

Beyond the Pale

By Brooke Lynn McGowan

“Don’t you know that this is a fairy-tale, and all fun and pretence; that you are not to believe a word of it, even if it is true?”

C. Kingsley (1863)

In *Restitutions of the Truth in Pointing*, the philosopher Jacques Derrida asks a question about the interpretation of works of art, as regards any attempt to recuperate their ‘origin’: “Why always say of painting that it renders, that it restitutes?”¹ Why say that art at once returns, refunds, and restores? He continues, conditioning his inquiry: “It is matter of knowing what revenue is still produced by their out-of-service dereliction, what surplus value is unleashed by the annulment of their use value: *outside the picture, inside the picture, and third, as a picture.*”² Or, as he states elsewhere: *outside of the work in the work, outside of the work as the work.*³

The contingency of the journaled scribbling, the interview response, the recovered postcard, the smallest fragment of historical anecdote: these are the foundlings of art historical interpretation, the points of entry, the frames through we attempt to see, reach, grasp the intention of the artist; this is the pretended ‘origin’ or truth of the work of art. Alibis of lists, factual content and biographies written: the art historian believes that by reading a letter, or enumerating dates s/he will know the artist’s pictorial practice. Yet, for Nicolas Hornby, is not a lack of evidence which obfuscates; history gives no access. The artist is beyond the pale. And it is the pale⁴ which we endeavour to investigate, here, and for all works of art,

Pale is not only a colour, the temperance of a hue. The pale is the signifier of the limits of interpretation, the border of the authorial voice, the authority of the institution, and when it is/not okay to colour outside the lines, to make-up, to pretend. It is the ‘beyond the pale’: the ancient and etymological echoes of a phrase. To be beyond the pale is to be beyond repute, outside of home, bereft of refuge. Outside of the border, the frame, the fence. “The paling fence is significant as the term pale became to mean the area enclosed by such a fence and later just the figurative meaning

¹ Jacques Derrida. *Truth in Painting*. Trans Geoffrey Bennington and Ian McLeod. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987: 258.

² Ibid, 259.

³ Jacques Derrida. *Restitutions of the Truth in Pointing (pointure)* in *The Art of Art History*. Ed Preziosi, Donald. Oxford: OUP, 1998: 440.

of 'the area that is enclosed and safe'. So, to be 'beyond the pale' was to be outside the area accepted as 'home'.⁵

It is December 2008. I approach Nick Hornby in the café beneath the gaping rotunda of the Tate Britain. Before him rests the silver yawning presence of a professional grade laptop, a strewn collection of papers, and the wreckage of a day's coffee consumed. The tea tray and sundries have been moved to the floor. "I find the edge of a painting so aggravating, so arbitrary,"⁶ Nick intoned, "Why is it here and not 2mm less or 3 inches more." The constructed nature of the work of art always exists as an opacity, an actual and already constructed thing, complete in its pretence.

Nick's charge has been to design an interpretative intervention into the Tate galleries on the occasion of this year's Triennial, and work with a group of young people. Their remit? To extend the picture beyond the frame; approaching the institution from the point of view of subjective interpretative, rather than Leviathan, Hornby has requested that his students extrapolate upon the abstract or formal qualities of each image attended and thereby to alter the singular pretence of their modernity. It is not removal of the painting from its context, but rather a return; "outside the painting, in the artist's studio was this coffee cup", says the artist, placing his own before me, "the paint brush, the table, letters strewn on the floor, cigarettes, old tea bags, sketches." What resists? What returns? What renders the painting into a contextual context which is not modern, but rather *alter, after, other than* modernity?

Other voices. Or playing with pretence. Indeed, whether the effort to distill perspective into the singularity of the canvas is a futile pretence towards mastery or not is as yet unknown. However, what is certain is that it is a pretence. And in this sense, it is *make-believe*. Of the many definitions which sunder the word 'pretence', aside from acts of claim to those of heraldry, is one more telling to our task: "make believe", or rather, "the action of pretending [...] fiction." Is fiction however a false claimant to being? Is imagination fallacious? Or rather, it is a way of subverting the single, stagnating point of view that it is the intention of the author or artist which defines any and all interpretation of work of art? Of inventing our own narrative? Of finding, within the painting not the singularly defined intention of the artist, but ourselves. Nick, presents an objection to the edge, the pretence of the frame with another, interrupting the authority of both the artwork's and the institution's pre-defined narrative. In doing so he reminds the viewer of his part in the construction of meaning; outside of the painting stands the viewer.

It is about authority, authenticity, the very abandoning of origins. Like pretence, authenticity is a contingent category; like pretence, it smells of fiction of and dirty feet. It is redolent, nostalgic, historical, meant to be thrown away. James Clifford calls authenticity a "local tactic"—a position of power. Indeed, authenticity is a plea for authority, the author, the essential, the absolute, the origin: an effort to reach the artist, who is none the less, beyond the pale. However, authenticity as authority demands consensus or at least consent; Nick Hornby and his interpretative chorus of young people dissent, not the very nature of the work of art or even the legitimacy of the museum as institution. Rather the crisis of representation heralded by modernity

⁵ www.phrases.org.uk

⁶ Conversation with the artist. December 2008.

signifies to these young people the opportunity of their own voice. Local here may mean not only a place, but also a time; the imperialist hegemony of singular interpretations of works of art has not only been deconstructed, but also moved beyond, not repunting but recognizing and then ignoring the pale they seek to move beyond.

It is March 2009; I enter room 19 at the Tate Britain. *Objects and Materials*, wherein Henry Moore's *Recumbent Figure* (1938) lounges beyond the cubist vibrations of flat *Kinetic Figure* (1931), itself a modest oil on canvas presenting layered and consecutive pink, blue and black squares: repetitions of form, rehearsals of modernism. It was 1930 that Paul Nash visited Léonce Rosenberg's gallery in Paris, returning to London to pronounce the virtues of this aesthetic Modernism, which Moore, Ben Nicholson, and Barbara Hepworth would abide. However, past these works, half-way down the room and nearly hidden on the left, one finds a work of Edward Wadsworth, the first in a series entitled, *Dux et Comes*, abstractions of marine still lifes. The canvas itself reveals two three pronged white figures, in seeming attraction and revolution, baring teeth of tongs against a receding blue background. The title itself bears ascribes to the object a musical metaphor: *Dux et Comes* arrives from a Latin language of music, specifically and importantly that of a fugue. *Dux et Comes* signifies a leader and following in harmonic composition marked by the contrapuntal pairing multiple of "voices": musical points and counterpoints. Against the background of this room, and the material resonances it proposes, Nicolas Hornby presents his own counterpoint, a white modular sculpture not its formal harmony within his oeuvre, revealingly similar to gleaming cross-section of airplane hull that marks his previous work. For Hornby, Wadsworth's modular formations—what have been called by Tom Lybbock, "matching blobby shapes"—comprise, "a painting of a sculpture"; for Hornby then the effort is mere to reverse the logic, producing a sculpture of a painting, the structure not only of a chiasmus, but an echo. Point. Counterpoint. Not a restitution. A response. *A return*. Even if it is make-believe.