

INTRODUCTION

James William Murray's work both represents and manifests sensation. It reveals a close attentiveness to the qualities of material from which we can consider embodiedness. Not only does it answer to the physical, but it does so with a conviction towards the possibility of a uniquely physical answer. In this sense, it is quiet. This quietness in turn discloses life lived together, presence over time. These things are, I think, important to grasp when looking at Murray's art, but they are not everything. There is openness and humour, although this is perhaps best felt from under the work's weight. These elements amount to good complexity rather than a punchline or a bum note.

This interview took place on 12 August 2021 at Murray's exhibition *Realia* at Brighton Centre for Contemporary Arts, which coincided with the end of the first stage of his PhD. Appropriately, the exhibition contained a mixture of familiar and emerging interests, which I was keen to hear about. Murray's recent use of Christian symbolism seemed an intriguing development of the humming, monolithic atmosphere present in earlier work. I also wanted to ask about the push-pull of material and meaning, evident, for example, in the influence of a resistant minimalist vernacular. Formalism permeates his work but this offsets rather than deposes meaning. Indeed, there is semantic potential in something being stripped of reference. Far from being a paradox, this is actually just a difference in the level at which the meaning enters our engagement with the object. Something becomes stark, obstinate or insistent by seeming to not mean. Original meaning can persist through the shock or aberration of formal attempts to take it away. In revisiting Murray's work, where the wavering and liminal endure, where you are not addressed so much as overhear, I wanted to look again at these issues.

Tom Laver, Assistant Curator of Southampton City Gallery

REALIA

James William Murray & Tom Laver

TL: The title of this project is *Realia*, which I understand refers to 'learning objects'. Why this title?

JWM: I am interested in subjectivities underlying formal, minimal and abstract art practice, and I set out to create a space in which viewers would have an opportunity to contemplate these concerns using these works as an entry point, as 'realia' if you will. Viewers are invited to attend one-hour viewing slots, which I am present for. It might seem like a long time to view five paintings; however, these are works that reveal themselves slowly. I wanted to give viewers an opportunity to fully immerse themselves in this space and get a deeper understanding of what informs my practice. I have also curated a small library of reading materials to provide context in terms of the theory I am engaged with. The aim of the project is to engender critical discussions that will advance my practice. The documentation of this installation, including this conversation, will form part of my PhD thesis.

TL: You've made the distinction between practice-based and practice-led research. As I understand it, within a fine art context practice-based research involves articulating a concept or theoretical premise through artworks, whereas practice in practice-led research takes priority and is not answerable to the concept in the same way. So you are developing your practice and then reading theory into it?

JWM: Yes, in part. The principal aim of my wider research project is to articulate a subjective, interdisciplinary methodology for contemporary art practice. My practice is leading the research process insofar as I am generating my own texts for subsequent analysis in the form of artworks, exhibitions and publications, which in turn inform the next body of work.¹ I have a theoretical foundation that I am continually building upon, but I tend to work intuitively and then trace back, re-reading and re-siting the practice in relation to contemporary and post-modern art criticism, photographic theory and queer theory, and reading on when I realise I need to go deeper. I have a core framework of texts but new things are constantly added, and some fall away as the project progresses. There is inherent 'messiness' to the PhD experience, which I find challenging, but this is inevitable in a multi-year project.

TL: So am I right in saying the practice has a certain amount of dominion over the project as a whole and is essentially what makes the breakthroughs? If something were to happen in the

practice, it would not be disregarded because it didn't fit in with the theory you're working with – is that correct?

JWM: Correct. I have a level of confidence in my practice that I allow it to guide me, rather than trying to force it in a certain direction. In the past when I set out with a fixed outcome in mind, the work tended to suffer. My primary concern is to advance my studio practice, and this PhD is one of the ways I am doing that.

FORMAL ANALYSIS

TL: Can you talk me through this installation?

JWM: Sure. My intention with this installation is for the viewer to encounter five works, which appear to be near identical, initially at least. They each share the same formal structure comprising two distinct material elements – a vertical 2:1 'painting element', which is essentially layers of graphite applied to various supports, and a horizontal brass 'altar' beneath it. The altar is proportionate to the depth of the painting stretcher. It is twice as deep as it is tall, thereby also following the 2:1 rule. These two elements, however, vary across the series, and through a close-up, decelerated viewing the subtle differences in texture and surface begin to emerge.

TL: That's interesting. When I arrived I was struck by the range of textures, and I initially thought that was to do with how you applied the medium rather than a difference between the supports.

JWM: It's very much about what's behind this graphite layer. The graphite itself is flat and even, although the nature of the material, its quality of absorbing and reflecting light simultaneously, accentuates the surface it is applied to. I've used two types of flax linen and two types of jute hessian, and this one [Untitled (James) iii] is cotton canvas.

TL: I can imagine that when you are working with a range of surfaces it takes time to develop an understanding of what each one requires and that it is a pleasure to work in this way, to see how each work responds.

JWM: It is an intuitive process, and it is a pleasure, but it is quite labour intensive. What I love about my painting practice is that it requires an intense focus and attention to detail. I have to work very methodically or the surface will look uneven. It is very physically involved and I have to be very present with it. I feel that this is particularly the case with monochromatic painting. People who do not paint might be tempted to think that monochromatic painting must be easy in comparison with sharply rendered figurative painting, for example. This is not the case. It is just as involved, but in a different way.

TL: I can sense that physicality in these works. Can you explain how you applied the graphite?

JWM: I suspended ground graphite in a fluid acrylic gel medium and painted the surfaces using very wide brushes. I applied multiple layers, sanding and buffing them by hand in between. I couldn't tell you exactly how many layers – it varies from one painting to the next – but I'd say it ranges between five and twelve. I worked on the series simultaneously so it felt like a single process. However, I recall that this one [Untitled (James) v] for instance was a real struggle.

TL: How so?

JWM: It just took a very long time to achieve this surface, to get it to a point where it was uniform. That's because heavy weight jute has to be polished hard, and it is easy to overdo it, to take it too far, at which point the process needs to begin from scratch.

TL: Coming back to me not realising about the difference of the support, would there be something missing if someone didn't recognise that you had used different fabrics, and instead thought you achieved this surface variation with just a paint-brush or similar?

JWM: To me, it seems obvious that the texture comes from the fabric, but perhaps I have taken this for granted. It is easy to forget how much knowledge of process becomes embodied as a maker. I paint the surfaces flat, as in I lay the support on my workbench and paint horizontally to minimise brush marks, and those remaining are more or less erased in the subsequent polishing process. The only real movement or trace you can see on the surfaces are bodily, particularly in this one [Untitled (James) III]. You can see here how it has been polished, by hand, using small circular motions. The physical labour is most apparent, however, in the altars, where you can clearly see every blow made with a round-headed hammer.

TL: It is interesting that you refer to the brass part as an 'altar'. Is this a religious reference?

JWM: It wasn't intentional but the relationship is there. Funnily enough, just last week I went to St Bartholomew's Church to look at the depiction of Christ cast in brass above the main altar. That figure has been looming over me my whole life.

TL: Literally looming over you or...

JWM: I went to the primary school next door and I was raised in the Anglo-Papalist tradition. That interior space and the ritual of mass has been a constant in my life, so it is unsurprising that aspects of this experience have manifested within my work.

JWM: All around the church, there are carvings depicting the crucifixion. The frames surrounding the figures have these gilded, chamfered edges. As a child, I recall being struck by the flash of gold. I wanted to touch it, but it was too high... The works presented in this installation are purposely hung with the lower edge at my hand height. Another notable aspect is that everything within the interior of the church is happening on a vertical plane, the candles, the columns, the epic height of the building, which is said to have been modelled on the proportions of Noah's Ark – it is all intended to draw the gaze upwards, except for the altar, which is horizontal.

TL: The meeting point between the graphite and brass is where the work feels most active. The light bouncing between the two elements causes this soft warm glow. It is really seductive.

JWM: You will notice that the intensity of the glow and its direction change throughout the day, which is why I am not using artificial lighting in the gallery. The brass has been hammered in different ways to reflect light – one has been hammered on all sides, two have been hammered on the top and front edge, and two on just the front and sides. They are not solid brass, but are made from 0.10mm brass shim folded over a piece of timber. I fold the brass in the same way I finish the corners of my canvases when I stretch the fabric over the wooden substrate.

TL: I really like being able to see that the brass is in fact a layer, that it has been folded over the wood. I don't know if you would be able to achieve the same effect with something solid.

JWM: There would certainly be a different sense of weight, especially when you get up close and see the edges.

TL: There is a particularly nice edge to this one [Untitled (James) iii] – it really stands out.

JWM: I'll show you the back of the work so you can get a better idea of its overall structure. [Takes the painting of the wall.]

TL: Hmm, what can I see here?

JWM: This is where the graphite medium has oozed through the weave of the jute. I've also applied a coat of acrylic primer to the reverse side of the jute to increase the tension that it loses due to the downward pressure exerted during the polishing process. The primer shrinks as it dries, pulling everything tight. [Flicks the surface.]

TL: Don't flick it! [Both laugh.]

TL: This one [Untitled (James) iv] has fewer scattered circles on the surface, and they are slightly larger here.

JWM: If I had to choose a favourite, this would be it.

TL: Why is that?

JWM: I think they each have their own singular beauty, they hold their own space, but I am just drawn to this one the most. Who knows why we prefer one thing over another in a selection of things which are all very similar.

TL: I am sure we would approach them very differently as individual works in isolation. The ideas of sameness and difference would be lost. Presented like this, in formation, they have a collective effect.

JWM: Do you have a favourite?

TL: I tend to look at variations with bodies of work in quite similar ways. I usually end up siding with the middle ground between the initial statement of the theme and the one that feels the biggest deviation from it. For me, these feel like two extremes [Untitled (James) ii and Untitled (James) iv]. But I find it very difficult to pick a favourite because I am drawn to the sequence. And so I feel like I should pick the one that is 'least extreme' because it best captures the development of the series, perhaps... So my favourite is probably this [Untitled (James) ii].

JWM: That is a very cerebral way of choosing a favourite, isn't it? [Both laugh.]

TL: Yes, and I think it is telling that I am doing so by taking a schema from other contexts irrespective of this experience and saying, 'Well I tend to like this about variations.' But look, from a purely material perspective I really like the delicacy of the edges of the altar on this one [Untitled (James) iii], the slight gap between the brass in the corner where it has been folded over – it is very tactile. Similarly, the smoothness of the top edge with its subtle undulations is satisfying... I like the middle ground you have achieved with this one.

JWM: You can also see that the edges of the brass are folded and finished in the same way that I finished the corners of linen and canvas after stretching it over a subframe.

TL: OK, so it is more a technical necessity rather than a conceptual reference to painting?

JWM: I think both. It is conceptual in that it is to do with an awareness of circumnavigating the medium. Brass is a material that is usually employed sculpturally, but here I am applying it within my painting practice. That said, there is a history of artists painting directly onto brass and copper surfaces.

MEDIUM

TL: So what kind of objects are they? How do you classify them? If at all...

JWM: It was only when this show opened that I firmly declared these works as paintings, although I had already started to theorise them as such.

TL: What is at stake for you in saying that?

JWM: I am still trying to work that out. I have no formal training in painting and I don't think of myself as a painter, just as I do not think of myself as a photographer or sculptor per se. I'm suspicious of these labels because they feel as much a set of identity categories as ways of describing certain modes of practice. I didn't relate to the archetypes they evoke, but I like the idea that I can use them as a guise in order to infiltrate different media, without 'permission', if you like.

TL: I wonder if you would have ever made these works had you had a medium-specific training in painting. You have had a medium-specific training in photography though, so how does that understanding impact your current practice?

JWM: My early practice was established on the basis of a constant exchange between images and objects, and it was as 'sculptural' as it was 'photographic'. At a certain point, I started drawing on the surface of photographs that I printed at 'painting scale'. It wasn't long before I switched out the surface of the photograph for wooden panels, linen and canvas, and so on. So the work became less visibly photographic, but it continues to be underpinned by photographic concepts of touch, trace, surface, loss, materiality, and desire.^{2,3,4}

TL: I was recently reading the aesthetician Kendal Walton who highlights the often implicit conventions governing what we do and do not appreciate and evaluate aesthetically about an object.⁵ So, for instance when we look at paintings, unless you are looking at, say, a Howard Hodgkin, we don't tend to consider the frame, or the hanging, or the back of the object. I found this very interesting as someone who has worked in exhibition logistics and now in a curatorial capacity, and I was particularly interested in how minimalist practice plays upon those conventions to create tensions in terms of what we are supposed to focus on when viewing art.

JWM: Me too. I am often drawn to the work that explores the formal structure of art objects and display apparatus – Didier Vermeiren's plinth sculptures, for instance. I think this interest stems from my experience working as a studio assistant to a painter. I literally spent years assembling substrates and stretching canvas. Over time, I found this to be a meditative process and part of the pleasure of making. I've subsequently made a lot of

work with an intense focus on the structure of the painting, often using raw, unpainted linen surfaces. As an aside, did you know the ancient Egyptians called linen 'liquid moonlight' due to its singular beauty?

TL: That's lovely!

JWM: I know, right? I get why when handling this Lithuanian linen, for instance [gestures to *Untitled (James) vi*], it is so heavy and yet it is incredibly soft and silky, it just slips through your hands.

TL: OK, so this hovering between media, this staged instability if you will – was it a strategic decision and, if so, what did it afford the practice?

JWM: For a long time I was heavily invested in ideas of post-medium practice,⁶ but I got to a point where I felt I had exhausted the limits of this as a theoretical basis for my work. By firmly declaring these works as paintings I have opened up a whole new set of problems to explore in relation to theory that I am not as familiar with. Working at intersections of media tied in with my interest in liminality, and resisting stable identity categories. But this has started to feel like a lazy metaphor, a bit too well rehearsed, so I am moving on. This is a recent development in my work and I do not yet have a full perspective on the transition, but I know these works are paintings, and I am very pleased that I have arrived at this point.

TL: And so ultimately what makes these works paintings, rather than sculptures? I imagine lots of people have picked up on their sculpture qualities?

JWM: They became paintings when I started to theorise them in relation to the discourse of painting. I think it is as simple as that.

ICONOGRAPHY

TL: You have used this 2:1 ratio in earlier works. How did this come about?

JWM: I've been using a 2:1 ratio in my work for the past five years. Essentially it is an abstraction of a human form. Sculptors often use a 2:1 carving block for standing or reclining figures – you can see this clearly in Egyptian and Archaic Greek statuary. I recently realised that it is also an abstraction of the Roman cross, and what could be more evocative of an absent or abstracted body than the symbol of the cross? So I see this ratio as having bodily connotations, particularly at the scale of these works, which are intentionally torso sized.

TL: I have also heard you talk about the 2:1 ratio in relation to photography.

JWM: There is a deep-seated connection to photography in that the first work I made using this ratio, back in 2016, was inspired by Lacan's metaphorical screen, which he evoked as a metaphor for the 'symbolic order' – the world of language and signs.⁷ Lacan's theories of psychosexual development inspired Roland Barthe's *Camera Lucida*, which was foundational for my early practice.

TL: So it seems that this particular ratio is at the centre of a web of references: ancient statuary, psychoanalysis, photographic theory and Christian iconography.

JWM: That's a good way of putting it.

TL: I wonder whether another way of linking your work to religious art is through a preoccupation with human touch and evoking physical sensitivity? For example, Matthias Grünewald's *Isenheim Altarpiece*, in which Christ's hands are twisted and distorted and he is covered in pustules, is intended to serve as a visual reminder of pain, sacrifice and suffering, and ultimately humanities' sins, past and future. But, of course, there is a certain amount of abstraction in your work that takes it away from a literal reading of a body or an icon.

JWM: I have often thought it strange that touch seems to be the most intangible human sense somehow, the most difficult to grasp. Perhaps this is what makes it so compelling as a subject for visual representation. In the *Isenheim Altarpiece* and other devotional works like it, there is a sense of there being a palpable physicality to the bodies depicted, which make them feel 'within reach'. This is in stark contrast to photographic images, in which bodies always feel 'out of reach', even when I am holding a photograph. I think this is due to the direct materiality of painting. Photography is a more allusive process, with multiple stages of mediation. It is worth noting that figurative painting always contains two bodily forms – the trace of the artist's hand, as well as the body of the subject depicted – an index and an icon, respectively. It is interesting that you cite this particular work in the context of our previous discussion about medium taxonomies. After all, this is a painting with clear sculptural qualities that can be viewed from multiple angles.

INDEXICALITY

TL: OK, so we've established that these works are paintings, and you've just mentioned indexicality, which has come up a lot in our previous discussions in relation to photography. What is at stake for you in terms of your painting and indexicality?

JWM: There are a lot of clichés surrounding 'the artist's touch', so I feel I have to tread carefully. I see it as a challenge, however, to develop subtle approaches to this trope throughout my work. Desires for art, human contact and mark making are timeless and widely felt, so indexicality seems like an egalitarian subject.

TL: In terms of mark making, there is a strong sense of these works being a marker or index of an absence, akin to a tombstone. I was hoping you could talk a bit about this and the process of naming artworks.

JWM: I often find myself lost in the fantasy of mediated touch – this idea that the work might somehow be able to embody the touch of someone who has touched my life. It is an absurd and slightly desperate poetic notion, but nevertheless compelling. When I name the works after specific individuals, they are not dedications as such, but more like the making of surrogates or stand-ins for the real thing, the loved object, like the *Corinthian Maid's* semblance.⁸

TL: This reminds me of Isabelle Graw's conception of a 'painting-as-a-highly-valuable-quasi-person' – the notion that painting, as an intellectual practice, with its own 'language', has qualities of personhood and can therefore intrigue us in the same way an alluring person can draw us in.⁹ I like how she discusses the idea of the trace of the artist's hand in a subtle, modest way, which I think is consistent with your point that, yes, these works are an index of you, but it also enters into a delicate compromise with the surface and the materiality of the object. It's not this kind of free-for-all where you are leaving arbitrary traces of yourself, like a Jackson Pollock's drip painting, for instance.

JWM: I think these works land at the subtlest end of physical expression. Abstract expressionism was forceful in such a normative-masculine way. I aimed to arrive at something more delicate and austere, less romantic, but no less impactful. These are quiet works but they command the space around them.

JOANNA'S QUESTION

JWM: Yesterday I had a visit from my former tutor, Joanna Lowry. She asked me at what point do these works, as objects, become subjects, and what agency might they then have? Reflecting on that question, I think a lot of the shift occurs in the power structures that surround art practice, 'the market', in all its layered complexities. It made me think about Foucault's discussions of how knowledge is produced, policed and commodified,¹⁰ and how such regulation is achieved by an artwork's context. These power structures are perhaps more

readily enforced in relation to abstract work, as it is not anchored semantical in the same way as figurative work. Another issue impacting this idea of art's agency – the force it has within the world – is minimal abstract works being largely dependent on the space surrounding it, unlike traditional portrait painting, for example in which the limit of the object is demarcated by the canvas edge.

TL: I think you might have begun to answer the question by suggesting that it is within an institutional context that an artwork starts to assume subjectivity.

JWM: Perhaps, although ultimately the question must be addressed in practice, through the making. I have been committed to abstraction for the past five years, and I absolutely needed to work through these ideas, but there are inevitably limits in terms of exploring interrelated subjectivities in all their complexities through abstraction alone. I think the next development of my work has to test the potential of combining both abstract and figurative forms, to see how I can advance my thinking in this relation to Joanna's question.

TL: It seems the question was particularly challenging because it has the potential to open up a major shift in your practice, and so in this sense the title *Realia* is apt – this is, after all, a learning process.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Barrett, E. 2007. Foucault's 'What is an Author': Towards a Critical Discourse of Practice as Research, in *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Enquiry*. London & New York: I.B.Tauris & Co Ltd. pp. 135-146
- 2 Bathes, R. 2000. *Camera Lucida*. London: Vintage. (Originally published in French as *La Chambre Claire* by Editions du Seuil, 1980.)
- 3 Doane, M. 2007. Indexicality: Trace and Sign: Introduction. *Differences* 18(1): 1–6.
- 4 Geimer, P. 2007. Image as Trace: Speculations About an Undead Paradigm. *Differences* 18(1): 7–28.
- 5 Walton, K. 1970. Categories of Art. *Philosophical Review* 79(3): 334–367.
- 6 Krauss, R. 2000. *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*. London: Thames & Hudson. Also see Armstrong, C. 2016. 'Painting Photography Painting: Timelines and Medium Specificities', in Graw, I, & Lajer-Burcharth, E.(eds), *Painting beyond Itself: The Medium in the Post-medium Condition*. Berlin: Sternberg Press. pp. 123-185. Also see Osbourne, P. 2003. 'Photography in an Expanding Field: Distributive Unity and Dominate Form', in Green, D. (ed) *Where is the Photograph? Maidstone: Photoworks* pp.63-70
- 7 Lacan, J. 1977. *Écrits: A Selection* (trans. A. Sheridan). London: Tavistock, p. 72. Also see Žižek, S. and Butler, R. 2006. *Interrogating the Real*. London: Continuum.
- 8 In *Natural History (AD 77)* Pliny the Elder located the origin of painting and sculpture in the myth of the Corinthian Maid. It tells the story of a young woman's attempts to preserve her departing lover's image by tracing his shadow thrown by candlelight. The girl's father then presses clay onto the drawing to create a ceramic relief – a kind of surrogate object to stave off the trauma of romantic loss.
- 9 Graw, I. 2012. 'The Value of Painting: Notes on Unspecificity, Indexicality, and Highly Valuable Quasi-Persons', in *Thinking Through Painting: Reflexivity and Agency beyond the Canvas*. Berlin: Sternberg Press. pp. 45-59.
- 10 Foucault, M. 2020. *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1. The Will to Knowledge*. London: Penguin Books. (Originally published as *L'Histoire de la sexualité*, 1976.)