

Breathing Space: Painting and surface displacement in the work of Susan Norrie

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For some time now Susan Norrie has been producing works where the painted surface is included as one of a number of interacting elements. Not simply sculpture or assemblage, these works take on appearances. Resisting the absolutes of categorisation they invite a consideration of the boundaries between painting, sculpture and design. Paintings are presented as objects resting on tables and stands, or as surfaces floating free from the wall. Texts are often incorporated into these surfaces conveying meaning both semantically and through the visuality of the script. And then there are free-standing objects whose only reference to painting is the transparency and/or density of surface. These recent works initiate a sense of jumping, between the blue of a colour field and the enclosure of a glass ball for example; between modes of representation, between spatial projections. But if these aspects appear at first distinct within and between works, in their considered juxtaposition there emerges a slow seepage of meaning.

These qualities of spatial installation and representational translation began manifesting themselves in Norrie's work as far back as 1987, when she was the Moët et Chandon fellow in France. Coinciding with that residency, Norrie produced a suite of paintings that formed the basis of successive exhibitions in Paris and Troyes. Titled *les roman de cape et d'épée*, these works, coupled with their installation in distinctly different spaces, advanced concerns and introduced conceptual strategies that have come to characterise her recent practice as an artist and painter. In particular, with these works, Norrie initiated her paradoxical treatment of painting as subject, surface, and object; as well as her frictional siting of painting within and against overlapping subjective and objective constructs of space.

In many ways the two installations were parts of the one project. The first was remarkable in that it took place in l'Hotel Pozzo di Bargo in the course of one night, a temporal frame suggestive of the performative, of dreaming, of the rhythms of the body. Set up in the ballroom of a large aristocratic eighteenth-century house, the presence these paintings achieved was emphasised by their overarching scale and their placement on easels.

Unrestrained by the perimeter wall this unruly configuration transgressed that very boundary that paintings conventionally embellish. But despite their move into sculptural space, the works paraded their status as surfaces, tensioned by multiple references to discrete moments in the history of painting. Simultaneously mannerist, heroic and pop in sensibility, these renderings of mythical subjects meddled with the conventions of portraiture. Their carnivalesque quality merged with the system of their display to nuance their surrogate role as players, a theatricality further accentuated by Norrie's use of stage lighting. Thus, transformed by the shifting parameters of reception, the works synchronised both an entry into and a description of an expository space.

This expository space began with the house and more particularly the room. As a specific site this room was already powerfully evocative of centuries of European tradition; its ornamental surfaces implicitly conveying a sense of historical continuity and representational order. As both object and subject the paintings were introduced within the space as characters. Their surface treatment of animal subjects dislocated these forms from a specific time or cultural context.

Thus, while derived from mediaeval animal myth, these forms referred as much to the mundane use of animal caricature within popular culture. Such connotations disturbed their stately presentation as subjects imbued with a sublime human presence. The overall sense of caprice was given further ironic resonance by the title *les roman de cape et d'épée*, a generic reference to the paintings as cloak and dagger stories. In an artist's statement on the work Norrie quoted Umberto Eco: "in the cloak and dagger novel the fictional characters must move among real historical figures who will support their credibility."¹ While this title layered the installation with further references to a genre of popular fiction it also intensified the allusion to masking, concealment and deception - that blurred boundary between fiction and reality.

In discussing the paintings Norrie has reinforced this point: "The original installation of this series was integral to the layers of meaning and in this sense the surfaces became a masking device."² These surfaces emerged as the primary focus for the second installation of the series at the Centre d'Art Contemporain in Troyes. Engaged within this more typical setting for the presentation of contemporary art the paintings behaved less precociously. Their arrangement on the wall as discrete units encouraged an initial reading of their surface expressive markings as a record of the artist's presence, a sign of her subjectivity. Read against other surface layerings this expressivity was quietly subverted, its signification reconfigured as one element in a sampler of images and genres. As a collision of signs drawn from high and low cultural contexts the paintings focused attention on the cultural specificity of images and their appropriation, circulation and revaluation within a global economy of images. But if these paintings highlighted their status as commodities, this was a foil that belied the subjectivity implied by their first installation, recorded and referenced in the subsequent installation by means of photo-documentation.

In isolation the works display characteristics common to much contemporary painting of the last ten or twenty years, specifically in their melding of pre-existing images. This is a strategy now commonly used by painters as a means to investigate the contingencies of representation and to challenge modernist programmes that advanced the potential of painting to represent an authentic, centered, and universal vision. It's a strategy that Rosalind Krauss noted as a possibility in 1979: "(The post-modernist space of painting would obviously involve a similar expansion around a different set of terms from the pair architecture/landscape - a set that would probably turn on the opposition uniqueness/reproducibility.)"³ The parentheses here are significant for they perhaps unwittingly predict a cul-de-sac for painting practice. Painting has tended to be isolated in critical discourse from an expanded field of conceptual practices that are not governed by the codes of a particular medium but rather utilise a range of processes and materials in order to explore and reorder the givens of cultural situations. In contrast painting in a purist sense has appeared limited in its ability to break free from its history of a privileged medium of representation.

However, with *les roman de cape et d'épée* Norrie began to extend the possibilities for painting beyond the limitations of surface signification. Through the incorporation of installation strategies into her practice Norrie engaged with subjects beyond the surface. In so doing she began to nuance the invisible processes and ideologies of translation and thereby positioned

¹ Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyper-Reality*, William Weaver (trans), Picador, London, 1987, p. 69

² Unpublished interview with Susan Norrie, *R.S.V.P.* series, 1990

³ Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field", in *The Anti-Aesthetic*, Hal Foster (ed), Bay Press, Washington, 1983, p.41

painting as an equivocal medium that both reveals and conceals. This attention to the relationship between paintings as objects and the socially controlled space these objects inhabit is reminiscent of work by artists such as American Louise Lawler, who explores the positioning of paintings in public and private collections in order to comment politically on their use-value. In particular in projects such as the *Arrangements of Pictures* series (1983),⁴ Lawler focused on the role of the patron or curator in structuring and narrating the meaning of images by means of their arrangement in relation to architecture. Such projects recall the rooms and courts of fifteenth and sixteenth century Europe where objects and images were consciously displayed and linked in order to articulate and control the subject position of the viewer. Many of these objects circulated within and between courts, which altered their sign value according to their narrative position within a given space.

Norrie's Paris and Troyes installations drew on this same history. Unlike Lawler though, Norrie's paintings and their arrangements were her own. By introducing contemporary painting into the space of l'Hotel Pozzo di Borgo and by emphasising an intertwinement of further mechanisms of representation, narration and display, Norrie engaged an exchangeability of meanings and values. Both familiar and alien in this setting, the paintings oscillated between being signifiers and the signified. The shifting spatial register between conventionally distinct codes of representation provoked a sense of disorder, destabilising the gaze and thereby the subject position of the viewer. In this sense the viewer was also put on display. Conditioned then by the occasion of their first presentation, a semi-public event in itself, these paintings issued forth into circulation - their subsequent reception contingent on this theatre of reference.

The first installation of *les roman de cape et d'épée* tested distinctions between reality and artifice, but it also collapsed the site of painterly production - the studio - with the site of its reception - the gallery, the museum, the parlour. The spaces became entangled, suggesting an exchangeability of origin and destination. But they were also hyphenated in that while they were meshed, they retained their separate identity. In their separateness each space contained its other. And so, while this presentation of the paintings served to rearticulate the space of the studio, by implication the intrinsic meanings of the paintings both arose out of and were confirmed by the room, a metaphorical space of display.

Figured as both frame or cabinet and as a space for exchange this room has continued to resonate in Norrie's work. Subsequent projects have grouped works to emphasise their interaction and to activate a hybridised space of production and reception. The installational frame in many of these projects often moves between the actual and the implied, as in *R.S.V.P.* (1990) at the Nancy Hoffman Gallery, New York. Here the works – diptychs that annexed wooden-veneer cabinets to painted surfaces - oscillated between an overt status as objects of display and being themselves framing devices. In this latter sense, the cabinets enclosed and thereby displayed images. In their aspect, size and material, they referenced the openings of windows, the closure of doors and the surfaces of interiors and items of furniture. Collectively these works suggested a habitat, an overture reinforced by the title, a convention often associated with the formal invitation to an event in the public space of a private home.

The title also brought the role of the viewer into play. It signified an occasion when one is more than usually aware of the codes of social interaction. Traditionally a postscript, it was literally the subject of some of the images, a text veiled within their surfaces. This request, with its

⁴ Reproduced in October, no. 26, The MIT Press, Cambridge Massachusetts, 1983, pp 3-16

implication of a tailored response, offered and questioned the potential of an active rather than a passive reception. As Norrie put it, she was "inviting and validating that exchange between word and image; between the verbal and the visual; between myself, the work and the audience - and questioning at the same time whether there could be any such place, or space, between such notions."⁵ It is language itself that structures space, that carries within its system the absolutism of separations of self and other, inside and outside, production and reception. Such concepts "form a dialectic of division, the obvious geometry of which blinds us as soon as we bring them into play within metaphorical domains."⁶ Norrie invited the viewer to push the envelope of language, to navigate the intersection points of relationship, to hear their voice as they see/read.

This probing of language, and in particular its inherent pre-emptory system for filtering vision and ordering the experience of space, is a recurrent feature in Norrie's recent work. The elements she deploys appear to be related according to a number of linguistic operations. Elements can be grouped according to their similitude of surface, material, colour, shape or function. Take for example works and components of works that reproduce surfaces of furniture or fabric; Norrie's continuing use of glazes and lacquers; the number of objects that can function as containers such as bottles or cabinets. Then there are works that activate a semantic interplay between a text and what the text signifies or an image and the object it represents. Still further works and their components can be related metaphorically as with the punching bag that stands in front of a blood red surface in *Installation Two* (1992). The semantic cross-referencing of these systems brings different constructs of vision face to face thereby disclosing the limitations of their power of description.

Norrie's interrogation of the interrelationship of language, visibility and knowledge had a specific resonance in her installation *room for error* at the City Gallery, Wellington, in 1993, for the building that now houses the Gallery was until recently a public library.⁷ Paraded heroically across its stone facade is a sequence of subject classifications that honour the former archive's regimental ordering of knowledge. This epistemological overlay served to heighten the dramatic effect of her installation of discrete surfaces, images, objects and furniture which were set within a classically proportioned space, once the room for fiction.

In *room for error* Norrie co-relates the instrumentalities of historical and contemporary models of vision and tracks the current mastery of vision among the senses back to eighteenth century Europe. She alludes to that critical moment when the emerging discourses and optical technologies of science and medicine promoted an objectification of vision reinforced by the materialist division of geographic and social space. Norrie positions this moment as a pretext for modernism and its universalist metaphors for vision.

While she acknowledges the potential beauty of the modernist vision Norrie challenges its hegemony, its veracity. This was epitomised in *Model Three* in the installation. Approached frontally this item of furniture presented itself as a lectern, if somewhat oversized. On moving to the rear this lectern held a square canvas painted a uniform white, a suggestion of a surface already linguistically framed. This canvas engaged the viewer so as to block their vision, rendering all else invisible. This lectern however was a hybrid, merging the form of a Victorian

⁵ Unpublished interview with Susan Norrie, *R.S.V.P.* series, 1990

⁶ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1969, p211

⁷ *room for error* was also presented at the Waikato Museum of Art and History/Te Whare Taonga o Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand, in March 1994

sewing box with its underside; a conjunction that also linked its signification of sexuality to a condition of invisibility. Thus, the interface of this model, both with the space and with other works, brought into question the claims vision has to certainty and truth.

As with l'Hotel Pozzo di Borgo installation, painting as both surface and object continues to function in Norrie's practice as a conduit through which external meaning is filtered and graded. She sites painting within a space of cross-reference and translation, a space necessarily enacted by the viewer. Her works also take on a human or subjective position but in doing so they target the body itself a, surface, a system of interchangeable signs. While largely unrepresented, this body is rematerialised in Norrie's work by deferral to its interiority – its fluids, its breath. It resists a predatory vision that would otherwise transform it into an image.

Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1994

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