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Featuring
Mali Morris on Robert Welch

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IN THE STUDIO: ROBERT WELCH'S PAINTINGS BY MALI MORRIS

'I found your pessimism so exhilarating!'⁽¹⁾

The mood of Robert Welch's paintings is not pessimistic, nor is exhilaration quite my response to them, but this pairing of words comes back to me, as I try to describe how I feel about his work. It was a post-card message to Michael Hamburger, from his friend Lucien Freud, after a weekend visit.⁽¹⁾ I laughed when I first heard it, because of how well it nails down paradox, relish, and appreciation. Sitting in Welch's studio I relate this anecdote, and he gives me a look of recognition. He points to his painting of a mop-haired figure, who is either yawning or singing, 'That rings true for him... and Lowry too, for that matter ...aren't they both from Salford?' The mop-head turns out to be Mark E Smith of The Fall, someone Welch has enthused about since the late 1970s, along with L S Lowry, whose late and least celebrated paintings once triggered a change of emphasis in his own work.

Robert Welch and I have known each other for many years, so I may be fusing something I enjoy about his company with what I enjoy about his paintings. Why do I feel that they have struggled outwards through doubt towards form? They don't look laboured. They don't look casual, either. Why do they seem to imply swathes of time, history, when they appear to have been painted quickly - fluidly made images, which look contemporary, but without that being their point? On the face of it, his progress reads like a long apprenticeship, beginning at Hull and Manchester under some memorable tutors (Clyde Hopkins and the late John Clark at Hull College of Art and David Sweet at Manchester Polytechnic). 'I spent years grappling with the early developments of European and American Modernism. In some ways I became crippled with self-consciousness, daunted

by Cezanne's extraordinary effort and baffled by Cubism, but eventually the rationality of Modernism began to offer something reassuringly concrete, and finally (though it took a long time), surrendering to the demands of a painting was a revelation. With hindsight, I would say that although I equipped my first studio in Hackney as a place for observation, visual study, I was always keen to distance myself from the so-called objective painters - all that 'hard-won' nonsense. This was borne out when, just after moving to London, at the Hayward Annual 1982 I saw a thumbnail crayon drawing by Geoff Rigden, which seemed to blow everything else off the wall. Initially I had a room in the house of painter David Nicholson (grandson of Ben). He owned some great pictures by his grandmother Winifred and his great-grandfather Sir William. You can get so much from living with good art. From there I moved to Carpenters Road and unknowingly tried to make a kind of car-boot Matisse - seems funny now.'

Moving to a high second-floor studio in South London in the mid 1990s gave him an uninterrupted bird's-eye view over Deptford Creek and its abandoned industrial landscape. He flattened and simplified what he saw, and began to set up single objects in the studio. There was a gradual shift in interest. 'I became more alert to a poetic reading of painting, despite it being fraught with cliché - how the world outside mirrors the psyche, the interior. It took the likes of a so-called naïf (Alfred Wallis) or faux-naïf (in the case of Lowry) to persuade me of the undeniable power of metaphor, haunting and uncomplicated. One such moment was an unexpected encounter with a painting by Lowry, which looked more like the moon than the Lake District. The lake had become an ominous stagnant white pool in the shape of a dead bird. The picture seemed poisoned by emotion.'

Correspondingly Welch reflects



Brim
1999
Acrylic on canvas
(61 x 46cm)

Courtesy of the artist



on how the Creek could read as 'an intrusion, an opening, a wound' in his painting *Untitled (River)* (1999). Also how Brim, of the same year, was inspired by a line from a PJ Harvey lyric, *Missed*: 'I burst in, full to the brim.' 'Somehow it made sense, for different reasons, to pare down the image; technically I switched to water-based paint. I wanted to employ some of that abstract dynamic – but I also found that a reduced image opened itself up to interpretation and offered itself as lyric or archetype'

This brevity had a further consequence. He was noticing potential material when in transit, out on the High Street, and found it in other unexpected sources, 'I began to see the fill-in shots of TV documentaries as paintings – the idea of the world as mute witness to a human drama, a device often used by film directors. That appealed to me.'

Welch talks of 'seeing potential for facture, for moving an image into a sign. And the sign might evoke a state of being.' The side of a building will startle him, because of its looming blankness, or 'unresponsiveness'. The sight of three men in a van careering off to work stays in his mind. A half-naked man lurches around a corner into sudden close-up, smoking fiercely, his torso white, with arms and face a sunburned red. Looking vulnerable and aggressive at the same time. But how these glimpses become paintings, how they can work as paintings, and how in turn the paintings will affect a view of the world – that will be another story. I know something of his working methods, trial and error, preparations for terseness. He makes many paintings on paper, not rehearsals so much as ruminations. Some of them become works in their own right. The discarded ones make the canvases more likely to succeed. He has always drawn a lot.

The photographer/artist Walker Evans, in his lecture *Lyric Documentary*, described his ambivalence to both those



Above: *Untitled (river)*
1999
Acrylic on canvas
(27 x 33cm)

Opposite Page: *Sunburn*
2004
Acrylic on canvas
(76 x 66cm)

Both courtesy of the artist

words, believing that if documentary truth is aimed at, it will be missed, and that 'the lyric is usually produced unconsciously and even unintentionally and accidentally.'⁽²⁾ I think that in his work as painter/artist, Welch is aware of the power of metaphor in his chosen imagery, but his conscious activity is in examining what he understands to be the terms of painting (because of the power he feels in paintings), and how this could relate to his own experience of being in and looking at the world today (because that too is felt). Description and the poetic are not sought, but might be arrived at.

We discuss photography and film, their differences from painting, and their influences on it. We both like the film-essays of Margaret Tait and the photographs of William Eggleston. Welch describes how the camera, in favourite films, pans away to focus on something which is inconsequential to the drama being played out central stage, the domestic objects in Satyajit Ray's *Apu*



Top: **Portal**
2008
Acrylic on canvas
(120 x 168cm)

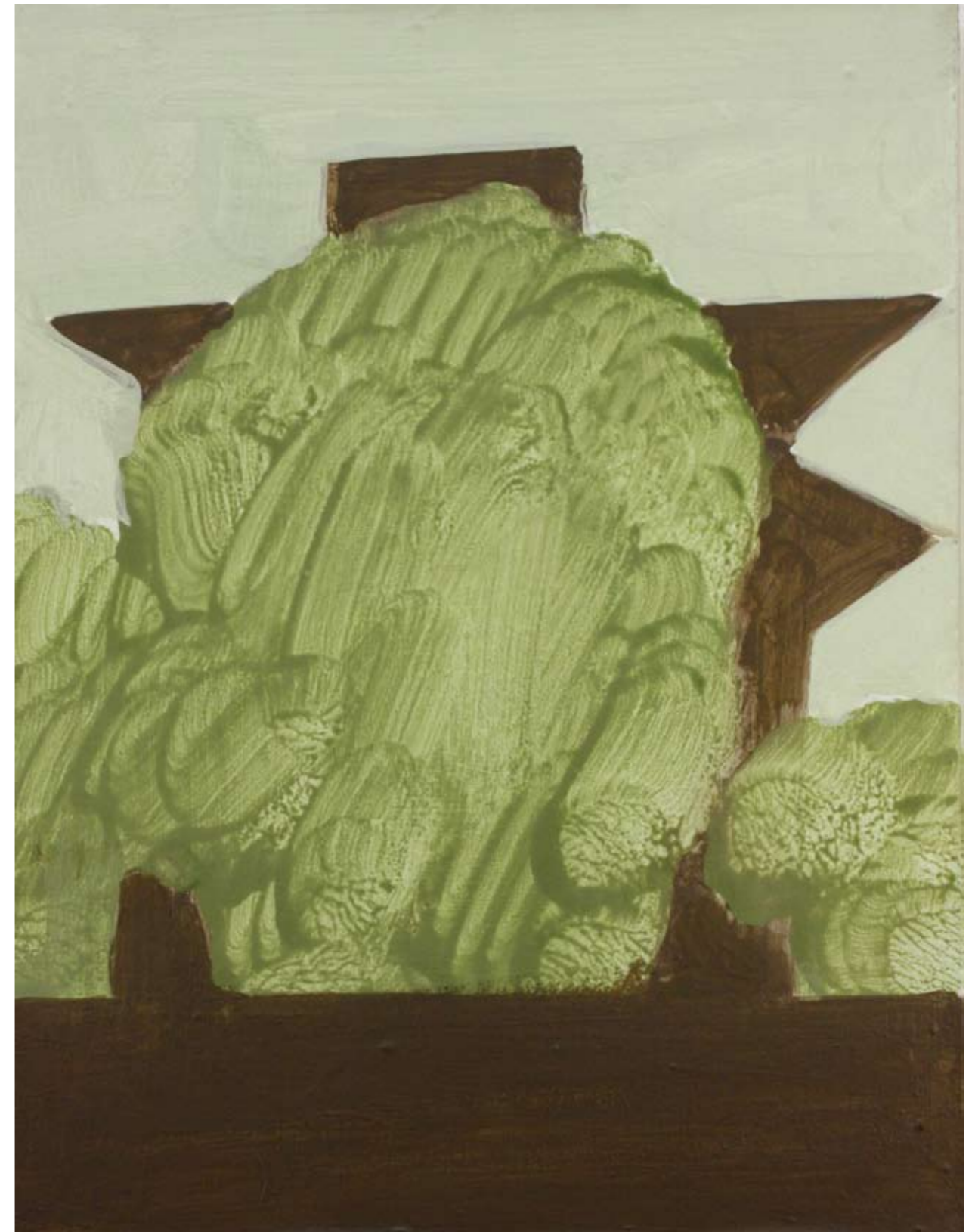
Bottom: **Untitled (pale curtain)**
1999
Acrylic on canvas
(66 x 51cm)

Opposite Page: **Georgian**
2009
Acrylic on canvas
(66 x 51cm)

All courtesy of the artist

Trilogy, the spider in *This Sporting Life*. He lists black-and-white images stilled by memory, composed originally by Hitchcock, Kurosawa, Ozu, and especially Vigo. He was affected by the way Wim Wenders, inspired by Hollywood editing, but finding his imagery in unglamorous Europe, combined them to find the monochromatic poetry of *Alice In The Cities*. In the painting *Pale Curtain* (1999), it is as if he has panned across a room with his own viewfinder. He has found two triangles of sky-blue bunting hanging in a flat painting-like space, caught between a sketched-in spread of drapery. It might be a frame, a crop, arrived at, paused at - and stayed with just long enough to make the sensation real in painting's terms. But to consider what these terms of painting are has taken much longer, and will mean continually weighing up all aspects of what is still present, to this painter, from painting's past.

Svetlana Alpers writes of how Manet recognized in Velazquez, and himself employed a 'naiveté du métier' - which she elaborates as frankness of technique, a candid economy in the handling of paint, in Velazquez's case, 'an abbreviation in his realization of painted things. Velazquez makes do with less paint. Manet's abbreviations are executed with juicier pigments. The appearance of speed, of ease, is different in kind.'³ The whole chapter explores how artists are 'at ease making connections between art of different times and places', how the flow from past to present and back again can seem continuous, in spite of the convulsions en route. This is a quality I sense and savour in Welch's paintings - an involvement with tradition, evolved into contemporary form. The 'how' and 'what' of depiction seem to collapse into each other, which looks like innocence, but is not. There is nothing didactic here, painting is not being used to make a





Top: **Cloud In Your Eye**
2009
Acrylic on canvas
(66 x 148cm)

Bottom: **Cavefish**
2004
Acrylic on canvas
(69 x 51cm)

Both courtesy of the artist

point, but is being inhabited, as a practice. I feel aware of an effort being invested in not making gratuitous claims for it.

In the paintings of the last ten years, forms are simplified with a lightness of touch almost like wit, but less antic, less dandyish than that. Relationships of any kind are taut, though this precision is barely noticeable at first. Palettes are very restricted, but colour reads as pitch-perfect, moving the eye through the often wafer-thin spaces, as much the subject of the painting as anything depicted. Drawing and painting are one and the same. Surfaces are velvety, but handling does not seem restrained. Sometimes there is very fluid calligraphic painting, on top of a dense, dry ground. It is an economy of form that feels like the ease of decision after dilemma, deliberation carried out elsewhere. There would always have been effort in looking hard at painting, and also when taking in the world with a sharp eye, and wondering, working out, how these two activities are connected, or ever could be. And there is certainly effort in judging what relationships of hue and tone will manage to get the light right, and what consistency of paint will reach the canvas in a particular way, to make a new surface.

This is Ortega y Gasset in 1943, on Velazquez, 'his concern: to translate the everyday into permanent surprise to

contrive that reality itself, once transferred to the picture, without ceasing to be the stark reality that it is, should acquire the fascination of the unreal. Only one thing concerns him: that the things are there, that they loom up taking us by surprise, with a ghostly air (By such means, he) accomplishes the retraction of painting into pure visuality.⁷⁽⁴⁾

To confirm his belief that the structures of painting, of the world, and of the psyche can connect, are connected, Welch lists the painters who have startled him, been revelatory in this, – amongst them Milton Avery, Georges Braque, and Stuart Davies. They have effected the transformation of observation/description into what Matisse called sign. A close study of Matisse has helped demystify this process (though would never have made painting any easier). I know Welch looks at contemporary painting too, - I am not sure which artists he has found most important, or useful, but we compare notes on shows, and I can see why he would be interested in how pictorial conventions are explored by Mary Heilmann, Merlin James, Alex Katz, Karen Kilimnik, Laura Owens, Wilhelm Sasnal, and Luc Tuymans, amongst others.

In a recent development he has hung a number of single images laterally or vertically, butted up against each other as if collaged or clipped from a sequence. 'Initially this came about by accident but resulted in the grouping of three canvases as one work, titled 'Transit'. I began to explore a more filmic content. Although I felt somewhat uncomfortable about it at the time, I was so impressed with certain sequences of editing in Julien Temple's film, *The Future is Unwritten*, I was compelled to steal from it.'

This documentary tribute to Joe Strummer provides imagery for a recent work, *Cloud In Your Eye* (2009).

The original spread of canvases was edited down to two, avoiding an overtly

narrative reading. The final pairing sets up a kind of bleached-out enigma. We are looking at a diptych, the jump-cut editing of two close-ups, one showing the features of a young woman, the other, a single eye. From the left-hand canvas her pale blue eyes look out into a distance, as if distracted. On the right, in a different version of shorthand drawing/painting, five grey lines on a grey brushy ground describe a more direct and possibly baleful stare. The painting's mournful beauty is as much to do with this comparison of sparse depictions as with its strange palette. There is a simple but disorienting shift of scale between the two images, and a central dip into space with the perspective white chevrons of raw canvas. A colour passage moves slowly across the whole work from left to right, pale face to pale green foliage, to the cold grey gaze, - which makes you look back again to the left-hand portrait, to see that it has a warmth, after all. It looked so simple, as a composition, when I first saw it, and almost spontaneous in its facture, but its complexities ripple out, and what might have been mistaken for cursory elegance becomes more full, more demanding and more layered each time I see it.

An earlier work *Portal* (2008) shows a spread of objects, a tableau glimpsed through the window of an antique shop, probably at night. The light is ghostly, because of the watery white lines on a solid black ground. There are chandeliers, music stands, and an all-over rhythm, which slips in to and out of various spatial readings. The energy packed in to the tight jostle of a stolid still-life at bottom right expands and fans out towards the opposite corner, reaching a white star-burst, a swinging lampshade, painted fast and open and carefree. The charge of the image I recognize, not specifically, but from those run-of-the-mill sightings that for some reason, in a flash, become arresting. And because an account of this has come

about through a fascination with language, we are given the poetics of painting.

They are without glamour or moral, these new works, but have the distinction of epiphany, delicate, and fleeting, melancholic perhaps, but not sentimental. At the same time they are as much about painting – about abstract painting, figurative painting, any painting – as they can possibly be, and therefore seem robust, time-defying, and convincing, reaching down through mood towards structure.

A man with a white T-shirt of a torso; and here is just a fragment of landscape paired with an electric fire. A block of flats would look grim but for its grid of tiny, glowing pastel-lit windows. A white kettle. A bucket. A drum-kit. But why are the things the way they are? Is it the same question as why are the paintings the way they are? Why does this make me feel and experience something, rather than understand it as description or idea? The paintings are stringent, but have an ease about them. It strikes me as poignant that they turn out to have what I would call beauty, for they do not seem to deliberately seek it.

Notes:

(1) Quoted by Michael Glover in a tribute to the late Michael Hamburger, poet and translator. News & Notes section of the third issue of *The Bow-Wow Shop* (www.bowwowshop.org.uk), an international poetry forum.

(2) Lecture at Yale University, 1964, quoted in *Walker Evans at Work*, Ed. Jerry L Thompson, 1994.

(3) Svetlana Alpers, *The Vexations of Art*, 2007 edition.

(4) Quoted by Julian Bell, *Velazquez Brought to Light*, TLS, 27 Oct 2006.

All the artist's quotes are from e-mail correspondence and recent conversations in Welch's studio.



Canopy (2) – Mali Morris
2009
Acrylic on canvas
(18 x 24cm)

Courtesy of the artist

