

Jon Davies
Surface as substance

I like to think of artworks as friends, or less presumptuously, as social actors. I find this easiest to do with films, because of their verisimilitude and the way they so vividly capture the sights and sounds, feelings and textures, of the “real world.” They are so easy to enter into, to be implicated by, and to develop intimate relationships with. My friend Mark is fascinated by what happens when a scholar becomes so enraptured by an artwork that they fall in love with the artist in the process (or arguably a fantasized idea of who the artist is and what they are like). There can be no critical distance in such a situation, only adoration and romantic longing. I have fallen in love with many artworks, but paintings are underrepresented in the tally.

Most paintings are harder for me to imagine as loves, friends or social actors. Their field of potential seems attenuated – literally flat – compared to the world-within-a-world of cinema (or even to the electronic image stream of video), or to the mischievous ways that sculptures and installations can occupy a gallery space. I like them, I get up close so that I can savour every little detail, but the result is more an appreciation than infatuation. I like it when artists can shift how we look at and interact with paintings. In an Ei Arakawa performance, another artist’s paintings – Amy Sillman’s – are removed from the gallery walls and marched around on crude scaffolding by human beings as part of his whimsically destructive choreography. In a Ryan Trecartin video, the paintings become performers – they carry data, propel narratives and cause trouble. Both of these artists supplement what good old pigment-on-a-surface paintings can achieve in terms of their dexterity in moving across space and time, even taking on agency to negotiate other dimensions. They remind me of the fantasy of painting in Oscar Wilde’s enduring 1890 novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, where the portrait transforms itself. Acting as a surrogate for its beautiful, young subject, the painting decays and bears the scars of Dorian’s sins so that he may remain physically unscathed. For the most part, however, paintings just sit there and present themselves; they don’t exactly have minds of their own.

For Beth Stuart, however, paintings can be characters and relationships, concepts and feelings, gestures and outfits – almost anything, really, which is why her paintings are so compelling to those who enjoy their company. Stuart’s paintings charismatically, charmingly, make demands of us, and how we engage them. They are marvelous eccentrics, full of witty anecdotes and exotic mannerisms. In her 2011 exhibition *The Cliques*, Stuart placed her paintings around the gallery in such a way that they were paired off in close-talking conversations with one another, surrounding and perhaps talking about you. The chatty

partners somehow seemed like equals despite great discrepancies in appearance. Looking at any of her works from that point forward, I easily imagine myself as one of the blobs or pulsating energy fields that so enraptured me in that gallery. I am here, a body with boundaries and various colours, textures, forms; and there in front of me is an equal, 2D instead of 3D perhaps, but animated by limits and qualities akin to mine.

Painting is the medium that is least susceptible to diffusing into the flow of everyday life. The canvas is the ultimate signifier of "art" – it brackets the painting off from the world and takes refuge on the wall instead. Maybe the nobility of pursuing art's self-sacrificing diffusion into "regular life" is over-rated; I value the decadence and unashamed artifice of the painter's pursuit of painting. Inevitably references to the world outside surfaces – as it must – but the canvas can be sovereignty, framed.

For Stuart, painting is a physical process with intangible goals, an aesthetic struggle with unfamiliar techniques and languages, and a way of learning through making. Her work (or rather, play) is animated by an intuitive ethos and a politic based on embodied forms of knowledge. If a painting is a body, the canvas is the skin, taking pigment like makeup. Stuart has referred to painting as pushing liquid around with a hairy stick – the body of the artist is always implicated in the body of her painting. And paintings, like people, do not have fixed identities; they are mutable, shifting according to desires and projections. We are not allowed to touch the painting but the artist is. There is a physical connection between the bodies of painting and artist: they are joined by the tendril of the brush, which mediates how the insides of the artist – her intentions and intuition – manifest on the surface of the canvas. (Think of the grooves of a record read by the stylus, which translates the vibrations into sound.)

Stuart tells me about the origins of the name "doubting Thomas": the apostle Thomas refused to believe in Jesus's resurrection until he could touch His wounds with his own hand, stick his fingers right up in there (at least that is how she tells it): "knowledge through physical engagement." Thomas's probing finger is akin to a paintbrush, a hairy stick extended out into the world in order to learn. Lucio Fontana's slashed canvases come to mind and I wonder what he expected to find under the skin? (Painting is not dead, it is merely wounded.) Traditionally, in painting, all substance is in the surface, and there is only blank wall beneath – not any great secrets awaiting revelation. Why search for truth beneath the skin of something when you can scrutinize the complexity and nuance of the surface itself?

Consider painting as drag. It is a field of possibilities: an infinite number of "looks" can be assembled from a smorgasbord of potential colours, shapes, textures, and figure/ground relationships – as well as the metaphoric wardrobe full of painting's various canonical and subaltern his 'n' herstories. Because

we are working with and on the surface, all of these options can be tried on, rejected, tried on again, in every conceivable combination, until some state of fulfillment – whatever that may look and feel like – is reached. The triumph of drag has very little to do with realness, passing or mimicry, but instead with how artifice and masquerade reveal all certainties – and gender has historically been among the most established of these, despite all the evidence to the contrary – as mere constructs, paper tigers threatened by the gentlest breeze. These paper tigers are much flimsier than the technicolor dreamcoats and other fantastical garments that Stuart's painting invokes, where, as in drag, the exposure-of-certainties-as-mere-constructs resembles an ecstatic rite more than an academic analysis. We build our lives from these constructs but the more that we are cognizant of how intangible, provisional and ultimately arbitrary they are, the more we can critically gauge whether they actually serve our individual and collective senses of happiness and justice, and the more strategic we can be in deciding how much to invest ourselves in them.

Stuart writes,

The trajectory of decision making from ground pigment into image is vast enough in its scope of possibility that its shape can't be recognized; its edges can't be defined. Sensibly, the act itself of wresting an image from this formlessness is comparable to putting a mathematical frock coat on the universe. But, in a manner similar to language, it is painting's capacity to clarify its own inadequacies in giving form to its own formlessness that is precisely its potential. Most simply stated, it is those decisions, and the visibility of those decisions that went from eye to brain to hand, that is the matter that is painting. I can accept that failure is an inevitable aspect of painting. Moreover I believe that the more a painting fails to put the mathematical frock coat on its universe – *the more it resembles nothing more than painting – the more successful it is.*

Such is the endless renewal of painting, the mesmeric quality it has exerted over the sentient since the Paleolithic era. Stuart's expansive painting practice enjoys itself and its artifice, while aiding to evacuate conventions of their hold over our psyches. As one might expect, Stuart has seen fit to leave the canvas behind and see how the successes and failures of painting can be applied to processes and objects that exist in three dimensions – that stretch across space, stick up on posts, or that act as pedestals on which one might want to climb for a novel vantage point. Because painting can be characters and relationships, concepts and feelings, gestures and outfits. It is not about striving to be new but about aspiring to be ever more free.

Jon Davies is a Montreal-born, Toronto-based curator and writer. He has written for publications such as C Magazine, Canadian Art, Phillip, Little Joe, No More Potlucks and Cinema Scope, and in 2009 he wrote a book on Andy Warhol and Paul Morrissey's film Trash. From 2008 - 2012, he was an Assistant Curator at The Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery, Toronto, and he is currently the Associate Curator at Oakville Galleries. He was recently the recipient of the inaugural Hnatyshyn Foundation and TD Bank Group Emerging Curator of Contemporary Canadian Art Award.