

Tony Swain
The Shorter Alphabet
Aird's Lane
11/07—22/08/2015

Tony Swain's paintings primarily occur on the surface of sheets of newspaper. Using this material support as a space in which to reconfigure and overpaint the original content, Swain replaces, blends, and obscures printed images with painted ones. His paintings weave together fantastical scenes and representations through a method that encompasses image repetition, multiple layers of paint over the printed page, and a stitching together of newspaper pieces to create extraordinary, fragmented compositions. Some of the imagery encountered in Swain's paintings includes landscapes, cityscapes, seascapes and interiors, alongside more abstract configurations, generated from the expectation of narrative. In each, an equilibrium between the painted scene and the newspaper's original content is reached - allowing the registration marks, colour bars and the printed text from the verso of the page to be left partially visible within the painting. Swain simultaneously uses the newspaper's photographs as key points for embellishment and painted images - 'a synthesis of document and imagination, external fact and internal thought'.¹

For *The Shorter Alphabet* Swain has produced several new paintings on pieced newspaper, following on from two recent solo presentations at the Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead and Kunstverein Freiburg.

Using his paintings as its touchstone and inspiration, the following text (an excerpt from Isla Leaver-Yap's 'Reading The Event: Notes on the Work of Tony Swain', 2012) is a collection of simultaneously recorded observations, short and long, that emerge from reflecting upon the relationship between painting and printing. These two processes, often distinguished by their differences to one other, are instead discussed in terms of how they might abrade together in a productive friction, and how their juxtaposition might generate multiple and perhaps unlikely points of connection.

The painted page

Key to understanding Tony Swain's work is that it is not painting on canvas, but painting on a page. Unlike the definitive singularity of a canvas, a page is part of a narrative sequence, a member of a quire. Newspaper is a material that asks us not just to look at the image but read it. Implied, in turn, is the notion that if it can be read then perhaps the image has indeed been written.

Swain's overpaintings begin from an initial detail found within the original newspaper, rather than by a preconceived composition imposed upon the page arbitrary to its original printed content. In this sequential structure, images follow images. The unfolding scene, ribbon-like and serpentine in its process of becoming, is constructed akin to Gertrude Stein's notion of language, where 'one word and another word next to the other word [is] always being chosen'.²

That the image might be treated as a text (and, by extension, that painting not always be considered in alterity with printing) should not be surprising. Indeed, the two elements collide throughout the period of Modernism with frequency, from the cubism of Pablo Picasso and George Braque, to the collages of Max Ernst, where such techniques were further constellated and embellished by the coming of Pop Art and the pluralism of postmodernism. And while one can also move in backward direction and find rich points of image/text interconnection in the role of ornamented text in illuminated manuscripts, let us nonetheless be particular about the material support upon which Tony Swain's images are constructed: newspaper.

Newspaper is the printed page at its most functional: thin enough to hold ink, light enough to carry, cheap enough to mass-produce, broad enough to read. But there is something 'off' about seeing paint on the printed page. The manual application of paint overlaying mechanical patterns admits the jarring relationship between human touch and machine. As if to acknowledge the oddness of its ornamentation, Swain's paint refuses entirely to cohere to the low-grade paper: it puckers and wrinkles; it summons up a strangeness in the image. That the translucency of the paper reveals not

¹ Isla Leaver-Yap, 'Reading The Event: Notes on the Work of Tony Swain', in *Tony Swain: Narrative Deficiencies Throughout*, published in 2012 by The Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh, pp. 43-45.

² Gertrude Stein, *Look at me now and here I am: writings and lectures, 1911-1945*, Ed. Patricia Meyerowitz, London: Peter Owen 2004, p. 42.

only the lightness of the artist's gestural strokes but also the verso of the page is testament to the presence of the 'printedness' of the page - a printedness that, when painted, appears veiled rather than completely concealed from view.

Painted, the page still hangs on to the residues of longing to be read, a habit seemingly hardwired into the materiality of the printed page. But this new reading must take place in a visual vocabulary. In its creative misuse, Swain's painted image wilfully inhabits a form that antagonises its material support, making that antagonism part of its subject matter, its exhibition.

A consideration of rhythm in text and image

By the sixteenth century, the need for mnemonic devices to faithfully preserve elements of collective memory had diminished due to the rise in printing and literacy. Use of cadence, rhythm, repetition and other forms of memory devices was replaced by comprehensive illustration both descriptive and diagrammatic.³ The printed image began to overtake the oral word. Mnemonic devices slowly lost their use and coherency; they were transformed into dead metaphors, nonsense rhymes and incantatory rituals where function metamorphosed into mythic gesture, artefact. Like abandoned titles, they lacked a context, a clue of their formation. As they became symbol, the uses of rhyme and cadence were transmuted into the medium of imagery, the newly literate visuality.

Ébauche and étude

Traditionally, the process of image-making and the precursor to much painting is the form of the rough outline, the sketch. And within this classic context, the sketch comprised two forms: the *étude*, a study of the subject that acted as an observational record; and the *ébauche*, an initial compositional draft that served to translate the artist's initial idea for a composition into a more elaborated version. Put simply, where the *étude* serves as a mere document of reality, moving outwards from the artist, the *ébauche* is a record of the imagination that synthesises what one has received within the mind.⁴

Responding to Paul Nash's painting *Event on the Downs*, 1934, art critic EH Ramsden noted, "It is not the painting of a landscape that concerns the artist, but the transcription of a mood."⁵ Here, Ramsden's emphasis is less on Nash's attempt to create a painted copy of the physical landscape, and more the way in which he appears to translate the idea of what takes place within that site into image as one might try to record a dream. This is the imaginative transcription of an event unfolding, it is the painting of an image reflected in the mind's eye.

While Nash's *Event on the Downs* prioritises the formalisation of the *ébauche* as a finished artwork, the paintings of Tony Swain describe a fluid movement between the two types of sketch. The latter's work takes the material subject as the primary apparatus through which to present the field of painting (where both the newspaper's materiality and its printed content are prerequisite triggers for the development of a painted image in the abstract). His paintings seek to draw the real and surreal into dialogue with one another; both states are made present, contingent on each other for meaning.

The consequence of such a dialogue is that the generated images are a lyrical reimagining of the printed page as a subject in possession of an unconscious desire, a page that dreams of itself beyond the confines of its literal definition. An imaginary document, the artwork is revealed to be in possession of an auratic potential, an abstraction that is an exhibition of desire.

Swain collapses the ephemeral, fleeting newspaper image with the flash of the internal mind. The process of painting extends the duration of that flash. Taking the initial printed detail as a starting point for the development of a painting, the artist's images find the breaches, the jumping-off points from the reality of the printed page. His images tug and unpick the newspaper's imagery, expanding its hallucinatory qualities as it dreams of itself as image.

Images dictated by print

At the dawn of the printing revolution, the rigidity of typographical possibilities within the standard printing press directly affected the production of imagery; the machine dictated the means by which images might be created, reappropriated and comprehended.⁶ Printed images, for example, did not proliferate with the same speed and variety as the printed word. In the Nuremberg Chronicle, 1493, a woodblock print of Mantua was reused to represent Verona. And later, in that same chronicle, we see an illustration serving as a portrait for two different men, Baldus and Lorenzo Valla. Visual cliché expanded as a consequence of a dearth of new imagery, and placed urgency on the need for new visual vocabularies.

³ Elizabeth L Eisenstein, *The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 98.

⁴ Peter Galassi, *Before Photography*, New York: MoMA, 1981, p. 20.

⁵ EH Ramsden, 'Paul Nash: Surrealism in Landscape', *Country Life*, 2 January 1942, p. 28.

⁶ Elizabeth L Eisenstein, *The Printing Press As An Agent Of Change*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980, p. 255.

Given the rigidity of the image, and the rise of cliché, there is a sense in which the image is a highly resistant element. It possesses wholeness. Irreducible to the same extent as moveable type, the image refuses to be derailed quite as easily as text and, even in its reappropriation, an image can't seem to let go of as much context as a word or even a phrase. It exhibits its origins yet.

Print and the event

'Press': it is not by accident that we use the same word for both the people and the mechanism involved in newspaper publication. With 'press' there is no differentiation between the authors and the machine. In each case, the word describes the effect of the contact that occurs between contingent elements — a collision between things that generates the newspaper, a fugitive pattern of information made material, developed under great pressure.

As if by alchemy, the press' application of ink transforms blank pages into the depiction of an event. This is content as event - the pronouncements of things made newsworthy for the reason that they lack the character of the pedestrian, the everyday, the banal. The press constructs the newspaper as an everyday product that nonetheless denies 'everydayness' by only choosing to print the remarkable event. As Maurice Blanchot notes with a certain horror, 'In the everyday, everything is everyday; in the newspaper, everything is strange, sublime, abominable'.⁷

The press does not merely find events that take place, but in its dissemination, the press *takes up* time and generates history. In its process of printing, newspapers not only make events for public dissemination, but they also put events in the 'just-past'. This just-past is the not-quite-history, an event whose recorded unfolding is still tangible through its ripples. In its daily reportage, the press dictates the length of an event to those who do not participate in its coming.

Painting, meanwhile, is a preservation. The presence of a painted image serves to encourage contemplation without the urgency of the fugitive event. Indeed, painting requires us to return to its presence over time. It has the capacity to conceive of new lines of time⁸, in order that its meaning might resonate through history and acquire different meanings, experiences.

Swain's paintings repurpose the 'eventfulness' of the press. Speaking only in terms of its formal qualities, his paintings are full of flat light. Without any adherence to single point perspective (that might mobilize the logical patterning of shadow), his paintings produce a vacuum of time; these collaged viewpoints do not produce an image with multiple temporalities, but rather generate an image of time without end. The architecture of the painted space occurs outside of time, providing a different route to the strange, sublime, abominable - an event in an unreasonable space.

- Excerpt from Isla Leaver-Yap, 'Reading The Event: Notes on the Work of Tony Swain', in *Tony Swain: Narrative Deficiencies Throughout*, published in 2012 by The Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh, pp. 43-45.

Tony Swain (born.1967, Lisburn, Northern Ireland) lives and works in Glasgow. Swain graduated from The Glasgow School of Art in 1990

Selected solo presentations include: *Undetailed Progress*, BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead (2015); *Other Planets are Available*, Kunstverein Freiburg (2015); *Drowned Dust, Sudden Word*, The Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh (2012); *Afterwards in Pictures*, The Modern Institute, Glasgow (2011); *Recollection Has Not Been Mentioned*, Herald St, London (2010); *Temperature is here too*, Art Now, Tate Britain, London (2009); and *Impure Passports*, Inverleith House, Edinburgh (2008). Swain was one of the artists representing Scotland in Venice as part of the 52nd Venice Biennale in 2007. Recent group exhibitions include: *Continue Without Losing Consciousness*, DCA, Dundee (2014); *A Picture Show*, GOMA, Glasgow (2013); *Transmitter/Receiver*, Hayward Gallery, London (2011-2013, touring to mima Soundspace, Middlesbrough, The Lightbox, Woking, and Tullie House, Carlisle); and *Le Drapeau Noir*, Glasgow (2010).

⁷ Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1993, p. 243.

⁸ See Claire Colebrook, Gilles Deleuze, London: Routledge, 2002, p. 62.