

A New Narrative of Time;

time and space mediated through the medium of painting.



By Lisa Rayner

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This exegesis is submitted to Auckland University of Technology, in partial fulfillment for the degree of Master of
Art and Design.

2010

Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Lisa Rayner

October 1st 2010

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge and sincerely thank my supervisors, Andy Thomson and Ian Jervis, for their amazing support and help throughout this project. A big thank you as well, to the rest of the Art and Design staff for the continued support over the years.

Thank you to my parents and extended family for their unwavering support and willingness to share their precious family album. Stella Castle and the rest of the studio PALS, thank you for the good times. To my esteemed colleagues, Gemma Skipper and Phillip Good, thank you both, this project would not have been possible without you.

And thank you Brendon Waterhouse and the Waterhouse family for all the encouragement and support.

For Nana

Abstract

Through a mediation across time and between images this project explores the many and varied perspectives thrown back and reflected onto a represented past. The aim is to bring these perspectives into some alignment to draw a connection between the past and present. Somehow drawing the past and present closer, as if I might get close enough to synthesize the two. The project arises from the sense of longing that came out of looking at a personal family archive of photographs; an exploration of the sense of longing takes place within the act of painting. This project hopes that through the act of painting new connections might be drawn and new narratives of time opened up in an unreal painted space. This project is an attempt at gaining perspective on myself as a product of this genealogy and these represented moments. The performance of painting opens up the possibility of re-experiencing and connecting with the past, even if just for a fleeting moment.

As a practice-based project, this exegesis comprises 20% of the entire thesis, with the studio-based work comprising 80%.

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Introduction:

"The places we have known do not belong solely to the world of space in which we situate them for our greater convenience. They were only a thin slice among contiguous impressions which formed our life at that time; the memory of a certain image is but regret for a certain moment; and houses, roads, avenues are as fleeting, alas, as the years."

- Proust, M. *In Search of Lost Time*, Vol 1.

The family archive is a documentation in pictures; mostly without any form of editing both in the process of making and in the output of the image. In every sense they are amateur with the purpose of providing a physical documentation that represents past time and represents the passing of time. These photographs operate as a trigger for a connection with the past and our own construction of a personal narrative of time. My project, *A New Narrative of Time; time and space mediated through the medium of painting*, has come out of my experience of looking at a personal family archive. The ritual of pouring over these represented memories evokes a desire and longing for connection. The act of painting is a way of dealing with this sense of longing. Through the medium of paint and the act of painting this project attempts to enact this represented past and draw meaningful connections through time and space. The process of painting serves to question and renegotiate temporal and spatial connections evoked by the photograph – allowing a new narrative of time to be presented in the unreal space of painting. Painting becomes a way of thinking and rethinking perspectives; my own and an imagined perspective of the people represented in the photograph. Painting mediates through and between these perspectives, in the vain hope of somehow drawing them into alignment - so they might exist as one in a new narrative space. As such, the performance of painting offers the possibility of drawing together the past and present - as if I could, for a moment, collapse time and experience a meaningful connection with the past. A connection eluded to but never delivered by the family archive.

1.0 The Imperative to Connect

1.1 A Meditation on Pictures:

The personal family archive exists as a memento or keepsake and the experience looked for or hoped for (when surveying these pictures¹) is one of connection. Leafing through a box of family photographs I encounter my parents' wedding, my grandmother who died and the birthday party of an unknown friend. I see people I barely know, have lost touch with, or don't even remember. My brother and I hold hands, smile, look cute, go to school, go on holiday, go to high school, dress up, have relationships, and go to balls. I order the events represented in my mind and create a virtual image of my life (in my family). However, a distinct sense of dissatisfaction arises when the virtual image I have created cannot provide the connection I seek. Looking at a photograph taken of myself at my fifth birthday party (Figure 1) I initially notice what Roland Barthes referred to as, the *studium*². The *studium* constitutes a mise-en-scène or general body of information that establishes context and provides nothing more than an "average affect"³. The clothing is reminiscent of the nineties (a time I remember with some clarity) and the surroundings specific to the context of a child's birthday party in a working class neighbourhood. This recognition and familiarity comes from both my memory of the event itself (however limited or affected it may be) as well as a more substantial knowledge of the people, place, and importantly, the ethos of the family and wider community depicted. This experience of looking back to a past that I recognise brings about a kind of nostalgic desire for connection. A longing to connect with that past in a way that goes beyond recognition to something more substantial and tangible. In this sense the average affect is transformed by the spectator into something more. The experience of looking through a family album can open up this need for connection. However, limited by its material reality the family archive falls short on delivering connection in any kind of meaningful or immediate way.

¹Picture: The photograph as a material object.

²Roland, B. (1981). *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. New York: Hill and Wang. p. 26.

³*Ibid.*



Figure 1.



Figure 2.

This lack of connection is evident and even more exaggerated when looking at photographs taken of my parents before I was born. These photographs evoke a sense of longing that comes from a place of not knowing rather than nostalgia. Countless questions are raised, about them as young people, about their friends and experiences and also about the sensibilities of the time in which they were taken. One photograph in particular struck me. It's of my father, taken in the seventies when he is probably about twenty years old (Figure 2). He and a group of friends pose together for the camera in a barren field. Each young man holds a beer bottle, and one holds a bottle of spirits. Their attire is casual and working class but their serious expressions and somewhat formal group pose, coupled with the deserted location gives the photograph an eerie feeling. I wonder what they were doing there. Who took the photograph? What happened in the moments before this photograph was taken? I begin to speculate and construct possible narratives in my mind about the circumstances surrounding this moment. I wonder what it felt like to be there. Was it a crisp winter afternoon or a balmy summer evening? And did the air feel heavy with the sombre atmosphere that I read? The questions opened up by this picture are endless, I feel dislocated in being unable to really identify with or relate to the time, place or people represented.

In *An Introduction to Metaphysics*⁴ Henri Bergson approached the subject of time by distinguishing two ways of knowing: relative and absolute “The first implies that we move around the object; the second that we enter into it”⁵. The relative is where understanding is achieved by moving around an object or by coming to know it by symbols or words (that still fail to render its true nature)⁶. Absolute knowledge can only be given by intuition – by placing oneself within an object to discover its uniqueness that is inexpressible. Photographs from the family archive evoke a sense of wanting to know an experience depicted in an absolute sense. However, we weren’t there, in the moment and experiencing the event depicted in the photograph, so we can only know by relative means. This knowing is then in relation to what we already know and through cognitive filters, from a singular and external perspective. I have an image of the seventies that is only partial and contingent, constructed of what I have read about or seen in movies or on television, as well as what I know from my parents. I have no real idea of what it was like to grow up in that time, how people thought or acted or even what was going on in the world. The questions I am left with point out this gap in my knowledge. My awareness of the vast expanse of time and space separating me from that moment gives me a sense of displacement and loss. Even though I never knew these young men or lived in this era, I feel as though I have lost something important.

1.2 Temporal Distance:

In this sense there is a sadness associated with the family archive. The represented memories can be happy ones but the overwhelming sense of loss lingers regardless. This is compounded by a compulsive and returning interest in surveying this evidence of events and time passing. The camera snap attempts to freeze time and preserve it but the end result holds only a partial sense of truth or authority. The photographs are limited in that they cannot convey any sense of the reality they depict. Some are black and white and others appear tonally drawn out as a result of fading over the years. The atmosphere is lost in

⁴ Bergson, H. (1999). *An Introduction to Metaphysics*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 21.

time, the photographic object a residue of that event but in no way a surrogate for experience. In *The Ontology of the Photographic Image*⁷ Andre Bazin writes that family photo albums are:

“The disturbing presence of lives halted at a set moment in their duration, freed from their destiny not however by the prestige of art but by the power of an impassive mechanical process: for photography does not create eternity, it embalms time”⁸

Photographs in our family albums are nothing more than an imprint of light on photographic paper, yet we project some sense of longing or nostalgia onto them because of what they represent. False or subjective connections are drawn between myself and family, places or behaviours; allowing for a narrative to be built around the image. Looking back at a photograph of my father in the seventies I am aware of the great deal of time and space that separates me from that moment. This distance enhances my desire to draw together the past and the present, so I could somehow come to know this moment and feel connected to the experience represented in the picture. Last year I came across a photograph of my father as a teenager where he is tentatively reaching out to a faun (Figure 3). The tender moment depicted is so far removed from the man I know as my father that I felt if I could somehow understand or come to know the experience - that I might discover something about my own identity in relation to him. While I know this in itself is impossible, as I can't know an experience I did not have and is no longer available - I search for it regardless. I went about painting this photograph (Figure 4) in an attempt at re-experiencing or enacting the moment represented in the photograph to try to come to know my father and, in turn, myself. The subsequent painting reflected its photographic source and as a result the work was etiolated (faded and stretched out), further compounding my initial feeling of distance and detachment. It revealed nothing of the character of the boy in the picture and offered no sense of connection. It was a pale, blown-out version of the original black and white photograph and seemed to recess into an unreachable and stagnant past. The reality of that moment seemed to slip further from my grasp. In the book *Camera Lucida*⁹ Roland Barthes discusses the feeling of loss and death associated with photography and in particular within

⁷Bazin, A. (1960). The Ontology of the Photographic Image. *Film Quarterly*, 13(4), pp. 4-9.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 8.



Figure 3.



Figure 4. *Deer*, 800x1200 mm, 2009, Oil on Board.

the context of the family archive. He talks about the idea of looking back to a time past and the affect the apparent distance has on a spectator. An affect compounded in the depiction of a lost loved one but present in all photographs of this nature.

“I read at the same time: This will be and this has been...What pricks me is the discovery of this equivalence. In front of the photograph of my mother as a child, I tell myself: she is going to die: I shudder... Whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe...These two little girls looking at a primitive airplane above their village (they are dressed like my mother as a child, they are playing with hoops) - how alive they are! They have their whole lives before them; but also they are dead (today), they are then already dead (yesterday). At the limit, there is no need to represent a body in order for me to experience this vertigo of time defeated.”¹⁰

And although my father is not dead, the young man in my photograph, who reaches out to the faun, in a sense is, and although I didn't know this young man, I can't help mourning his death.

⁹Roland, B. (1981). *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. New York: Hill and Wang.

¹⁰Roland, B. (1981). *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. New York: Hill and Wang.p. 96.

2.0 Images and Psychology; from the family archive to painting

2.1 The Virtual Image:

A photograph provides a slice of time and image that exists not in the material of the picture but in the consciousness of the spectator. The rest of the image is projected and constructed by the spectator - the photograph itself merely a trigger for this construction. The photograph here offers an unstable image which has the potential to shift with the passing of time, as well as dramatically change through each individual viewing experience. Photography's slippery and suspect relationship to veracity means that each new incarnation of the image (created in the consciousness of the viewer) holds as much (or as little) truth as the last. The subject's existence in a particular time and space cannot be denied. The photograph is evidence of this existence. Andre Bazin stated: "In spite of any objections our critical spirit may offer, we are forced to accept as real the existence of the object reproduced, actually re-presented, set before us, that is to say, in time and space"¹¹. The photograph, in some cases is the only thing that remains of an event, person or place. The creased and faded image seems insubstantial but the once presence of a moment, in this paper object, is confirmed. Roland Barthes describes the photograph as "a certificate of presence"¹²: 'that which had to have been'¹³. Which confirms the existence of people, places and events occurring in front of the camera, even if only for a fleeting moment. This apparent authentication of subject matter opens up this longing for connection. It suggests something more than evidence of a time passed and eludes to a hidden 'truth'. The photographic image is on paper, and is produced by an 'impassive mechanical process'¹⁴ the result of which is a reaction on photographic paper between light and chemicals. It is a creased and faded object, that has been produced with little thought or care; the colours often strange and acidic due to the blunt chemical and mechanical processes used to create it.

¹¹Bazin, A. (1960). The Ontology of the Photographic Image. *Film Quarterly*,13(4). p. 8.

¹²Roland, B. (1981). *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. New York: Hill and Wang. p. 87.

¹³*Ibid.*

¹⁴Bazin, A. (1960). The Ontology of the Photographic Image. *Film Quarterly*,13(4). p. 8.



Figures 5-8.

The material, objective nature of a photograph undermines any potential for connection. The family archive is a collection of paper objects, and as such is ill-equipped for such a task. The presence that is confirmed by the photograph is laden with the heavy weight of time (and with that, death and loss) when encountered by a spectator. Because of the inadequacy of the photograph, a sense of presence - that ineffable quality which we desire and long for (that would provide relevance) cannot be experienced. The family archive fails to actually deliver depicted loved ones, or lost time. Their once-presence only serves to point to their absence now. In the viewing of the photograph they are lost once again, rendered mute and insubstantial by the medium. Coming across a photograph of my grandmother who recently passed away, like Barthes with the *Winter Garden*¹⁵ photograph of his mother, I can see only death. Pictures of her in the family archive have been transformed into a kind of ghostly residue since her passing. They are acutely inadequate and can in no way represent the dynamic, quick witted, darling woman I knew her to be. Some photographs capture something of her character and offer a fleeting moment of implied connection but leave me dissatisfied. Roland Barthes however used the word *punctum*¹⁶ to describe something in the photograph that affects the viewer: "A photograph's punctum is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)"¹⁷. Within the context of a family album the word *punctum* could be used with reference to a feeling of personal significance or connection, to the people or places represented in a photograph. It is the idea that while pouring over family photographs one might be struck by a feeling at some point caused by a person, place, action or event represented. Opening up an emotional resonance and activating something in our subconscious that gives the feeling of being momentarily linked to that time and place. The *Punctum* here is perhaps the illusion of presence, the mere suggestion of it which further exacerbates the aforementioned longing for connection.

¹⁵Winter garden photograph: a photograph of Roland Barthes mother taken before he was born, that he found after she died.

¹⁶Roland, B. (1981). *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. New York: Hill and Wang. p. 27.

¹⁷ Ibid.



Figures 9-11.

2.2 Painting as Performance:

The act of painting explores the inadequacy of the photograph and opens up the possibility of somehow animating an image of the represented past; bringing it to life and making it vital. Threads of connection can be drawn across time through the family archive. The photographic image however cannot substitute experience so can provide no true sense of connection in any meaningful or immediate way. The performance of painting in this project becomes a re-experiencing of an image of the past, in the hope that through this painted action threads of connection could pull a moment from the past close enough so it could be briefly realised, known and connected with in the present. The process or action of painting is an intuitive process; my physical involvement with the material of paint in an intuitive way instils an indelible emotional presence into the work. A spectator too must be involved intuitively as the painted image cannot be decoded into a simple narrative and can only be experienced as sensation. There is awareness, for the spectator, of some emotional significance that has become non-specific and ineffable in paint. Painting, in this project, becomes a means to unpick the emotional and psychological reasons for this resonance evoked by photography. Not to determine factual specifics about an event represented in the photograph, but to connect with the sensibility of a moment. Painting attempts to extend connections by means of speculation and imagination. To draw together perspectives as if to collapse a temporal and spatial distancing (if only for a moment). This extension through painting invites the materialization of the virtual image in my mind that has come out of the original experience of looking at the photograph. This virtual image is framed by my psychological relationship to the people, places and actions depicted as well as to the wider context of the present time in which I live i.e. the political and economic climate. Opening up these ideas in paint is an exploratory process that involves cutting and pasting photocopied pictures from my own personal family archive and making multiple drawings, studies and paintings. This process shifts, moulds and edits the image continually and intuitively. Just as the psychology and emotion evoked by a photograph is subject to change, the painted image is never stable. The act of painting opens up perspectives on the image through a web of new connections.



Figure 12. *Girl in Forest 1*, 210x290mm, Oil on Paper, 2010.



Figure 13. *Girl in Forest 2*, 210x290 mm, Oil on Paper, 2010.



Figure 14. *Girl in Forest 3*, 210x290 mm, Oil on Paper, 2010.

The painting *Girl in Forest*(Figure 15) comes from a close study of a single photograph of my mother as a young woman standing in a field with three friends next to a car (Figure 16). Quite a banal picture in most respects, but for me, something about my mother in the image struck a chord. Perhaps it was the way she was standing, with such poise and exuding what I read to be a kind and warm aura, relaxed but vulnerable. My reading of the image is of course influenced and affected by my personal relationship with, and knowledge of, the person I actually know as my mother. Even so I believe these qualities of warmth and vulnerability to be subtly embedded in the photograph itself, perhaps in her body language, or the way the others situate themselves in relation to her. My acute awareness of this is because of my privileged relationship to the subject, putting me in a position to be able to reveal that which is inherent and embedded through the mediation of paint. In my painting, singling her out as a lone figure in a sparse ambiguous landscape was a way of isolating and amplifying these things. Two tree trunks jut out from the landscape, asserting their vertical nature in the horizontal plane. The figure of the young girl operates in much the same way and is painted with no more detail, given no more importance in the composition. The absence of detail and fluid painterly form of the figure works to undermine her 'status' as figure and creates a sense of ambiguity as a spectator is offered limited information (particularly with regards to her identity). Like the tree the figure affirms its presence as a vertical in the horizontal. Through painting I explore and reflect on this gentle vulnerability I see in the photograph. The painted figure appears to look out, aware and uncomfortable being observed. Murky, painterly shadow's slide across the foreground on a plane that expands out to a distant horizon. The uncertain landscape and subsequent atmosphere, created in paint, explores and opens up ideas and emotions that have come out of this experience of looking at an old photograph. The *punctum* I experienced in the photograph is realised, amplified and extended in paint.



Figure 15. *Girl in Forest 5*, 800x1000 mm, Oil on Linen, 2010.



Figure 16.

We encounter the family archive through cognitive filters. These filters are made up of a range of factors, from the personal and familiar to cultural influences and it is through these that we engage with images. Cognitive filters exist in our subconscious and as such are difficult to be examined or known in any kind of objective way. When looking at a photograph of my parents taken before I was born I reflect back an image of them as my mother and father. The fact that they are not yet parents, and a long way from being parents, doesn't seem to matter. Although the photograph opens up questions about them in their youth I read in their young faces the wisdom of age and an air of responsibility – as though time had already connected them to their future selves. The photograph acts as a trigger, evoking an image that exists in my imagination and opens up a speculation on the past. I throw back a kind of virtual image of what might have been. In doing so, filling in the gaps in my knowledge to form particular narratives that are influenced and affected by what I see in the pictorial image and what I have already established in my imagination. The performance of painting is a way of thinking and an act of mediation across time and between images. Painting extends the reflective experience of looking at a photograph and through a mediation between these images attempts to re-experience a time past (a transience which is partially and inadequately captured in the photograph). Painting as a means of reflection and meditation becomes a way of exposing and amplifying psychological and emotional 'truths' which are both inherently embedded in me as well as suggested by the photograph. I came across a photograph of my father as a young boy of maybe three or four (Figure 17) where he is standing in a backyard that I recognise as that of my grandparents because of the old fashioned clothes line. Hung on the clothes line is a sheet, caught by the wind but frozen in the faded black and white photograph. I know this backyard intimately as I grew up playing around that clothes line with my brother and cousins. The image of the clothesline has such resonance with me that although it is an image of my father as a child in the 1950's, it feels as much a representation of my own childhood as it is his. The process of painting this image was more than an attempt at enacting this moment to draw together the past and present, it was a way of opening up and extending this emotional resonance in paint. As such the act of painting becomes a way of searching for and locating the image which opens up from material relations of pigment on a surface. The shifting and moulding of figure, form and composition causes a metamorphosis to take place where the pictorial image opens up

connections across time and space. The painted image, a residue of this act of metamorphosis, ceases to be understood and discussed in any narrative way and can only be talked about in terms of affect. The clothes line was repeated several times (Figures 18-21), each time chance, and the paint, fell in a different way. The atmosphere created in paint in each separate work explores different facets of my psychological relationship to the space and the photograph. My emotional connection and psychological relationship to this object is never revealed in its entirety. How can that be? For the spectator, there is an unwarranted sense of importance placed on the clothesline in its repetition; each painting offering a glimpse or suggestion of something more poignant. There is a sense that the image could be repeated again and again and but reveal nothing further. Its un-locatable, undefinable nature means that it cannot be situated within a narrative and a spectator can only experience the work by means of affect or sensation.



Figure 17.



Figure 18. *Backyard 1*, 400x500mm Oil on Canvas, 2010.



Figure 19. *Backyard 2*, 210x290mm, Oil on Paper, 2010.



Figure 20. *Backyard 3*, 210x290mm, Oil on Paper, 2010.



Figure 21. *Backyard 4*, 210x290mm, Oil on Paper, 2010.

3.0 Eluding Representation

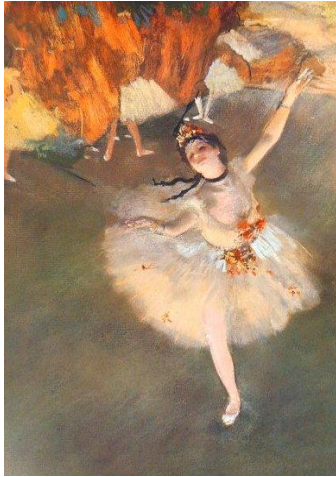


Figure 22. Degas, E. *The Star*.

3.1 An Indeterminate Exploration:

The painted image arises through the action of painting and the relational distribution of pigment on the surface of a canvas. *A New Narrative of Time; time and space mediated through the medium of paint* is an exploration through the performance of painting. It is an exploration into how paint acts on the surface of a canvas and the ability of paint to embody the sensibility of a sprawling landscape in an economy of brush strokes, and at the same time be just paint - just a sweep of paint on canvas. Edgar Degas' painting *The Star*¹⁸ (Figure 22) is an example of this style of painting. The dancer in the foreground is in parts highly rendered but her dress blurs into a soft luminescent haze its edges blending into the ground. Disembodied legs and a flourish of colour is all it takes to suggest dancers in the background behind her. The loose rendering of these background dancers isn't received as inaccurate but rather as a celebration and acknowledgement of the indeterminacy of

¹⁸ Degas, E. (1876). *The Star*.

painting. It is playful and assured, as well as controlled and delicate; slipping in and out of figuration and abstraction, allowing a spectator to appreciate an ebb and flow. Moving effortlessly through multiple readings of the image and its form and plasticity. This exploration through painted means with a focus on the visual-material nature of paint, also explores the potential of the pictorial image to lead a viewer off into known narratives. The painted image is here not representation but the residue of an exploration. The visual elements in a painting cannot simply be broken down into an indexical system of coding. The painting is experienced as image, rather than decoded, as language. A photograph of my brother and I as children is a representation of us at a certain age, and although the visual elements cannot be broken down and decoded into a language that forms a clear narrative, I am able to create narratives from the information given to me in photographic image. Painting from a photographic source therefore has the potential problem of illustrating narrative. In Michel Foucault's book, *This is Not a Pipe*¹⁹, Foucault discusses the work of surrealist painter Rene Magritte. Magritte's work was able to exclude itself from the "language that lies buried in representational realism"²⁰ not by use of abstraction (like many of his contemporaries) but by using 'literalism to undermine itself'. "How to banish resemblance and its implicit burden of discourse? Magritte's strategy involves deploying largely familiar images, but images whose recognisability is immediately subverted and rendered moot by impossible, irrational or senseless conjunctions"²¹. In subverting the subject Magritte dislocates a viewer from any of the associated narratives surrounding that subject. Thus allowing the painting to be 'nothing other than itself'²²; a residue of action. The indeterminate nature of paint, within the event of painting, might allow me to capture something temporal that has been lost in time. The painting *Red Dress 2* (Figure 24) came from looking at a photograph of my mother as a young woman crossing the street. The act of painting in this work was an exploration

¹⁹Foucault, M. (1983) *This is Not a Pipe*. California: University of California Press.

²⁰Ibid. p. 9.

²¹Ibid. p. 8.

²²Ibid. p. 8.



Figure 23. *Red Dress 1*, 210x290mm, Oil on Paper, 2010.



Figure 24. *Red Dress 2*, 210x290mm, Oil on Paper, 2010.

of her presence in the space. In the photograph she was cut off at the waist so cast no visible shadow. How could this be? In the painting, like in the T.S. Eliot poem, her shadow is ‘striding behind her.’²³ A block of charcoal coloured paint substantiates her, locating her in the painted space and asserting her presence. Within the event of painting, she is at once present and at the same time just paint.

3.2 Opening up Affect

The figure evokes many and varied narratives. Treating the figure simply as an object, that holds and reflects light helps evade this problem of narrative. A viewer is able to move more easily beyond figuration and experience the composition as a whole without being preoccupied with decoding a narrative. For example, as discussed earlier, in *Girl in Forest* (Figure 15) the handling of the figure is comparable to the rest of the composition, giving it no greater status and appointing no unnecessary emphasis. It is loosely, but clearly and succinctly, explored in paint without any particularizing detail or information. The figure appears to sit in an unreal, expansive landscape, as if to raise questions about her identity and purpose.

²³Eliot, T. S. (1963). *Collected Poems, 1909-1962*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World. p. 45.

The atmosphere is one of suspense and uncertainty as the picture falls away into paint and ambiguity. Even upon moving closer a spectator is offered no more information, leaving questions around narrative hanging, unanswered. This treatment of the figure takes the pressure off the narrative without allowing it to disappear. *A New Narrative of Time; time and space mediated through the medium of painting* challenges traditional understandings of figure-ground relationships, to further disconnect from known narratives. The work explores this through a pushing and pulling of background and foreground, situating it, as a result, somewhere between figuration and abstraction – as the figural²⁴. This causes a slippage between a spectators' awareness of the materiality of the work and representation, leaving a lingering presence of unknown, ambiguous and enigmatic narratives. My practice employs a sort of studied play and experimentation, where the composition is shifted, recomposed, broken down and built back up continuously. By means of painting wet on wet, figure and ground are moulded in and out of being. At other times, a work will be partially or completely sanded back, and the *pentimento*²⁵ of the previous image allowed to show through. As if a painting could reflect back on itself, the *pentimento* is an echo lost in time and space like the image in the photograph. The painted image is in a continual shifting process; evidence of this process i.e. the emerging of a previous image, scale discrepancies or any kind of rendering 'inaccuracy', exist within the image alongside the editing trajectories. The duration of the action of painting and of the attendant shifting material and visual relations is thereby evidenced in the work, and the painting's material nature is acknowledged. For example, *Figures in a Field* (Figure 25) was a painting that had been re-worked after several months; sanded, scraped back and painted over. The subject, a vast and expansive field, is interrupted by the texture and form of the original painting, breaking the illusion of the plane.

²⁴Deleuze, G. (1990). *The Logic of Sense*, New York: Columbia University Press.

²⁵Pentimento: An alteration in a painting, evidenced by traces of previous work.



Figure 25. *Figure in Field*, 800x1000mm, Oil on Canvas, 2010.



Figure 26. Detail from *Figure in Field*, 2010.

The dislocation, occurring because of two overlaid images, prevents a spectator being swept up in the rendering of the subject, where they could easily be led off into familiar narratives reminiscent of traditional landscape painting. The viewer is then further dislocated by the unusual spatial relationship the figures have to one another. One is much taller than the other two, but not forward enough in the composition to justify the discrepancy in scale. The rendering of the figures means that the differences in scale can't be reconciled by labelling one as adult and the others children. The forgiving nature of the unreal space of painting means however that the scale doesn't feel wrong or call attention to its 'wrongness'. Allowing this disorientation of perception to work to preclude known narratives without disrupting the image. In some areas, figures seem to recede into the field as the ground pushes forward to overlap or envelop the figure. This treatment of figure ground questions, and the way we construct our image of the world and blurs the line between the real and actual and the imagined.

4.0 The Unreal Space of Painting

4.1 Exploring Perspectives in Painting

The painter Dexter Dalwood deals with the idea of distancing through time and space in his work and employs a similar process of construction in order to blur the relationship between reality and perception. Interestingly, Dalwood makes work that references people, places or events that he has no real or substantial knowledge about. They are paintings of famous or iconic places he has never himself seen. These spaces, because of their cult like status, exist both in reality and as imagined spaces. They are plausible suggestions of the iconic haunts that linger invisibly in our collective consciousness. McCarthy's living room²⁶ (Figure 29), Kurt Cobain's Greenhouse²⁷ (Figure 28) and Jackie O's yacht²⁸ (Figure 27) are depicted with uncanny believability; not as real occupied spaces but our media-constructed fantasies of them. His work, in this sense, sits



Figure 27. Dalwood, D., *Jackie Onassis*.
© Dexter Dalwood

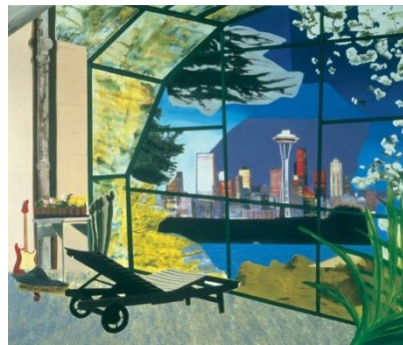


Figure 28. Dalwood, D., *Kurt Cobain's Greenhouse*. © Dexter Dalwood



Figure 29. Dalwood, D., *McCarthy's List*.
© Dexter Dalwood

²⁶ Dalwood, D. (2000). *McCarthy's List*.

²⁷ Dalwood, D. (2000). *Kurt Cobain's Greenhouse*.

²⁸ Dalwood, D. (2002). *Jackie Onassis*

outside of what is real and actual, even outside of the linear nature of time. The paintings are a culmination of what is known and the myths that surround the place or the people and events associated with that event. The subsequent images are a construction of these things and insert themselves into the myth; adding to it, becoming intertwined with the spectators' future imaginings of the iconic person, place or event. Dalwood's painting is intertwined with the fantasy. Similarly, in my own painting I am interested in this idea of a construct, a construct and conflation of what is known and what is perceived to be known, as well as the things we project (i.e. perceptions that come as a result of cognitive filters). This construction represents time in the unreal space of painting, offering a new narrative of time that both encompasses and excludes the past, present and future. It does this by undermining the arrow of time by way of sitting outside of linear or chronological time. In *The Ambassadors*²⁹ (Figure 30) Hans Holbein depicts two French ambassadors standing either side of a complex still life depicting scientific instruments of the time, along with objects relating to their travels. The arresting part of the image is the elongated human skull which hovers in the foreground. The skull can only be recognised as such when viewed from a particular angle (Figure 31), pointing out the limitations of our vision in time and space and suggesting the existence of some 'other' space where such limitations do not exist.



Figure 30. Holbein, H., *The Ambassadors*.

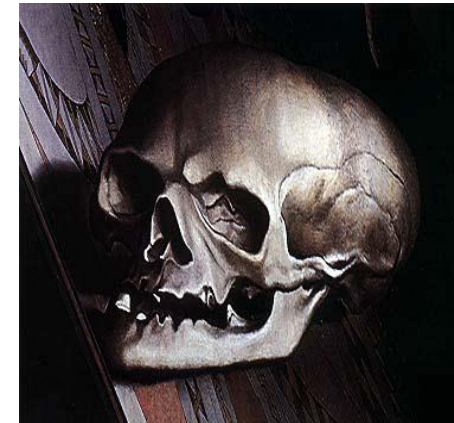


Figure 31. Holbein, H., Detail from *The Ambassadors*.

²⁹Holbein, H. (1533). *The Ambassadors*.

Painting can explore all perspectives on an image located elsewhere in space and time through the unreal space of painting which is not governed by the arrow of time. The photographs I am looking at are situated firmly in a time and place, emphasizing and asserting, death. My painting *The Deck 4* (Figure 35) is a construction of multiple photographs; both figures depicted derive from photographs of my father. The photographic source material is nothing more than relics of a time past, an insignificant remains survived by chance. The painting however extends and amplifies emotion in an un-locatable 'other' space where an inescapable emotional intensity lies not in time or space but within the painted residue. We can never know in any absolute sense a past moment represented in a photograph. Painting cannot draw together the past and present; it instead deals with the inadequacy and dissatisfaction of looking at photograph's in a family album, by creating new narratives of time in paint. A temporal and spatial distance denies any true feeling of presence. The people depicted in the photograph, who were actually there, perhaps didn't even feel a sense of presence in that particular moment. Painting



Figure 32. *Deck 1*, 290x210mm, Oil on Paper, 2010.



Figure 33. *Deck 2*, 290x210mm, Oil on Paper, 2010.



Figure 34. *Deck 3*, 290x210mm, Oil on Paper, 2010.

could never reveal or unpack a past moment completely. Instead it allows me to recover things that seem to be lost and open up a speculation on the past without coming to any definitive resolution. In its attempt at opening up some specific sensibility, painting further complicates perspectives bringing us no closer to the reality of the represented moment. Multiple paintings that arise from the same photograph i.e. *The Backyard* series (Figures 18-21) are a continued searching and speculation on the past through painting. Repetition of a painted image is an extended and prolonged meditation on the past, pointing to the seemingly infinite perspectives evoked in a photograph. Creating multiple and open ended narratives of time, further complicating and transforming the past in a painted space.



Figure 35. *Deck 4*, 500x650mm, Oil on Canvas, 2010.

Knowing something in an absolute sense, Henry Bergson says is “synonymous with perfection”³⁰. Absolute knowledge is unattainable, we can never experience an object in its entirety because from whatever angle we position ourselves we are only ever experiencing one facet ‘shown’ to us by an object. Even if we could conceive every possible facet of an object we would still only have a collection of views that can never add up to the object in its plenitude. The desire and need for connection, when looking through a personal family history represented in pictures, is then not only precluded by time and space but by the actual reality of knowing and connectedness. Looking back on the photograph of my father in the seventies (Figure 2), where I am starved for information and long for connection, I realise that even if I had a hundred photographs of that single moment, I would still have questions, feel detached and frustrated. In fact, even if I was there, in that moment I probably wouldn’t feel any sense of a meaningful connection. The relationship our body has to the world limits the way in which we experience it. Perhaps we can never truly experience any moment in present time to its fullest extent; never be completely ‘present’ or possess any true sense of ‘knowing’. Desire, then, to experience connection and a ‘knowing’ that transcends time and space is even more so a vain hoping, a fantasy.



Figure 36. *Sitting in the Field*,
400x500mm, Oil on Canvas,

³⁰ Bergson, H. (1999). *An Introduction to Metaphysics*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company. p. 22.



Figure 37. *By the Lake 1*, 210x290mm, Oil on Paper, 2010.



Figure 38. *By the Lake 2*, 500x700mm, Oil on Canvas, 2010.

Concluding Commentary:

The act of painting here is a meditation on the past which attempts to mediate between now and then – to connect that past with the present. Engaging with the plasticity of paint on canvas and building image/s intuitively by thinking through painting, expands this meditation and provides an active connection. Figure form and compositing shift and mould with the indeterminacy of paint. Through the animation of form in the performance of painting I am briefly connected. This feeling of connectivity is momentary, if I turn away, even for just a second, when I look back it is gone. Like photography, the medium of paint, in this way, fails me. These paintings have come out of the longing to feel authentically connected with a partially represented past (the photograph). By creating new narratives of time situated outside of chronological, linear time, as we know it; in an unreal painted space that encompasses both the past and present. *A New Narrative of Time; time and space mediated through the medium of painting* opens up and questions how we perceive and engage with time and the world. The paintings raise questions about how we build our image of the world, and expose the blurred line between what is real and actual and what is imagined. But they also allow the viewer and me to analyse the rich and exciting subjectivity of a temporal consciousness's, loss and gain. It is a private exploration, the action of painting an attempt at gaining perspective on myself as a product of this genealogy and these represented moments. As such it is bound to fail. The pursuit of temporal connection is never resolved but becomes exhausted in each work. At a point where some resonance has been opened up or when hope of accessing such a resonance is lost. The project persists, never satisfied, always trying to collapse time to synthesise the past and present. Questions of connection are never resolved but refreshed in the medium of paint. The possibility is more palpable and the project remains open.

I heard Vera again speaking of the mysterious quality peculiar to such photographs. One has the impression, she said, of something stirring in them, as if one could hear small sighs of despair.... As if the pictures had a memory of their own and remembered us, remembered the roles that we, the survivors and those no longer among us had played in former lives.

- Sebald, W.G. Austerlitz.

Figure 39-55. *Deck 1-17: 'Deck Series'*,
300x450mm, Oil on Canvas. 2010.

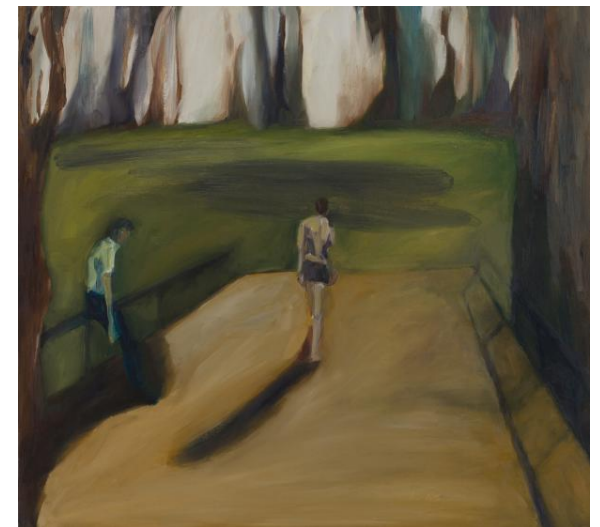














Figure 56. Installation shot from: *Deck Series*, 2010

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Image List

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Retrieved from Rayner family album in 2010

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Oil on Board
800x1200 mm

Figure 5.
Retrieved from Rayner family album in 2010

Figure 6.
Retrieved from Rayner family album in 2010

Figure 7.
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Figure 8.
Retrieved from Rayner family album in 2010

Figure 9.
Retrieved from Rayner family album in 2010

Figure 10.
Retrieved from Rayner family album in 2010

Figure 11.
Retrieved from Rayner family album in 2010

Figure 12.
Lisa Rayner.
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Figure 21.
Lisa Rayner.
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Figure 35.
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Figure 40.
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Figure 41.
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Figure 42.
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Figure 43.
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Figure 44.
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Figure 55.
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Figure 56.
Lisa Rayner
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