

Before the After

Richard Wathen's work came to prominence in 2003-2005. At the time Wathen was living in his Hackney studio, more precisely painting through the night and sleeping during the day on an oxblood, Chesterfield armchair. Set within a brutalist building, the now demolished East End studio's front entrance consisted of a metal door which made a loud noise when shut, like an anvil struck with a hammer – and at the back – a large wooden door secured from the inside gave the impression of being barricaded to prevent the Visigoths from storming in. Built from unforgiving materials of concrete, metal and glass, the building was a 'greenhouse' in the summer and 'fridge-freezer' in the winter, and it was in this dystopian outpost at the turn of the millennium that Wathen first made paintings, the likes of which would eventually appear on the cover of *The New York Times* in 2005.

Most of these early works were painted at night employing a table-palette on wheels, where brushes lined up like players before a match. Most often after midnight the studio became a hive of activity with the sound of *The Fall* or Dylan cheering and chanting from the side lines. Before the seminal Morning Lane studio paintings, various experiments took place. The artist once made works which appeared to be painted by a robotic-machine; with involuntary paint splatters attacking the surface. Another earlier painting consisted of a surrealist inside view of Moby Dick's mouth, with a full living room set inside where teeth doubled up as chairs. A portrait of Frankenstein wearing a *Kraftwerk* red shirt and black tie, toyed with painting techniques and conceptual ideas the artist employs to this day, but the sentiment was different.

One day something changed in a way that cannot be fully explained and the artist began to re-enact paintings sourced from a collective pool of memories, in particular *Rococo* and European painting from the 1700's onwards, but there was a sense of inspiration having been found from painting reproductions on an old tin box or pages that fell from art history encyclopaedias. There was a warmth to the memories and associations being repurposed and less of John Currin's 90's canned laughter. Wathen dared to be sincere in a post-conceptual age.

The works invited to negotiate a familiarity with historical paintings and at first sight resembled in appearance some of the tropes and techniques of pictures from the past, however the canvasses clean unpainted edges indicated they were painted in the present day and their proximity to ideas of a painting tradition, also held a distance to 'traditional painting'. As a device the clean edges functioned like labels inadvertently left on an actor's coat, reminding us that this *olde worlde* production is taking place today.

In paintings like *Olive*, 2004 and *Gerty*, 2004 children began to appear often seen holding a rabbit conveying a sense of warmth, or more precisely the experience of warmth through haptic sensation; the artist inviting us to imagine what the warmth might feel like through this vicarious experience. Like Wathen's earlier Frankenstein/Kraftwerk painting; *Olive* and *Gerty* offered mixed readings, evoking shared childhood recollections of Peter Rabbit stories woven into the artist's own imagination; *Olive*'s grey hair offering an alternative narrative or unfamiliar ending to bedtime stories.

In paintings such as these, fictional figures have been placed in pictorial spaces reminiscent of photographic studios *faux* backdrops used in 'retro' photography, where the artist's own imagined figures posit their presence like painted *tableau vivants*. Employing oil painting

techniques to an exquisite high level of resolution, *Over the Moor*, 2003 is typical of Wathen's work from this period where the artist acts like a set designer; in this instance staging a central figure dressed in period costume, holding flowers nestling a butterfly. The painting heightens observational details such as the shape of eyebrows, fold of a sleeve or shadow cast by a hat, allowing the artist to play with the re-enactment of a historical source, but heightening idiosyncratic details to achieve a contemporary present day resonance. Whilst typical of this period *Over the Moor*, 2003 is distinct from other works because of a hazy mid space set within the figure, which suggests a portal to another dimension or place beyond the painting. One of the last paintings made in the Morning Lane studios, in May 2005 it featured on the cover of the New York Times in a review of an exhibition at Salon 94; fittingly marking a before and after moment in the artist's career and works produced thereafter.

In paintings like *Animalia*, 2006, various animals have been rounded up in a group portrait to pay homage for their contribution in the artist's production. Penguins, dogs, tropical birds, foxes and geese, pose in this improbable gathering of animals from different continents and time zones. A range of moods now begin to appear. *Elspeth*, 2008, is imbued with a theatrical or filmic darkness straight out of Stanley Cubrick's *The Shining*. *Lavinia*, 2009, curiously holds a glass; one of the first uses of a distinct new prop. In appearance, *Lavinia* is reminiscent of a character in M. Night Shyamalan's period movie thriller *The Village*. The artist does not quote the film or may have even seen this, but there is a sense that in this painting – much like in Shyamalan's film – we are being presented a staged illusion.

The Maker, 2009 presents a male figure of unclear age playing with a set of cards in front of him. The cards however have no faces and read instead like Lego building blocks; the artist possibly reflecting on the way his paintings have been constructed from facets of painting's past and legacy, a theme more explicitly expressed later in *Modern Painter*, 2011 where the painting's protagonist literally carries blocks of painting's history on his back.

The Eavesdropper 2009, shows a protagonist listening, or eavesdropping by a set of curtains. The painting looks deliberately staged as if made from a photograph taken in a room that is 'contemporary'. The room's lighting is bright and modern. Although the setting could be read as an actor about to go on stage, the colour of the small wall segment revealed on the right is reminiscent of a domestic wall painted with *Farrow & Ball* emulsion, and the curtains look like a thick set of expensive curtains rather than torn and worn theatre curtains. The curtains, wall and floor create also create a geometric counterpoint more *Bauhaus* than *Rococo* as we become increasingly aware of these dramas taking place in the present day.

The notion of the present day is stretched so that it includes what could be nostalgic recollections. *Violet*, 2012, has the guise of a hand-painted 1950's photograph of a knitwear model. The character has a half smile, somewhere in between tenderness but also patient model with better things to do, as they hold a flower which looks to have been handed to them to hold, and a yellow fabric draped over their shoulders to magically transform them into a make believe character from the past. The tricks played with props get more and more slight, and *Atticus*, 2012, could easily be wearing a polo shirt from River Island. Hat and pipe handed to him; *Atticus* looks less patient than *Violet* to play along with these shenanigans, and has an intense gaze as if saying how long is this going to take? All along there is a slight humour, not comical or that could provoke out loud laughter, but the humour you can only play with close friends; when teasing them or affectionately attributing them nicknames.

In Richard Wathen's journey a lot has changed in the works that lead us to this exhibition. The references no longer feel overtly historical. In fact they feel like timeless pictures because of their refusal to be placed in a particular time or space. Period props have disappeared and replaced by the minimalistic accessories more likely to be found in experimental theatre. Occasionally a flower, glass or surface support stands out, in stark contrast to the monolithic monochrome backgrounds the new figures are set within. With the exception of one diagonal intervention in one painting, most of the backgrounds are anchored by 90° right angle shapes, painted by masking-out with the same exactitude found previously only on the canvas' edges.

Many of the techniques employed in previous paintings remain but they are now employed to paint the figures that no longer exist 'elsewhere' but in an absolute 'non-space'. It's difficult to place the associations the colours now bring. One moment they seem like extracts from *Quattrocento* frescos and the next moment they evoke pastel's 70's nostalgia or early science fiction T.V.

The backgrounds are less dense and seem to be constructed with thinly applied layers which continue to be completed before the figures arrive. Greyed out and pale colour combinations no longer seem to correspond to specific times, places or paintings past and they are designed to evoke internal feelings. Opaque cobalts, and transparent purples, violets and turquoise glazes are set against pale yellows and pinks, conjuring feelings of stillness, and nostalgia.

The paint application seems to be quicker and more economical, but no less technical; the way a player uses skill and lightness of touch to run past the opposition. The application seems focused on finding only what is essential with more slight marks and layers being applied, and an increased use of lighter transparent glazes.

Figures now exist in a non-space and the models' poses stand in a new production with fewer props and period wardrobe changes. In its minimalism it is closer to Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. You can hear a pin drop. Occasionally the figures seem to be having a break and are captured during the interlude; resting, waiting or lying down. Unlike previous works where the majority of figures were upright; often looking at the viewer straight on, the new figures seem to be lost in their thoughts and more often avoid eye contact.

I am only sleeping, 2020 shows a figure set on a block appearing to be simultaneously awake and sleep, or appearing to hold a stillness intended into tricking us into thinking they are asleep. If we were to walk up to them they might turn to us a go "boo", but this never happens. The painting's 'portrait' orientation feels as if the figure was once upright standing on a plinth or stage, but now can be found at rest. It's like we see the after of a before. We are drawn to the emptiness of the space above – much like *Animalia* wanted to draw attention to a supporting cast of animals – here the artists shows the painting's backdrop and the way this expanse of colour is instrumental in creating the feeling through which we view the painting.

Although historical painting references are now secondary to the painting's making or reading, the figure's blanket in *I am only sleeping* evokes a Paul Nash landscape and momentarily we are lost in our own thoughts wondering on the improbability of these sketchy painterly marks offering the warmth of a real blanket, only to return to the painting's eye, which now seems larger than life; a portal into a non-place.

Silent Stories, 2020 and *Figment*, 2020, appear to return the figures back into action in this modernist drama. The director notes may read, “Next Day. Same Time. Same Place.” (from *Godot*’s Act 2), which the actors are asked to interpret until new stage directions are delivered. In *Figment* we are made aware of the figure’s face and blue hair, as if a stage light was catching what looks like a slightly askew synthetic wig. The figure in turn physically holds onto the space in front as the painting’s background begins to turn ‘solid’ and materialises before our eyes.

In many ways Beckett’s examination of the human condition may seem like a fitting sentiment in a current age of uncertainty, and the paradigm shifts which took place in 2020. Unlike Beckett’s theatre of the absurd however, Wathen’s new works produced for this exhibition at Mostyn Gallery, continue to affirm a love of painting and painting’s potentiality to be a bewildering force of the imagination. They immerse us, to mystify, perplex and enchant, showing here more than ever in the words of Albert Camus, that in the depth of every winter there lies an invincible summer within.

Juan Bolivar