OTHER OBSERVATIONS

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DOCUMENTATION AND COMMENTARY ON THE BODY OF PRACTICAL WORK PRESENTED FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ART AT THE MICHAELIS SCHOOL OF FINE ART, UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN.

May 2004

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to express my appreciation to my supervisors Julia Teale and Andrew Lamprecht for their guidance and support throughout the duration of this degree. Their expertise and insight were given generously and were invaluable to my progress. I also wish to acknowledge the support, both financial and otherwise, of my parents, Piet and Ronnie van der Byl, who made my years of study possible. And of course, Tom.

I gratefully acknowledge the financial assistance received from the Reginald Turvey Painting Bursary, the Cape Tercentary Foundation Dudley D'Ewes Scholarship, the MacIver Scholarship and the Jules Kramer Scholarship.

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Introduction

Painting presents an almost infinite range of possibilities to convey meaning through the versatility and potential of the medium. It is to this potential for mimicking and representing the real world that I wish to turn; for whilst the word painting refers to the manifestation of the physical object, it also, more importantly for this discussion, refers to the act of painting itself, the application of paint onto a surface in the articulation of an illusory reality. This ability to represent in paint, upon a two-dimensional surface, the real world in such a way as to cause in the viewer an experience which is somehow like that of looking at the world, is called naturalism.

Yet what does it really mean to say that a picture looks like the world? The mimetic claim made by naturalistic painting is not as straightforward or uncomplicated as it would appear. As the following investigation into the workings of naturalism will show, inextricably bound up with the concept are notions of visual and mental perception, cultural conventions of representation, the conditions of illusion, inherited technical strategies, and the practice of imitation. Yet these areas too are contested ones, and thus there has been little agreement between artists, theorists, and art-historians on the subject. What may be called naturalism is a highly contested category influenced and shaped by three millennia of conflicting ideas.

The body of practical work which informed this investigation, was undertaken in order to develop my own pictorial language within the ambit of naturalistic painting, and in working towards this end, I was cognizant of the varying and conflicting ideas of what it was that actually constituted naturalism of depiction. Yet despite this written dissertation in which these ideas are explored and evaluated, ultimately lessons are only learnt and discoveries made on the canvas, not in the texts.

In order then that practice does not become subsumed by theory, this investigation will return repeatedly to the problems involved in the actual production of naturalistic paintings, and that inexplicable moment when one suddenly attends to the illusory world of the picture, rather than just the materials of which that picture is made.

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The subject of naturalism in art, and painting in particular, is a very broad one and draws from many different areas of study and discourse. As a student of painting, I intend for this dissertation to reflect, in theoretical terms, the investigations and explorations conducted within the paintings themselves. Issues such as the classical positions on painting, the heuretic functions of image-making and the social conditions which led to the rise of Western naturalism, whilst pertinent to the subject as a whole, will only be discussed briefly. Rather, the central line of inquiry of this dissertation will begin with an investigation into the role of vision in providing information – both true and fallacious - about the world. Through an exploration of the painted highlight in art, naturalism will be shown to have been a collective effort, and that acceptable pictorial equivalents for the real world were discovered and developed over long periods of time. Returning to the question which underlies this entire investigation, that is, what do we mean when we say that a picture looks like the world, various possible explanations for the way in which naturalistic pictures actually produce an experience which is like looking at the real world will be explored.

Having shown pictorial naturalism to be an inherited and learnt language of conventions, the issue of artistic originality, and in particular, the use of the term in both an evaluative and non-evaluative way, will be examined. The historical practice of imitation as a legitimate artistic strategy and the process of assimilation in which

what is learnt from others through imitation, becomes an integrated part of the artists' pictorial vocabulary, will be discussed.

The concluding chapter of the dissertation does not make concrete deductions and conclusions so much as point to the ongoing nature of the project. Developing a pictorial language of naturalistic representation – a language both learnt and specific to the artist – is a continuous process and thus cannot be concluded. This dissertation represents the first part of an exploration and learning process that will continue beyond this period of study.

Terms and Definitions

Before proceeding onto any discussion of naturalism, it will be useful to define the term in the way I intend to use it. By "naturalism" I am referring to art - and in particular the paradigm of painting – the elements of which are presumed to coincide with the elements of visual or optical experience.[1] (The term naturalism does not include, for the purposes of this paper, photo-realism. Photo-realistic painting refers explicitly to the photographic source from which it was literally transcribed. Naturalism involves the translation of the visual information provided by the real world into the visual language of pictorial representation, which as we shall see, often bears scant resemblance to the real world.) The terms "naturalism" and "realism" are often used synonymously and interchanged freely with each other, but it is necessary to distinguish carefully between them. "Realism" - often mistakenly employed to describe that which appears "realistic", by which is actually meant "naturalistic" – essentially describes a category of subject matter and refers to an artwork having a

[1] To define naturalism thus is to overly simplify it. For the purposes of this historical investigation into the circumstances with led to the rise of naturalism in western art, this definition will suffice; further exploration of what it is we actually mean by the term will follow.

concrete historical reference or an apparent historical reference. "Realism" thus concerns the content rather than the manner of representing. A painting could therefore be both realistic and naturalistic, although such a union is not necessary. Imaginary or fantastical subjects can be depicted in a naturalistic way, whilst real subject matter can be set against anti-naturalistic colour and drawing.

The term "naturalism" also needs to be distinguished from the term "imitation" which is a broader category, referring to art that makes "artificial analogues" to things (Summers 1987: 3)[2]. An imitated form may refer to a natural one but does not necessarily reduce it to its optical elements. Summers uses the example of a marching army shown as a frieze of undifferentiated soldiers, the simple repetition of the forms of the soldiers themselves made to stand for the army's movement without any further concessions to the description of the appearance of an army on the march (ibid). Naturalism is a kind of imitation, but one in which the "artificial analogue" is a relationship of visual elements determined in principle by the physical laws of sight and optics. What exactly these visual elements may be, and they precise way in which they operate within the picture to produce the effect of naturalism, will be explored.

[2] The term 'imitation' will be used in two different ways in this paper: as the imitation of nature, or the world; and as the imitation of artistic precedents. At this point 'imitation' assumes the former meaning of the imitation of nature.

Naturalism and the Platonic legacy

It can reasonably be said that there are few concepts more central to our notions of pictures than that of naturalism; simply put, to mean the practice of making pictures which can be said to resemble that which they denote. Even with the advent of modernism, when naturalism seems irrelevant, it remains the gravitational centre that directs all the surrounding discourse; abstract, non-representational and conceptual art had to be defined in terms of what they are not: naturalistic and representational. Pictorial naturalism is at the foundation of our sense of Western art history and remains "indispensable to the difference between pictures and other visual artifacts" (Elkins, 1998: 7). Yet how are we to account for the development of naturalism? What were the particular historical and social conditions which led to the rise of this particular mode of representation? The following is a brief look at some of the major factors which led to the development of Western naturalism, including the classical positions regarding both the primacy and fallacies of sight.

It would be simplistic to account for the emergence of naturalism as merely an inevitable consequence in the development of painting (any discussion of the arts in general, which of course were affected by the emergence of naturalism, is outside the ambit of this paper which is concerned with painting in particular). It would be equally incorrect, through the inappropriate application of critical hindsight, to assume that earlier medieval painters were aware of the failure of their images to achieve the kind of naturalistic fidelity that later painters of the Renaissance achieved, and thus attempt to account for the rise of naturalism; an assumption which erroneously devalues the function of painting to a merely illustrative one.

Summers' book *The Judgement of Sense: Renaissance Naturalism and the Rise of Aesthetics* presents itself as an argument for the emergence of naturalism as complex set of pictorial inventions arising from meaning and immediately both amplifying and transforming meaning (Summers 1987). In order for Summers to ask why it is that art changes at the depth of the emergence of naturalism, and why these deep changes persist, he asks what we call naturalism might have meant in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, for in fact it meant many things. His investigation is guided by the hypothesis that the characteristics of naturalism as the precondition for Renaissance painting regardless of subject matter were themselves "both significant and value-laden, and that the development of these characteristics in their specific historical forms (Western naturalism really resembles no other naturalism) are only explainable in terms of those meanings and values" (Summers 1987: 11). Summers goes on to examine what these values might have been and explores in depth Renaissance notions of the primacy and fallacies of sight, beauty, the pleasures of sense and imagination, reason and will, common sense, cogitation, the mechanical arts, prudence and aesthetics. The argument proposes that the development of naturalism in the late Middle Ages was part of a vast and relentless transformation in attitude towards the world, which became visible in terms of the meaning of naturalism; and it is for this reason that naturalism is "deeply implicated in the rise of science, the rise of the individual, even the rise of the modern state" (Summers 1987: 12).

A more thorough discussion of the complex social, historical, artistic and philosophical circumstances which led to the rise of naturalism is unfortunately beyond the ambit of this dissertation. (Yet I hope to show that the development and adoption of the style was not an arbitrary choice or a natural conclusion to a particular

trajectory in the history of painting. No less now is the decision to paint naturalistically an arbitrary or default one; it would be incorrect to assume that the conscious adoption of naturalism is of little conceptual significance to the practitioner; a discussion which shall be elaborated further in later chapters). Within this complex set of shifting values however, there is one thread which, as a student of painting working within the ambit of naturalism, is of particular interest and thus deserves further discussion: the role of sight in apprehending and translating the world.

*

Naturalism, defined as a visual coincidence between a painting and optical experience, *ipso facto* privileges the sense of sight. Complicating this notion however, as E. H. Gombrich insists, is that there is no innocent eye (Gombrich 1960: 297-8). The eye "always comes ancient to its work, obsessed by its own past and by old and new insinuations of the ear, nose, tongue, fingers, heart and brain" (Goodman 1968: 7). The conflict between the truthful and the fallacious eye can be traced back to Plato, whose distrust of all the senses, particularly sight, is well known, as are his suspicions and reservations about the art of painting.

If, as Plato believed, sight can perceive more that the mind can know than any of the other senses can, then everything that sight perceives is not true (Summers 1987: 42). Strongly associating the realm of the senses with the irrational it was accepted that no wisdom or knowledge was to be found there; and precisely because it showed us the most about this realm, sight was most often deceived, since what it showed us was always fleeting and insubstantial. When enumerating the deceptions of sense, deceptions of sight always outnumbered those of the other senses. Plato

condemns the painter; his power to reproduce owes to the "absolute superficiality" (ibid) of the art and its concern with mere appearances. Illustrating his argument with the analogy of the reflections upon the surface of a constantly moving mirror, the surface of which is a metaphor for the dazzling passage of visual phenomena, Plato claims that the painter does not imitate ideas, or even the copies of real forms, but only the appearance of these copies. "Mimetic art, then, is an inferior thing cohabiting with an inferior and engendering inferior offspring" (Plato *Republic*). The data of sight are thus phantasms, appearances of things in the light, in themselves without truth, illusive and chimerical. Pictorial art is condemned as an illusory, infinitely possible game with reality, and because, insofar as it inevitably stood apart from truth, was deeply related to fiction (Summers 1987: 44).

The cataloguing of the fallacies of the senses – and especially sight – was commonplace in ancient, medieval, and Renaissance literature, and always turned around the problem of the relation of sense to truth (Nordenfalk 1985). The Skeptics turned the fallacies of sight to the purpose of discrediting all judgment concerning the nature of the world; basing their argument on the paradoxical changes in the appearance of things effected by changes in location of the viewer, like a ship which at a distance appears small and stationary, but large and in motion when nearby (Summers 1987: 45).

Within the Christian vocabulary of the Middle Ages, derived in large part from Neoplatonic texts, the fully negative Platonic position toward the senses is retained; and is most strikingly expressed in the Sacrament of Extreme Unction, in which the sense organs by which the dying man may have sinned are anointed, so that, to quote a particular Sacramentary " the stains which through the Five Senses and weakness of mind and body might adhere to them, thanks to this spiritual medicine and the grace

of God might be purged" (Nordenfalk 1985: 227). In many late Medieval Books of Hours there are written prayers to the Virgin to protect the pious from sinning with the eyes and other senses (ibid).

Yet, in spite of his enduring legacy of distrust, even Plato found occasion to praise sight: "Sight is the source of the greatest benefits to us; for if our eyes had never seen the sun, stars, and heavens, the words which we have spoken would not have been uttered. The sight of them and their revolutions has given us the knowledge of number and time, the power of inquiry, and philosophy, which is the greatest blessing of human life..." (Plato *Timaeus*) Thus, in a conflict between reason and sense, Plato concedes that knowledge of the natural world can indeed proceed from sight, and, over and above this, the sustaining principles of order and harmony are most evident through it. This conflict extends to Plato's ambivalence toward painting, for whilst disapproval remains his dominant attitude towards it, he occasionally spoke of painting in more positive terms. Comparing his ideal philosopher state with "the fairest painting" (Plato *Republic*) Plato concedes that painting could in some sense look to the ideal; to reveal that which is more beautiful or godlike than others. Thus painting can both invent and discover and through this reveal true knowledge. Plato's contradictory positions find reconciliation in the idea that insofar as painting merely reflects and transcribes appearances it has no value; but insofar as it reveals and realises the ideal, it is worthy, a means by which the eye is elevated from an organ of sense to a privileged organ of sense, an indispensable tool for the understanding of more than we could otherwise know by simple sensation (Summers 1987). As a means of magnifying the power of sight, painting may thus even be a source of wisdom in its ability to access and realise the ideal.

Aristotle believed that all men by nature desire to know and acquire knowledge, and justified this assertion through pointing out our delight in sense, and especially in sight. "For not only with a view to action, but even when we are not going to do anything, we prefer seeing to everything else. The reason is that this, most of all the senses, makes us know and brings to light many differences between things" (Aristotle *Metaphysics*).

In his *De rerum natura*, Lucretius resolved the conflict between the fallacious and truthful eye by stating that the eyes simply see what they see, and this is the foundation of knowledge. The eye does not form opinions about what it sees, that is done by reason, and it is here that errors arise (Summers 1987: 44). "'Tis after all the reasoning of the mind that must decide; nor can our eyeballs know the nature of reality. And so attach then not this fault of mind to eyes, not lightly think our senses everywhere are tottering" (Lucretius *De rerum natura*).

Having briefly sketched but a tiny sample of the vast historical literature regarding the eyes and the sense of sight, the question of how we are to thus explain the rise of naturalism, which naturally privileges this sense, remains. It is possible however, to glean from the ideas discussed above, that if, as Aristotle believed, our natural desire to know is evident in the value we place upon our senses, then it follows that we must learn through our senses, and thus we must be taught through sense. Images had always been justified as educational, argues Summers, but now they come to be accommodated to the conditions of finite human knowledge: "not that they be simply visible, but that they be *like* the visible; not that they be encountered, but that they be *as if* encountered" (Summers 1987: 312-3). This represented world, so like the present, could carry the imagination and therefore the soul to the source of human knowledge; and it was in these terms that naturalism came to be regarded as both a

simple and powerful teaching device and means to meditation. Naturalism becomes an integral part of the religious imagery of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance; the Franciscan Ugo Panziera, a contemporary of Giotto, argued, against the ideal of 'higher' imageless devotion, that it is impossible to think of nothing; "all the wise determine that the soul may not remain idle for any interval of time" (Nordenfalk 1985: 229).

Naturalism in the visual arts is thus justified through the notion that perception forms the basis of all knowledge; the importance of art comes to be amplified precisely because it is visual and *like* the world. Yet, as we shall see later, these images could not initially just be referred to by painters at will; it was necessary to develop a visual language and acceptable methods of constructing such images, and to achieve consensus regarding their deployment. This meticulous and laborious endeavour, argues Summers, of inventing both vision and painting was "the long and splendid development of optical naturalism in the Middle Ages and early Renaissance" (Summers 1987: 313).

Naturalism and the Painted Highlight

What do we really mean when we define naturalism as a coincidence between the elements of a picture and optical experience? What actually occurs upon the painted surface that compels us at a certain point to attend to the contents of the picture and not its materials? An understanding of the complex circumstances contributing to the rise of naturalism, no matter how thorough, fails to advance our

understanding of how naturalism actually works. As a practitioner, one needs to move from theory into practice and ask what exactly the conditions of illusion may be.

In the face of the vast tradition of Western painting, the only way to begin exploring this question was to apply it to one easily defined element of naturalistic painting; in this case I chose to apply it to that seductively simple and elegant mark: the painted highlight, or *splendor*.

*

> A clever incident took place between Protogenes and Apelles. Protogenes lived at Rhodes, and Apelles made the voyage there from a desire to make himself acquainted with Protogenes's works, because that artist was only known to him by reputation. He went at once to Protogenes's studio. The artist was not there, but there was a panel of considerable size on the easel prepared for painting; and it was in the charge of a single old woman. In answer to his inquiry, she told him the artist was not at home, and asked who it was she should say had visited.
>
> "Say it was this person," answered Apelles, and taking a brush he painted an extremely fine line in colour across the panel.
>
> When Protogenes returned the old woman told him what had happened. The story goes that the artist, after looking closely at the finish of the line, said that the visitor must have been Apelles, because no one else could have made so perfect a work; and he himself, using another colour, drew a still finer line on top of the first one, and leaving the room told the attendant to show it to the visitor if he returned and added that this was the person he was searching for.
>
> And so it happened, since Apelles came back, and, ashamed to be beaten, cut the lines with another in a third colour, leaving no room for any further display of minute work. Afterward Protogenes admitted he had been defeated, and rushed down to the harbour to search for the visitor; and he decided that the panel should be handed down to posterity just as it was, to be admired as a marvel by everybody, but particularly by artists. (Pliny, *Naturalis historia*)

The painted highlight, or *splendor*, is that tiny dot of paint, usually white or yellow, which, in the absence of tonal modeling, is used to describe the brightest point of light falling on an object. As we shall see, this method of describing an object's characteristic reaction to light forms an integral part of the Dutch tradition of painting, and the following two illustrations of *splendor*, figures 1 and 2, were taken from the works of Vermeer.

Fig. 1 Vermeer *Allegory of the Faith* (detail) 1672, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

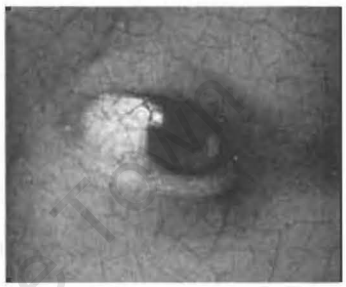

Fig. 2 Vermeer *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (detail) 1665, Mauritshuis, The Hague

Marks

The difficulty when talking about pictures, lies in dealing appropriately with the immense aggregation of theory to which pictures inevitably find themselves inextricably bound. The advantageous or deleterious effect of this theoretical accumulation is determined by the appropriate or inappropriate application of such theory to an analysis of one's own or someone else's work in either a sound or uninformed, indiscriminate and uncritical manner; which only narrows the scope of art into empty self-referentiality. Unquestionably, theory provides elegant solutions to problems both intellectual and practical. The difficulty lies in recognising those situations where the application of theoretical solutions serves more to obfuscate than

to enlighten. James Elkins memorably stated in his book *On Pictures and the Words That Fail Them* (1998: xi): "What gets lost here is the picture *as picture*": in the application of theories to describe, pose and solve problems about what they mean, pictures become relatively easy to talk about and the fact of their painted, physical reality is often not so much ignored as evaded by theory which "often ceases to provide answers in the inchoate half-light between the splendour of rational representation and the darkness of non-verbal marking" (ibid). Pictures inhabit a space partly within, but also partly outside, systematic, logical and linguistic structures of meaning; thus, there are ways of talking about pictures in which the inevitable linguistic or semiotic model stops making sense and becomes counter-intuitive (Elkins 1998). In other words, we lack the language required to fully describe pictures.

This was precisely the problem with which I was faced when investigating the subject of the *splendor*. When talking about pictures on the minute level of not only individual marks, but of a very specific kind of mark, one lacks recourse to a definitive discourse, and is compelled to devise a strategy for talking about such marks. My intention therefore is, to distill from the large and diverse literature on the subject of mark-making in general and highlights in particular, several personally relevant ways of talking about *splendor*. Whilst failing to provide a satisfactory account of *splendor* when considered independently of each other, these ideas will perhaps when considered together, reflect the maxim that the whole is more than the sum of its parts. Predictably perhaps, but necessarily, these investigations will be art-historical, theoretical, and technical, though maintaining such clear delineation between these concerns is impossible, for, as any painter will know, paint has its own logic and will thus describe its own course of investigation.

Simply put, the distribution of light and shade helps us to perceive the forms of things; the nature of reflections tells us about their surface texture. A matt surface reveals the direction from which light strikes the object and has the effect of modelling and indicating form. This type of illumination is entirely objective in that it depends solely upon the position of the object in relation to the light source. The effect of lustre, which occurs on shiny surfaces, is literally a mirror image composed and distorted upon a surface whose physical properties tend to reflect the light source; and as with all mirror images the places where these highlights occur depend, unlike upon a matt surface, not only on the angle of incidence of the light rays, but on the position of the viewer. A flat mirror for example, will hold a particular reflection only so long as we keep it and ourselves still and maintain a position relative to each other. Possessed of binocular vision, we do not even see these highlights in the same place with each eye and as mirror images these highlights appear to lie behind the reflecting surface – an effect which affords lustre its peculiar hovering quality. The perception of highlights upon a reflective surface is thus largely subjective, maintaining neither a fixed position upon the surface nor providing a naturalistic indication of volume and form.

Nonetheless, the shape and position of highlights offer the viewer *clues* to the form of the reflecting surface. A curved surface will collect more or less light depending on whether it has a convex or concave shape and will thus reflect images from a wider or narrower sweep of its surroundings respectively. The more steeply curved a surface, the greater the amount of light it will gather and thus intensify; the strength of a highlight can therefore serve as an indicator of the shape of an object as

it is consequently on the ridges and corners of objects that highlights appear most frequently (Marshall 1981).

Yet not all effects of lustre are dependent on the relative position of the viewer and object: a diamond which has had its surfaces polished into many flat facets will catch the light differently at every slight movement, yet the gleam of a round pearl remains relatively constant (Gombrich 1976). The complexities of light are too great to be dealt with adequately at this time: my brief sketch above will suffice as an illustration of the difference in physical causality between objective modelling light and subjective reflection.

Painting with Light and Shade

Goethe, in *Farbenlehre*, speaks of "the actions and sufferings of light" yet art history has largely ignored light's role in representations of the world (Gombrich 1976: 4-5). That art has a history is due to the fact that methods of constructing images have had to be developed, learnt and passed on to the next generation of artists; a fact which demanded that innovation occur gradually, thus allowing the art historian to trace connections and conventions in styles which aim both at a faithful rendering of the world and that deviate from reality (ibid).

The preservation of literary testimonies dating from as far back as late antiquity and the physical evidence contained within a few preserved artworks themselves, allow us to trace the history of the painted highlight and the subsequent divergent practice of representing light in the Northern and Italian schools. In his essay *On The Sublime* from the first or second century A.D., the Greek author

Longinus compared the effect of certain rhetorical devices with the effect of light in a painting:

> Though the colours of shadow and of light lie in the same plane, side by side, yet the light immediately leaps to the eye and appears not only to protrude, but actually to be much nearer. (Gombrich 1976: 5)

In the fifth century A.D. Philoponos, in his commentary to Aristotle's *Meteorologica*, wrote:

> If you put white and black upon the same surface and then look at it from a distance, the white will always seem much nearer and the black further off (ibid).

Philoponos then proceeds to lay down certain rules for the correct use of dark shade when depicting such hollow objects as wells, cisterns or caves, and of light when depicting prominent objects such as an outstretched hand or the legs of a horse. Of course, these rules do not always hold true: light can penetrate a recess and hollow spaces can reflect light. The assessment of likelihood, however, plays a large role in our visual reactions and our perceptual system responds to these indications of *probabilities* without our even being aware of their cause (Gombrich 1976). The practice of ancient artists therefore conformed to Philoponos' rule; the evidence of which can be seen in ancient mosaics in which caves and hollows are depicted in black, and white lines on tree trunks and rounded objects contribute to their three-dimensional effect.

However, Philoponos' rule presents an oversimplification, for ordinarily light shines from above and consequently the reflection of the sun or sky is located higher

on the upward curve of an object; a skyward shift of the highlight of which ancient painters were well aware.[3] The distinction thus made between illumination and reflection required a new terminology: light becomes *lumen*; and lustre, or reflection, becomes *splendor* (ibid).

These observations became embodied within traditional artistic formulae for the naturalistic rendering of the world; formulae which passed on from antiquity to both the Byzantine and Western tradition of the middle Ages. In *Art and Illusion* Gombrich illustrates the persistence of this tradition in examples which display identical highlights both upon the cheek of Theseus in a mural from Herculaneum and upon the cheeks of saints in twelfth century frescoes from Eastern Europe: a formula which survived more than one thousand years of artistic development. The question which Gombrich poses at this point concerns the function of this seemingly innocuous white highlight: is it still a highlight and thus conceived as a reflection, or has its function been downgraded to that of mere modelling? It is of interest to note that even modern historians have neglected this difference between *lumen* and *splendor*; perhaps, as Elkins postulates, this omission is due to the effect of two contradictory trends in the art of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, trends which undoubtedly influenced the observational bias of art historians, namely, Impressionism and Expressionism. In his publication of *The Vienna Genesis* – an early Christian manuscript - in 1895, Franz Wickhoff introduced the term 'illusionism' to refer to the loose and deft brushwork of Roman decorative paintings and disregarded the close application to the study of modelling and highlights which he regarded as part of the academic tradition; a disregard he bequeathed to art history (Elkins 1998).

[3] Whilst the light falling on an object is modified by light reflected off surrounding surfaces, in the absence of extreme or unusual conditions, the source of brightest light – for a scene depicted in clear daylight – would be the sun, and thus the *splendor* would be correctly located on the upward curve of the object.

Expressionism positioned itself even more strongly against academic concerns; remoteness from a 'photographic' translation of the world became a positive value within a movement for which the expressive qualities of line and colour are what mattered.

Byzantine and medieval painting, however, greatly valued the characteristic of luminosity as an artistic element, though whether tied to spiritual values or due to the convenience of application of a learnt convention, is unclear (Gombrich 1976). Beauty was identified with and expressed through splendour, and the means of conveying *splendor* acquired a new meaning for the Middle Ages as the formula was translated from white painted highlight into gold, in favour of a general effect of splendour (ibid). Yet despite this partial loss of differentiation between *lumen* and *splendor*, residual distinctions remain, albeit in highly formulaic and schematic form. The conventions and formulae present in medieval painting whose derivation from ancient mural painters is easily traced are too numerous to be adequately addressed here. Suffice to say that the method of application of highlights to indicate form – though often employed with little rational justification - survived within a style which had otherwise discarded naturalistic methods of modelling. The reduction of a principle originally devised to aid in the naturalistic rendering of form to such an abstracted formula which in all likelihood was applied by medieval craftsmen without any awareness of the rationale behind the tradition, makes it dangerous for us to presume to perceive meaning through the use of such ambiguous and illogical highlighting effects. Rather, we need to ask how it is that, within a style for which naturalism was not an aim, such an artistic device persisted, particularly when one considers that it was this device which gave rise to one of the most tenacious conventions of medieval art: the layered rock formations which stood in for most

representations of landscape features (Gombrich 1976). This convention departs entirely from the method of tonal modelling; rather, steps of rocks are depicted in even light which increases in brightness as the step advances toward the viewer, the foremost edge gleaming with an unnatural lustre (ibid). The numerous examples of such gleaming rocks points to the evolution of a formula which had increasingly lost contact with observation. Is the persistence of this highlighting convention merely the result of thoughtless copying on the part of medieval artists, or can we trace its use back to the rule of Philoponos from which was extrapolated the rule that highlighting a ridge will counteract the possibility of ambiguity inherent in the depiction of grazing, or laterally falling, light? (Gombrich 1976). This ambiguity has, I am sure, been experienced by most people – it is the visual confusion which can arise when looking at an image in which any roughly geometric object such as a flight of stairs, rather than being depicted in gently modelling light, is painted on a purely tonal scale, that is, in adjacent areas of flat colour of varying tone. Such an object may appear to volumetrically 'reverse'; those parts which protrude appear to recede and vice versa. Apply a gleaming edge to the object, however, and it will resist this kind of apparent transformation. Gombrich believes that despite the loss of differentiation between *lumen* and *splendor* in Byzantine and Medieval paintings, the methods and devices developed in Hellenistic painting for the rendering of light had not been entirely abandoned, but rather that this vocabulary of ancient art was used in what Vasari called the 'Greek Manner' (ibid) albeit in a highly stylised and crude way. [4]

[4] There exists much visual evidence to suggest that this particular Western painterly device spread eastwards and influenced art production in Central Asia, Mongolia, China and Japan. Gombrich provides a concise summary of the writings of various historians on this subject and presents it alongside the visual evidence in *The Heritage of Apelles* (1976).

Persistence of Tradition

Art historians often define the Renaissance in both Northern and Southern Europe in terms of a deliberate eschewing of the past and a fresh discovery of the world: a view which tends to exclude considerations regarding the *persistence* of artistic traditions. As a student of painting concerned with exploring varying methods of naturalistic representation, the most interesting distinction between the Northern and Southern traditions lies in their diametrically opposed ways of seeing and rendering light; a difference not merely accidental, but arising out of a difference in conception of the world. Earlier in this dissertation I briefly sketched the causal difference between illumination and reflection, and stated the incontrovertible fact that whilst illumination exists objectively, the perception of highlights is entirely subjective: a difference which I believe forms the basis for this distinction between the Northern and Southern, or Italian, traditions.

Leonardo Da Vinci's treatise on painting clearly differentiates between *lumen* and *splendor*, and although this text was not published until 1651, one hundred and thirty-two years after his death (White 2000), Italian artists and craftsmen were well acquainted with his work; yet it was not in Italy that the greatest advances in the rendering of surface texture through the use of specular highlights were made. Considering then the artistic revolution of the Renaissance in terms of artistic continuity, we need to ask why it was that Italy occupied itself with the development of perspective and thus with the mathematically precise methods of revealing form in ambient light, whilst the other aspect of optical theory, that of the reaction of light upon varying surfaces, was first explored by painters north of the Alps: painters who

were indisputably the greatest masters of lustre, sparkle and glitter as rendered through the skillful application of surface *splendores*.

The best way of answering this question is to turn to the textual evidence: the volume of writing on the subject of painting by both the artists of the Quattrocento themselves and writers such as Alberti and Vasari, is vast and, as such, cannot be covered within the limited scope of this dissertation.[5] It is however, an incontrovertible fact that the course of human development has often been shaped by one man's beliefs; beliefs which influence thinking on local, national or global levels. Gombrich presents a compelling argument for the widespread influence of just such an individual: Cennino Cennini and his text *Libro dell'arte*, written at the very end of the thirteenth century and on the threshold of the Renaissance. This text is an important source of our knowledge of medieval conventialism; his strict and precise instructions for the painting of drapery and flesh for instance, contain scant reference to natural appearances. For the purposes of this dissertation, the most telling aspect of *Libro dell'arte* is Cennini's complete lack of awareness that different materials should receive more or less white on their ridges according to their tendency to reflect or absorb light (Gombrich 1976); an omission due entirely to the medieval legacy of the loss of distinction between the functions of *lumen* and *splendor*. He proceeds to advise artists who wish to depict the textures of such materials as wool, velvet and silk, to imitate directly upon the surface which is to be painted, the actual texture of the material to be painted. Thus the artist is advised to copy or duplicate the *actual* material texture and character of the object depicted, rather than its characteristic reaction to *light* (ibid). Gombrich argues for Giotto as the source of this tradition as Cennini's master had in turn studied under Giotto. Whilst medieval artists had lost the

[5] These texts include Vasari's *The Lives of the Painters, Sculptors and Architects* Volumes I, II, III; Ghiberti's *Commentarii*; Alberti's *De Pictura*; and Cennini's *Libro dell'arte*.

desire and the capacity for conveying the distinction between illumination and reflection, Giotto moved away from this undifferentiated convention of painting light and had instead concentrated on illumination alone as an articulator of form. Thus in *Libro dell'arte* can Giotto's influence be felt in the recommended procedures which concentrate on the modelling of form from light to shade to create an impression of solidity. This type of meticulous blending of tone devalues the function of the painted highlight and such accents are subsequently subordinated to the establishment of structure (ibid).

In the works of Massacio the clarification of form within a field of uniform illumination coincides with the first attempts at the application of scientific perspective: a combination which was to consolidate the effect of sculptural solidity and firmness that we still associate with Italian art (Gombrich 1976). This increased emphasis in modelling in firm planes necessitated increasing attention to the imagined fall of light and the effect of tonal gradation: a procedure which automatically excludes the ancient and medieval convention of marking the foremost ridge with white. Thus the achievement of the Italian school remains the clarification of structure, not texture; the flickering highlights that shift with position have no place in this rational and above all, objectified world. "The rule of Philoponos has been rendered obsolete" (Gombrich 1976: 29).

Gombrich hypothesises that these reforms did not affect the tradition of Northern painting to the same degree as Italian painting, that it was therefore easier for painters in the North to rediscover the pictorial potential of the white highlight in pursuit of the wholly un-Italian effect of subjectively perceived reflection. Whilst to Italian painters the appearance of unstable reflections upon the surface of objects was little more than random and unwanted visual interference which they disregarded in

their search for form, some Northern artists became fascinated by the sheer and unexpected power of such highlights to powerfully reveal and invoke myriad surface textures (ibid).

It is precisely this observational and painterly occupation with light which allows a direct line of artistic tradition to be drawn between the Northern school and the ancient Hellenistic painters. Despite the fact that the virtuosity and subtlety required to render these effects of light eluded medieval craftsmen and was virtually lost, it can be argued that the new visual explorations of the fifteenth-century northern painters took as their starting point the ancient practices of Greek artists. A most profound difference between Italian and Northern painting thus lies less in the contrast of technique and media than in their divergent approach to visible phenomena (a distinction appropriate to the subject of this dissertation, and not discounting other formal, conceptual and narrative differences).

Whilst Gombrich's hypothesis certainly presents a plausible account of the adoption by the two principal schools of European painting of such disparate identities with regard to the seemingly insignificant and innocuous highlight, as a student of painting my interest lies primarily in the consequences attendant upon the application of these fundamentally opposed ways of seeing to the act of painting itself, for, ultimately each was an attempt to effect a greater advance towards pictorial naturalism.

Painting Naturalistically

To reiterate an earlier statement, there is perhaps no concept more central to our notions of pictures than that of 'naturalism', taking the term to mean the practice of making pictures which can be said to resemble that which they denote. Pictorial naturalism is at the foundation of our sense of Western art history and remains indispensable to the difference between pictures and other visual artifacts (Elkins 1998). Yet it remains the most embattled of the founding concepts of pictures; with theories of resemblance and representation first arising more than two thousand years ago, it continues to provoke debate and dissent. An overview of all the theories of representation would be impossible. What follows is an examination of those major theories most relevant to my investigation and which most closely follow the explorations being conducted concurrently within my paintings.

An investigation into theories of representation would gain little from those writers who disparage the very notion of describing pictorial naturalism as irrelevant, unnecessary or uninteresting, and who would encourage that we turn away from such 'old' problems. It is more useful to look at those writers who, whilst preferring not to provide an account of the detailed workings of naturalism, have nonetheless

formulated approximate theories regarding how it is that it works.[6]

An explicit kind of theorising is exemplified by Richard Wollheim who proposes that naturalism comes about through a "twofoldness": that is, a reciprocal relation between seeing objects 'in' pictures and an awareness of the "marked surface itself" (Wollheim 1980: 205-227). Wollheim proceeds to contrast this theory with five 'competitors', which can be summarised as follows:

The *illusion view*, that naturalistic pictures provide a "false perceptual belief" (ibid) of the presence of the represented object.

The *make-believe view*, that naturalistic pictures work by enticing us to believe that we are "face-to-face" with the represented object.[7]

The *resemblance view*, that naturalistic pictures "produce an experience which is like the experience of looking" at the represented object (ibid).

The *information view*, that naturalistic pictures "give us the same information as we should receive if we saw" the represented objects (ibid).

The *semiotic view*, that naturalistic pictures seem so by "belonging to a symbol system" which is somehow linked to the represented object (ibid).

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[6] Postmodern writers have written extensively around the concepts of reality and imitation, mimesis and similitude. Jean Baudrillard, in his *Similacra and Simulation*, illustrates, through his study of Pop art and ultra-naturalistic *trompe l'oeil* painting, the way in which simulacra came to replace replicate reality and the process whereby it became increasingly difficult to distinguish between simulacra and reality. "To dissimulate is to pretend not to have what one has. To simulate is to feign to have what one doesn't have...therefore pretending, or dissimulating, leaves the principle of reality intact: the difference is always clear, it is simply masked, whereas simulation threatens the difference between the 'true' and the 'false', the 'real' and the 'imaginary'."(1994: 3) For Baudrillard, illusion is no longer possible because the real is no longer possible.
Umberto Eco, in his essay *Travels in Hyperreality*, examines America's obsession with realism, where, if a reconstruction is to be credible, it must be absolutely iconic, a perfect likeness, a "real" copy of the reality being represented. The American imagination demands the real thing and, to attain it, must fabricate the absolute fake, or what Eco terms it: 'hyperreality'. The 'completely real' becomes identified with the 'completely fake' (1998: 7).
Relevant as these theories are to the broader subject of naturalism I will not however, examine them within the body of this paper as they fall outside of the line of investigation pursued by it.

[7] Whilst the *illusion* and *make-believe* view may seem too similar to merit separate names, they are differentiated by virtue of the first implying a delusion on the part of the viewer, and the second a voluntary participation by the viewer in a game or pretence.

By the standards of actual pictures however, both Wollheim's and his competitors' theories remain somewhat vague. Crispin Sartwell criticises Wollheim for being both imprecise and incomplete. Even after a thorough reading of Wollheim, Sartwell says: "one could still reasonably wonder whether it actually explains pictorial realism in an interesting way" (Sartwell 1994: 2). The difficult part, he believes, is accounting for the fact that "we can readily see items in the marked surface" (ibid). Despite Sartwell's accurate assessment of Wollheim, however, he fails to make any significant contribution to the debate with his claim that: "[a] picture is realistic to the extent that its visually discernible, variable properties overlap with the recognitionally relevant properties of its objects" (ibid), a claim which is really little more than a slight variation on Wollheim's 'resemblance view'.

A more elaborate interrogation is provided by Nelson Goodman in *Languages of Art* who, dismissing the naïve view of representation as expressed by the well-worn formula "A represents B if and only if A appreciably resembles B" (1968: 3), approaches the problem by examining those characteristics of pictures which are commonly believed to constitute naturalism of representation. Pertinent to this discussion are the ideas of denotation and imitation.

A picture, argues Goodman, in order to represent an object, must be a symbol for it, stand for it, refer to it; and that no degree of resemblance is sufficient to establish the requisite relationship of reference. Resemblance is not necessary for reference because almost anything can stand for almost anything else. A picture that represents an object, continues Goodman, refers to and denotes it. "Denotation is the core of representation and is independent of resemblance" (1968: 5).

The flaw in the simple-minded statement "to make a faithful picture, come as close as possible to copying the object as it is", argues Goodman (1968: 6), is that the

object before one may be "called a man, a swarm of atoms, a complex of cells, a friend, a fool and more" (ibid). If these are all ways the object is, then none is *the* way the object is. The copy theory is confounded by its inability to specify what is to be copied (ibid).

Thus Goodman, after arriving at the conclusion that resemblance to reality does not constitute naturalism[8] of representation, yet noting that we do in fact compare representations with respect to their naturalism or fidelity, asks what the criteria for naturalism is (Goodman 1976). He dismisses the popular notion that the test of fidelity is deception and that a picture is naturalistic just to the extent that it is a successful illusion which leads the viewer to suppose that it is, or has the characteristics of what it represents; the proposed measure of naturalism therefore being the "probability of confusing the representation with the represented" (Goodman 1968: 34). The difficulty with this lies in that what deceives depends on what is observed, and what is observed depends upon and varies with, the interests and habits of the viewer (ibid). This probability of confusion is extremely low for even the most skillfully painted *trompe-l'oeil* picture seen under ordinary conditions, for "seeing a picture as a picture precludes mistaking it for anything else"(Goodman 1968: 35) and the conditions of observation – framing, uniform background – are calculated to defeat deception. Deception necessitates such devices as a suggestive setting, or the occlusion of frame and background through a viewing device. Thus deception under such conditions is no test of naturalism, for, with enough staging, even the most 'unrealistic' picture can deceive (ibid). Rather, Goodman says, one recognises pictures as signs for the objects represented: signs which work without being confused with what they denote (ibid). This idea would tend to suggest that the

[8] I have substituted Goodman's use of the term "realism" with the term "naturalism" for the sake of clarity. Goodman clearly means to refer by the term 'realism' to that which is 'naturalistic'.

most 'naturalistic' picture is the one which provides the greatest amount of information pertinent to the object being represented. But information-preserving transformations are possible: 'naturalistic' and 'unnaturalistic' pictures may be equally informative (Goodman 1968: 36). If informational yield is no test of naturalism, Goodman argues, then the ease with which this information issues is. And this depends "upon how stereotyped the mode of representation is, upon how commonplace the labels and their uses have become"(ibid). Naturalism therefore, is relative, and "determined by the system of representation which is standard for a given culture or person at a given time" (Goodman 1968: 37) (a subject which will be explored more fully). Goodman concludes by stating that naturalism is a matter not of any constant or absolute relationship between a picture and its object but of a relationship between the system of representation employed in the picture and the standard system (ibid). In other words, we think a picture looks like nature only because that is the way nature is usually painted.

This symbol theory of pictures would seem to provide an answer to one of the great riddles of naturalistic painting: how it is that naturalistic works can differ stylistically so radically from one another and yet still produce the effect of naturalism. Renaissance writers seemed undisturbed by the fact that the world could be pleasingly and convincingly painted in a great number of ways (Summers 1987). If, however, painting what one sees cannot be understood as an imitation or copy of an independent given reality, then the question of how the naturalistic artists' claim to objectivity and the undeniable subjectivity of their product is to be reconciled, disappears.

Yet the symbol theory appears to contain a logical contradiction: if naturalism is relative and determined by the relationship between the system of representation in

the picture and the standard system of representation, then perception is essentially interpretive. This being the case, we would have no recourse to any objective reality whatsoever against which to measure the level of naturalism of a given picture, and the argument would collapse under the weight of its own pointlessness.[9]

Symbol theory also focuses on the ontological difference between pictures and the world they depict; the argument runs that since pictures are composed with marks upon a flat surface, whilst the reality they represent exists in three-dimensional space, paintings are thus more like other paintings than they are like the things they represent (Goodman 1976). This problem has been called the 'crisis of twentieth-century art', a problem borne of the artist's self-consciousness about the problem of transforming three dimensions into two, yet Alberti's *Della Pittura* of 1435 deals explicitly with the problem of rendering three-dimensional reality upon a flat canvas (Blinder 1986). This problem then, is not a modern one, rather it is *the* problem of naturalistic picture making. And whilst there is much truth in saying that paintings are more like other paintings than the world they depict, the difference between two-dimensional images and three-dimensional reality does not preclude us from saying that a picture naturalistically represents something insofar as it would look sufficiently like the real thing would to an observer. Thus, the most basic question of how it is that we can readily recognise things on a marked surface, remains essentially unanswered, for there must be something more that we can say about a picture of Table Mountain, for instance, that makes it a picture of Table Mountain and nothing else.

The assumption with which Goodman began his argument is that pictures are representations. Max Black problematises this assumption by asking *what it is* that

[9] The limited scope of this dissertation prevents both a more thorough exploration of symbol theory and its assumption that pictorial symbols function in representational art in much the same way as words function within verbal language; and the contrasting of this theory with its major competitors. Rather, I have chosen to follow a line of investigation that reflects the explorations I made during my practical process.

makes any naturalistic picture a representation of its subject (1972). Black considers various answers to the analysis of the statement "P depicts S"; two of which are of particular interest to this paper's line of investigation. The first of these two propositions concerns the producer's - or more specifically the artist's – intentions. If we can know what the artist intended to visually represent, runs the argument, then we can know what is being represented. This position, however, assumes the infallibility of the artist's intentions: simply wanting to make a picture of x or y would necessarily make it so (Black 1972). This paradoxical notion would necessitate that as we would say of a botched and unrecognisable picture "He intended to draw x but failed", we should say of any failed intention, for the notion of intention involves the possibility of failure (ibid).

The second proposition which is of interest is that of depiction as illusion. We still need, argues Black, "to isolate something about the representation itself that will enable a viewer to perceive in the art object something about P that makes it a picture of P and nothing else" (Black 1972: 113). Black echoes Gombrich's discussion of "illusion" (to which I will return) in saying that when one looks at a naturalistic painting of x - Black uses the example of a white poodle on a sofa – it is *as if*, looking through the picture frame, one actually saw an animal of a certain appearance, resting on a piece of furniture at a certain distance. What distinguishes this illusion from delusion is the fact that we are not really deceived, but have enough visual experience to know that we see what it would be like if the poodle were really there (Black 1972). This is what Coleridge described as the willing suspension of disbelief; and what Plato despised as a sacrifice of the higher faculties in favour of the lower reaches of the soul (Gombrich 1973). This account seems to fit all cases of response to even partially naturalistic pictures, including instances in which the presented subject is

completely unfamiliar or fantastical (remembering that non-real and imaginary subject can be depicted naturalistically). Objections to this account includes that which draws our attention to the inevitable distortions which occur in even the most naturalistic of paintings; the viewer will see the brushstrokes for instance, and will thus become aware that what he is seeing is not very much like the real thing, a point that recalls Goodman's statement that "seeing a picture as a picture precludes mistaking it for anything else" (Goodman 1968: 34-35). Once we have learned how to look through the distorting medium of paintings, continues Black, we shall simply see the depicted objects as if they were really present. The phrase "once we have learnt how things look" concedes, however, that in many cases the subject does not look in the painting as it would if it were really present behind the picture plane.

Common to the three arguments presented above is the idea of pictorial naturalism as relative to *learnt* cultural conventions. In the same year that Goodman's *Languages of Art* was published, Gombrich wrote:

> Every tradition develops an idiom or code in which certain features of visual reality can be recorded or encoded. Once the attention of the artist and of the public has become focused on a certain method of suggesting reality the painter is likely to watch out for those effects he can best express in his system (1976).

To borrow Black's formulaic expression: "In general, P is a representation of S, if P looks like S, according to the conventions embodied in the artist's style and technique". Realism is relative, argues Goodman, and determined by the system of representation standard for a given culture or person at a given time; a relativity ordinarily "obscured by our tendency to omit specifying a frame of reference when it is our own" (Goodman 1968: 37). We become habituated to culturally common

modes of depiction, and once again, we say that a picture looks like nature only because that is the way nature is usually painted. In other words, paintings teach us to perceive paintings.

If we accept that naturalism is thus a matter of habituation, we need to ask how these accepted modes of depiction are known. Margaret Hagen believes that this knowledge is tacit; not necessarily conscious or explicit and that the viewer is bound by this tacit knowledge of the rules for depiction in judging which pictures look naturalistic[10] (1986). Rudolf Arnheim argued that pictures seen as very "lifelike"" such as those of Giotto, were judged from a context of familiarity with those pictures that had preceded them within the culture (Arnheim 1954). He wrote that it was the "deviation from the prevailing norm of pictorial representation that produced in the viewer the astonishing effect of naturalism or "lifelikedness" in Giotto's pictures" (Hagen 1986: 86). This is not to say that any randomly selected deviation from the accepted modes of representation will necessarily produce this advance toward naturalism, but as the history of Western art can be seen to a great extent as an advance toward photographic naturalism, the argument could be made that any stylistic change in that direction would produce a greater effect of naturalism (Hagen 1986). Thus we learn about how pictures work - in the context of our specific set of cultural conventions - within the world of pictures, and not within the outside world [11]

The obvious question which this raises is whether the role of cultural conventions can fully account for the fact that we can identify a painting of a horse as

[10] Gombrich provided anecdotal evidence for the argument that judgements of naturalistic depiction are culture bound in his account of the Japanese man who could make no sense of the apparent "distortions" of Western perspective upon first encountering it, but who later, after habituation, found them to be more naturalistic than his traditional conventions (1960).

[11] These pictorial conventions include: Position in the visual field; linear perspective; texture gradient; relative size of objects; shadow; overlay and aerial perspective. In speaking about naturalistic painting, I have assumed knowledge on the part of the reader of these most basic of illusionistic devices and therefore shall not explicate further on their roles in aiding naturalistic depiction.

such. Is it at all reasonable to assume that I, as the viewer, am so entirely a product of my cultural environment that I cannot perceive anything I have not been taught to? Is there a limit to pictorial relativism? H. E. Hinton's exploration of the visual deceptions that have arisen in nature through evolutionary pressure to survive even at the expense of another species – for example, the way certain insects resemble twigs or leaves, or the false eyes on a butterfly's wings – would suggest that there is (1973). Gombrich points out that what looks like a leaf to modern humans must also have looked like a leaf to predators in distant geological epochs (1973). It seems that there must exist certain commonalities of visual experience, independent of pictorial conventions.

As we saw earlier, Goodman dismissed the resemblance theory of naturalism, which states that pictures succeed as representations because they contain the same kind of information as the world, by pointing out that naturalistic and unnaturalistic pictures can be equally informative. There is however, another proposition offered by general resemblance theory which proposes that there is a one-to-one mapping of the visible surfaces of the world onto the picture plane, and from there into the eye. The most obvious example of this, and one through which the limits of pictorial relativism can be examined, is that of perspective; the development and adoption of which during the Renaissance is generally accepted as having facilitated a great advance in naturalistic depiction. The question is whether the laws of perspective provide an absolute and objective standard that overrides differences in style of depiction and conventions of seeing.[12]

An answer could begin with the incontrovertible fact which forms the basis of perspective theory: light moves only in straight lines, and consequently, we cannot see

[12] For the history of perspective see: S. Edgerton *The Renaissance Rediscovery of Linear Perspective* 1975; J. White *The Birth and Rebirth of Pictorial Space* 1957.

around corners. These are physical laws which govern the behaviour of light and are thus no more conventional than any other scientific law. Yet Herbert Read wrote that "we do not always realise that the theory of perspective developed in the fifteenth century is a scientific convention; it is merely one way of describing space and has no absolute validity." (1956: 66).

In contrast, James Gibson defended the "naturalness" of linear[13] perspective constructions and wrote that "...it does not seem reasonable to assert that the use of perspective in paintings is merely a convention, to be used or discarded by the painter as he chooses" (1960: 227), and Gombrich derided the idea that perspective is merely a convention and declared: "One cannot insist enough that the art of perspective aims at a correct equation: It wants the image to appear like the object and the object like the image."(Gombrich 1960: 217). According to linear, or artificial, perspective, the laws of projective geometry provide the answer to the problem of accurately reproducing on a flat surface the real world as it appears from a particular point. Once the station point – the vantage point from which the artist chooses to depict a scene and includes only that which can be seen from that point without moving – and picture-plane are established relative to the scene to be depicted, there is, perspective theory maintains, only one pictorial image that will accurately represent that scene. This occurs because light rays connect each point on the surface of the real scene facing the viewer to a corresponding point on the picture-plane placed at a right angle to the artist's line of vision. The picture-plane thus becomes what Alberti called the "open window" on the world (Blinder 1986: 21).

[13] Gibson distinguishes carefully between what he terms 'natural' and 'linear' perspective; the former defined as the geometry of light that strikes the eye, a Euclidean geometry made up of the array of visual angles formed by the reflection of light from the visible surfaces of objects to the eye; the latter, also known as 'artificial perspective', referring to the theory of projection on a transparent picture plane to a station point or vanishing point (1960).

The anamorphic[14] image in Holbein the Younger's *The Ambassadors* and the Ames chair demonstrations (in which the objects viewed through three peepholes appeared to be three identical chairs; yet when examined from another, unconstrained angle, are found to be an incoherent collection of lines and shapes which create the illusion of a chair when viewed correctly (Gombrich 1960) require the viewer's collaboration in the reading of perspective pictures; what Gombrich calls 'the beholder's share' (1960: 210). Whilst Goodman argues that the conditions of observation for such images, i.e. through a peephole with one transfixed eye, point to the failure of linear perspective to provide an absolute visual truth, Gombrich argues that this viewer collaboration does not contradict the contention that perspective is in fact a valid method of constructing images designed to create illusion. David Blinder, defending Gibson's artificial perspective, argues that this kind of frozen 'aperture' vision constitutes "the *artificiality*, but not the *conventionality*", of linear perspective (Blinder 1986: 25).

The assumption made by perspective theory is that artificial, or linear, perspective obeys the laws of geometrical optics, and that a picture constructed according to these pictorial rules matches the natural perspective of the depicted scene. In certain instances, however, this assumption is clearly erroneous. Goodman illustrates this fallacy through a comparison with the way in which, in accordance with the pictorial rules, railroad tracks running outward from the eye are drawn as convergent, whereas telephone poles running upward from the eye are drawn parallel (1968). Yet by the laws of natural perspective, and this is easily verified by anyone, the poles should also be seen as converging; but when drawn as such, appear as wrong as would railway tracks which remained parallel. Thus the rules of pictorial

[14] The technical term for an image drawn on an oblique or curved surface which, when viewed from the correct angle, fulfil the conditions of linear perspective constructions.

perspective seem to have diverged from the laws of optics which govern natural perspective; and if "the behaviour of light sanctions neither our usual nor any other way of rendering space"(Goodman 1968: 19), then perspective would appear to provide no absolute standard of pictorial objectivity.

It would not, however, be unreasonable to say that the science of pictorial perspective occupies a space along the continuum between absolute objectivity and conventionality, for it is important to remember that it is founded upon an indisputable scientific law, which, for our purposes, holds true under all conditions. The single station-point adopted by Western artists, presumed to be a mere convention by virtue of the fact that the pictorial perspective constructions of non-Western cultures often employ multiple view-points within a single image, should rather be seen as the closest possible approximation to the way that we actually see. (The small difference in the angle of view between each of our eyes – the effect of binocular vision which allows us to perceive the world in three dimensions – is, as far as the construction of pictorial perspective is concerned, negligible.) Any rule generated from a single law – in this case that which governs the behaviour of light – is bound to contain some level of conventionality if it is to be applied broadly and under varying circumstances. Hagen argues that linear perspective needs to be modified from its mathematical correctness in order to appear natural and convincing to those accustomed to the pictorial conventions of Western art (1986). It would therefore not be unreasonable to say that there does exist, on some level, an objective reality upon which we base the pictorial rules that later incorporate themselves into the collective set of rules we call conventions. Without recourse to such a given reality, there could necessarily be no concept such as naturalism, which is predicated on the ability of the viewer to identify represented things correctly, and for there to be consensus with

other viewers regarding the identity of the represented things; a consensus not entirely dependent on habituation to learnt cultural conventions of depiction.

The answer as to whether or not perspective provides proof of the limits of pictorial relativism is both yes and no, yet perhaps the question is less important than it seems. The important question for the naturalistic painter is not whether perspective affords an objective rendering of the world, but how it is that perspective is actually deployed in pictures; for precise Renaissance perspectival constructions aside, how often is pictorial space really constructed according to the rigid rules of linear perspective? Thus the answer to the question of how it is that we can recognise items upon a marked surface, and what it is about my picture of Table Mountain which makes it a picture of Table Mountain and nothing else, whilst partially answered, remains essentially elusive.

Our ability to recognise objects upon a painted surface undoubtedly relies in part on all the explanations offered above, and owes much to a certain level of habituation on the part of the viewer to particular modes of representation. But these triggers would seem to operate on an automatic and passive level, in other words, we do not perceive painted things through a conscious referencing of Western perspective or one's particular cultural conventions of representation for instance, but through a tacit knowledge of the rules and conventions governing pictorial depiction. Yet might there not, in the very perception of likeness in a picture, operate a certain level of complicity on the part of the viewer; a complicity suggested by Coleridge's "willing suspension of disbelief" (Gombrich 1973: 197)? Having correctly recognised the represented thing through the passive referencing of accumulated knowledge and familiarity with other pictures, perhaps we encourage and further foster the *illusion*

through the active participation in a game something like the *make-believe* view of naturalism.

Illusion

Common to the various attempts at a definitive account for the workings of naturalism explored above, is their denial of what Gombrich calls paradoxically "the reality of the illusion" in front of a painting (1973: 194). Let us return to the 'poodle on the sofa' example, in which, as Black argued, it is *as if*, looking through the picture frame, one actually saw this scene; and the objections to this view which include that which states that the inevitable distortions present within the image – brushmarks for instance – preclude us mistaking the picture for anything else. Common to these opponents of illusion, who include Goodman and Wollheim, is a distinctly Platonic distrust of the eyes and the echo of Goethe, who dismissed all talk of the deception of the eye as "sparrow aesthetics"[15] (Blinder 1986:1). Richard Wollheim notes:

> As the eye passes over the picture, across the frame, to the wall on which it is placed, it cannot but become aware, however cunning the painting may be, of a discrepancy or discontinuity which is fatal to the illusion. (1963: 25)

Goodman's use of the term 'mistaking' in the statement "seeing a picture as a picture precludes mistaking it for anything else" points clearly to the erroneous assumption on the part of such writers that illusion consists in the mistaking of a picture for the real world; and if this were indeed the case, there would be little more to say on the matter. But awareness of the means, or medium, and of the

[15] Goethe's use of the term "sparrow aesthetics" refers to the ancient anecdote from Pliny, in which the painter Parrhasios trumped rival Zeuxis by painting grapes so naturalistically that birds came to peck at them.

representation are not mutually exclusive; I believe it can be reasonably said that there exists within us the motivation, however small, to react to a naturalistic picture as to the real thing, however overlaid by our critical reason these responses may be. And even Plato, for whom these critical faculties were located in the higher reaches of the soul, would have had to concede that the dominance of these higher reaches is insecure; for reason reacts more slowly than our automatic responses (Gombrich 1973), which includes us reacting to a picture as if it were real; and any argument predicated on the assumption that the viewer actively seeks to undermine the effect of illusion has forgotten the viewer's 'willing suspension of disbelief', without which we might see nothing but the materials of which the picture were made. The effect of illusion then depends both on our automatic, instinctual responses and the complicity of our higher faculties of reason and judgment, and it is to the discrepancy between the responses of these "various reaches of the soul" (Gombrich 1973: 199) that a discussion of illusion must turn. (A comprehensive examination of the complex and contentious subject of illusion is beyond the scope of this paper; a brief overview of a few of the most relevant points will suffice for the purposes of this discussion.)[16]

The lowest level of response, occurring within what Plato referred to as the vegetative soul (ibid), involves the automatic reaction of an organism – in this case humans – to specific stimuli; a response which relies on there being a limit to perceptual relativism. As we noted Gombrich stating earlier: "What looks like a leaf to modern humans must also have looked like a leaf to predators in distant geological epochs" (1973: 201).

[16] In addition to the texts referenced in this paper, explicit and thorough investigations into the problems of illusion – both artistic and scientific – are to be found the in C. Blakemore's *The Baffled Brain*, J.B. Deregowski's *Illusion and Culture*, R. Penrose's *In Praise of Illusion*, and H. E. Hinton's *Natural Deception.*

A second level of response would include our habituation to culturally specific conventions of representation, however at variance with real appearance they may be. It is this response which causes the viewer to say that the painted thing, a hand for example, looks like a real hand, even though real hands do not really look at all like the painted one.

There is a theory regarding the psychology of the mind which relates its capacity for perceiving illusion with the search for those satisfactions which life often denies us (Gregory 1973). Freudian psychology describes our psychic life in terms of a conflict between the pleasure principle and the reality principle, the first of which rules our lower soul, the latter the higher soul. The pleasures of illusion were believed by Freud to be bought at the expense of reality (Gombrich 1973). Gestalt psychologists have investigated the phenomenon of 'closure', the tendency to ignore the gap in a circle exposed to the view for a moment (Gregory 1973: 71), a useful ability when looking at a pictures, for of course they rarely provide the viewer with anything approaching the informational load of a real scene.

The important point to make in this discussion, despite its inability to address more fully the problems of illusion, is that illusions cannot be equated with delusions or mistaken beliefs. Even if we grant that Plato was correct in his assessment that artistic illusion exploits our uncritical and instinctual reactions, it is precisely because we are "less concerned with what is than with what might be", that we find it easy to enter into the illusion of a painting (Gregory 1973: 55). Because artistic illusion affects us in any case, we allow ourselves to be further aroused by it; a situation summed up by the Italian idiom *Non è vero, ma ci credo* (It is not true, but I believe it)(ibid). This maxim brings the discussion to the great riddle of naturalistic painting, a riddle elegantly expressed by Descartes:

> It is sufficient that images resemble their objects in some few respects (i.e., in respect of extension, shape and size); and often, indeed, their perfection depends on their not resembling them as much as they might have done...and thus it comes about that often, precisely in order to be more perfect in their quality as images, i.e., the better to represent an object, they ought not to resemble it. (Descartes, *La Dioptrique*)

With this statement, Descartes has summed up the entire mystery of naturalistic painting: the fact that pictures don't ever look very much like the thing they are depicting. Even taking into account the roles of denotation, habituation to standard conventions of representation, pictorial relativism and illusion, as every student of painting learns, the visual language used to bring about in the viewer that moment of recognition owes little to the actual appearance of that objective world to which we have limited access.

Despite the inability of this paper to examine more fully at this time the concept of illusion, the fact is that we still don't fully understand how it works, for the simple reason that we don't yet fully understand the workings of perception, physiologically or psychologically. Erasmus' claim that "to destroy illusion is to ruin the whole play", adding: "What else is the whole of life but a sort of play?" (Penrose 1973: 245), points to the complicity of the viewer in a game of make-believe, and encourages us to suppose that "we not only cherish at least occasionally this equivocal state of mind but may hope to gain some important enlightenment from being its victim" (ibid).

An Inherited Language

In order that we not lose sight of our original question - how is it that we recognise items on a marked surface – we need to ask whether these ideas help the painter at all? For whilst they indeed form part of the broader concerns of naturalistic painting, they remain approximations or rules of thumb; they do not address the issues involved in the actual *production* of naturalistic pictures; and the sense in which a naturalistic picture 'looks like' its subject still resists analysis.

The difficulty, I believe, is that whilst one acknowledges that a particular theory is not obliged to describe every aspect of the set of objects it purports to explain, that which is explained is usually something other than what we *see* and *look for* and *wish to describe* in pictures. As I stated at the outset of this essay, I do not wish to deny the explanatory power of any theories, but I do believe that every one stops short of coming to terms with what happens in *individual* pictures (I emphasise 'individual' because too often theories are founded on a few generic examples which are required to stand on behalf of the thousands of pictures which may also display the same characteristics as those few examples. Whilst it would, of course, be impossible for a theory to speak about every picture, this does limit the scope of what theory can tell us about pictures on an individual level and with regard to specific characteristics). Elkins believes that this inability to deal with individual pictures results in theories: "cutting themselves free from any strong connection to what they putatively describe" (Elkins 1999: 69). Unless aesthetic and visual theory devotes more attention to historical practices, they risk explaining objects other than real pictures (ibid).

A search then, for a practical definition of naturalism needs to look to art historical practices to provide an applicable account of the way it actually works when expressed through the medium of paint. Returning to Gombrich, we may recall that he writes:

> I have argued in *Art and Illusion* that we could not study the history of art if every artist had been able to start from scratch and to arrive at an independent method of representing the world around him. Art has a history precisely because the methods of constructing an acceptable image have to be developed and have to be learnt. Innovations and reductions usually come gradually and allow us to trace any stylistic innovation to its source. (1976: 27).

Both *The Heritage of Apelles* and *Art and Illusion* present themselves as part of Gombrich's project of describing the slow accumulation of painterly strategies that constitutes Western art. He returns to the example of the highlight, or *splendor*, in order to illustrate this process and attributes its discovery to the Greek painter Apelles, the subject of Pliny's anecdote. This story has attracted so much attention in the two thousand years since it was written that it has almost disappeared beneath its commentaries. The Rembrandt scholar Hans Van de Waal lists in his essay "*The linea summae tenutatis* of Apelles; Pliny's Phrase and its Interpreters" (Elkins 1998: notes to pg. 18-25), the thirty major commentaries dating from the Renaissance to the twentieth century and each proposes a different way of imagining how the panel featured in the story may possibly have looked. Whilst these commentaries remain conjecture, they provide a wealth of debate around the nature of marks and surfaces. Strangely, most of the commentators considered it inconceivable that any painter would have admired something as simple and obvious as three straight lines and

consequently imagined the lines to be figures, parts of figures or objects – it is only Van de Waal, and Gombrich in his thirty-first commentary, who believed that the contest was purely about manual skill. "All subsequent readers who have felt it necessary to add some further explanation have done so in part under the un-Greek assumption that there must be more to the comparison and judgment of painting than manual skill" (Elkins 1998: 38). Gombrich interprets the story in the following way:

> If the prepared panel in Protogenes' studio was grounded with the first colour, say blue, Apelles could have drawn his exquisite line with a second, say brown. Protogenes, superimposing a thinner line with another colour, might have used a third, say ochre, to produce the effect of illumination; the third coloured line, with which Apelles "cut the lines, leaving no further place for more subtlety", would have been done with the fourth pigment, the trumping line of gleaming white. (1976: 15-16).

Elkins points out a number of problems with this interpretation, not least of which the assumptions Gombrich has made regarding the colours used and the thinness or thickness of the initial lines. After all, if Apelles had intended to make a statement about his ability to master *splendor*, why not paint the initial line in relief, complete with *umbra*[17] and *splendor*? For the purposes of this discussion however, I am making use of Gombrich's interpretation as it concerns itself with the very subject I am investigating.

In Gombrich's view, Apelles's accomplishment forms part of a larger class of painters' methods that together comprise the repertoire we now possess for

[17] *Umbra*, from the Latin meaning 'shadow', is used, when talking about drawings or paintings, to denote that area of dark tone which represents the most deeply shaded side of a figure, object or space. Ordinarily it is complemented by an area denoting the light side, or *lumen*, (in academic drawing convention of the nineteenth century, papers were usually toned to a middle value which, when left blank, denoted the light side),and areas within the *lumen* highlighted with white mark the *splendores*.

naturalistic representation. The general hypothesis proposes the sensible idea that artists draw on one another's methods, that naturalism is a collective effort, and that it takes time to find acceptable pictorial equivalents for natural objects. I have already sketched the history and development of the *splendor* through art history; Gombrich asks only that we see the various incarnations of the highlight as aspects of a single phenomenon invented by Apelles. Nor does it entirely matter what the *splendor* is: Gombrich calls it an "invention", a "visual idiom", a set of related schemata that "betray their Western origin", and a "language of light and lustre" (Gombrich 1976: 9-15). It could even be called a trade secret, a trick, an epochal discovery, or an incommunicable knack, yet, no matter how it is named or how we may choose to tell its history, writes Gombrich, the *splendor* has two essential properties without which it ceases to be a way of accounting for naturalism: it creates a history of "simplifications" and "manifold observations" based on a *single* phenomenon; and that phenomenon is an "instance" of the gradual accumulation that constitutes naturalism (ibid).

The difficulty with this assumption that *splendor* can be understood as a class of innovations gradually accumulated which together comprise a reasonable way of understanding naturalism, is that it more properly belongs to a small class of nameable 'tricks' which do not bear enough relation to naturalistic pictures to count as an explanation of them (Elkins 1998). If naturalism is indeed an effect brought about through the collective application of individual 'tricks', as Gombrich seems to believe, then it would follow that they could be identified, catalogued and applied equally well by all painters alike who wish to naturalistically render their world.

Elkins "entertains the fiction" (1998: 55-58) that such a list could indeed be compiled. He begins by naming that cornerstone of Western naturalism: perspective,

adds to that continuous colour, tonal gradients and aerial perspective; moves onto the notion of the "incompleteness of figure, cutting of frames, parallax, occlusion, and competing outlines" (ibid). To this could be added Gombrich's "etc. principle" which holds that illusion is served by objects, such as telephone poles, which appear to go on into infinity even though only a dozen or so may be drawn. Elkins continues his list with "the thick wrinkly skin Rembrandt painted"; "Constable's jagged shorthand brushstrokes"; the discovery of refractions and reflections in water, usually attributed to Konrad Witz, although anticipated by Masaccio; Georges de la Tour's study of the vortices of candle smoke; Jan van Eyck's brilliant oil technique; Titian's glazes; and Gerard Ter Borch's satin (ibid). As Elkins points out, it is clearly impossible to continue to compile such a list for it would necessitate the inclusion of one 'trick' for every picture or artist and would thus trail off into the arcana and obscurities of artists and pictures whose existence has been all but forgotten. Such a list would also present a rather jumbled and confused collection: a collection incondusive to the predication of a coherent theory of naturalism. It is also not clear which 'tricks' are based on a single discovery or technique, and which are composites, for instance, Elkins suggests that Rembrandt's noses, Ruoppolo's fish, and Ter Borch's satins are subsets of the original Apellean *splendor* (ibid). And finally, since some of these 'tricks' appear to be the end products of earlier developments rather than useful inventions, it becomes difficult to judge which ones could reasonably be included in a list of illusionistic tools. As every painter is only too aware, the fact that certain painters have come to be identified with the mastery of certain painted things – Turner's atmosphere for example – argues that these strategies are not transmissible; many have and will continue to remain secret despite much dedicated research by both painters and conservators.

(From my own experience as a student of painting, I have discovered, for instance, that raw umber and dioxanine purple combine to effectively create the illusion of recession underneath a painted chin, yet it certainly does not constitute a rule for such depiction, and thus does not describe the workings of naturalism in a useful way.)

If the elements of naturalism cannot be defined in any way that may prove useful to the painter, and if those 'tricks' which bear names do not amount to a description of it, then naturalism has evaded the theory. It is impossible to found any adequate theory of naturalism upon these individual discoveries; they in themselves do not make sense of enough of naturalistic painting to enable us to claim that we can describe pictorial naturalism (Elkins 1998). Of course that is not to deny that when actually looking at a picture one may perceive a context in which it would make sense to say that a particular effect of naturalism has arisen out of the use of such a series of 'tricks'. As one still grappling with some of the fundamental issues of painting, I have on many occasions deliberately appropriated the 'tricks' and strategies of other painters in order to better serve my picture. What prevents me from feeling like a cheat is the certainty that whilst naturalism may superficially appear as the sum of strategies, this sum in fact accounts for only a very small percentage of that which happens in naturalistic pictures.

If, leaving behind the specific example of the *splendor*, we accept Gombrich's general hypothesis that naturalism is a collective effort, and that within a context of continuity, artists draw on one another's methods in order to arrive at acceptable pictorial equivalents for natural objects, where does that leave the artist in respect of another foundational notion of art: originality?

Precedence and Originality

> Weaker talents idealise; figures of capable imagination appropriate for themselves. But nothing is got for nothing, and self-appropriation involves the immense anxiety of indebtedness, for what strong maker desires the realisation that he has failed to create himself? (Harold Bloom 1973 :5)

The theme of originality was a constant within modernist theory; the avante-garde artist claimed and valued above all, originality as his right (Krauss 1985). R. Adam argues that the origin of this attitude lies to a significant extent in the twentieth-century projection of the nineteenth-century idea of the avante-garde artist, in other words, the fact that much art, later regarded as great, had not found immediate appreciation with the general public, led to the illogical deduction that in order to be great, art had to be unacceptable to the general public (Adam 1988), a view which enabled and still enables artists to engage with a continuous search for novelty. Contemporary artistic practice, often proclaiming the paramount importance of originality and enthusiastically praising those works which employ innovatory techniques, new stylistic tricks, or newness of form or medium, often appears to value this novelty above all else; "a novelty that will surprise and astonish the common man by overturning all those things to which he had become accustomed" (Adam 1988: 18). Yet what does it actually mean to say that an artist or artwork is truly original?[18] To the painter whose methods of naturalistically representing the world are largely determined by his particular cultural milieu, and whose methods for constructing such

[18] By the term 'originality' I am referring to notions of invention which differs qualitatively from anything existing previously, and am ignoring other meanings: e.g.,when 'original' means genuine or prototype. I am not concerned with forgeries, nor with the much discussed questions regarding copies and their value in relation to 'originals'.

images are learnt from the vast store of rules and strategies which comprise the tradition, is the question even relevant?

In an attempt to answer ultimate questions of origin, originality and precedence, Plato imagined a creator he called the prime mover, who gave form to matter, thus instituting motion, time and history. Saint Augustine provided a more concise account, with an "immaterial Judeo-Christian God" creating everything from nothing (Shiff 1996: 103). For the historian, history cannot proceed without time, and thus we narrate history with the assumption that it once had a beginning (ibid). Originality implies a coming or doing first, a lack of precedent; therefore it cannot be divorced from considerations of chronology and historical sequence (ibid). Investigating the concept of originality thus reveals three distinct attitudes: a classical, modern and postmodern variant.

The classical position is founded on the principles of imitation - a concept related to the active engagement of an artist with tradition, and which describes the relationship of an artist to the antecedents whose work figured in his development (we will return to the concept of imitation later) - and invention: the creation of effective combinations derived from multiple sources which serves to enrich the standard imagery of a particular time. Through this process of artist emulating and re-creating artist results an expression of Western culture as a set of collective, anonymous values (Shiff 1998). The principle of classical originality thus has little to do with one's position in a sequence of artists, but depends on how one participates in the transmission of a culture's primary values. Priority becomes a matter of rediscovering first principles, and thus classical artists work not to innovate but to "preserve established priorities" (Shiff 1996: 107).

The Romantics, claiming originality as their own and conceiving of themselves as the first true moderns, regarded classicism suspiciously because of its normalising values and collective identity; and as the bearer of order and hierarchy, classicism regularised and restrained, an impediment to the emphasis on change and diversity, personalised and expressive form espoused by the Romantics (Jauss 1988). Dismissing the artistic practices of the Renaissance and classical revivals as 'academic', nineteenth-century critics advised artists to leave their studios and "find their model in the landscapes they found themselves in" (Shiff 1998: 410). The 'natural' order of nature, observed and immediately represented, would free them from the influence of the artificial existing culture and its accepted modes of representation.[19]

This cult of originality, obsessed with tracing origins and the concept of 'genius' – central to the discourse of modern art – was challenged by postmodern artists and theoreticians, who systematically subverted and discredited modernist values, including the notion of originality (particularly as understood as the creation of new forms) (Sartwell 1998) by denying the very possibility of origin through strategies such as appropriation.

Value and Originality

It is clear, when speaking generally about originality, that we use the term in two apparently contradictory ways: as a concept related to excellence, or as one related to innovativeness or newness. When ascribing to pictures the attribute of

[19] An alternative to the modernist claim on the natural and thus originality, stated that when classicists turned to ancient art as a model, this was in fact to also work from nature because the ancients, as the first artists and thus having no model to follow, used nature directly, capturing its truth for the first time. Thus nature's originality could be adequately communicated to the moderns through these ancient sources, whose "style had no precedent and therefore nothing from which to deviate" (Shiff 1996: 108).

originality we usually fail to make this distinction; our habituation to the insistence of originality as a significant merit, has confused the notions of value and newness – or novelty - and made each a function of the other. Yet as Immanuel Kant said "there may also be original nonsense" (Kant *Critique of Judgement* Section I, Book II).

If we define originality as something uncopied, unplagiarised and qualitatively different from anything existing previously, it is clear that the term could be used both non-evaluatively and evaluatively. In other words, one could speak of the originality of an otherwise valueless thing; as F.N. Sibley writes: "Inventions of worthless ingenuity and originality abound; the Patent Office is full of them"(Sibley 1985: 170). The attribute of originality does not necessarily confer merit by virtue of its being original; anyone could paint a picture (or for that matter, write a poem or compose a piece of music) that fulfils the criteria for originality, and thus in all relevant respects be different from any other existing picture, but in point of artistic value be worthless. There is certainly no illogic or absurdity embodied in the declaration: "It is original, but utterly without value" (ibid).

Equally clearly however, we can use 'original' in an evaluative way; and in indeed this is the way in which we have become accustomed to using it, for when speaking of the originality of the work of a particular person, we are apt to automatically assume and attribute merit. Thus in using 'originality' evaluatively, we now mean uncopied, unplagiarised, qualitatively different *"and of some value"* (Sibley 1985: 171), and in this way would not refer to a work as original if it was without merit.[20]

[20] The contrast between the two uses of the term 'originality' has been drawn very sharply, and excludes degrees of greater or lesser originality. In describing works with regard to their originality, one is likely to qualify one's assessment, and works may be thus somewhat original, rather unoriginal, derivative, imitative etc. and our variety of uses pick out positions further or less far along a continuum of difference.

From this familiar evaluative use of 'original' it is often erroneously extrapolated that works which are both extremely innovative *and* possess aesthetic merit must necessarily have great rather than slight merit, or that greater originality implies greater merit. When 'originality' stresses only the extremely different or innovative, then the concept has no value but the most trivial beyond the excitement of novelty for novelty's sake.[21] It is also worthwhile to note that extremely innovative and original work can be aesthetically neutral; that is, some innovations in style, technique and medium, by the very limits they impose, "open up and make possible little of aesthetic significance" (Sibley 1985: 174).

Yet, as misplaced as praise for works merely employing innovatory techniques and novelties of form or medium without aesthetic value may be, it would be equally wrong to decry any stylistic or technical innovation purely on the grounds of their departure from the accepted *oeuvre*, for without any first stumbling efforts, however successful or not, progress is impossible. Sibley argues *one* instance for the necessity of originality for the creation of value in the following way: "Any really different aesthetic value, however small, outweighs, in context, any aesthetic value, however great, that resembles too closely those existing already; only new sorts of values genuinely extend our aesthetic store" (Sibley 1985: 180); and therefore the most valuable work is that which will add any shred of significantly different aesthetic experience. That is not to say however, that amongst all works, those with any new value merit the highest praise, but rather we should bear in mind that "the greatest artists as well as the failures have ventured among untrodden ways" (ibid).

A tentative definition of originality, and one in which the contradictory positions regarding the determination of value are reconciled could thus state:

[21] 'Novel' and 'original' are sometimes used interchangeably; but 'novel' more often implies the trivial, the gimmicky, or the mere thrill of the new, and is thus more quickly exhausted than 'original' is (Dix 1986).

"Originality is the discovery of new and *valuable* truth" (Sibley 1985: 182). The question – particularly for the practitioner - immediately arising out of this definition is how to arrive at this 'new and valuable truth', stranded as he is somewhere between tradition and innovation.

Paul Crowther, in considering what the general conditions of creativity might be, proposes that originality is to be found between a refinement of traditions and innovation (1991). When a work, Crowther argues, embodies new features which enable it to fulfill its definitive function – within a tradition and canon of excellence - more efficiently than other such works, or which extends its functional scope, but without radically transforming the way in which such works of that sort are henceforth made, it counts as a refinement of the rules and traditions of production (ibid). Refinements of this kind could be achieved by following established patterns of use, Crowther continues, but are sometimes due to a "chance idea, lateral thinking, a quirk" (ibid); and it is on these occasions, when the rules which govern production are refined on the basis of subjective creative insights, that we may speak of originality (1991: 302-4). Innovation occurs when a work's *success* is due to its "breaking with existing rules of production in a way that makes new sets of rules possible" (ibid). Originality consists therefore in a refinement or innovation which cannot be achieved simply through the repetition of existing ideas, and the original work is one which, in its particular configuration, moves beyond customary levels of accomplishment.

According to Crowther's criteria for originality, the determination of a work's level of originality could be determined by the inter-relations of three elements: Firstly, the work's "particular created formal configuration"; secondly, "its function within the artist's *oeuvre*"; and thirdly, "the relation of the two preceding elements to the traditions of the medium" (Crowther 1991:305).

Two implications are immediately suggested by this position. The first, as a logical extension of the notion of a subjectively determined originality - that is, success due to creative inspiration - suggests that in ascribing originality to a work, we are not simply saying that it is the product of *a* creative individual who extended the rules of production, but rather, that it is necessarily the product of *just the* individual who produced it (ibid). If originality is a function of the relation between all the elements within an imaginative construct, then every choice which informs the creation of this order is the expression of a unique personal history (ibid). This concept of artistic originality thus presupposes the existence of just that individual who is responsible for its achievement.

The second implication arising from Crowther's particular definition of originality, is that which closely relates the concept to that of artistic excellence. Like Sibley, he argues that originality is not a *sufficient* condition of excellence, but nonetheless, a necessary one; for a work which simply reiterated well-established rules and traditions of production, we would at best describe it as accomplished, but in order to merit the term 'excellence' "we would expect that work to be original in a way which clarified and deepened experience" (Crowther 1991: 307).

(Both Sibley and Crowther appear to speak about artistic originality in general terms and do not make the distinction between originality of content and originality of form; presumably they imply both in their discussions. Others have made the distinction, however, and David Goldblatt argues that artists who repeat the aesthetically significant features of their earlier works are essentially self-plagiarisers (Goldblatt 1984). Central to his argument is the assumption that what is aesthetically significant in a work of art is its style, and claims: "Style plays a role in artworld conditions that allows for successful plagiarisms" (1984: 71). Thus stylistic

innovation alone describes artistic originality. Selma Kraft by contrast, argues that artistic originality may occur with or without stylistic change, but that change in content is necessary (Kraft 1986). "The style of a work of art is its form; the meaning is its content. Since "style" means the manner of expressing something and not what is expressed in that way, the narrow focus on this element ignores the possibility of the aesthetic significance of meaning, or content" (ibid). For the purposes of this discussion around the general conditions of originality, however, such distinctions are beside the point.)

The concept of originality is an insecure one, continually shifting and elusive; and answers to the question of originality vary according to the social situation with which they are identified. Shiff argues that "originality is subject to the same irony that characterises other cultural constructs: because different social and political systems prevail in different eras, any particular cultural value, such as originality, appears to lack its own essence or fixed centre, having instead an irregular history" (Shiff 1998: 409). So what once might seemed necessary, is revealed to have been a fashion associated with a particular time and location, rather than an innate, absolute tendency. As well as asking what might be the moment of origin for a particular practice or tradition, we could ask what might be the originating conditions or motivation for any given sense of originality (ibid). It is clear that the concept of originality becomes a matter of what people at a given time believe, why they believe it, and how they choose to express that belief.

For the artist, the works of the past always influence him, whether or not he cares to admit it. There are two ways in which we may know this past: tradition and history; and whilst a distinction is often not made between them, they are different. John E. Hancock describes the fundamental difference between tradition and history as the respective "singularity and plurality of mental models, the closed and the open range of past-rooted possibility for creative action" (1986: 65). In other words, history is descriptive and tradition is prescriptive. Historical knowledge, continues Hancock, presents choices but in its universality precludes depth of understanding and conviction about the truth of its application, while traditional knowledge of the past attains great depth of understanding but only because there is no openness or breadth of choice (1986); a view that echoes Greenberg's belief that creative virtuosity flourishes only within the very bounds and restrictions of the vocabulary and canon within which the artist works (Greenberg 1988). History is indifferent; tradition is conservative in its true sense: it conserves. In addition, it sustains itself by continuing to provide solutions to new problems in such a way as to remain plausible and convincing; it is flexible enough to absorb change without losing its coherence. Tradition is an engagement and dialogue with the past that is invaluable for the creation of new and valuable work that integrates into the tradition. In the words of Lucien Steil: "Tradition is history with a project, not history as an undifferentiated description of the past" (Steil 1988: 9).

Imitation

> Invention, strictly speaking, is little more than a new combination of those images which have been previously gathered and deposited in the memory; nothing can come of nothing: he who has laid up no materials can produce no combinations. A student unacquainted with the attempts of former adventurers is always apt to overrate his own abilities; to mistake the most trifling excursions for discoveries of moment, and every coast new to him for a new- found country. If by chance he passes beyond his usual limits, he congratulates his own arrival at those regions which they who have steered a better course have long left behind them... if we were to forbid to make use of the advantages which our predecessors afford us, the art would be always to begin, and consequently remain always in its infant state; and it is a common observation, that no art was ever invented and carried to perfection at the same time. I am...persuaded that by imitation only, variety, and even originality of invention, is produced. What is learnt from others becomes really our own, sinks deep, and is never forgotten, nay, it is by seizing on this clue that we proceed forward, and get further and further in enlarging the principles and improving the practice of our art. Study, therefore, the great works of the great masters forever. Study... those masters... consider them as models which to imitate and at the same time as rivals with whom you are to contend.
>
> - Sir Joshua Reynolds *Discourse VI*

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As social beings, we communicate through inherited and shared languages, be they verbal or pictorial; artists employ a language and medium shaped by predecessors who have already established its conventions of use. Even contemporary aesthetic privileging of the new "necessarily presupposes the old as a horizon of understanding" (Jauss 1988: 376).

There is no colour I could include in or mix upon my palette that has not seen service countless times. My brushes apply paint to canvas in the same way as every brush ever has. My use of artificial perspective, the modeling of forms, the deployment of light and shadow, my use of line, were worked out, and moreover, employed more skillfully than I am able, a millennia ago. Yet despite my continual reiteration of tradition, the paintings I produce are fundamentally different from those another painter would. (Renaissance writers seem undisturbed by the fact that the world may be pleasingly and convincingly painted in a great number of ways (Summers 1987), no doubt because they thought that the kind of reality with which painting dealt could only be painted (and seen) in as many ways as there were painters.)

"Creation means the repetition of the original creation," wrote Mircea Eliade in *The Sacred and the Profane* (cited in Steil 1988: 9). Echoing this opinion, Quatrèmere de Quincy wrote: "the imitative faculty is truly characteristic of Man: it features in all his acts, it enters into all his works, it is so much a part of him and him alone amongst all creatures, that one could define him through this attribute, naming him: the imitative being" (De Quincy 1988: 7).

The concept of imitation[22] was understood in two senses during antiquity and the Renaissance: the imitation of nature, and the imitation of preceding artists; the latter being of the greatest concern to Renaissance writers influenced by Aristotle's sense of imitation as *mimesis* (Ackerman 2002). It is interesting to note that Leonardo Da Vinci was the only Renaissance writer who disapproved of all imitation and wrote:

[22] Closely related to the concept of imitation is that of appropriation; but whilst imitation refers to the adoption of the technique, style or manner of working of others in an inventive process serving to expand the tradition; appropriation involves the conscious use of pre-existing material – in this case images – that derives from a source outside the work and that is then presented as one's own (Nelson 1996: 118). One of the particular targets of Postmodernism's practice of appropriation, is Modernism's claim that important artists are original; an attack ultimately unsuccessful because appropriation itself has been effortlessly appropriated into the discourse of originality (Sartwell 1998: 70).

"No-one should ever imitate the *maniera* of another because he will be called a nephew and not a child of nature with regard to art. Because things in nature exist in such abundance, we need and we ought rather to have recourse to nature than to those masters who have learned from her" (cited in Ackerman 2002: 132).

It is important at this point to distinguish between the acts of *imitating* and *copying*, a distinction clearly established by Renaissance artists. To copy was to parrot the past by using its forms literally and therefore without understanding. The principle of imitation allowed the artist to follow the examples of the masters and expand this inherited tradition through subtle innovation. Despite the apparent negative attitude of Renaissance artists toward copying, it was of course an important part of contemporary artistic training, whether within a master's studio or the academy. This institutionalised copying was a heuretic exercise, intended to lead the pupil to imitation and finally, assimilation. Imitation, argues Steil, is the reconstruction of an original, whereas a copy is merely a reproduction of a precedent (Steil 1988). Imitation is based on the critical, selective and inventive process of a living tradition and addresses both essence and form, whereas a copy is interested only in appearance.

Ackerman likens the Renaissance fixation with imitation to the modern critic's and historian's fixation on what, in the modern era, the concept of imitation merged into: that of influence (Ackerman 2002). Whilst both concepts explain the relationship of an artist (or writer, architect etc.) to their antecedents whose work figured in his development, imitation functioned, in the premodern era, as a principle of creative procedure, fostering sustenance and security; whilst influence relates to the modern practitioner in an oppressive way, fostering competition and anxiety (ibid). This fraught relationship is discussed in Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence*, in which

he attributes the abandonment of the principle of imitation to "the post-Enlightenment passion for Genius and the Sublime when there came anxiety too" (1973: 27).

For the master, argues Allan Greenberg, imitation was and still is an engagement with tradition itself and an opportunity to expand, redefine, extend or illuminate a part of it (1988); and whilst the student was expected to *copy* the canonical masters, the mature artist's use of imitation allowed him, paradoxically, to develop an individualised expression. Thus the Renaissance's conception of imitation operated forward, as necessary preparation for emulation, as if in competition with one's antecedents to achieve the highest level of skill possible; whilst modern influence operates backwards in the sense that after a work has been completed, the interpretive process works backward from the work to discover which earlier works are relevant to the discussion of it (Ackerman 2002).

Imitation, of course, involves the possibility of failure; and it could be said that the fact that the great volume of writing on the subject by artists and writers of the Renaissance which – apart from Leonardo - never entertain the possibility of *not* imitating, indicates a presentiment of the failure of the ability of artists to match or to surpass their forebears (ibid). In the wake of any exceptional artist or period of artistic activity, "the possibility of decline is always on the horizon" (ibid).

To decry the principle of direct borrowing from, and the desire to formally emulate, past tradition, would be to render most of art history as artistically invalid, and would remove Roman, Romanesque, Renaissance, Baroque, Neo-Classical, and many more artistic epochs, from serious consideration (Adam 1988). Even distinct artistic movements tend to have their roots in other, earlier artistic traditions; where new traditions overtly emulate the old, such as Neo-Classicism's revival and imitation of Classical artistic forms and values, the continuity of tradition is clear. And even

within those movements whose declared aim was a reaction and revolt against a previous era, and we can use again the example of Neo-Classicism in its reaction to what it perceived as the excesses and extravagance of the Baroque period, the new regime nonetheless resembled for the most part the previous in its deployment of the formal visual language of art despite differences in content and meaning. Imitation thus mediates actively between tradition and reconstruction and functions as the means by which norms are both passed from one generation to the next and adjusted to present needs. It could be argued that imitation is a necessary precondition for artistic progress. Creativity itself depends upon tradition, argues Greenberg (1988), for it requires a complex language with a rich history that balances stability and flexibility. The creative powers of the mind, he continues, can be fully engaged only within such a vast tradition; artistic virtuosity can only flourish and persist because the vocabulary of art is a defined set of bounds within which the artist may exercise his skill, and imitation is the means by which the artist, in a dialogue with the past, is able to access the vast wealth of the artistic tradition (ibid).

Assimilation

Imitation culminates in assimilation. To repeat Reynolds, it is what occurs when, through a continuous dialogue between the imitated and the imitation, "what is learnt from others becomes really our own"(Discourse VI). Successful assimilation is what distinguishes the merely competent and unremarkable work from the masterpiece; the masterpiece resulting from the "unique integration of tradition with a particular time and place by a particular individual" (Greenberg 1988: 44). It is

appropriate at this point to bring this discussion to a brief explication of the work produced by myself for this degree, around which the ideas explored in this dissertation turn.

My proposition at the commencement of this process was clear: to acquire the skills, technique and language of Western naturalistic painting; my intention being to put these acquired skills to the task of investigating that enduring riddle of naturalism, that is, what we mean when we say that a picture looks like the world. The decision to work within a well-worn and well-defined tradition was an intentional one. The limitations imposed by the narrow genre of naturalistic figure painting pose significant challenges, not least of which being the necessity of achieving a certain level of proficiency in the deployment of the medium as dictated by the canon and tradition of Western painting, a discipline that recalls Greenberg's comment that artistic virtuosity can only flourish because the vocabulary of art is a defined set of bounds, and that only within the tradition can the artist fully engage his creative powers.

For the painter, the works of others present themselves as recipes, the ingredients of which – composition, line, colour, light – differ only in terms of quality and quantity. In setting up propositions within the tradition, these offer themselves as potential answers to the aesthetic questions which arise in one's own work. In a sense the painter becomes a scavenger, gathering bits and pieces plundered from the works of others. (Curiously, in my own practice of borrowing and imitating, I tend to become obsessed only with *aspects* of other paintings. The particular jagged and fleshy white highlights in the work of El Greco for instance, compel me to try and imitate them; yet I cannot deny the sheer crudeness of some of his colour combinations. Thus it is often the more slightly imperfect or flawed works – not

denying of course their deserved place within the canon - which invite imitation; whilst those works which come as close as a painting can to being perfect – certain works by Vermeer for instance – I tend to exclude from that repertoire of precedents from which I borrow.)

There are of course varying degrees of borrowing and imitation. Avoiding the literalness of appropriation, I allowed aspects of those works which, through close study, I borrowed from and was influenced by, to assimilate into my working practice and thus become part of my own visual language.

Notes on Process

My choice of subject matter – the solitary figure in an interior space – brings with it the possibility that the work may be read within the ambit of various areas of discourse which may be suggested by, and ostensibly relate to, my chosen subject, such as those concerning the body or feminist theory for example. The motivation for choosing my specific subject matter however, arose out of a particular fascination with the rendering in paint of flesh and form, a motivation which overarches all other possible readings, however relevant they may be. Subject matter is deployed in the service of the painting; what is ultimately important is what the subject does in terms of the construction of the picture and the possibilities it offers regarding its rendering in paint, rather than what it means.

The body of work falls into two distinct groups. Not wishing merely to continue producing works similar to those of my undergraduate study, I was determined at the start of the masters program to use the opportunity to learn and expand my conceptual and technical skills. The five paintings of the first group

represent this process of learning and the exploration of the strategies and techniques of naturalistic painting.

These five paintings (Plates 1 - 5) are concerned with a more obviously optical investigation into the actual workings of naturalistic representation. The optical information provided by the source material was – allowing for the inevitable liberties taken in the making of a picture – precisely translated into paintings in which the logic of the real world prevails over the internal logic of the painted world. Yet even so, and remembering that in fact any painted object more closely resembles *any other* painted object rather than its counterpart in the real world, the very act of applying paint to a surface, no matter how closely one attempts to recreate an accurate 'likeness' of the represented thing, distances the representation from the represented immeasurably. The two bathroom paintings (Plate 4 and 5) evidence this in the disparity between two pictures of the same subject in the same space. Both pictures display an equivalent level of naturalism, yet investigate two very different ways of seeing and describing the same subject.

The first two works in the series (Plates 1 and 2) explore various formal devices – compositional structure, the distribution of light, and the abstract effects of colour – in different ways. Contrasting perspectivally constructed space with flattened space, strongly directional light with ambient and diffuse light, points of heat with areas of coolness, I arrived at a greater understanding of how these formal and abstract elements operate and describe the world within the picture. The third work (Plate 3) combines the lessons learned into a more complex articulation of geometric space, lighting, and distribution of colour. Reference to the Northern European tradition of the specular highlight is clear in the still-life which occupies the centre of the picture. (Although not explicitly apparent, the five works of the first series make

use of a large range of visual borrowings and references, derived mainly from the Italian and Dutch schools of painting.) This work, which endured many incarnations, functioned as a sort of testing ground for newly developed skills, and began to reveal the infinite possibilities afforded by the medium of paint for the naturalistic rendering of the world. The bathroom paintings (Plates 4 and 5), in their exploration of two opposed ways of seeing and representing, are an attempt to arrive both at a consolidation of technique and at a point where I could begin to develop a personal aesthetic and mode of depiction less reliant on the visual information contained in the source material.

Having considered the successes and shortcomings of these five works, and extracting from them a clear and well-defined idea of the direction in which I wanted new works to go, the second series of five paintings evidence the development of a more idiosyncratic manner of working and aesthetic.

Whilst the first paintings reflect the process of learning the language and technique of naturalism, it is within the second group of five works that I began to explore the question of how it is that naturalistic paintings produce an experience which is like looking at the real thing. Through the subtle subversion of various artistic conventions - perspective, naturalistic colour, and informational load – these works seek to interrogate some of the possible answers to the problem explored earlier in this dissertation. Integral to these interrogations was the adoption of a limited and sombre palette; a palette similar to that of the Spanish school, in particular Velasquez and El Greco. It is difficult to say whether the shift in interest from the Dutch tradition to the Spanish was a reflection of the direction in which my aesthetic was already developing, or whether my interest in the work of the Spanish school influenced my adoption of new aesthetic principles. This limited palette was part of a strategy to

progressively limit the amount of information provided by the paintings; a strategy which also included the systematic emptying of the picture space. Whereas earlier works, Plate 3 in particular, tended to be crowded by both the figure and the environment, the second series is slowly stripped of both objects and the substantiality of the figure, a subtractive process reinforced through the restriction of colour. Liberties taken with other pictorial conventions are entirely intentional. For example, both the figure and the environment of Plate 9 are flattened both through the lack of differentiation of colour or tone between the receding plane of the floor and the horizontal plane of the wall, and through the flat black clothing of the figure which is seated in such a way as to prevent the body from providing any spatial information.

Another important shift in my work was the conscious effort to apply paint in a more economical and painterly manner. This shift was imperative for a number of reasons, not least of which was helping me to avoid the laboured appearance of the earlier works; an appearance due both to a lack of confidence on my part in the actual application of the paint, and in the necessity of numerous repaintings in order to achieve the desired result. Remembering the objection to pictorial illusion that proposed that the awareness of brushstrokes precludes us from mistaking the picture for anything else, this economical and looser manner of painting allowed small areas of canvas to remain visible under very thin, scrubbed layers of paint yet did not lessen the naturalism of the pictures, and thus allowed me to confirm practically the fallaciousness of this argument.

In tracking the shift between the first and second groups of works, it becomes apparent that there is a move away from a generic type of figure painting to a more person specific form of portraiture. I do not intend at this point to explore the tradition of portraiture; suffice to say that this shift served to complicate the essential problem

of naturalism. Rather than merely asking what it is that makes the painting a picture of a figure, one now has to ask what it is that makes it a picture of a particular person.

The disparity – in terms of composition, colour, technique and conception – between the two groups of works is clear and has been commented on by various viewers. I felt that it was important to let these differences stand as evidence of the learning process which is an essential part of the masters degree.

Both this brief discussion of my work and the dissertation as a whole, represent only one way of talking about painting in general and my work in particular. There are many other, equally relevant ways in which I could speak about both the tradition of painting and the work produced for the degree, but as a student whose primary concern is the language of paint itself, a discussion of naturalistic painting was the most interesting way I could approach the huge subject that is the Western tradition.

> Are not our lives too short for that full utterance which through all our stammerings is of course our only and abiding intention?
>
> – Joseph Conrad "Lord Jim"

Conclusion

The task of navigating one's way through the vast and complex history of European painting is a formidable one. The exploration presented here represents but a tiny line of inquiry, a line which is both necessarily exclusive and inconclusive. The tradition of painting presents itself as an immense agglomeration of histories, artists, styles, and works which, through the continuous processes of creation and imitation, preservation and discovery, selection and reiteration, tends to impede any attempt to trace a linear path through it. Thus in attempting to trace a particular and specific course of investigation through the subject, every change in course necessitates the exclusion of any number of alternative and equally relevant ways of talking about it. Thus the arguments presented in this dissertation cannot be anything but inconclusive as the ideas explored represent only a tiny fraction of the discourse. Yet one suspects that even given unlimited space in which to collect every idea and notion pertaining to the practice of naturalistic painting, it would continue to resist analysis. Naturalistic pictures create a world of appearances and illusions; and whilst images have a material existence, what they represent is something other than an integrative part of an empirical reality. Pictures properly belong to another way of knowing, a way of knowing only partly definable through conceptual, logical and theoretical terms.

Perhaps the problem lies with the language we use to talk about pictures. Michael Baxandall wrote: "...the nature of language means that the description [of a picture] is less a representation of seeing the picture, than a representation of thinking about having seen the picture." (Baxandall 1985: 67). Language, argues Gombrich, developed as a social tool to communicate ordinary experiences, hypotheses about the world and our normal reactions to typical events (Gombrich 1973). It therefore fails

notoriously when we want to convey the elusive states of subjective reactions and responses.

Even if we possessed the perfect tools for describing it however, the difficulty with naturalistic pictures lies in the fact that the very notion of it, and the attendant issues which inevitably arise within the discussion, even the very concept of painting itself, is an inherently unstable one. With every social, political and aesthetic shift comes a resultant shift in the attitude, conception, and mode of expressing such values; they are not absolute or eternal values and thus the best one can hope to achieve is to trace these historical shifts and fluctuations.

In the end the question remains, what is a painting? Is it, as Elkins asks, the physical, framed object, with its entourage of meaning, the gossip about its painter, and the letters, reports, reviews and books it inspired? (Elkins 2000: 192). Or is painting a verb that describes the movement of paint across a surface? It is to this second definition that the painter, who spends his entire life applying paint to surfaces, is inextricably drawn. Perhaps talking about paintings in terms of paint is the only reliable way we have of describing them, for there is no escaping medium. Whilst depicting things naturalistically is a huge preoccupation for some – myself included – it is ultimately ancillary to the medium itself. Painting, as way of depicting things, is notoriously inefficient and labour intensive, and as a means to create illusion does no better than many other media. Thus there must be something about the paint itself that keeps drawing artists to it and occupies their imaginations - a preoccupation which has allowed painting to reinvent itself within every artistic epoch and to maintain its relevance within the larger world of art making.

I therefore will not attempt to draw conclusions to this line of investigation, for there can be no such thing as a conclusion to painting. Rather, in acknowledging

the immense size and complexity of the tradition within which one works, one accepts that there can be no definitive account of what painting is, or even, for the purposes of this investigation, how naturalism works. In the end paint resists analysis and refuses definition.

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

- T.S. Eliot "Little Gidding"

*

THE PAINTINGS

PLATES 1 - 10

THE WORKS ARE ARRANGED IN THE ORDER IN WHICH THEY WERE PAINTED AND ARE ACCOMPANIED BY A BRIEF COMMENTARY.

PLATE 1

Tom reading a book

Oil on canvas

120cm x 90cm

This work explores the effect of intense directional lighting and the way in which light serves both to reveal form and to obliterate it. The clock on the wall makes reference to the Dutch tradition of the painted highlight and the depiction of objects through a description of their characteristic reactions to light, rather than through tonal modeling. The mirror was used a s a device to both concentrate the light source and to reveal those parts of the scene which would be otherwise hidden from view.

This work also constituted an exercise in relating the formal elements of the composition to each other: the relation of the bright mirror to the dark painting above it, the harsh light of the mirror to the delicate light of the clock, areas of light with areas of darkness, and areas of heat with areas of coolness.

A difficulty I encountered with this painting involved the rendering of the mirror and the area of bright light surrounding it. White paint is often difficult to integrate into a picture surface and tends to appear as if hovering on the surface.

PLATE 2

Tom sleeping

Oil on canvas

120cm x 90cm

In contrast to the preceding work, this painting explores the effects of ambient, rather than strongly directional, light. The relationship between the figure and the environment was of the previous work was inverted so that rather than the body being the warmest part of the picture, the body is now the coolest, and is contrasted with the red sheet which in turn carries the heat and fleshiness normally found in the body. I wanted the figure to appear as though it were sinking into the cool void of the wall behind it.

During the course of numerous reworkings – in order to resolve problems relating to the use of colour and the rendering of the wall – I removed both the pillow against which the figure had originally reclined, and a painting which had hung above his head. This was the start of a process of subtraction which continued throughout the body of work.

This work presented a significant problem with regard to the rendering of the head; a problem which I have had to concentrate on resolving through the later works.

PLATE 3

Tom asleep in his bedroom

Oil on Canvas

120cm x 175cm

The knowledge gained through the problems of the preceding works was put to the task of arranging and resolving a larger, and compositionally more complex painting. Resolving it was a challenge in terms of the rendering of form with light, and the spatial arrangement of the elements within the picture. This was – with regard to my learning process - an ambitious painting, and required many reworkings, even entire repaintings, in order to bring it to its present state. During the course of these reworkings, the colour of the wall surfaces was shifted – through degrees - from a warm orange to its present cool green-grey. Overall, the palette was gradually reduced and refined from its initial warm and overly colourful state to its present subdued one.

Reference is made – through the still-life in the center of the picture – to the genre of the *vanitas* still-life: the books, coins and flower are common elements of such paintings. In addition to the table and still-life, the composition had originally included a bookcase, desk and lamp, all of which were systematically removed as it became clear that they did not serve the painting in any useful way. An open door was then introduced in order to relieve the somewhat cramped and oppressive atmosphere of the depicted scene.

An oblique reference was also made to Velasquez's "Las Meninas", which contains at its center a small mirror around which the spatial paradox of that painting revolves.

Fig. 3 Velasquez *Las Meninas* (detail) Museo del Prado, Madrid

PLATE 4

Tom standing at the bathroom mirror

Oil on canvas

120cm x 90cm

This work afforded me the opportunity to resolve many of the problems previously encountered regarding the use of colour and the fall and actions of light. The real subject of this painting is the great expanse of the figure's back which occupies most of the space in the picture. The difficulty lay in achieving – through modulations of colour, rather than tone - a convincing rendition of the fleshiness and three-dimensionality of an otherwise fairly undifferentiated form.

PLATE 5

Tom sitting on the bathroom floor

Oil on canvas

120cm x 90cm

This painting explores a different way of seeing and depicting – in terms of light and colour - the same subject in the same space as the previous work. Despite the fact that I work primarily from photographic sources, I do not incorporate this aspect of my working practice into my paintings. This painting is the only one from this body of work which makes reference to its photographic source; and it does this for instance, by retaining the peculiar shadow cast behind the figure which was caused by the flash used when taking the photograph. Other photographic residues however, I did not wish to retain. This caused particular difficulty in the perspectival depiction of the floor tiles due to the fact that modifying the angles distorted by the lens of the camera caused the perspective of the floor to become strangely skewed. Not possessed of a scientific knowledge of perspective, correcting this flaw proved extremely difficult; and I do not make any claims for the absolute accuracy of my construction.

PLATE 6

Lawrence standing in his studio

Oil on canvas

175cm x 120cm

The composition of this work is based on the painting *Young Boy With Cat* by Renoir (Figure 4). There was no particular reason for choosing to imitate the composition of this work other than it suited my purpose in terms of what it was I wanted to say about the subject of the work, Lawrence. Renoir's boy, though turned away, is inviting in his coyness, and he inhabits his body with ease. Lawrence is more reserved however, his body is less languid, his face partly obscured, and he is not nude. The birds in the mirror can be read as a reference to Goethe's 'sparrow aesthetics' in which he derides the practice of naturalistic painting. Other visual references are to be found in the red draped cloth, which is based on the red drapes Velasquez so often included in his royal portraits; and in the palette, which is influenced by El Greco's distinctive use of colour.

Fig. 4 Renoir *Young Boy with Cat* Museé d'Orsay, Paris

This is the first work in which I began to move away from a close description of the scene as it actually appeared. By taking the perspective lesson of the previous work (Plate 5) and distorting it in an intentional depiction of a slightly illogical space (the reflection in the mirror would not actually appear in that position), I was examining the way in which the internal pictorial logic of a picture differs from that of the real world.

The first major challenge posed by this work was the articulation of space and volume by modeling through shifts in hue, rather than merely shifting a particular colour tonally. The second challenge was an unforeseen one. In plotting the figure on the surface in the underpainting stages, I realised that because of the vertical length of the figure, an inevitable distortion appeared when viewed from the correct hanging height: the legs appeared too long and the upper half of the body too short. (The general elongation of the figure is drawn from the physical distortions present in the work of El Greco. See Figure 5.) I therefore had to build a distortion into the actual painting – the legs were shortened and the torso lengthened - in order to counteract this effect. This constitutes an actual example in which naturalistic pictures work counter to actual experience.

Fig. 5 El Greco *Laocoön* (detail) 1610-1614 Washington National Gallery of Art

PLATE 7

Lawrence sitting in front of his hammock

Oil on canvas

125cm x 100cm

This painting displays the first convincingly rendered and articulated head and face in this body of work. The mirrors found in the previous works are echoed in the reflective surface of the floor which, through the uneven fall of light on it, imparts a fractured quality to the surface. This fractured surface then becomes a void-like space beneath the feet of the figure, which hover disembodied between the void and the darkness of the trousers he is wearing. The biggest problem posed by this work was the convincing rendering of the broken and reflected light of the floor into the picture surface. As with *Tom reading in his room* (Plate 1), the white paint tended to sit on the surface and resisted integration.

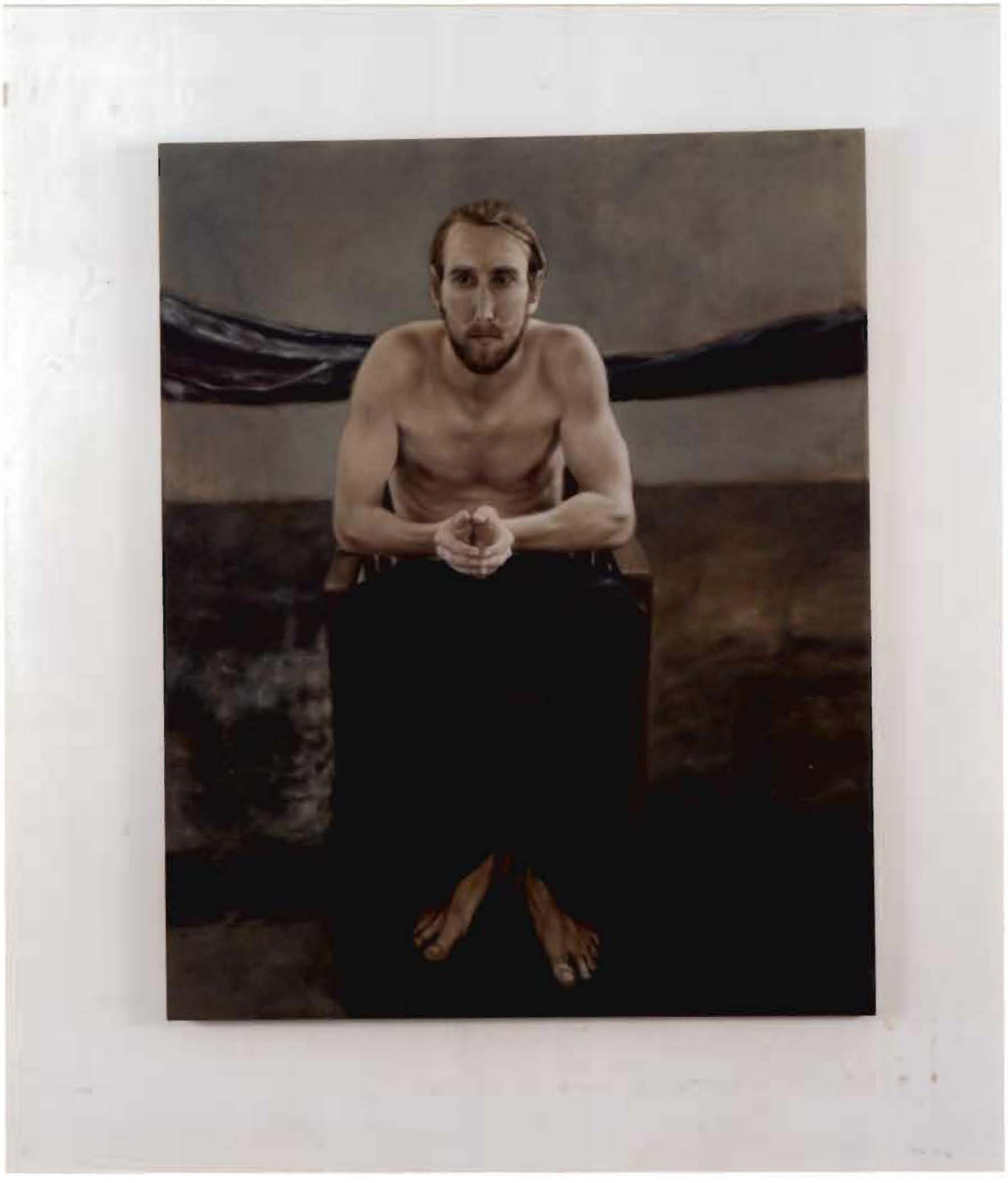


PLATE 8

Catherine sitting on a chair

Oil on canvas

125cm x 100cm

Both the elongation of the body and the palette of cool greys, brown-greys and yellow, are influenced by the works of El Greco. My intention for this work was to reduce the clarity and articulation of the space through the use of similar hues and tones and loose brushwork in both the foreground and background planes. In addition, the clothed portion of the figure recedes and partly merges into the background in order to allow a visual relationship between the lit parts of the figure, the head, hands and feet, to be set up.

This work demonstrates an increasing economy of brushwork and paint application, in a looser and more painterly description of space and form.

PLATE 9

Catherine with a fox stole

Oil on canvas

128cm x 98cm

Like the previous work, the general elongation and leanness of the figure – particularly evident in the hands - is derived from El Greco. (Figures 6 and 7)

Fig. 6 El Greco *Saint Andrew and Saint Francis* (detail) 1590 Museo del Prado, Madrid

Fig. 7 El Greco *Holy Family with Saint Anne* (detail) 1595 Museo del Prado, Madrid

With this painting I intended to play a game, if you will, with the some of the conventions of naturalistic depiction: those of volumetric modeling and perspective. Through the clothing of the figure in undifferentiated black, and the drawing of the body up into a compact form, volumetric modeling of the body was limited to the extremities and the bulk of the figure remained relatively flat. The floor and wall surfaces are not overtly differentiated in terms of colour or tone, which ordinarily would be used to create a sense of space and depth in a painting. Due to the relative dullness of the palette (despite the red underpainting which was allowed to show through) the modeled parts of the figure, and those parts of the floor which have been shaded, were difficult to resolve convincingly.

PLATE 10

Corky at the open window

Oil on canvas

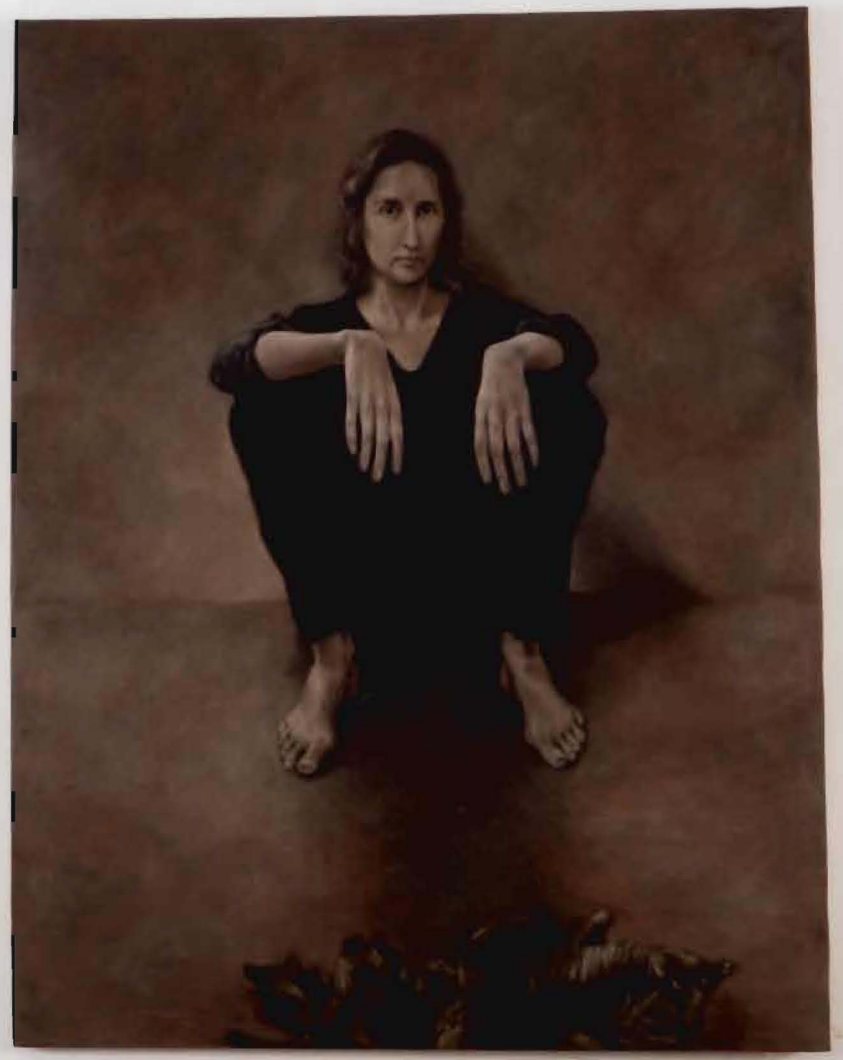
120cm x 105cm

The work refers explicitly to Bronzino's *Portrait of a Young Man* (Figure 8). Once again, it was not through a desire to refer in particular to Italian Renaissance painting that I made use of the composition, but because, like the previous work *Catherine with a fox stole*, I liked the way the bulk of the black clothing formed a flattened mass in the center of the picture.

Fig. 8 Bronzino *Portrait of a Young Man* Metropolitan Museum, New York

Using this device of the black clothing, I allowed the black shirt of the figure to recede into the dark background. The window and window handle were added later to counterpoint the large ears of the figure, and to set up a relationship between the focal points of the hands, head and window handle.

(Although evident in a number of the paintings which comprise this body of work, the problem of surface shine and glare as a result of the particularly high oil content of certain dark colours, is most evident in this work. This can only be rectified by the application of varnish once the works have had the requisite drying time.)



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