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2014-04-25

## Brian Fay contribution to the Lismore Castle Arts Public Discussion- Painting As A Dream, Friday 25th of April, 2014

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### Recommended Citation

Fay, B. Brian Fay contribution to the Lismore Castle Arts Public Discussion- Painting As A Dream, Friday 25th of April, 2014. Lismore Castle Arts, Waterford, Public Discussion- Painting As A Dream, Friday 25th of April, 2014.

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**Brian Fay contribution to the Lismore Castle Arts Public  
Discussion- Painting As A Dream, Friday 25<sup>th</sup> of April, 2014.**

Public panel discussion at Lismore Castle Arts on the role of painting in contemporary practice, with contributions from Brian Fay (D.I.T.), Christina Kennedy (I.M.M.A.), James Merrigan (+billion- journal) and Katy Moran (artist).

<http://www.lismorecastlearts.ie/index.php/events>

Invited to respond to the question - What is the role of painting in contemporary art practice?

For me there are two quick responses and a third slightly longer one.

The first quick response is a quote from Wilhelm Sasnal himself – ‘ painting has its own space in culture – as badminton has in sport’! Discuss that one yourselves, or I might try and return to it briefly.

The second is, and paraphrasing the curator Katharine Stout of the Drawing Room and now the ICA, London when she spoke at the Glucksman’s seminar related to the *Motion Capture* drawing show; she said that artists who practice drawing ‘ *it is how they use drawing that collectively defines the medium*’. The same could be seen for painting – that tautologically what contemporary painters do is what defines the role of contemporary painting.

The longer response, in the time that is available here, is linked to two further issues for me. Do we perceive painting as a single activity that actively and self-consciously needs to seek and define a role for itself - and if so in relation to what? Or does painting get on with its own business (whatever that might be categorised as) and de facto that is its role.

Maybe underlying these issues is the notion of paintings insistence. By this I mean it can be seen as a contingent and adaptable set of systems that has the capacity to attune its own traditional material limitations and expand them into other objects and processes (e.g. Wade Guyton etc). Or, to translate/transliterate pre-existing objects, phenomena and images into its

own painterly vocabulary. The latter is perhaps what we see in Wilhelm Sasnal's work and here I am thinking of sources from private family photographs, historical and contemporary images of and from conflict, pre-existing artworks (Seurat) etc. Importantly now, these choices can be seen to operate without a particular hierarchy, or authorial claim for the artist over the source of the photographs for instance.

Both of these models can be seen to be representative of what David Joselit describes in *Painting beside itself* (2009, October) as painting being a form that is marked by constant transition rather than rigidity. As in both models set up relationships with political, social, historical networks and locate painting as both an individual object but also as an element in a broader discursive context.

For me this insistence is underpinned by painting's capacity for self-reflexivity that defines its position now. While I acknowledge that self-reflexivity is not exclusive to painting, I think it is something that can usefully drive it forward and go towards defining a role. It is also important to think of this as a property that is distinct from a limiting self-referentiality, which was perhaps a condition that dominated much of modernist and indeed some post-modernist painting.

By self-reflexivity I mean painting can now ask - what is it today that a painter can paint? And what can painting do that reflects what it is to be in the world today? I don't see this as a manifesto for painting to be seen as a form of reportage, rather as an understanding and evaluation of the implications of its own history and that of the history and possible readings of its sources.

In many cases what a painting can be seen to do is to respond to something that has gone before. By this I mean an event is recorded by a photograph that is then used as the source of a painting. The painting as an activity or artefact is one that comes late, or belatedly to its source. In that it carries with it its own attendant history and can be seen as an indexical activity that can (obviously not exclusively) be an image that is created by the hand, creating a certain temporal reading. In this context contemporary painting can be viewed

as having multiple dialogues both internally with itself and externally with its sources.

This dialogical relationship with the past is useful and has a part to play in whatever role it might have in the future. Not in terms of a romantic or nostalgic view but to understand how it can inform the present. In this sense painting can be seen now as anachronistic- the bringing together and presentation of different events or points in time. It also makes we wonder to be contemporary - does a painting that is not painted now can it be considered contemporary? I was recently struck forcibly by a painting by Pierro Della Francesca *St Jerome and a donor*. This small painting on a wood panel depicts two figures, the saint seated and the donor kneeling penitently beside him in front of a city landscape. The highly finished and vibrant paint surface was framed on both sides by the slivers of wood from the panel which were visible, showing the layers of paint beneath that contribute to the final surface. The piece itself was behind a sheet of glass bolted in relief, inches in front of the painting onto the wall. It appeared insistently vital. What it depicts, how it is presented and how it reads are all anachronistic.

For me this anachronistic property is paintings strength. If we consider it as an activity that is discursive, that enters into a network of images and intentions its status of anachronism is useful. Again Joselit's suggests that in terms of the artwork as an element in and of a system that:

*Sometimes it might be better to use an outmoded medium, like painting, to think about multitudes of images or populations of images in some way.*

So in concluding and thinking about Wilhelm Sasnal's earlier mention of badminton and painting. I note that Badminton supposedly has a history of over 2,000 years. While initially known as Battledore, then Shuttlecock, Poon and since it's christening by the Duke of Beaufort as Badminton in the mid 1800s has proved a resilient and transitive activity itself. So perhaps in this designation there is indeed more to this relationship than immediately meets the eye.

**End.**

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