

Paintings and Other Constructions, Patrick O'Sullivan.

APT Gallery, London. 25th February 13th March 2016.

Beyond the Wall.

During the nineteenth century, the division between painters and sculptors remained stark. The Renaissance's hierarchical division still held sway, placing painting as a higher art whilst sculpture was the preserve of the labouring tradesman, slumming it alongside the stonemasons and carpenters. As the century progressed and the Renaissance's grip began to wane however, painters started to shift away from an elitist division and seek a more inclusive image, to be a part of the real world, not separated from it. The simplest way to do so was to try their hand at sculpture, and become 'worker artists'. Today, at the beginning of the twenty first century, the worker artist is a more pragmatic term with none of its nineteenth century romantic idealism. Apart from the relatively few who can sustain themselves purely from their practice, the vast majority of contemporary artists have separate jobs to fund their creativity. While today's painter may no longer see dabbling in three dimensions as a socialist response to elitist division, and regard paid work a necessity rather than a choice, the day job has an inevitable creeping influence on what happens in the studio after hours.

From his early career as an abstract painter to his self-built studio at the bottom of his garden via a post-graduate degree in the US, Patrick O'Sullivan has nurtured a practice that is tightly associated with both sculpture and painting, whilst never fully adhering to the conventions of either. The fact that he has been head technician at the National Gallery in London for over twenty years bares discussion beyond the anecdotal, because of the fascinating creative traffic that flows between these two parts of his life. Working so intimately with paintings, altar pieces, triptychs, frescoes, sculptures and so on has an effect akin to the piercing of the theatrical fourth wall, in that when the

frame of an artwork is carefully removed to allow for restoration or transportation, the fluid vulnerability of the painting is exposed. Without its protective exoskeleton it becomes at once more real in its tactile immediacy, and also less so - having literally lost its contextual framework it appears to no longer have a purpose. O'Sullivan speaks of the frame as a device that manifests the painting, literally measuring its boundaries so that it can be observed and understood by the viewer. When these metaphysical considerations are combined with the utilitarian pragmatism of the devices O'Sullivan conceives and designs by hand (no CAD for him) for the gallery, there is a certain clash of methodologies, which O'Sullivan mediates in his studio with diplomatic tact; fully cognisant of the unlikely yet necessary pairing.

If we consider *Office Work is Easy* (2014) it appears to be a tumbling stack of frames mid-collapse. Looking closer we notice that the illusion of precariousness is not just the result of its staccato composition, but of the delicate way each component appears to be both balancing on top of the one beneath it and also supporting the one above. Our instinctive understanding of gravity tells us that these objects should not be able to do this, that they ought to be falling from one plane to the next. Yet the illusion tells us otherwise – the intricate engineering that goes into the structure of the piece (so intricate we can't see it) denies us the satisfaction of having our suspicions confirmed. In *Harbourland* (2014) there is a less dramatic animation, initially because of its domestic familiarity as a shelf, yet even here, the white curve suggests imminent and catastrophic slippage.

Despite his obvious sensitivity to space, depth, volume, and the haptic relationship between the body and the objects that surround it, O'Sullivan shies away from defining his work as sculpture. This reluctance may in small part be related to his earlier practice as an abstract painter, and the fact that he cites painters as key influences. However, I would suggest that there is a deeper meaning that is borne from O'Sullivan's keen understanding of the frame as a physical, metaphysical and perhaps most pertinently, a time-based device. O'Sullivan has the rare privilege of handling magnificent works of art – imagine being able to cross the social (if not legal) line in a museum and

touch the very substance of the painting, to literally go beyond the confines of the frame. He is directly responsible for the safe transportation of artefacts, and when these objects are removed from their context (be it the frame in which they are hung or the plinth on which they stand) they effectively become out of time – they are in limbo. Clearly O’Sullivan is aware of this conceptual freezing of time, and the crucial importance of an appropriate viewing context in igniting the reality of the artwork. The fragility of this moment when the painting is vulnerable, missing the safety of its frame and the validating gaze of the viewer is where O’Sullivan’s work is situated. Ironically, by measuring and quantifying this liminal part of an artwork’s existence he (albeit reluctantly) gives it substance, makes it real. The objects he creates entice us into this metaphysical world with the forced perspective and speedy lines of his diagonals, creating an imaginative space for us to occupy, but as soon as we get close to any conclusive or holistic understanding of what we see before us, we’re pushed back with a sharp hit of physical reality – a reminder of the rule of gravity perhaps, or an allusion to a piece of familiar ergonomic architecture.

It is no coincidence that while considering these points we learn that one of the paintings under O’Sullivan’s care is Caravaggio’s *Supper at Emmaus* (1601), a painting which he returns to again and again. Caravaggio’s masterpiece is a technical tour de force, his characteristic chiaroscuro lending an almost hyper-reality to his forced perspective, with which he is able to compress an impossible amount of depth into and beyond the picture plane. The disciple to Christ’s left helps us as viewers to gauge the depth of this painting by measuring it with the span of his arms, only for this distance to be expanded even further by the bowl of fruit on the edge of the table, being held on by what must be divine power. As if that wasn’t enough the picture plane is deepened further by the second disciple rising in disbelief as Christ blesses the bread, causing us to flinch away from his scraping chair. Even the disciple’s elbow is in on the game, trying to push further out into our world by ripping a hole in his over-shirt. Caravaggio’s ability to illicit responses in his viewers more akin to those associated with viewing sculpture gives us an idea of where O’Sullivan’s interest lies, and how this finds its way into his practice. Returning to *Office Work is Easy* he gives us the option of a fixed

viewing point as we follow the beholder's convention of standing before a wall-mounted work. There is a stasis, a fixed moment before movement, an inhalation of breath before a profound realisation. But unlike in Caravaggio's painting where the tension mounts by persisting on the cusp of movement, we are given the chance to change the pace and to push time forward with movement.

O'Sullivan doesn't give us the satisfaction of being able to encircle his (non) sculptures entirely, restricting our parallax journey to that of a mere 180 degrees with a flat wall behind them. In doing so he controls our movement between a static focal point where time is frozen, and the ambulatory arc we subsequently describe around the work, re-booting time and with it the tactile reality of the object. As we navigate these two points of experience we realise that we are the third party synthesising O'Sullivan's work. We stand and pause, walk then return, and it dawns on us that we are the spark that animates these objects, that makes them whole.

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