

A Sort of Night to the Mind, a kind of night for our thoughts. Illusion and Materiality in Contemporary Painting

Moyra Derby 2011

Honoré de Balzac describes in his introduction to the short story 'The Purse' how at twilight the materiality of a painting diminishes. Evidence of making, the skill of material manipulation, the physical sense of stuff on a surface gives way and illusion is realised, "In the half light the physical tricks used by art to make things seem real disappear completely, ... At that hour illusion reigns supreme; perhaps it comes with the night? Is not illusion a kind of night for our thoughts, a night which we furnish with dreams?" (1)

Balzac's account of illusion opens up a world of imagination made possible by fading light, 'a kind of night for our thoughts', or variously translated as 'a sort of night to the mind' (2). These alternative versions of Balzac's description form the title of this exhibition of paintings. The negotiation between the actuality of a materially marked surface and the potential for that surface to contain the appearance of something is framed differently in each of the works presented here.

Illusion and Materiality are often considered as terms in opposition; an engagement with one implying the suppression of the other. Balzac's description, from the early 19th Century, positions materiality as a necessary carrier for an illusionistic outcome, but one that needs to be curtailed in order for illusion to triumph. This sense of curtailment works both ways, when contrarily the physicality of paint and surface is activated in order to counteract spatial illusion. Though Balzac's position still has resonance, it is maybe less familiar to us than a mid 20th Century position that sees the perception of space in painting as problematic in itself. The train of thought that argues for the inappropriateness of the depicted 3 dimensional on an actual 2 dimensional surface has been very resilient, and has informed in one way or another much of the criticisms of painting from the 60's onwards (3). Balzac talks about the 'physical tricks' or ruses of art, and it is maybe this connection between illusion and deception that has provoked the unease.

It has been argued that painting is unavoidably illusionistic, that material on a surface prompts a sort of picture making faculty in our brains, and that we assign spatial depth positions to marks that sit side by side as a way of making sense of the world (4). Richard Wollheim's term 'two foldedness' (5), draws out an interdependence between materiality and illusion in painting, and considers it as a condition of representation that one sees the marks on a surface and sees the illusion within a surface at the same time. Wollheim talks of reciprocity, in particular between the recognitional aspect and the configurational aspect of painting, and although his choice of language reveals a definite sense of materiality being in the service of image making, it is the co-dependence that this position establishes that is useful here. Specifically it is the 'at the same time' inability to separate one thing from another that often gives painting a peculiar potential.

Balzac's description of illusion signals an imaginative engagement with image making, and it also signals a level of melodrama for the subsequent story. 'The Purse' is a story about a painter who falls off a ladder in his studio at twilight and falls in love with his rescuer, a young girl accompanied by her mother. The narrative interest turns on a missing purse; the painter fears that his purse has been stolen, but he hopes that it has been mislaid. Balzac's narrative describes in detail the painter's observations on the rooms and objects that for him provide evidence of the young girl's situation, but evidence that could be read in conflicting ways. His fears lead him to doubt his love, that all has been an illusion, that he has been tricked, that he cannot trust what he has seen with

his own eyes. Like the tightly controlled plot of a detective story, a tradition which Balzac's approach is said to have influenced, the observable is put under question.

Although Balzac might talk in his introduction about flights of fancy, and a world apart from reality, the guts of the story is grounded in that much more down to earth quality of imagination, the ability to see something from another's point of view. Pictorial illusion's dependency on point of view can elicit criticism based on the limitations of a fixed position. The sense of privileging one view point over others, of imposing it with certitude, of centring the visible round an individual ideal viewer has unsurprisingly attracted associations with the hierarchical and the dogmatic. Yet point of view implies from the start a willingness to participate in shared looking, an invitation to look as another has looked. The empathy, identification and self-consciousness that might provoke can be argued as socially productive and responsive.

The observations made in paint by the artists in 'A Sort of Night to the Mind, A Kind of Night for our Thoughts' connect with the imaginative potential of material on a surface. The works presented here variously engage with the ambiguities of what is observable or recognisable, and they acknowledge the emotive potential of point of view. Side stepping through usage the oppositional mindset that pits one term against an other, they demonstrate the continued relevance and inextricability of illusion and materiality in painting.

(1) 'A la faveur du clair-obscur, les ruses matérielles employées par l'art pour faire croire à des réalités disparaissent entièrement..... A cette heure, l'illusion règne despotiquement : peut-être se lève-t-elle avec la nuit ? l'illusion n'est-elle pas pour la pensée une espèce de nuit que nous meublons de songes ?' Honoré de Balzac 1832

(2) 'a kind of night for our thoughts' as translated by Sylvia Raphael 1977 Penguin Books, 'a sort of night to the mind' as translated by Clara Bell Classic Literature Library classic- literature.co.uk

(3) see as an example Donald Judd's objections to painting in favour of actual space in 'Specific Objects' 1965, 'the problem of illusionism.... one of the salient and most objectionable relics of European art'.

(4) see Michael Fried writing on Frank Stella's shape paintings in 'Shape as Form' 1966 Artforum NY November 1966 p18-27, 'the universal power of any mark to suggest something like depth belongs not so much to the art of painting as to the eye itself; it is, one might say, not something that has had to be established so much as something - a perceptual limitation - that cannot be escaped'. More generally see Gestalt Theory, and the drive to recognise whole forms.

(5) 'a strange duality of seeing the marked surface, and of seeing something in the surface - which I call two foldedness' Richard Wollheim 'Painting as an Art' 1987 p 21