

Engagement Ring,
oil on board,
121.9cm x 121.9cm,
1963

Waiting, Thinking, Drinking: A Conversation
about Patrick Caulfield's Interiors
— Thomas Lawson and Katherine Lewis

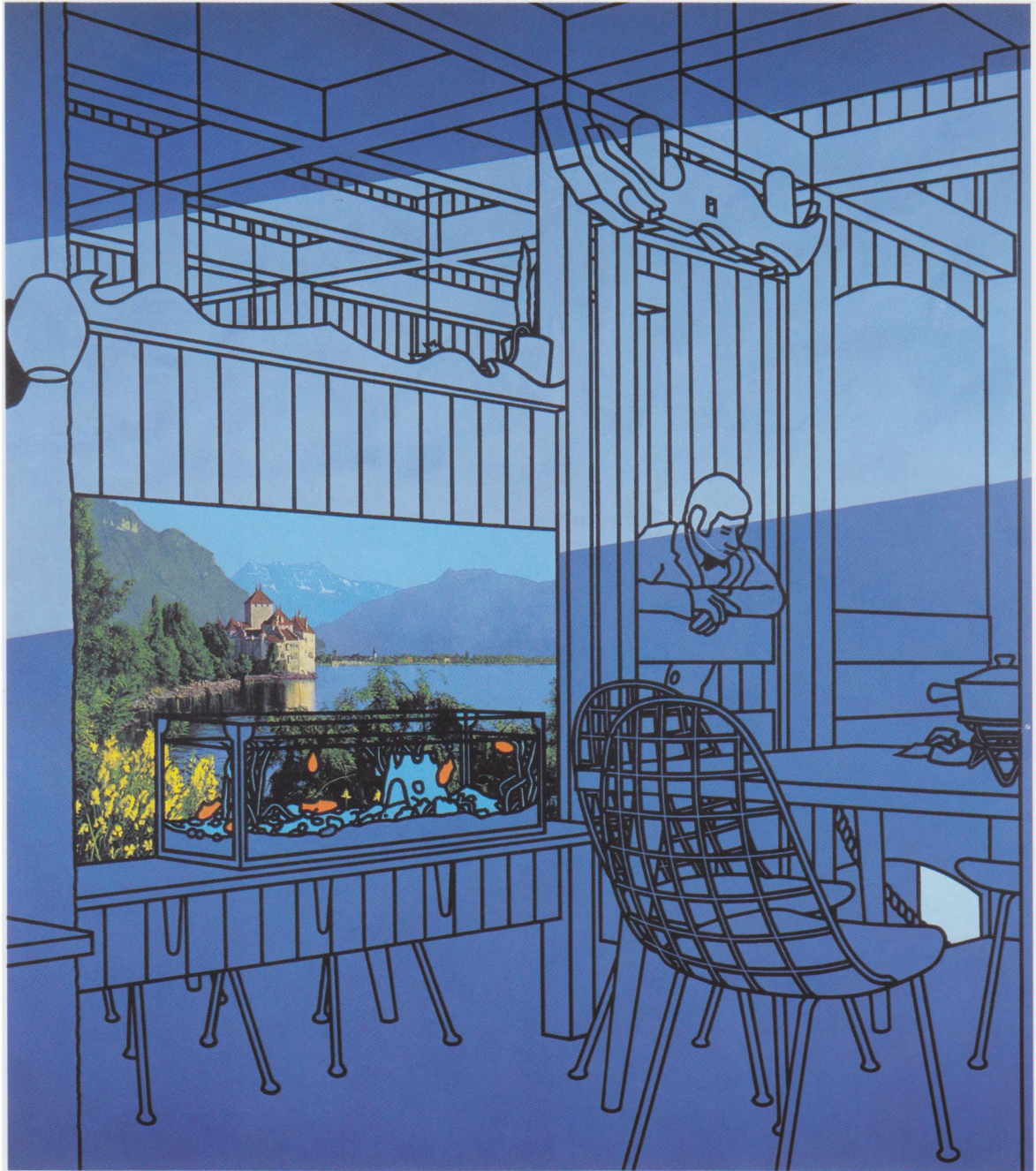
I know that I've seen this painting somewhere before. The jovial mix of a flat-coloured, hard-lined interior with the pitch-perfect mountain view through the window. I go home; I rifle through my shelves to get to that 'a-ha' moment. I reach it when I pull out the Routledge *Companion to Aesthetics* (2001), a hastily purchased book meant to help my transition into art school. There it is on the cover, all cool and funny with a small trapezoid of Romanticism pushed to its left edge: Patrick Caulfield's *After Lunch* from 1975, owned by Tate Modern in London.

Shortly thereafter I realise that this, too, is hasty. I feel as if I know it in some other way. Of course, the black-outlined chairs and brightly painted café recall some easily retrieved examples of American Pop art, but that is not enough. What about that strange light under the table? I guess that is the door out of this place, but I cannot leave yet with the rest of the interior still to explore. The aquarium: the small globs of bright orange double as fish and suggest a tightened-up version of Matisse's fish bowl. I finally realise that it is that scene out of the window. It is not that I actually have been to the Château de Chillon in Switzerland, but I am sure that it, or something nearly identical, appeared in one of the many jigsaw puzzles that my family worked on together in the holiday season during my childhood.¹ Such images were an escape from the snowed in, not-so-idyllic suburbs of Chicago, and marked a destination in two senses: to get to the end of the puzzle to see the whole scene, and to get out of the American Midwest and visit a place like this. But it all appears to be a joke, Caulfield's joke about what we want from his painting. That great view out of the window is not really a vista, and there isn't really any opening into some other pictorial reality. The whole wall now appears to be a screen onto which this image is projected. However, if this is the case, why doesn't the slab of light blue cutting across the upper third of the painting line up with the screen it is meant to illuminate? It isn't the first time I've thought this since looking around the room — that is, the painting — but it is the first time that I'll write it: something is off.

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Marco Livingstone,
'Perspectives on
Painting: Seven Essays
on the Art of Patrick
Caulfield', Patrick
Caulfield, London:
Hayward Gallery,
1999, p.15.

I see the whole painting as a puzzle, an intricate linear pattern that resolves into a rendition of an architectural interior. This is a space of some complexity: it is hard to determine both how the ceiling works and which parts of the partition are solid, which parts void; the space under the sideboard seems to harbour an odd assortment of furniture legs; and there is that strange area under the table. In some sense, the whole doesn't quite add up. This is due partly to the way the even strength of the drawn lines ~ whether they describe a perspectival system or the wood paneling of a partition ~ create an all-over pattern that remains flat to the eye. This flat pattern is punctured by the two superimposed full-colour areas: the photographic image of the castle by the lake and the bright-orange goldfish in the tank in front of it. More spatial conundrums here: we want to look out and into the photographic image, but context tells us it is one of those dismal photomurals that cheerfully depress the spirits of all who find themselves nearby.



Intended to spirit the mind away to a more glamorous setting, it inevitably reminds you of exactly where you are. And isn't that a fondue pot on the table?

The strange thing about the painting is that, at first, it is exhilarating to see. The two shades of blue are so resonant, the sunlight on the lake so appealing. But the longer you look, the sadder and lonelier you feel. The room is abandoned, cleared of the messy evidence of human enjoyment; no dirty glasses, emptied bottles, no cutlery or crumpled napkins. Only the downcast gaze of the disembodied waiter. The room is haunted by a sense of unfulfilled desire; in the end the illusion failed to work and lunch was merely lunch, and probably not so good. Sure this is a sort of Romanticism, but one laced with enough irony to nearly curdle into cynicism.



*Looking at Caulfield's early work, the paintings of the 60s, I get the sense of an artist who has worked hard to eliminate everything unnecessary from his paintings, but who still has not quite figured out what he needs to put in them. In *Red and White Still Life* (1964) two polygons ~ one red, one white ~ float against a black ground. Scattered across these clearly defined planes, arrangements of red-and-black dots throw a decorative caprice into the picture, making the abstraction into more of a pattern. In front of all this, a patterned carafe and plate sit on a blue café table. In doing this Caulfield succeeds in delivering a painting with a strong visual presence that cleverly fools with the tension between abstraction and representation found in 20th-century painting, especially as it plays out in the tricky arena of decoration. The patterning, the carafe and the little table indicate the Mediterranean, or at least a Greek restaurant in London's Soho. But then what?*

There is perhaps a polemic implied ~ most of his contemporaries in London were in love with the idea of America. Pop goes the Easel, a documentary film made by Ken Russell in 1962, recreates a day in the life of four of Caulfield's London contemporaries: Peter Blake, Derek Boshier, Pauline Boty and Peter Phillips. They prove to be a group of fantasists living in the sour, dark world of post-World War II Britain, wishing they were elsewhere, namely an America they only know from movies and advertisements. Caulfield obviously shared the desire to be elsewhere, but his dream was the more orthodox one of southern Europe. In a 1969 catalogue Anne Seymour wrote (and one senses she is paraphrasing Caulfield's remarks): 'He never felt the romantic interest in America which affected many artists around 1960 ... It is significant that he felt drawn neither by the techniques of the Pop artists, nor to their attitude to the images they used.'² Instead he hews to a determined European set of references, from Delacroix to Raoul Dufy to René Clair. Postcards from the sun, with the clarity of a dream remembered.

*And yet there is one painting from this period that suggests at least a moment of thinking otherwise. *Engagement Ring* (1963) is a square painting, a format associated more with American minimalist strategies, and not one much favoured by Caulfield until the late 90s. It is black and white, and depicts a diamond ring seemingly set on a diamond grid whose interstices are marked by different graphic renditions of diamonds. It's a very glamorous, very 'American' painting. One immediately thinks of Lichtenstein, who in fact did paint a similar picture that same year, also square and black and white with a ring against a patterned ground. But Lichtenstein's *Magnifying Glass* (1963) is a painting made up of Ben-Day dots; it is about the relationship between the mass produced and the handmade, and in a sense about the future of painting itself. This I take to be the 'attitude to the images they used' that Caulfield wanted to stand apart from. And he does. The paintings of the 60s seem impersonal in their cool anatomies of style, successful on a formal level, but troubled by an apparent lack of purpose. As the work develops in the following decades and his subject becomes more focused ~ the intimate spaces of work and relaxation ~ the paintings turn out to be much more private, a repeated struggle to record the banal reality of a precise moment in everyday life when nothing is happening, work is over, the drink has not been tasted.*

2
Anne Seymour,
'Patrick Caulfield',
*Junge Engländer,
Marks on Canvas*
(exh. cat.), Kunstverein
Hannover, 1969, p.18.

After Lunch, acrylic
on canvas, 243.9cm x
213.4cm, 1975
© Tate, London 2005

overleaf
*Red and White Still
Life*, oil on board,
160cm x 213.4cm, 1964







It is precisely this sense of anticipation that is honed in Caulfield's work of the 80s and 90s, and the particulars of this fine-tuning are worth tracking before we consider his recent work. Looking back, one may have been able to see this sharpening of subject and mood in earlier pieces such as *Dining Recess* (1972). Here it would seem that the table is ready, awaiting the weight of food and drink, but none has arrived. The chairs are tightly drawn in and indicate a period of social hibernation meant to be ruptured. The source of light that will illuminate the next meal is so painfully literal in its perfect roundness and whiteness that one cannot help but laugh. It is a small giggle, almost under one's breath, compared to the full-on cackling brought on by the pieces made on the brink of the 80s. This humour is a constant trait of the artist's touch and helps lead the way.

I find the humour to be dry rather than hysterical, dry and sophisticated, like a perfect martini. That space in Dining Recess is so perfectly modern in a James Bond way ~ the ski-lodge wood paneling, the Saarinen table and chairs, the globe light ~ it almost seems like a backdrop to a scene in a Harold Pinter play, with Julie Christie and Alan Bates trading gin-soaked barbs. Translated to the space of the art gallery, it works as an invitation for the viewing public to assume a more discerning role, perhaps more civilised than in everyday life. But you wanted to talk about the work of the 80s...

We might start with a painting such as *Town and Country* (1979). It is unruly, to say the least, combining five different competing patterns, loud colour transitions in keyed-up pinks, reds, aquas and greens, and references to pop-culture including faux-wood paneling and paint-by-numbers. Its particular style of comedy is created by the seeming recklessness with which aesthetic elements are mixed. The title of the work announces its tension: this is a battle between the beloved trees and yard of a country estate and the up-to-the-minute fashions of interior design promised by an urban life. Could we be so foolish to think we might have them both, the painting seems to be asking. And what happens in this room? Once again, gone are the cues of human leisure — no beverages or snacks, let alone a mid-century breakfast nook in which to sit and enjoy them. There is only a clock on the wall and a fading sign that seems to be promising a light refreshment. All in all, the interior is unconvincing as a place in its own right, yet successful as an indication of a place that could be.

While the issue of Caulfield's relationship to his contemporaries both in England and in America may have been some point of contention in his early years of artistic development, this contest of influence seems less important in works from *Town and Country* (1979) onward. It is less a tug-of-war over which side of the Atlantic had more pull, but rather more a question of whether or not these oddly personal places in the later paintings are worth inhabiting, or are better left abandoned. Should we stay or go? Even though I just described *Town and Country* as if it had everything to offer, it does have a profound sense of longing. It seems hardly surprising to have this feeling created with an exuberance of pattern, unstoppable colour and an irreverent combination of styles. As one may read in David Batchelor's *Chromophobia* (2000), colour has always been classified as something beyond, or even outside of the norm.³ It comes from somewhere else — someplace foreign, strange and worth yearning for. If Matisse's anticipatory mindset in his last days before heading to Morocco could be translated into the aesthetics of an environment, or even the inner-imagining of Gauguin before Tahiti, or Hockney before Los Angeles, maybe this would be the place. It is as if the colourist must travel to find his tools. But Caulfield himself never left his home, so perhaps these moody interiors — little private pockets in public life — ultimately belong to him. And also to us, those viewers who possess a certain longing for the positive promises that Modernism failed to deliver.

Even though the aesthetic bombast quietens down in pieces such as *Glass of Whisky* (1987) or *Rust Never Sleeps* (1996), the sting of longing remains. In the former, areas of flat colour act as shadows or even traces

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David Batchelor,
Chromophobia,
London: Reaktion
Books, 2000, pp.22–23.



Glass of Whisky,
acrylic on canvas,
76.2cm x 111.7cm,
1987

of light, and we imagine the drinker of the drink alone at night, illuminated only by the beams of passing cars seen through the window. *Rust Never Sleeps*, also the title of Neil Young's 1979 milestone album/movie extravaganza, lets the aesthetic volume rise a bit more, but not above a red warmed by brown and surrounded mostly by darkness.⁴ The picture does its best to entice one to remain, perhaps even smell the flowers. And who knows, that empty plate may shortly be filled and joined by a small glass of something fine.

The more I look at these barroom pictures of the later 90s the more I obsess about the décor, those little touches of oppressive gentility ~ a frilled lampshade, fake-wood paneling, plush leatherette, a leaded-glass window, a reproduction gaslamp. The eponymous glass in Glass of Whisky is stemware, not a tumbler; no vulgar ice will dilute the purity of the spirit here. This is a very particular type of British space, the slightly pretentious, 'tony' lounge bar, a quiet refuge from the lads in



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'Rust Never Sleeps' was the slogan for Rustoleum, a rust-retarding treatment long-available in the UK and Canada. Both Caulfield and Young refer to this in their respective works.

It is unlikely that the painting has anything to do with the album.

Rust Never Sleeps, acrylic on canvas, 193cm x 103.7cm, 1996

the pub, the darts, the game on the telly. A place to be alone with a drink. The glass is the focal point of the painting ~ a bright and alluring centre, or a peculiar and unsettling absence. The walls fade into uncertain shapes and textures, or intrude in nightmare-ish animation, brightly coloured shapes overlapping in a confusingly disoriented distortion of space. Looking hard at these paintings we can reconstruct this depicted space through an elaborate act of concentration. It is as if by paying very careful attention to the detail in front of us, a moment of clarity, a glint of reality can be salvaged from the noise and glare of the passing world.

One last painting, *Trou Normand* (1997), or Normandy hole, 'refers to the glass of Calvados drunk halfway through a meal in order to revive the appetite'.⁵ Here the joy of pattern returns, albeit in restrained stripes and the interlocking diamonds that form the window pane, but the direct view of someplace else is gone. Nevertheless, one feels as if in a holding pattern, a brief moment of

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Livingstone, *op. cit.*, p.19.

respite and even preparation en route to somewhere else, just as the Norman tradition would suggest. The colours reinforce this feeling, carefully balanced between the bright, sometimes garish notes of Pop and a more sombre, earthy palette. Yet perhaps we won't pick up and leave, but instead will linger, even live in this interior with its brick-red surroundings that indulge us with the vagaries of spatial play. Regardless of the choice, Caulfield's paintings have a powerful psychological dimension, suggesting that these physical layovers exist in places outside of airports and other transportation hubs. Both of us observed the relationship to puzzles in Caulfield's work, and the thing about puzzles is that they beg for resolution: they must be finished. So if the space in these pictures is the destination, what does one do in these interiors? More than just shedding the day's trivialities, Caulfield's pubs and rooms act as zones in which longing is crystallised and explored.



Trou Normand,
acrylic on canvas,
190.5cm x 190.5cm,
1997