Finding Time: How it is Made Visual Artists Newsletter

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Finding Time

BRIAN FAY OUTLINES THE PROCESSES AND CONCEPTS UNDERPINNING HIS PRACTICE

IN 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 within. I began to work on process-led repetitive drawings – reiterating lines within a given formal constraint; and where time was revealed through the act of drawing. While this was a necessary stage, it became somewhat reductive, and so I began to look at ways of making the line refer to something outside of itself – some thing or form, whereby time would already be present and referenced.

Sometimes, when you are using reduced means, it can be the little things that can have a major affect. I noticed that if I broke up a line it began to resemble the dots and dashes of Morse code. At the time – February 1999, Morse had just been officially declared a dead language – having been superseded by GPS tracking systems. On time – February 1999, Morse had just been officially declared a dead language – having been superseded by GPS tracking systems. On

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 times 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, format, they can potentially have infinite ‘other’ existences. 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'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 Shergan, 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 infra-red 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 analysis 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.

Conceptually, I find myself returning to Henri Bergson’s notions of time as simultaneity of both ‘presents’ and ‘pasts’. Edmund Husserl, developed this idea further with his treatment of experience time as containing competing hierarchies of time and memory – between recollection, retention and pre-ention. This notion of time as a multi-faceted experience seems to correspond well with the increased layering of line and imagery in my drawings – and it certainly informed my thinking for my most recent show ‘Some Time Now’.

This facilitated a shift in my choice of sources, while I was still using works by artists such as Vermeer, I extended my references to include 19th century modernist painters such as Mondrian and Malevich as well as film stills from early silent Buster Keaton films. My aim now is to add new work to this show as it tours, that will particular relevance to each specific venue, but just like the content of the work it is all a matter of ‘finding’ the time.

Brian Fay