

Contemporary Painting

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By: Kate Brundrett, Graham Crowley

GRAHAM CROWLEY IS ONE of the most distinguished living painters in the UK today. As the deadline closes on entry to the John Moores 2010 competition, Jobs and Opps Editor Kate Brundrett asked him for his views on the competition's significance and for his 'take' on the state of contemporary art practice.

How important is the John Moores to painters?

If a Martian turned up to your studio and said, "Tell me what's been happening in post-war British painting." You could do a lot worse than to show him some of your John Moores catalogues. It would give him a pretty good idea of what had been going on.

Looking at the Moores and the Walker as a project, you've got one of the most comprehensive histories of post war British painting. Whereas, when you look at the Tate collection over the last ten or twenty years it's become increasingly a reflection of the market. There are fewer and fewer paintings that have any kind of influence on the discourse of practice, and certainly very few paintings that have any political kind of cogency or subject matter.

With the Moores, you've got a history there that is totally parallel, another history, and a more comprehensive reflection of post-war British painting than just about anywhere else.

With prizes like the Turner we're all aware of the influence that a few dealers exert. The John Moores is relatively free of these influences. This leaves the way open for some of the more engaging, innovative, independent and intelligent voices.

So is there a shift from the market being that benchmark?

Because of the way the John Moores is conceived, and due to its 'distance' from the market, it has meant that it's more independent. Its also been going for 50 years and has established a continuity. Galleries like the Tate seem to have become embroiled in the corporate politics that come with sponsorship. That's the principle difference, structurally and politically. We're at the threshold of a huge transition, where unfortunately sponsorship is lagging behind, and the state isn't even in the picture.

The other thing about the Moores is its diversity and its pluralism. It is free to follow tendencies and developments as they appear – it's an endorsement of its independence.

I wonder if it's an example of things to come... ?

I hope so!

Nobody I know about talks about the market (as represented in the media) or discusses the work of artists like Damien Hirst in any critical manner. It's seen purely as a construct of the market and the media, and that's fine.

In the context of celebrity, media and capital, the John Moores has managed to circumvent that toxic triangle, which has hijacked the visual arts, as it has hijacked all other forms of media and the arts. We're not a protected species in that respect.

The interests that characterise the John Moores are based around a discourse, a 'community of practice'; the painters, practitioners, critics, reviewers, theorists and historians. It's tempered by a sense of collective enterprise.

Can you see this elsewhere? Is John Moores the only example?

Speaking as someone who was shortlisted for the Jerwood Painting Prize six years ago, I think the current Jerwood Contemporary Painters, started in 2006 is one of the best platforms for emergent and new painting. It uses the 'intelligence' of a group of selectors who are in touch with contemporary practice and developments. Their primary purpose is to showcase work by artists that might not otherwise be seen.

The John Moores has been very good at reflecting tendencies and shifts in post-war British painting. If you look at the John Moores in the mid 70s you see that the first appropriationist paintings shown in Britain were shown there and were widely discussed not only in the media, but also in art schools around Britain. Within the next five or ten years, appropriation became so academically fashionable that it became almost mandatory.

In 1993 Peter Doig won the Moores with a stunning painting entitled '*Blotter*' and it drew mass attention. The fact that Peter won it was an affirmation of the significance of his work. It was the beginning of a massive recognition. There was also wide critical peer group discussion, which translated into a market situation. Nowadays, you'd be hard put to see it that way round.

Institutions such as Tate are entwined with the market – the idea of dealers creating ideas of significance and importance seems improbable. Some years ago a dealer told me that he thought that 'so and so is an important artist, because his work is becoming very expensive'. I disagreed. His reply was that nobody's interested in what painters thought. His work is expensive in the marketplace, and that's what was important. You have to wonder why people are prepared to pay £10m for lame knock-offs of Bacons. It's not irony, it's just shopping. The skull, the bling... these rich pikey's will buy any crap you put in front of them.

Do you think there will be a backlash – has it already started to happen?

History is reckoned to be cyclical. You hear people talk about artists like

Elizabeth Peyton, claiming that their work is a critique of celebrity culture. It's not! It's a kind of jerk-off of art celebrity. It's an affirmation of the interdependence of commodification and celebrity. Most of the celebrities she paints are pretty mainstream stuff, like the Rolling Stones. It's an orthodox, lazy view of celebrity – she's not 'challenging' the status quo she is just bathing in it, basking in it in a reflected glory.

The YBA thing – the tragic pictures by Damien Hirst, which are such an embarrassment when you think it was all wall furniture. The oligarchs, the footballers, entertainers and WAGS, all those that currently dominate mass culture seem to have one thing in common, they're poorly educated. A democracy of the dumb and the greedy. Rich people generally do a lot of shopping. They buy a whole load of stuff. Some of that stuff is marketed like art, but is simply 'wall furniture'. As Robert Hughes said, "They buy with their ears". It's like a misplaced form of eulogy. We've come to rely upon the word 'like' too much. We've managed to conflate shopping with notions of judgement. I don't 'like' art, but I 'like' that t-shirt. This has come about because of a general intellectual 'impoverishment', aggravated by a widely held and profound set of misunderstandings about art. The most popular is the assertion that 'art is a matter of taste'. Art is not 'a matter of taste', but shopping is, providing you've got the money.

There's a growing resistance to this market-led phenomena. During the judging of the John Moores 25 there was an awareness of these forces and they were met with healthy scepticism. It has already taken hold.

You were a John Moores judge last time – what's it like?

It was great, I really enjoyed it. I was a member of a really good team. They're all really savvy people; they know what's going on. There wasn't any dead wood on the panel, there wasn't anyone being carried. You could see something was emerging, because we knew what was going on. On a more personal note, I'm always aware how important the John Moores has been in my career. I want others to have that opportunity.

How did you manage the selection and arrive at a prizewinner?

We went through it, again and again, many, many times. There was a great deal of intelligent and reasoned discussion. I think we must have spent the best part of two weeks on the selection. It was a rigorous and exhaustive process.

In 2008 there was a record submission of 3,322. You've got to ask why that was? It might have been because the recession was beginning to bite. Pragmatically and ideologically, the market and the whole conditioning in which painting is being made is changing. It might also have been because potential entrants thought that the panel was made up of practicing artists. There was great diversity. Just look at the prizewinners, all five of them were exemplary in their different ways. However, a sure fire way to screw up a competition is to invite celebrities to be judges. Credibility and quality go right out the window. I know, as I've been a judge on such a panel. There's nothing

more depressing than listening to some celebrity letting you know that they 'wouldn't give it house room' or 'it's all a matter of taste'. To challenge such complacency leaves one open to charges of elitism and cultural snobbery. This was the antithesis of that; we shared our enthusiasm for, our analysis of and our appreciation of the work. I'm still very proud of that exhibition.

Recently I got the opportunity to select an exhibition of contemporary British painting at the Highlanes Gallery in Drogheda, entitled *'Precious Things'*. In the text to the catalogue I write about these issues.

In brief, I assert that not only are we all post cubist painters but some are post-conceptual painters. The John Moores of 2008 was, an exhibition of (mainly) post conceptual painting. I use the term to describe painting that has acknowledged and accepted the legacy of conceptual art.

Every year some presenter asks people if the Turner Prize will be an endorsement of painting or conceptual art? This is a false dichotomy, it's as simple as that. Conceptual art was epoch making, a whole paradigm shift, an historic change in the mindset. I was an art student in 1968, it was one of the most exciting, challenging and innovative times imaginable.

What's going on in your practice at present?

Where to start.

My painting tends to reflect social change, from an appropriationist/punk aesthetic in the mid 1970s to a rather more polemical response to Thatcherism in the 1980s.

The 1970s were eventually dominated by appropriation. It became problematic because it was essentially formalist, and academic and I left myself out as it were. I'd always wanted to make art about what it was like to be alive rather than what it was like to make art. I began to favour a more 'vernacular' kind of art.

I then painted a series of domestic pictures – deliberately domestic pictures about the every-day.

I employed a kind of anthropomorphism to paint 'still lives' and interiors. I went on to paint larger, more politically motivated pictures in the Thatcher years that reflected the very painful transformation of British society, paintings like *'No Such Thing'*, which is a direct quotation from the old girl herself, "There's no such thing as society". In a sense I think a lot of people these days subscribe to that belief, I think it's lamentable and deeply depressing, the abandonment of socialist values. I then made paintings about being a parent, pictures like *'The Poetics of Space'*, which won joint second prize at the John Moores in 1987 and *'No Such Thing'*, which was exhibited at the John Moores in 1992.

The difference between these paintings is important. I went to college in

1968, when the 'dominant discourse' was conceptualism. If you insisted on painting you were thought to be a reactionary.

But there was such a consensus about the 'death of painting', that people like myself abandoned any attempt at institutional approval. We wanted to be so radical that we couldn't gain approval. Today, that sounds like vanity or just plain delusion. Other, more overtly 'situationist' strategies influenced our thinking. Installation, environmentalism and video art rapidly created the same diseases as painting had over the previous 500 years but it took them 400 days or something, and it was about the discourse at any one time. I do believe painting is a discourse – much more than just an activity.

This has led me to the contemporary set of paintings which reference post-cubist painting. I've always admired the work of Stuart Davis and David Milne. The central dichotomy of painting for me is the painting as 'window on the world' and the painting as 'the thing itself'. Since Manet, I think it's mandatory that painting, for me, has that duality about it. It's a central aspect of my philosophy of painting.

By the late 1970s authenticity had become problematic. The only way painting could be considered critically 'relevant' was by adopting 'second order meaning'. This was one of the primary strategies of early post modernism. As the idea spread into common use, it rapidly declined into irony. The lazy, middlebrow and apolitical cop-out that it has become today.

Since then my painting and that of a lot of others, has been attempting to discover a credible and legitimate idiom that can support a full range of expression, without seeming nostalgic or arch. This has meant that I now look to synthesis for innovation and change. That's why I find Stuart Davis so relevant. It's not so much the quality of his work – it's clearly uneven and sometimes trite – it's the trajectory of his career. It's no surprise to discover that he was the 'founding father' of Pop Art and one of America's first modernists.

I've always been very suspicious of a didactic or literal adherence to 'theory' in painting. The only 'theory' to have any lasting resonance is the 'picture theory' of Wittgenstein.

Your newer paintings are so different in style, how did they evolve?

They are different because my work is not wrapped up or guided by any 'product identity'. I've heard people say 'well how can you do that, you betray your market identity... ' and you think, wow if that's all they're worried about then tough.

I'm now painting 'romantic' landscapes. They're the work I 'need' to make now, not the work I ought to make, or even the work I 'want' to make. It's only right that they should be different to those that I made when I was 26, I'm a different person.

You've got to work with what you've got. When I started work on the

monochromatic flower paintings I made a conscious decision to employ an archaic method. I wanted to make paintings that were luminous. It would be highly laborious. I wanted my method to be the antithesis of the 'keep it open, keep it free' mantra of a non-threatening and ailing modernism that had become facile. It's worth pointing out that by this time the term 'avant-garde' had become a trim option of a mid-range Mercedes.

I think I still had a sense of political conscience. I chose Flower Painting as a genre as it seemed the most oblique. It would invariably be exquisitely crafted. Colour was widely assumed to be an expression or affirmation of joy. I thought this was a convention of painterly rhetoric. The thing I took issue with is that the colours were the idiom, the rhetoric of celebration – red, yellow and blue – that is, we're happy, we're on top of things – we're all cool and it's champers all-round. So I took the idea of celebration. The idea that colour equals celebration equals confidence. I wanted to make intelligent and sensual paintings, that are more of a lamentation than a celebration, by painting them in these smoky monochromatic tones. The ambiguity was a celebration of the physical, of the tactile, but at the same time eschewing or refuting the values of what I saw as conventional bourgeois values of the acquisitive. I wanted to paint something approaching a 'memento mori'; an acknowledgement of mortality. Flowers were beginning to appear everywhere as expressions of public mourning, particularly after the death of Princess Diana. Flower painting also had a dreadful reputation amongst artists and theoreticians. It was regarded as the preferred genre of the amateur. It was 'dumb'. I found this irresistible, in a perverse way.

I can't think about any other thing that I'd rather do with my life than paint. As a child, growing up in the 1950s I grew up in an uncultured, coarse and often violent environment. That is, until I went to art school in 1968. Education changed everything.

I still love painting. There's no two ways about it, I think about it all the time. I eat, sleep and breathe painting. I don't like it. Liking, as I say, is something to do with shopping.

Are you yourself entering John Moores this year?

Yes, of course I've applied again this year. I hope there's something on the CD that I've sent in and that they get to see an image, and then I hope that I get through to part two. That's all you can do. As an entrant you have to be stoic. Don't get suicidal because you didn't get the judges approval. Move on. I'm sure your readers are familiar with this experience.

There have been times in the past when I've looked over a list of judges and thought I don't stand a cat in hell's chance. You have to think strategically. It's expensive; you've got the work, the transport, the entry fee. Above all though is the emotional investment. I've made masses of bad commercial and strategic decisions during my career. You have to treat the only other resource you've got – your time – as precious.

Do you have any advice for students and new graduates?

They're going to have to work more collectively.

A healthy, diverse, multicultural, society is predicated upon by dissent – let's start making art of dissent again. In order to survive within a mixed economy, you've got to organise galleries, workspaces and education. Do it collectively. Don't wait for the state or business to do it. 'Go and do it'.

You said in 2008 in *Art Monthly* (and *The Guardian*) that "something systemic is wrong with the way in which the education of fine artists is managed". Do you think the situation has improved?

In 2008 I wrote a letter to *Art Monthly* and what followed was an extraordinary and lengthy correspondence on the *Art Monthly* website.

I'd advise anyone thinking of going to art school in London to Google 'Sandra Kemp meets angry students' on You Tube. I think we're really at the end of this market led thing. I've seen it all; as a parent, as an educationalist and as an artist. We need a radical rethink. We could start by restoring choice to students in London, and break up the University of the Arts as a matter of priority.

***The Irish Times* quotes you as saying 'art schools are worth practically nothing if dissent is marginalised'.**

Yes. I also said 'what is the use of art schools if they only certificate and do not educate?' This for me is the more immediate problem. I'd like to make sure that all the potential students who are contemplating applying to an art school get an education, and don't spend £10,000 on a certificate that is effectively worthless. In my letter in *Art Monthly*, I say that The Slade and City & Guilds are the two best art schools in London at present. Recently, I've been very impressed by what I've seen as the external examiner on the Visual Islamic and Traditional Art MA at The Prince's School of Traditional Arts. The quality of work this year is great.

Is it getting better?

No, it's getting worse. There are some appalling things going on in society at present. We're being thrust into what's been described as a 'liberal dictatorship'. But, this is where education comes into the equation; it's easier to control a poorly educated proletariat than one that is well educated and sceptical. That's why the state and police have demonised the environmentalists, because they're educated and intelligent.

Where else is the discourse taking place?

London has been and still is the art capital of the world, particularly when you look at the quality of what's going on. There are a lot of things to celebrate. Two remarkable recent examples of artist led projects are *39.london* and *The Rockwell Project*. The quality of painting going on at the moment is exemplary, but unfortunately most of that work is not represented in the media but excluded by news management – the usual, tiresome soufflé of celebrity, capital and PR. There is much more intelligent and dissenting work going on than they'd have you believe.