

### **GI symposium: Painting as a New Medium. Thomas Lawson**

I wanted to talk about painting and the problematics of painting and I also wanted to do that in a slightly biographical fashion because that's how you talk about your ideas.

So, I went to New York in 1975 and at that time, I loved the Museum of Modern Art and I particularly loved work like this, this is Duchamp's *Fresh Widow* and the Modern didn't particularly love work like this, it was often hidden in a low gallery underneath the staircase, and it seemed to me you know in ways that John's very clearly kind of articulated at the beginning that art had come to this sort of impasse where it wasn't entirely clear how it related to life in general. And all the problematics of representation and so on about that early modernism, and Duchamp, and Dada and Surrealism had all kind of raised were still unanswered questions and there still are unanswered questions but looking at that seemed to me a priority. And that there was a kind of issue that had something to do with the representation of the real and what I liked about Duchamp in particular was the way that he used real things to talk about unreal things and altered the understanding of reality. More recently I was back at the Modern admiring their new building and their new installation. And I found that what I wanted to look at was actually this painting of Picasso (*Green Still Life*). And the surrealist rooms, which are now expanded and dominating because in all those years since 1975 art has very clearly taken the side of Duchamp and I found that I was really sick of that. And that this painting, it's a little painting, this painting really summed up for me a lot of the things that I'm actually currently interested in which have to do with the more particular ways in which painting itself talks about these problems. It's called *Green Still Life*, and the thing that's really great about it is the way that Picasso plays around with different schematic methods of representing form and light and he does that by using colour; he uses pointillist colour and illustrations of shadow in the bottle. But it's an essay in the problematics painting presents at this moment and how it might relate to every day life. And so the subject matter is table top, the bottle of wine, a glass, fruit bowl, some fruit and so it's about nothing in fact, I mean it's just sort of about some stuff. And the whole problem is about how we really talk about that and makes some work. And which puts in motion a train of thought that brings us back to the Beckett - Joyce quote, it's all kind of wrapped into all that. But somehow putting it back into the frame of painting just seems to me currently to be somehow richer or but in a way more personal than I hitherto thought possibly interesting.

Backtrack again. Shortly after moving to New York, Susan Morgan and I started this magazine (slide of first cover). And it was I mean it was just this little artist magazine, the idea was that it would be a forum for artists to talk about the issues that were of vital importance to them and it was a vehicle for a younger generation to speak to each other. And what we were interested in was this gap between art and life and how you might sort of negotiate that. It's a black and white magazine was published for about twelve years. Slightly erratic, sometimes it came out twice a year, sometimes we skipped a year, sometimes it came out four times a year. This is the first issue and the cover is a work by Sherrie Levine. So we were involved in that whole idea of appropriating imagery from other places, to insert into the art world to talk about positions of representation. And more recently, time actually has this horrible way of

catching up with you and becoming history, a couple of curators recently put together a show of the archive real life magazine. I didn't even know we had an archive until they asked about it, and (slide) so this is a picture of the display where we showed copies of the magazine, images taken from it, some manuscripts. One great thing about it was that the early manuscripts were typed and edited by pencil and pen and cut and paste, physical cut and paste. The layout was done also by typesetting and wax. It's sort of an incredible thing, it's not that long ago that we didn't have the computer. And in doing it we learned something about the way that art supports itself

(Sol Le Witt slide).

The thing about the Real Life Magazine Project and the Real Life Magazine Archives, and in fact a great deal of conceptual art that it grew out of, is that it is in black and white that it's sort of a process of thinking that privileges the idea over visuality per se and there's a desire to create a fairly sort of logical set of meanings. And as you know I do a lot of writing and one of the reasons for doing the magazine was to publish that writing, and writing is a form of expression that has a sort of black and white quality that has to do with trying to create legible narratives of thought that very clearly broadcasts from me to you or me or whoever. And that's all well and good and very useful, but one of the things that I've always thought important about art and again going back to the Duchamp in the initial framing of my thinking about art is that the great thing about art is that it doesn't make it sense, that it comes across in these other forms of communication that get to you through your senses, and make emotional sense or some kind of physical sense or something that takes you off into a different plane of thinking. And therein there's always lain my interest in painting.

This is an installation shot from a recent show, I think it was a year ago, at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles. A survey of painting curated by Russell Fergusson the chief curator there. And these paintings are works that I did in 1980 in those first years of doing Real Life magazine and writing essays in Artforum and so on. And they were attempts then to engage in the idea of painting from the positions that I've just sort of mapped out. So I was looking at painting as a strategy and I thought of each painting as analogous to a very fast song by the Ramones, something like that, a very simple idea that could be executed very quickly with minimum fuss, minimum of tools, just done you know essentially in half an afternoon or something. And again like a song from the Ramones oeuvre it would pick up a quick punchy sexy theme, in this case death. And the series all had to do with children who had been murdered or beaten and whose stories have become front page news stories in the tabloid press. And so I was interested in quick shock value and sort of efficiency of just getting something out. But I was also interested in somewhat confusing that by throwing in a range of colour values that didn't exactly register with the severity of the content. These nice yellows and pinks and so on, so that the colour information was, some people said, kind of jarring. Probably important to note also that there was an aspect to this work, all of my work has to do with reprocessing information already existing in the world; one of the crises for art in the twentieth century had to do with a stepping back from the direct representation of reality and thinking about it as a more distance project where you're thinking about the ways in which reality might be framed and talked about. So these are all based on found imagery

A decade plus of art making and thinking about different contexts for that, the whole issue of audience I think is a really crucial one and a really complicated one. When you're thinking in terms of communication and discourse and writing essays and presenting work as a series of quick communicative bursts, you're thinking about the audience and how the audience is going to react to that and you just think contextually and you do shows that have that kind of context and make decisions that lead away from the abstraction of the studio/gallery kind of presentation and move into the public areas and by the late 80s I was doing a lot of public commissions to do with temporary works that would bring these kinds of demonstrations into a public realm that was talking to a broader public than the art public. (Slide) This picture is an installation from downstairs when this was the Third Eye Centre and the layerings of imagery are all from Glasgow; the tartan, the artist figure was a sculptural figure I found at Kelvingrove and then grotesque mask came from some other building in Glasgow and I don't remember which one anymore, and you know the whole thing had to do with the art stardom of the late 80's - art as a side show, surface event.

(Slide)

More recently I've moved back into the studio and begun to think of the work, not exactly a private enterprise, but an enterprise that has to do with thinking consistently through a set of problems and ideas without so much concern for public. I can't tell if that's because I have this job that keeps me so busy with all kinds of publics that I don't I don't really give a shit about yet another set of publics, that I want to sort of retreat and so it may be I've turned into some kind of old fart but I'll accept that it's possible.

I've been doing a number, two sort of concurrent series of work that have something to do with each other and then something to do with an idea of using the medium that allows for sort of unstructured continued rethinking of itself within the frame of painting. This part here is part of a project that is both part writing and part painting and concerns as its functional starting point the political biography of a figure called Thomas Muir, who had a sort of five year adventure in republican and revolutionary politics in Scotland and France in the 1790's. These two images are sort of before and after of his adventure. This is an installation shot from a show I did last year in Chicago and excerpt from a series of a 100 portraits of his associates. It's sort of a rogues gallery or something of the world wide terror network of the 1790's - a mixture of British working class republicans, French revolutionists, American republicans and a sort of smattering of some Spanish, Mexican. All are concerned with that late 18<sup>th</sup> century issue of political representation. In terms of the painting they were based on portraits from that period of these characters. Some of them were aristocratic in origin and so their portraits are by well known portrait painters of the time. The French people were associates of Jacques-Louis David so he made portraits of them. The working class guys, got their pictures made when they were on trial for treason, by courtroom artists. And some of the other figures are captured by the kind of antagonistic caricaturists like Rowlandson and Gillray and so there's a kind of range of information reprocessed into a series of paintings that ultimately has nothing very much to do with that original starting point. But the paintings themselves take on this life with being in a state of free play, where the colour decisions and style decisions and so on move off on their own. I think of it also musically but in a longer form of music than a Ramones song.

Concurrent with that I'm doing these pictures of renditions of the globe. And again it's this idea of using a fairly simple concept which is simply the difficulty of representing the globe on a flat surface and the related political issues of where you centre your representation. And using that as a starting point then the paintings again become this sort of ongoing contemplation of form and colour that then sort of rides free of the original ideas to some extent, with I hope some kind of slight disorientation effect. Having said that though of course, I began to think well this is kind of crazy, I'm not so entirely divorced from reality that I'm just happy to be just in my studio, that I do continue to want to see some way of bringing some of the issues of the day into the studio and figuring out some way of talking about that. This little painting helped me think of that to some extent. So along with the map paintings, I've been doing these paintings of hostages from Iran er, from Iraq - soon to be Iran though. And again they kind of create a place where you're thinking about the news and the horror of the news and the despair you have living in America - with an administration that seems to be completely out of control and has no mandate for being as out of control as they are - but doing it in the cocoon of a studio space that's cut off from the world and withdrawn from the world. And so you're in this very strange sort of disconnect. I mean it's a connect, but it's also a disconnect.

I wanted to end with this one, to come back to the studio. You seemed to be talking about the significance of having a studio or not having a studio. To me it's absolutely crucial, I don't actually any longer understand how you work without one.

(Clapping)