

## ***Painting per se***

by Merlin James

Alex Katz Chair in Painting

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is customary to begin a lecture such as this - given by the holder of a 'named' chair - with a brief tribute to the benefactor who has endowed the position. In this case my words of respect for Alex Katz are far from a mere formality. I have been an admirer of his work from the time I first seriously began trying to become a painter myself. I sought out his paintings when I was a student in London at the beginning of the 1980s, when they were still rarely seen there, and I think little understood. I championed his work ceaselessly and I found opportunities to write about why I thought he was so important. My convictions about the significance of his work have got stronger and stronger the more of it I have seen, and the more he continues to make. His paintings are never repetitive, though they do not seek novelty; they are never cynical, though utterly disabused; they are always restless, strenuous and recurringly difficult while never parading difficulty. Justly celebrated as he is now, internationally, I am still not sure how fully his achievement is understood. But I will not talk more of him in this lecture; I have done so extensively elsewhere. Suffice it to say, I find exemplary the way he so clearly engages in the same activity – plays the same game – as Manet, Chardin, Velásquez, Veronese. Absolutely relevant to what I am going to discuss tonight is the way Katz, while reflecting a fully contemporary consciousness of the modern and post-modern disjunctures of history and culture, still plays the grand, complex game of Western painting – grandly, complexly.

I will not talk here, either, about my own work as an artist. I don't think I have ever lectured on my painting as such. If called on to speak, I always try to address larger issues in art practice and history, or the works of certain artists that preoccupy me. I let my own paintings' relation to them remain implicit. (Similarly, the critical writing I have done on art over the years has always been intimately connected with what I do in the studio.) I have a horror of the solipsistic, 'welcome-to-my-world' style of artist's lecture. However, the slides I am showing tonight are of a body of recent paintings of mine, works which I will exhibit later this year in New York.

My hope is that these slides, while not directly illustrating my thesis, might have more interesting counterpoints and resonances with my argument than would an academic series of 'examples' of this or that trend in current art to which I may refer, and with which everyone here will be familiar anyway.

The paintings of mine I am showing, by the way, all have a starting point in, or no, not a starting point exactly but in some way a relationship to, nineteenth-century documentary photographs of Italy. (I am also showing slides here of the source photographs - though again, source, is not really the right word); they are anonymous shots from the Alinari photography studio in Florence.

A sub-plot of this lecture is certainly going to concern the continually interesting and problematic relationship of painting to photography. My title is 'Painting *per se*', and of course it is the advent of photography that is axiomatically (usually too literally) thought of as the occasion of modern painting's having to become conscious, or more conscious, of its proper nature. After Daguerre, we feel, painting had to promote itself qua painting, no longer on the pretext of a functional imaging of the world. From photography - a simplistic logic would suggest at least - came the impulse for all the distortions and abstractions, all the self-referentiality, of modern painting.

In fact, as we know, it wasn't quite like that. Painting never really had to protest its independence from photography (rather the other way round), as was well understood by painters who used photography best and most immediately – Vuillard, Degas, Munch, Eakins, Sickert and others. (Walter Sickert is especially crucial, and still too little regarded outside the UK. I think he precedes, and far exceeds in interest, much post-modern photoquotation.) Painting, these artists knew, would always be painting. But as time has gone on, photography seems to have come back to dog painting. Irrespective of the advent of digital imaging (a revolution that was spoken of as robbing photography of its aura, just as photography supposedly robbed painting), the use of explicit photosources – computer-modified or not – is today depressingly endemic among painters. I want to reflect on why few of them seem to use photography now in as liberated and interesting a way as those very first users. But more of that later.

What I really intend by my title, 'Painting *per se*', is to invoke an idea of painting as a specialism. I want to talk about medium-specificity; except that even the word 'medium' is unfortunate in implying that it is a language that carries an independent message. I want, rather, to propose painting as a world of material meaning unto itself, of course not divorced from the wider realities around it nor from fruitful dialogue with other media, but nevertheless painting as a reality with its own culture, its own history, tradition, conventions, genres. Its own ways. Its own ways of being. I am trying to identify what French poet Péguy would have called the *mystique* of painting, meaning its inner animating nature, as opposed to the *politique*, of its administration, its use by society, its function in the market and in the power relations network that is the art-world.

Although I am a painter, with often a fairly scant knowledge of many other visual art media, I do not want you to think I am a painting chauvinist. In fact what I am proposing is that all recognisable art forms - not just painting but sculpture, film, photography, installation (not to mention poetry, theatre, the novel, dance... ) each have their own proper character, their own DNA as it were, tied to the material and technical procedures of their production and their on-going histories in which artists learn from, challenge, allude to, and develop out of, other artists in the same discipline. It is precisely my respect for, say, video or performance as specialisms in themselves, that makes me hesitate to pronounce on much that I see in those fields. Not that one cannot cultivate a feeling for more than one medium: I am very interested in sculpture for example, though acutely aware of its differences from painting. But like everyone I have limited energy and time, and to verse myself in, say, text-based conceptualism, would require an emotional and intellectual investment that I know I cannot meet. Just as I know there is not enough room in my life, sadly, to get seriously into chess, or jazz.

The material and technical engagement with any 'genre' of art making requires, I believe, initiation. It requires a nurtured inwardness with the continuing history of the activity, and an earned familiarity with the terms, conventions and sheer physical /emotional/ intellectual experience of making works that can be recognised as paintings, or sculptures or installations, or whatever it be.

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I think it is fair to say that a rather different model has been dominant, in recent years, certainly in the institutions of art education, contemporary museum curating and what is understood as the contemporary art scene. For a long time now we have had the strenuous promotion of an idea of interdisciplinarity, in which artists frequently speak of, or are celebrated for, breaking down barriers between disciplines, resisting categorisation, within any specific medium, creating a hybrid practice, occupying the space 'between' traditional fields and so on. To be experimental or self-questioning is usually now assumed to require a refusal to specialise, to be pigeon-holed, to have one's vision constrained by allegiance to a conventional medium. Even when artists do concentrate on a core medium, they frequently assert their freedom to make token forays into other practice. The odd video, performance, photo- or digital piece, or installation by a painter is quite typical. Photographers or film artists regularly switch to painting, too. And of course the major group survey shows and biennials insist on the heterodoxy of the current scene; it is quite uncool to curate a medium-specific group show, especially devoted to one of the older-established categories such as painting or sculpture. Painting is shown next to video, next to sound works, next to photography. Similarly the big art prizes (unlike the Booker prize for novels, or the Oscars for the various categories of feature film arts) skip between media, somehow judging conceptual installation against painting, against video, against text works, against sound works, against photography. Assertions of the death of painting have blown over, but painting is tolerated now as long as it patently repudiates any claim to its old supremacy among the visual arts, and announces itself as just one choice to be selected with others from the broad menu of contemporary art practice. Painting is not dead, it's optional.

I need scarcely give examples, surely, so widespread is the multi-media trend. A few things that recently came through my mail box, all at once, will serve as illustrations. One is a press release for a recent show in London (*Shelf Life* at the non-profit space Gasworks) in which artists 'use appropriation to the point where language is both created and unraveled... re-evaluating art historical values; situating the art in the street as well as the gallery, using ready-mades and crafted objects, challenging distinctions between high and low art. Together their practice forms an invisible network of resistance to the homogenisation of culture, and crosses social and political boundaries as a result'. The show included a subversive comic-strip artist, a photographer, a web type-face designer, a video artist, a conceptual textile artist, a sound artist, an installationist, an artist using skin tattoo and another using graphology (the study of handwriting). In among them was the lone painter Kerry James Marshall. Another press release arriving in the same post announced a show at a private gallery that similarly mixed painting with diverse other practices, claiming that 'the resulting work occupies a space between painting, sculpture and architecture, questioning conventional categorisation'. Yet a third press commutiqué concerned the appointment of veteran conceptual artist Conrad Atkinson to a post of

Distinguished Professor at the Courtauld Institute (and collection) in London: 'Atkinson plans to create what he describes as a series of 'interventions', installations of mixed media, based on interactions with several of the historic works, for exhibition adjacent to the masterpieces...an excavation and investigation and ultimately a synthesis of an interdisciplinary visual art practice'.

Interesting artists, we believe today, are those for whom Art is an encompassing, umbrella activity, in which anything is possible. The artwork can take any form, and must indeed announce to the viewer that its form is contingent. The artist is not the practitioner of a narrow trade, or craft, such as painting or sculpture, or photography or video making. No. What makes the artist is the broad vision, the restless, uncontainable creative curiosity, the concept, the incisive or subversive intelligence, the grasp of important issues and the flare to come up with telling, challenging encapsulations of ideas. Now, some of the ideological appeals of this broad, anti-categorical model are quite clear. It feels democratic, non-discriminatory, unexclusive, refreshingly opposed to elitism. We read it as politically liberal and open minded. To avoid artistic conventions seems to guarantee a freedom from mere conventionalism, from conservatism. In particular a long established form like painting has associations of social privilege and hierarchy, dating back to when paintings were commissioned by the powerful and the wealthy and used as currency in an establishment status quo (as of course they still often are... ). The appreciation of such works has been traditionally the preserve of the fortunate few, and connoisseurship is associated with a rarefied, exclusionist social milieu. How much more radical appears an indefinable, ever self-redefining art practice that avoids categorisation, remains continually experimental, and thus evades a precious hierarchical ordering and the constant fixation with romantic, mystificatory ideas of the 'genius' and the 'masterpiece'. Conrad Atkinson's subversive, deconstructive forays into the Courtauld collection are typical of many such interventions into the traditional museum by artists in the last decade or two, sceptically undercutting the supposedly narrow and complacent definitions of art and excellence.

But this reading of interdisciplinarity as a socio/political metaphor is quite misled. of course to categorise and stereotype and aesthetically evaluate people, human beings, can be dangerous. It can facilitate prejudice and racism, can be a tool of oppression (though it can also be a strategy of liberation: 'Black is Beautiful!'; 'Workers of the World Unite!'). But we are not talking of that sort of 'discrimination', here; we are talking of being discriminating, not discriminatory. In what fields other than fine art do we have these ideological qualms about categorisation, or about the associated value judgements - quality judgements - that categorisation permits? In sport, for example, we quite understand if someone is a baseball fan, but has no interest in motor racing. They offer very different pleasures. Yes, someone might well be keen on (or for that matter a practitioner of) more than one sport (golf and tennis, whatever); but there is no imperative to be an all-rounder. The club and the racket, the net and the green, are very different typologies, though both golf and tennis are games. And we are very happy with judging the quality of a sportsman or sportswoman, and to see a certain team win the league, and to argue fiercely with our fellow sport enthusiasts about the relative merits of different basketball players, hockey teams or whatever it be. Similarly, be it TV shows or restaurants or wines or pet dogs or cultivated flowers, we seem naturally to want to compare like with like (to categorise), and to evaluate things on the terms appropriate to their category. It is an innate human impulse. Life would probably be impossible without

acting on such principles. (I'm afraid I've no specific anthropological authority to cite in support of that assertion, but I am sure anthropologists, as well as philosophers and psychologists, have looked at the categorising impulse. Certainly someone like Peter Winch, the philosopher of social science, applied to social behaviour ideas of 'rule-following' from Wittgenstein. And back in the 'forties, Malinowski's cultural anthropology talked about consensual groups in society, with agreed charters, of behaviour. Structuralist anthropology was obviously highly involved, too, with categorisation and associated taboos. I'd be very interested to find out who has worked on ideas of ethical or aesthetical value judgements in relation to those kinds of social rule-following).

So anyway, it is very curious to me, this phenomenon in fine art of the erosion of the categories and sub categories, and this almost moralistic urge to declassify (and as a correlative to suspend value judgement). When I say to people that, well, painting is really my field, and I'm not such a good judge of, or so interested in, video, or performance, I am often met with accusations of narrowness. I was recently encouraged to apply for a post at a London art college. It was in the painting department, but at the interview I was asked by intermedia faculty how I would teach cross-over students, exploring other forms and materials. I said I would of course engage with them and help them find direction to the best of my knowledge of the kinds of art they seemed to be moving toward, but that primarily I would refer them to professors more expert and engaged than myself in those media. I am happy to say that following that interview I was free to take up the post of Alex Katz Chair in Painting at Cooper Union.

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Far from being elitist, critical categorisation and evaluation is in fact the only safeguard against the appropriation of art by social and economic power play. Only in such terms – evaluation within category in terms appropriate to that category – is it possible to mount a critical argument why certain art is inherently more worthy of promotion than other art, and thus why the promotion of certain art is merely the function of art world politiqué. The tour and exchange of exhibitions on the international curatorial circuit, the routine art press reviewing, the rising and falling stocks and shares of current art-world reputations, the biennale ballyhoo and the academic research-rating game, all these will roll on, self sufficiently and self-perpetuatingly. So will the art market, which is largely synonymous with them. That's fine; that's life, But the reality of painting, the life of painting as a whole and of each individual painting that matters to each individual viewer who dwells in the real world of painting - these are quite other matters. And yes, there is a barrier to cross to enter the world of painting, or of any art form. Sometimes it can be a difficult barrier to cross. There is not 'open access'. But the entry requirement is not one of economic or social privilege. An art form such as painting is simply a field of experience into which one has to be initiated, whether as practitioner or as an 'amateur' (one who has fallen in love), an 'enthusiast' (one whom the god has entered). All that is required is that one consume and be consumed by, give oneself to and take possession of, the form. One *becomes* a painter. or one *becomes* a lover of painting. It takes profound familiarity with paintings and, for practitioners, with the act of painting. It takes absolute identification with the physical and cultivated practice of the mode. It changes you. And you do pay a price, if only that you devote time and energy and emotional loyalty that you will then not be able to spend on other things. And if you begin to decide, within painting, what you believe are the important directions for painting now, and who are the important painters,

you may have to say 'no' to other directions, other painters, painful as that may be. You will have to be *against* a lot painting, to be *for* other painting.

I hope it is clear that I am not promoting a timid traditionalism, neither of the worthy back-to-life-drawing-basics variety (though I've nothing against life drawing), nor of the cute-recycling-of-modernist-tropes variety (of which the New York Armory art fair was so full just last week). Any art form, to thrive, must constantly have its definitions tested, its boundaries and frontiers pushed forward. But I would submit that this can only be done from inside the discipline. Painters can extend painting, video makers can expand the limits of what video can be, and installation artists can innovate in installation's terms. What does not seem viable to me is the creation of uber-art works, ur-art works, that borrow the materials and format of painting, yet evade evaluation as painting, and the materials and format of film, yet evade evaluation as film, and the materials and format of theatre, yet refuse to meet theatre's requirements, and the materials and format of literature, or philosophy, yet shirk the rigorous standards of those disciplines. Logically, the perfect 'intermedia' work slides between all registers, but is answerable to none.

Well, hold on. I'm not being quite fair. Because interdisciplinarity, 'mixed media', (for want of a better term), has arguably itself become a specialism now, with its own tradition, its own cannon, its conventions and genre tropes. When we confront a work that deploys maybe sound, video, ready-made elements, performance and text all in combination, we do categorise it with, and begin to judge it against, other such hybrid and conglomerate works from recent decades. But would I be wrong to venture (I may well be wrong, it's not my specialism) that such work is often not made from a highly informed and nuanced sense of its own tradition, but rather from an aspiration to be still avant-garde, still pioneering and ground-breaking? Such work is still often defining itself, surely, against more traditional, homogenous media such as painting. (It often does so quite literally, in all those museum, intervention' pieces),

It is a highly interesting question, that of how new art forms come into being. How long it takes them to evolve a set of conventions, a tradition. one would have to look hard at the origins of, perhaps, opera - with its roots in song, pageant, drama, ensemble music, ecclesiastical chant, sermonising and whatever else; or at feature film, with its format drawing on theatre, literature, and photography. New forms do seem to evolve as hybrids. But one interesting thing is how quickly they develop quite strict formats and structures, and then how quickly value judgements set in. So you start to get classics of cinema, acknowledged masterpieces, influential practitioners, a canon and a criticism, very soon after the technology and structure of cinema is in place and the basic conventions agreed. Is there yet a consensual coagulation of the conventions and materials that constitute the format(s) of mixed media conceptualism? I don't know, but I will bet that the best artists in the field will prove to be those who accept that it *is* a field, not those who sit on the fence, who hedge their bets, forever deconstructing.

As I've hinted already, I'm not calling for fanatical devotion to just one medium. Artists have often had more than one form of expression, if only in that, say, they painted, made prints, drew and sculpted. Some have been great all-rounders. And one format would of course cross-fertilise with another, within one artist's work, or between artists. But each product, each individual work, can only make sense and have value for the viewer in so

far as it is recognisable (however problematically) within a category. Specialism, I'd argue, is in fact the best basis for fruitful cross-fertilisation. I have visited a lot of art colleges over the years, here and in the UK, and the breadth of the modern curriculum, in colleges such as the Cooper Union for instance, is a wonderful, liberating thing. It certainly offers students freedom from a romantic attachment to one vocation (the fantasy of being a great painter, classically) to which they may be quite unsuited. The only danger is that a student may be faced with such an embarrassment of riches, such a plenitude of choice, that deep communion with individual art forms might never take place. One might hover forever, with all one's options open, the eternally potential and protean artist, full of ideas to be realised in whatever seems the appropriate medium, the convenient vehicle.

This is perhaps the point to go back for a moment to this issue of painting's widespread dependence today on photography. Because it is connected to the tendency to see painting as just another image-delivery system, an available option for encapsulating an idea, an equal-opportunities alternative to photography or any other medium. It is connected of course with our post-modern obsession with mediation, with notions (attached to much 1970s Continental Theory) of reality as information, always already processed; everything as sign.

The artists who used photography well, early on, used it partly to let play, upon a photo-derived image, all the faculties of painting that were un-photographic. They used it to point up, by contrast, the inherent properties of painting. Photography's arbitrary, non-composed cropping of the image; its feeling of a frozen moment paradoxically receding from us in time all the more palpably for being 'stilled'; our awareness that this image is documentary, factual, not an invention, or design of the author; above all the evocation in us of a sense of estrangement or detachment from the subject, our incapacity to respond, to touch, to communicate with the reality that we see preserved with such magical accuracy – all these qualities are addressed when, say, Walter Sickert squares up a newspaper picture, transfers it to canvas, paints it. And they are not just addressed but redressed, redeemed. Contingent planes are eased into a felt composition; deathly detail becomes vital abbreviation; the untouchable becomes touched, touching; the reportage of digital dot matrix (when he uses a newspaper photo) becomes the empathetic analogue of the contour traced; monochrome becomes coloured; the unreal, distanced factuality becomes a real, realised fiction in its retelling as painting.

There has there been an erosion, through the late twentieth century, in the appreciation of painting's expressive faculties. At one level, the psychological functions, via empathy, of simple formal and haptic qualities like texture, composition, rhythm and colour (functions that were the concern of German and Austrian critical art historians since the nineteenth century, and later of thinkers like Susan K. Langer, Rudolf Arnheim, Adrian Stokes) are now rarely discussed. Ideological readings have replaced them. More than that, there is an active scepticism toward notions of painting's efficacy as aspirational human expression. Such a proposition is now implicitly derided as naive, bourgeois humanism. The use of the photograph by today's painters usually signifies a deliberate deracination and denial of the affective potential of painting. The godfathers of the trend are of course Warhol, and more so Gerhard Richter whose influence has been so universal in art colleges. Richter's reduction of colour to grey; his dead-pan transcription

of press and other photos, and (even with his return to colour, texture, abstract 'composition') his air of detachment and parody; his indifference to subject; his randomness of motif; his synthetic nature of chroma; his allusion to manufacture and technologised reproduction even within *matière* - all this has become axiomatic for so much current painting. His supporters find something heroic in his preservation of absolute ambivalence, or inscrutability, his severe contempt-of-court. It is perhaps felt that in the shadow of the horrific events of his century (which surely haunt his project), no avowal is adequate and any effort at expressing feeling will seem hollow and somehow sentimental: the best and most honest thing he can do is maintain a grim silence. But it seems to me sad that such apparent emotional nullity has become the keynote of so much painting for so long. We have always known of the importance in art, sometimes, of *sang froid*, of steely realism, of a bitter, brave comfortlessness in the face of pain. But surely, now, we are seeing a posture that has become academic, an easy resignation of responsibility, of the ability to respond, to feel. Is that resignation and numbness not actually part of what allows atrocity to happen? The sad fact of Richter's art seems to me to be its utter lack of compassion. Other art forms, notably literature, have indeed found ways of treating, even directly, the most unbearable aspects of our recent history with profound humanity. I'm thinking not just of books by survivors such as Primo Levi, but staggering imaginative responses like D. M. Thomas's novel *The White Hotel* (I mention it simply since I have just read it; it was written twenty years ago). It seems to me pitiful that painting relinquishes its humanly expressive capacities just when we need them most.

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For the classical world, the liberal arts were presided over by the Muses. I like the idea, because it implies that there were already varieties – categories – at the very source of creativity. No creativity without form, and a Muse special to each mode. There was Calliope for poetry, and indeed ones for sub-genres within poetry - Euterpe for lyric poetry, Erato for love poetry. There was a muse for dance, Terpsichore, one for tragic drama, Melpomene, one for comic drama, Pthalia, and so on. The Muses were the daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne, who was Memory. So they were the products of the union of the godhead with memory. Why memory? Well, perhaps because it was the job of the art to commemorate (celebrate or lament) the great moments in human affairs. Perhaps too because art works enact an anamnesis, an unforgetting, of perennial truths. But also I like to think that memory is the mother of the Muses because any form of creativity - any art form - requires a continual internalisation of its own tradition, an everpresent consciousness of its past. The past of painting is remembered in each new painting, as the past of theatre is recalled in each new play, the past of poetry in each new poem. Each painting contains the memory of painting.

So I guess I am calling for a Muse of painting to visit us and inspire us and refresh our memory of the proper nature of painting (and I hope Zeus and Mnemosyne are also busy right now conceiving another daughter, a Muse of MultiMedia). I promise you though, I do not have some nostalgic wish to return to any past, in painting. The memories that make us strong in our identity are those that are internalised and permit us to move forward into the future. But I am making this plea for categorisation and value judgement in art partly out of a concern that the sheer volume of art being produced and

exhibited and reviewed and promoted now, at least in cities such as New York or London, is becoming quite unmanageable and unmeaningful. More and more art school graduates are expecting careers as practising, exhibiting artists (where in the past the fall-off rate was high, and students very effectively transferred the skills they learned at college into other professions). The market is saturated with product. Undifferentiated, uncategorised, art product. We are reaching overload, a situation in which fine art is turning into a kind of crazy, democratic hobbyism, an oddly frantic cottage industry that anyone can join in with, and from which a few float to the surface for a while, gaining some notoriety through a fickle mixture of networking and hustling and luck and fashion fluctuations. Art works are the fuel of the artworld perpetual motion machine. They ignite fastest and burn hottest the more they are made up of the high octane of concept, of pure art idea, least aggregated by any raw, resistant, slow-burning matter, any dense fossil-fed material, But the machine is turning faster and faster, with less and less traction, burning more and more fuel in the effort to maintain any kind of pressure. Maybe there is no slowing it down. Already it is spinning so quickly it is practically invisible, at least to me.

All I can do, anyway, is get on with what I love –

Painting.

Painting *per se*.