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JUDITH TUCKER IN CONVERSATION WITH GRAHAM CROWLEY

The idea that conceptual art and painting were in opposition was an entirely false dichotomy spun by the middlebrows of the art press and academe.

Judith Tucker: Your essay, *I Don't Like Art*, ends with the statement “*I may not like art... but I love painting*” which sounds paradoxical but that's not really the case is it?

Graham Crowley: *I Don't Like Art* was an attempt to outline a critical methodology that has enabled me to ‘think better’; to challenge my sense of orthodoxy and habitual ways of thinking. It doesn't matter *what* I like – only *why*. Goethe said that we should “*seek out what is, and not what pleases us.*” My essay was intended to challenge complacency and assumptions about the legitimacy of taste. The days of Berenson and Clark are gone.

Whilst teaching, I became frustrated by tutors and students who, when pressed about their value judgements, would say that it was ultimately because they liked or disliked a thing or notion. It shuts down serious discussion. Art education is a matter of knowledge and judgement and shouldn't be reduced to a matter of taste. A potentially damaging aspect of art education is the way that students seek approval. I feel that a situation in which students are having to constantly second guess has no place in an open and mature form of discourse. I hope that has changed now. My discomfort with the idea of *Art* is particularly acute when it touches on identity.

JT: You refer to yourself as a painter and not an artist. Ideas of *Art*, with a capital ‘A’, imply taste, especially ‘good taste’.

These are, of course, loaded terms and, as you suggest, we all need to be careful of value judgements. The way you talk here invites us to challenge the *status quo*: it invites us to consider who makes what, and for whom, and why and how this is tied into ideas of power – certainly an approach I use in discussion with my own students. The idea of the paradoxical seems to be a significant aspect of your work. For example, you use the ultimate bourgeois medium, oil paint, and somehow manage to use it in an anti-elitist way.

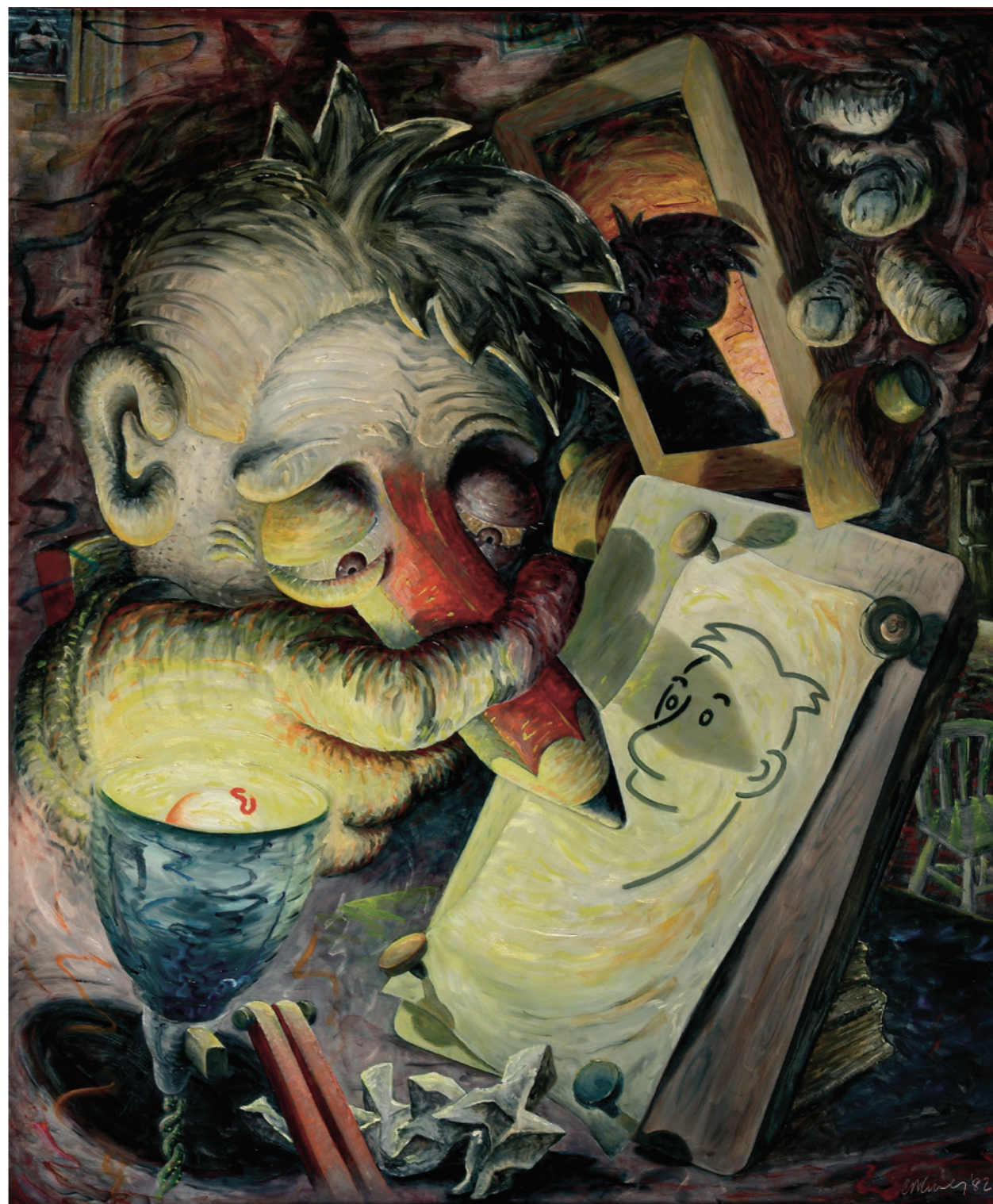
GC: It's the paradoxes that fascinate me – anthropomorphic still lifes and monochromatic flower paintings are just two examples of my obtuse thinking. I'm constantly frustrated and perplexed by my paintings – some are plain irksome – I work against good sense, consensus, and sometimes, reason.

JT: Listening to some of your interviews, I enjoyed the idea that we don't have to defend painting any more.

GC: That's right. It's a level playing field now; levelled, ironically, by conceptual art. I'm adamant that conceptual art was one of the most significant things that happened to painting in the twentieth century, and painting that has embraced that legacy has become better for it: post-conceptual painting.

JT: This idea of contemporary painting, which has taken on board all that conceptual art has to offer and challenges our normalised assumptions of the freighted history of oil painting, chimes with many of your recent works. In another essay you wrote of it as “*the kind of painting which refers to a condition rather than an object. A remembrance of paintings past. Painting as discourse.*” Could you expand?

GC: I'm referring to second order meaning – a major component of postmodernism and appropriation. Appropriationist paintings were regarded as unoriginal. Nowadays, if someone says your work is ‘original’, it's a sign of their ignorance. The condition is cultural –



3B
1982
Oil on canvas
137 x 114 cm

Courtesy of the artist



Head 2
1977
Acrylic on canvas
153 x 92 cm

Courtesy of the artist

the space we intellectually occupy. The term 'remembrance of paintings past' is an appropriationist nod to Fernand Léger whose early work I referred to in paintings like *Head 2* (1977). My paintings at that time were not only described as

lacking in originality, but as nostalgic pastiche – all of which was intentional. It was about facing up to painting's alleged shortcomings (and my own). I was beginning to develop a weakness for the kind of painting that had the power to perplex.

Orthodoxy is by its very nature ubiquitous. Nothing epitomised orthodoxy better than that old 'painting is dead' chestnut. Even the term *appropriation* has now gained an unwarranted respectability. But what fascinated me was the fact that painting could be both behind the curve – that is, reactionary and nostalgic – and ahead of the curve for the painters who seemed to acknowledge the legacy of conceptual art. The idea that conceptual art and painting were in opposition was an entirely false dichotomy spun by the middlebrows of the art press and academe.

JT: It's often easier to think in these sorts of binaries and much harder to understand these notions as being on a continuum. I think of the 70s and 80s, when you were formulating these approaches, as being when there was a major rethink in terms of the effects of modernism on our society, including of course, art and culture. There was a rise in neoliberalism then. So at that time who could you look to for support in your subversive task?

GC: Whilst at the *Royal College*, in the early 70s, I received the most support from student peers, particularly Michael Major and David Wiseman, along with Professor Peter de Francia and tutors Alan Miller and John Golding. On leaving, I got to know the philosopher Richard Wollheim.

As for writers, it has to be John Berger, and then there's Gaston Bachelard's influential *The Poetics of Space* (1957) – I borrowed this as a title for one of my paintings – David Hickey's *Air Guitar* (1997); Richard Wollheim's *Art And Its Objects* (1968) as well as his collection of Adrian Stokes' essays *The Image In*



Flower Arranging 6
1998
Oil on canvas
183 x 152 cm

Courtesy of the artist



Spider with Mushroom Soup
1982
Oil on canvas
122 x 92 cm

Courtesy of the artist

Form (1972), and Suzi Gablik's books *Has Modernism Failed?* (1984), and *The Reenchantment of Art* (1991). I found Ray Monk's biography *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* (1990) utterly inspiring. It wasn't so much a biography of an individual as a history of European thought during the first half of the twentieth century.

JT: Once painting has lost its privileged position, might it then become an act of disobedience? Was painting seen as a provocation?

GC: Absolutely. To paint represented a rejection of a particular kind of modernism and a challenge to the orthodoxy. There are other ways to irritate though: nothing irks conventional thinking more than the idea that esotericism had influenced modernist thought. But that's what happened and it is exactly why theosophy interested me then, just as it had Mondrian, Kandinsky, and Malevich fifty years earlier. The idea that mysticism had influenced the course of modernist painting was considered utterly unacceptable. So much so that it was entirely redacted from mainstream art history. I subsequently discovered the profound influence that the theosophist Rudolf Steiner had had upon Joseph Beuys – and that of Madame Blavatsky upon the thinking of Jackson Pollock and Philip Guston. For them, the esoteric and the political were connected, something that today has become regarded as almost untenable. Latterly, I learned that *Buzzcocks* quoted P. D. Ouspensky on their 7" EP *Spiral Scratch*. I was stunned by how delightfully incongruous that seemed but the extraordinary industrial outfit *Coil* maintained the practice throughout the 80s.

JT: This incongruity reminds me once again of Léger – he was interested in the quotidian and drew on shop window dressing to inform his paintings. In your most recent paintings, it seems you've returned us to some of those values – in a different idiom via some of the ideas



formed in the 70s and 80s – but in a contemporary vernacular.

GC: You're right, the vernacular has always been an important part of my work – in both subject matter and form – whether that be due to the legacy of pop art or plain curiosity about the world around me. I've always been fascinated by different forms of visual language: *style*.

JT: The notion of style sounds as if it's referring back to those appropriationist ideas you mentioned earlier, and aspects of your very recent work confounds our expectations of surface and depth, for example, in your use of local colour in relation to grisaille and glazing. Through your materials and processes, but also through your ostensible subject matter, you subvert the ordinary. I'm thinking of your latest paintings: those depicting a garden, West Cork, or places that you're familiar with, and the idea of working with the local.

GC: Yes, making the familiar unfamiliar. My early paintings rapidly became



Red Terrace
2003
Oil on canvas
114 x 137 cm

Kerry Moon
2019
Oil on canvas
106 x 137 cm

Courtesy of the artist

unsustainable and were followed by work about home and family. I was attracted by the (then) preposterous idea of still life, spurred on by the way in which 'Kitchen Sink' painting of the post-war years had been dismissed. If that wasn't perverse enough, I decided to paint 'against the genre' – to use your term – courting disruption and inviting disapproval. I felt a constant need to expand my vocabulary, and to do that, I set about 'reclaiming' practices that had become obsolete (most significantly, glazing). Academic painting seldom addresses an audience of more than twenty people and I wanted to address a much larger one – and much broader issues. This is one of the reasons that I became involved in site-specific projects during the early 80s. These works were shallow reliefs made from stove-enamelled aluminium. Two still exist: one at Chandler's Ford Library and the other at West Dorset General Hospital. Sadly, a third (which was located at Royal Brompton Hospital Chest Clinic) no longer exists.

JT: Accessibility to your viewers remains important to you, and looking at your work (and through this conversation) I have a sense that you are bringing disparities together to see what happens. This might be radicalising or reworking popular genres like flower painting and landscape. Through that you are making challenging work that is also accessible.

GC: You mentioned flower painting. I decided to embrace the issue of genre and 'work against it'. Genres are vehicles for convention and that fascinates me. The flower paintings explored prejudices and frustrated expectations – they somehow looked 'wrong' but in a significant way.

JT: This resonates with Alexandra Harris' assertion in the concluding section of her book *Romantic Moderns* where she makes a clear argument against 'Englishness' and modernism being antithetical – arguing rather, that British artists such as the neo-romantics were 'differently modern'. Of course, this

was written about another generation of painters. Might this apply to you?

GC: I'm not sure. But if by 'differently modern' you mean a mistrust of orthodoxy, a lack of complacency, scepticism, and a sense of curiosity, then the answer is, yes!

If you mention that you paint flowers, people immediately assume that you have no ambition, or they burst out laughing as it's commonly regarded as the reserve of the amateur. This is where downright lazy notions associated with radicalism fall short. The idea of the 'differently modern' becomes relevant; it's about thinking in a counter-intuitive manner, and frustrating expectations – particularly your own. One of the most significant criticisms levelled at flower painting has been its apparent sense of dominion. Contemporary issues demand a different approach to the natural world and therefore colour. Similarly, flower painting has always exuded a sense of the funereal – the transient and the mortal. The 'differently modern' demands a different way of thinking.

JT: Yes, temporary floral memorials are everywhere now and seem to draw on that latter aspect of flower painting – that of *memento mori*. I went to the Harewood House show, heard you talk, and saw your monochromatic flower paintings. Naively, I anticipated a rather conservative, predictable show, but it turned out to be a very exciting exhibition with all sorts of works reconsidering that genre.

There's the idea that a painting oscillates between the thing itself, the material, and being a sign or image. That's what I find interesting about your landscapes, they hover somewhere between all these ideas.

GC: That's the intention. In paintings like *Kerry Moon* (2019) it's the familiar that is made unfamiliar. The means are intentionally direct, 'lo-fi' but luminous. That luminosity is brought about by glazing which lends the work its sense

of inner light and space. The imagery is summoned out of the paint – not imposed upon it. The image is located entirely in the glaze. Any lapse in concentration results in a very different kind of painting.

JT: This idea of the marginal and of lo-fi resonates with our earlier conversation about the overlooked and the local. That also reminds me of the lack of distinction between 'design' and 'fine art' that emerged in the interwar years – the utopian dream with no hierarchy in terms of craft, skill, and thinking. Then, later, they became separated once more. I work in a 'school of design' as a 'fine artist' and enjoy the various synergies that offers – I see that in your work. You bring strong design principles into your paintings along with a limited palette – we share a liking for Payne's grey – I'd like to hear about that.

GC: I use Payne's grey because of its shifting appearance and values. I use it for its luminosity; it is simultaneously synthetic and highly illusionistic. Employing glazing was a vitally important development in my work.

I was commissioned to design stamps for the 2018 *TT Races* on the Isle of Man. When my stamps (fairly austere duotones) went for official approval, one of the panel members described them as "rather *Stalinist*". I assumed this was intended as a criticism but I took as a compliment. Regarding colour, the duotone is about being spare and lends the subject matter a sense of impoverishment – it reeks of austerity without it being explicit.

JT: I think this is really important and returns us to your idea of painting as discourse and the related ideas of subverting culture, power, and class. This brings to mind, the late David Walker Barker who integrated his hobbies into his painting practice – bottle and mineral collecting. Perhaps this consolidates another disparate pair of apparent differences – hobbies and work, in your case motorcycling and stamp collecting –

within painting?

GC: That's very interesting territory. You must remember that for some people painting is a hobby, and this really reveals the fallacy of hierarchies. Hobbies are much needed displacement activities which can temporarily take the mind away from thoughts of death or something. I find objects that are the product of obsession are not only fascinating but infinitely more powerful than almost all expressionist work. I admire skill in all its forms, whether displayed by carpenters, model makers, engineers, or fabricators. But I find it's the work of model railway scenery builders that gets me thinking most about what we're doing, and why we are doing it. Theirs is a breathtaking mix of the exquisite and the irrelevant.



Judith Tucker
Dark Marsh: Winter Tangle
2020
Oil on linen
30 x 40 cm

Courtesy of the artist