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Mike Silva *New Paintings*

10 September – 20 October 2019

Opening preview: Monday 9th September, 6-9pm

Mike Silva in conversation with Jo Harrison

Jo Harrison: You paint from photographs and you've mentioned before about how they are helpful in slowing time down, particularly in a world where we are so increasingly time-poor and have an attention deficit. You describe it as a discipline of looking or focusing.

Mike Silva: Yes, I've even stopped projecting images, I've started gridding up, which slows the process down even more. It's an old traditional form of 'blowing-up' an image. When I used to project, not only was I saving time, I was also controlling the image more, by cropping it, for example. But taking the time to draw the image onto the canvas square-by-square, the focus is on the whole image. The gridding part is almost the most enjoyable aspect of the painting process because keeps me in a suspension with the work.

JH: At some point in time you have taken these photographs of people and places. Was it always with the intention of painting the images at a later date, or was it more about capturing a moment?

MS: The latter. It's always been about capturing the spirit of a moment. All of these photos have been taken pre-mobile phone and it was more about recording my friends, my lovers, my environment. Not as a conscious biography or visual diary but it's just always been something I've done since I was a kid; as a way of remembering. I moved around a lot when I was young. So, it became about a way of anchoring where I was at a particular time.

JH: How do you decide which photographs become paintings?

MS: I sit with them for a long time. Some of those images are 15 years old, but in a way, you can give them a present tense cohesion. Looking at an old photograph, it's rooted in nostalgia, and it can be potentially quite sentimental, but I think when you paint it, you're giving it a 'here and now' feeling that everyone can lock into or relate to.

JH: There is something extraordinarily tender about the way you paint, and you approach your canvas with a lovingness and warmth. But you are always working from both a combination of a photograph, as well as your memory of the moment the photograph was taken, and the person or place captured within.

MS: When I was at college, I did all these portraits of my partner and my friends and I was kind of embarrassed about the intimacy and the tenderness of them – cos the music I listen to is quite harsh, quite aggressive, quite 'fuck you', and I always wanted to make work like that too. But looking back, some of that 'fuck you' music is just concealing something quite soft and tender anyway. I'd go to these hardcore punk shows in the '90s and everyone was always really up front and there was always this feeling of togetherness and affection, but then I would go to gay clubs and it would be the opposite. You'd have Sister Sledge full volume live on stage and yet it would be very malevolent. I was speaking to some friends about this recently, and they said, "yeah, well, it's that gay rage". On the outset, stereotypically, gay people are seen as being 'soft', but what they project is tough. So, you're seeing this unexpected inversion of two ostensibly opposing cultures; and I think I was battling with that dichotomy a lot in my practice.

JH: Whenever we speak, you always make references to music. It's obviously a big part of your life. How much of an influence does it have on your painting practice, if any?

MS: I like to think that the music I listen to informs and influences my work, but I think it's more just something I am interested in as a hobby. The main connection between my artistic practice and my taste in music is that it's

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rooted in youth sub-culture. A lot of the photos I have taken and paint from relate to the community of people I hung out with in the '90s or early '00s, but they are still there in my life, except we're a lot older, and we're not partying anymore, but we are still there for one another; we're just fatter and balder and less photogenic. I don't think it would be as charming to paint what we look like now!

JH: Doesn't your friend Jason, from the painting *Jason with Beer* refuse to let you paint him now?

MS: Yeah, Jason, he's my ex. He actually had a breakdown recently when he saw a photo of himself. He was surprised at how much his body had changed. But when you look back at pictures of yourself from your youth, you enter a kind of grieving process, where you find yourself mourning your former self.

JH: You can only see youth when you don't have it anymore; it has nothing to do with how a young person actually looks, it is just that youth itself contains an innate beauty.

MS: Or a purity, or an energy. A lot of people I'm friends with post images of themselves on social media from the '80s or '90s, out clubbing and having fun. And it's like a collective mourning.

JH: You've spoken before about anonymity vs. intimacy, in terms of meeting people, but the photograph-turned-painting makes an otherwise fleeting encounter become more significant.

MS: The painting is also just like a mask because you're experience of someone when you only meet them in a park or in a sauna, for example, remains surface-level. Some of these guys I photographed because I liked the way they looked, their clothes, their style. I used to carry this clunky Pentax K1000 as a kind of surrogate weapon – in case I got attacked – but also if there was the right opportunity or the light looked amazing, I would ask them if I could take their photo, and they'd always say yes. It used to be an event to photograph someone. And I still use my camera today to take photos instead of my phone, it's a different experience and creates a much better editing process that I prefer; one which feels more personal.

JH: Earlier you used the words 'nostalgic' and 'sentimental' to describe your work. Most artists would avoid those terms but you seem quite comfortable thinking of your work like that.

MS: I think it's something that is very personal to me. But hopefully, when other people look at my paintings, they have a different experience of the work. A photographic image always holds a kind of sadness about it, because it is taken in a moment that doesn't exist anymore. Years ago, I was wanting to pursue a much more abstract language, but it felt too forced. And now I've come full circle, and returned to a practice that feels more truthful. Even if it's taken a major life event for me to be confident – or at least comfortable – enough to show my vulnerability. When I was making those abstract paintings, I thought I was being really expressive and not at all self-conscious, but looking back, they are *so* self-conscious; and in fact, I'm making the same decisions with the photo-like paintings but being much less aware of them. There are painterly elements in the clothing, or the foliage – it's all there – but I have the construct of a photograph to forget about those images being too forced.

JH: You've found your groove. There's an element of decision making involved in your painting process, but a huge part is also just trusting your instinct, and believing in what you know you're good at and what you enjoy doing.

MS: Using a photograph means that you are always remembering, but through the process of painting, you are also just forgetting and focussing on the practical task at hand, you're doing what you're good at.

JH: Do you think having the conviction to go against what's considered 'acceptable' or 'fashionable' within art comes from you going against things more generally in your day-to-day life, for example, living in a way that is defiant of social conventions, whether listening to punk or living in a housing co-op?

MS: I used to think of myself as militant anti-fascist fighter, and I still am, but actually I've realised, through experience, I've had much more effective interactions with neo-Nazis when I've just had a conversation with them. That actually seems more radical than beating them up. It's surprising how well you can get along with someone who you have different fundamental values to. You're not going to change their way of thinking, but they're not going to forget that conversation they had with you. I think it's possible to exploit the tender side of oneself, and not be confrontational, rather than thinking you're hard all the way through.

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JH: Has that knowledge simply come through age?

MS: Yeah, but also going through something that makes you feel vulnerable. Men can be crucified by the whole notion that they should act a certain way, be masculine. Whatever social clique you're in, there's always this pressure to be the baddest, the toughest, the edgiest, when really, you're not. You find yourself performing a persona that has nothing to do with who you really are.

JH: You almost exclusively paint men, are these questions of masculinity part of that?

MS: I just like looking at men. And the people who have always hung around me are men. I had a dream the other night that I was painting women and it was really strange. But I think when you become too conscious of what you are painting, you slip into a territory that becomes too 'knowing' and what you're doing no longer feels honest or true. There was a period where I felt like I could paint whatever I wanted, and I still could, but ultimately subject matter is important to me – even though it wasn't fashionable to admit that when I was at art school.

JH: There's a vulnerability to your work that happens twofold: the first is that you, as an artist, are exposing your life to your audience, because everyone in these paintings are people that you have known, whether as friends, lovers or in fleeting moments. Secondly, there is the vulnerability of the person you've photographed and painted, as your subjects, these men – and their masculinity – are being exposed.

MS: But they are also gay, black men, so this is amplified. Robert Mapplethorpe was huge in the '80s for his images of, primarily black, men. There was so much objectification going on there, but they were also incredibly beautiful, formal, photographs. The men that I paint are always known to me, but as someone who is mixed-race, I've always grown up being aware of otherness. The mixed-race experience is a very strange one, I almost feeling like I'm floating between identities. And friends who I have spoken to, whether from West Indian or Asian heritage, have also expressed this conflict, of feeling simultaneously very British but also not British at all.

JH: Besides painting people who you know, a large number of your works are actually of interiors or domestic spaces – places that you've either lived at some point or that has a personal relevance to you.

MS: Well I'm still part of that Short Life Housing Co-op, so we used to get moved around a lot. We lived all over Westminster for nothing. But I always had my camera on me, so if the light was right or the environment just looked a particular way, I would document it. I still photograph the washing up, or my kitchen, the bedroom, it's just a sort of ongoing project.

I lived in Canada until I was 6, and me and my brother used to play in this ravine near the house, and I remember my mother always taking photos of the area because it was under development, and it used to make me so sad, even as a kid looking at these pictures. And now, it still makes me feel sad, because she captured this moment and you know that it's all changed. Jon Savage perfectly encapsulated this in his photos of London in the '70s, the empty streets and corrugated fencing: they're deeply melancholic. Sometimes I would return to places that were interesting to me, for example, Finsbury Park cruising grounds, because I would often take pictures when I wasn't meeting guys. But whenever I went back solely to take photographs it was never quite the same.

JH: What's the difference between taking and looking at photographs as a way to remember or record a particular moment and your specific memory of that moment? Because memory is fallible, so even if we think we remember an event or a person accurately, a photographic image – being more objective – could undermine that memory.

MS: Memory and longing is something we project onto an image. The photographic image is rooted in the time and place that it was taken – it is fixed to that specific moment. Whereas a painting can appear to always seem in the present, because it's been divorced from the exact point in time it originally refers to; it has a more universal quality. I paint wet into wet, and although I love colour, sometimes it can be too attention-grabbing, so I like to keep it subtle by adding white to all the colours I work with. This creates a milky or hazy quality to the surface, which perhaps reveals that I'm painting from the past, even if I'm not intentionally trying to make the image look worn out.

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It's not healthy always looking back to the past, but we have a strong desire to remember. I don't know exactly who said it, but I read this quote in *Fugitive Days* by Bill Ayres where someone said that "remembering is a way of forgetting". It's a very romantic book even though he's recounting some quite horrific events. That quote has always stuck in my head, because it's definitely possible to use remembering as a way of working through things, as a cathartic process, as a way of letting go.