

Interface

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Hi everybody, thank you for coming. So I figured I would talk for about 15 minutes, then I'll open it up to you all if you have any questions.

I'm going to start my talk at the beginning of my career and say that I have always struggled to answer a simple question, "What kind of work do I make? My painting has never fit neatly into any one category, so when I approached Kelly and Jane last year about doing this show what I had in mind was a project exploring the range of abstract, representational and conceptual strategies I use in my work. As I got deeper into the work I began to see this mix of approaches as perhaps reflective of a broader shift in the 21st century into a new kind of hybrid space - both physical and virtual.

To establish an historical foundation for my project, I'll begin with a brief look at a turning point in representational painting reached in the early fifteenth century. As the story goes, the Florentine painter Filippo Brunelleschi traced the outlines of some buildings onto a mirror, when he extended the rooflines he noticed that they all converged on a single "vanishing" point, thus taking the first step toward what became the modern convention of linear perspective.

It's hard to overstate the impact of this discovery, not just on renaissance painting but on the development of a new understanding of space, our place in it and ability to represent it. Together with Copernicus finding that the Earth revolves around the sun, these twin discoveries resulted in a profoundly psychological and spiritual paradigm shift, moving us from an idea of space as sacral and ordained by God, to a secular one governed by mathematical laws.

There are numerous scholars today writing and talking about a new paradigm shift into the hybrid space of the digital environment. It's a huge topic so I'm going to narrow my focus to one phenomena, what MIT social psychologist Sherry Turkle calls the experience of "real enough".



In over thirty years of studying human/machine interactions she regularly encounters what she calls a kind of real enough response. Her study participants consistently state that while they know the demands of toys like Tamagotchis, Furbies and AIBOs to be fed, pet and loved aren't real, they are nevertheless "real enough" for her human participants to form real, albeit one way, emotional bonds with the toys.

Before I extend Turkle's idea to a concept of painting, I'll first quote Leon Baptiste Alberti, another early renaissance figure:

"The ultimate aim of an artist is to imitate nature. Painters and sculptors strive by different skills, at the same goal, namely that as nearly as possible the work they have undertaken shall appear to the observer to be similar to the real objects of nature"

Nowhere is his dictum more fully realized in my mind than in 17th century Dutch still life painting, like this picture by Willem Claesz. Heda.



Willem Claesz. Heda; Still Life with Glasses and Tobacco

In her book “The Rhetoric of Perspective” Hanneke Grootenboer writes:

“Still life has a particular investment in the “art of describing” because it is purely descriptive; literally nothing distracts from the objectifying representation of mere objects.”

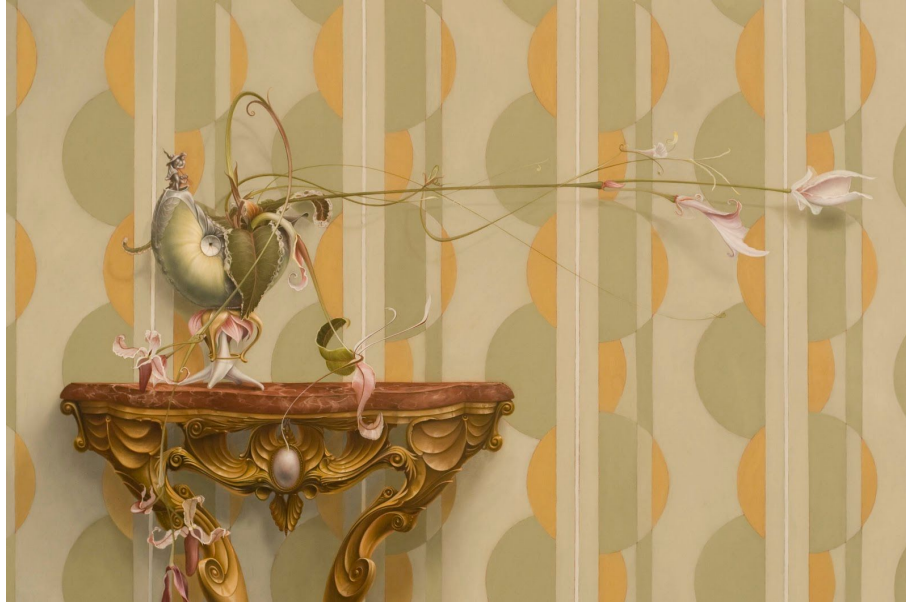
So, here we have two assertions of what it meant for artists in the classical and Baroque periods to represent something in paint and both are rooted in a modern “scientific” idea of observation.

In 21st century hybrid space however we regularly immerse ourselves in a disembodied space defined not by the presence of physical objects but by their absence. In this environment I believe the action of “observing with one’s own eyes” is no longer the basis of discerning the objective truth of a thing, but is rather to immerse oneself in a stream of visual rhetoric whose effect is to detach the experience of “real” from its connection to quantifiable truth.

When pundits today talk about a “post-truth world” I think that is about more than the spread of false or misleading statements online. I think what we are really talking about here is a much more fundamental change in the basic architecture shaping the “truth” we experience.

So, what is “Real Enough” painting? First, I think it’s more interactive, detached from objective truth, my still lifes require participation from the viewer to make them real enough. Second, I think it proposes a fundamentally different way of relating to images, and here I must give credit specifically to art historian David Joeslit, but others as well, whose ideas I’m building off of.

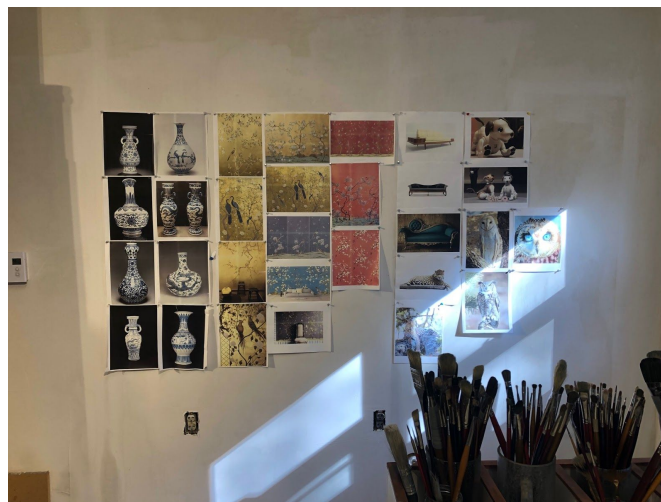
Where Heda’s picture is of a singular nature and effectively states, “this exact grouping of objects existed in this specific time and place” my idea of real enough painting, is that it originates within a format in which an infinite number of images are accessible.



Ben Lincoln: Still Life with Nautilus Cup

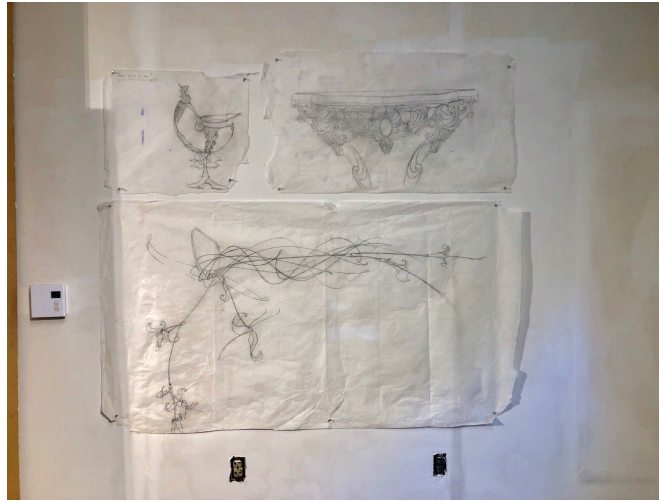
So, "Still Life with Nautilus Cup" is not a picture of a specific group of objects in a particular time and place in the way Hedda's is, but is instead a product of a vast network in which images are searchable, discoverable and transferable, linking multiple times and places.

Now a bit about my process. I have one precondition in painting still life, while I strive to paint the objects in a realistic manner, they are never physically present in my studio:



From hundreds or even thousands of images I comb through online, I select a few dozen out of which I construct a kind of ideas board. For instance, for a new painting I plan to include Chinese wallpaper, a leopard reclining on a sofa, an AIBO, an owl, and a Ming vase.

Next I'll proceed to drawing:



but here again, my approach is a little different. Along with a variety of imaginary elements I draw a series of sketches from the ideas board on separate sheets of tracing paper, once each element is complete in its own window, I “compose” the final scene by arranging and layering the drawings which I then transcribe sequentially onto the panel. The ultimate effect I’m striving for is a kind of seamless collage, there are no literal cut and paste lines to be seen, but the aesthetic of cut and paste is inherent to the process.

I’ll often do a study or two as well to practice things I haven’t done before.



I wanted to include one more note here about the scale of my still-lives as well, traditionally the genre tended to be somewhat small compared to say narrative or historical painting of the period:



Willem Claesz. Heda; Still Life with Glasses and Tobacco

Let me just put the picture by Heda back up here, as I recall, this painting is no more than thirty inches wide, thus when I viewed it from about the same distance away the proportions of the objects appeared more or less life size and in proper perspective. In my idea of Real Enough painting, perspective and proportion are arbitrary, thus individual objects may be significantly larger or smaller than lifesize, and may or may not be appropriately scaled to one another.



Ben Lincoln: Venus Interregnum



Self-Portrait Interregnum

Moving on now to my self-portrait and picture of Venus. Many European and later American ideas about painting developed over the last five or six centuries alongside a humanist philosophical tradition which, among other things, came to revere an ideal of

the self-determined individual, endowed by the creator with certain inalienable rights etc. As we now know of course, this idea of self-hood has not always been equally applied. Laura Mulvey first coined the term male gaze in the 1970's to describe an inherently gendered structure within the visible realm. Since then a great deal of scholarship has been devoted to decoding masculine and feminine symbols in art and popular culture:



William-Adolph Bouguereau; Birth of Venus



Jacopo Tintoretto; Self-Portrait as a Young Man

To the left is William Adolph Bouguereau's depiction of Venus, to the right is Tintoretto's self portrait as a young man. Two examples out of many thousands of depictions of the male artist's self portrait and the female nude. So what do these pictures say about male and female persons? I don't mean to put words in Ms. Mulvey's mouth but I think she might say that there is only one "person" represented here. In Tintoretto's eyes we see an intensity of emotion, we see intellect and a personal point of view, in short a thinking feeling subject.

Venus' eyes by contrast are averted so we have no window onto her "soul", where her vagina should be there is nothing but a smooth patch of skin. Lacking "soul", and stripped of her sexuality she has no personal identity, she is just an object, an exquisite form adored by the surrounding host of angels and nymphs.

Hopefully, in the 21st century we've made at least a little progress toward a less narrow understanding of male and female identity - and of course, as we all know, many people today don't experience gender as binary at all. But I also don't think we are yet at the place Mulvey advocated in her trailblazing essay, "Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema":

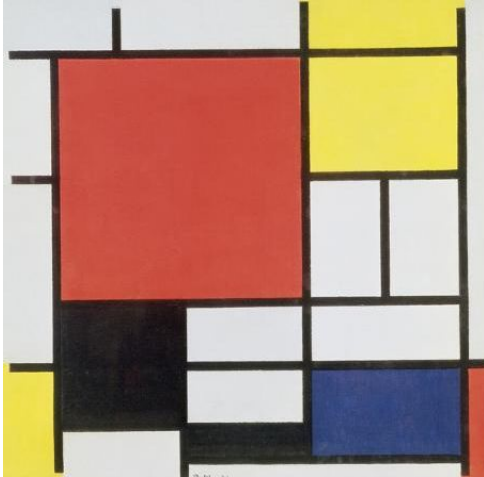
“... to leave the past behind without rejecting it, transcending outworn or oppressive forms, or daring to break with normal pleasurable expectations in order to conceive a new language of desire”

My sense of our moment is that we are in a period of interregnum - defined as an interval or pause between two periods, usually relating to some change in government or society.

What we are lacking is an image type depicting what amounts to a societal consensus around gender that functions in our time the way the Tintoretto and Bouguereau paintings did in theirs. I'm not suggesting that such a consensus is possible now or even preferable just that in a relatively short period of time western modernity has experienced a kind of untethering from established norms that though sometimes quite flawed, provided a sense of security and certainty.

We live in a deconstructed moment, the uncertainty of which is exacerbated by disruptive technologies. When I was still working on my self-portrait, a friend visited my studio and asked me what makes it a self-portrait, after all it doesn't bear any resemblance to my physical appearance. At the time I struggled to come up with an answer, but later I realized that her question is the whole point of the painting. In the digital age I don't think an image merely depicting physical appearance, however faithfully or expressively rendered, is adequate to define self portraiture. Neither am I comfortable with the idea that the data I generate online is sufficient to “represent” me. So, once again, I believe we are between idioms, in a place not fully theorized with respect to identity.

Finally, my abstract work... or at least what I call my abstract work because my approach departs significantly from what the early architects of this type of painting had in mind. Like the ideal of the individual self, generally speaking, western philosophy tends to emphasize a distinction between the external truth of an objective reality and the internal spiritual truth of the individual. Where representational painting depicts the former, the idea of the modernist abstract painters was to express the latter. To do so they abandoned what they saw as the “illusionistic practices” of painting's past, employing instead a variety of non-representational strategies:



Piet Mondrian, Composition with Red, Yellow Blue and Black



Robert Motherwell; Elegy to the Spanish Republic #132



Barnett Newman; Whose Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue



Hilma af Klint; The Ten Largest, No. 3 Group IV, Youth

Clement Greenberg, the eminent critic of the so called New York School painters of the 1950's, made his case against illusionistic practice in part by insisting on "medium specificity", that a painting should be what it's made of - paint and canvas, nothing else. Thus he believed a modern painting should ideally be flat, drippy and look like paint... period, no surprise then that he was Jackson Pollock's biggest champion.



Jackson Pollock; Autumn Rhythm, No. 30

This is by no means intended as a survey of the last century of abstraction, just as a point of departure from which to talk about my own ideas.

At the moment, the concern I am most interested in with regard to abstraction is the boundary - or rather its erosion - between the internal and external ideas of truth I mentioned earlier. Just as I've argued that the digital revolution has changed how we relate to images, I think it has also changed how we experience the self.

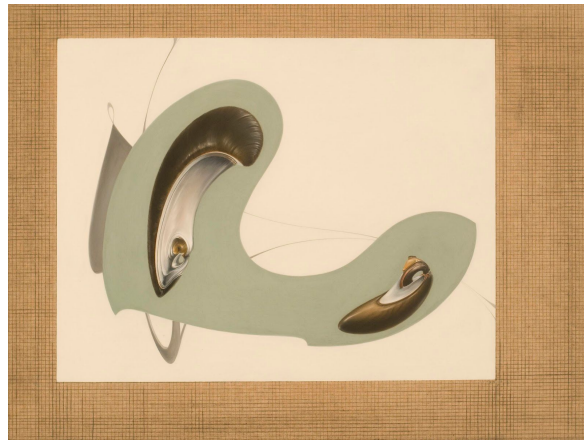
As we are all now learning, when we go online we generate behavioral data, not just what we look at but how we look at it, not just what we post on Facebook, but how quickly we write and what kind of punctuation we use etc. This data makes the most intimate details of one's inner life and personality searchable and discoverable - just like the images I use to construct my storyboards. Even more importantly though, in the new marketplace of online surveillance, our inner lives are quantifiable and tradable... like an object.

To keep me online generating data, the content I am shown is selected and sorted by algorithms to match my interests and tastes, thus the "external" virtual environment I experience is a purposefully tailored reflection designed to resonate as accurately as possible with my internal reality. Online, we are both subjects and objects in the fullest sense of those two words. I'm not suggesting that we've lost our internal dimension, just that the boundary between the inner self and external environment is less distinct.

In my view, the "illusionistic practice" of our time is to maintain that the internal truth of the self and an external truth of "reality" remain as separate as they once were. Where the modernists eliminated "objects" from their abstract practices, I specifically include forms rendered as objects.

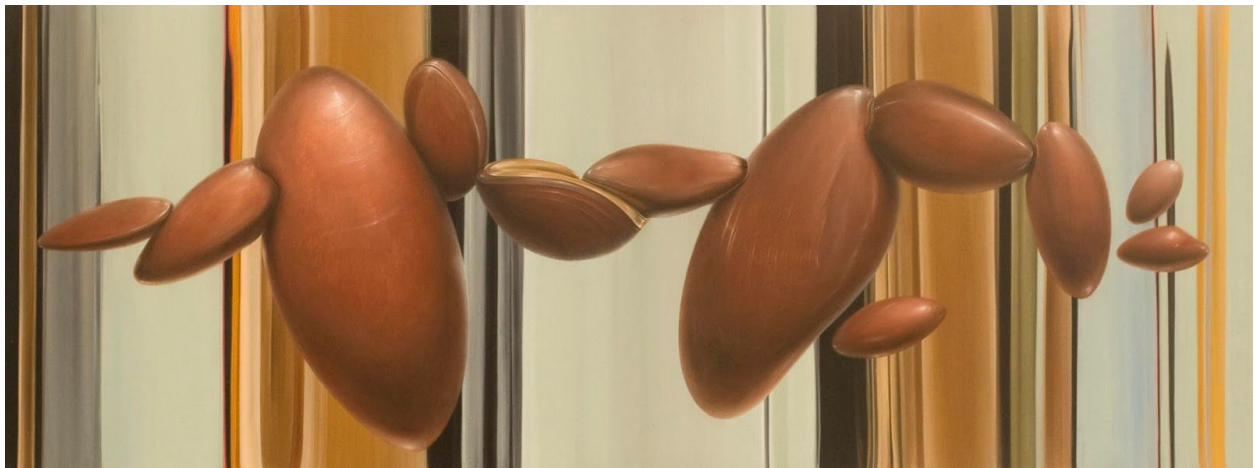


Ben Lincoln: Abstract Solids; Group II, No. 1



Abstract Solids; Group I, No. 1

In my pictures titled Abstract Solids, this is in fact my only goal, propose an idea of abstraction that includes objects. The artist Frank Stella frequently said of his work, “what you see is what you see”, I would say the same thing about my approach to abstraction. There is no narrative, spiritual or archetypal truth I am trying present, just expressive forms reflecting an internal state of sensation and rendered as objects.



Ben Lincoln: Elegy to the Modern Republic No. 2

My Elegy paintings are both an homage to and departure from Robert Mowtherwell's famous Elegy series, and like his are a kind of lament for something vanishing or already lost. They were originally inspired by dance performance which began with a group of four dancers at the back of the stage rhythmically pressing their bodies against

one another, later in my studio I made a series of sketches of simple organic shapes pressed together:



My Elegies have a single aim, to evoke in an abstract work the simple physicality and sensuality of touching bodies, something we lose in cyberspace.

To conclude, I'm fond of analogies, so here is how I think of my abstract paintings; in them I work with what I think of as an internal language based in my sensory experience of my body, the grammar and syntax of this language however derives from external phenomena of light and shadow, surface and reflection more generally associated with representational painting. For me abstraction and representation proceed from the same source and are part of a common practice that reflects the blurring of the boundary between human subjects and external objects.

Thank You.

