Finding Time: How it is Made Visual Artists Newsletter

Brian Fay

Technological University Dublin, brian.fay@tudublin.ie

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Finding Time

BRIAN FAY OUTLINES THE PROCESSES AND CONCEPTS UNDERPINNING HIS PRACTICE

Within recent years my art practice has been almost exclusively drawing based – using drawing as a vehicle to record and mark time. My current work is focused on the cracked surfaces of historical paintings and distressed film stock from early silent cinema. The intention being to record the effect that time and history has had on their materials and supports.

I arrived at drawing through a process of stripping down to the essentials of exactly what interested me in terms of looking at and making art. Removing everything else and focusing on line enabled me to see more clearly the areas and issues that I could concentrate on and work with. I began to work on process-led repetitive drawings – reiterating lines within a given formal constraint; and where time was containing competing hierarchies of time and memory – between the visible cracks onto a layer in Photoshop and then removed the original image. The result was a latticework of lines of different width, density and weight. What emerged was evidence of the gradual deterioration of the original painted image and object over time. It seemed that you were no longer just looking at an image of a painting; but rather a recording of time’s action since the painting was made. The digital drawing was then projected onto paper and redrawn. For each of finished pieces in this body of work, there are at least two layers beneath the finished surface of the work, showing the time and work within. The drawings that I have developed range from small works on A4 or smaller sheets of paper, to wall drawings and supports. As this collaboration continued I started to look at other forms denoting time that could be examined through line. During this period I noticed the cover of an Irish Times magazine depicting a detailed reproduction of the face of the Mona Lisa. It was used for a feature on David Hockney’s book Secret Knowledge. Hockney, with his collaborator Charles Falco outlined the arguments that artists like Vermeer, Holbein and Van Eyck would use projections or camera obscura to transfer images to the painting surface. The use of optical technologies seemed to have a resonance with my own working process, which had increasingly shifted to using digital technology to inform analogue outcomes.

I kept returning to the ‘craquelure’ on the face of the Mona Lisa and began to look at methods that would allow me to most accurately record them. I scanned a reproduction of the Mona Lisa and traced all the visible cracks onto a layer in Photoshop and then removed the original image. The result was a latticework of lines of different width, weight and density. What emerged was evidence of the gradual deterioration of the original painted image and object over time. It seemed that you were no longer just looking at an image of a painting; but rather a recording of time’s action since the painting was made. The digital drawing was then projected onto paper and redrawn. For each of finished pieces in this body of work, there are at least two stages of drawing. And as the drawings exist in a reproducible digital format, they can potentially have infinite ‘other’ existences. The process of projection has allowed me to experiment with issues scale, space and context. The drawings that I have developed range from small works on A4 or smaller sheets of paper, to wall drawings and animations of up to three or four metres square. I have realised some drawings a couple of times – and in each context they manifest impresonless or ‘virtual’ lines. The title being a reference to both a spider’s web as well as the phenomenon of the World Wide Web – a juxtaposition of a spider’s manual creation of an intricate web of fine lines in real-time, with the global connections and networks made the virtual space and time of the digital realm.

This show coincided with the commencement of Art-Watching, a collaborative devised by myself, artist writer Niamh Ann Kelly and designer Brenda Derrymo in association with Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane and The National Gallery, London. A limited edition book being published in association with Dublin Institute of Technology, and will consist of digital drawings and texts reflecting the collections at The Hugh Lane Gallery and The National Gallery, London. An earlier manifestation of Art-Watching appeared as a supplement in CIRCA magazine (issue 116 2006). We included an essay, Watching Over Art – Thoughts on Art and Art Criticism, and a selection of digital drawings responding to specific works at the Hugh Lane that will shortly appear in the Art-Watching book. Secondly, and specifically for the supplement, we invited 12 art writers, critics, historians curators and conservators to submit a short reflection on the subject of ‘watching art’.

I’ve been undertaking further research into the subject of craquelure – in particular how it is recorded and imaged with conservation technologies. I was fortunate to speak with Joanna Shapard, Head of Conservation at The Hugh Lane and the set me in the right direction in order to track down the relevant sources. Increasingly the sophistication and accuracy of iconographic imagery and infrared photography is offering conservation new avenues to explore – in particular the x-ray. I have started to incorporate images derived from x-ray analyses of paintings into my drawings – thus tracing a further element of time into the works – revealing of the layers beneath the finished surface of the work, showing the time before the painting was completed.