

**BEYOND
REALITY**

**BRITISH
PAINTING
TODAY**

**4.10./30.12.
2012**



**Beyond Reality.
British Painting Today**

Petr Nedoma
catalogue text

The problem of sources, models, and inspirational themes gained momentum in the 20th century, especially from the moment art began to look down on itself with delight. The very reality of the image becomes increasingly important, as does the assumption that the opportunity to view further layers can be accessed through the image. The miracle of direct depiction, the transformation of the seen into a “mere” image, was confined to history. These days it can be experienced only as a past event, or at best as an artificial and conscious reconstruction. Nevertheless, today it cannot be sensed without the context of everything that followed after that. The potential of the then hope of what would and could come is now behind us. We can only look back. Or try to see beyond the reality.

Continuity with the past is crucial, especially on the fundamental plane of enduring values, which, if interlinked with the present, can be rendered contemporary and enriched with other contexts. Drawing on the history of European painting means, inter alia, embracing classic painting, which, rather than working on a basis of realism and attempting to capture the real world as it was, tried to capture and constitute the way people thought about the world by depicting certain quite precisely observed fragments of reality. In other words, elements taken from reality were used to tell all sorts of stories, illustrate abstract processes set against frequently rather inappropriate scenery often taken from the reality authentic at the time. This gave rise to what were occasionally very colourful mosaics of the different strata of reality, consisting of accurate observation, the narrated story, fanciful ideas about the world that have very little in common with reality, and, finally, the means of expression and stylistic confines of the time. This may be one of the reasons why, of the stories, only the pictorial world has remained most within our reach up to the present, a rich apparatus of motifs closely connected with painting itself, containing a number of secondary meanings and contextual information which, reused, albeit only as an echo of the original meanings, imbues the world today with concepts that these days really only live in the world of images. Metaphors function only as a distant echo where the harmony has shifted and the tonality is imperfectly experienced.

The reality of the image, in the broad sense of depiction, is inherently quite obviously tied to general reality. At the very least, as the reality of the work, in a physical sense, created by the hand of the artist. The issue of a link to a model, the question of what prefigured the painting created by the artist and presented to the public, has a rich history and is still fairly widely discussed. The history of art has provided us with a myriad of solutions, many of which, to a significant degree, are already canonized, while others still remain almost unnoticed and untouched. If we try to build on Wölfflin's duality of opposing concepts and paraphrase it slightly, in our case, at first glance, there could be a simple breakdown into the outside and the inside, the surface, nodding in agreement, versus the inner historically based pictorial intention.

Reflecting reality by creating its image is essentially the basis for painting in general. The form, method, content and reason for depiction are at least one level lower. The question today is not whether reality can be realistically depicted, but why such images are created. Furthermore, which segments of reality, whether tangible, visible, or only conceivable, imaginable or sensational, can be depicted at all. And, finally, where to go in order to break through certain seemingly impenetrable

BEYOND
REALITY

BRITISH
PAINTING
TODAY

4.10./30.12.
2012



paths to the visibility of the hardly conceivable, let alone the ever seen. Indeed, whether it is possible, simply with a picture – yes, a painted picture – to capture something that is not visible and difficult to imagine. There are many ways to approach such a task. One leads to the surface of objects and its most precise possible depiction. Another is the path through a tangled web of references to previous images, and links to facts and their contexts, which creates incredible space for the combination of facts and myths that can be endlessly invented and developed. Both paths have their own laws, limits and charms.

The invention of photography clearly relieved painting of its historically established compulsion to come to grips with the seen reality, to keep returning to narrative realism, to strive for the most faithful possible representation. On the other hand, photography allowed painting to re-emerge as a separate quality, capable of bearing many meanings that could not be achieved or accentuated in other forms of imagery. Gerhard Richter, for example, consistently and systematically worked with this finding and fact early on in the 1960s. A classic example of one of the major themes of his life's work, concerning the increased significance of representation through painting, is the well-known *Onkel Rudi*. An almost banal family (i.e. private) photograph, the message and meaning of which was constrained from the outset by the subject, date and original purpose, found itself in a radically different position once used as a template for a painting. The original photograph acquired a qualitatively entirely different content and meaning. The brother of the artist's mother, photographed in the uniform of a Wehrmacht officer when Gerhard Richter was about ten years old, was merely a record of the appearance of a loved one for him, someone he viewed as a person from the immediate family circle. In light of other circumstances, the photograph, when painted over, took on an enormously rich network of other meanings, connotations and contextual cues. To a certain extent, it became an icon from many different angles and planes. Richter quite deliberately and systematically explored the relationship between the direct, unmediated, still virtually mechanical reflection of the world with photographic technology, a reflection which was largely a guarantee of concurrence between the seen and photographed reality and the semantic shift occurring when (usually deliberately blatantly) this record was used as a basis for a painting.

Not every photograph used as a painting template necessarily gained a rich variety of meanings as a result of the painting process. Nevertheless, a painted photograph is a fascinating moment of transformation, a qualitative change in substance, a kind of alchemical procedure converting the trivial into the noble, endowed with special and extraordinary properties. It is conceptually difficult to arrive at such transubstantiation. One is reduced to employing a detour of metaphors and analogies. The most notable is probably the ability to deliver photographically precise paintings and convey meanings beyond the seen, i.e. meanings that classic photography, to all intents and purposes, has never been able to capture (though of course this quality is not limited to the type of depiction mentioned, as evidenced by practically the whole history of art). Painting consciously and purposefully started working with this phenomenon sometime in the 1960s, when the results were usually clumped together under the term photorealism, hyperrealism, supernaturalism, etc. Obviously, verismo depictions were pursued as a fundamental objective as far back as Greek and Roman painting. The Renaissance, especially in the 15th century, systematically explored avenues of depiction on what, for us today, is an incredibly rationally and methodically conceived basis. The problem was that, until the second half of the 19th century, the possibility of photography as a template did not exist. It was not until then that a notion of reality was introduced which appeared to be purged of human intervention and was objectified by a technological process of origin. At the same time, its neutrality, perhaps amusic nature, is again strongly reminiscent of the concept of painting quality. Fine arts, especially painting, in particular from the second half of the 19th century, began to address completely different problems than the technologically brilliant capturing of reality

BEYOND
REALITY

BRITISH
PAINTING
TODAY

4.10./30.12.
2012



with a brush on canvas; on the contrary, painting at this time headed off in another direction, while photography also went its own way.

It is remarkable how the development of photography has left its mark on a certain part of today's painting. New technologies, especially digital photography, have heralded an end to "truth" in photography. Yet there was greater opportunity than at any time beforehand to create an artificial reality propagating the magic of true reality, even though – or perhaps precisely because – this is clearly a construct. These options have always existed; for example, customized studio output worked with arranged photography almost from the very beginning. Nevertheless, it was not until the aura of the true reflection of reality disappeared that they gained in importance and attractiveness and came much more to the fore. The conditions vital for cinema to tell stories, i.e. careful preparation and, in particular, the artificial construction of each shot to give the best possible impression of reality, started to appear serviceable – even desirable – in photography really only after the credibility of depiction had essentially been lost, after the onset of digital technology.

While Gerhard Richter unabashedly used photography as a template for his painting, and ultimately, in the resultant picture, quite clearly, distinctly and above all deliberately admitted as much, even using this as part of the pictorial message, it should be noted that, besides photography, as another technique for depicting reality, he also worked equally with the subjects, visual themes, contained in photography and then, of course, in the picture. *Onkel Rudi* is the most obvious example of this. Damien Hirst makes similar use of photographs of personal family stories, powerful moments from the life of loved ones, captured more with an emphasis on the uniqueness of the moment rather than on a coherent visual structure as a basis for painting. Examples of this are *Surgical Procedure (Maia)* (2007) and *Caesarian Birth (Cyrus)* (2006), the template for which was emotionally tinged photography of the birth of his son. Hirst generally has a tendency to work with the border issues of illness, medical intervention, death, i.e. extreme, tense moments that, through painting, he attempts to elevate to a position of grandeur, to the permanence of the theme. These works are undoubtedly universally accessible, as their topics are part of everybody's life and thus potentially contain lots of space for a high degree of identification based on the personal experience of each viewer. In Hirst's case, there can certainly be no talk of a sophisticated approach to the history of painting based on refined strategies; it is difficult to reflect on the need to deal with the problem of appropriation in connection with a feeling of the exhaustion of painting as such, of its retreat from the scene. That said, the efficacy of his works can hardly be doubted, perhaps because they aim for different layers.

Turning our attention to the paintings of Jonathan Wateridge, we often find ourselves standing before a very enigmatic statement, where the identity of those depicted is not crucial – they are just anonymous figures acting on a stage; in fact, the true content of the message is a certain vagueness, a theme where things are left unsaid, a resulting mere hint of or reference to a common type of depiction. Wateridge works with the simulation of fact, which is plainly a simple reference to reality. In this respect, the artist guides us all the more into the depth of the picture, in that we transgress ordinary reality in favour of moving beyond the painting towards a rather enigmatic reality away from visible reality. Jonathan Wateridge's technique has parallels, in particular, with the work of the American photographer Jeff Wall. His richly sophisticated, strictly focused and unswerving concept of his lifelong work is based on paraphrasing the construction of the fictional reality of movie scenes. Those scenes that, using all available means, are the most faithful possible imitation of reality, which stands at the core of the film fiction of artificial worlds. They are often so faithful to reality that surrogate immersion in them is possible.

**BEYOND
REALITY**

**BRITISH
PAINTING
TODAY**

**4.10./30.12.
2012**



The discovery of the concept of straight photography in the 1920s was, to some degree, a miracle and a major step forward in the history of this medium. Its essence was (seemingly) simple: using the then technology of black-and-white photography to capture reality as it is. This step was a perfectly logical response to photography's previous efforts to follow a path at odds with the medium and its inherent nature by imitating painting and graphic techniques. It should be added that, even then, i.e. as of the end of the 19th century, photographers have set their sights on images in which they felt there was potential for the transubstantiation of reality, required, in their view, for a certain overhang, let's say, of everyday banality. Straight photography, as a theoretical attempt to capture the reality of the world, was based on the assumption that reality itself is endowed with something more than just itself, and that photography is able to capture this moment and deliver "visual sensation", as that miracle of representation was called in theoretical literature. The painted image and photographic depiction, after a period of coexistence, dramatically diverged. Photography moved away from storytelling to search for stories in the mere recording of fact, where any changes to the reality that had been found and the representation of reality were considered contaminants, an inadmissible departure from a puristically configured system. It was this fascination with capturing reality as faithfully as possible that led Jeff Wall, for example, to design completely artificial scenes simulating reality, which, because they could be controlled and arranged to the last detail, resulted in vibrantly exciting photographic images with a clearly notable overlap.

Wateridge's paintings are scenes from a story that never happened, even though it is plastically real; everything is real, tangibly demonstrable. After all, the template for the painting is photography which is not a product of computer software. All these people, the actors and protagonists of the story, could tell us, perhaps, about the casting, the staging of the scene in the studio, the long lighting, the stage spacing tests, the scene, the arrangement of their postures, etc. In other words, they would not tell us about the theme of the story in which they are the protagonists, but about the reality of the set design, and their experience of the scene setting, in contrast to the artificially created situation which, in its pictorial result, informs us of something completely different, namely reality arranged in the neutral reality of the studio. Yet the reality of the resulting photography is not definitive; it is only a matrix, a pictorial model for a painting. It passes through a graded process of transformation into a picture, into another reality with a different quality of testimony, weight, tone, articulation; it passes into another context of reading, ultimately evoking different connotations. The arrangement of reality as a model for a painting in order to achieve a depiction more realistic than that using only photographs, drawings, etc., is not anything new in the history of painting. Still life in 17th-century Dutch art was often a model for painting because it enabled the painter to show off his bravado in capturing the quality and texture of substances, where the matte shimmer of a pearl, the sparkling pulp of a sliced lemon, and the refinement of precious furs were milestones necessary for success. This almost impossible capturing of the surface of objects using a brush has always been perceived primarily as a metaphor, as a spur to deeper considerations guiding us beneath the surface.

At least two specific genres of painting, the portrait and vista, inherently placed an exceptional stress on a high degree of faithful depiction. Architecture, in the European concept a sign of power and wealth, has always been linked, more than other forms, to accuracy and a clear grasp of precisely articulated and moulded shapes. The vista contained a naturally encoded will to depict faithfully because not only the value of the picture, but also, and in particular, its meaning and intention, depended on consistency between the depicted and the template. Various tools, such as camera obscura, experiments with a single vanishing point, in short, the striving towards the most meticulous and thus most realistic possible rendering of the visible came to a halt with the onset of photography, which took over painting's entire "agenda" related to the "portrait of the place".

BEYOND
REALITY

BRITISH
PAINTING
TODAY

4.10./30.12.
2012



Nevertheless, it was unable to replace the unique quality of painting, which is able to deliver more than just a view of reality in a flat two-dimensional depiction. This problem is perhaps best understood today by the German photographer Andreas Gursky, who, by manipulating photographs into inhuman perfection on a massively exaggerated scale lends the image the value of a work which is able to accommodate and, especially, to express more than just a reflection of reality.

Ben Johnson's paintings of interiors and vistas are quite openly based on photographs. This photography, however, by means of quite complicated software, is converted into an extremely laboriously created template used to accurately reproduce the original with the help of an extremely wide range of colours applied in the form of American retouching on canvas. Besides the initial photography, which is quite obviously used according to its original intention, i.e. a precise, essentially mechanical reflection of reality, there is a second stage, which is the conversion of the photography into a reduced drawing of the original. This drawing is again mechanically transformed into a template, which is the basis for the painting, i.e. the individual boxes are filled in with sprayed paint with a precisely chosen tone. In this respect, Ben Johnson is a true worker of the picture and imaging; he is more of a Renaissance master looking for ways to transfer reality into two dimensions. Piero della Francesca's *Ideal City* is not nearly as accurately painted as its "copy" by Ben Johnson, who even, in the interests of accuracy, slightly shifted the vanishing point to the precise centre of the image, i.e. he corrected an error by the Renaissance master. Of course, it is questionable whether such a model of copies of past masterpieces, either interiors of classical buildings, usually of a museum-like nature, which clearly evoke a link with the art of the past, or direct copies of old works, is able to provide multiple layers of references and interpretive stimuli than the original work itself.

This issue is even more acute in the case of Jason Brooks and Hynek Martinec, who create, in an extremely laborious way, photographically precise portraits of their contemporaries. In the era of digital photography, the portrait as a painting genre appears to have been completely sidelined. On the other hand, at least since the 1960s, which witnessed the first wave of hyper-realistic paintings, it has been quite clear that we ourselves are capable of shifting the boundaries of our perceived reality even using traditional imaging methods. Returning to them need not mean pulverizing that which has already been expressed, but, rather, emphasizing at least one level which is virtually inexpressible, ungraspable, elusive, and non-transferable by other means. Both the architectural pictures of Ben Johnson and the portraits of Jason Brooks portraits and Hynek Martinec are not and, by definition, cannot be a copy of reality, but something that expands reality by at least one dimension, namely the reality of the new image. Another important layer that is particularly apparent in Johnson's reproduction of the painting by Piero della Francesca is the significant new contextual references resulting from the time span between the Early Renaissance and today. Where Ben Johnson paints a view of today's Trafalgar Square (*Looking Back to Richmond House*) from approximately the same perspective as Canaletto painted the Stonemason's Yard in the mid-18th century, we feel that jump between the centuries at least as a stimulus to contradict the then and now. Hynek Martinec has designs on a similar effect in his series of portraits of Zuzana, where, as the matrix of the painting, he uses portraits created with historical technologies, such as the ambrotype or daguerreotype, which, in a way, visually and conceptually evoke a *cæsura* between the suggested time of production and the present. If we go deeper, we are confronted by the history of the depiction, with all the content and theoretical apparatus connected to the theme. First and foremost, the question of illusion, that semblance of reality, whether displayed or merely conjectured, has links to a wide variety of techniques and procedures that are meant to open up to us something that we can feel, live, experience and above all desire, but that is hardly expressible and, especially, visually detectable. In particular, the almost inhumanly precise surface of Johnson's painting, Hynek Martinec's finesse in depicting the shallow depth of acuity, and the strangely inconsistent

BEYOND
REALITY

BRITISH
PAINTING
TODAY

4.10./30.12.
2012



authenticity of the moment arrested in the pictures of Jason Brooks are fundamental elements of significance.

Photorealism, painting dazzled by its own properties and possibilities of capturing a precise surface, is, in effect, paradoxically a denial of the authenticity of depiction. This is because when the illusion moves beyond reality, when it attacks the boundaries of reality, when it moves beyond the credible, it can collapse inwards due to its exaggerated perfection or, conversely, it can make full use of its capabilities to be such a precise mirror of reality that it is possible to catch a glimpse of more than just a subtle detail, i.e. the integrity of the reality of a higher order. The arrested time of the “shot”, with an emphasis on absurdly perfect detail, also trains the spotlight on the mistakes in the original and the technical imperfections of the matrix, although, in this framework, they are also included in the conversion process, in the process of painting. Using an example of archaic technology – the ambrotype – in Hynek Martinec the resulting picture, portrait, is completely outside reality, and remains in a confusing interspace of depiction bearing all the hallmarks of 19th-century photography, albeit painted using all of today’s American retouching finesse. The resulting image concentrates all attention on the quest for the identity portrayed, which, in this way, is positioned outside of time and space. Viewers intensely look for believable detail, but at the same time are kept at a distance by the painting, unable to recognize all levels of the shifts in reality with which they are confronted. Arrested time, which is also one of the key factors in the work of Jason Brooks, transferred from a parent photograph which clearly originated in a split second, is somewhat impertinent in a painting, especially in one which, at first sight, clearly defies this reality of time. Thus, we are witnessing the painted metamorphism of an authentic portrait into a study of arrested and shifted time, where the only reference point is the identity portrayed in contrast to the abstract shifts in the context of contemporary references, while maintaining all the formal features of both the matrix of the photography, and the resulting depiction, i.e. the image. In other words, we might say that, through the smooth surface of photorealistic painting, we have broken into fiction, an illusory world of discontinuous realities, from which such painting, on the surface, despite all its traceable connection to specific reality, is also the gateway or window into a fantasy world outside of time with evocative potential breaking up possible references to the here and now.

Keith Tyson’s images are exhibited with reference to the Internet, now a widely exploited source of visual memory, with an inexhaustible and, in particular, qualitatively unsorted amount of information of all kinds. Tyson’s *Time travelling with the clouds* (2011) is a metaphor for the infinite riches of diverse realities in an absolutely confusing visual clutter with virtually no order of any kind, taken from the depths of the Internet. This mosaic of different, illusively submitted visual records is a kind of visual memory test for the viewer. The iconic images of powerful stories are scrappily stacked into a whole, intentionally without any internal connection. The essence of the statement lies in the viewers’ ability to evoke the stories mentioned through visual information, with an emphasis on their non-linear order. The inability to find any inner connection, the sorting system, and the sense of connection in a single picture still lead to the notion that there may be some order inside that is as yet indistinguishable. Smoke from a falling shuttle, part of Dürer’s *Melancholia*, the aeroplanes slamming into the Twin Towers, the explosion of an atomic bomb over Hiroshima, a sunset... This set of the realities of stories and events combined into a single whole carries the evocative power of a testament to a higher stratum of reality that we cannot see but are at least able to cogitate. Just as we are able excerpt, in our minds, a set of previously experienced Baroque paintings, if we are confronted with the evocative potential of a “sampler” of the illusory Baroque representation of high clouds in *Nine Tributaries*.

BEYOND
REALITY

BRITISH
PAINTING
TODAY

4.10./30.12.
2012



This illusion, in an almost crystalline form, is the theme and vehicle of Marie Harnett's work, which, in minutely detailed drawings, depicts selected scenes from films, in this case *The Great Gatsby*. The more or less real elements forming an underlay for the sophisticated composition of Fitzgerald's novel become the illusory spectacle of a Hollywood-style film, whose carefully contrived sequences, where each individual shot, in the construction of the stage and in the preparation of the scene, is developed, rehearsed and then, using all possible technical finesse, filmed, are a reality of film narrative which has very specific laws. And that arrested, extracted shot is then the authentic material forming the basis for the drawings. A very similar principle, parallels to which we can look for in the social situation of the present day, has previously been encountered in the final phase of the Renaissance, particularly in 16th-century Italy. The relatively long, heroic period of the early Renaissance, full of creative quest, the joy of broken borders and, especially, complete immersion in reality discovered on the basis of rational consideration and research, is followed by a short peak and break. Mannerism in itself bore the signs of languidness, enigmatic signs, obscure games with meanings, the exploitation of one's own roots, the particularizing of painting as such, the quest for dark corners and other solutions. Rediscovered rationality, the laws of nature, a direct view of reality and the clear light of day, all this was set aside as too rough, raw material, which in itself did not have enough potential to express the subtler aspects of reality. Only art itself, as an already refined material, suddenly seemed to be the only possible source of true art. This was not about appropriation or copying, but primarily about the use of already discovered malleable principles, repositories of existing images, whose weight was multiplied by their previously established and deeply rooted context, relations with other works and theories, inclusion in a network of meanings regarded as central and standardizing.

Photorealism can be viewed as a commentary on reality mediated by imitating the language of photography, represented in a traditional form of painting as one of the strongest means of the illusion of reality. The extraordinary imitative processes very often ended in plain enchantment with the surface, the representation of the original ended up as a very laborious but essentially mechanical reproduction of a section of reality. This method of painting turned in on itself alone. Photorealism, since its inception, has almost exclusively relied on photography as a source, which is logical in terms of the technical aid, the model, which seemed to be the most natural and immediate basic intention – the transfer of reality into a two-dimensional flat depiction with a claim to the most faithful possible concurrence. Yet, from a certain point in time, it was possible to consider the use of this process, i.e. the transfer of the original, with the help of the brilliant painting to the order of the old masters, into the form of a picture. The difference is that the original is no longer a photograph, but an enormous reservoir of historical painting. Furthermore, it is not strictly necessary to keep to the original in every detail; rather, it is possible to combine a variety of sources.

At this point, the old painting tradition of the "trompe l'oeil", which can be interpreted as a fundamental expression of a willingness for materiality, comes to the fore again. However, sticking to the mere surface, dedicating attention to mere maximum reproduction, to the accuracy of the transfer of one image to another, did not and does not deliver virtually any meaningful overlap, any expression of another layer or plane of communication. Only when the initial excitement of the painting's opportunities to surpass realities faded did the moment come to look for new ways to take advantage of the quality of painting guided by the old masters' bravado and new techniques to engage in tasks that went beyond mere reality. Only then, when the postmodern emptiness of the image definitively collapsed, or, better, when resignation to content clearly proved untenable, was there an opportunity to draw on the elaborate system of old masters' paintings and all achievements of photorealism (hyperrealism, supernaturalism with references to one branch of Surrealism) in

BEYOND
REALITY

BRITISH
PAINTING
TODAY

4.10./30.12.
2012



order to create images of a different reality , fantasy worlds beyond reality with the utmost attention to accurate detail, which gave the resulting image due credibility.

The reality of an image which is an exact copy of a past work, or a new paraphrasing thereof, is a fascinating loop in time that works with a shift in meanings and gaps in information. The original work was naturally and firmly tied to preceding developments in imagery, with its own content, links, connotations, metaphors, historical references and interpretations; it was understandable and functioned in its time, where knowledge of the world was constrained by the date of production of the picture. It should be noted and pointed out that even those former interpretations had their limits. What is more, we are no longer capable of reconstructing the periodic context completely, or sometimes even at all. The use of historical depiction (where possible in its most authentic form) evokes a *terminus ante quem*, which is underlined by the insertion of a new, contemporary story into a paraphrased image. The incursion of the impertinent present, the destructed reality of today, the relics of recent, gloomy and unappealing stories, is positioned in contrast to the ideal landscape. That classical landscape of the dream of the ancient ideal, of the never existing world which we consider to be the roots of our own culture and the meaningfulness of our own existence, on which we build our sense of anchorage in concrete, definable reality. This contrasting irruption is a double metaphor for the clearly abstract construct we have adopted instead of the true reality which (perhaps) actually occurred and which (perhaps) could become a true guiding principle, a point of departure for today's world, for our being. Both Glenn Brown and Ged Quinn take this approach, taking pictures of the past as a basis and reworking canonized images from history. It is important that they do not maintain an ironic distance, they do not regard them as an empty cliché of the obsolete past. On the contrary, they reaffirm and often newly acknowledge and stress their quality, which they incorporate into their own visual and intellectual concept. This is neither a contemptuous rejection of the obsolete past nor ironic detachment, nor even a superficial postmodern game with deliberately empty motifs and allusions taken from anywhere and anytime, of which only an empty echo has remained. These artists show that they have traversed the academic regurgitation of artificially fabricated and fruitlessly established rules and have found a way of developing this type of painting further. Paintings, whose potential has been long mothballed, seemingly relegated to the past, but, as it turns out, can be developed further without, in their interpretation, having to think of the retrograde process as a result of exhaustion, as re-oriented academism.

The high evocative and metaphorical potential of classical illusive painting, especially that which does not conceal its source and point of departure and openly works with them, has been known, as we have already mentioned, at least since the time of the late Renaissance, or more precisely from the time of Mannerism. The Baroque elaborated this process as one of its guiding principles, which, in various waves, has ultimately made its way virtually to the present. The Baroque's freedom from or loosening of relatively strictly set standards of Renaissance painting, and its emotional expressiveness and opulent form, sharp colour contrasts and expressivity of expression, are the most obvious factors and basis of the work of Glenn Brown. The transgression of standards, the tenseness of expression, the dynamics of movement, the eccentricity in the movement of the figures and the exaggerated colours are all significant factors used by Glenn Brown, with the hyperbole of a clown, irony, and particularly dazzling paintwork, to rework themes based on ancient legacy with which we are intimately familiar, which are deeply entrenched, almost paradigmatic, and, one might say, genetically encoded and therefore easily readable. In his case, the term "appropriation" often crops up during interpretation. The question is whether we can inquire in this way, especially in view of his long previous development, which also applies to Mathew Weir and, in particular, Ged Quinn. They all work with the material which has a rich history, the contextual richness and variety of combinations of motifs make their inside story incredibly expansive. Work with the reality of the image as their initial material and inspiration for the richness of motifs, resulting in what are often

**BEYOND
REALITY**

**BRITISH
PAINTING
TODAY**

**4.10./30.12.
2012**



scurrilous and exaggerated stories with a wide network of references from various levels of European cultural memory, is based on firm belief in the shared and constantly communicated content of highly trained painting. Painting which rises and falls with the European tradition of pictorial work with ancient references developed over the centuries with a whole apparatus of stories, myths, intricately interconnected iconographic schemes and narrative processes.

The work by the Chapman brothers is a chapter in itself. They too have taken as their basis the classical painting of the late-18th and 19th centuries. They too transform works of the past to the extent that we can say they have broken the surface in order to reach beyond the reality of the original and the picture as such. They too tend to create works with an expanded semantic field, a more complex structure of statement, a richer layering of meanings, a context which can capture the ambiguous complexity of meanings, facilitating multi-layered reading. Yet their approach is much sharper, more direct, callously ironic, provocatively open.

Unlike Brooks, Martinec, Johnson, Tyson, Wateridge, Harnett, Hirst and, to all intents and purposes, Weir, they have not taken a photograph as a template to be artistically reworked and expanded in meaning. Like Brown and Quinn, their source and literal background material is past images. But actually, physically, really. This almost clownish literality is considerably lacking a softened, in principle Mannerist detachment from the original, which is primarily refined, and indeed is often the subject of a more or less discrete presentation of technical and artistic skills to cope with the great and sacred masterful examples of the past. They too fundamentally expand the context of the original works. They too expand the semantic layers of images; they too work with an intricate web of subtle semantic shifts and the creation of new relationships. Yet they paint their new paraphrases directly into (not on) the authentic works of the past. By this radical act they significantly add to all the artists in this show, and not only them, one more dimension, and express a fundamental question. The question of the authenticity of works, which by definition could not be grown in a vacuum, but on the other hand, it is necessary to ask where the boundaries of the source, the original, the model, lay. The question of how to work with all that has preceded us, but is also an essential basis not only of painting and its history. For Europeans in particular, the crucial question of originality in art and the question of the boundaries of art in general have been opened up again. Not to mention a number of other issues, such as the question of the ethics of gesture, its direction, the question of the context in which the gesture is read, where it was made and where it works, the question of historical conditionality and the possibility of different readings in different periods, etc.

All the participants work with the layering of the reality of the image, the richness of the contextual framework, the different methods of painting a picture, often with very sophisticated layering of the structure of references and meanings, with refinement worthy of a Persian painter of miniatures. They all work with the image with belief in the possible continuation of the history of art, recognizing the validity of representation as such on the – as yet – uninterrupted axis of its historical development. And, if this is to be confirmed, subversive questions asked by the Chapman at the end of show are entirely apt. Virtually all of the artists represented in this exhibition construct, in the studio, images of new reality which, due to its credibility as a result of high quality, usually illusory painting, not only faithfully imitates reality, but, through this fidelity, offers an insight, a guide, to the world beyond reality. A world that may be conjectured, felt, but often seen in a dream, in everyday reality or in a gallery of old masters, a world that has more than the heady dimension of a mechanically captured surface simply offered for consumption, a world that is often a highly complex intellectual construct based on creative thinking, providing space and incentives for richly structured thought about reality in its individual elements and as a whole, and how to reach beyond it.