

Over Niagara in a Barrel

Painters take risks when they make paintings. If, when you look at a painting, you track backwards and forwards along the painting process you can see where they have made those key risky decisions. For many painters, however strategic their thinking, however acrobatic their decision making, there comes a moment when they have to nail themselves into the barrel, trust to luck and instinct and the gods of painting, and roll out into the fast current that carries them toward the edge of the waterfall.

There are, of course, a whole host of decisions that are made well in advance of the first brush mark but the moment the brush is loaded and poised above the canvas a different order of decision-making comes into play.

There is a lovely bit of film footage made by François Campaux in 1946 of the provisional positioning of Matisse's brush as it hovers just above the canvas, seeking not only the best place to make the mark but also the speed with which to make it and the pressure and angle and inflection too. Speeded up on film the brush appears to make a series of swordplay-like feints before committing itself to the final mark-making act. These feints are surely the conscious mind of the painter being tugged at by some other urge as the painter feels his way towards his image.

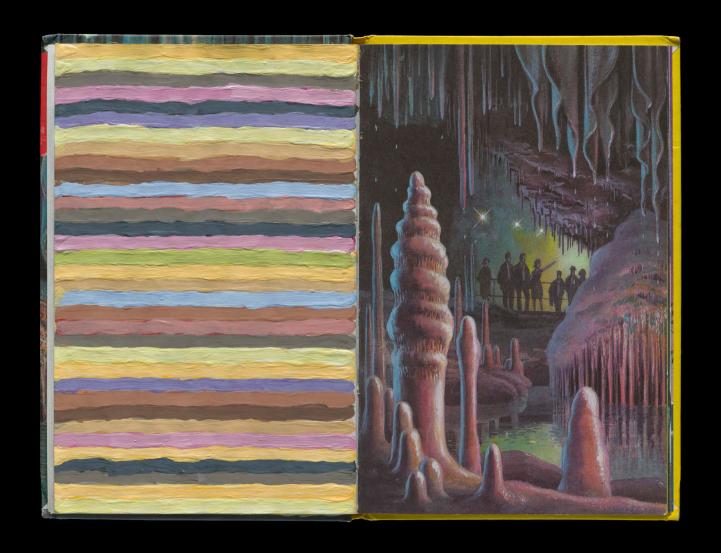
The gap between intention and execution is the moment for fluid decision making. This is the zone of subconscious promptings, often indistinct, more felt than consciously determined, where wayward impulses can urge a painter to do the opposite of what is expected. Sometimes even the opposite of what is required. To signal left and turn right. To do a reverse jump. Or a double reverse jump. Where they can undermine the expected order of things.

Not because painters are inherently revolutionaries, but because it is a way of testing the limits of their medium and, where paint acts as a mediator of perception, through that to test out something of the perceived world too.

One of the pleasures of looking at painting is looking out for artistic changes of mind - signalled by over-painting, erasure, abrasion and cancellation. It is very difficult to eliminate all trace of change, sometimes the full effect of a painting is only gained through the layering of change over change. All painters like pentimenti, those bits of underpainting revealed through time and the natural thinning of paint in old paintings, that show where the artist had a change of mind. It humanises them somehow, and removes the distance of history. If paintings can be said to have an internal life, if they are more than the sum of shapes on the surface, then that life is made legible through those decisions that the painter has made or, equally importantly, chosen not to make in constructing the painting.

These decisions can be signposted as significant choices made at a crossroads, or they can be discerned as the residues of a change of mind but they are never without consequences. These testing decisions give the work a density, not necessarily a density of materials, of thickened paint, but a density in interpretation and possibility. It is demanding of the viewer as well; when the painter heads towards the edge the viewer is invited to come too.

Ansel Krut, 2008 (with thanks to Domo Baal)



Augustine Carr

The work of Augustine Carr crosses several registers, combining painting, sculpture, print, photography, digital scanning and film. An appropriated book cover is painted over, not so much defaced as embellished, and then it is scanned and printed at a much-enlarged scale. His work 'Things to Make' depicts a few trees painted in a free and simple manner. The book it is painted on, referred to in the work's title, is a classic book for children, and it underlines the childish nature of the image and the emotive occlusion that has occurred. The work 'Lost at the Fair' also consists of an appropriated book from the same series whose cover is painted over, yet here the image is abstract and consists of a pattern of colourful triangles aligned to the geometry of the book. The care and sensitivity with which the paintings are made suggests that there is not just childish vandalism or effrontery at play here, but that some kind of reverence or homage is at work. The relationship between the paintings and the particular books used is not specific or conceptual but open and elliptical. But it is the photographic enlargement of the paintings that works to both distance us from the emotively painted book and bring us closer to it through its enlargement. The device is both undone and magnified - as is the emotional intimacy - and the enlargement generates an objectivity that offers up the work as a museological specimen.









'Tricks and Magic (Blindfold)' uses a similar device, but takes an open spread from another title of the same series. Here, one of the pages is obscured by a sequence of coloured squares whereas the opposite page, depicting a blindfolded boy pointing upwards, is left intact. The veiled boy is echoed by the paint that veils the image beneath it. In a way, the paintings seem to offer a kind of lit darkness. As Maurice Blanchot suggested, it is only at the threshold of vision, when we can no longer see very well, that we actually begin to see. In this case, it seems that artists are the blind who lead the blind to vision.

Carr's sculptures, titled 'Summa Theologica', involve a similar process of enlargement but involve small hand-modeled clay sculptures that are 3D scanned and reproduced by detailed CNC milling. Again, what appears as a small child-like sketch is enlarged and reproduced with a technical precision that amplifies the haptic quality of the object and places it in a space of intimate virtuality. The enlargement brings us into direct contact with the physical hand-made action and elevates it to a material spectacle. But the sculptures have an uncanny presence as their new proportions take them into the world of the gigantic. Their new scale reveals both a sensitivity and a brutalism, they are overgrown and lumpen and yet innocent and playful.

Carr also makes films involving sculpture and shifts of scale. 'Summa Theologica' is a film that involves the same hand-made clay boat as the sculptures. But here the original clay maquette appears submerged in water and darkness and gradually falls apart as the water is absorbed and its structure collapses.



The small and apparently life-sized projection of the film draws us in to the vulnerability of the maquette and compared to the sculpture it appears like a ghostly negative image of it. There is a pathos to the spectacle, the process of disintegration luring the eye as thew falling flecks of clay catch the light before tumbling into the darkness. The drama and opulence of the image entices like a vanitas and looks like an elegy to some kind of lost experience. The title, 'Summa Theologica', refers to Thomas Aquinas's instructional guide for theology students and seminarians written in the 13th Century and suggests that the creative process might function as a kind of spiritual training. Carr's recapitulation of play suggests that the creative process is both a source of knowledge and an elegy.

Another of his films entitled 'Investment for Economy' involves a hearse driving an enlarged reproduction of a series of hand-modeled castle crenellations. The object and the performed action are doubly over-blown and yet the distance of the film medium gives poignancy to the elegy on what might have been an embattled childhood. As Robert Harbison suggests in his book 'Deliberate Regression', romantic individualism shared the same path that led to the disasters of totalitarianism. Carr's work is far from decadent, however, but it certainly has a romanticism to it. His work is not idealistic or programmatic but has both largesse and vulnerability. The precarious path it traverses involves a searching that is as sincere as it is blind.

Dr William Horner RCA PHD, 2017









