

Now and Then

Graham Crowley



Light Industry

1968 WAS ONE HELL of a year to go to art school. Western European society was in ferment. In the UK there were two art schools that were synonymous with what became referred to as 'a cultural revolution', they were Hornsey and St. Martin's, both in London.

I applied to Foundation Studies at St. Martin's. Once there, I became overwhelmed by the sense of possibility. The excitement was palpable. Having completed my Foundation Course, I immediately chose to stay at St. Martins and decided to apply to study Painting.

When I told my parents the news, my father replied, "Why would anyone want to go to a place like that? Those places are full of communists and queers." At which point I realised I'd made the right decision. This would be my life.

I soon discovered that not only were we taught to draw – but more importantly – to think. The dominant discourse was conceptualism, accompanied by a constant chorus of 'painting is dead'. What no one had reckoned with was an emergent and overwhelming sense of empowerment and dissent. We'd learnt not only to identify 'group think' when we heard it – but how to negotiate it and move on. Emerging out of this heady environment was not only a new approach to painting – but a new form of critical methodology. One that transcends approval, taste and mere opinion. Which meant that if one was serious about abandoning the desire for institutional approval. One would paint! Strange as it may seem, for a moment, painting became counter cultural. In the midst of so much hyperbole and high octane rhetoric, the study and practice of painting simultaneously offered a sense of cultural continuity along with the 'healthy' doubt engendered by scepticism. I'd 'learnt' to become a contrarian. It would be this approach to the conventions of late modernism that would spur me towards appropriation – the primary signifier of post modernism. The flower paintings in this exhibition were instrumental in this.



Kerry Moon

At last I could face down the constant worry that I wasn't an 'original artist'. In fact it was at this point that I chose to identify as a painter rather than an artist.

If the 'revolutionary' fervour of '68 had taught me anything it was the realisation that art now had the potential to be everywhere and anything. Painting was not only a pursuit but a discourse. The term artist would now become an accolade.

Like many others, I came to realise that postmodernism was unsustainable. It was a transitional phase. Painters over the last thirty or forty years have had to address the unprecedented absence of any 'dominant culture'. The result is a healthy diversity in the practice and discourse that is contemporary painting. I also feel that I've finally 'faced down the tyranny of ambition'. Which rather ironically, is due in part, to my conceptual 'roots' which have survived to inform my practice as a painter – a post-conceptual painter.



Joanna Whittle – a reply

What occurs to me is that you developed this understanding of dissent and that painting could become dissent and this became a legacy because this thinking was passed on to your students. You brought it with you and made us all feel that painting could always be a part of this discourse of dissent or questioning. Subversion through the language of, and the dismantling of, tradition. And appropriation which I think moves through so much of our work, this conversation puncturing layers of time, history and concept. Stepping into our current discourse.

We spoke about the flower paintings when we spoke the other week and I remember that moment of seeing them. The clarity of their conversation and their elegiac surfaces, themselves punctured and flecked with time and interference. There is, and has always been, something about your work in which the surface of the painting shimmers and becomes permeable, be this visually (optically), emotionally (phenomenologically too) or conceptually and almost at once and in the same moment, becomes completely itself, back to surface and materiality.