of adoring fans of royalty when close enough to a king, queen, prince, or princess to be able to hesitantly reach out and touch them.

<sup>7</sup> We could also refer here, to Walter Benjamin’s mentor and inspiration, Charles Baudelaire, who, in a poem titled *Loss of a Halo* ([1869] 1970: 94), created the image of a worthless halo, something that

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the modern poet could lose, shed, or eschew without fear of the consequences for the validity of his role in modernity. i.e., the modern (no longer Romantic) poet could get by without a certain inherited notion of the poet's virtue and piety.

<sup>8</sup> The practices of both Berthold Brecht and Samuel Beckett could also provide examples of an immanent art here.

<sup>9</sup> The Pre-Socratic philosophers were admired by Nietzsche for their consideration of the universe as a culmination of forces and energies, ungoverned, unformed and unrepresented by any overarching human (with Socrates as the apotheosis of the human here) conceit of deploying a transcendent logic and reason that would tame and govern an unruly universe by means of reasoned understanding and strategic debate.

<sup>10</sup> Pop songs are sometimes referred to as 'Three-minute operas'.

<sup>11</sup> During the 1990s I tried to find more of MacAdams' poems and was only able to trace a handful, to an archive in Camden, London. As for his biography, I gleaned the impression that he moved from the East Coast to the West Coast when he was older and became known for his political activism as much as for his poetry. I would like to find out more about this poet and to think more about why his poems seemed to reach out to me from within that collection of more famous writers.

<sup>12</sup> Here we might reference Ed Ruscha's artist's book *Thirtyfour Parking Lots in Los Angeles* (1967).

<sup>13</sup> Consider here Nietzsche's claim in his essay *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense* that '... if we could communicate with the mosquito, then we would learn that he floats through the air with the same self-importance, feeling within itself the flying centre of the world' (Kaufmann, W. 1982 pp. 42-46).

<sup>14</sup> <https://camdenartcentre.org/whats-on/mohammed-sami>

<sup>15</sup> See e.g. reference to Poiana, and a notion popularly celebrated in our key example here of the Estorick collection's latest exhibition of Morandi's work.

<sup>16</sup> See *MEI National Museum of Italian Emigration*: [https://www.museidigenova.it/en/mei-museum-italian-emigration#:~:text=The%20MEI%20%2D%20National%20Museum%20of,even%20before\)%20to%20the%20present.](https://www.museidigenova.it/en/mei-museum-italian-emigration#:~:text=The%20MEI%20%2D%20National%20Museum%20of,even%20before)%20to%20the%20present.)

<sup>17</sup> See (Canetti 1973).

<sup>18</sup> Re: 'Nietzschean manner', see our section here titled 'Giorgio Morandi'.

<sup>19</sup> *Freiwillige Selbstkontrolle (F.S.K)*, a postmodern German rock band that I encountered in the 1980s, comes to mind. Their name translates as 'Voluntary Self Control'.

<sup>20</sup> The tragic character of Bobby in *Saturday Night Fever* is faced with two-three fatal choices, obtaining an abortion for his girlfriend, marrying her, or dicing with death, which he does, and loses.

<sup>21</sup> <https://messumslondon.com/exhibitions/private-viewing-room-francesco-poiana/>

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<sup>22</sup> The invention of the term ‘post-Impressionism’ was key to Fry’s thesis presented as the 1910 exhibition ‘Manet the Impressionists’ held at Grafton Galleries, London (source: Courtauld Galleries, London).

<sup>23</sup> ‘When our sculptures work, they achieve the position of reducing the viewer to a state of absolute moral panic...they’re completely troublesome objects’ (Jake and Dinos Chapman, quoted in Fogle 1996: n.pag).

<sup>24</sup> <https://14gwangjubiennale.com/#aboutAnchor>

<sup>25</sup> ‘Still Point’ is a reference to Eliot’s *Four Quartets*, and to one of the best known and celebrated stanzas, an excerpt from the section titled *Burnt Norton*. ‘At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless; Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is, But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity, Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor towards, Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point, There would be no dance, and there is only the dance. I can only say, there we have been: but I cannot say where. And I cannot say, how long, for that is to place it in time.’ (Eliot 1994: p.15)

<sup>26</sup> <https://tessjaray.com/>

<sup>27</sup> I believe Dave Hickey has written on this theme of a traditional, modern, and postmodern forms of magic trick. See also Jonathan Allen and Sally O’Reilly’s 2009-10 *Magic Show* curation:

<http://www.jonathanallen.info/magicshowinfo.html> and (Allen and O’Reilly 2009)

<sup>28</sup> See (O’Kane 2017: 195–207)

<sup>29</sup> Howardena Pindell recently displayed interesting references to Ittens’ art in her Victoria Miro show of new works.

<sup>30</sup> Sigrid Holmwood recently contributed an article to this journal, see (Holmwood 2022).

<sup>31</sup> <https://sigridholmwood.co.uk/>

<sup>32</sup> ‘Nay saying’ and ‘nay sayers’ are habitual Nietzschean concepts referring to the antithesis of affirmation that he sees at the heart of art, and at the centre of his own ‘philosophy of life’.