The Familiar and Unknown

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ATTESTATION OF AUTHORSHIP

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge, 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 accepted for the award of another degree or diploma or a university or institution of higher learning.

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ABSTRACT

This practice-based project is an exploration of how sensations of 'the Uncanny' can be evoked through pictorial form. This has involved an in-depth investigation into the signification of the subject matter I employ, along with its means of description via an examination of the conceptual and applied characteristics of photography and the medium of paint. Through the transaction between photographic reality (as documented through the 'objective' camera lens) and the visceral effects of painted expression, I disrupt what is familiar with what is unknown. I create work which activates an atmosphere where something has happened, will happen or is happening quietly and unseen, an atmosphere implied by a residual mood or echo that resonates from what is missing. Through sensitively cropped representations of landscape and suburban scenes my work activates a concept of absence via signs of human activity. The mundane subject matter of my paintings - clotheslines, rubbish bins, backyards - abandoned by their occupants, appear populated instead by emptiness, stillness and silence. I am interested in drawing the viewer in through the everyday and the known, whilst simultaneously employing the same banal imagery to create a sinister undertone that interrupt certainty and comfort, and alludes to something more ominous.

INTRODUCTION

The focus of this research is based upon Sigmund Freud's notion of 'the uncanny' (as discussed in his 1919 essay Das Unheimlech), and how this analysis informs the conceptual framework of my practice. The key signifiers of 'the uncanny' sensibility and stimuli which characteristically activate my work are examined, along with the importance of nuance (via realist representation, beauty and 'heimlich' imagery) as an essential means of conveying this phenomenon pictorially. Photography utilised as both tool and subject matter within my painting approach is explored in relation to its indexical connection with 'the uncanny'. My employment of cropping as a compositional device to capture the strange within the ordinary is contextualised through a summary of Surrealism's use of photography to reconfigure reality.   The translation of photography's indexicality into the medium of paint is discussed in reference with Freud's notion of 'screen memories,' positioning images of the commonplace, such as those depicted by Edward Hopper, as substitutes/signifiers for recollections of trauma, thus acting as another device which incites 'the uncanny.' The next section of this exegesis provides an outline of my practical methodology and development over the duration of this research project. Referencing both initial (medieval, naïve and faux naïve painting) and contemporary influences (with specific comparison to Luc Tuymans' work), I trace my journey from photorealist aesthetic and methodology to a painting approach which is aimed at creating open ended narratives which incite 'the uncanny' through simplification of subject matter, economic and gestural brushwork and reference to the materiality of the paint medium. The importance of narrative in my practice is then discussed in relation to developmental possibilities in the future.

UNHEIMLECH – THE UNCANNY

In his 1919 essay Das Unheimlich, Sigmund Freud presents a psychoanalytic investigation into the identifying characteristics of 'the uncanny' phenomenon, distinguishing it from other types of fear sensation. Although, its affect varies in relation to subjective experience, Freud asserts 'that a special core of feeling is present, which justifies the use of a special conceptual term.' (2003, p.1) He defines 'the uncanny' as 'that class of the frightening which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar.' (2003, p.1)

Freud examines the meaning of Unheimlich through the usage of its base word 'heimlich.' Heimlich denotes 'the homely and familiar,' whilst its antonym the 'un-heimlech' pertains to the foreign, eerie and un-homely. German psychologist Ernst Jentsch noted that 'the uncanny' 'appears to express [something that happens to someone] that is not quite 'at home or at ease' in the situation concerned.' (1997, p.8)

However the opposition of these concepts is not absolute. Historically heimlich has been used to convey two separate ideas, the first relates to the home, to what is comfortable and not strange, and the second to what is 'intimate, withheld from others and kept out of sight.' (Freud, McLintock, & Haughton, 2003, p.4) According to philosopher Joseph Schelling – 'unheimlich is everything that ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light.'(Freud,McLintock & Haughton, 2003, p.12) The second meaning of heimlech is therefore understood to share an important commonality with its linguistic opposite. Freud states that 'Unheimlich is in some way or other a sub-species of Heimlich' (2003, p.4) – therefore it is a merging of familiar and unfamiliar terrain which triggers 'the uncanny' sensation.

According to the Freudian psychoanalytic model, 'the uncanny' stems from the repression of primitive and infantile feelings of anxiety - two states of being closely related in their comprehension of the external world. Jentsch explains that 'the child has had so little experience that simple things can be inexplicable for him and even slightly complicated situations can represent dark secrets.' (1997, p. 8) Primordial superstitions and infantile fears, once surmounted by rational explanations of material reality, become reassured.

'Intellectual certainty provides a psychical shelter in the struggle for existence. It signifies a defensive position against the assault of hostile forces, and the lack of such certainty is equivalent to lack of cover in the episodes of that never-ending war of the human and organic world.'' (Jentsch, 1997, p.15)

The uncanny manifests through the dissolution of intellectual certainty - doubt occurs when memories of these ideas and experiences become activated by stimuli but are only partially recalled, disturbance and disorientation results.'[The uncanny] is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old – established in the mind and becomes alienated from it only through the process of repression.' (Freud, McLintock & Haughton, 2003, p.12)

In my practice, depicting 'the uncanny' is the key means of accessing feelings of anxiety - it is the inconsequential details of everyday life, the mundane or banal that are usually overlooked, which can offer the richest source of unease.

NUANCE

Incitement of 'the uncanny' in creative productions is inextricably bound to nuanced and subtle forms of expression. I believe that this is because the phenomenon resides in partially recalled experiences and feeling, therefore to create a sense of it either visually or in written form, its expression should be equally intangible – only just detectable and on the periphery of awareness.

'In telling a story one of the most successful devices for easily creating uncanny effects is to leave the reader in uncertainty…. This is done in such a way that the uncertainty does not appear directly at the focal point of his attention, so that he is not given the occasion to investigate and clarify the matter straight away; for the particular emotional effect…, would hereby be quickly dissipated.' (Jentsch, 1997, p.15)

'The uncanny' is a muted and disoriented sense of horror. Ambiguity is an essential part of creating this impression - refuting intellectual certainty and invoking a subjective response which belongs to the ephemeral and interchanging realms of memory, emotion and imagination. As a result, the viewer is able to participate in an open-ended narrative, interacting with the subject matter in a highly personal and individual way.

Surrealist works such as those of Salvador Dali - which aim at reconfiguring notions of reality and disrupt what is recognisable with blatantly warped and distorted forms, have never held much appeal for me. These paintings in my opinion, confront the viewer with a fixed statement of the incredible and grotesque, leaving little room for subjective interpretation or interaction.

By comparison, Georgio De Chirico's painting 'The Mystery and Melancholy of the Street' is in my view, a more effective expression of horror. In this work, the artist has carefully crafted a sinister psychological drama, setting the scene through a calculated use of light and shadow, movement – a flag waving incongruously in the still night air – and subtle distortion of perspective.

What is absent from this scene is as important as what is represented, offering suggestion rather than explanation. De Chirico manages to capture a profound sense of quiet and stillness which disturbs and unsettles. Freud states 'that when [considering] silence, solitude and darkness, we can only say that they are actually elements ….of the infantile anxiety from which the majority of human beings have never become quite free.' (2003, p.18)

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Fig.1. Georgio de Chirico, Melancholy and Mystery of the Street, (1914)
oil on canvas, 88 x72 cm

I view the employment of realism as an important means of conveying 'the uncanny' through nuance. Depicting subject matter as it is, unaltered in form, colour and light, rather than through obvious distortion or invention, presents reality that is familiar and easily identifiable. Describing everyday experience and surroundings through closely observed

realism will provoke the effect of 'the uncanny' more convincingly than any other approach. This is because it essentially lures the viewer into a false sense of security of what is known, setting a trap and providing a means to release the strange.

> Freud asserts that 'the uncanny belonging to the first class – that proceeding from forms of thought that have been surmounted (the other {being} infantile complexes) – retains character ….in fiction… so long as the setting is one of material reality; but where it is given an arbitrary and artificial setting in fiction, it is apt to lose character.' (2003, p.18)

Utilising beauty or formalist notions of visual harmony, as a means of expressing horror, has always been of interest to me. In my view, it has greater impact in activating a sense of discomfort and anxiety than imagery which is overtly gruesome. I think this is because visual beauty also works as a powerful mechanism of nuance, in the unravelling of the uncanny. Beauty (in my work) operates as an instrument of seduction, inviting the viewer in only to disrupt their pleasure of looking with the presence of menace. This creates a construct of reality with an appealing and recognizable order of things. However as the viewer continues to look, this order is subtly displaced with that which cannot be reconciled, the world on hold, silent and still, resulting in an impression of uncertainty and alienation. This provides a malleable tension between feelings of attraction and repulsion, and notions of the familiar and strange.

When selecting subject matter to photograph and then paint, I am not consciously seeking out 'the uncanny.' The compulsion to photograph is always motivated by a confrontation with a scene that encapsulates a sense of beauty in the ordinary. This finding is based primarily on formalist concerns – discovering a compositional balance of horizontal and vertical forms, surface detail (or visual texture) that is contrasted with large areas of space.

It is only upon printing the photograph that I see 'the uncanny' potential of the image captured. This impression becomes stronger through the process of translating the image into a painted scene. Although the selection of these images is based on an entirely intuitive response, there are certain elements which consistently feature. Pathways and vertical power lines guide the viewer's eye over the picture plane, while hedges and fences act as interruptions – barriers which dissect the space and shut the viewer out, although not always, sometimes an open gate offers an invitation inside.

An animistic quality can be found in much of this mundane subject matter; the windows and doors of houses form faces overlooking hedges, trees loom beside them, a creeper winds its way round a telephone pole - its appearance reminiscent of some monstrous creature from a children's story.

Animism - the belief that physical entities and natural phenomena are imbued with spiritual essences or souls – is positioned by Freud and Jentsch as one of the key triggers for 'the uncanny' sensation. Freud locates the belief system within a primitive view of the world, and as part of the infantile complexes - both of which have since been repressed.

> 'It seems that each one of us has been through a phase of individual development corresponding to this animistic stage in primitive men, that none of us has passed through it without preserving certain residues and traces of it which are still capable of manifesting themselves.' (Freud, McLintock & Haughton, 2003, p.12)

Although this interpretation of the subject matter was not part of my original intention it has become increasingly more evident over time. Jentsch asserts that. 'There is] …the natural tendency of man to infer, in a kind of naive analogy with his own animated - ness, that things in the external world are also animate or, perhaps more correctly, are animate in the same way.' (1997, p.13)

The shadow is also a recurring element in my work, the house or tree silhouette casts a dramatic figurative intrusion in what would otherwise be an 'unremarkable' (and frequently abstract) pictorial space. My continual attraction to this feature resides in the ever present influence of 'The Mystery of the Melancholy of the Street' upon my practice. In this painting, a girl playing with a hoop runs toward an open carriage and is about to be engulfed by the shadow it casts. In the distance, an elongated silhouette of a figure looms around the corner of a building, holding an unidentifiable but weapon like object. The shadows featured in this work evoke a feeling of menace with what is at play, however the threat is not spelt out but provided as a question for the viewer to ponder.

As an avid follower of Freud's writing, De Chirico's use of shadow can be attributed to the psychoanalyst's theories on 'the double' to rouse sensations of 'the uncanny'. Citing his colleague Otto Rank (1914), Freud positions the creation of the eternal soul as the first

double of the human body - as 'an insurance against the destruction of the ego, and an energetic denial of the power of death.' (2003, p.10)

However, when combined with elements of the uncanny 'the double' ceases to represent the promise of survival but transforms instead into an omen of death - activating a fear, which although intermittently repressed, is far from being surmounted. Freud states that 'since almost all of us still think as savages do on this topic, it is no surprise that the primitive fear of death is still so strong within us and always ready to come to the surface on any provocation.' (2003, p.13)

The idea of 'the double' also dates back to an animistic perspective of human existence, but continues to resonate a feeling of terror. Freud explains that 'involuntary repetition forces the idea of something fateful and inescapable.' (2003, pp.10 -11) Historically the 'double' has been implied via reflection, twin imagery and shadow in both literature and art.

HEIMLECH

Reference must also be made to the 'heimlech' nature and appeal of the subject matter employed in my work. Houses, backyards, sheds and cultivated gardens (complete with 'white picket fence') – are all components of familiar suburban scenes embedded with 'homely' experience both remembered and imagined.

In his book 'Poetics of Space,' Gaston Bachelard's explores the psychical connection and co-creation of meaning between the 'self' and the environment.

'…space that has been seized upon by the imagination cannot remain indifferent… space is subject to the measures and estimates of the surveyor. It has been lived in, not in its positivity, but with all the partiality of the imagination. Particularly, it nearly always exercises an attraction. For it concentrates being within limits that protect.' (Bachelard & Jolas, 1994, p xxxii)

He also explores the importance of the house as a symbol of shelter, intimacy and solitude, in its ability to recall primitive and subjective notions of refuge, stating that 'it is our corner of the world… our first universe, a real cosmos in every sense of the word.' (1994, p. 4) The house 'apart' frequently depicted in my paintings references a kind of seclusion not dissimilar

with Bachelard's notion of 'the hermits hut' as archetype of acute isolation. 'The hut immediately becomes centralized solitude, for in the land of legend, there exists no adjoining hut…. The image leads us on towards extreme solitude. The hermit is alone before God. (1994, p. 32)

The heimlech-ness of this subject matter acts, therefore, as another means of drawing the viewer in before the uncanny manifests. However, according to Bachelard, the attraction of such imagery does not dissipate when faced with outside threat; he asserts that 'a reminder of winter strengthens the happiness of inhabiting. In the reign of the imagination alone, a reminder of winter increases the houses value as a place to live in.' (1994, p. 40) Interpreting 'winter' as a metaphor for the presence of menace, the house' as signifier will only intensify, resulting in an affect which oscillates between feelings of appeal and unease.

> 'In the realm of images, the play between exterior and intimacy is not a balanced one. And with regard to images, it soon becomes clear that to attract and to repulse do not give contrary experiences. The terms are contrary. But images do not adapt themselves very well…to definitive ideas.' (Bachelard & Jolas, 1994, p xxxii)

PHOTOGRAPHY – INDEXICALITY AND THE UNCANNY

Photography operates as both tool and subject matter within my practice – the boundaries of which are not clearly defined. Utilized as a point of departure for painting to begin, the camera lens allows me to arrest reality in the present – in its essence fleeting and elusive - and fix it as a static image to be preserved. 'The reality recorded by the photograph relates exclusively to its moment of registration; that is, it represents a moment extracted from the continuity of historical time.' (Mulvey, 2006, p13)

The indexical nature of photography is intrinsically connected with notions of the uncanny. The camera makes what was alive and active, still and quiet - inferring lifelessness to the subject caught within its apparatus. The photograph is a material testament to the passage of time, effectively collapsing the present into the past by recalling the instant of register to the moment of retrospective contemplation.

'A photograph weaves together presence and absence, present and past. The nature of the medium as an indexical imprint of the object means that any photographed object or person has a ghostly, uncanny presence that might be likened to the return of the dead. (Iversen, 2007, p114)

Photography acts, therefore, as a vehicle for the uncanny, reminding the viewer of the inevitability of death through its inscription of time.

According to Rosalind Krauss (1985), the inherent paradox of photography resides in its ability to provide an indexical trace of reality whilst simultaneously transforming it into a sign - fixing the experience 'apart' – via the framed limits of the camera lens and material image. This separation can be seen as a form of spacing, which similar to syntax in language, codifies the captured image as different and referred - turning the real into signifier. 'Spacing is the indication of a break in the simultaneous experience of the real, a rupture that issues into sequence. Photographic cropping is always experienced as a rupture in the continuous fabric of reality.' (Krauss, 1981, p32)

Cropping subject matter (at the time of registration) is an important part of my practice acting as a key informant of my paintings' composition. The process of selection, deciding which parts qualify as found image and which do not, relates to visual prerequisites which are primarily intuitive. However, locating and capturing juxtapositions of abstract forms/space against the specific and even anecdotal is an ever present theme. Cropping condenses the information received, altering its perception by placing greater emphasis on the photograph as a frame; this signified containment ultimately transforms the presence of reality into a depiction of its absence, '….this segment which the frame frames is an example of nature-as-representation, nature-as-sign. As it signals that experience of reality the camera frame also controls it, configures it.' (Krauss, 1981, p16)

This effect on the image preserved is integral to articulating the conceptual framework of my practice, instilling the uncanny upon my subject matter by rendering (in part) the commonplace as strange and ambiguous. This condensation of reality when translated into the medium of paint is also able to create an image fraught with spatial tension and claustrophobic in atmosphere. Influenced by the processes and effects of film and photography contemporary artist Luc Tuymans utilizes extreme cropping to increase the

strangeness of the image even further - its positioning almost an act of brutality upon his subject matter. Michael Archer (2000) references the implicit violence of Tuymans' methodology in his description of the artist's work Orchid (1998),

'The succulent fullness of the flower…is cropped sharply by the paintings edges. To top and bottom, left and right, the space of the canvas is insufficient to accommodate either the full spread of the petals or the length of the stem. Its cramped dimensions sever the flower….' (2000, p 70)

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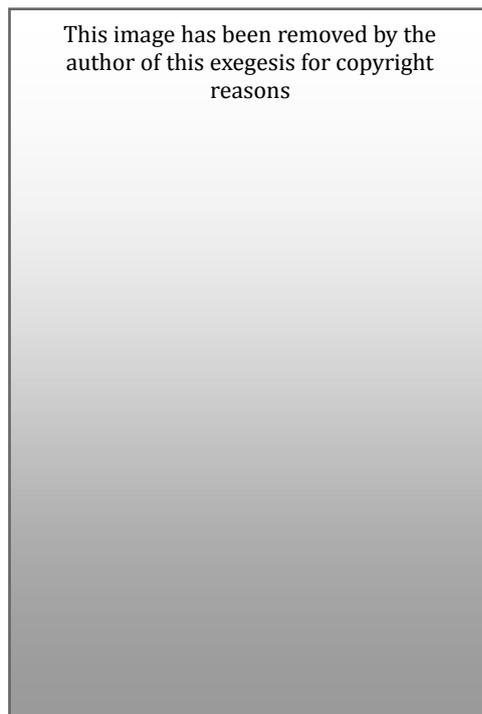
Fig.2. Luc Tuymans, Orchid, (1998) oil on canvas, 99.5 x 76.7 cm

Cropping was one of the many photographic strategies the Surrealist movement utilised as a means of challenging conceived notions of the real. By manipulating the photograph through cropping and other techniques such as negative printing, double exposure, rayography and solarization they were able to convulse images of reality via internal disruption. However, one method of manipulation that was shunned by the Surrealists was the Dadaist's style of photomontage[1], claiming it 'expressed not simply the fact which it shows, but also the social

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1   Dadist photomontage – typically an arrangement of photographs (of related subject matter) in a grid formation, syntax or spacing occurs through the separation of each image by borders.

tendency expressed by the fact.' (Krauss & Livingston 1985, p25) In contrast, the Surrealist photographers preferred to distort images from within as they believed it maintained the photographs unique connection with the real.

> 'By preserving the body of the print intact, they could make it read photographically, that is to say, in direct contact with reality....For these techniques could preserve the seamless surface of the final print and thus reinforce the sense that this image, being a photograph, documents the reality from which it is a transfer.' (Krauss & Livingston 1985, p28)

Despite the Surrealist's belief that internal spacing upheld photography's unique relationship with the real, I view manipulation which occurs post registration, as a compromise of the reality I wish to document and utilise. In my opinion, many of the methods employed by the Surrealist photographers implement distortions which frequently result in contrived constructs of reality and therefore sacrifice the medium's unique connection with the world. The visibility of these interventions is unappealing to me as it defies nuance and the depiction of the material world which is essential for the effective conveyance of 'the uncanny.' Imagery infiltrated with meaning is also fundamentally at odds with the open narrative I am trying to create in my work. Reconstruction of the photograph's essential composition/information, as a means of imposing 'the strange' upon the real seems an unnecessary intrusion -'the strange' can be found in the most commonplace setting or detail.

When discussing the unique characteristics of the photograph and its translation into a painting, Gerhard Richter observes that

> 'The photograph has an abstraction of its own, which is not easy to see through. ...its 'normal'. And if that then becomes {the} 'other', the effect is far stronger than any distortion, of the sort you find in Dali's figures or Bacon's. Such a painting can really scare you'. (Richter & Obrist, 1995 p 30)

Cropping by comparison, does not pose an issue for me in terms of distortion, probably because it occurs at the time of registration, and as such I associate it as being part of the photograph's indexical relationship with the real. In this sense my approach to the photography is more aligned with what could be considered the purist code and aesthetics of Straight Photography. This was an American movement in the 1930's, which opposed any technical process which interfered with the 'truth' of the photograph,

> '...all photographic activity that resorts to construction: to darkroom manipulation, to the manipulation of scissors and paste, to any contrivance that would seem to construct, "the real." How can it be real, if it is fabricated?' (Krauss & Livingston 1985, p91)

For me, the internal disruption of photographic reality resides in its translation into the medium of paint. By simplifying and describing form through expressive gesture, the information captured undergoes further signification but not, in my view, at the complete expense of photography's indexical nature - a trace of its documented 'truth' still resonates.

PHOTOGRAPHY TRANSFORMED – SCREEN MEMORIES

The depiction of banal subject matter when transferred from photograph to painted image is often able to convey the eerie stillness and silence of its source - referencing unconscious trauma through its emphasis of the seemingly unimportant.

Margaret Iversen (2007) relates the uncanny character of Edward Hopper's work to the photographic format of his compositions. This sensation is evoked through the artist's cropped depictions of the mundane, capturing a film still or suspended narrative quality that is characteristic of 'screen memories.' 'The peculiar effect of Hopper's paintings derives from their indirect representations of unrecallable memories, banal but too-clear screen scenes of traumatic events' (2007, p 35)

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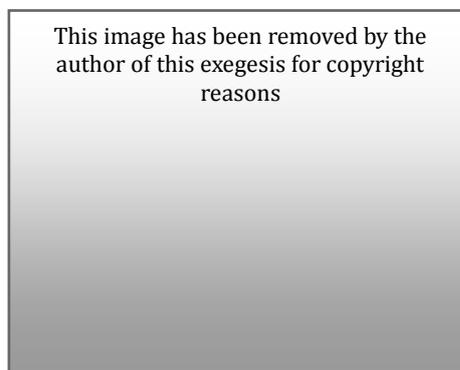
Fig.3. Edward Hopper, Gas, (1940) oil on canvas, 67.7 x 102.2 cm

The term 'screen memories' refers to Freud's (1899) theory of trauma repression via the mind's substitution of non-offensive mnemic images[2], ordinary and insignificant in content, in the place of those which recall disturbing childhood events. He explains that there are two mechanisms of recollection involved in this process; the first - which acknowledging the significance of the event seeks to remember it, while the other - as a means of defence against its harmful affect upon the ego resists the memory, storing instead an image which references unimportant and banal experiences. The substituted 'benign' mnemic images act, therefore, as a screen of protection against recollections which would cause anxiety and distress.

Although seemingly incongruous with the traumatic experience in question, the substituted memories are usually 'closely associated [to it] (whether in space or time,' (Freud, 1899, p. 307) and can therefore be seen as signifiers of those exiled to the unconscious mind. Freud also asserts that these preserved memories are characteristically recalled as vivid representations '… (too clearly, one is inclined to say) in every detail'. (Freud, 1899, p. 304) This clarity and focus bestows a sense of importance upon that which appears irrelevant – unable to ascertain the significance of these images the mind/ viewer becomes subject to 'the uncanny' sensation.

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2   Mnemic - a psychic mark or trace usually resulting from a traumatic event

METHODOLOGY AND DEVELOPMENT

Previous to this research project, my practice was heavily influenced by photorealist concerns. The primary attraction to this aesthetic was in photography's ability to capture subject matter as it is in that instant; documenting its form, colour and light without invention or intuitive response, because approximation of this information felt fraudulent and unconvincing to me. I was also drawn to the pure technical analysis involved in this approach - investigating the craft of realist painting in which the concept of the work is effectively isolated to the selection of a readymade image. The subject frozen in time presented a simplification of tonal variations and distinction of dramatic contrasts of light and shadow, which facilitated my goal of describing form accurately through economic mark making.

However, over time I became increasingly dissatisfied with the rigid process and static effect of this method of painting. Although photography is still an essential part of my practice, I have since moved away from making what felt like prescribed pictorial statements and toward the creation of open ended narratives which are subject to change and innovation during the act of painting. This has involved a deliberate revision of my painting approach. Methods of paint application (i.e. precise edges and minimal evidence of the hand) which I once held as absolute in terms of technical 'proficiency' have been re-evaluated to include processes and effects (texture, soft delineations of form, gesture, dry and broken brush marks) which I had previously attributed to 'bad' craftsmanship.' This development, consistently fuelled by the need to break my former photorealist rule set, has enabled an extension of my mark making vocabulary via a more experimental and inclusive approach.

The initial influences behind this development came from looking at medieval, naïve and faux naïve painting; its emphasis on narrative, simplification of subject matter, incorporation of a wide range of painting techniques within the one image, and frequent disregard for classical perspective, presented a conceptual and technical freedom that seemed the very antithesis of photorealist practice.

Since then, I have been looking at the work by contemporary artists Matthias Weischer, Dexter Dalwood, Wihelm Sasnal and Luc Tuymans. All of these painters utilise an array of painting styles to explore the boundaries between abstraction and figuration. Tuymans in particular, has helped elucidate the rationale behind my own approach - revealing both commonalities and marked differences in my practice.

Tuymans deals with a variety of imagery in his paintings, ranging from the commonplace; still life, landscapes, people involved in everyday activity, to specific historical events. Stylistically his methodology varies in equal measure to the subject matter he depicts – utilising pictorial language situated across the figurative and abstract painting spectrum. Underpinning the apparent disparity of Tuymans' work is a consistent sense of menace which is activated through a silence primed with fear. Luc Tuymans quoted in Turner, (2003, p.1) states

> 'Pictures, if they are to have effect, must have tremendous intensity of silence, a filled silence or void. The observer should become motionless before the picture, freeze. A kind of picture terror. This can only come about in a certain silence. I mean the silence before the storm.'

Although his paintings do not appear to reference 'the uncanny' specifically, Tuymans' interest in imbuing his work with an atmosphere of menace through the conveyance of silence and emptiness presents a conceptual framework which is relevant to my own.

For Tuymans, the suggestion of horror is also inextricably bound to the ambiguous nature of his painted imagery. By abstracting his subject matter through the use of tightly spaced compositions and minimal description of form, the artist forces its legibility to hover on the very edge of perception – calling upon both subjective and collective memory to complete the process of recognition. The simultaneous absence and presence / visibility and invisibility of the imagery depicted, activates the threat he wishes to imply through uncertainty, Tuymans argues '...when something is not painted it makes it more meaningful. There is a sort of indifference in my paintings which makes them more violent, because any objects in them are as if erased, cancelled.' (Luc Tuymans quoted in Turner, 2003, p.1) This negation of imagery is executed by the simplification of his subject matter, pared back in form and articulated though a pictorial language of economic and directly applied mark making.

Although still adverse to pure invention of form, I have become increasingly interested in its simplification. Depiction of subject matter through the use of efficient and expressive gesture allows room for viewer participation by creating an atmosphere where 'the uncanny' can exist. Although I have made progress in employing a more reductive approach to my painting style, the photorealist urge to complete every detail is ever present, however I use this to continually question how much is enough?

Tuymans' imagery oscillates between photography and painting, utilising and negating their effects within the same work. By crafting three dimensional illusion only to interrupt it with painterly gesture or flattened space – the artist reveals the materiality of the medium - juxtaposing it against the very subject it represents.

> 'What is unique to Tuymans….is his concern for the very different spatial and psychic apparatuses of painting and photography. He does not merely paint from photographs or in relation to them …instead his paintings work against the spatial logics of both systems of representation.'
> (Tuymans, Grynsztejn & Molesworth, 2009, p. 21)

Part of my previous attraction to photorealism was its use of photo vision (reality seen through the 'objective' camera lens) as an exploration of the boundaries between abstraction and figuration via the medium of paint. Flattened pictorial space, over exposure and out of focus areas sharply contrasted with precise detail - distortions which can be found within one image - fracturing the reality it represents, blurring the lines between what is recognizable and what is not. By utilising a range of painterly effects (texture, transparency, gestural brush marks) I now disrupt the image further, challenging its photographic truth by exposing the materiality of three dimensional illusions. This pictorial unravelling operates as another way of triggering uncertainty in the viewer's act of looking.

Over the year I have found preference in painting skies which are overcast with cloud but glare bright from the sun behind. It seems a combination which is neither one thing nor the other - not storm nor calm - almost a statement of nothing. One of the things I have come to exploit from photographing these bright overcast skies is that elements of the landscape (roofs, power poles, trees…) can often merge into its grey glare. This visibility/invisibility when translated into paint can facilitate a ghostly and menacing effect.

However, utilising white oil paint (for skies and buildings) has presented some technical challenges – its working properties makes opacity difficult to achieve without also causing unintended texture. Earlier in my research, I tackled this issue by using the translucency of the medium to my advantage - so rather than trying to gain a clean surface of opaque white, I applied an undercoat of darker colour (grey or brown) for thin layers of white to be applied as streaky brush marks over top – this proved successful in creating gestural effect and revealing the materiality of my medium. Recently however, I have been undercoating areas of the image that I want to be pure white in acrylic white first. This enables a bright opacity without unwanted texture, offering a dramatic contrast to shadowed areas. I also have found that during the development of the painted image, the application of white oil paint does not always perfectly align with the white undercoat, leaving its edges visible underneath the painted forms on top, thus exposing both materiality and process in the final image.

NARRATIVE

I have recently realised how important narrative is to my practice. Although it has taken me some time to articulate this, my attraction to artwork which tells a story has always been evident in the artists and types of painting that I have sought inspiration from. Over the course of this research, it has become apparent that Tuymans' method of conveying narrative is very different from my own.

I employ photographic cropping as a means of imparting a film still quality to my paintings – creating scenes which the viewer completes via memories and imagination. Ambiguity is generated through an atmosphere of absence and silence that is filled to the brim with narrative possibility.

In contrast, Tuymans fragmentation of subject matter is often so de-contextualised that its extreme abstraction negates narrative, operating as a symbolic language that resists decoding. Although absence is an essential part of Tuymans rationale, the severity of its execution in many of his works is fundamentally at odds with my interest in depicting a scene for 'the uncanny' to manifest.

I think this is why I have always resisted moving toward a minimal aesthetic. Simplifying subject matter (through efficient mark making and expressive gesture) continues to be one of my concerns but not at the expense of the narrative I am trying to convey. Iversen states that 'Hopper emphasises formless and fugitive phenomena that resist symbolisation.' (2007, p. 26) I believe that my imagery functions in the same way – ambling pathways, large expanses of concrete paving, doorways and windows – these voids (existing in both negative and positive form) rely on contextualisation to evoke meaning.

Christopher Woods' painting continues to be an important influence on my painting approach. He creates scenes which are rich in narrative, utilising simplified imagery and a wide range of painting techniques. Compositionally, his works are very different from my own – the placement of his imagery appears more organic which creates greater disparity of space.

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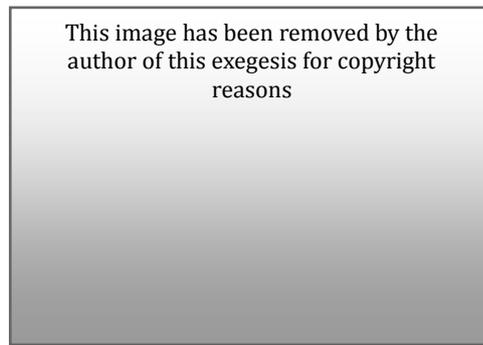
Fig.4. Christopher Wood, Douarnenez, Brittany, (1930)
oil paint on board, 33 x 46.6 cm

This effect has instigated a change in my methodology when transferring the photographic information on to the canvas. Previously the image would have been drawn to scale using a projector as assurance of its accuracy. Now the image is sketched on to the canvas with chalk. Although only a small revision, the inaccuracies which occur from this subjective apprehension, allow the image to emerge in a more spatially dynamic way.

I have thought about painting straight on to the canvas (without preparatory sketch) to try and achieve the expressiveness of Woods' paintings. My reasoning for having not yet employed this approach resides primarily in concern that the indexicality I am trying to translate from photo to painting will be compromised. Whether the stillness and silence can be maintained via this direct application is however, an avenue which requires exploration in the future.

The work of New Zealand artist Richard Lewer has also become of interest, his recent painting, 'David Bain in trance like state talking about black hands' is particularly inspiring. Depicting a cramped room, the artist flattens the back corner into a large expanse of white that is interrupted by two small black squares (vaguely indicating pictures) and an oddly shaped green curtain vertically intersects the right end of the wall. This flattening of perspective and overlap of many of its elements (the red carpet painted to cut into the duvet and side table) creates a scene packed with irrational space and psychological tension. Lewer references the materiality of his medium through the brutal directness of its application; crude brush strokes of colour are used to describe the subjects' jersey and a childlike simplicity is employed to depict the chest of drawers. The artist uses an oil/medium combination to mimic the effect of enamel; the glossy viscous surface that results evoking a sense of rich impenetrability. Using enamel or paint with an enamel like appearance has been something I have been thinking of for a while. Although rather employ it for an overall effect, I would like to apply it in selected areas of the imagery, to provide a greater vocabulary of paint application and also juxtapose (partially) the ordinariness of the subject matter with opulent effect.
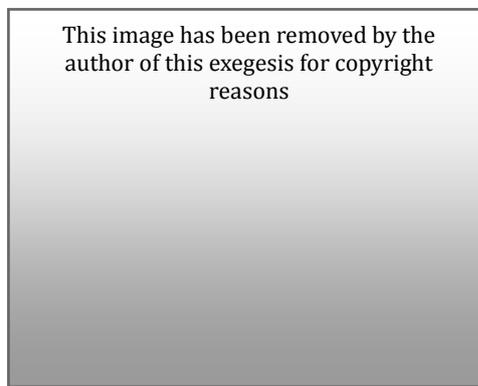
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Fig.5. Richard Lewer, David Bain in trance like state talking about black hands, (2013), oil on canvas, 112cm x 112cm

Understanding the significance of narrative in my practice has brought about a division of strategy to my '*making*' rationale. The first approach is to paint scenic scale paintings which offer the viewer a number of narrative possibilities – facilitated through both size and the

composition of the scene. Photographing subject matter from a low view point produces a condensation of imagery which is similar to the 'scene stacking' - a compositional effect (often found in medieval and naïve art) which negates the rules of classical perspective to incorporate greater narrative content. The combination of this angle and the spatial flattening which occurs during photography results in a kind of unreal realism that is both disconcerting and reminiscent of a child's view of the world. Working in a larger scale will facilitate the use of this compositional device.

I have recently started to manipulate the perspective of my subject matter through the use of photomontage technique – subtly extending the horizontal and vertical proportions of selected elements. Although still adverse to overt deformation of form, compositional distortion which exists on the edge of perception has become an acceptable process to employ.

My second approach involves painting smaller works which act as quiet statements about the conceptual terrain I convey. This way of working is an essential part of my practice as it enables expression of smaller glimpses of 'the uncanny' which are easily overlooked but all around us. It is also an important means of technical exploration and experimentation which can be utilised later in large scale paintings. Working quickly on a number of small works at once and/or while working on a larger scale work has proven to be a good way of preventing the paintings from becoming too laboured. Although these small paintings are intended to be complete works in their own right, rather just preparatory sketches, they are just one trajectory of a dual system of development.

CONCLUSION

This research project has elucidated intricacies embedded within both the conceptual meaning of my work and the photographic/painting processes I utilise to express it. Understanding the indexical nature of photography and its inherent relationship with 'the uncanny' has brought clarity to my resistance to its overt manipulation - it is the photographs unique connection with reality that I wish to transmit into my painted imagery. This interest in preserving what is real also illuminates my seemingly instinctual opposition toward invention of form and the use of minimal or symbolic pictorial language, and pertains to the importance of creating a scene for subjective narrative to play out. However, there are distortions which are permitted within my process of *'making.'* The compulsion to photograph subject matter (through the selective process of framing or cropping) has always been motivated by trying to locate the abstract within the real. This internal disruption is considered 'acceptable' not only because it occurs at the time of registration (and therefore seems to be part of the reality captured) but also because its effect hovers on the edge of awareness. So if visibility of distortion is considered 'unacceptable,' then revealing the process and materiality of paint as a means of defying realism should present a problem to my rationale. However in this case, what qualifies as 'real' resists logical explanation, allowing instead a new terrain of how 'the uncanny' can be expressed within my painting approach. This negotiation of the porous boundaries between what is familiar and unknown will continue to be explored and developed within my practice.
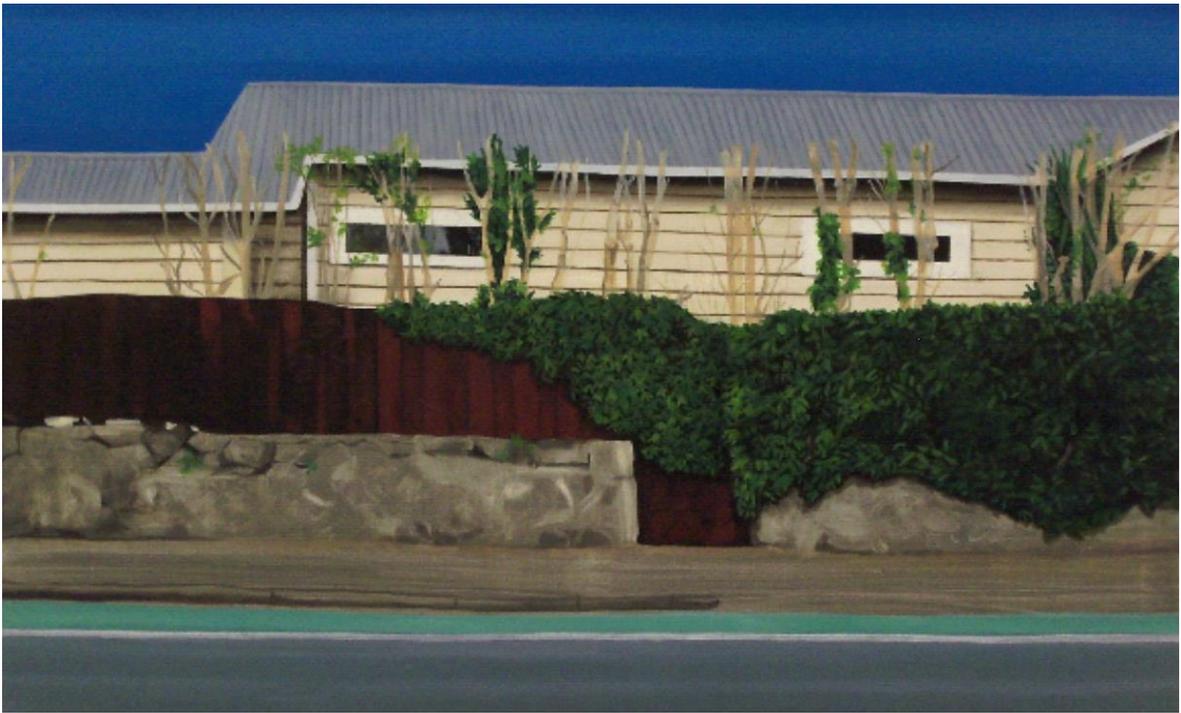
Fig.6. on the fence (2012) oil on canvas, 90 x 60 x 2cm

Fig.7. hangin' (2012) oil on canvas, 30x 30 x 2cm

Fig. 8. twig (2012) oil on canvas, 45x 60 x 2cm

Fig.9. by the by (2012) oil on canvas, 61x 61 x 2cm

Fig.10. cherry hill (2012) oil on canvas, 100x 80 x 2cm
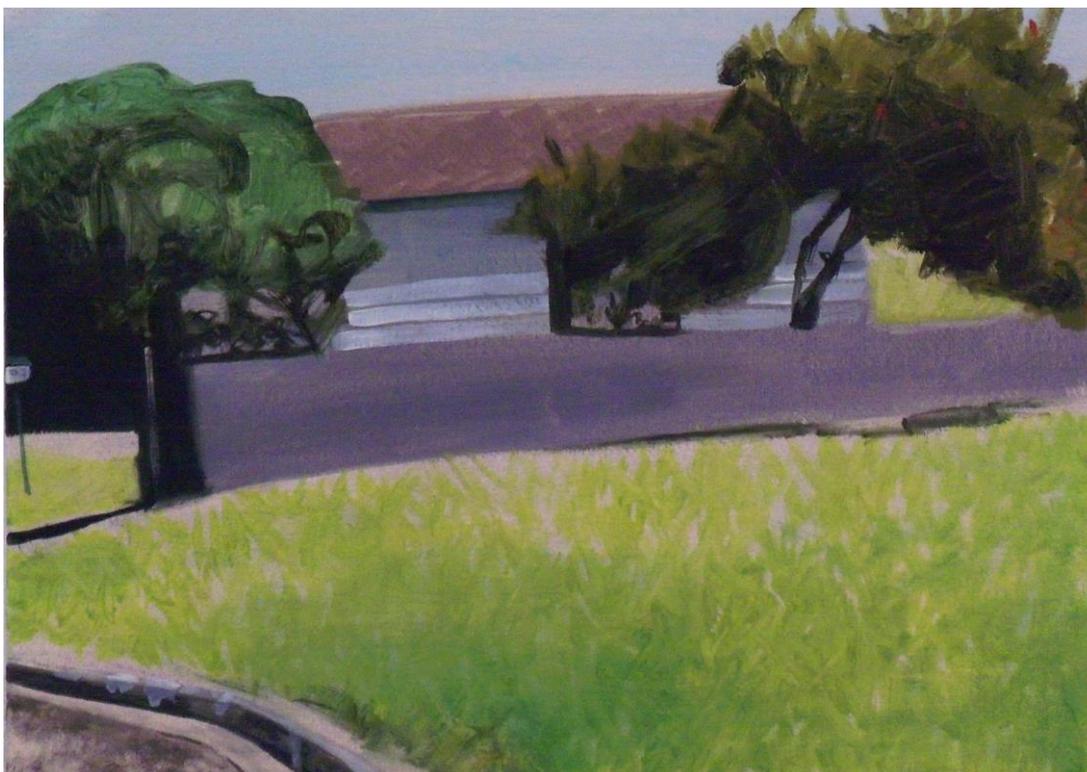
Fig. 11.grassy knoll (2012) oil on canvas, 32x 41 x 2cm

Fig. 12. the dishes (2012) oil on canvas, 31 x 41x 2cm

Fig. 13. drive by (2012) oil on canvas, 32 x 41x 2cm

Fig. 14. S.O.N (2012) oil on canvas, 46 x 35.5x 2cm

Fig. 15. little house on the road (2012) oil on canvas, 45 x 40.5x 2cm

Fig. 16. punga lane (2012) oil on canvas, 46 x 60.5 x 2cm

Fig. 17. 'The Lamps' (2013) oil on canvas, 30.5 x 29 x 2cm

Fig. 18. swing low (2013) oil on canvas, 40.5 x 50.5 x 2cm

Fig. 19. satellite view (2013) oil on canvas, 61 x 45.5 x 2cm

Fig. 20. It takes two (2013) oil on canvas, 35 x 45 x 2cm

Fig. 21. jeepers creepers (2013) oil on canvas, 40 x 50 x 2cm
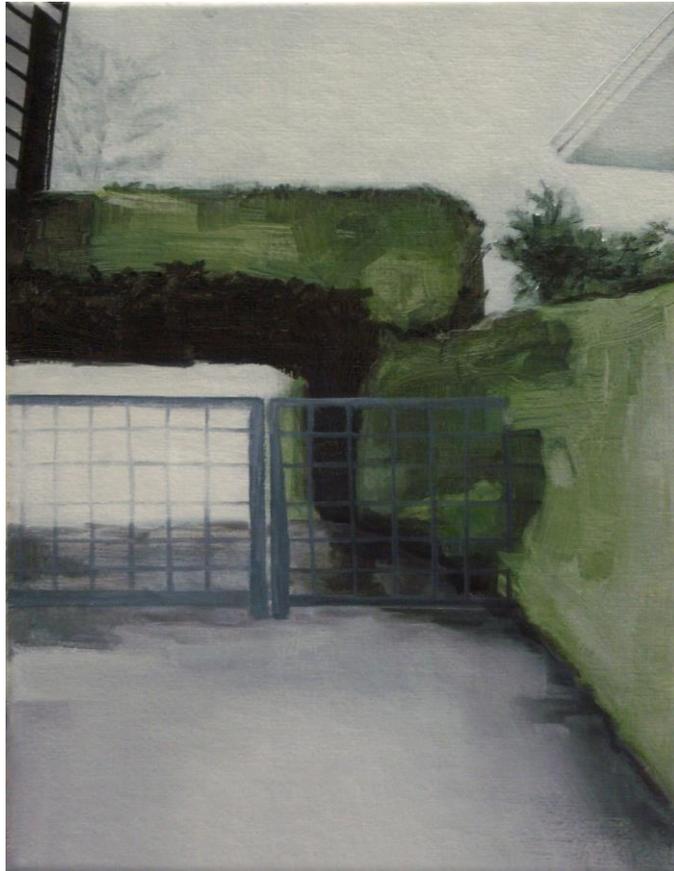
Fig. 22. On a clear day (2013) oil on canvas, 40 x 30.5 x 2cm

Fig. 23 'on the lam' (2013) oil on canvas, 40. x 30.5 x 2cm

Fig.24. picket fence (2013) oil on canvas, 30x 30 x 2cm

Fig.25. blue fence (2013) oil on canvas, 50 x 60 x 2cm

Fig.26. (work in progress 2013….) oil on canvas, 140 x 160 x 4cm

Fig.27. (detail work in progress 2013….) oil on canvas

Fig.28. Installation shot (November, 2013)

Fig.29. Installation shot (November, 2013)

Fig.30. Installation shot (November, 2013)

Fig.31. Installation shot (November, 2013)

Fig.32. Installation shot (November, 2013)

Fig.33. Installation shot (November, 2013)

FINAL EXHIBITION

Following the submission of this exegesis I began working on the large painting I had been planning all year (see Fig 26 -27). This work was aimed at depicting a more complex composition than previously executed during this research project. Although an ambitious undertaking (considering the timeframe of completion) the closer I came to finishing the work the more uncertain I became about its inclusion in my final presentation. Although satisfied with its development (in terms of technical and conceptual effect) the scale of the painting meant that what I felt to be significant works would have to be excluded from my show. After experimenting with the ordering and spacing of those which remained, it became clear that a coherent relationship between these smaller works was being detrimentally affected by the removal. The large work was simply too overpowering in the space I had been given – interrupting a dialogue of the quiet statements I had sought to create. As such I decided to stop working on the larger painting and concentrate on finding an installation strategy which involved only the smaller paintings. Although I am still interested in creating narrative via larger scale, this experience has instigated greater consideration of how a 'scenic' work can be presented without destroying the psychological effect of small paintings. At this point I believe the only way such a scale disparity can work in a show is if the large painting is exhibited in a separate room of its own.

Figs. 28 -33 are images from the final installation of paintings shown as part of the Art and Design Graduating exhibition in November 2013. The images below document the paintings shown in the subsequent order; 'blue fence' 'it takes two,' ' swing low,' 'jeepers creepers,' 'satellite view,' 'on a clear day,' 'on the lam'. In terms of presentation approach, I tried to provide each painting with as much space as possible so that even when grouped together (i.e...'it takes two,' 'swing low' and 'jeepers creepers'), the viewer was able to consider each work as an individual statement.

It was also important that my presentation space architecturally reflected 'the unheimlich/heimlech' significations depicted in my paintings. This involved creating a room-like environment rather than an institutional gallery setting. By utilising corners and the shadows cast I hoped to invoke a subtle sense of enclosure upon the viewer, the atmosphere of which would oscillate between intimate/domestic and claustrophobic/stifling feeling. The large window located towards one end of the installation also contributed to this idea of a room – flooding areas with bright sunlight, intensifying shadow and presenting an interplay between interior and exterior space.

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Fig.3. Edward Hopper, Gas, (1940) oil on canvas, 66.7 x 102.2 cm. Retrieved from http://www.moma.org/collection/object.php?object_id=80000

Fig.4. Christopher Wood, Douarnenez, Brittany, (1930) oil paint on board, 33 x 46.6 cm. Retrieved from http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/wood-zebra-and-parachute-t12038

Fig.5. Richard Lewer, David Bain in trance like state talking about black hands, (2013), oil on canvas, 112cm x 112cm. Retrieved from http://richardlewer.com/work/artwork/122/