

The Corrupt Geologist and the Awkward Coroner

Strictly speaking, the cleansing of language is less a political act than an economic one. Language is liberated from excess, from a corrupting mass that cannot be said to amount simply to the opposite of the beautiful. What the master excises is ornament: the calligraphy that enlightens the eye; the things in language that go beyond articulation; that which encumbers its flow and makes it unwieldy; that which fattens language without enriching it.[1]

Questioning the author and reader's relationship is as good a place as any to start writing about painting, and particularly so with regard to the corrupted image that Damien Flood presents to us. This is not a strategy to direct you, the reader and observer, away from the *object* of Flood's paintings and towards a *subject* of my casual acquaintance. No! I promised myself back in 2010 when asked by the artist to write a text around his work that I would confront his paintings head on, 'stay the course' so to speak, through what could be generally thought of as the descriptive storm of writing on painting.

Furthermore, this was a self-directed challenge, not a request by the artist: the brief was open-ended. This essay developed, as the title suggests—'The Corrupt Geologist and the Awkward Coroner'—through a corrupted process, having been rewritten several times since 2010 and existing in the public already, well a version of it.[2] But, for this particular context, one that is as much about the search for a context-appropriate art writing and criticism as it is a textual confrontation with the artwork, I felt it was necessary to dig the essay back up after it had settled for two years—much like the process that Flood adopts in his painting practice—and have at the ready the metaphorical shovel, spade, pickaxe to excavate the hidden text just beneath the image.

All these analogies and metaphors for digging lead directly to the ritual of death, which extends back to the death of the image—the 'finished' image in other words—and with that the death of the artist and birth of the observer. However, before any 'birth' could take place a referential starting point had to be resolved. The referential compass, however, was gyrating from side-to-side, as if a dialectic was being played out between the word as infinite conveyor and the image as production 'belt'; word and image being complicit in Flood's corrupted, and corruptible, aesthetic.

Furthermore, the seeds of Flood's corruption was one thing, but mixed with my corrupted sources, as designated observer and author for this particular context, they would trigger further corruption down the interpretative line, with the obvious, but never personally acknowledged, realisation concerning the hand-me-down nature of visual interpretation and verbal translation between artist-observer-writer, and how the painted image is translated through the interpretive and subjective limitations of visualisation and verbalisation.

When confronted with Flood's paintings, with the purpose of writing on them, literary references churned, with Ernest Hemingway's fisherman, Santiago, coming to the surface for a gulp of air first, pronouncing a 'yelp' when no translation was possible: "'Ay', he said aloud. There is no translation for this word and perhaps it is just a noise such as a man might make, involuntarily, feeling the nail go through his hands and into the wood." [3] Then, in tow, D.H. Lawrence came to mind, specifically his example of repressed and vulgar interpretation through the eyes and vernacular of the cultured and the common: "Their ['high-brows'] fear of the instincts and intuitions is even greater than that of the English Tommy who calls: 'Eh, Jack! Come an' look at this girl standin' wi' no clothes on, an' two blokes spittin' at er.' This is the vision of Botticelli's Venus." [4]

However, my promise to address Flood's paintings 'head on', a promise that would start the hand-me-down (conveyor) belt of interpretation, meant that things got a little messy. Idioms and phrases took on double meanings. Sincere and humble Arcadian phrases like 'live off the fat of the land' became anthropo-morphised: 'fat' suggesting cannibalism by living off the very fat of the land. My corruptibility was tested. But the desire to fatten language, to dig deeper into the Earth, or 'earths', that Flood paints, was inevitable. As was giving a voice to the silent subterfuge of his imagery, and with that, verbal etiquette and table manners were forgotten.

And so I start with an image, not a painting, but the beginnings of a painting[5]; an unrecorded image of J.W.M. Turner tied to the mast of a ship in the 1840s, to experience the violence of Nature at first hand. This image signifies a self-reflexive analogy for the act of writing 'directly' on painting, and an apt curtain-raiser for what are the tempestuous images that Flood paints, as they relentlessly rub a little corruptibility on the tongue and mind of the observer.

*If language is beautiful, it must be because a master bathes it—
a master who cleans shit holes, sweeps offal, and expurgates city
and speech to confer upon them order and beauty.[6]*

Whatever interpretative 'Frankenstein' is produced by the reader, the author's textual vision will be reassembled through subjective convenience. Deleuze describes this type of assimilation and synthesis as a form of "buggery" and "immaculate conception" that produces a "monster." He defends this practice when he writes: "But it also had to be a monster because it was necessary to go through all kinds of decenterings, slips, break ins, secret emissions".[7]

Damien Flood's paintings look like they were made by a corrupt geologist. He is knee-deep in 'stuff' that is suggestive of the ecologically friendly—browns, greens, drips, rainbows, islands, mountains—but that first impression is only made at face value. Under this lamina of ecological and organismic growth a malformation is taking place. What can be interpreted from these malformed shapes and entropic spaces is that Flood's daily painting routine is a process of excavation, where, in the studio, several layers of painted horizons are covered over and then dug back up, using the awkward relationship between chance and intent to create a corrupted materiality.

It is the slipping-and-sliding between what bit-parts to disregard that is aesthetically proactive, and what scraps to keep that are profoundly difficult to reassemble verbally. That places the viewer in an interpretative space that is contorted by dualities; between life and the cadaver, mass and precision, nature and nurture. To find our verbal feet, in a painted space where rational perspective has broken its logical legs from an infinite fall—all crumbled and bent in the corners of Flood's stretched cotton, impossibly tangled, a Gordian Knot—perpetuates a further set of dualities, between attractiveness and revulsion, potentiality and helplessness.

'Slippage' is one way to describe how words fail you, while inert before Flood's paintings: the act or instance of slipping, especially, a movement away from an original or secure place. Language becomes profuse and heavy; populated by laconic sentences, decadent synonyms, unassertive semi-colons.

'Slippage', however, also intimates surface rather than what is underneath. Flood's paintings are an invitation to dig, taste, smell the stuff beneath the surface—moisture, salt, trace minerals. In the act of writing, these traces can only be listed, not sensed—as Roland Barthes succinctly diagnosed: "when written, the word shit doesn't smell." [8] However, to write shit with shit offers an alternative.

And there are instances when paint approaches the appearance of shit, especially when the painting is in jeopardy of becoming a diarrhetic mess. Flood's paintings somehow manage to suggest both an intestinal and ecological world that has been lacerated and tormented by disaster, whilst also retaining a translucent and colourful note of hope in the biologically lyrical accents of his brushstrokes.

In *Lake*, what looks more like a pond—those geographical oddities that attract the gumboots of children—paint itself plays the part of waste, left to stagnate at the water's edge. These pictorial orifices that are sometimes found on Flood's shattered earths are in the process of flux, about to excrete a mutated future that has not yet formed, and in doing so prevent the potential for a childhood memory to take root, gumboots or not. Oil paint, just like Nature, when left lying static for too long, stinks, as if movement and re-articulation produce evolution and pleasant aromas. The fact is, oil paint never dries, it oxidises: Rembrandt's fungal portraits are still, after 400 years, secreting humanity. Stasis, on the other hand begins a phase of devolution and decomposition, placing us back in the primordial muck. Flood's paintings are stuck in the middle, acting as a pivot for the ethereal and earthbound to rock back and forth.

There is skin here also, paint that becomes skin, or metaphorically wraps itself around the canvas like skin. *Waist* has an overhang of paint reaching beyond the stretched cotton. The title *Waist* could be heard and understood as 'waste'. Dangerously extending this shit metaphor beyond redemption, let us venture out from this colonic portrait, like a parasite might, and onto the land, specifically, the landscape.

Our perception of landscape is drawn out by the elements of light, wind and water. Tradition shows us that the painter is fixated on these elements. John Constable and Camille Corot's oil sketches and painted landscapes reveal both artists' shared tendency to let painting itself corrupt the nature of representation, and the representation of Nature, all for the sake of good painting. This was not *mimesis*, but *diegesis*, the artist speaking from within the artwork. There are no breaks in the clouds of a Constable oil sketch. There are no openings in Corot's foliose trees. As viewers of the painted image, all we are left with are canopies and umbrellas of grey that don't illustrate Nature, but allow us to imagine what is behind it.

Flood's landscapes are typically overcast. Although there are instances of colour in his articulation of his new geographies, the colour takes the form of what looks like the residual noise from an explosion or implosion of elements.

Fictional chemistry and physics are at the heart of the artist's aesthetic. His previous solo show at Green on Red Gallery entitled *Counter Earth* borrowed the pre-Socratic hypothesis that the Earth was counterbalanced by another Earth, called *Antichthon* (counter-earth), which was said to be Earth's polar opposite in every sense of the word. Flood proffers an appreciation of what 'opposite' may pertain to in his painted skies and grounds, which all at once seem to flip, invert and swallow their peripheral contents in a struggle to create a pictorial opening in the most frustrating of framed spaces—the stretched canvas—a straitjacket of sorts. The bits of rock, the ruptures in space, the unwieldy shapes that slug on the primed cotton are stuck in time, trying to break free into Einsteinian relativity. Puddles can be imagined on the periphery of the frame, formed from the storm drifts of layered paint. The paint itself is bogged down in the canvas as if weathered by wind and rain. And when it rains it pours in Flood's paintings. Well, the potential to *lash* is signified by the ubiquitous emblematic rainbows that act as formal signposts between change and stasis: signalling the storm and subsequent calm of the storm's destructive aftermath.

It is Flood's 'fear' of representing the figure as a whole entity on the canvas, however, that bears the most visually innovative and metaphorically enticing fruit of his creative labour. That is why you only see a skull cap with furrowed brow in *Furrow*, and the tips of glove-like fingers in *Populus* (a video game in which the player is God). *Electric*, however, is Flood's best and most illustrative exercise of this figurative fear. Flood arrogantly locates the amphibious form at the centre of the canvas. Significantly, the composition is not off-centre or askew. It is a creature bereft of balance, all arms and elbows. It seems in the process of tearing itself apart—a self-dismemberment. All this malformation has the marks of a Stanley blade, not a surgeon's knife. Flood does not paint a convenient image.

In *Eye* a giant Galilean 'eye' projects its downward gaze onto a polymer-type tree spurt. Here, the molecular is being observed by a cyclops' eye—the Titan's gaze. The *Titanomachy* (The War of the Titans from Greek Myth) is described as an orgy of castration, vomit producing life, spilled blood begetting more life, Oedipal love and cannibalism. In Flood's paintings there is a face-off between the irrationality of myth and empirical science. But just like in a Constable or Corot, the artist is fiendishly attracted to what is not observable, that which is imaginable beyond the perimeter of the frame.

D.H. Lawrence once said that good painting relied on the two positions of subjectivity and objectivity. For him, Paul Cézanne's "objective substance" and Vincent Van Gogh's "subjective earth"[9] represented this duality. Both these artists can be unearthed from Flood's soiled paintings. Cézanne is here in the artist's patient delivery of his new geography, while Van Gogh is in his subjective forms—literally so in *Envelope*, in which Flood borrows Van Gogh's *signature* brushstrokes that uniformly swirl across the surface. It is a wonderful painting, verbally playful, along with *Breath*, which represents the artist's most recent direction.

Envelope is made up of three coagulated masses that are pinioned by a pyramidal shape, yellowish-green in colour. 'Pyramidal' suggests a form that has a stable geometry, but this shape visually shifts between something polyhedral and something flat. Against the vortex backdrop of schizophrenic dabs of paint, *à la* Van Gogh, the amorphous shape reflects the dual accents and meanings of the painting's title: 'envelope' (envə,lōp), and 'envelop' (in'veləp).

In *Breath*, the solid, misshapen masses are replaced by dabs of paint that are caught, seemingly, in an ecological storm. Like *Envelope*, the word 'Breath' has two accents, 'breath' (breTH), and 'breed' (brēD). Both 'to breed' and to take one's 'first breath' represent an ontological beginning: Flood's corrupted aesthetic, as a whole, resists an epistemological conclusion.

James Merrigan

Endnotes

- 1 Dominique Leporte, *The History Of Shit*, reprint edition, MIT Press, 2002, 9.
- 2 The first, let's call it loosely an 'edition' of this text, was published on the occasion of Damien Flood's solo exhibition at the Green on Red Gallery, Dublin, November, 2011. The publication, entitled *The Spectral Gallery*, included essays by Saskia Vermeulen and Mary Conlon.
- 3 Ernest Hemingway, *The Old Man and the Sea*, Panther, 1976.
- 4 See D. H. Lawrence's 'Introduction to These Paintings', from *Phoenix: The Posthumous Papers of D. H. Lawrence*, (Ed.) Edward D. McDonald, Viking Press, 1972.
- 5 *Snow Storm—Steam-Boat off a Harbour's Mouth* (1842), by J.M.W. Turner.
- 6 Dominique Leporte, op.cit., 7.
- 7 Gilles Deleuze, *Bergonism*, (Trans.) Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habermas, Zone Books, New York, 1991.
- 8 Roland Barthes, *Maison de Marie-Claire*, March, 1977, 100.
- 9 D.H. Lawrence, op.cit.

