

Richard Wright



Richard Wright and Thomas Lawson in conversation

Most contemporary artists flirt with the idea of difficulty, with the idea that the reception of art should be a well-earned reward after some struggle. But in making fugitive wall paintings, labour intensive riffs on found insignia that will be wiped out in a few weeks, Richard Wright foregrounds the whole issue of value. What makes art important? What is it for? What does it mean, especially if it will be gone so soon?

The central importance with which Wright invests this issue of transience, this improvisatory nonchalance, marks him as an artist deeply resistant to the concept and culture of the museum. He wants his art to be alive, and a part of life. He does not want it to become part of a back catalogue of hallowed, and therefore 'beautiful' objects to be revered but not touched. Instead, he delights in the more generous idea that making art is more akin to playing music, or having a conversation; that it is a series of beginnings, not the perfected presentation of closure. It thus seems appropriate to allow the artist to introduce the work himself, in talk. The following interview was conducted in Edinburgh in early December 1999.

Thomas Lawson: Just before I got the tape running, as we were warming up for this interview, we were talking about how to make sense of the activity of painting now, the endless revivals, the stubborn ability of painters to find something else to do.

Richard Wright: Yes we never seem able to shake this question. But that is what is interesting about painting for me, for in a way it occupies a space of resistance, or at least a possibility of resistance. And I am attracted to this idea of resistance. Painting has this outsidership. Maybe I decided to be an artist because I wanted to get up when everyone was going to bed. I always hated Mondays and Fridays, but not in the obvious way. It was the inevitability of a certain thing happening, the structure of the workweek levelling out past and future, denying in a way the very possibility of the present. For me the attraction of painting was that it was something chosen, not given. It was this very specific thing; what I mean is I find it hard to see it as a 'type' of activity. It was a pursuit I could choose. Of course something with a problematic and sticky history, but something which almost had to be occupied for the present or reinvented.

Do you find that you want to rewrite the history of painting in some way, reorder the given understanding of who and what is important?

The thing that interests me with painting is its fragility. I'd like to find a way to talk about painting that doesn't involve hierarchies. In a way this is not consistent with the idea of history, in which there is danger for painters to become heroes – placed in positions of greatness. But painting is more anxious than this – no one ever really knows what's good. I'm attracted to the ghosts of 20th century painting – people like Ensor and Guston, who can be both pompous and totally out there. In a

way they are remote from history as we learn it, but also very much attached. Both work in an awkward way which plays between this personal thing and more public ideas, there's an inconsistency or messiness that seems to upset prevailing notions of importance, or good behaviour even. Odd mixtures. *There is a way in which artists like that, who do not fit into a prevailing argument, tend to get dismissed, written off as eccentrics.*

I think artists have to investigate the possibility of failure, and that is why I admire these two so much. The decision to use something that is out of place or might not actually work out, seems to be a key to making any kind of real progress in the work. I'm scared of failure like anyone else, but I try to make this kind of openness part of my procedure. Ensor went on about fault redeeming the work... this could end up sounding dangerously trite but there is something about the specific history of the incident – the work – which destroys the categories of history and ends up leaving the work on its own. *What do you mean?*

I try put myself in the position where the work is not quite within my control. It's almost a physical thing, to convince yourself again that painting is really about something. The material is always so dumb and intractable, the action always seems so idiotic. Painting refuses to co-operate; by that I mean something like refuses to make itself invisible – or go along with the idea. It's like a word that changes shape in mid-sentence, no matter how fast your ideas are you find yourself watching and waiting.

About ten years ago I began working in what for me was a new way. I wanted to get at the idea without the object getting in the way. This seemed to have something to do with the action of painting and turned out to mean working directly on the wall, which in turn implied thinking about context and architecture as part of the content of the work. So what happened was that a group of images to which I had some undefined attraction – some typography, for example, or a club flyer, or a geometric device or even an obvious reference to painting – came into play with the configuration of a particular space, and my frame of mind, the amount of time I had to actually realise the piece – in other words the live situation.

The structure of the work became provisional or improvised, something moving through space and time. This opened up a way to level out certain questions about value and meaning by relating the event more directly to everyday experience. Acknowledging a randomness made it seem more real. And the key factor of the work – its impermanence – seemed to heighten this. Of course I wanted to get away from the idea that the artist was some kind of knowing creature, on some higher ground, with a special ability to choose things which have meaning from those things which do not. But I also

wanted to put the work into the position of action: no matter how prepared I am the edges always have to be found and this is a fleeting thing. I guess there was also some attempt to step outside the ease with which painting becomes a commodity.

Lately I have begun to realise that all the work I did before I started working directly on the wall continues to play a part in my thinking. There were outlines of thought imbedded in these paintings which I am still trying to remember. I find that I have an attraction to things misplaced, and a desire to find a way to reconnect to that past. This isn't about conservatism but has something to do with recognition and memory. I am not looking for an idyll, but certain primary attractions re-occur which I cannot explain and part of the work is to do with this.

I think I understand what you are getting at, because when I look at the most recent work I get a sense that the images are conjured out of a place that is part communal memory, part personal. There is an implication of a kind of web of association, endlessly connecting interstices of meaning.

The weave of possible readings and meanings is important to me, particularly as they get shaded by the working of memory. I used to have an interest in Symbolism, especially the literature. Once there was a French poem I was trying to remember, so that I would know it and possess it. But I don't actually speak French; hopelessly I decided to teach myself. But although I did learn the first line or two the words were always clouded like the names of mythological cities. I gave up before really getting it or understanding it. And the problem was not simply a matter of verbs and pronouns; there was the entire cultural landscape informing the language that remained unclear and beyond my reach. I think there is a way in which painting is approached like that now. Painting isn't stupid it's understood stupidly; this is inevitable. Knowledge may help but in the end you can only read things from a certain position. Painting might be a dead language – beyond reach I mean – but for sure it's always translated badly, or partially. But in a way this is what makes it interesting. It has to stand on its own – outside.

I think this is what makes it possible to understand the abrupt emergence of distinct localities in painting. An idea gets carried abroad, gets altered, misunderstood and then generates a new set of rules which become paramount for a group of artists far from the point of origin of the idea.

Exactly, it's not so much about the individuality of ideas, but the quickness of how an idea gets translated through the agency of something like skill. It's karaoke shit really. The sheer dumbness of trying to transmit something through your own body – being forced to find definitions. The agency of this kind of manoeuvre that, against the odds, allows you to come up with the goods. When it works it can in fact shock.

Skill is an interesting thing to mention these days. It is one of

these things that barely gets discussed, a kind of dirty secret. Definitely a touchy area, perhaps I could get my head shot off here and say that painting is essentially a physical question. Paintings don't want to be read, they want to be learned by heart. There is a chemical formula for a Mantegna as there is for a dollar bill. These things are vaguely knowable after the event, but how do you start from the other end, with just stuff and make something that works like a Mantegna. This is the kind of impossibility that I find interesting in painting, because when it is done it is obvious, but how do you get there? Painting is always a series of procedures but knowing the procedures doesn't always make it.

I'm interested in working in a situation in which I don't know what I can physically do. I mean by that pushing a sense of skill that is outside skill. For this reason I like the work to be visible – superficial if you like. When you are thinking about the work you may be able to imagine the image, but in the actual situation of making the work there is only you and the instrument. Time changes, the body has to slow down in order to be able to get to the end. The question becomes terrifyingly simple – how do I get from one side of the room to the other. In a sense this means that my control of the body, which is partly about skill, becomes philosophy and practice in a deep way. As I work in a gallery, or whatever, something is happening that I can't speak about, this comes back to the thing I said before about watching and waiting. The technical question turns out to be the main question with regard to painting; I have been asked, many times, why not silk screen the images on to the wall. I can only say that this simply would not be equivalent, but here the question gets complicated.

There is this character in Tarkovsky's last film who says something like – if you get up every morning and go to the tap and fill a glass with water and then take that glass to the toilet and flush the water away, you can change the world. There is something of this idiocy in painting. The image is always the main thing, but paintings are more than images – painting is an enactment or a physical occupation of material, in a way it speaks about time.

I'm definitely looking at the work very differently from ten years ago when I started this. In some ways the beginning was a solution to a series of questions which perhaps don't seem so important at this time. The resistance I had to working in a studio – habit – a place to go to, and to do this specific thing, day in day out. There were no beginnings and no ends. No aim, except the production of objects. All this had been part of some received background. I had to play out the opposition to painting, move against things being too easy. Now I have an aim, but no objects result. It is a different model of working, perhaps more aware of context.

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