

Phil Illingworth

Interviews Natalie Dowse

PI: A lot of your work is based on film or moving image. Is this a recent thing?

ND: It is something I first touched upon in my student days at Falmouth and something that I have dipped in and out of since. Back then I was making work about movement, dance and the body. I won't go into detail as it was a long time ago, but it sort of sets the scene. In my final year I was making large drawings from video stills in compressed charcoal and also drawing around my body and dancing across drawings with dry pigment on my hands and feet. Although I was also making paintings, I didn't include them in my final show. My degree show consisted of a video, photographs where I had projected my own paintings onto myself, and an installation of extremely large drawings. As I look back I often see recurring patterns, returning to certain methods and concepts.

PI: Did you continue this work after Falmouth, and did you continue to use moving image?

ND: I continued for a while, but then I started my MA and my work went through quite a few changes at the time and shortly afterwards. I continued to make videos - though not to paint from, making installations, some sculptural pieces, and paintings. I should add that painting was very unfashionable at the time - this was the mid 90s - when people were saying 'painting is dead'. However, around 2003-ish I remember making a conscious decision to take my focus back to working solely with painting and drawing. This is when I also made a return to using moving image and photography as source material and I've worked in this way ever since.

PI: With regards to moving image, do you always work with existing film or do you create your own?

ND: Actually, both. My most recent paintings are based on stills from film and television. However, in the past I've also used my own video footage taken on a digital camera or mobile phone.

PI: Before we go on to your most recent work, could you give me examples of how you used your own and existing materials before now?

ND: Yes sure, I'll pick out a few projects that come to mind. A good example of when I worked from existing moving image is a series I made around 2005-6 about former Eastern Bloc gymnasts from the 1970s, most notably Olga Korbut and Nadia Comăneci. These countries dominated the sport, but behind the façade of impish superstardom was the brutal reality of punishing hard work, lost childhood and the aching bodies of young women. Fear of injury, and pressure to remain pre-pubescent and child-like for brief moments of perfection, were set aside with the aim of Perfect 10's to showcase political agendas.

I sourced VHS videos of major competitions of the time from eBay. They were often very low quality, recorded from television, and had also been copied multiple times! I ran the tapes, pausing at the moments I wanted, and I captured my images by simply photographing the TV screen.

If you have ever tried to take images from an old cathode-ray TV, you will know that you get a lot of banding and interference. Combined with the low-quality video, by the time the images have been through this process the source material has seriously degraded. This process removed them even further from their original source, and I embraced this low-resolution poor-quality imagery, and sometimes chose to paint in, or exaggerate, the glitches and video/jpeg noise. In fact, I feel the degraded image offers me a certain sense of freedom in the painting, and is still relevant in my current work.

All the images that I used were from in-between moments rather than the routines. For example, just as the gymnasts were coming on and off the podium, collecting their medals, or waiting nervously for their score, and other quiet moments between events.

This series *Pretty girls in little boxes* consisted of a number of small paintings that were presented as painting installations of different layouts. Later, three of these paintings *Olga 1, 2 & 3* became part of the Priseman-Seabrook collection.

PI: And what about your own moving image footage?

ND: I started to use my own video again on a 6-week residency in Riga, Latvia in 2006. I remember thinking it was important to respond to the location in some way, rather than just continue with the work I was making in my studio at home. I wanted to capture the essence of the place, so I began walking around the city taking photographs and video on my very basic digital camera. Back in the studio I set about distilling images to turn into small paintings.

The following year I was awarded the year-long Jonathan Vickers Award residency in Derby. The residency was based on the theme of *Sense of Place*, and I had written my proposal based on my methodology. One of the pieces I made, which I feel has a very strong connection to what I am doing now, is called *Constellation*. This comprises 54 individual small canvases, 12.5cm by 12.5cm, arranged on a sort of scattered grid. Each painting was a face I had extracted from video footage collected whilst walking around the city centre. Again, the source material was very low quality and the resulting paintings took on the essence of CCTV camera stills. It was all about the idea of surveillance and capturing the people of that place. One of the major events to happen to the city centre that year was the opening of the brand new Westfield shopping centre.

As with many of these shopping centres, although new to Derby, they all become homogenised with the same chain stores and shopping experience. In fact, once inside you could, ironically, be anywhere. By focusing on the shoppers and passers-by I was documenting *these* people in *this* place. However, through the 'surveillance' process the protagonists in the paintings become mere glimpses, rendering them virtually

unrecognisable and anonymous - they could be from here or anywhere, a bit like the ubiquitous shopping centre!

PI: You say you also use still photography in your work, is this similar to your use of film, in that you might use existing imagery or your own?

ND: Yes, both. It depends on the concept.

PI: Can you give me examples of each?

ND: Yes sure. I made a series of paintings called *Between the lines* using images sourced from the internet. They were all someone else's family snapshots, very low resolution and pixelated. I like the idea that the photos look personal - the sort of thing that would be in your own family photo album. The snapshot suggests familiarity, whereas in reality the subjects are completely unknown to me as the artist. They were all small paintings that I displayed in various configurations to suggest different readings and connections between them.

When using secondary sources like this, I feel I can take ownership of them, evoking imagined narratives and memories. The spectators' personal response intrigues me too, there's that familiarity of common experience.

Conversely, another series of paintings *Between dog and wolf* were all based on my own photographs, which I staged with your help. *Between dog and wolf* comes from the French saying *Entre chien et loup* referring to dusk, just before nightfall, when the light is so low that it would be difficult to distinguish between a dog and a wolf. It somewhat poetically describes the limit between the familiar and the unfamiliar.

The setting is a dirt track which meanders through a French forest, although the actual location is unimportant and could be almost anywhere. I say it was staged as I asked you to take us there at dusk so I could light the scene with the headlamps of the Landrover for my photographs, and whilst I directed from the track, you patiently shunted the vehicle back and forth and side to side until each scene was lit as I wanted. The resulting paintings are very 'filmic' with a strong sense that perhaps something is about to happen. We have all been afraid of the dark haven't we? It is interesting that by day we know this place well as an area of beauty, but in the dark it can take on a quite different atmosphere - evoking memories of Grimm's fairy tales or the settings of horror films.

There is also a connection to my earlier *Roads (going home)* series, again using my own photographs, in this case from the passenger seat of a car.

PI: As you have touched on films perhaps we should discuss your most recent work. You've returned to your *Cuts* and *Crocodile Tears* series you started some years ago. What made you go back to them?

ND: Yes, I started these series in 2015 and 2016 respectively. The two series were always intended to be ongoing, because there's something about the concept that interests me deeply, and it was a case of revisiting them when the time felt right. Since, as well as making new works in these series, I have added other related series, giving the title *Mise en scène* to encompass the whole body of work.

All the paintings in *Mise en scène* are based on images captured from film and television. The *Cut* series focusses on a bit of a cliché in film: the actor's face is always on screen, and a cut on the cheek is an easy way for the director to show that the actor has been involved in an incident of some kind. In older films particularly the cut is often quite neat, and always strategically and artistically placed to look 'good'. The paintings parody this. My subjects are male and female, and the cause of the cut could be an accident, or a fight, flight, or perhaps a heroic rescue for example. Importantly for me, all the women I choose to paint are usually strong characters. Another important thing is that the violence isn't real, the cut isn't real. It's only make-up, in itself a painted mark.

The paintings don't include the whole scene, but are cropped. With the earlier *Cuts* the images weren't cropped as tightly as they are now. I know I was going for a slightly different aesthetic, but the downside was that this occasionally made the actors recognisable, or led to the audience playing a guessing game as to what role they thought they were playing. I became frustrated with how they were being 'read' in the sense that I felt that the concept and meaning was sometimes being lost. I wanted to return to them to hone the concept more, and to make it more dominant.

I had realised this pretty quickly, so for the initial *Crocodile tears* paintings, which are based on actors crying in films, I began to crop the images more closely and painted them in monochrome. This did the trick and did render them more anonymous, but again I wanted to take the concept further. Anyway, I really do like to use colour.

PI: When did you return to them, and what did you do differently?

ND: I returned to them in June 2023, and made several changes. Firstly, I made them much smaller, to date ranging in size from 15cm square to 40cm square, and I decided to paint on panel rather than canvas. Although the paintings are physically small, they are *huge* in scale, far larger than life, and this brings to mind the screen at the cinema. There's something about this, and the rhythm of the variety of sizes, that I love.

Secondly, I have pushed the crop and the composition much further. So not only am I abstracting the images from the original context of the film and narrative, some are beginning to touch on the fine line between figuration and abstraction itself. I'm playing with this more as I go along. I also have other formats and larger sizes planned for these and others in *Mise en scène*.

PI: How do you go about selecting this material, and does it take a long time?

ND: Generally, as I'm watching a film or television I make a note of potentially interesting scenes. I record a lot of films with this in mind, so that I can return as often as I need to. Also 'on-demand' has proven very useful. It is an incredibly lengthy process to find and collate material – isolating just a single frame out of hours and hours and hours of watching.

I will shuffle back and forth, frame by frame, until I find what I want. Sometimes what seemed to have potential as I'm watching doesn't turn out to be successful or as expected. Often particular lighting conditions or the atmosphere of a scene will play a part in my choice of frame. Different periods in cinema often have a distinct identity which I enjoy as much as the challenge of video noise.

In fact going back to colour, I like to play around with it, and I go for images that have interesting or unusual colours to explore. Also, because the images come from screen-based media I like to exploit and maintain a feeling of the back-lit light and colour that emanates from the screen.

PI: You've added other cinematic tropes to these series, notably the *Cut lips*. Can you tell me a little about these?

ND: Yes these are a little different in the sense that, unlike the *Cuts* and *Crocodile tears* where the actor can be any gender, the 'cup lips' are all images of women. I noticed that in film a woman portrayed with a cut lip is almost always suffering the aftermath of violence inflicted by a man. This is a very different trope, and carries a heavy burden.

I must admit I was in two minds as to whether I should make or show these paintings. I was, and still am, somewhat uncomfortable with them. They are inherently more distressing than the others, but that's entirely the point. After all they are taken from mainstream film and television, broadcast into our homes - and just as film and television draws on real life, it is by the same association a reflection on society. Therefore, I didn't want to avert my own gaze and I think it's important that the viewer doesn't either.

PI: There is a dichotomy between a beautifully rendered painting and an obvious manifestation of violence. It confronts the viewer with something quite unsettling.

ND: Yes, a beautifully painted but bloodied mouth places the viewer in an uncomfortable position, even before other allusions come to mind. And when they do, it perhaps becomes even more discomfoting.

The paintings themselves are rendered carefully, with their own beautiful colours and surfaces, but it is hard to admit or acknowledge any kind of beauty when confronted with blood coming from a woman's mouth. That the source material is taken from a 'pretend' act of violence becomes irrelevant.

Despite my reticence I have had some very thoughtful comments about the work, that show a real understanding of the sensitive issues involved.

I have shared some of them on social media. One comment was simply, 'Very disturbing image!' which of course it is, it's supposed to be. By contrast, to date, the cut cheeks have not provoked such a response.

PI: You mention that the cut lips can also allude to other things, but from what you have said, these come from a strong feminist angle.

ND: Yes they do, and this is where other allusions become important. I want the viewer to be confronted.

PI: In discussing the *Mise en scène* series, I get the sense that the paintings have their own personality. Do you develop a relationship with the subject?

ND: Yes I do. My process and the way I compose the image removes the actor from the original context, so I don't reflect on the role or the scene. The subject takes on the character and story I give it through my intervention, and their personality develops in my imagination as I paint. I feel I become more emotionally invested in this way.

PI: You home in on your subject very closely. The *Crocodile tears* paintings in particular have quite an intense emotion to them.

ND: Yes, in most cases the painting represents a tiny portion of the frame, I discard everything superfluous. An outcome, particularly for the *Crocodile tears* paintings, has made them so much more emotionally charged. They seem to acquire an intensity, often quite different from the original context, and they aren't sentimental. These, and some of the *Cut* paintings have a hint of say, religious subjects, and I really enjoy making this nod to the Baroque and similar precedents.

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