

... same
as
it ever
was

Painting at Chelsea
1990—2007

Foreword

In curating this exhibition, it's been my intention to reflect something of the collective energy and creativity that characterised painting at Chelsea College of Art and Design in the period 1990—2007. With almost 50 artists represented, the exhibition is extensive in both the range of work exhibited in the three spaces and the age of the artists. It cannot, however, take in all the visiting and part-time staff that contributed to the dynamic of the painting course – artist tutors like Kaye Donachie, Gareth Jones, Dawn Mellor, Nicholas May; visitors like Matthew Higgs or the late Stuart Morgan. Of the many remarkable alumni who could justifiably be in an exhibition such as this, I have had to make a very small selection. Put simply, it is a subjective, idiosyncratic selection and reflects only those aspects of the Chelsea experience with which I have felt

personally connected. I can only hope that this early apologetic note will serve to re-direct any spleen elsewhere.

Around three quarters of the artists in this exhibition are tutors, with the remainder being Chelsea alumni. This simple categorisation begins to fracture, however, as one realises that some current artist tutors are also graduates of the Chelsea undergraduate course – Martin Westwood and David Musgrave, for example – and some, such as Jo Bruton and Tim Renshaw, studied on the postgraduate course over ten years ago. Many Chelsea tutors, past and present, studied at or taught at the art colleges that formed the London Institute, now University of the Arts London.

Before the entire College moved to the Millbank site in 2005, the undergraduate painting course was housed in studios in the early 1960s purpose-built art school at Manresa Road; the postgraduate painting course was situated in old London Board school buildings at Bagley's Lane, close to Chelsea Harbour. I mention the physical space at Manresa Road, not merely to be nostalgic, but because the arrangement of studios and where they were situated in the building had a strong influence on the way the

course was structured and how the teaching took place. The sheer size of the undergraduate course – there were usually around 90 students specialising in painting – meant that subdivisions of studio space, staff and students were a structural necessity if we were to continue to promote the rich variety of practice and thought that we aspired to. Thus the salaried staff – Brian Dawn Chalkley, Mali Morris, Trevor Sutton, Roger Ackling, Jeff Dennis – were frequently responsible for a suite of studio spaces and a group of students; it is to these staff, and the regular visiting tutors, that the students owe their greatest debt, as I do. The geographical location of the studios came to represent, in broad terms, the sort of work found therein; thus work, and students, might be designated 'Third Floor' or 'Fourth Floor' or 'Old Life Room', for example. I was amused to hear, some years later, that many students had little idea as to why we bothered with these designations, but thought it best just to indulge us....

This structure ran, with modifications, for many years and was broadly successful in that it allowed the individual student a form of identity within a smallish group, whilst promoting a kind of aesthetic or critical rivalry – or perhaps heated

discussion is a more accurate term – across the painting area.

I can't begin to thank all the staff – tutorial, technical and support – and all the students sufficiently for their contribution to the lumpy dynamic that is the pursuit of painting, but my time at Chelsea was always interesting, sometimes exhausting, never dull and frequently amusing.

Professor Clyde Hopkins

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Recently, while looking at some photographs from the mid 1960s of the Painting Department at Chelsea School of Art, as it was then known, I was struck by the almost emblematic 'cool' of these grainy black and white images. Almost straight out of Antonioni (who in fact visited the school during the filming of *Blow Up*) – the paintings in these images are predominantly op, pop or hard edge abstraction – a veritable lexicon of painterly styles predominant during that decade. Arriving at the same institution, now renamed Chelsea College of Art and Design in 1989, I found an atmosphere far removed from the 'Kings Road whiz kids' of the those 1960s pictures. Times had changed. Painting had changed. The brash confidence of 1960s painting, of modernism itself, had changed. Shaken by pressures on all sides, from a voracious and burgeoning art market economy,

as well as a growing critical community who demanded a broader cultural analysis often outside of painting, it could no longer have that unified confidence. But two things stick in my mind as I think back to my first step into the working machinery of the College: the immense feeling of creative 'electricity', and a sense of – though I will have to qualify this below – authenticity. Both of these aspects are a testament to the work of staff and students at the College, and the ethos that was created by both. I had worked in various provincial art schools in the 1980s, and in my opinion much of the painting produced in these institutions suffered from either too close an eye on 'flavour of the month' determined by the art market, or forceful dominant role models within the institution itself. At Chelsea neither of these pitfalls were allowed to take root. Not that there was a lack of dominant characters there; on the contrary, it was full of them. But rather than wielding the stylistic 'power of influence' individualistically, the model at Chelsea was to allow various discursive fields to be generated, which energised the students and allowed them to construct their own sense of practice. In such an atmosphere it wasn't simply 'the next big thing' that mattered, but rather the depth of

one's individual practice and the kind of expanded chronologies or synchronicities that might contextualise that practice.

In 1990, when Clyde Hopkins took over the helm in painting, he had inherited a system of studio groupings at Manresa Road that appear to have been in place for some time. Studios were rationalised across two floors in the building: the Third and Forth floors. Both floors were run by different groupings of staff. In many ways this demarcation had a remote genealogical relation to a previous figurative/abstract divergence that had, thankfully, by this time complicated itself and was certainly no longer about those polarities whatsoever. While many felt that because of this complication the 'mysterious floor system' had run its course and was no longer useful, Clyde, perhaps at the time surprisingly, held on to it. I think he recognised that it provided a useful tension in terms of the territories of painting, and that this could work positively for both staff and students rather than negatively; but more on that later. On the MA course, smaller as it was, the painting specialism was treated more homogeneously, and later adopted – as the BA course only recently has – a more 'generalist fine art' approach. On the MA, one felt, as is natural,

the presence of the art market and the current 'scene' much more palpably. But for the first half of the 1990s, painting on the MA was generally large scale and physical, and perhaps only obliquely relevant to what was happening in the galleries.

In retrospect, painting in the 1990s was pulled in so many directions that it is difficult to pin down. It was a rapid turnover from the YBAs through to a kind of new internationalism, as exemplified in shows like *Unbound: Possibilities in Painting at the Hayward* curated by Adrian Searle, and on, by the middle of the decade, to the first rustlings (at least at the College) of what was later to be known as 'relational aesthetics.' Although not exclusively painting, each of these positions made their mark on painting at Chelsea. Pluralism has had its critics, and certainly the 1990s and the present decade appear pluralist decades par excellence. The danger is, as Hal Foster pointed out years ago, that 'Art of many sorts is made to seem more or less equal – equally (un)important.'¹ We could argue that this state of affairs is also exacerbated by a kind of art boom, first felt in the dark days of 1980 with New Image painting and an inflated art market that reflected the reckless economic

strategies of the day. This marked what seemed at the time a crisis, a violent split of post-modernism from the modernist canon. Many conceptual artists metamorphosed, like Kafka's Gregor Samsa, overnight, into fully-fledged painters. And while many conversions took place, confusion reigned as to the meaning of this upheaval; was it a real paradigm shift? Was it playful distance from the stringencies of late modernism? Was it a market-driven cop-out? I remember these conversations being endlessly played out. By 1990, they were a distant memory, and the 'faggy-caveman' staged angst of Schnabel and Kiefer had long been replaced by the corporate gloss of a Jeff Koons. For many painters, at the time, the dominant models were two artists who had been on the periphery of the trumpeted 'return to painting': Sigmar Polke and Gerhard Richter. They were stalwarts of painting rather than fly-by-nights, and both had a remarkable fluid and critical relation to the image and representation without jettisoning completely the traditions of modernity. Theory also had transformed the relationship to art-making in general. Some would argue that it had become smothered by it, and the mid 1980s saw theoretical application

as a necessary 'ingredient'. Perhaps it was, at the time, simply a fashionable about-face from the neo-expressionism dominant earlier in that decade. And certainly, there was a fair share of embarrassing 'conceptual painting' by the late 1980s/early 1990s – whereby some thematic from a European theorist would be badly 'sello-taped' on, or where the painting became a diagrammatic illustration pointing to a general cultural issue. But, engagement with theory, if absorbed and not used simply as an 'alibi' or apology, not only enriches, but transforms the object of study. Painting boundaries have been expanded by theoretical concerns, sometimes indirectly, rather like the culture of painting had ingested aspects of the theoretical climate, with some artists addressing it more consciously or directly than others. Adrian Searle, writing in the 1994 catalogue for *Unbound: Possibilities in Painting*, suggested: 'In the face of doomy presentiments concerning the loss of language and power – the loss of affect – [we have] a sense of language used with more self-consciousness and even awkwardness. Instead of new movements or revivals a more heterodox way of thinking, a greater diversity.'² Again we end up with pluralism, but as Searle suggests, not the

numbing, greying effect that Foster described, but an active positioning of diverse voices. The *Unbound* exhibition brought forth Raoul de Keyser, Luc Tuymans, Peter Doig and Jessica Stockholder, each of whom would add new perspectives to that culture of painting. Together with Marlene Dumas amongst many others, each of these artists would also refigure the possibility that a direct approach to materials need not be a regression to an unthinking position of 'natural expressionism'. As Searle noted, melancholy, or even a bitter or mordant sensation can permeate these works; but this is a positioning within history and an expanded sense of a chronological depth that can be tapped into via the medium of paint, rather than any individual's sensation or feeling. Over the last ten years, this play with the various temporal dimensions of painting has become more dominant, regardless of the approach or stylistic concern. Historical surpluses and residues are often a product or starting point of various investigations for a whole range of painting today. On the other hand, seventeen years of painting practice is still something being formed historically, and what might seem the dominant issues now may well fade into oblivion. How an art institution

registers these shifts of the art world and acts upon them is yet another question: Does it mirror them? Does it ignore them? Does it actively attempt to participate in them?

Chelsea, I have always felt, had the right answers here. In many ways it cut across the questions above, in that it aimed, and still does aim, to create a sense of autonomous practice: informed, educated and yet independent. I think it was this sense that I termed earlier 'authentic' – one felt that students inhabited a practice – whatever direction it might look in. And this also reflected the way the teaching operated. To go back to the floor system on the BA at Manresa Road, it operated in two directions but also had enough overlaps to create a coherent whole. With the Third floor, it could be argued that it followed more traditional notions of colour or pigment articulating a surface in order to form an image or a painted object. On the Fourth floor, the interface with the object was more phenomenological, and often led to an expanded notion of painting and installation. Both encouraged thinking directly about and through materials, and enabled students to be alert to what they had done and how they had arrived there. Teaching on both floors was rigorous and yet also open to poetic speculation.

It was never 'school-teacherly' and allowed for a great respect between both staff and students, with staff often genuinely intrigued or surprised by solutions and methods adopted by the students. It became an incubator for artists, in that it generated personal and collective discourses that no doubt would be come a touchstone for professional life. Again this was enhanced by the diversity of the approaches of the staff: Roger Ackling's unswerving investigative logic; the late Noel Forster's benevolent anarchy; Trevor Sutton's psychological insights; Mali Morris' delight in discovery; Brian Chalkley's probing perceptiveness; Andrew Stahl's and later Jeff Dennis' solid pragmatism; the list could go on and on, and all headed by Clyde Hopkins' openness of spirit. This diverse collective allowed frank discussion of differences, of personal crises and strong aesthetic or even ideological positions amongst staff and students. It also equipped students with analytical skills for the competing narratives and confusing array of work out there in the world, as well as a strong sense of self-sufficiency important for their departure from the College.

Theoretical and historical studies were also important for this process. At Chelsea on the BA, this input was run by Chris Yetton, who had

long championed the possibility of developing not only an in-depth understanding of the diversity of fine art practices of the past, but also the experience of the current shifting ground of contemporary work in conjunction with a real possibility for experimentation and original research. It was a creative environment, allowing students to develop a critical perspective on their work and that of others, while at the same time allowing them to go beyond the limitations of their own taste or predilections, which were constantly challenged. Again it was a diverse team, with a variety of perspectives: Martha Kapos, Neil Cummings, Maria Walsh, and later Andrew Chesher, David Musgrave, Jo Melvin and Bernice Donszelmann, each contributed to the painting course in different ways and with contrasting interests. Sometimes bolstering students' concerns, sometimes initiating a healthy questioning. Neil Cummings would often raise the serious question of why another object should be added to the world of things. So this was far from an academic bolt-on to studio practice; it breathed the same air.

By the late 1990s I remember conversations with students where they were suddenly much more conscious of their audiences. Tutorials in

theory might well bring up Situationism or Fluxus, movements that were suddenly enjoying a new vogue, appearing vivid once again for a new generation, who were rediscovering, for better or worse, politics. Painting at Chelsea had always been a loose assemblage of activities, and certainly no line or boundary was drawn at installational, object-based or even moving-image work. Several painters became involved, as the new decade was ushered in, with contemplating the social structures that build a painting culture, and indeed an institution; for a while there was an art school within an art school initiated by a group of painting students, each giving presentations to themselves, organising, or rather re-organising, their own education. One member of this group, Daryl Stadlen, curated a series of exhibitions of long lost student work that had been revealed, rather like an archaeological excavation, from storage passages behind walls. The freedom of working with these anonymous relics and their juxtaposition was, in fact, a revelation. Such activities have become much more common and Chelsea has always, to its credit, encouraged reflexive practices without any prejudice to, or against, the outcome.

Within the broader art world, painting is still present, but seems no longer to possess any need to regroup itself together for the next 'revival.' It feels more dispersed, holding its own against and within other mediums. While some might feel this is a loss of its specificity, of its reduction to an object amongst other objects, it could also be argued that it is in fact a new found freedom, a break from the ghetto of the token 'painting show.' After Chelsea's move to the Millbank site in 2005, a new structuring was necessary and, given the current climate, it was inevitable that painting as a separate entity would be amalgamated into a general fine art provision. And this opens another chapter, perhaps a significant marker for change. Under Clyde's leadership at Chelsea an incredibly lively and versatile painting department was allowed to develop its own dynamic. If this sounds like a 'golden age' then, yes, history always prematurely sanitises its object; and there were tensions, struggles, and the daily graft of politics – of survival no less. All of this points to the presence of a community, and certainly this is what painting at Chelsea represented, in the fullest sense. This exhibition brings together the work of staff and ex-students as a testament to that sense of

community, as well as a homage to a spirit that continues, despite (or even because of) all the changes and upheavals, and remains 'same as it ever was...'

David Ryan 2007

1 Hill Foster, *Recordings*, 1986, Bay Press, California, p. 15
 2 Adrian Squire, *Unbound: Possibilities in Painting*, 1994, Hayward Gallery Publications, p.20