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Painting Everyday Life: Fulfilling Baudelaire's Challenge through Photographically-Driven Painting

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Abstract
This essay, based on practice-led research, examines whether the challenge for painters to capture the character and essence of everyday life laid down by Charles Baudelaire in his essay, 'Painting of Modern Life' (1863), is fulfilled by photographically-driven painting. It studies, on both historical and contemporary grounds, the relationships artists have with photography and painting and the relationship between the two genres themselves. It will examine the relationships that artists such as Gerhard Richter, Francis Bacon, and Marlene Dumas have with these genres and how, through these, they witness and record the complexities of everyday life. It also refers to my own work to provide an insight into a practitioner's point of view. Baudelaire's own relationship to these genres will also be examined, as well as the associated theories, histories and concepts as seen through the writings of Roland Barthes, John Berger, Barbara Bloom, Yves-Alain Bois, Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, Van Deren Coke, Nina Felshin and Clement Greenberg. This essay will illustrate photography's initial effect on painting, how this led to the domination of abstraction in painting, and why photographically-driven painting emerged as it did.

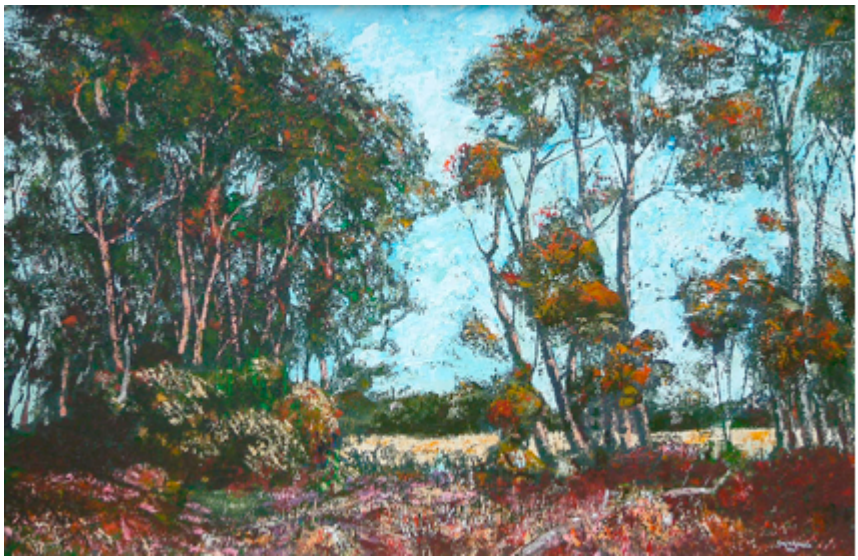
A photograph exhibits an instant in everyday life and photographically-driven painting is a means for artists to interpret that instant. This grants us another view of the socio-political, economic and aesthetic situations surrounding us by re-animating and creating another sense and meaning, providing a new 'truth' for the audience to consider and question. Photographically-driven painting is a genre, not a movement. It is not dependent on any hierarchical leadership or any manifesto produced by that hierarchy. It is solely dependent on the artist as producer who utilises a combination of processes and the artist's relationship with the surrounding world, to produce thought-provoking and even idealised outcomes pertaining to everyday life. With this in mind, the question for this essay is, how does photographically-driven painting fulfil Charles Baudelaire's challenge for painters to capture the character and essence of everyday life? To explore this I will examine related art histories and theories of photography and painting, the relationships between the two, and the consequences of combining them. I will also discuss both the work of artists who study everyday life through their practice within this genre as well as my own work as an insight into a practitioner's point

of view.

While studying in London in 2007, I had the chance to visit some of the most significant art galleries and museums that exist in the art world. In one of these, the Hayward, I came across an exhibition that, for me, became one of those defining moments in one's life. I went to an exhibition called "The Painters of Modern Life," six times in total. The exhibition was all about painting from photographs, but not the ordinary copying of the photograph because it involved interpreting the imagery. This is referred to as "photographically-driven" or "photographically-orientated" painting, which is what my own art practice has been involved with for at least the past 20 years. I never knew that it was considered to be a genre of art because here in Australia you were always told that painting from photographs was cheating. Some art competitions would actually disqualify you if they found out that you were using photographs. One only has to recall the disqualification of John Bloomfield's painting of Tim Burstall in the 1975 Archibald Prize for this very reason, and the subsequent discussion about it. You wouldn't discuss using photographs with anyone. This exhibition inspired me to paint this way more, as well as to write about the genre.

As a demonstration of what photographically-driven painting is, I will discuss two images. The first is a photograph (Fig. 1) that I took of a clump of trees in a paddock, around the

corner from my father's old home on Goodwood Island on the Clarence River in northern NSW. The other image (Fig. 2) is of the painting that I did of those trees, some 20 years ago,



entitled Shea Oaks. The significance of this clump of trees is that it was a haven for birdlife wedged within a sugarcane farming area. The clump was cut down to make a cane pad for the trucks that come once a year to collect cane for the refinery. The trees were removed by my cousin, because he didn't want to use part of his fifteen hectare paddock next to this one in case it upset the 10 cows in the paddock. I admit any other farmer would have done the same at that time. I took the photograph a year or so before this happened, but when I saw it in a pile of other photographs everything came back to me and so I decided to do a painting that would express how I felt about what happened. As you can see I haven't painted the whole photographic image, only that part significant to me which was where the birds nested. As far as witnessing everyday life, you can't get anything more everyday than nature and what we humans do to it, and so this representation of the everyday is a socio-political and environmental interpretation versus an economic and cultural one.

So, what is this form of painting all about? It theoretically started with Charles Baudelaire who in his 1863 essay, The Painter of Modern Life, challenged the painters of his time to paint the character and essence of modern life and abandon the traditional subject matter that had been in vogue since the Renaissance (Baudelaire, 1863). The effects of this challenge at the time brought about a significant change in selection of, and ways of seeing, that subject matter, which eventually led to the questioning of the approach to, and content of, art making itself.

Prior to the arrival of photography, the purpose of painting was regarded as one of representation, where it documented the 'visual truth' of nature. Photography freed painting from this role as it was seen to be quicker, more accurate, less expensive and mass-produced (Reichelt, 2005, p.11). This changed the status of the artwork from its documentary purpose to that of one of just an object and a commodity. This was because painting was no longer one of life's necessities, if it ever was.

From the time of its beginnings, photography, and its usefulness to artists, has met with mixed reviews. Initially, the lack of a personal touch and the artist's eye and hand were considered to diminish the photograph's effectiveness. It was however, also considered to be effective as a replacement for an artist's sketch. Critics like Charles Baudelaire, and here is my dilemma when it comes to Baudelaire, argued that the photograph had no place in art and those painters who used photographs were not really artists (Baudelaire, 1859, p.84). In his review of the 'Salon' exhibition in Paris in 1859, Baudelaire demonstrated his disdain for mechanical reproduction processes that were coming into vogue, namely photography, which he saw as

promoting a popular conception of realism, one which subsumed the idea of artistic truth (Meyer, 1980, p.83).

The use of the photograph as an image source for painters was very popular in 1859. It was new in a period of great change as the bourgeoisie majority was challenging the elite minority, but Baudelaire considered the use of photography as an "attempt to provoke astonishment by means that are foreign to the art in question" (Baudelaire, 1859, pp.83-4). This led to his assertion that "the photographic industry became the refuge of all failed painters with little talent or too lazy to complete their studies" (Baudelaire, 1859, p.87), which he held as a contributing reason for a decline in artistic genius in France. I ponder on this as some of the artists who used photographs included Degas, Cezanne, Courbet, Manet and Renoir.

Not long after Baudelaire, photography came to be thought of as causing the 'Death of Painting' because it witnessed everything, relieving painting of the necessity to do so. As a result, the everyday as subject matter in painting fell by the wayside, especially in the first half of the 20th century as art became more abstracted, but as a reaction to Modernist abstraction, Baudelaire's challenge re-emerged in postmodern and contemporary art.

The defining moment for painting in Yves-Alain Bois's eyes came when Marcel Duchamp introduced his Readymades which brought about another way of thinking about art, making it no longer just about the painted canvas (Reichelt, 2005, p.13). Over the next 50 years, abstract painting, which became the main focus of Modernist art and Greenbergian theory, developed as a consequence of the notion that photography devolved the process of recording appearances unto itself and because of the changes in attitude to the painted canvas. In the 1950s and 60s when abstraction dominated painting, many artists such as Gerhard Richter, Francis Bacon and Richard Hamilton, were looking for a new form of art to experiment with, one that would release them from the restrictions of Modernists' abstraction and provide a way of renewing their interest in figurative and representational subject matter. The problem with Modernist aesthetics was that it became isolated from the realities of everyday life and art, which made it no longer compatible with the thinking and attitudes to art at that time (Felshin, 1995, p.80).

Bois's discussion of the 'Death of Painting' in Painting: The Task of Mourning (1986) is reflective of abstract painting's own propensity to seek its own apocalyptic myth, which is deemed to have instigated the 'death' of abstract painting. He also argues that industrialisation's mechanical production led to the commodification of art. Art lost its mysticism as its value became commodified: for this reason, commodification made art dependent upon its "rarity, authenticity, uniqueness, and the law of supply and demand" (Bois, 1986, p.35). The commodification of Modernist abstract painting also led to a decline in its status, but it also paved the way for the emergence of cross-media art genres such as video installation and painting orientated to photography. It was this latter form that took art away from the purely abstract and back into more figurative and representational forms.

Van Deren Coke (1964) in The Painter and the Photographer, demonstrates that the diversity of mass media was on the increase right through the middle part of the 20th century. The availability of source material increased with the proliferation of newspapers and magazines and so photography provided a variety of ways for satisfying the quest of artists like Richter and Bacon. Some were influenced by the reductive power of the photograph, some understood the camera's expressive potential, while others found potential in the subject matter paraphrased in news imagery (Coke, 1964, p.109). The pictorial accuracy and its focusing qualities, such as blurring, which are prominent in the works of both Richter and Bacon, were

also part of photography's attraction for artists. It enabled them, by observing an image in a flattened form, to easily recognise, mimic and understand such elements as foreshortening (Coke, 1964, p.7), tonality as a defining consequence of black and white imagery, and perspective, all of which are difficult for the eyesight to comprehend. Photography provided viewpoints for the artist that were not, and are not, found in direct experience (Coke, 1964, p.100) and which subsequently allowed these artists to instil the experience into the painting.

This particular genre of painting is dependent on three ways of seeing: the photographer's, the painter's, and the viewer's (Berger, 1972, p.10). The photographer's viewpoint is illustrated by the subject matter, the painter's by the painting process, and the viewer's by perception and appreciation of the imagery. A photograph is a witness to the photographer's decision about what is worth recording. Everything recorded in a photograph has equal power, relevance and importance and there is no way of altering the photograph's composition. On the other hand, painting is compositionally wide open to rearrangement, "[e]very relation between forms in a painting is to some degree adaptable to the painter's purpose" (Berger, 1980b, p.262). Berger argues that "unlike memory, photographs do not in themselves preserve meaning" (Berger, 1980a, p.55), and also that they are lacking in narrative. The isolation of the moment is the major factor surrounding the photograph because this takes away that image's timelessness and separates it from the experience (Berger, 1972, p.18). In photographically-driven painting, the memory of the painter provides the meaning and narrative through interpretation, which brings a reinvestment of experience into that stolen moment and, subsequently, creates a wholly new narrative. Philosopher Roland Barthes' theory of "obtuse meaning" is also relevant here because it falls into the realm of disguise, which creates a blurring of meaning that is discontinuous and indifferent to the 'obvious' meaning (Barthes, 1986, p.55). This could also lead to the creation of a counter-narrative, a different story to that which was intended and all of these possibilities help to form the basis of the work of South African painter Marlene Dumas, who I will now discuss in order to demonstrate another approach.

Dumas' work is figurative and based on photographic imagery of everyday events. She regards photography as "second-hand images and first-hand experience" (Bloom, 1999, p.22) and this is her point of departure for her painterly co-relationships of colour, gesture and texture, that can distort photography's flatness and its 'I-see-everything' features. Dumas doesn't manipulate the photograph, she tries to make something different out of it, to facilitate the imposition of her intentions and to free herself from the restrictions of the photograph (Dumas, 2007, p.121). She is stimulating audience reaction to see what they accept or reject and why they do so.

She says that she learnt the rules of imagination from watching movies (Boogerd, 1999, p.34) and so it was natural for her to develop a cross-media practice as a methodology for her everyday socio-politically based practice. Some of her early works addressed the subject of apartheid where she utilised old postcards to create very in-your-face images, her version of a 'close up'. These 'close ups' are now a major device in her practice. Now, much of her in-your-face imagery explores the plight of the indigenous people of countries such as Palestine, Iraq and Afghanistan, as recorded in newspapers, magazines and on television, in the hope of extending the awareness of such situations at a local and global level (Christov-Bakargiev, 2007, p.36). This is demonstrated in her work based on the arrest and blindfolding of hundreds of Palestinians who surrendered to the Israeli Army in the West Bank city of Tulkam in 2002. This triptych, titled The Blindfolded, emphasises how the individual can become the anonymous in photography and how painting can reinvigorate the experience into the imagery. The photograph shows a group of detainees, several in the background and two in

the foreground. All those in the back have had their hands secured and are blindfolded. The one at the left of the foreground has suffered the same treatment and has been turned to the right and is being led away by a soldier. The one on the extreme right of the image has been blindfolded and is in the process of having his hands secured. Dumas has reduced this image to three individual images of faces, but scaled them up to 130 x 110 centimetres to enable her (and us) to focus on what has happened to the detainees through their facial expressions. This illustrates Dumas's approach to contemporary art practice where she provides a window into global everyday life that leaves the middle ground to others as she exhibits her poignant points of view.

Fractured Homecomings I is a recent work of mine, where I explore my relationship with photography and painting, and my relationship to the two cities I call home, London and Sydney. Centred on the Thames, I am situating this work in the everyday industrial working environment of cities and their waterways. The photograph and the painting (Figs. 3 & 4) are

very different in appearance. The photograph is bright and sunny and the painting is dark and

gloomy, something which is based on my experiences of living there. The colouring of the painting has arisen as a development of my expressionist approach to how I personally interpret what I see. Dark and gloomy is not always a negative, but it remediates my approach, from a descriptive one to one of interpretation.

Not all photographs are paintings 'in waiting', just as all painted images may not make an interesting photograph. The selection of a photograph as a source of material for a painting is crucial to the process. The photographic image has to allow a conversation to take place between it and the painter. In England in 2007, I took over 3000 photographs to document my time there but only 17 of them proved to have what was needed to produce a painting. On occasions, the whole photographic image provides something for me to interpret, on others it may only be a section or two that works. The important aspect is that it allows me to make an interpretation of what it is saying. A shape, a tone, or the subject may be the instigator and in my discussion with the photograph, we discover together how to execute the painting. Just as a photograph is full of realities, accidents and distortions, these same three things occur in the execution of a painting and become an inherent part of that painting's narrative that gives the audience something more to take in.

Marlene Dumas's practice and my own, with our crossing-media processes and our subject matter, are examples of the freedom now found in art. Our work demonstrates that photographically-driven painting provides a field of investigation into the socio-political, economic and aesthetic situations of everyday society. We now know that photography itself brought about a decline in the recording of everyday life through painting, but subsequently in the cycle, painting's resurrection has occurred through narrative and meaning and there has been an ironic return to the process of art making through painting's association with the cause of its initial decline. Artists are cross-pollinating media and looking at the nature of their source material to examine and question the relationships of media and discussing what we now imagine to be the 'realities' found in media and everyday life. The validation of Baudelaire's challenge lies in the processes of investigating and witnessing everyday life through a process of art. One of those processes is photographically-driven painting, but the irony here for me is that Baudelaire considered it to be ludicrous for painters to work from photographs. I wonder what he would say about photographically-driven painting, especially as it expands into digital processes and manipulative softwares.

With the commodification of Modernist abstract painting, artists, some of whom I have discussed, were looking for a way past the Modernist's restrictive practices. Photographically-driven painting has provided a variety of means for satisfying this quest. The genre's cross-pollination of painting with photography, painting's nemesis if you believe the 'Death of Painting' debate, has strengthened its continuum. Artists no longer use the photograph just as a substitute for a sketch and are now fully involved with the exploration of photography's and painting's relationship. A significant factor that has been garnered from this study is the development of the differing ways of seeing. Not only do we have the alternative ways of seeing through the photograph and the painting, but as a combination in this genre of painting we have an alternative way of seeing and witnessing everyday life. What we also find, when we examine this genre, is that it opens up a whole different field of investigation that takes us into the socio-political, economic and aesthetic situations of everyday life.

List of images

Fig. 1: Makin, G. N. J. (b. 1952). *Shea oak Trees, Goodwood Island, 1987*. Photograph on Kodak paper, 10 x 15 cm.

Fig. 2: Makin, G. N. J. (b. 1952). *Shea Oaks, 1990*. Synthetic Polymer paint on board, 45 x 65 cm.
Fig. 3: Makin, Gary Norman James. (b.1952). *The Thames, London, 2007*. Digital Image, 10 x 15 cm.
Fig. 4: Makin, Gary Norman James. (b. 1952). *Fractured Homecomings 1, 2008*. Synthetic Polymer paint, ink and collage on canvas, 1.6m x 2.2m.

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About the Author

Gary Makin has been a cabinet maker, an accountant and a picture framer amongst other things. He has also been a professional musician since 1972 and a practicing artist since 1988. In his association with the arts he has taught painting, and has also worked as a curator and education officer (both part time), as a senior gallery technician at a regional gallery and as the Art Director at St. Gregory's College, Campbelltown. As part of his arts practice he works in woodblock printing and is devoted to photographically-driven painting. He has just completed an Honours degree in Fine Art in the School of Communication Arts at the University of Western Sydney.

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