Likeness and presence: a precise complication

Painting, according to Stanley Cavell, is obsessed with reality. Taking Manet as a starting point, Cavell describes painting as being led away from likeness because 'the illusion it had learned to create did not provide the conviction of reality, the connection with reality that it craved' (Cavell, 1979:21). What painting wanted in this desire for a connection with reality (as it actually feels; actually looks) was 'a sense of presentness – not exactly a conviction of the world's presence to us, but of our presence to it' (Cavell, 1979:21).

The form of presence that I am interested in is the one that Cavell goes on to more clearly define as 'presentness to ourselves', an experience that, speaking as a painter, I find fleetingly occurs sometimes when painting, and which is similar to the one I have, also occasionally, as a viewer coming across a really good painting.

It seems to me that the premise of this exhibition is an important one. Not just because, as a painter, I want to defend the possibility of contemporary relevance for this ancient medium, but also because this subject and the Balzac tale of illusion and materiality that underpins it, tells a meaningful story about the enduring appeal, and complexity, of painting as a thing in the world.

Now, imagine the painting I am making: of a forest, the dryness of the woodland, the pared down colour, the fall of light, mixed with other presences: memories, places, other paintings. The attempt is to catch something of all of this in a precise but open way; I think of this combination of precision and openness as 'loose control'. There's a photograph as reference, the colours of nature removed, and an oscillation in my attention between the 'image' and the application of 'material'. There are times when these positions of attention seem to coalesce, and eye and hand execute one singular action. I lose an hour.

The moment I speak about is one in which a connection with reality, a sense of self-hood, is palpable, through contact with a mediated resemblance to the world, and it can be experienced both as painter and viewer. The mediation is the materiality of the work, but also the selection made by the maker, the complex set of decisions that shapes the painting; the artist's eye and hand together. What makes the painting good, and the act of painting itself compelling for those of us who are thus compelled, is the handling of the relationship between the subject or the allusion to an external appearance, and the material, its texture and surface. The sharp sense of self I am wanting to describe happens when sight and touch open the same space in the painting, when visual resemblance and affect combine; when I internalise the experience of looking.

The rightness of this handling seems to rest in the sense that this particular chosen illusion and material articulation are well suited, and that somehow distance and proximity are simultaneously accommodated. This is a careful balance and one which seems to be well described by Hal Foster, in his commentary on the Hayward exhibition ‘The Painting of Modern Life’, as involving ‘the detached and the insistent, through a precise complication…’ He is writing about the central dialogue in the exhibition between painting and photography, but it seems to me that regardless of whether the source of a painted image is a photograph or any number of other points of reference, the relationship between reference and material handling requires an understanding of exactly this 'precise complication' if it is to succeed. If the painting allows us a pointed awareness of ourselves, it might be said to do so because it has that itself; it knows what it is for, and seems a painting of its time, because,
when precisely handled, resemblance and materiality ‘charge each other and burn the image into its moment’ (Foster, 2007).

Can we say something more about the way in which this presentness of self might be afforded to us by a painting, and the importance of this being a mediated image? Ranciere has much to tell about the complexities of image, and he is clear about the fact that in art the question is one of alteration of resemblance: ‘the images of art are operations that produce a discrepancy, a dissemblance’ (Rancier, 2007:6). I think this might be crucial when looking for a sharper sense of reality by approaching illusion via materiality; in other words, approaching the appearance of the world by a different route, a route which brings with it an inevitable condition of detachment. As Foster points out, there is in painting’s iconic nature (as opposed to photography’s indexical one), a ‘remove’, a delay, which gives it a specific kind of potential to explore images of the world (Foster, 2007). And of course painting has the possibilities of multiplicity and of slowness on its side, a very particular kind of temporality; an accumulation of presents, all of which are there but not all seen, nor in any particular order.

So, we might say that a painting’s capacity to refer to the world in a convincing and evocative way, while keeping its distance, remaining ‘other’, sets up a complex space for the painter and the spectator in which to be. In the way that, in Balzac’s story, the diminishing light upon the painted surface opens ‘a sort of night to the mind’, so a painting, through the precise balancing of illusion and materiality, might permit a momentary connection with reality beyond likeness; a moment in which we appear present to ourselves.

Beth Harland, 2011

References:


