

## Anything Still

### John Young

If the Early period is characterized by the birth of the City out of the Country, and the late by the battle between city and country, the period of Civilisation is that of the victory of the City over country, and the late by the battle between city and country, the period of Civilisation is that of the victory of the City of country, whereby it frees itself from the grip of the ground, but to its own ultimate ruin. Rootless, dead to the cosmic, irrevocably committed to stone and to intellectualism, its develops a form-language that reproduces every trait of its essence – not the language of becoming and growth, but that of a becomeness and completion, capable of alteration certainly, but not of evolution. Not now Destiny, but Causality, not now living Direction, but Extension, rules. . .Whereas every form-language of a culture, together with the history of its evolution, adheres to the original spot, civilized forms are at home anywhere and capable, therefore, of unlimited extension as soon as they appear. . .but that which was thus disseminated was no longer a style, but a taste, not a genuine custom but mannerism, not national costume but the fashion. This of course, makes it possible for *remote* peoples not only to accept the “permanent” gains of a Civilization, but even to re-radiate them in an independent form (as “moonlight” civilization).”<sup>1</sup>

A split second after the *flash*, the world runs riot within shallow space. The photographer slips by and figures pass the eye anamorphically. Emptied of its light, we worship Hades as Pluto (riches) or Trophonios (nourishment)<sup>2</sup>. Still lifes often maintain this very effect. As a subject matter it is an *ad hoc* enquiry – it is as though still life cannot be painted unless there is a pre-given truth. Still life is painted more than often with a pre-established ontology, a steady roof over our heads – at least there are indications of this from Chardin to Cezanne. Then there are Morandi’s boxes and bottles. For Morandi, vision has always been theory-laden. In fact, those Ovaltine tins and the tea boxes which were his objects of depiction were at times painted over with the very oil paints that coat his canvas (re-presentations)! But then there are those *trompe l’oeil* of Fantin-Latour, of Peto (e.g. his *Old Scraps*, painted letters on the letter rack) – for which this force of seduction was of such a tremendous degree that “the perfection of illusion was also the hour of disillusionment” (Gombrich)<sup>3</sup>. The perfection of illusion is no other than the perfection of truths: what then is this “hour of disillusionment” – the sliding from one truth to the next yet to come? The “hour of disillusionment” might come when we realise that the “illusion” of the still life becomes a multi-coloured canvas, but who is to say that this “multi-coloured canvas” is not yet

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<sup>1</sup> Oswald Spengler *The Decline of the West* p. 108 Volume 2. Published by George Allen & Unwin Ltd., first published 1928.

<sup>2</sup> Spectrum. When we are photographed we fear the transforming hand of death, becoming-spectre. Not alienation, loss of essence (soul, breath) but the revelation of no-essence, of our death at every moment. We are (the world is) our (its) poses. (from T. Blake and my “The Disguised Saint: Bragaglia” in *PhotoDiscourse*, 1981.)

<sup>3</sup> Gombrich *Art and Illusion* p. 236

another illusion?<sup>4</sup> Is it, then, the disillusionment from the loss of power of a monistic ontology? – We are reminded here that Francis Bacon, for example, deliberately renders the haptic forces visible by smearing the code<sup>5</sup>. Surely then, this “hour of disillusionment” is only for those who fear the loss of essence (of any illusion, of any object, of any simulation); who do not allow themselves to be fascinated by the plurality of realities.

In the advent of neo-expressionism, texture (this haptic pleasure<sup>6</sup>) reaches a state of delirious ontological attention not unlike Heidegger’s attention to Van Gogh’s Old Shoes<sup>7</sup>. The difference, in fact, between the use of texture in neo-expressionism (of Europe and America) and traditional still life is the difference between desire and descriptive encodification.

With the traditional still life, and especially the *trompe l’oeil*, there is at most times a direct scalar relationship with our “natural” world-picture. The *trompe l’oeil* serves an ontological role in vision seemingly directly interchangeable with the “real” world. Thus the often used shallow-space (as Gombrich pointed out) was utilized for the still life to attain maximum “illusive” effect; “the painter of a real *trompe l’oeil*, therefore, will have to be content with a shallow arrangement, such as a letter-rack, or a flat relief, where this failure of internal movement is less noticeable”. Indeed, the *trompe l’oeil* heading toward the “perfection of illusion” only serves a purpose if the metaphysics of perfection<sup>8</sup> is toppled over, under its own fullness, and fades into the realm of nihilist *jouissance*.

It has been said that the Australian brand of neo-expressionism carries with it the ascription of “moral connotation of urgent honesty”<sup>9</sup>. This ascription of a moral sign holds true because we fail to engage on other levels normally characteristic of European and American neo-expressionism. One such instance is that of scale. Painters ranging from the cannibalistic Schnabel (with his plates, car body fillers, carpets) to McLean and Haring’s colour systems, the gestural scales of the young “Berliners” (Elvira Bach, Hella Santarossa, Middendorf and Fetting et al.) all rely on the fact that one of the primary aspects of engagement of the object with the viewer is one of desire, of *libidinal cathexis* rather than descriptive encoding<sup>10</sup>. It is because of the initial *local* failure to engage the libidinal level that we can easily succumb to the well-known monopoly of an art practice based on descriptive encoding. Evidence of this is the popularity of the photographic works of Cindy Sherman, whose “shallow space” extends to the

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<sup>4</sup> for more information on this, see Wittgenstein’s *Remarks on Colour*.

<sup>5</sup> Deleuze on Francis Bacon, *Flash Art*, May 1983.

<sup>6</sup> see Imants Tillers’ article “Fear of Texture”, *Art & Text* 10.

<sup>7</sup> In Heidegger’s “On the Origin of the Work of Art” which has resonance with Spengler’s sense of the battle between the country and the city “whereby it (civilization) frees itself from the grip of the ground”.

<sup>8</sup> . . . of a perfected subjectivity, the subject of the picture itself, the subject who paints and the subject who sees. “The represented (via the picture) is the object of the gaze of the viewer (the possessor), whilst the viewer is the object of the rhetoric of the picture (The possessed).” from R. Dunn’s “Skating on Thin Ice” in *On the Beach*; number 2.

<sup>9</sup> I.Tiller’s “Fear of Texture” op. cit. p. 11.

<sup>10</sup> For more information on this, see “Julian Schnabel” by Richard Francis, Tate Gallery Publications 1982.

construction of images by the use of slide projections as a backdrop for her “Rear Screen Projections” series of photographs<sup>11</sup>.

And perhaps, there is further distinction that has to be made – and that is the difference between libidinal cathexis seen as an effect/fascination and the local brand of romanticism seen as gestural signatures (which leads to the production of subjectivity: both of the viewer and of the artist).

This however, is not meant to be a critique of description. But the space which is generated by this initial local failure in realising the libidinal aspect of art making can be substituted by yet another cultural “cuisine”<sup>12</sup>. Indeed, the still life is one subject where traditional sources can be utilized within one’s interpretive procedures. Starting with Jacopo de Barbari (*Dead Bird* of 1504) one could paradoxically draw lines of determination/counter-determinations backward and forward to even Australian still life (e.g. a most extreme “conceptual” use of the genre can be found in the much disguised first exhibition of Imants Tillers’ exactly a decade ago titled *Moments of Inertia*<sup>13</sup>). However, it is not until of late that the very possibility of utilizing such a genre to the level of clarity it demands became possible within the arena of contemporary enquiry.

The recent still lifes by Richard Dunn recall 17<sup>th</sup> century emblematic painting. In two still lifes: *Normal Picture (typewriter and ‘X’)* and *Normal Picture (House and Gun)* – objects are rendered in almost identical shallow space which allows for the visibility of *different* representational systems. The questions associated with the category of literal/representation that is based on one ontological position drops behind the primacy of different or many representational systems. Shallow space also eliminates the flattening indifference of object-images placed (over-layed) in graphic form – in which case we do not know the exact location of each object (as in the “city” paintings of David Salle). It is because of hierarchy amongst the object-images can operate. For example, a more “convincing” object may appear “behind” a less “convincing” object.

Every object within *Normal Pictures* exists in a “twilight” context – they cannot exist *as* objects outside this shallow space – the typewriter is an axiomatic form; the cross hovers on constructivist space. In fact each object has a different object status or belongs to different representational systems. Each object belongs to a separate language-game, yet has a family resemblance with each other. (One holds back at this point in making a comparison between this level of the text and the private significance of the work).

Indeed, it is this paradoxical shallow space (the paradox generated by the notions of perspectival depth/flatness) which provides a “neutral” context for these different representational systems to exist side by side. What is at stake is this very difference between *Normal Picture* and the traditional still life; that each object exists on the *same* representational plane, whilst in the *Normal Picture* a “crowded” plurality is suggested,

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<sup>11</sup> particularly “Untitled #66, 71” from “Cindy Sherman”, Schirmer/Mosel, 1982.

<sup>12</sup> Paul Taylor, “Items in the Menu” *Art & Text* 10.

<sup>13</sup> which was quite mistakenly reproduced in the “Documenta 7” catalogue as “Monuments of Inertia” which reverberates Andre Derain’s early “monumental still life” of 1904 comprising of no less than 16 objects attributing its influence ranging from Cezanne to Gauguin!

i.e. the difference lies in the latitude of representational systems. There is then an ontological shift of the definition of “still life”, from a singular representational plane as “experienced” by a subject encoded with a specific world-view – to the construction of a linguistic subject, in the case of *Normal Picture*. Yet these ‘objects’ are not so much held together by the paradoxical space as by the unitary common denominator of light/shadow. But this common denominator also belongs to another representational system.

Normal Picture stands in sharp relief to traditional still life, because these still lifes are at the ‘critical point’ of their own definition within a genre. And it is also at this point that the critical value of “still life” provides a reduced but clear arena for the redefinition of certain codifying categories or genre within the Australian context. Perhaps the melancholy of indifference can be escaped from: to a contextual enquiry which starts from a ready-made – a ready-made manner open to transformation and “worlds in collision”.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> This text has not followed up the relationships between desire (in the form of libidinal cathexis), descriptive encoding and the manner of still life. The reason is that perhaps it is more important to point out a “critical” paradigmatic case rather than providing linguistic heuristics for visuality which might delimit the possibilities of desire.