



THE MEDIUM IS THE MESSAGE

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Curated by Michael Brennan

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PAINTING?

PAINTING IS DEAD

Don't worry – I'm not about to give this false and flimsy assertion any more oxygen. We've moved on. New technology is now a given. We're no longer completely overcome with oohs and aahs when some shiny new gadget promises to capture our image – or that of the world around us – and reproduce it for all to see. This is now the stuff of the 'everyday'. And there was no need to set out an either/or proposition either – to mark a new paradigm where the predecessor's role is made redundant or obsolete. If anything, photography exposed painting's hidden potential, veiled by the illusion of form and space that had hitherto characterised its usage.¹ The medium's ability to be just that, a medium – a vehicle for the artist's vision, no matter how intangible and abstruse – was freed from the shackles that bound it to optical fidelity. The proclaimed demise of painting was more akin to a resurrection – a rebirth rather than an end.

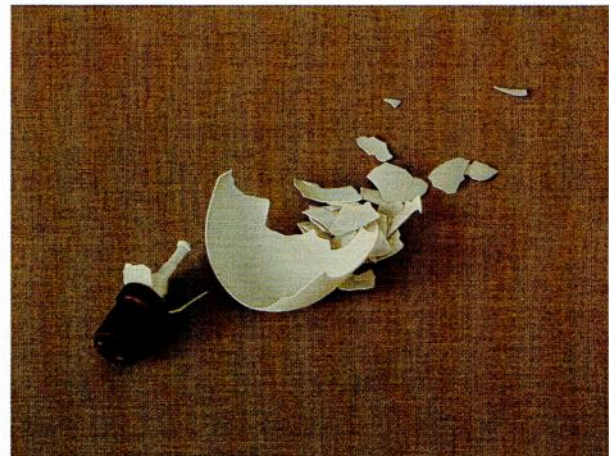
Photography wasn't the sole perpetrator. The death of painting has been declared – again and again – for the better part of two centuries. But photography drove home the first nail. It was the 19th century French painter, Paul Delaroché, who in 1839, on seeing an early daguerreotype is said to have ceded, 'from today, painting is dead.'² There no longer appeared to be a need to labour with pigment and brushes when a more faithful representation could be achieved with the press of a button (or exposure to light and heated mercury fumes as the case may have been). And then, in the space where new possibilities for the medium were imagined, there were those who believed they had seen this reinvention of painting through to its necessary end. In 1921 the Russian Constructivist, Alexander Rodchenko, executed a series of monochrome canvases titled *Pure Red Colour*, *Pure Blue Colour* and *Pure Yellow Colour*, in which the surfaces of the works were evenly treated with flat coatings of the respective pigments – the three colours from which all other colours can be made. Later Rodchenko claimed, 'I reduced painting to its logical conclusion and exhibited three canvases: red, blue, and yellow. I affirmed: this is the end of painting.'³ Similarly, in 1951, American Abstractionist, Robert Rauschenberg created his infamous *White Paintings*. In a complete reduction of content and with the elimination of gesture,⁴ Rauschenberg painted the surface of his canvases tonelessly and unchangingly white, arguably producing the most minimal work possible short of not applying any paint at all. There seemed to be nowhere else for painting to go.

But of course, there was. Artists continued to use paint. Jackson Pollock flung it, Yves Klein patented it and Andy Warhol applied it *en masse*. New works were created and new idioms embraced, extending existing ways of working, responding to and reflecting the social tenors of the times. Only now there was a sense that the

medium – its capacity, materiality and limitations – were known. The scope of painting as a tool or form had been laid bare. The incessant questioning of its relevance and credibility had failed to bring it down and the demise of painting was revealed as an overstatement and a lie. Painting persevered. But as with any aspersion, spread the word often enough and the smear will leave a stain – maybe even in the minds of the most ardent of devotees.

THE MEDIUM IS THE MESSAGE

The effect of a medium – the way it shapes relationships and human interactions – the transformative and correlative implications it has for 'the extensions of man'⁵ as Marshall McLuhan put it in the by-line for his text, *Understanding Media* – carries greater weight than what it is being used to say. The medium is the message – a phrase coined by McLuhan in the very same text – sets out that the effect of the delivery mechanism is quite independent of, and has farther-reaching consequence, than the content that is being conveyed. McLuhan's head was in the space of electronic media at the time – particularly television and the moving image – but the argument could be extended to all instruments of agency. He even went so far as to say that the electric light is a medium – 'a medium without a message, as it were,'⁶ but a medium nonetheless, as it 'shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action.'⁷ Like painting perhaps, its advent shifted the way we could see and describe the world, extending what could be achieved and understood under its glow. It changed human relationships forever. With this irrevocable displacement in mind, perhaps a different light is cast on Chris Bond's painting, *Light Fragments*, from 2011, where a broken bulb is photographically described on an empty field of clear-primed linen. Bond gives us the destruction of one medium captured through the application of another mimicking the appearance of a third.



It's interesting that one of the prevailing and more celebrated paradigms in contemporary figurative painting is the emulation of the photograph. Fidelity to appearance has re-emerged as a favoured means of capturing a subject in much contemporary painting. But that's not the full extent of it either. Amongst those working in this space there is a subset of artists whose subject matter is the stuff of the work itself. The object depicted is the medium. Paintings of paint; paintings of print; paintings of photographs of plasticine sculptures of... you get the picture. The plasticity of malleable material, or perhaps the flatness of commercial print, is exactly reproduced as an object in and of itself. This is different to mid-20th Century Abstraction's attestation that 'paint is paint and surface is surface,'¹⁸ but in some ways it is also a kind of abstraction of its own – abstraction and representation simultaneously.

Abstraction has never been a simple definition to pin down or parameter to fix. On the one hand, it has become the easy catchall for images that deviate from the figurative, the representational and the recognisably real. On the other hand, it might also refer to a process of drilling down – of looking at a quality or detail of something larger, something removed from the lexicon or landscape in which it is most readily encountered. In the context of this exhibition, this double bind is perhaps most visible in the lush, almost palpable paintings of Amanda Marburg. Marburg's canvases magnify and painstakingly reproduce soft and sinuous plasticine forms. Squeezed between fingers and squashed beneath thumbs, the plasticity of the stuff has been pulled, twisted, pressed and stretched for no effect and towards no end other than the realisation and emphasis of its own materiality and form. It is non-objective in its project and appearance, while also a supple, somatic object of resistance and give. Both states of being are captured by Marburg in her exacting transposition of the colour and light that describe its surface and shape.

Similarly, Juan Ford gives us astonishingly illusory depictions of painterly media and form. The contradiction he posits has pools of pigment facing off against meticulous renderings of native Australian flora – so realistic you'd expect to encounter the scent of both eucalypt and linseed in the air. Claggy and congealing rivulets of paint cling to branches, stems and leaves. Stalactitical shapes bud from drips and spills as gravity stretches a skin that holds back the liquid beneath. The medium is captured as both a substance in itself and a coating conforming to an underlying shape. Ford's project is to confront the absurdity of pursuing the re-creation of nature on canvas with brush and paint. In doing so he reveals – while still tempting us to believe – the conjury and sleight of hand that antecedent artists used to dupe their audiences into accepting they were looking into a landscape taking up three-dimensional space.

Much like the electric light, the advent of the printing press and the organisation of its product into a single volume changed the

experience of information, communication and the ascription of truth forever. Books provided a platform for the re-telling of stories – a medium specifically designed for the sharing of secondary experiences. Replication imbued a text with a sense of authority, but also a condemnation of its contents to history – to a time now passed. Chris Bond engages with this history – the history of painting – with his finely reproduced dust jackets from actual Jackson Pollock monographs. More than simply referencing, however, he writes himself into this timeline, poising his highly controlled and refined approach to painting in contrast to the gestural turmoil that typified Pollock's life and work. Bond re-creates these book covers at 1:1 scale, only without the words that identify their subject and author. Devoid of title and text, Bond reduces them to formal arrangements – abstractions – but abstractions that precisely imitate real world graphic compositions as they appear printed on the flat paper dust jackets of carefully selected art history texts. The works in this exhibition pictorially describe three different aspects of Pollock's mythology – the man, his work and his intertwined medium and method. The traces of the passing of time – creases, tears and tattered paper edges – have also been expertly painted as part of the figurative representation. These exist only as illusion and artifice. This is all artful fabrication – a construction – reminding us that a book should not be judged by its cover.

Like the death of painting, print media is today undergoing an onslaught, with constant speculation about its end. Its advocates argue that its physicality – the act of actually holding a book, turning its pages, maybe even marking its text – is an experience that can't be replicated with electronic media. Reading a book is an intimate, personal encounter. A line of spines along a bookshelf says just as much about the reader as they do about the contents of the books. Victoria Reichelt's paintings embrace this idea, presenting stacked bookshelves as portraits of those who have collected and mined their pages. Reichelt's object of attention – like Bond – is the medium of print. It is reproduced in her paintings with photographic accuracy, however her forms are multiple and sit framed within an illusionistic space. Art books also feature heavily in Reichelt's paintings. The fact that the subjects of her 'portraits' are often artists themselves goes some way towards explaining this. However there is also an investigation of narrative and history at play here more generally – a questioning of how these individual art practices – including Reichelt's herself – are positioned in relation to all that has come before. The history of art and the canon of painting is considered and represented through Reichelt's own photo realist painting practice.

In a similar vein, Eolo Paul Bottaro and Sam Leach are artists working within realism whose depictions reference and reproduce compositional structures from earlier art historical epochs. It might be a stretch to say that the posing of a group of figures with precedent, or replicating the lay of a landscape in relation to a golden mean,

is recreating the likeness of a 'thing' per se, but it is definitely being employed by these artists as a subject, and a subject that evokes the canon in which the artist is endeavouring to place their own practice. Eolo Paul Bottaro's *Pactolus* positions a group of figures in the centre of an ambitious canvas, evoking a composition created by Michelangelo in his sketch of the deposition of Christ from the cross.⁹ Bottaro draws a line from Michelangelo to himself by populating the group with figures from his own world, playing out a narrative from contemporary art and life. The backdrop for this party is the bluestone façade and water wall of Melbourne's own National Gallery of Victoria. The representation of this context again raises the question of art history and Bottaro's own place in this ongoing tale.

With similar intent, Sam Leach's intimately scaled circular canvases reference historical works and the atmosphere and compositional structure typical of 17th Century Dutch painting.¹⁰ Reconstructing these spaces with the subtle incursion of rectilinear surfaces and planes, Leach too layers a contemporary reading and adds a new proposition to the annals of art history. His highly finished resin surfaces hermetically seal the past, while his conflicting art historical juxtapositions bring with them a new commentary around painting's recurrent themes. The way we think of painting – its journey from illusionistic representation to modernist reduction – and a consideration of its role today, each play out amid other philosophical musings about life, existence and the universe.

While their works are multi-layered and complex, exploring a range of concerns, there seems to be a degree of self-consciousness and reflexivity at play in the practices of these six artists. Perhaps part of it is doubt and second-guessing – questioning and interrogating painting's relevance today. Maybe it's taking control of the conversation and reasserting painting's place in the field of contemporary art. Either way, it seems these artists are working with paint while false claims of its death echo in their ears.

The figurative representation of material and process might be thought of as reading like an art historical 'selfie' – proof that you were there, but also – importantly and knowingly – turning your back on the spectacle and stepping outside of the story so as not to implicate yourself should your art history decide that it's not really that cool – that painting has finally kicked the bucket. It's decidedly postmodern. But then there's an air of confidence and maturation about the handling of this idea too. This act of creative contortion might well be critiquing and questioning the story of painting and the role it has played, but there's more than just unpicking and self-referential scepticism taking place here. It's a project being undertaken with purpose. Another chapter is being composed.

Michael Brennan

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¹ Usage in the Western tradition.

² Ziff, N., *Paul Delaroche: A Study in Nineteenth-Century French History Painting*, Garland Publishing, New York, 1977.

³ Gaiger, J. & Wood, P., *Art of the Twentieth Century: A Reader*, Yale University Press, London, 2003, p. 101.

⁴ Dennison, L. & Spector, N., *Singular Forms (sometimes repeated): Art from 1951 to the Present*, Guggenheim Museum, New York, 2004.

⁵ McLuhan, M., *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1964.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁸ A phrase credited to New York based Art Critic, Clement Greenberg.

⁹ Brown, M., *Eolo Paul Bottaro: Olo*, Catalogue Essay, James Makin Gallery, Melbourne, 2011

¹⁰ Craven, O., 'Sam Leach: The Science of Painting', Artist Profile, pp. 56-63, 2013

¹¹ *Ibid.*

IMAGE:

Chris Bond, **Light Fragments** (2011)

Oil on linen on board

Private Collection

Courtesy of the artist, Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney, and

Nellie Castan Projects, Melbourne

CHRIS BOND

Chris Bond, **Phthalo Blue** (2012)
La Trobe University Art Collection. Purchased 2013
Courtesy of the artist, Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney, and Nellie Castan Projects, Melbourne

OVERLEAF

Chris Bond, **Greenish Umber** (2012)
Private Collection
Courtesy of the artist, Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney, and Nellie Castan Projects, Melbourne

Chris Bond, **Olive** (2012)
Private Collection
Courtesy of the artist, Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney, and Nellie Castan Projects, Melbourne

Chris Bond, **Twin Set** (Pollock) (2008)
Private Collection
Courtesy of the artist, Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney, and Nellie Castan Projects, Melbourne



