

INTERVIEW: RUBEN PANG

BY ALESSANDRA ALLIATA NOBILI



Gerhard Richter, Portrait Dieter Kreutz, oil on canvas, 1971



Glenn Brown, Nausea, oil on panel, 2008

Can you please describe briefly how a couple of paintings in the show relate to your art practice? (for instance: how did you choose the subject-matter; was it on the internet or in art publications? Why choosing that particular subject? What is the significance of the western tradition of painting in your work?)

I'm in love with illusion, self-concealing techniques and the idea of transcending the medium. It's the sense of heightened reality created with a variety of methods that is so captivating. I'm also interested in painting as a bridging intermediary between a spectrum of concepts. It could be the conflict between the material and the subject in Francis Bacon's figuration, or the very deliberate portrayal of technicolor light (as opposed to light from God, in renaissance paintings), being emitted from the David Reed's alkyd paintings.

There is also the painting's "gravity"; how it initiates and maintains the gaze, as if the artist is behind the work, controlling the thresholds of colors and forms being projected at the viewer. There seems to be a lot of preempting done, perhaps to paint in search of an audience that might view the world in almost the same way as the artist ... In this sense, when referring to the painting as an intermediary, one interpretation could be a two-way theatre, with both the viewer and the image projecting unto one another, trying to find a point of sync.

With regards to affinity, I'm trying to understand why I find myself drawn most to the phantom image of Dieter Kreutz among all of Gerhard Richter's portraits, or Glenn Brown's interpretation of Pope Innocent X, *Nausea*, when he omits the element which made it famous—the head. It seems they all have a common denominator in portraiture, especially if it ever so subtly suggested.

In my explorations, the figuration is very crudely planned if at all, and occurs spontaneously. The volatile and deceptive nature of memory is a creative filter; paintings record experiments and obsessions: the process alternates between layering and sanding down in search of a point of opportunity—allowing a motif to surface spontaneously. It's a kind of visual syncopation ... finding a melody in white-noise.



David Reed, #442, oil and alkyd on linen, 1998-1999



At the Heart of the Sun, oil and alkyd on aluminum panel, 2012

At the Heart of the Sun is the most abstract deviation from portraiture within this series. It is a more physical (and in some ways literal) use of the portrait, layered through mark-making and erasure. The area of the painting which corresponded to my eye level was where I felt most comfortable with detail, while the sides and edges of the painting received more forceful strokes. I also layered with symmetry, by flipping the painting panel upside down as the transparent surfaces interact with one another. (I was looking at a whole lot of Hermann Nitsch on YouTube prior to this!)

Painless and *Laughter* both incorporate the head and hands arranged in a traditional apex. In the painting process, I add these elements last as they are the densest units and alter the composition most dynamically, therefore needing careful adjustment. Timing is also an important aspect in the process. If I commit to a composition prematurely, it lacks vitality—perhaps the same vitality which Bacon wanted to preserve by painting on the reverse side of canvases. Apart from the visual stimulation, in a painting developed over a series of choices, the resonance beneath the surface is autobiographical. In this sense, I believe that if the painter finds the process exciting and decides to hide some messages in the dirt, the viewer experiences some of that in their own way.



Laughter, oil and alkyd on aluminum panel, 2012



Painless, oil and alkyd on aluminum panel, 2012

In his essay in the catalogue of the show at Marella Gallery, Jim Amberson says that you compared the process of composition of a painting of yours to a hamburger: can you please explain? (I love the idea and I'm really curious!!!)

I had a feeling I was going to regret that joke! This is going to be such a terrible analogy ... Its about simplifying complicated ideas ... The background is the context—the buns; the motif—the patty, is established by a piece of meat with just the right amount of “something people don't really notice until it isn't there”—lettuce—that's the sanding away of layers, trimming, and dulling things down so the painting sits nicely. After all, the viewer won't miss what they never saw!



Strobe like a Butterfly, digital photograph, 2010



Jasmine, digital photograph, 2010

3) Your work has a strong visual appeal, that seems tied to a form of spirituality, as if you were catching the spiritual, almost burning essence of the figures you depict: can you please comment on this?

I think there are two layers to the effect of spirituality.

The arbitrarily created marks that actively shape the composition is an attempt to incorporate photographic/digital effects into the painting process ... The translucent effects were first informed by experiments in light painting and photography which I was doing a few years ago. *Strobe like a Butterfly* was a study done by recording the movements of a light-source over a few minutes, before processing the image in Adobe Photoshop. *Jasmine* is a portrait of a friend captured by gradually shifting her position in relation to a light source emitted from behind the camera.

There are also ghost-marks in the surface due to the sanding process, that reveal the insides of a painting. These marks are the traces left behind by transitory layers of the painting. I use these “opened wounds” as part of the composition—creating a compound mark—a combination of a damaged surface and a healing layer. These are unpredictable scenarios ... and again relate to the difficulty and potential in dealing surfacing memories and harnessing the subconscious in painting.

Thank you Alessandra for your awesome questions! It really got me thinking and revisiting the beginnings of my work. I hope my answers can give you and the viewers a sort of background, without taking away the narrative from the viewing experience!