

**Latent imperatives of narrative in painting**

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**i 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”

Phillip Good

2010



## ii **Acknowledgements**

I would like to acknowledge my supervisors Ian Jervis and Andy Thomson for their support and assistance throughout the duration of my research project.



### iii **Preface**

This is a practice-based project with accompanying exegesis (constituted of 80% practical research and 20% written research).





#### iv **Abstract**

This practice-based art project explores latency in relation to the way viewers engage with images and in the context of images themselves. Through an exploration of the medium of painting, the project aims to open up territories of speculation about disruptive liminal moments, temporality, the unknown, theatre, narrative structures, and painting as theatre.

Disruptive liminal moments are studied particularly in relation to images that sit on the threshold of catalysing alternate interactions with the world. The project's interest in temporality spans from an image's propulsion toward a future state to the notion of feeling connected yet displaced from historical places and times. The sublime threshold, the dangerous, the exotic and the other create the context for an inquiry into the terrain of the unknown. The parallels between theatre and painting are explored through the three perspectives of illusion, amplification and watching. Through the processes of painting, this study attempts to open up avenues of narrative; particularly in terms of an investigation into the way still images disrupt the momentum of narrative.



## 1.0 Introduction

### 1.1 Latency and images

Latency projects towards a future. The enigma of latency in an image is compelling for the profusion of pathways of possible unfolding, and the infinite array of images and narratives which might emerge through those unfoldings. However the painted image which holds rather than releases the latent potential of its unfolding is able to sustain the inherent tension of latency, which is reflected in the spectator as perceived intensity (the intensity of potential and promise). Such an image held in tension understands that the spectator will be the agent of an inevitable unfolding, and knows the imperative to initiate this unfolding which the spectator experiences. My project explores latency in the context of images, as a complex charged state between being and becoming, an underlying energy that could move to the cusp of manifestation. Consider it as one side of a relationship between an energized state and a state where this energy is released. These two states are separated by a threshold, which is the infinitely small barrier where there is propulsion toward the release, without it yet happening.

My practice aims to make images that create and maintain a potential for numerous different viewings without crossing into a state of explanation or illustration. In this sense it is not the strategy of the images, or of myself as a painter, to strive to answer questions or form resolutions. (As such, the discussion of ideas, methodologies and readings of works in this essay form a *speculative* context from which one may approach my work). The only resolution of significance to images in my project is the one that is essential to latency. A latent state might have an ambition to encounter its other resolved state, and as such it has an apparent momentum. The potential is propelled toward this resolution but does not cross the threshold to meet it. Therefore, through painting I aim to sit an image at this threshold, make it beg the viewer to release the tension in the image, without ever crossing into release itself. Latency must not move into the future state or it will lose its quality of becoming.

If we consider my painting *Open space with log*, 2009, what may arise in the viewer is an awareness of conflicting forces and visual frustrations within the work. While the figures pause, their environment bristles with movement. A tension may be sensed between inaction and pulsing energy, between lethargic figures and the shifting landscape of paint. This conflict might suspend itself in a flow of continual movement that never finds resolve. If these tensions are ever resolved, it may be in unpredictable ways. As viewers we become voyeurs of images, in that we stand separate from an image yet project onto it. In viewing a work we become protagonist agents in the unfolding of latency, of perhaps pushing the potential of an image that sits on the threshold into a state of resolution.



Figure 1.1. *Open space with log* (2009)

To move into the future state is to experience the loss of potential, for example from moving from the ideal to the real, and the loss of excitement or interest through the narrowing of possibilities. The moment the threshold is broken, latency ceases and there is a release of tension through an active expression of energy. However, in the case of images any form of resolution is only live in the viewer, it only takes the form of invention and speculation. If the art-image is not the image we see but rather the image that could be, then the still image retains its potential from one viewer's experience to the next.





## 2.0 Disruptive liminal moments and the unknown

### 2.1 Disruptive liminal moments

An image can be considered as sitting at a threshold that is a disruptive liminal moment. An image – or a literary work in relation to this interest in my project – marks a point of movement toward an alternate reality that is not an enervated state but one that still holds the potential for fantastical, idealistic, unreal and inventive interactions with the world. Similarly, in the context of latency, the image provided the viewer with ambiguous elements of potential that allowed an extension of the image through invention. A disruptive liminal moment threatens to displace from regular behavioural, psychological, or emotional cadences, which includes the way one engages with the world around them. Regular cadences, however, do not imply states that lack energy. On the contrary, these cadences flow in a manner that holds a potential energy to be disrupted at any moment. A disruption involves a movement toward crossing the threshold into a displacing state that is separate from the regular ways one perceives context– the past, the present, or the physical surrounds of a location.

Consider a disruptive liminal moment as creating the potential for a minor, internal *event*. This minor event is directly related to Jean-François Lyotard's notion of an event as the "fact of something happening and introducing a break in the space-time continuum" (Macey, 2000, p.236). The act of crossing into a displacing state is the fact of a happening, while the disruption and displacement is the break. This is not a break in a universal space-time continuum, rather an interruption in an individual's perception of cadences that appeared deceptively routine.

Languor is an example of a displacing state that highlights a shift in the way one engages with the world. The lazy, relaxed quality of this state may seem to temper its potential to displace, yet, this idleness only masks the depth and power of this dream-like state. In this sense, languor is completely enveloping; the world becomes veiled and one is displaced from a fully aware existence. To induce one into such a state, there must be a considerable amount of force behind the cause, such as an

intense level of indulgence, ignorance or satiety. A number of my paintings from the first year of this project (and extending into the first half of the second year) such as *Grounds*, 2009, developed from an interest in exploring the way literature, film and television series portrayed languorous youth in period dramas, specifically those set in the early twentieth century. In the stories set in this period, often we see the aristocracy beginning to feel the comfort of their 'old money' wealth slipping away. As a result, the youth that have been coddled in this environment are faced with the dilemma of how they will choose to engage with the world. Will they accept their changing circumstances and adapt accordingly or will they desperately hold on to their indulgent, dreamy existence? This became a disruptive liminal moment to a state that was already displacing, in a sense, reversing the original move from the real into the unreal. Potentially, my works that responded to this particular narrative of languor might also explore the wider concern of the literary as a realm of the unreal and ideal that conflicts with the notion of the real, its emphasis on logic and responsibility. This discussion of the tension between illusion and reality is further extended in the section 'Theatre'.



Figure 2.1. *Grounds* (2009)



## 2.2 The minor sublime threshold

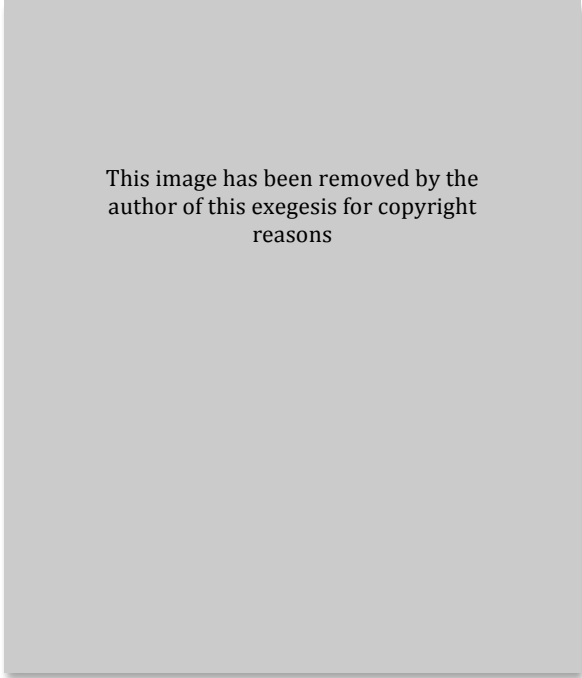
The threat of displacement opens up the relationship between disruptive liminal moments and potential. A moment becomes disruptive when it reaches a certain, yet indefinable, intensity. At this threshold, the potential for the liminal moment to become displacing is awakened. With this awakening, a question arises. *Will the intensity of this moment push one over the threshold into a disconnected experience?* In comparison, the amplification of the sublime creates potential for transcendence, which is a threshold analogous to that created by the intensity of a disruptive moment. Lyotard argues, “the sublime can be distinguished... by the quantity of energy that is expended on the occasion of the object said to be sublime” (1994, p.154). The “quantity of energy” is the amplification of the sublime (Lyotard, 1994, p.154). Like states that displace, the sublime encompasses many feelings or experiences. Lyotard states that “any emotion, any subjective “state” of thought can pass over into the sublime: anger, desperation, sadness, admiration, and even “freedom from affection” or apathy, a state of disaffection, can become sublime” (1994, p.154). This aspect of sublime’s extensive inclusion of emotions and psychological states is what leads Lyotard to conclude that the distinguishing factor of a sublime experience is amplification, not exclusively, for example, an overwhelming admiration for nature (1994). In his discussion of Caspar David Friedrich’s paintings, Joseph Leo Koerner states:

...the sublime can be present in landscapes neither exotic nor Antique, that pathos and sentiment can be expressed without histrionic plots of storms, shipwrecks, avalanches and erupting volcanoes, and that infinities, everywhere present, must be invoked subjectively, not as attributes of setting or event, but as simply the transformation, through painting, of *how* we see ...significance resides in the way we see things, rather than what things in themselves might possibly be or mean. (2009, p.100– 101)

Painting has the potential to present new ways of seeing. As a form of disruption, painting potentially catalyses the manifestation of imagined worlds, and as such, acts as a romanticised lens through which to view the world of actuality. A romanticised lens may amplify experience and states, whether they are raging, euphoric, apathetic,

dangerous, melancholic, threatening or transcendental. Painting, particularly Romantic image making, is a space where a range of what might be perceived as 'other' can be engaged with in a new way.

My project aims to explore the sublime and the romantic in the context of both the past connotations of these concepts as well as a wider and more complex discourse. In this sense, the sublime is addressed from the historical view of it being an experience of the beautiful and powerful in nature and exquisite things, without ignoring the discussion of the significance of amplification and the way this opens up the territory of the sublime to any emotion or psychological state. The experience of an adolescent may be a pertinent example of the minor sublime threshold within an individual. A situation, which might seem insignificant in the light of a grand experience of nature, may still flare emotion within the adolescent to create an amplified experience. What is important is the way that individual sees the situation, not the situation itself. From the perspective of that individual, their experience is just as sublime as the experience of the figure in Friedrich's *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog*, 1818 (Koerner, 2009, p.185).



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Figure 2.2. Bas, H. *The soap box in his mind* (2009)

In Hernan Bas' recent paintings, such as *The soap box in his mind*, 2009, there is a sense that the figures are not caught in a special moment of the sublime, but rather that they constantly live in a strange heightened state. In this painting, a figure stands next to a white human-like silhouette in a strange construction, which appears futuristic or otherworldly. While it may be due to a history of a compulsion in fiction (literature, cinema, images and others) to link the feelings of a figure or character to their surroundings, the environment of the figure in Bas' painting appears to be a projection or reflection of his amplified state. This environment may not be 'real' within the logic of the image, but instead an invention which grew from the displacement, disconnection and disorientation of the figure's state.

Disorientation is a confusion of a sense of direction, a change in perspective due to a dislocation. This sensation develops from unfamiliarity with a situation, from an encounter with the unknown.

### 2.3 The unknown

The unknown is a void that one senses and desires to fill. This void holds all potential. Being faced with the unknown is to be faced with all the possibilities, yet have none of them yet revealed. The mystery that surrounds such a void opens it up to invoke fear, curiosity or excitement. These states become motivations for filling the void with mysticism, speculation and fantasy. History may be an example of an unknown that one desires to fill with idealistic fantasy. Consider recent films such as *The Young Victoria* (2008) or *Marie Antoinette* (2006), which portray possible (yet likely not-altogether-true) personal and intimate scenes in the lives of these monarchs in an attempt that the audience may be able to identify or empathise with them, and thus shrink the gap between the past and present day. Or, for example, in my work *Folly painting*, 2009 there may be a sense of feeling displaced from a time, or of trying to connect through an image with a time, place or atmosphere not personally experienced. Of course, these connections are mediated by entertainment and fiction, and therefore skew one's perception of a real time or place. The unknown

may never find grounds in actuality for the ideals or fears put in its place, and remains primarily an invention of the mind, a condition of the psyche.



Figure 2.3. *Folly painting* (2009)

To sense danger is to be faced with the unknown and expect, through fear, a harmful outcome. It may be the threat of a latent energy. It could be the storm that lurks over the sea in the distance, threatening destruction on land. As potential, danger is not manifested catastrophic effects; rather it is the power of what has not yet happened. This tension is the risk posed by being propelled toward the unknown. The filter of danger is one way of viewing unexplored territories such as the wild, thus it influences the type of speculation and myth that aim to satisfy the rift of the unfamiliar. The wild may not always be a place of danger; it may also be the domain of the exotic. The exotic is an idealised version of the other. Although it is alien, the exotic holds only a hint of danger, rather it has a strange allure because of the unfamiliar pleasure it offers. The promise of the exotic however is concocted through the way one views the wild. In the hothouse of my painting *The Garden Room*, 2009, imported tropical species of flora are nurtured in a microclimate beneath a vaulted glass ceiling. It is a constructed environment made to mimic a foreign landscape. As an ecosystem it has been designed from scratch, its makers and tenders have determined every detail. The product may be a fantasy garden, which might mirror the idealised construction that is the exotic.



Figure 2.4. *The Garden Room* (2009)

#### 2.4 The woods and the other

This view of the wild assumes there is the potential for the flourishing of fantasy when the context of civilisation has been removed. The cities and settlements of civilisation stand as symbols of culture, society and rational thought. Without these elements – away from people and the structure that everyday social interaction provides – in the seclusion of the woods, there is less to tie one down to the world. In effect, an escape from civilisation is a distancing or removal from societal boundaries and rules. In Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the setting of the forest acts as a space where the logic of the city gets turned on its head. The lovers Hermia and Lysander escape from Hermia's obligation to marry Demetrius. When they elope, these characters leave this obligation behind in Athens and pass through the forest, a realm where the other (in this case, marriage for love) is not opposed. It is a domain where the characters become influenced by magic and entangled in scenarios so bizarre they can only be dismissed as a dream. Similarly, Illyria in *Twelfth Night*, is a destination arrived at by the shock and disruption of a shipwreck. The twins Viola and Sebastian find themselves in a place that is, although populated, still embroiled in

confusion and madness unlike they had previously experienced. Sebastian, for example, comes across the beautiful Olivia who appears to have instantly fallen passionately in love with him. In response, Sebastian wonders whether the cause of his experience is a dream or his own madness. In these stage plays, the disruption caused by relocation or dislocation sparks the possibility for fantastical happenings. The unknown as a location becomes the field on which these fantasies are projected.



Figure 2.5. *Swimming Pool* (2010)

The unknown is a form of otherness. The other, like the unknown, lives in the cerebral world of invention. It comes from a perspective that aims to identify and focus on difference. Tradition has seen the woods as a realm of the other. It is a notion that has woven itself throughout a history of fiction, embedded in the logic of tales and myths. The forest in my painting *Swimming pool*, 2010 creates an arena in which figures lay about. It may be a space for respite, or the site of getting lost, or a realm of impending danger. Each of these scenarios suggests a displacement from a dull existence to one that is worthy of a tale. In 'Landscape and Memory', Simon Schama discusses how, despite the settlements in the woodlands of England and France, the idea of "the forest as the opposite of court, town, village" was lodged "tenaciously in the poetic and the pious imagination" (1995, p.142). In order to survive, this attitude relies on favouring the structure of dichotomies. One side of this dichotomy is the populated landscape and all that ideally converges with the identity of this place, such as culture, safety, reason and the idea of self. The forest is the other side of this relationship. Included in the identity of the woods are aspects that do not converge with the ideology of civilisation, such as nature, danger, chaos and the idea of other. Yet to what extent is the unknown other, if what is projected into

the space of the unknown comes from self? In the same way the notion of the other is a reflection of one's own perspective.



### 3.0 **Theatre**

My project explores, through the act of painting, the idea of theatre in relation to the problems and tensions in painting. Therefore, this section discusses paintings with the language of theatre, and in the conversation around theatre, its relationship to

the discourse of painting is implied. This is a discussion of the medium I use— its possibilities and its failures.

### 3.1 Illusion

The forces of illusion and reality form an internal tension, that is, one within an audience member. The evidence of the illusions of the stage, the revealing of that which is not artifice, and the function of illusion as reality within the space of the performance, all need to be negotiated by the viewer. The theatre is a very particular type of experience. The viewer needs to give oneself over to the illusion in order to engage with the narrative and not just the performance. And yet, one is also constantly being reminded of the artificial qualities of what they are looking at, through conventions like scene changes, special effects, curtains closing, and the spectacle of production. The viewer is fooled, they are enveloped in the story, but simultaneously they are aware of the trickery and are separated from the action that unfolds within a field.

Illusion is an integral part of the theatre. The stage set, props, music, costumes, lighting and actors work together within the framework of the theatre toward a presentation of a story that is to appear beyond the theatre. Theatre often accepts the artificial and assimilates it into its common strategy. Shakespeare, for an extreme example, would work into the dialogue quotes that would draw the audience's attention to the fact that what they were watching was clearly a production on stage. He would have Fabian from 'Twelfth Night' say "if this were played upon a stage now, I could condemn it as an improbable fiction". Such a quote not only pointed out that the play was bordering on the ridiculous, but also interrupted the process that the viewer undertakes of falling into an acceptance of the overall illusion. Theatre takes what is artificial and uses it for its own purposes.

If theatre is considered as a metaphor for painting, then paint might be the artifice. Figurative painters are faced with decisions around the mimetic quality of paint. *Will I make use of my knowledge that paint is only a stand in for the subject being depicted, or am I more interested in the subject? Am I interested in the plastic qualities of paint or do I try to hide them?* Peter Doig's *Man Dressed As Bat*, 2007 demonstrates the painter's equal interest of paint as a medium and its quality to be used to create an illusion of space, depth or figures in a landscape. While the paint on linen describes the vibrating outline of the figure – that is, the man dressed as a bat – it also drips and stains, revealing in its layered veils the properties of thin paint, and in the residue, the process of making.



Figure 3.1. Doig, P. *Man Dressed As Bat* (2007)

In my painting *Thicket (number two)*, 2010, the lattice of paint marks may fail in their description of the branches and twigs which fill a large portion of the painting. The staging of marks within the *mise-en-scène* of the painting might appear to rebel against what may be considered as their 'original' purpose. In this sense the paint seems reluctant to become something that it is not, reluctant to be anything other

than paint. As viewers we may want the paint to perform in a figurative manner, that is, we invent the paint into forms similar to those from the actual world.



Figure 3.2. *Thicket (number two)* (2010)

Just as a painter can take an interest in the plastic qualities of paint, so too can he or she exploit paint's ability to allow for invention and manipulation of the visual. Jean-Antoine Watteau's *fêtes galantes*, such as *The Embarkation for Cythera*, 1717, are apposite examples of a painter's invention. Watteau kept a sketchbook of models in poses. When time came to paint one of his populated scenes, he would select figures from his sketchbook that "best suited him at that moment" and would arrange them in a landscape background (Rosenberg, 2009, p.7). My own method of composing a painting is not unlike that of Watteau. I film people moving and posing on camera and then sketch from freeze-frames, building a kind of archive of poses. These sketches of poses become cutout figures that can be positioned and repositioned in relation to each other and their surroundings. In this way, I am able to play with the elements in the *mise-en-scène*, to invent with paint and then reinvent. In her essay, 'Landscape Confection: The Loneliness of the Decorative', Helen Molesworth says that Watteau's "lush landscapes were wholly invented; they never represented a real place (or real people) in time" (2005, p.12). Molesworth goes on to say that Watteau refused "to

depict the world with any kind of naturalism in favour of a highly codified form of artifice” (2005, p.12). Watteau even treats his backgrounds like backdrops– we know they are supposed to be illusions of distance, he applies all of the conventions of perspective to them – things get smaller the further away they are meant to be, the atmosphere of distance casts a bluish-green haze – but despite this, they appear flat and oddly separate from the foreground. This highlights the painter’s interest in the artificial in both painting and theatre, and how the use of artifice can be a tactic for catalyzing discussion around other ideas such as pleasure.



Figure 3.3. Watteau, J. *The Embarkation for Cythera* (1717)

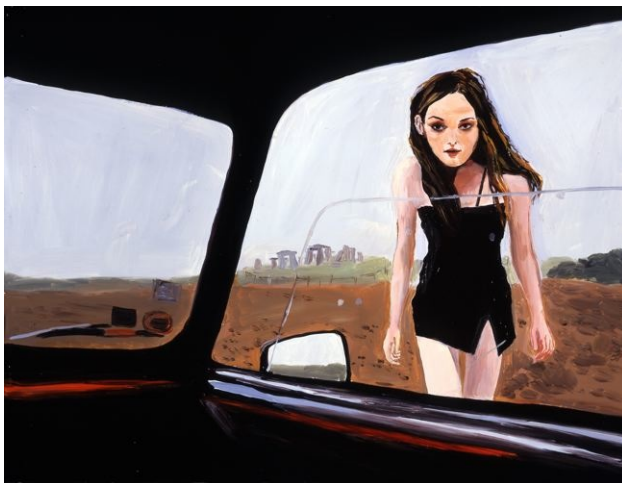


Figure 3.4. Kilimnik, K. *Me– I forgot the wire cutters– getting the wire cutters from the car to break into Stonehenge*, 1982 (1998)

Karen Kilimnik uses paint as a tool for invention in a way that emphasizes the view that a painter may have a directorial prerogative. In the painting *Me– I forgot the wire cutters– getting the wire cutters from the car to break into Stonehenge, 1982, 1998*, paint becomes a medium for personal fantasy fulfillment. Kilimnik not only features in her work, but also as a painter is able to construct a fictional situation with a lasting image as evidence that, in a way, the *fantasy* occurred. Édouard Manet's *Mademoiselle V... In the Costume of an Espada, 1862* is another obvious construction. The following caption about the painting reveals the extent to which Manet enjoyed the obvious artificiality of images:

Despite the semblance of realism, the painting is an explicit fiction. The title declared that the matador was impersonated by a woman instead of a man and, what's more, a Frenchwoman posing as a Spaniard. The shoes are completely unsuitable for bullfighting, and the great distance between the size and rendering of the figure in the foreground and the background gives the impression of a kind of photomontage (Price, 2006, p.76).

It becomes clear in this caption that Manet was not interested in creating a 'true-to-life' representation of an *espada*. Rather, he acknowledges the impossibility for paint to create an exact mimetic copy of a person or scene from the actual world and how this opens up the medium to be able to manipulate the truth.



Figure 3.5. Manet, É. *Mademoiselle V... In the Costume of an Espada* (1862)

Performance is an illusion of actual or natural behavior. On the stage, performance may come from an imitation of known behavior or assumed actions sourced from a fictional involvement with the constructed situation. In figurative painting, the performance of figures in the painting may be considered, or perhaps even the performance of the painter. If the act of applying paint to canvas, of making gestures with paint is a performance, hence labels like 'performance painter', then the painter could exploit their position as a performer. The marks and gestures they make do not have to be viewed as a mark of the personal expression of the artist, as they may have been with Abstract Expressionism for example. Instead, the painter could view the act of mark making as an opportunity to play with this established, yet possibly failed connection between gestural painting and expression. Now, the marks are an illusion of mood, the gesture is a mannered expression. The earnest sincerity of the expressionism is transformed into a contrived performance. Yet, one must consider that there may be no clear boundary between actual or genuine behaviour and performance. This confusion between the real and artificial and between humour and seriousness is something that influences my thinking when I consider my role as a performer.

Colour mixing and paint manipulation used by the painter to create a sense of emotional weight are the devices of artificial constructions, like designing a stage set and lighting a scene. Early on in my practice (in 2007 and 2008) I was conducting a playful exploration of light in suburban scenes. I studied Edward Hopper's use of deliberate light because of its relationship with artificial lighting. I developed an interest in how creative and entertainment culture may have taught the viewer to interpret mood through colour, and in particular through the lighting of scenes in stage productions and films. It became apparent that a painting or film that moves the viewer emotionally might also, in part, remain separated from the world of actual experience.

### **3.2 Amplification**

In the theatre, action and performance are amplified so that the audience can see it from a distance. For example, actors wear makeup to project expression as far as it



will go, and the stage set and costumes are made larger or more intense. While an actor's expression may be amplified, an over-the-top performance inspires connections with melodrama. Melodrama describes the excessive enactment of drama to the point of ridiculousness. At this point, the illusion of performance crosses the line to become artificial. The ridiculous nature of melodrama and its relationship to the excessive and artificial in painting, points to the possibility for humour within the arenas of both theatre and painting. From the perspective of the amplified artificial, one may consider the potentially humorous anomalies in my paintings, such as the inaccurate description of perspective in the manor in *Grounds*, or the purple sky in *Folly painting*.

If the stage is considered as an arena of concentrated action, then it can be related to the idea of tension. Concentration or density is like amplification within bounds, made more intense because of those bounds. As a framed field, the stage usually contains the action being played out. While the edges of the stage concentrate action, the duration of a performance compresses the action on a time scale – where years can pass in the space of two or three hours and only the important happenings or events are presented to the audience.

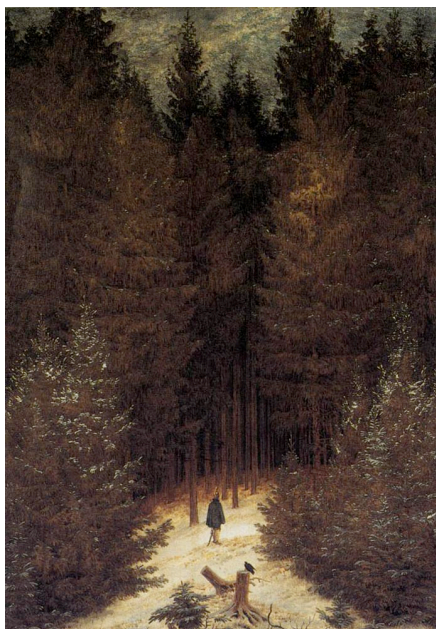


Figure 3.6. Friedrich, C. D. *The Chasseur in the Forest* (1814)



This tension within the theatre highlights that an experience or a feeling can be amplified. This quality of amplification in theatre and painting suggests that both arenas may provide spaces for the experience of the sublime. As such, they have the potential for a movement beyond the norm and to engage numerous intensified states. Due, in part, to the early Romantic period in which they were made, Caspar David Friedrich's paintings, such as *The Chasseur in the Forest*, 1814, explore the traditional sense of the sublime as a shift toward something greater, stronger or stranger. This idea of the sublime is said to affect the abstract conventions of thought, emotion and spirit. Nature, or the experience of nature, is presented in his images as an overwhelming power, with the figures, like the chasseur, dwarfed by the scale of the forest. As a place of disconnection, the wild landscapes of Friedrich's paintings become a theatre for intense introspective experience.



Figure 3.7. Fragonard, J. H. *The Swing* (1766)

In contrast, Jean Honoré Fragonard's *The Swing*, 1766, explores a theatre of pleasure and frivolity. The subject in pink on the swing is seen at the pinnacle of a heightened emotional state. Her ecstasy is reflected in the billowing, radiant haze of trees and sunlight. This is the amplification of escapism in both theatre and painting.

### 3.3 Watching

Watching is crucial to the function of the theatre. Every aspect of the stage is orientated toward the audience, to present to them what needs to be shown and to hide what needs to be edited out. Each member of the audience becomes a watcher, actively looking at the action on stage, like voyeurs or spies. Yet what the audience sees is designed especially for them to see. For example, in my painting *The Garden Room* an entire conservatory, including arched windows and a folly, existed as a painted layer before the wall of trees and plants blocked it from view. Through the editing process of painting this architecture was covered, presenting to the spectator only the elements that take form in the final image. In the theatre, the performance is activity conducted in a certain way because people are watching. In the same way, posing is the positioning of the body for the purpose of being read. A painting can then be said to be performing and posing within itself – arranging itself – both showing and editing out elements, with the intention of being looked at. In J. W. Waterhouse's painting *Ophelia (lying in the meadow)*, 1889, the viewer does not just see her lying in the grass, as if they had stumbled upon her presence, but they see her body orientated in a way that the viewer might read her particular style of repose, read the meaning of her hand buried in her hair, and meet her gaze as she appears to watch the viewer watching her. In the same way, through collecting poses to be used in my constructed scenes, I am able to take a directorial approach in considering how particular positions of the body might be read in the context of the figures' setting.



Figure 3.8. Waterhouse, J. W. *Ophelia (lying in the meadow)* (1889)



Figure 3.9. Fortescue-Brickdale, E.  
*The Little Foot Page* (1905)

As a result of watching, the audience may become invested in the characters and story. With still images, the viewer might engage through speculating about the narrative and inventing a context for what they see. A cold reading of Eleanor Fortescue-Brickdale's *The Little Foot Page*, 1905 would have the viewer asking questions such as: *why is the girl dressed as a page? And why is she at the edge of the woods?* Falling deeper into looking and engaging with an image or watching a stage performance, one may feel displaced, forgetting that they are watching a space of illusions but instead feeling as if they are utterly involved.





## 4.0 Narrative structures and still images

### 4.1 Momentum

To engage with narrative is to engage with time. Progression is a determining characteristic of narrative. The actions of subjects and the effect of those actions form a concatenation, a series of linked events. The idea of concatenation negates Lyotard's event, undoing the event's power to be a break, creating a progression less like distinguishable interruptions in a space-time continuum that follow one after the other, but more like a flow. A continuous flow blurs the boundaries between these events and they cease to be separate occurrences. This continuous flow is momentum. The continuous generation of new moments caused by those that have passed creates a momentum with propulsion. For example, in Oscar Wilde's play *An Ideal Husband*, when Mrs. Cheveley threatens Sir Robert with blackmail it catalyses the start of a series of conflicts and interactions that become increasingly complicated and charged with urgency. One happening inevitably catalyses the next, each building on the previous action, resulting in a quickening of the pace of progression and the passing of time. This acceleration of unfolding moments is initiated by propulsion toward the crisis. In Wilde's play, the main crisis is the separation of Sir Robert and his wife Gertrude. This is the threshold where circumstances change. At the brink of change there is tension between the momentum of the narrative and the potential for this momentum to significantly shift. Many works of fiction, from novels to plays and film, appear to follow this arc-form based on concatenation. At the bottom of the arc a problem causes action. These actions produce more problems, which build toward the climax at the pinnacle of the arc. The descending side of the arc consists of the various resolutions to the problems and is usually shorter than the climb, which often positions itself as the focus of a conventional narrative.

In other instances of narrative, it is not necessary that momentum suggest speed or an acceleration of pace, but rather movement with potential for more. For example, Luchino Visconti's *Death in Venice* (1971) is a film that meanders toward its conclusion, that is, the death of the main character Gustav. The patient, watchful eye

of the camera observes long, ponderous scenes. Shifts in plot occur as a whisper and scenes bleed together to create an overall mood, a unifying sensibility, as if a cascade of images has slowly drowned the viewer. However, while this film may highlight the importance of the passing of time to the structure of a narrative, it also opens up the way a pervading atmosphere or tone may somehow surpass the role of time in a viewer's engagement with narrative. This is of particular importance in the context of still images.

#### 4.2 Still images and the reader/viewer

Still images interfere with the structure of narratives and the continuous flow of momentum. A still image can only present a fragment of this flow. As such, they act as an event in the sense that they become a break in the continuum. There may only be a latent sense of a narrative in an image. As a point of interruption in narrative's reliance on time, the still image accesses that which surpasses the role of momentum, that is, the overall sensation that opens up the text to the viewer's engagement.

If a narrative is open it has porous boundaries to the way a viewer or reader may interact with it. For example, a novel with ambiguous elements, such as unresolved conflict, opens itself up to interpretation. The writing of fan fiction is an activity that acts as evidence of the reader/viewer interaction with a popular text. It demonstrates the way a reader engages with the characters of a fictional work and desires to extend their engagement through the invention of their own making. The limited description of facial features of the figures in my paintings such as *Swimming Pool* and *Grounds* might open the figures up to become fields of projection for the viewer. With faces they may become characters with an identity determined by the painter. As faceless figures there might be a hint of an identity through the positioning of the body, their perceived age and clothing, yet they may still hold potential for the intervention of the viewer.

In contrast, if a story is closed it has distinctive boundaries that shut down the reader/viewer's engagement. For example, a film with a concrete plot where each avenue of conflict is resolved constricts the possibilities of interaction with such a text. I have considered the function of the specifically historical architecture in my

works such as *Green*, 2010 and *Folly painting*, and noticed the possibility that these elements may be like characters. In this sense, they might bring with them the identity (or ethos) of particular periods in time. Does this quality close down readings of my work? Could my paintings have a more complex relationship with history and time through ambiguous kinds of architecture that are part of the landscape of my work? While a closed narrative tells rather than shows, an open narrative provokes questions, welcomes confusion and complexity. In the context of my project, this notion of a reader/viewer's inventive engagement with narrative developed from the idea of the birth of the reader in Roland Barthes' 'The Death of the Author' (1968).



Figure 4.1. *Green* (2010)

Barthes' 'An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative' (1966) was written from a structuralist narratological perspective, which aimed to classify and categorize narratives. 'The Death of the Author' marks a shift toward a poststructuralist point of view that aimed to consider the complex multiplicity of narratives. Barthes viewed the idea of the author as a barrier to the possibilities of reading a text (1996). An author, traditionally seen in the history of literature as both the person who produced the work and also the source of the "*explanation* of a work", closes down a text (Barthes, 1996, p.119). "To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing" (Barthes, 1996, p.121). In order to open up writing, or open up narratives, the role of the reader must be more than



that of trying to find a single meaning in the text embedded in the identity and intentions of an author-figure, but rather elevated to the activities of writing, such as speculation and projection. "The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed", which is to say that writing finds its cohesion in the reader (Barthes, 1996, p.122). The birth of this role of the reader should then influence the way new texts are made, change the aims of the writer and the image-maker.

Hernan Bas' paintings appropriate, assimilate and extend other texts, which range from Greek mythology and religious biographies of saints to the 'Hardy Boys' and 'Moby Dick'. According to Barthes, all texts are made from other texts, which is a tactic of reframing, and the basis for subverting the centrality of the author (1996). Robert Hobbs writes, "creativity can stem from the processes of rereading, reframing, and finding new and compelling spaces in the interstices of established social and cultural artifacts where new and thought-provoking possibilities can develop" (2007, p.58). In considering that Bas uses this tactic of reframing, Hobbs' essay discusses the paintings of this particular artist in relation to Barthes' 'The Death of the Author'. Hobbs views Barthes' essay as having helped to change the view of "the work of art as whole and complete" (2007, p.56). Instead, the work of art, or image, is "permeable not only to the worldviews for which it was created, but also to other perspectives that might differ substantially from its assumptions and conclusions" (Hobbs, 2007, p.57). While Bas may embrace his role as a reader, his collection of works at the time Hobb's essay was published did not appear to reflect a consideration for the role of the reader/viewers of his own works. In other words, his works seemed to expect a reading that would look to the identity of the artist/author for meaning. However, Bas' recent works play with an ambiguity of states in a way that suggests what Hobbs was already projecting onto his work in 2007. While Barthes claims that the "destination", which is the reader, "cannot any longer be personal", that they are "without history, biography, psychology", Hobbs argues that "the individual and sometimes-idiosyncratic reader" should be taken into account (Barthes, 1996, p.122) (Hobbs, 2007, p.57). This view, which builds upon an idealistic view of the reader to include myriad complex reading tactics, has been adopted by

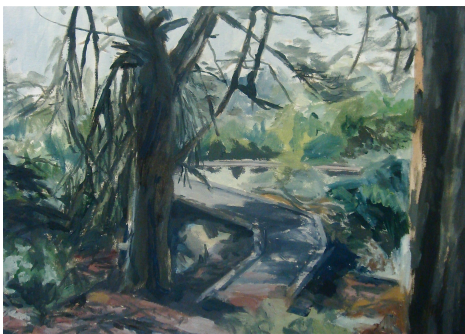
Bas along with a strategy that aims to make open narrative images.



*Figure 4.2. Thicket (number one) (2010)*



*Figure 4.3. Untitled (bank) (2010)*



*Figure 4.4. Untitled (tree) (2010)*



*Figure 4.5. Untitled (outside) (2010)*



*Figure 4.6. Untitled (creek) (2010)*

The aspects that open up or close down possibilities for viewer engagement in an image are difficult to identify. In this context, my project aims to explore the

threshold of narrative potential. For example, the series of works on paper from August 2010 (*Figure 3.2, Figure 4.2– 4.6*) show multiple, unoccupied forest scenes. It may be possible for these images to move beyond a simple reading of them as picturesque landscapes, not only by being exhibited alongside works of populated scenes, but also through an attempt to conjure the charge of an ambiguous atmosphere through the process of painting. By placing works that include figures next to vacant landscapes within a series, the viewer may begin to read the group of works as a whole, where the viewing of one painting may influence the next. In this scenario, if the viewer identifies a sense of a suppressed narrative for example, there may be the potential that this will be carried on to the viewing of works with a more tenuous connection to narrative. An indefinite trajectory of a narrative may open up questions that tempt the viewer to search for answers.

If momentum is reinstated to a narrative, it is due to the viewer, who by a process of invention and speculation has completed the circuit, whereby one event flows into the next. As a fragment, the narrative in an image is separated from context. It is suspended at a liminal threshold between its myriad possible pasts and futures. The fragment creates a rift shrouded in questions. It is in this space for the creation of context, in the desire to concoct myths to fill the void of the unknown, where the latent energy of fragmentary visual narratives lies.





## 5.0 Final Exhibition

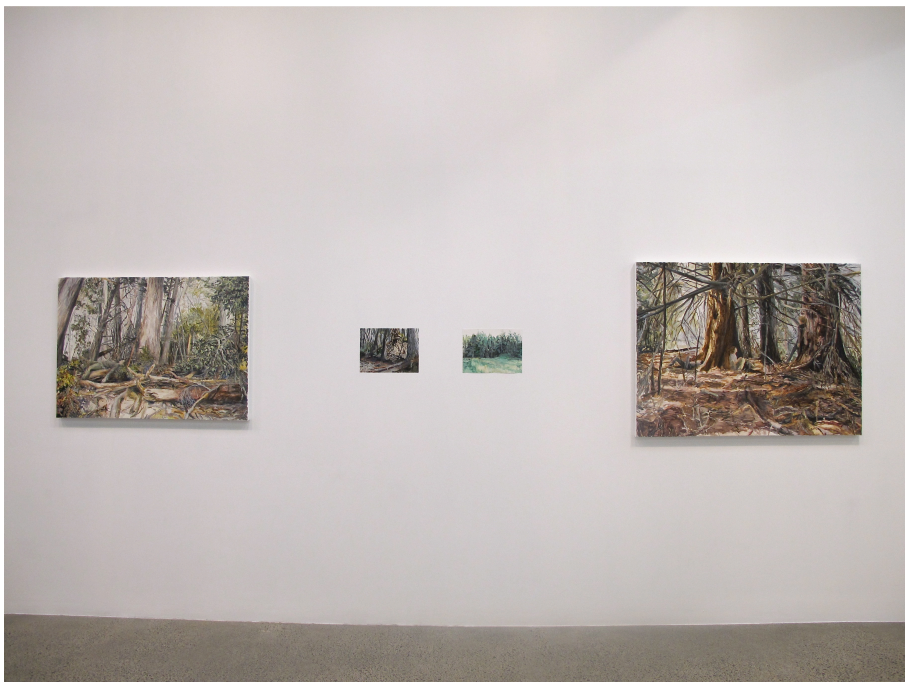
The following images are from the final exhibition of paintings shown in St Paul St Gallery One in November 2010. Included in this group of works were *Thicket (number one)*, *Untitled (outside)*, and *Untitled (creek)* made earlier in the year as well as the newer works *Stack*, 2010, *Bough*, 2010, *Slough*, 2010 and *Beck*, 2010.

Placing the earlier works of unoccupied landscapes alongside newer works that included figures was an installation strategy that evolved from considering the way a viewer may read the group of works as a whole and let the viewing of one work influence another as discussed in section 4.2. I was also challenged to think about the ordering and spacing of the works in relation to the flows and stops in narrative and how the rhythm of viewing works may direct a viewer's approach to the series. For example, the two works on paper between the larger paintings *Stack* and *Bough* (Figure 5.2) may act as a pause or interruption in the overall flow as one is pulled in closer to the smaller scale then pushed back out to view a larger painting.

The painting *Beck* was an attempt at further exploring a question that arose in section 4.2: Could my paintings have a more complex relationship with history and time through ambiguous kinds of architecture? Through various sketches and paintings I built up a small archive of structures that served as a departure from the specifically historical architecture in past works. The structure in *Beck*, for example, could potentially be from many different times or places (or sit within many various genres), and in this sense it may cut itself off from a single and particular time period identity. This change in architecture was made to try to further open up readings of my works.



*Figure 5.1.* Installation shot at St Paul St Gallery One (November 2010)



*Figure 5.2.* Installation shot at St Paul St Gallery One (November 2010)





*Figure 5.3. Stack (2010)*



*Figure 5.4. Bough (2010)*





*Figure 5.5.* Installation shot at St Paul St Gallery One (November 2010)



*Figure 5.6.* Installation shot at St Paul St Gallery One (November 2010)





*Figure 5.7. Slough (2010)*



*Figure 5.8. Beck (2010)*



*Figure 5.9. Thicket (number one) (2010)*



*Figure 5.10. Untitled (outside) (2010)*





*Figure 5.11. Untitled (creek) (2010)*



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