

The devil is in

Andrew Bracey

(detail) 1

A photographer prints an image in a dark room. He spots something almost indiscernible to the naked eye. He enlarges a section of the image several times. This process and his scrutiny reveals something unseen on location. The cropping and enlargement of the original image reveals a body hidden in the bushes. This scene from Antonioni's *Blow Up* is an influential example of cinema critically examining the image.

(detail) 2

In an earlier scene, David Hemming's character moves from his photographic studio to a neighbouring artist's studio. Unprompted, the painter's first words to him are about a four year old painting; "They don't mean anything when I do them; just a mess. Afterwards I find something to hang on to, like that bit. The 'it' sorts itself out and adds up. It is like finding a clue in a detective story."¹

1 Antonioni, Michelangelo, *Blow Up*, DVD, Directed by Michelangelo Antonioni, Jersey City: Turner Entertainment, 1966.

(detail) 3

Near the end of Balzac's *The Unknown Masterpiece*, Frenhofer shows a mystified fellow painter, Porbus his final painting, and says, "Come closer, you'll see better how it's done. At a distance, it vanishes."²

² Balzac, Honoré de, 2001, *The Unknown Masterpiece*, New York Review of Books, p.42

(detail) 4

Malcolm Morley has claimed that looking at a painting under a microscope changed his approach to painting; saying, "... that's really where the energy of the painting was – in all those tiny strokes. I realized I wanted to see through and into, instead of across."³

3 Erik Verhagen, 2010, The Painting of Gerard Gasiorowski circa 1970: A Comparative Reading, In *Gerard Gasiorowski*, ed. by Bonnet, F & Mangion, E, 2010, Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, p. 18

(detail) 5

Similarly, in John Hughes' *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, Cameron Fry appears to 'zone out' when looking at *A Sunday on La Grande Jette*. The camera increasingly zooms into the painting, going beyond Seraut's dots into the weave of the canvas, as a parallel with the character's state of mind (concentration, insight or his vacuity).

All these are examples of getting in closer to view a painting to enable a different response. In my own painting practice I have spent countless hours in the studio staring in a focused daze, seeking the 'it' referred to in *Blow Up*, or trying to find something that went un-noticed whilst I was involved in the activity of painting. Whether I am in the studio painting or in the gallery viewing pictures I try to get up close to a painting, to attempt, in Morley's words, to see through and into. Perhaps, against convention, I am more interested in looking than seeing. After all to say 'I see' implies you understand, or at least give the impression of comprehension, whilst to say 'I'll look into it' suggests investigation; one does not see harder, but rather looks harder. (*detail*) is an exhibition that has developed from the scrutiny involved in looking at paintings, both in person in the studio or gallery or in varied forms of reproduction. The idea was sparked as a response, in part, to my reaction to the mural paintings at Phra Rabiang in Wat Phra Kaew, Bangkok. This mural stretches serpentine-like around a large courtyard in the Royal Palace, causing the visitor to walk the mural and make a collection of sections in their mind, in order to construct a whole 'picture'.

(*detail*) collects together a wide range of painters, from the well established to recent graduates with the objective of creating an exhibition that through its installation: a) explores the notion of the reproduced painting, b) investigates the close up or detail of (reproduced) paintings and c) explores the paradox of choice in a mass image culture. Their work encompasses myriad subjects; spans abstraction, landscape, figuration and conceptually driven practices; and includes a wide variety of mediums associated with painting. 118 artists were invited to select a close-up from one of their paintings; which painting and what constituted a detail were left for the artists to decide. These details were printed and displayed en-masse in the gallery. The exhibition is both a group show of 118 artists, and a room-sized collage created from 118 photographs of details of artworks. It can be seen as a collection, or more accurately a snapshot, of contemporary painting. The exhibition brings together diverse paintings and repositions them with other works; the connections between the images are simultaneously deliberate and serendipitous.

Jonathan Lasker has said that he sees his own paintings “as a form of image kit or perhaps as jigsaw puzzles, which offer components of paintings as clues pointing the viewer, not as finished narrative (as when the last piece of the jigsaw puzzle completes the picture of Norte Dame), but rather to a self awareness of how one construes a painting. Throughout I try to put things in non-normal relationships with one another.”⁴ Lasker’s idea of non-normal relationships was incorporated into the ethos of the exhibition through the selection and display of the paintings, in order to encourage viewers to create their own associations and interpretations of the (interplay between) images.

The placement of the works, both in relation to each other and as a whole collection in the space, is a shifting one, near infinite in its possibilities, but tied also to the decisions for each venue. I asked artist/curator Nick Simpson to decide which images would go into the different sized panels in the irregular grid framework that covers the walls at H Project Space in Bangkok. Rosalind Krauss has written of the grid being ‘fully, even cheerfully schizophrenic’ and that it indicates infinity, meaning that any boundaries are changeable. This idea of a cheerful schizophrenia embedded in the grid is interesting in the context of the display of works in (detail). By making all the arrangement decisions away from Bangkok⁵, a form of near-randomness occurred; or at least away from curatorial choice governed by aesthetic, thematic or ‘gut’ reasoning.

The decision to relinquish my responsibility for the positioning of the works was a conscious one⁶, born from the surprise of image juxtaposition in folders on a hard drive being reconfigured when re-ordered in different headings

4 Lasker, Jonathan, 1998, *Complete essays 1984-1998*, New York: Edgewise Press, p. 19

5 By necessity of printing the photographs to size, all the planning for the positioning was done in the UK in the weeks prior to the exhibition, by Simpson, who had no first hand experience of the space.

6 At Transition Gallery the order of the artists in the grid will be decided by pulling names out of a hat, the first name will be nearest the door. In the Usher gallery the images will break from the grid and be more randomly distributed.

(by 'name', 'date modified', 'size', 'kind', etc.). This was carried through to the exhibition's website⁷ and this publication, for which the image layout has been decided by the designers, Jonathan Casciani & Oliver Wood. I believe that switching my paradox of choice when positioning the works with the (non) choice and taste of other parties has made the show more interesting. The exhibition is a shifting entity, not fixed in form and is re-presented and re-imagined as it moves to each venue, creating an exhibition that is site responsive to the particular nature of each gallery.

Krauss has also wrote that the, primarily, Modernist paintings that use the grid, only present "...a mere fragment, a tiny piece arbitrarily cropped from an infinitely larger fabric. Thus the grid operates from the work of art outward, compelling our acknowledgement of a world beyond the frame."⁸ There are of course, also a near infinite list of other possibilities of different photographs of painting details, other paintings and further painters that could have ended up in the exhibition. The photographs in the exhibition are each an image themselves, and a fragment of the original painting. When seen on mass in a (near) grid, they hint at an almost infinite amount of possibilities for images.

Krauss describes how a window frame limits our view of the landscape, whilst confirming our certainty that the world continues beyond it. The images in this exhibition could be seen in a similar manner; by our knowledge that they are details of paintings they offer a certainty that the image continues beyond the edge, without us being necessarily sure of what it actually looks like. This is further muddled in the gallery by the juxtaposition of images, which inform and contradict the images we focus on. In many ways the images in this exhibition are partial, in that they are only a part of the whole composition and that by its nature, painting should be experienced first hand. The reproduced close-up allows us to focus on the brush strokes, surface and minutiae of the painting, but the reproduced painting is fundamentally experienced differently to how a painting is primarily experienced;

7 www.paintingdetail.com

8 Rosalind Krauss, 1997, *The Originality of the Avant Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, London, MIT Press, p. 18

arguably even more so when the reproduction is exhibited in a gallery (as art), as opposed to being online, in a catalogue or a postcard.

John Berger's iconic series *Ways Of Seeing* famously starts with Berger taking a knife to (a copy of) Botticelli's *Venus and Mars*, to cut out the detail of Venus' face, so Venus shifts from "allegorical figure (and) becomes a pretty girl anywhere"⁹. Berger uses this painting (and much of the series and corresponding book) to make the point that since mechanical reproduction (and more so now with digital reproduction) the unique painting in one room, can now be seen in millions of other places and that when the "camera reproduces a painting, it destroys the uniqueness of its image. As a result its meaning changes. Or, more exactly, its meaning multiplies and fragments into many meanings."¹⁰ This idea of their being many different ways to experience what was once a unique image is an exciting one.

James Elkins has written at length on the importance of looking and on the detail in painting.¹¹ In *The Object Stares Back*, Elkins lists numerous ways he has of looking at reproductions of paintings, including in a bath! He suggests that once you have spent a long time looking, and in diverse ways, an image will become more complex and become an amalgamation of different thoughts and images, gathered over time. He uses an example of *St. John the Merciful* by Titian that he has never seen in person, but has learned to appreciate from images in books; Elkins states that, "My idea of the picture is composed of all those reproductions, in black-and-white, in color, and in slides, together with all the remembered and half-remembered things I've read and heard."¹² This idea of

9 Berger, John. 1972, *Ways of Seeing* http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OpDE4VX_9Kk, accessed 16/6/2014

10 Berger, John. 2008, *Ways of Seeing*, London, Penguin Books, p19

11 As a start please read: *What Painting Is, Pictures and Tears*, Elkins entries at the Huffington Post <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/james-elkins> and *The Object Stares Back*, a section from which is reprinted in this publication.

12 Elkins, James, 1997, *The Object Stares Back*, New York, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, p.38

a picture amalgamated by experience and by 'second-hand' viewings is a significant one and is explored in my companion essay on *Las Meninas*.

Painters have, of course, long used reproductions of paintings to re-examine painting and created their own versions of other artists' work. Francis Bacon was obsessed, not necessarily with the original of Velázquez's *Portrait of Pope Innocent X*¹³, but with multiple reproductions of it. Gerhard Richter, whose work has been said to both problematise the reproduction, the act of looking¹⁴ and to resemble picture details¹⁵, has talked of his desire to paint as well as Vermeer or Titian, and has responded, in part, to this by painting five versions of Titian's *Annunciation*, importantly from a postcard. One could speculate that Bacon or Richter might have been unable to produce their own work if they were responding to original painting, instead of the reproduction¹⁶.

The photographs in (*detail*) reference the original paintings by each of the 118 artists, but they are also removed from the context of the original painting, because of the particular nature of the camera. Photographic details of paintings are most commonly seen in exhibition catalogues and artist's monographs¹⁷. In this regard Kenneth Clark's 1938 book, *One Hundred Details From the National Gallery* is a precursor to (*detail*), being arguably the first context where the notion of the photographic detail of painting was explored publically in depth. The premise of the book was to pair paintings from

13 It is said that he never viewed the painting first-hand, even when in Rome.

14 Achim Borchardt-Hume, 2011, 'Dreh Dich Nicht Um': Don't Turn Around, Richter's Paintings of the Late 1980s, In *Gerhard Richter: Panorama*, Ed. Godfrey, Mark & Serota, Nicholas, London: Tate Publishing, p. 163

15 Obrist, Hans Ulrich & Elger, Dietmar, 2009, *Gerhard Richter – Text*, London: Thames & Hudson, p. 297 and p. 417

16 Someone asked me if (*detail*) could have been made of actual fragments of paintings, which to me is less interesting as an exhibition construct than dealing with photographs of the paintings. Please see <http://www.paintingdetail.com/extra/2014/6/9/curators-talk-h-project-space-bangkok>

17 My favourite is: Born, Annick & Martens Maximiliaan, 2012, *Van Eyck: In Detail*, Antwerp, Ludion

across genre, geography and time, with an emphasis by Clark on bringing out beauty and to create analogies and contrasts. Clark recognised that, as a culture, we are increasingly not looking at pictures carefully enough and saw a power in the photographic detail to enable us to value patient scrutiny. He wrote that, "They are, in fact, an aid to appreciation more valuable, because more concrete, than the numerous books on how to look at pictures. They fulfil one of the first functions of criticism by presenting familiar material from a fresh point of view."¹⁸

Clark and other examples cited above hint at painting being freed of some of its essential qualities (the frame, being seen in person, complete composition etc.) when it is reproduced and seen in close up, to offer up something fresh or new. For me there is something fundamental in this ability for a painting to be able to change in the eyes of the viewer, and the idea of the detail promotes this shift. (*detail*) as an exhibition was an attempt to look at painting with fresh eyes. By taking some of the key concerns from my own painting practice (the importance of looking, of the detail or close up and of a collage mentality in relation to painting) I hope to have created an exhibition that questions painting in an attempt to look at it anew.

18 Clark, Kenneth, 2008, *One Hundred Details From the National Gallery*, London, National Gallery, Company Ltd., p. 7

