

Conversation between Merlin James and Richard Walker, first published in the catalogue for the exhibition, House Paintings.

RW It's certainly something I talk to my students about a lot, sometimes they equate large with more important. But if a big painting is really good, you don't question it. Maybe the larger scale gives you opportunities to use colour in a different way. Matisse talked about the difference between a square centimetre of blue and a square metre.

MJ Yes, I guess with someone like Alex Katz, who we've talked about before, when the scale really works, it's necessary and great.

MJ The last things of yours I saw in the studio were really large — the big sort of jig-saw compositions on board, with interlocking panels. But you're back to an intimate scale with these works.

RW Yes, the largest of that series was 8 by 15ft, so they're pretty big. I tend to work either really big or pretty small — not so much in between. The big ones envelope you and you can lose yourself in them; but small paintings draw you in, in another way.

There a difference in approach as well, the smaller works tend to be done in one sitting with no reworking. The larger ones can continue over years.

MJ I'm always interested in the way small works are able to trump big ones. Generally I'm more sympathetic to small things. The world is already so full of paintings, for one thing.

RW Still it's his small oil sketches I love most. That show of them at Timothy Taylor in London a while ago — I spent ages there.

MJ In the exhibition I curated recently for the 2012 Glasgow International [Ever since I put your picture in a frame, 20 April – 7 May 2012] we had a Katz portrait, oil on masonite, and a haunting painting by you of a moth, from your Albers Foundation residency in Connecticut a few years back. The show was a lot to do with the power and resources of painting within apparently limited or modest means. There was a James Castle picture and a Sickert portrait and various contemporary things like a Tony Swain and a Joe Fyfe. It reminded some people of an important show you were in nearly fifteen years ago in Glasgow, The Persistence of Painting at the CCA. That exhibition, which was itself sort of deceptively modest, and hung in intimate spaces, actually anticipated so many

later exhibitions about painting that ran through the '90s and the two-thousands.

RW I suppose, as the title suggests, the show was a reminder of how painting keeps folding in on itself and then something new and interesting bubbles up.

There were a lot of really strong artists in that show including Carol Rhodes and Julie Roberts; like your own show all the artists were linked by a common activity but were stylistically very varied. The work was celebrating all the tiny decisions, thoughts and gestures that make a painting; how enthralling the whole activity is. Nicola White who curated the show was very open minded in supporting a real range of work. I suppose it was interesting that there was a need to have a painting show, sort of to prove it was still alive. The show was also a reaction to Neo-Expressionism, it's not surprising that one reaction was to make the work more intimate.

MJ Also a contrast to the neo-conceptual work that Glasgow was known for in the 90s. Tell me about this recent residency you did, where you made these new things. It's a country house down towards the Scottish/English border?

RW The house is called The Haining, outside the town of Selkirk. It was built in the 1790s and it passed through various hands until it came to a lawyer who lived there in recent years. He bequeathed the whole estate — house, loch and woodland — for the 'benefit of the people of Selkirk'. The attraction for me initially was to do with landscape.

MJ Somewhat related to the Connecticut landscape that was so productive for you before. But that was early spring, wasn't it, and snowy. This was summer.

RW Yes, though when I made the work at the Albers Foundation I wasn't thinking beyond the immediate problems of making landscapes. It was later they became the basis for some of the larger works. That was the way I thought I would continue in Selkirk, but once I got there it was more the interior of the house that interested me, and the feeling of the woods being just outside.

The shutters were closed a lot, for security, and you had the light coming in through chinks and cracks. Somehow I felt like an intruder or someone hiding or prying in the place. I'd be on my own in the house, and hearing people outside. There was a performance aspect almost; working from life also has that feeling for me of being a performance. The preparation, psyching yourself up then the mixture of concentration and letting go, I suppose similar to a pianist or actor.

MJ Is it semi-derelict, this place?

RW Not really. It had maybe got dilapidated and run down. I think the owner was latterly a bit unwell; his cats had a room in the place and so on. The smell lingers on.

MJ I'm thinking of the documentary *Gray Gardens* about those women in a house out on Long Island.

RW I haven't seen it. The Haining certainly had aspects of Miss Haversham's house. The trustees have actually restored rooms and conserved the best bits of furniture and arranged things to recreate a period look. There are massive dining tables, and mirrors and fireplaces and old framed photographs. It really felt like a like a film or theatre set. The objects were like props.

There was this sense of an event or a 'scene' about to happen. In the past I'd made paintings at the Scottish Opera, in their set-building studios and workshop spaces. I'd also painted scenery for the Opera productions. The whole thing of dramatic lighting, projected light and shadow — all those concerns came back in Selkirk. And in general the idea of painting light — that still seems so magical to me. That you can paint light. How does that happen? There's the emotional and psychological possibilities in light, I think particularly gradation.

MJ You often paint doors and windows and the ways light is cast through them or changes from one space to the next.

RW Well it's been a theme in work for a while, even my graduation show in 1977 was based on

a small abandoned mill, which the forest had grown up around and enveloped, all the images were doors and windows. With the recent work I did not want to make paintings just of a country house, even though Turner made a pretty good job of it. Initially it was just a response to what excited me visually — the dark. I started to light the rooms with a projector and lamps, to create shapes, or to obscure things. And another aspect was that I'm often thinking how to use photography, or what the relationship is in my work to photography; using photographs as light rather than a printed image is interesting. I had photographs of the landscape around the house and I started projecting those into the dark rooms. So I was shutting it out, but putting it back in, in another way. And then I began even taking photos of the interiors and projecting them back on to themselves with maybe a slight shift in alignment.

MJ So then you're painting what you see. Painting the projections in the rooms.

RW It's still observational painting. I'm always interested in painting direct from what I can see. You get things then that just can't happen in other ways. There is also something fascinating about working from life, the connection to the subject; like photography it has that indexical link to reality. But I'm always thinking how to expand and explore that and push it. The big cut-panel paintings you mentioned were also trying to do that — transcribing and transforming observational sketches.

MJ In the house you'd set up the projections and the lights, then paint in one sitting?

RW It's all painting wet into wet. Very rarely I'll go back to things, but mostly it's one sitting. In a way a lot of the work — the composing, the image-making — was done in advance of the actual painting. Recently I had been experimenting with lots of different kinds and colours of priming on the boards or canvases, sometimes changing the ground colour half way across the board. So the priming colour may gradate from greeny/black to cream. For the recent paintings they are white panels but I laid

down a wet ground of a darker colour. I had four or five different blacks pre-mixed. Then I could use the white ground if needed, often wiping areas off to reveal the ground again, scratching through and so on. Mostly the lighter colours are laid on the wet black, which takes quite a bit of control.

MJ Were you in there at night, working?

RW I was, sometimes, but mostly what was interesting was in the daytime, with the light outside forcing its way through the cracks. Like the light wanted to be in the room and in the painting. It was a bit like when the dark colour was laid down the image was in there already, waiting to come out. There was something perverse but good about keeping the shutters closed and making myself work with that. Also, the problem of seeing what I was doing; seeing my colours and the board I was working on. I had to try to set up local working lights.

MJ This one with round table looks like a lot of the ground is preserved? It feels like the big oval shape is shadow of table.

RW Yes, the shadows were another projected image, sort of negative light. Also the scale of the images I was projecting is sometimes very odd. There's one that's a close-up photo of a mushroom, I've got the data-projector on the floor, with a laptop on the table, so the shadows are cast upwards. Or an oval mirror will project a circlet of light, or even a fragment of the projected image. Everything's bouncing around. It was interesting to combine this traditional way of painting with technology such as laptops and data projectors. I think the projections almost took on the role of dreams or memories, in relation to the immediate observation and visual experience.

MJ Is this face here the reverse profile of that other one?

RW No — that's a plaster or marble bust that was in the room, and the other is from a photo that was in another room that I took and projected. It's odd, there are these family photos there,

or formal studio portrait photographs, but I'm not sure they are really of people connected to the house. And I felt a bit as if I was populating this empty house with presences, or actual figures that were in some of the photos I was using.

MJ Yes, this figure isn't really in the room, is she? She's in your photo. But the scale is such that one feels she could almost be in the 'real' space. It's a bit like a ghost.

RW It's interesting, I did find myself painting the projected imagery a bit differently from the real space. It does look different. But then I'd play with that. The one with the stairs, they are projected from another bit of the house, but I painted them maybe more solidly, to increase the ambiguity.

MJ There's a Film Noir-ish thing going on, isn't there.

RW Some people have found the work quite dark, emotionally. Some part of my nature coming out, maybe!

MJ Well, there's that Nordic drama feel — Ibsen and Chekhov — domestic claustrophobia on a crumbling country estate. Again, in the show I've curated for GI we have a 1916 painting by Pryde [James Pryde, b. Edinburgh, 1866], and again I think he's quite good company for you, with those paintings he's famous for; of shadowy interiors with four-poster beds and drapes. I think a bit about Jack Yeats as well; fleeting details, fragments of an old world, refracted and dislocated.

RW I think in these paintings there's a feeling of someone stuck indoors, housebound somehow, like a childhood memory, and it's a sunny day outside, you can hear voices, maybe you're even eavesdropping on people outside the windows who don't know you're there.

MJ Eavesdropping in reverse.

RW James Pryde was definitely in my mind. But I think as well of the psychology of Dutch seventeenth-century genre paintings

— someone like de Witte. The stillness and the enigma.

MJ And you are a big fan of Fairfield Porter's interiors.

RW Yes, those views of the hallway, with the model boat, and the rooms with lamps. But also Hopper, that great painting of the cinema and I thought of some of his empty rooms with patches of light projecting in. There are lots of references in the work.

MJ These verticals keep recurring through a lot of the pictures, mostly from the cracks on doors and shutters. They set up intervals and rhythms; they're like musical bars or something.

RW Some of the verticals come from these poles I was using to stretch sheets. I was just trying to block off parts of the view at first; then the sheets and poles come into the image itself. As you say, the verticals were very useful too as a rhythm.

MJ The face in this painting looking at the stretched screen, It's like an allegory of painting and representing — of 'the viewer' looking at a canvas. In all these paintings (maybe it's too obvious to say, even) there is a lot about looking and representing. That plaster bust, or a figure in your projections, seems to stand in for the spectator looking a sort of kaleidoscope of images and fragments. And the pictures on the walls, and the bits of picture frame, or mirror. And I almost wonder if it's something to do with painting itself being, as it were, an 'old house' to be occupying now.

The culture of painting itself is an environment with a history and with layers of redecoration and restoration and reconstruction going on.

Someone told me Picasso used to use old wallpaper in his collages, not new wallpaper. So, there was maybe a datedness already to the materials he wanted to use. (Apparently Ben Nicholson was in a hotel room in Paris where there was some old wallpaper — rolls or spare scraps of it I suppose — and he gave it to Picasso for collage.)

RW Well, I didn't want the paintings to be nostalgic, but it is such a distinctive setting. And the paintings and photos on the wall meant you couldn't avoid the history of the place, some of the owners clothes were still hanging in the cupboards. To come back to the culture of painting though, I was at a meeting the other day at Glasgow School of Art, and one of my colleagues there was talking about how you can only paint in reference to the past now, and past styles. That there was no authentic way to paint any more. I don't feel that at all. I'm aware of the history but it doesn't feel like a ball and chain.

Maybe it helps that I am reacting to the physical world as much as to culture. Maybe it's a generational thing. Speaking of influence, the profile in one or two of my paintings seems really like a quote from Picasso, from Cubism. I worried it was too much of a reference in fact.

MJ Oh yes I see it now. Of course it's very like that, and like some of the late Braque studio pictures. But no, it reads as a conscious, controlled allusion. Almost a slight joke. It's not like you're painting Cubist pictures. I've just been trying to write a little recollection de Francia who died recently [Peter de Francia, 1921 – 2012], and for me the basic predominance of a Cubist 'look' is a problem in his paintings. Like an Abstract Expressionist 'look' was a problem for a lot of painters coming afterwards, and a minimalist 'look' and so on. It's not that one always has to invent a totally new language, or not in an obvious way. But, sometimes maybe it's better to go further back, if anything. Like Morandi going back to Chardin, or Katz going back to Munch or something. Sometimes that can be made new, more easily than a more recent language can.

RW I don't really know de Francia's work well.

MJ As a draughtsman especially he has a lot of admirers. He's in Beckmann/expressionist territory. Sandy in Glasgow [Sandy Moffatt, b. 1943] was quite allied to him I think. They were both in R. B. Kitaj's 'Human Clay' show, and they had some affinities in the way they championed figurative painting at the Glasgow School of Art and the Royal College in London, in the late 70s/

early 80s, In Glasgow that produced the 1980s 'New Image' generation of figure painters who got some international recognition, like Steven Campbell and others, who I guess are almost your generation. But again that was mostly big, bombastic painting; I associate you with a slightly different moment, with that 'Persistence of Painting' show that included Richard Wright, Hayley Tomkins and others. And a lot has happened since then. Painting's had so many 'comebacks' !

RW Hayley Tomkins is I think a younger generation, but artists like Richard Wright were certainly involved with the whole neo-expressionist thing in Glasgow. For some artists their 80's work is the equivalent to a mad sibling locked in the attic, we both know of one well known Scottish painter who has tried to buy this early work back as if it negated his later work. Certainly a lot of artists had to re-position themselves and in a way re-invent their practice. I suppose that is interesting to think about in relation to whether there is an authentic way of working, choosing a new style. It was a gradual change for me, like I had to pay for all the figurative excess. I had slowly been removing the figures from the work and then I was really focusing on painting what were essentially backgrounds. The interiors on their own became more interesting. Then I started working from life using the studio as subject matter.

MJ Maybe there's a sense that these paintings are stage sets, and the action is provided by the viewer's imagination entering and acting in that space. I remember a painting of yours of a satellite dish, and the way that was maybe a metaphor again for the painting as receiver/transmitter of signals — of meaning.

The painting is both receptacle and source in various ways. And interesting painting has always been that. I was just looking at an old video interview done in Glasgow in 1980 with the curator Rudi Fuchs, when he's still quite young. And here he was at the CCA in Glasgow (back when it was the third Eye Centre) and he's talking about how painting is something that's fixed and finished and that

can only be responded to in an art-historian's kind of scholarly way, or in a passive admiration of the artist's execution — like a 'jewel' he says. And he's contrasting that with conceptual art that uses a mix of text and photography and sound, and (though he admits its 'not very interesting to look at'), he's saying how much more interactive and involving and open that kind of art is, because it is hard to understand and one can read it in any order, and so on. And of course this is such lazy thinking and so obviously fallacious, because those mixed media are not inherently a guarantee of that openness, and painting was always just as capable of that complexity and non-linearity and active engagement by the viewer.

RW Painting still seems to be the default setting for visual art in some ways. Maybe the attention been given to all the other working methods, the 'expanded field' takes the pressure off painting.

Do you feel your own work responds to the 'new' media in any way? Or does it make you question what you are doing?

MJ I was interested in conceptualism and various media when I was at school and first at art school. I got deeper into painting finally for theoretical reasons as much as for a 'love of painting', whatever that is.

No art form can afford to take its terms for granted, obviously. Interesting art is always re-testing itself. And of course someone like Fuchs remained interested in painting, and realised that multi-media conceptualism itself became an academic style. I can't believe that the ICA in London just ran yet another crisis-in-painting-type debate and artists were still getting up there saying: well, we all know what painting is, it's all been done, it's time to go into the unknown and infinite possibilities of other media, of virtual cyber reality or whatever. I mean, best of luck to them because that kind of impatience can sometimes be the fuel of some good new art; and of course there is a lot of awful painting being promoted now. But the idea that painting, or any other art form, could lose its *raison d'être* by having its 'function' taken over by some other medium — that seems

to betray a very basic misconception about what art is, really.

RW I think a lot of the 'death of painting' debate was a bit lost on me. It seemed such a ridiculous idea I couldn't really engage with it. I am still in 'love' with painting, I still feel a thrill that the canvas becomes animated, I hate to say it's magical, but it is. I recently saw the Munch show in Tate Modern, it does feel that some trace of Munch, the man, is there in his work. I mean, a Donald Judd maybe makes you aware you are alive, but a Munch or a Breughel painting makes you feel that it's alive.