

Real Life Research: Ross Sinclair interviewed by Ross Birrell

RB. I had a question to do with the authenticity of painting and the reference to the brushstroke which came up in our previous discussions in Cove Park, but which was also referred to in the CCA conference: Painting as a New Medium. It was to do with the use of the word 'Show' in the title of the exhibition: Real Life Painting Show. Why not stop at Real Life Painting, why have Real Life Painting Show? To me, the inclusion of the word 'show' seems to introduce a distance from the notion of authenticity, from risking the brushstroke and introduces a performative mode.

RS. I don't know if I would have used the term the authenticity of the brushstroke but maybe we could get into that in a minute, but with the title, I think it seems clear to me that once I had hit on the title being Real Life Painting Show that helped define what it was – what it could be. For example the press people made an innocent mistake in an advert which ended up reading - Real Life Painting and when I saw that I did think, no that's not what it is. I think for me, the idea of this show is so essential to it, which I suppose it is, effectively, the polar opposite of any kind of flirtations with modernism in that sense, because for me with this, as with everything else I do, it does absolutely need the show. It's just not the same with the door shut and the lights off. ... I mean, it just felt so right for a start, Real Life Painting Show, Real Life Painting.... Real Life Painting sounds so arrogant and self-aggrandising, somehow, like this is Real Life painting, and all other painters missed the point. This is it now, you know? I mean, it's really not that. It's a Real Life Painting Show, yeah, it's kind of temporary, it's in the moment, it's about now. Essentially it's about doing a painting show perhaps now, you know, in May 2006. What does a painting show mean now, compared to, you know, what a painting show might have looked like in the sixteenth century, or 1950s or sixty-five, or whatever. But I think essentially, for me, what that underlines is still the idea of audience and dialogue. That's the really strong desire for me, that it's about the idea of like, one brushstroke, could one brushstroke save the world? And all the kind of things that go with that, that make up that sort of gesture, the individual, the transference of the human hand. But it only is worth anything, I think, if someone else is looking and a dialogue takes place, however slight or abstracted or after the fact or in someone's memory or imagination. The significant thing is the impetus to say, I'm still alive, I'm still here, you know, this is only me, but this is this really simple mark which is a kind of pre-language, signing your name with a cross, or something, you know? And I think its important as an artist you are conscious of setting up the conversation. The work is constructed to test the premis Admittedly, within an extremely self-conscious articulation and I don't know if that's a long way of saying it, but for me, the show is still the moment of debate. It wouldn't be Real Life Painting Show in a crate in a storeroom somewhere. It would be in some sort of hiatus then, but it's here and now, in the show and what that means at the moment.

RB. That possibly makes it like an event. Not necessarily a performance event but a performative relation to the element of dialogue or even open-endedness which you mentioned. But where are those points of entry for the audience in something which looks like a very complete, sealed exhibition in a very traditional sense; you walk into the gallery, the paintings are on the wall, which

are finished in the studio being brought into the gallery, so the studio is the site of production, the gallery is the site of exposition? It seems that's the kind of relationship in my mind as well, with the repetition of the production, or the serial production works and then you're getting a different sizes... this is the large scale, then the smaller version. So it has a very close relationship to commodity production and painting is seen at the centre of the market place in the fine art tradition. Tom Lawson - who was at the conference you organized at the CCA - obviously talked about the camouflage of painting as a critique of the market place in the 1980s and 90s, and that's something that came out of the idea of painting being a kind of strategic place to be, as a critique of the marketplace whilst aping the marketplace. And I wondered if that was also feeding in to the context of the painting in this case, this event - it's a show, a strategic moment rather than lasting for all time. Is it because painting and the market place here is still a site of antagonism, is it something you see in your question 'can a brushstroke save the world?' Well save the world from what? A brushstroke against what? There seems to be a kind of interesting ambiguity here; echoing traditions of painting echoing the production of commodities for a market but at the same time referencing this recent history of Tom Lawson and the antagonism with the market and saying that there is something resistant in the brushstrokes still.

RS. Well, there's a lot of points there. I think, in a sense, its about wanting to explore this medium which is in more straightforward a dialogue with an audience, it's the one medium a 'public' most expect to see in an art gallery, so perhaps for me, for whom the formal aspect is usually much more sculptural and complicated and busy, this takes away a couple of those barriers and makes it much more straightforward sort of relationship.

And I really wanted to explore this medium, this relationship – this love affair I'd never been part of. So with this work I try and make that 'way in' as straightforward as possible which I suppose in a sense, is the opposite of what I usually seem to do, which is to make the space of viewing, or reception - that moment of *consumption* – something other than which the viewer might expect. I will try and build that into the work in terms of their expectations of what might happen in an art gallery or some other space.

And yet here the whole structure of the project, the show... ninety percent of it is all exactly the same on each different piece. – The difference, of course is the colour definition, yellow, black, brown, blue, yellow, green, pink, black, white, grey, what have you. What could this mean...Red Real Life, Green Real Life? Do they have a life outside of the structure? – I think they could. So, this system is just a sort of armature that the colours and the mark-making sit on top of, and as you pointed out, you know, we have basically small, medium and large, so it hopefully can test that response to the colour, to the mark-making on a kind of small scale, where it does look very market-oriented, let's say, and through to the large ones, which I specifically made to have a very physical human scale, you can stand in front of them, you can stand right next to them and they basically completely fill your field of vision and you can still just about smell the oil paint and it's quite physiological, phenomenological, even, this sort of physicality of them and you know, the cyan, magenta, yellow, black one, you know, it's twenty-five feet long, it must weigh 200kg. It's quite a substantial object in a sense, and that's partly also the fact that

they're all on 18mm MDF and not on canvas. I wanted them to remain quite brutal, sort of ugly objects in themselves, although the surface was very carefully contrived, very seductive, beautiful, but only perhaps a mm or two in depth.. So yeah, I mean, the structure is the same in all of them. There's no interest, there's no distraction, you know, other than the colour, the texture, the application, the scale. So, in a sense, in terms of a set of research questions, let's say, it boils those down to quite a tangible... quite a quantifiable straightforward equation. What do these specific constituent parts amount to? What does it mean when you see them repeated again and again, in different tones, in a different scale? How does it make you feel – are you seduced, repelled, bored? How do you respond to it as a totality? What does it make you think about? How did colour relations work with each other on this small scale, on a medium scale, on a big scale? How does it affect your perception of the work there? Can meaning be constructed in relation to the scale? Or, how does the response differ on the different scale? For example to the small ones you feel you could hold in your hand, and to the big ones that are these big lumps of wood that weigh fifty-five kilos each, and would probably kill you if they fell off the wall.

So, I suppose it goes back to the kind of over-arching questions for me, about the whole project which were to try to identify very particular and quite small details within my practice that I had been working with for twenty years, let's say, but never really paying enough attention to them. So, over those years, you know, many, many works were made that dealt with colour and text and letters but I felt I was never giving myself enough time to think about the decisions I was making. For example in these early t-shirt pieces that I started making around '93, which, incidentally, I called t-shirt paintings... when you look at all these together, for example at the Fruitmarket in '94 they're not so different, really, you know, in form from these paintings. Sort of squares of coloured t-shirt with three lines of text on them, I mean, not dissimilar at all in many ways to these different colours together, different text, so in a sense, there are various antecedents in the work.

Anyway over the years, particularly as the Real Life project developed I was working through bigger scale installations or you know, came across moments where I forced to make decisions about colours and what went next to each other, and why things felt different if they're blue, or red, or yellow, or green. I mean, it's very basic, of course, but you know, with this project I wanted to, take these tiny details and amplify them. I guess with a fairly open-ended ambition to see how they would resonate in a very clean 'white cube' space like this.

RB. Did you have a specific of research context you were dealing with in relationship to colour theory or a particular moment in the history of artistic investigations in the use of colour. What were the touchstones here?

RS. Well, I mean, I've articulated the sort of strategic model of everything being the same, just laying different colour relationships, which is on top of all that, of course. I'm almost embarrassed to mention it in the same breath but of course Josef Albers' 'Homage to the Square' series, which you know, is a lifetimes of work, and maybe I spent a year on this, but you know, in fairness, probably twenty years before that, thinking about it in the back of my mind, though perhaps not in this form. I don't feel there's a big rush. Of course I could have made it an extremely dry and technical sort of unpacking of that sort of theoretical perspective from a number of different angles but that's not me really. And in a way I was more excited about some abstract concept

of Reinhardt vs Ryman, black vs. white. I wanted to find out what it would mean to completely immerse myself in painting for a while, to try to make it feel like mine. Also a desire to go back to basics, to check the foundations of the most fundamental of desires to communicate. What really interested me was, actually using the paint, working with the paint and that was a bit of an unknown quantity, I didn't really plan each one. What would happen when I kind of got the paints out and put them on? The whole structure was pre-determined, the preparation the under-painting with the particular colour with acrylic, the vinyl text being applied, then already for the top coat, and when the top coat of oil paint went on, I was quite intuitively, playing with the paint and seeing what happened when you pushed it around, and as the bigger ones are more than two metres square there's a lot of paint to push around on those, so it's quite a physical relationship to them when I'm working all this paint about on the surface, and how the image, if you like, such as it is, is sort of constructed within that.

So, I wanted to leave a certain ambiguity there, a certain openness, a certain feeling that could develop from how I just... how I intuited it really, at the time of the construction, within the framework. And, for example, I worked for a long time just on the computer, everything was done on the computer, so I've got a million and one prints of everything in absolutely pure, tonally flat, perfectly beautiful, one colour behind, you know, green, another shade on top, really beautiful empathetic relationships I built up with all those combinations of them, in the computer. But as soon as I started working with them, with paint, forget it - it became much more than that. You know, maybe that could be interesting for a series of prints, flat screen prints. or something, But its is a lot to do with the paint as well, the oil paint, the quality of it - it's part of the equation for me and it's so alive... I didn't want to make that completely flat and I wanted there to be plenty of evidence of hand and evidence of the construction of them and the sort of humanness of them within the strictures of the template.

RB. So the next question is to discuss painting as a methodology. You mentioned that the method of composing the works on computer was different. It seems that in 'Real Life Painting Show' you can't *not* use painting as a method – it would be perverse to just use the computer.

RS. Yeah, although I did make some at the beginning, when I was of developing the research, that were completely flat and devoid of brushstrokes and the brush marks and were not expressive in any way, but that didn't seem to be it for me. That wasn't heading where I thought these questions were going to be addressed, if not completely answered, but it was I think in relation to this idea of the brushstroke, it's much more about one position, one voice, one hand, one person, one individual within any given peer group, society, world, country, whatever, and perhaps the idea of the show sort of underpins that as well, that's it's not a technical exercise. It's more open-ended than that and it's just the fact that all the text is the same, the template is the same, that's enough. Then the space is left for a free hand, literally, in terms of the application of paint and the way it goes on and that's the start of the journey to a dialogue.

RB. In the last decade or so there seems to be a real significant return in investment, and I don't necessarily mean an economic investment in Saatchi

terms in *The Triumph of Painting*, a real investment in painting again in terms of a return to investigate the premises, the roles and the possibilities of painting. In *Painting As Model*, Yve-Alain Bois quotes Hubert Damisch, which seems to get to the contemporary context:

'It is not enough in order for there to be painting that the painter takes up his brushes again,' Damisch tells us: it is still necessary that it be worth the effort, 'it is still necessary that [the painter] succeeds in demonstrating to us that painting is something we positively cannot do without, that it is indispensable to us and that it would be madness - worse still, a historical error - to let it lie fallow today.'¹

Damisch's comment seems to come close to something you were talking about with the possibility of the brushstroke saving the world, that it seems, you know, painting not just *is*, but *is necessary*.

RS. Obviously I've seen quite a lot of that work and seen some good, some bad, some terrible, but you know, very little that moved me. Generalising, of course, there's a lot of work in these shows you're talking about so it's probably not fair to do so, but I mean a lot of painting just kind of goes on, rumbles on and I never... a big beef that I always have with certain painters is that they never seem to consider why they're painting, it's just the sort of, it's just what they do, you know, it's what they've always done. They don't think about it, what it might mean to be making a painting right now - today. It's just simply their format, you know, their platform, their surface to work on...

Anyway, in the 'Painting as a new medium' symposium, we held while the show was on you remember I drew an analogy with works that I've made like *Dead Church/Real Life* which addresses faith and the idea of ones relationship to the church and organised religion through the process of remembering and learning and singing religious songs within a sculptural construct contrived for the work and in a sense, this painting project is similar to that. In the former I start from a position of having no faith and trying to address how one may acquire some and perhaps here with *Real Life Painting Show* my starting point is a dearth of experience or understanding of painterly notions of the sublime, let's say. Rather than painting just being *with me* I wanted to go towards painting to understand it, to interrogate it, , to ask some questions - to try to know it - initially for simply find out for myself, ... having painted quite a lot over the years in various projects and works, but really just as a basic tool.

The idea of painting as a conceptual tool was something that Francis and I were batting about, I think it was perhaps one of the sub-titles of the symposium, but I suppose that was partly my premise to go to the idea of painting, fully cognizant of these questions - the history, what it might mean, how it wasn't simply enough to be painting and you know, to lift the brush and that that brushstroke... I think can mean quite different things, depending on the context, depending on the framing of it, which again, I suppose, underpins further this idea... explains to some extent this idea of the show, it's a painting show but it's in a very particular context, it's a *Real Life Painting Show*. In a sense, I could argue that it sort of packs into all these simple images a compact history of things that I've made in the twelve year history of this

¹ Yve-Alain Bois, *Painting as Model* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT, 1990), p. 255. The quotation is from Hubert Damisch, *Fenêtre juane cadmium, ou les dessous de la peinture* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1984), p. 293.

Real Life project. For me, it's all in there, in the foundations of the construction of this project, which is I guess paradoxical with the modernistic sheen of them, but I suppose just thinking aloud, that's really part of the research question for me is, do they work individually on their own as groups, and how much can I expect my whole body of work to be... is that assimilated within these or does it stand apart from it?

RB. If I can return to Bois, in *Painting as Model* he not only refers to Damisch and to the indispensability of painting, but to painting as a site of antagonism. And there was an element to the Real Life project which I always saw as an act of defiance of to spectacular relations, spectacular society - which is I why I referred back to Tom Lawson's essay 'Last Exit: Painting' in relation to the camouflage of painting as a critique of consumer capitalism - an act of defiance of its position at the heart of the market place. These were obviously antagonisms based in the art world of 1980s/90s New York when something else may have been at stake. But although there may be this challenge, do you situate or see these works more in relation to your other works on Faith, Utopianism or Democracy, with the mention of the challenge of the sublime. It seems to be a slightly different question than attacking painting as a cultural commodity. It seems to be a different site of investment, more cultural than economic. For example, although there is a tension between the vinyl text and the paint, the machine and the hand, I'm not sure I get the same sense of antagonism, I mean we're not confronted with the tattooed figure with their back to us, the rebuff of 'Real Life' is elsewhere.

RS. No, I think this is a very particular project for me I mean, that currency of painting is so entrenched I felt I wanted to utilise it perhaps to address that spectacular relationship in some sense. though not simply to criticise. Yes maybe it is more like some of my other projects when I try to take on a particular idea of an institution and try to deal with it in my own terms, in order to set up a relationship with a broader audience. I guess painting is also an institution just as clearly defined as some of the others I've been interested in. Though in a sense they couldn't really be any dumber or have really only one level - less content but I suppose my challenge in that, perhaps of myself, is the question - can they collectively build on the Real Life project which I have been working on for more than a decade, can they embody that, can they advance that in some sense, take up the baton and run with it?

RB. On one level, you could see them as a process of reduction in order to negate that access to the sublime, which you would expect from a language of pure colour, paintings which are intended to invite the sublime. These seem to invite the sublime and negate it in a double-handed gesture. But on another level, there does seem to be a totality addressed in the sense of the scale of the show, having them all in a series of 'all creatures great and small'. Does this sense of totality have something at stake - the project of painting?

RS. Yeah, maybe it's a sort on Noah's Ark of colour, there's two of everything and they can all go into the ark of culture when the flood happens. We can unpack them afterwards and again repopulate the world with colour after the apocalypse. That's it. Thank you.

Yeah, I mean, to be honest I mean I had a lot ideas about it and a lot of impulses in the development of the show but I certainly didn't have an over-arching, conceptual agenda in terms of a fixed outcome that would be simply tested with a sort of formula versus a pre-expected solution somehow, that could then be held up against the sort of ABC conceptualism, I suppose, or ABC of painting almost. But it is much more fundamental than that, really. I wanted Blue Real Life, Yellow Real Life, Green Real Life on this sort of scale and I certainly did want to have my cake and eat it, you know? I wanted to test this... What are these colours? What do they make you feel? You know, what emotions do they conspire with you in producing? But also, I mean, as a sort of abstracted conceptual premise, Blue Real Life, I wanted to look at that and kind of imagine what that was, what that felt like? And maybe ultimately, you know, it's too ambitious for that, it's wanting to do that, and do the sort of technical exercise and do the scale and do everything, and maybe that's somehow possible.

RB. There are two things, which are related in my mind but which are not resolved, to do with the context of research, the context in which we are discussing the work, and that is the relationship between play on the one hand and research on the other. Although there are obviously research questions to discuss, I also see a lot of playful elements in the show which are either foregrounded or creep in which don't necessarily address the same kind of questions you've talked about. There are gaps in the show. In the CCA conference, you talked about one of the inspirations as not necessarily Albers but your daughter being an inspiration, your daughter playing with colour, that kind of return to the simplicity of just playing with colour or material and then just allowing that conceptual baggage or framework to fall away.

RS. Yeah, definitely...

RB. And also the smaller works become far more playful and they really start to become small jokes, in-jokes and references.

RS. Yeah, I think this thing with the kids and colour, I mean, it is very refreshing to see that sort of pre-cognitive response to colour and form and art generally, and you know it's not to do with any kind of external validation... anything anyone thinks is valid or worthwhile, or good or interesting, it's just a pure kind of joy of colour. Making a mess You know, that's definitely something I was interested in as well in terms of my own practice and where it is twenty years down the line from a beginning, it's like having dealt with a lot of, sometimes with a very small 'p', politicised questions of various investigation of subjects or institutions, structures, whatever. The constant questioning of what is art for? How can art be of value? To whom, by whom, for whom? And I don't mean in a sort of funding framework where you've got to kind of fight your corner, in a kind of honest me and you talking about it, you know, really, having a sort of interest in things political, and as we both do, dealing from time to time in the work with things with a bigger 'p' or a smaller 'p', or sometimes no 'p' for political, but having done that for ten, twenty years, with still a kind of idealistic, youthful feeling that art can in some sense have the possibility to change the world as stupid as that sounds in the current climate. Maybe that gets back to the idea of the brushstroke saving the world again?

I suppose, and maybe it's a bit of a mid-life crisis as well, turning forty, but it's sort of taking stock in a sense, formally, in the work and looking at these details that I sort of felt sometimes got missed out, but also feeling that after like, you know, twenty years of working, and making dozens of projects, hundreds of works over that time and all that time desperate for this sort of dialogue with an audience, always thinking about the audience, the context, what could be... what were people thinking about? What kind of space was it? How could I change that relationship? How could that plug into what was in the world? How could art have some meaningful engagement in that sort of context? In very practical terms, of course, knowing, understanding full well that one's own contribution to the world and culture probably has made an extremely small, invisible, dent in the kind of global carapace of capitalism, let's say, to use a term that's not really discussed any more as a catch all of all things bad. I'm a big boy and I know I've done it enough and spoken to enough of the 'audience' to know that I think there's a real value in just this voice, this presence in the world, this affirmation of one voice having a meaning and a value and a location that's embedded in something that *is* real life, let's say. So, perhaps this project maybe tries to address that from a different angle and...can, could red, yellow and blue - well, it's not my question, could... who's afraid of red, yellow and blue? - change the world let's say. Which of course, is a sort of forty year old question. But I suppose within my own practice that kind of riffing off this sort of joy of painting that my kids have and seeing how the older one is already kind of growing out of that at eight years old, and is becoming more self-conscious and 'I'm no good at painting' sort of style. Just startled to just sort of take that sort of real basic simple, stupid kind of potential for joy and affirmation of life, however sort of hippie-ish that sounds, to feel how that sort of investigation of that could perhaps inform and advance my practice generally. Some of these other kind of more deep-seated or longer term questions to see how exploring this for a year can maybe alter some of these other questions of pre-conceptions or ways of working or researching or methodology, how that could change with the emphasis on perhaps another way, looking at a very different way to try and engage in this sort of conversation with the viewer.

RB. Had you done any wider investigation or research in the context of child development or children's experience of art and drawing?

RS. I did look at quite a lot of stuff, but to be honest, I never wanted the project to be... I mean, I'm very wary of the work being so heavily 'visibly informed'. You know, I looked at a lot of that and... but really, that was kind of in the bubble around how I wanted to develop it so I think to be honest, I was looking at that but also looking within a fairly dense vein in my own practice of you know, as I say, a lot of rich experience of dealing with colour, dealing with text, dealing with scale, dealing with installation, dealing with spaces, dealing with audience and I suppose in a sense those were the sort of questions that I was wanting to address in quite a different way from the way that I normally take them on, which is possibly a lot more about the scruff of the neck and this time, I wanted to be, I don't know, be a bit more friendly or something.

RB. I only ask to establish the distance from that kind of artistic research, because I don't see it as about that at all. I see it as a spark rather than a context.

**If you turned that moment into a research project looking at children's painting
- I can see it getting a grant but maybe not being very interesting.**

RS. I think if I was talking to a student I would be telling them that all that theory and would be like in a sense, secondary research, where I'm kind of reading up on it, on the subject and I'm wanting to get informed about that but my own investigation of it has to plough its own furrow and a lot of that comes with a momentum of practice of research questions of methodology that I have perhaps developed in quite a kind of genuine, real, truthful sort of practical way over a couple of decades where I've gained a lot of experience testing these kind of questions, because virtually every thing I've ever made has been specifically for a particular context, environment, gallery, space, hillside, magazine, book, whatever. I mean the reality you know, is I've been working fairly seriously for twenty years, let's say, I feel like I've been making exhibitions for a long time, thinking about the questions of audience and context and engagement and dialogue, or not, and form and content. I've been thinking about that since the first exhibition I ever made.

So I'm always thinking about that context and how that might change the perception, the meaning, the kind of engagement with the work. So, I think my research is encapsulated in there but I think the specific research questions might be informed by the existing material which is out there in the world but *formed* more by the different avenues of investigation in my own practice in which I've sort of identified different questions, but wanting to refine or further investigate in a different way or try to renew somehow, or to further investigate, or to nail down, or to define more.

There were perhaps things that got kind of dealt with quickly at some point, but this project was an occasion where I wanted to take those out and really try to address those questions in a much more detailed way.

RB. How do you see this project developing? What's next?

RS. Actually, what I feel now is that, I think I'd still like to go into it more deeply and I think probably I would do that using small ones again, because as you said, they were more playful and just more expedient really and I think there's quite a few things in that I'd like to kind of test out more and try and it's much quicker doing it in that way so in a sense, the smaller ones are more like a kind of open sketch book or a sort of more worked up sketch book, that they're smaller kind of Maquette's almost for the ones that turn big or medium sized or whatever. So, I'd like to certainly do that but also, what I've been thinking a lot about is actually how these might be informed within the other works... with other strains of practice and I'm quite excited about that idea of physically putting these together with various kind of relationships with other formal kind of premises of the work, let's say, and with the scale and the colour and just the form of them. I'm quite interested in how they might form sort of architectural spaces in the way that I've done a lot with other works, built spaces and spaces that you go through. It crossed my mind at the beginning of this also but I wanted to kind of do it straight first in away, but I like the idea, for example, the one I'm looking at over your shoulder, cyan, magenta, yellow, black, it's about twenty-five feet long, in four sections, I really like the idea of like turning that round as if hinged, into a sort of box space and rather than looking at the things on the wall and retaining that sort of hierarchical, spectacular relationship, you actually stand in the

middle of it and it becomes this sort of enclosed space that as a viewer, you're no longer looking at, like you're actually much more inside it. So, I mean that, there's a lot of different things in there which need a lot more development and research – oh and I really want to get some neon on them, I've been messing about with that – I just can't resist it.