Painting as a Function of People and the City

A Conversation between Painters: Frank Creber and Agnieszka Mlicka

The proposition of 'painting as...' suggests that painting has a function beyond its aesthetic autonomous form. While the city continues to be a source of inspiration for painters in the 21st century, the conversation between Agnieszka Mlicka and Frank Creber reveals a reciprocal relationship in which painting in return responds to the urban condition and functions within its physical and social networks: as conversation, as public art, as place-making, as politics, as urban composition, as catalyst, as didactics, and as experience. The artists met on the 27th of July 2011 to discuss the many ways in which their painting practice contributes to the city and its people.

Painting as Conversation

Frank: I met the manager of a hotel in Dalston today, because they were interested in my works. I showed them this portfolio of my paintings, but it turned out that they were only interested in showing the A6 postcards.

Agnieszka: Strange, as you would expect a hotel to want to fill the walls. These drawings are interesting though, because as cards they don't have a clearly defined message. The cards show groups of people presumably in an urban setting, because the figures are engaged in ambiguous activities just like on a busy street. Does the hotel intend to frame all these cards in order to hang them on the walls?

Frank Creber, Cards (various images), 2011

F: No, they want to display them simply as cards in a stand. I think that the images worked well for what the hotel wanted to achieve, which is to bring people in from the street. Passers-by could be easily attracted by these drawings, because they are accessible.

A: What about the cards that resemble digital images, but which also seem to contain drawn elements? I am interested in your question about the relationship between drawing and painting, which has a strong presence in both our practices. I think, however, that the conversation between mediums has moved on, and is now taking place between traditional techniques and digital technology. Do you consider these cards to be drawings, paintings, or rather digital artworks?

F: They are neither in a way. These figures exist as ink drawings, and the background exists as a pencil drawing, which I did out on location.

A: And you merged these together on the computer, as a montage?

F: Yes, on the computer it is possible to move the figures around on the background, as a transparency. I developed ways to bring together separate drawings of figures quite early on, like ten years ago, by using collage and photocopy. Nobody taught me this, which is why I had to invent ways of drawing narratives. I looked at the past Masters like Poussin or Breughel, and got some clues about how to arrange and compress figures together. This is one possible way of doing it on the computer.


Frank Creber, Bromley by Bow, 2010

A: Is this also the way you work with your large scale paintings, into which you collage the figures? They don't reveal that the figures come from separate sources.

F: There are different ways in which I develop the composition. For example, in this work which is called 'Bromley by Bow', the figures are quite distinct and separate. They are quite static, in a sense, and slightly iconic or motif-like.

A: Indeed, they are spread out equally over the page, isolated from one another, and the only connection to the background is their shadow. This makes the image look rather unearthly.

F: They are positioned against the painted backdrop, but there is no direct connection between the figures and the backdrop. I wanted to create a structure for the narrative as an open system. In the history of Western painting, we frequently come across groups of figures that are engaged in one unifying action, a visualisation of the classic idea of the story that takes place in one place within one continuous moment of time. There are exceptions to this, for example, where one key figure appears several times in the painting to show various stages of the story. In the painting 'Bromley by Bow', I was exploring this idea of a group of figures alongside the notion that the figures were somehow disconnected, like in a community where disparate individuals live in the vicinity, rub shoulders with each other, but have separate lives. And then there is another way that I've made groups of figures, as in the painting 'Royal Docks', in which they are a bit more organically involved and probably more connected to the landscape.


Frank Creber, Royal Docks, 2007

A: Here, the figures are fully immersed in the city. This painting is currently in the exhibition 'Romanticism in the Urban Environment' in Manchester, right? I find it very strange that the hotel wasn't interested in these paintings, especially because they are about East London. On the other hand, hotels are difficult places to show artworks. You set an interesting question by asking how the community can relate to painting. In this case, first of all it evoked a conversation with the hotel management whether to display these paintings, and secondly, it might start a conversation with the general public. These

conversations would be very different if the paintings were exhibited in a gallery. Do you prefer to show in galleries or in spaces with a different function?

F: I think it's good to show in different contexts, rather than just always pitching it for a proper gallery space. So even though this project was very small, there was an invitation from the hotel and I thought it was worth the effort to have a little connection with the people on the street, because lots of people will come past. I am curious that in your series of works about cities you chose not to include the figure, or they appear as a fragmentary presence, only noticeable after some time of looking at the painting.

A: The figure is superfluous, because the viewer becomes part of the work. Especially in my earlier installations, the aim is to stimulate a reflection on how architects influence our life through architecture, by using the space in conjunction with the two-dimensional work. This is probably a different kind of conversation than your audience would have. Maybe I try to start a discussion, whereas your work evokes a more intuitive response? Also, in regards to your paintings, their functioning depends upon the image content, whereas your murals function more as physical objects. These are two slightly different ways in which the community can relate to painting.

F: I think the paintings are quite accessible images, because they have a narrative content. They are illustrative, and therefore they can stand on their own in different contexts. During the conversation I had with the hotel manager, her father came over and said: "No, we don't need any more cards in the window. It's not a card shop". She was arguing that it's good, because people would be intrigued and come in, and because I was a local artist depicting local places. They might buy a card and start a conversation.

Painting as Public Art

A: Whereas the function of the cards is to increase contact between people, the paintings you make during the workshops with the community seem to function beyond conversation. Can you tell me more about the way painting functions as part of your community projects?

F: I think it's an important part of my practice to be making artworks with people as well as my own paintings. It is not a totally separate activity as it probably informs my painting, and certainly my painting would inform how I do community art practice. For example, this is a mural which I did in Nicaragua with some teenagers from London, together with local teenagers. They do a lot of mural painting there. It was part of an urban regeneration project called Funarte, set up 15 years ago in Estelli, north of Manauagua, to teach children how to do mural painting as part of understanding citizenship in the context of their war-torn country.

Frank Creber, Urban Regeneration Project Funarte, 1975-present

A: So the murals function here as social work, but rather than being imposed upon the youth, it takes place through their own involvement. As such, painting becomes interactive, and the

process of making the product will probably have more importance than the final image. Were the results of these workshops tangible, aside of the visual outcome?

F: They created a charity where children from the street would come in on a Saturday and they would have a hundred children painting on paper on the floor. They were telling their own stories or hearing stories and painting these. Over the years, they would run these drop-in workshops which were open door, and therefore very accessible, alongside building a team of young painters who painted actual murals in the town, building up their skills to create a portfolio. These young people are now in their late twenties, early thirties, employed and running the mural project.

A: Aside from their own personal stories, did the collaboration between the children also start a discussion about the urban condition they live in?

F: When these children where interacting with each other there was a language barrier, because the children from London were not speaking much Spanish, except for one girl who spoke a little bit. So there was quite a lot of translation, but also a connection which was not about language.

A: I guess a visual language can in such a situation take over and create a relationship beyond words, which is especially effective in collaborative mural paintings. Mural painting has an embedded history in Central and South America, much more than here in the West where we build upon a Western tradition of painting. Over there, everyday life takes place outdoors, so I assume art follows the same pattern. Their public art has not necessarily the same connotation as our 'public art'.

F: Dan Hopewell, who is one of the founders of this project and now works as a Director at the Bromley by Bow Centre, is of the view that *this is* Art, that public art has the most currency, rather than have an obscure meaning that confuses the majority of people.

A: So in his opinion, painting has to relate to the community and the community has to relate to painting through a direct and intuitive relationship? Here in the West, such a natural affiliation has disappeared through the division of art into high art and public art. There is this preconception that the wider community doesn't understand the art shown in galleries, while the art elite disapproves of art for the streets. In my PhD research, I explore the potential of painting to move outside of the gallery and to function within another field, without falling outside of the discipline of fine art. I think that the meaning of painting is very fixed. This relates to your question about 'place-making', and whether artists can use painting in relationship to communities in order to 'make places', just like regeneration agencies claim to do in the East End of London. Painting becomes a functional tool then, reaching beyond its own autonomy.


Frank Creber, Children's games mural, 2009

F: I think that is true of this mural, which is about children's games. It created a connection which was beyond the language barrier. As part of a preparatory art workshop, the children made drawings about games they played at home, both in the UK and in Nicaragua. This was fun,

with a lot of play acting and a bit of translation during which ideas were exchanged. Children's games are physical and about body language, and the narrative mural design is also about body language. I suppose that the mural transforms the room, which is rather large and used for a youth project. It affects the place, as it's quite a big mural, approximately 15 to 20 metres.

Painting as Place-Making

F: In East London, development companies and local authorities often use the phrase 'making a new place' as part of the process of building housing estates and local shops. Earlier, we were having this conversation about place-making and regeneration in certain areas in the East End which are under rapid change. I suspect we were discussing how we are both trying to translate these processes into some kind of imagery.

A: In my practice, I try to achieve an awareness of how places are constructed by showing the physical structure of the city. My paintings respond to place-making not on the street level, but on the backstage level of urban planning. It is a response to images created by the agents involved in planning, such as architects, councils, planners, visualisers etc. I work with representations of space, whereas you work with actual creation of space. In the painting 'Planning Permission', for example, I was wondering to what extent citizens have an impact on the city versus regulations imposed from above, and to what extent a city can evolve naturally. The lower part of the diptych shows an organically growing city where inhabitants can individually contribute to its development. The upper part shows a privatized area, where citizens have no impact whatsoever.


Agnieszka Mlicka, Planning Permission, 2009

F: Is that an image of the Docklands?

A: Yes, the top is of the Docklands and the bottom is of Prague. Prague is one of those places where you feel really connected to the city, even if it's your first visit.

F: Do you think that this painting says something about two kinds of aspects of humanity? It seems to display two approaches to building the city.

A: Maybe it presents two different needs of people, because although I personally prefer the organically developing city, privatisation seems to be the result of people's need to control, organise and sterilise urban space. Through my engagement with Public Works, an art and architecture practice working within the public realm, I am familiar with the critique. But you hardly hear any grounded arguments in favour of privatised space. It is controversial, but I assume that there are people who value such areas, and prefer to live, work and shop there.

F: Haha, people who like sitting in a mall!

A: Exactly, people who want sterile streets and private security guards patrolling the neighbourhood.

F: These are always very impersonal spaces. In regards to what you were saying about organically growing cities, I feel quite antagonistic towards 'ready-made' places. I guess there is no community ownership, although they do programme in many live events and exhibitions which help to bring some life to a place.

A: There is a serious problem when privatised streets obviate our human rights and as a result control and limit behaviour. For example, the right to protest does not exist within such privatized areas. Anna Minton has written a good book on this topic, titled 'Ground Control', revealing how privatised spaces take over large parts of cities. However, a challenging suggestion would be that painting as place-making might have to incorporate a diversity of urban spaces, and thus also reflect the increasing privatisation.

F: When I was drawing the marathon as it went through the Docklands, I started leaning against the building. Someone came out and told me off.

A: Exactly, artists can be directly affected, and especially photographers often complain about the way they are treated by private security. I am interested in the relationship between ethics and aesthetics. If a painting tries to say something about the urban condition, how can it reflect on ethics through a pictorial language? For example, when dealing with cities in which people's lives have been affected by war, or in cities like London where there are deeply rooted social problems, how can painting speak about ethics through its aesthetics? For example, Picasso's 'Guernica' has become a strong political symbol, but in what way is he making an argument, if at all? The painting represents the tragedy of war and suffering, but in what way can the artist make a comment rather than merely provide an illustration?

Painting as Politics

F: Maybe the painting as an object becomes the focus for a political struggle? People want it to be in the MOMA or they want it to be stationed in Guernica itself. Things can happen to a painting afterwards.

A: This means that painting cannot be autonomous in order to function as a political tool, it is always contingent. The work is inseparable from the exhibition space, the interpretation of the audience, the status of the artist, and other more indirect conditions. This would also mean that an image can be used equally by protagonists and antagonists, as the final meaning depends on the external conditions, rather than within the work itself.

F: How does this relate to your work about cities?

A: In my recent project entitled 'Alternative Masterplan', I created a PowerPoint presentation which was projected onto canvas, and directly informed the making of the painting. These projected images and text were taken from marketing materials of the regeneration scheme currently taking place in Canning Town, in London. I used specific quotes from these texts to reveal the kind of language used by investors and commercial planners. However, it turned out that such appropriation was interpreted as protagonist, rather than the intended critique.

Agnieszka Mlicka, Alternative Masterplan, 2011

F: This relates to an issue you raised before about the meaning of painting, whether it's open to interpretation or if you can make paintings which don't go down that route. Not without meaning, but maybe an ironic approach, employing existing fixed meanings which aren't open to interpretation.

A: In my painting, I try to be as specific as possible and to develop a certain argument. However, I am not saying that painting can do this naturally. I'm rather testing this proposition through my practice and research.

F: I am so used to making images which play on nuances of meaning. When I drew a group of figures, it kept occurring to me that I didn't have a story for what I was drawing. The story was actually created by the groups of figures as they were appearing on the page; what were they talking about, why were they there, what is the meaning of their body language?

A: You left it to the painting to develop?

F: Maybe I just left it hanging in the air a bit, to be resolved by the viewer. But I think you're saying that you're not comfortable with that approach. Can you say more about the relationship between your painting practice and your ambitions or goals for your PhD? How do these two activities challenge or feed each other?

A: Indeed, my approach to painting is much more channelled and controlled. I like the practical and theoretical challenge, and without a solid conceptual foundation I cannot paint. The arguments I develop in the thesis are translated into my practice, but also vice versa, the studio work helps me to develop my arguments. Painting becomes the methodology, but of course the question remains how to analyse such qualitative outcomes. The parallel between my practice and theory is possible, because I investigate how and why architectural representations are constructed, and reveal the inherent problems in current practice. In that sense, there is a political overtone to it. But my goal is to develop a coherent proposition for a critical painting that is both functional and propositional. What is your starting point when you paint, an idea or an image?

F: Going back to that painting with the figures hanging above the city, I can't quite remember what the starting point was, but I remember reading that astronauts say that from the moon you can see the Great Wall of China with the naked eye. I got curious about this idea that we are making things which are visible as shapes on the earth's surface, that humanity is slowly making these big 'drawings'. I saw a parallel when I was up a tall skyscraper drawing the city below, and was struck by the beauty of the roads and buildings. Then, I was interested in what people looked like against those shapes. When you are down at street level we see people against the shapes of buildings, but this aerial view had more possibilities of talking about where we have arrived with technology and our philosophical view of ourselves. We

can be up in an aeroplane and we have taken the position that the Gods once occupied, looking down from on high at the earth beneath. That was probably my starting point.

A: So this idea was then translated into a visual image?

F: Yes, but when I make work it is more a cloud of ideas, I find. So there was also an idea about people who are living on the edges of society, who are living in little shelters or make temporary houses under a bridge. On a trip in the early eighties, I met people in Bombay (now Mumbai) living in huts next to the skyscrapers, who were the workers on site. I also saw scaffolding around quite a lot, which again is a motif about construction, regeneration, change, renewal and all those things. I thought when you actually put people on the scaffolding, you are also telling a story about those connections between the individual, the group and the place they live. In the images there are also places where people are rescuing each other or falling off and needing help, where there is fragility. There is a sense in which people are quite exposed in the city. Someone else commented that they were impressed by the image because people are above the city and they are triumphant.

A: I think that the more ideas come together in a work, the more interesting the visual image might become, because you are working with several layers of meaning. I am interested in the fact that your painting hasn't become abstract, because seeing patterns from a large distance would suggest that the reality is abstracted into a simplified form. The painting, on the contrary, is very figurative and even a bit absurd.

F: I particularly noticed that in your painting 'Urbanization', which has both elements of order and chaos. It seems to represent a universal image of a city. Or did you intend to describe the street as a particular kind of space?

Painting as Urban Composition

A: As the title suggests, it is not about a particular place but about the process of urbanization which is why the image is left unfinished on the right side. I tried to envisage the urban architecture as continually developing, and framing our movement through the city. By leaving the woman's head blank, and through the many window reflections, it is also a statement how urbanization creates and changes our identity. I think we might be both interested in seeing the city not as an organized system, but as an expression of complexity. Jane Jacobs used the term 'ordered complexity' to describe a healthy and well functioning city, whereas chaos is a negative term.

Agnieszka Mlicka, Urbanization, 2008

F: Complexity is an interesting notion. For example, when the government is trying to think of communities and creates policies to alleviate problems, my view is often that they have not recognised that on the ground a community is quite messy and complex.

Government policies are intended to inform practical ways to promote positive change in the inner city. I am one of many artists who are interested in describing or documenting a similar territory, the social landscape as well as the topographical cityscape. Painting can reflect the complexity in the world that the artist lives and works in. Painting is about the whole and the parts, you can't separate out what is going on. It is a great example of joined up thinking.

A: The government, whether locally or nationally, has a very difficult task at hand in regards to social change, as we can see in the current climate of riots and protests. To find the source of a problem you need to understand the underlying structure. Cities require both an overview of the whole as well as an insight into the parts. This is why one can speak of urban systems as long as they are not oversimplified, which is why Jacobs used the term complexity. She also speaks of the need for diversity in cities, and I am interested how this can inform painting. My favourite artist is Julie Mehretu, because she seems to be able to embrace these terms in her large scale paintings. Her mark making is explained as inhabitants who create the pictorial space, adding a narrative to an otherwise abstracted representation of urban space. Through the layering, her paintings show simultaneously the physical, historical and social aspects of the city. I think there is a link here to your way of thinking about the urban environment.


Julie Mehretu, Looking Back to a Bright New Future, 2003

F: You could almost imagine this being the notation for music. We spoke earlier about the Western tradition in painting leaning heavily on the idea of a window into a world that depicted one story, on place at one moment in time. In contemporary painting the situation has opened up; paintings are often layered, consisting of different types of motif and notation, and referring to separate origins which can co-exist in dynamic flux. Given this agile quality that painting possesses, can an artist satisfactory represent urban processes through a still image?

A: It is indeed a good question how a notion of time or process can be captured visually. This is the challenge for architects, who often unsuccessfully position their architectural product as part of larger urban processes. I think that Julie Mehretu's painting is able to achieve this through the abstract marks and the layering, so that the image seems in continuous flux. Her work could be interpreted as urban compositions, and maybe even as designs for future cities. The concept of hybridity is relevant here, because it encapsulates the complexity of references within an artwork. Painting is also becoming a hybrid itself, literally merging with other mediums as for example in my earlier discussed work 'Alternative Masterplan'.

F: What about Rosalind Krauss' idea of the expanded field, and your question whether painting can also develop into such an expanded field?

A: I am frustrated with the way that painting doesn't seem to be able to move outside of the gallery without becoming something else, whereas sculpture did manage to do that. Since the late 1960s, a critical art practice has emerged which excluded painting, because it was too self-referential. Conceptual art, on the other hand, found new sites and methods for production, and continues to dominate art schools to this day. While painting is slowly resurrecting from being proclaimed dead, it is still discussed in terms of its form rather than

its engagement with reality. Painters might be interested in global issues, but there is a lack of critique in their work.

F: Well, actually, how do you describe painting? Is it everything that isn't 3D or time based? Krauss developed her ideas in the late seventies, so I wonder if we might have moved beyond that. Maybe there are other imperatives which make these questions less relevant. The agenda that I live every day is more about how painting might connect to, and be part of, community life. I wonder if there is something missing there, a big gap between people in the base community, and how artists might be doing them a service, or how art could be part of their lives. It's interesting how people experience their lives through the mass media and how it might be reflecting back an uninteresting and dumbed down version of reality.

Painting as Catalyst

A: It sounds like it's time for art to take a more active stance then, and to act like a catalyst for change. Generally speaking, it does look like aesthetics are of lesser importance than impact in contemporary art. Certainly in my work, I am not interested in concepts such as the poetic realm, although I wouldn't go as far as saying that beauty is irrelevant. A painting is always created through certain aesthetic choices of the artist, even if these are not the main motive for making art. But painting practice is increasingly reacting to external stimuli, instead of a preoccupation with its own form.

F: Yes this is one of the more tangible leaps from modernism to post modernism. Painting too seems to be more tangibly 'out there' in the everyday world, and artists are ready to engage in matters that concern society. In regards to art's impact, to be in the presence of art you enter a slightly different relationship than when you read the newspaper, in which case you are expecting to read something that is giving you a direct concept. If you watch TV, for example East Enders, you are picking up on the next bit of the story. But when you enter the presence of art, especially the presence of beauty, this opens a door in a different direction.

A: Indeed, but it is hard to pin down how the presence of art affects people. If you compare looking at a painting with watching TV, you can definitely say that a painting is quiet and requires an interaction, whereas TV throws a multitude of jolts at the passive viewer. What about the people who visited the exhibition at the festival? How did they encounter the paintings, by focusing or through peripheral vision?

F: Some people were looking around at the show, while others wanted to actively get involved, for example the children wanted to do some painting themselves. We made an effort to chat to people, as it's always helpful to make art more accessible by giving people background information which encourages curiosity.

A: Painting then becomes a medium for people to meet, talk and do things together. What is missing in a metropolis like London is interaction between people, but your projects show that even painting can become a catalyst for increased activity between individuals.

F: Maybe, going back to public art, this is what planners want to do with sculpture on the roundabout: to make it feel like a place, to give it an identity.

A: Which doesn't necessarily work.

F: Haha, not when the sculpture isn't very good.

A: I would simply provide more benches in order to improve interaction between citizens. I think they are more useful than sculptures, to be honest. The Big Society idea is doomed, because instead they are removing benches to discourage 'the wrong people' hanging around.

F: So we are wondering whether a painter can make a change in the world through his own practice? I think that to put on exhibitions, to do quite regular shows with other people, is an important way of achieving that outcome.

A: But I am discouraged by exhibiting in a gallery which hardly anyone will visit, except of your friends and family. This is the reality of being an artist. So what change can you make?

F: At the event last weekend, 'London's Lost Fishing Village' at Trinity Buoy Wharf, we had seventeen hundred people around, according to the staff team running the event. It is good to show regularly and to bolt it on onto other events. In order to generate a discussion it is helpful to come together with a group of artists and to organize an exhibition. I believe you are an artist when you are showing work in the public realm. I am not sure if you are an artist if you make work to just talk about it. I like things to have a practical outcome.

Painting as Didactics

A: My way of working is very different, probably because it is research based. My motivation to make art is to provoke, challenge and change established thinking/making patterns on the level of urban planning and design. Whether the artwork enters the art scene is of lesser importance. I agree that ultimately by showing the work you can test it and analyse its effectiveness, but I think that my paintings have to be shown in a more academic context.

F: But also you want people to see it, to interact with that piece, especially people who are working in the regeneration context.

A: Exactly, this is the reason that I intend to show the work 'Alternative Masterplan' to a specific audience, rather than the random gallery visitor. My audience would be selectively chosen and invited for a time-based viewing. I like the work to be rhetorical and maybe didactic as well, which is something that few artworks seem to do. Do you know of any artists who experiment with didactics?

F: Does didactic mean related to learning and teaching? There are artists who moved into those territories, for example Joseph Beuys who used the blackboard which is related to teaching and learning. There are probably lots of others who touched on that, but I don't know if you mean it in that sense.

A: I mean that an artwork aims to convince the audience without leaving any scope for free interpretation. Rather than creating its own narrative, as in your work, the painting acts as a visual argument. There are artists who give lectures and call these artworks, similarly to guided walks as art practice, which is an interesting development in art. In regards to painting, you would speak of 'reading' the painting, instead of looking at it.

F: But a painting would never be as specific as a text, would it?

A: Indeed, I don't think it is possible to be that accurate, but maybe a painting can speak of things that are impossible to express with words. Romanticism is the prime example of this,

but I am much more interested in asking whether painting can embody pure rational thought without losing its identity as a painting.

F: I think we have to be careful to distinguish for ourselves the difference between visual and conceptual thinking. We tie painting down if we want it to merely visualise a text. This is where painting can be a witness to the unfolding world, in the way spoken and written language cannot. No history book could tell me as much about the Spanish civil war as Goya's black paintings do. I can look at a painting just like someone else, and we would probably see different things. I suppose that when you narrow it down to a certain group of people as audience, for example the people who are working on the regeneration in a particular site, you are going to get a closer reading of the work. So you could create paintings for a specific group of people, in order for it to have a very specific message.

A: This goes against the traditional image of the painter for whom painting is a means of self-expression. In contrast to modern painting, contemporary painters reflect our diffused attention, and therefore a shared concern with global developments. This makes a single interpretation impossible, which explains the latest curating trends such as hybridity and contingency. But their audience is still gallery-based, whereas we both seem to paint with an alternative audience in mind.

F: Indeed, I have worked within the community context for so long that I do think my audience is implicit in how I go about making the paintings. But I have shown in commercial galleries before and I think that the imperative for me is how I make the next painting, and how I make a good painting. My main focus is how to put a good show together. If you have to show twenty paintings, the worst painting is going to drag the show down, so it is quite a practical consideration to showing in a commercial gallery.

A: The only thing missing is feedback from your audience, which might be crucial to your work if it is about human relationships. Initially, my idea was to submit the painting for an architectural competition and to see whether they would accept the painting as a submission. It would be an interesting experiment to see if painting could function in such a context. I am interested in the concealed didactic function of painting, similarly to the efficiency of images in advertising, although I am not interested in the commercial aspect of making art. Of course it is nice to sell a work every now and then, but it's not my goal.

Painting as Experience

F: I think my aim is not as commercial as it should be haha, because you have to pay the bills! My aim is more on a philosophical level. I am making works which are realising some philosophical considerations I am having. But of course there are layers, so the content is about emotional responses, about relationships and about people. That's probably what is so interesting about community because it is about human relationships, about people who live in close vicinity, and either make good relationships with each other or bad ones. Or they avoid each other. Fundamentally, my work is about relationships, visual relationships as well as human relationships, and the connection with our environment. I think your work is layered and therefore more difficult to read. It requires time to let its content be understood. Do you think it is a positive thing to show your work in a variety of places, because they may be experienced slightly different depending on context?

A: A painting like ‘Photographic Memory’ could easily be shown in a gallery as in other contexts, because my motivation for making it was purely aesthetical. I love the atmosphere in the picture, but beyond the visual impact there is no intended meaning. My other works, especially the site-specific ones or those with a rhetorical message, are more complex and would trigger a different experience depending on site and audience. Do you think that the experience of the aesthetics inherent to a piece depend upon the site or context?


Agnieszka Mlicka, Photographic Memory, 2011

F: The way you use the word aesthetic is to describe something to do with form or qualities of the painting, for example the balance of the light, the composition etc. I don't know if there is a wider way in which we can understand aesthetics, although it can't help being a bit about social aspects. When I see those tower blocks in the front, it immediately resonates with questions such as: are those small businesses or colleges, do people live there, what does it feel like to be in those buildings? I look at that painting, but I don’t see just colours and shapes, or just buildings on their own.

A: The reading of an urban setting must therefore depend on the city you grew up in. The interpretation of the tower blocks would mean something different to a person from Warsaw, Hong Kong or New York. This could alter the decision where the work would be shown.

F: There is an element of documentary in it, of the environment we live in. There is something about that particular architecture that is modernist, made with cheap materials and about being lonely, or depressed. On the other hand, you mentioned that it was the atmosphere that attracted you to the image, and the title indicates that there is a personal story behind it. There is a note in it that Hopper arrives at, about emptiness which is almost a kind of pregnant space, a vacuum.

A: Especially his paintings without human figures are intriguing, because instead of illustrating the concept of loneliness, it is expressed through colour and composition. Another intriguing artist who expresses an eerie urban atmosphere is Ben Johnson, who recently did a project at the National Gallery. During a two-month residency, he created a large cityscape while the gallery visitors could see him at work. It was an interesting experience to see the artist at work, and not just the finished painting. His technique is rather the opposite of Hopper, as he uses digital photographs to print out ready-made stencils for the painting. The effect is collage-like, not literally, but in the final visual effect.


Ben Johnson, Looking Back to Richmond House, 2011

F: I imagine you have a strong relationship to your recent painting, to the experience of painting it, of imagining a city and a place, and a moment in your life. In a sense you become that cityscape. There's something about the experience of doing a painting that connects the thinking, the emotion, the theory, but it's not a removed experience – it's part of you. I question the validity of the debate about whether art needs craft. There is a lot of debate about 'mimicking' in contemporary painting. When you paint that cityscape, it's actually not about mimicking reality; it's about you becoming that reality.

A: I probably reach that point after having spent a lot of time with the work, for example 'Planning Permission'. However, it depends very much on the work. Making 'Alternative Masterplan', I felt more like a mediator between the projection and the canvas, part of a triangular relationship. And what kind of relationship do you have with your paintings?

F: When I arrive at finished things, I am realizing something that I hadn't understood before. Maybe you can't conceptualise it or write it down. You are arriving at something for yourself. I was interested in the question whether a painter can make a change in the world. Maybe what the painting does is that it changes you. By changing yourself, you probably act differently in the world. We seem to have a shared ambition to use our painting to comment on or document these urban processes, and so we have a belief that the work will function in this way. By responding to the regeneration in Canning Town, you have taking a lot of time to think about it. Now you are a different person and you are communicating that to people. You are making a difference.

A: I agree, maybe that change doesn't necessarily happen just through the work, but through *being* a painter. It is an artist's ability to interact with other disciplines and respond to it that brings about a critique and, hopefully, positive change. And this exchange, subsequently, changes your perception, sensibility and understanding of processes in the world, beyond rational thought.

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