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Hartgrove Paintings and Photographs

Ian McKeever and Richard Deacon in Conversation

RD: I think you should start by describing the selection of paintings and photographs, and the reason for putting the two together. I assume the *Hartgrove Paintings* are the first paintings you made when you moved to Dorset?

IM: Yes, that's right, they were the first group I made. They seemed to herald a shift in my work from what had previously been more constricted paintings to a feeling of openness, expansiveness, perhaps a direct response to this environment: the landscape and big skies, rather than the strictures of being in the city.

RD: Obviously there is a connection of place between those and the black and white photographs which document the interior of the house. Is that why you put the two together?

IM: Yes, and what I sensed was a dialogue between the more outward-looking aspect of the paintings and the inward-looking nature of the photographs.

RD: So it's simple: they both relate to Hartgrove.

IM: Yes, it's a relationship of place.

RD: For you, place is what?

IM: Place is where I am. Not necessarily in the geographical sense, but where I literally stand, where I position myself from moment to moment, that's place. I can't understand it in any other way.

RD: Both practices – the practice of painting and the practice of photography – are continuous trajectories in your career. You have a dedication to black and white photography, which you mostly print yourself. Indeed some of your early paintings were based on large photographic prints – did you also print those yourself?

IM: Yes, I did print them, usually on the studio floor because they were so big.

RD: And the photographic process is never digital.

IM: No, it's always traditional film photography: wet-processed, bromide prints.

RD: And what is it that is interesting to you about working with traditional analogue photography?

IM: I think it's the nature of the image that comes through. It has a different quality to a digital photograph. Also there is a reduction which goes on through the processing that I like. Painting is an accretion. Whilst working with traditional photography everything after the initial taking of the photograph is a reduction, it is less than what was photographed. I find that reassuring compared to the accumulating uncertainties of the painting process.

RD: For me, it's a question of linearity as against wholeness. Digital images are linear in that as they are printed the printhead runs across and prints a line of colour, the printhead returns, the paper advances etc. When you process an analogue image it materializes at the same rate across the whole photo-sensitive surface. And also, for me, funnily enough, it's a question of depth – it would be, as a sculptor – the analogue photographic image is *in* the paper. There's a relationship between light hitting the film when the image is taken and light hitting the paper as it's printed, so the image is imbedded in the supporting surface. With digital photography the image is on the surface; it's so thin that it's almost detached from the support. In analogue photography the film support, the light-sensitive medium, is absolutely necessary for the thing to exist at all.

My interest in photography has waned as it's become more and more difficult to use anything other than a digital camera, although there are some qualities I like about digital cameras. You are lucky in your commitment to black and white, as I think that's the sole analogue process that will survive, because it's so simple. They will make the film, they will make the paper, they will make the chemicals. You can do it in your bathroom. Whether you'll be able to get big pieces of paper is another issue, but the process will survive. I've gone back to taking black and white photographs myself because it's the only process I have confidence in. Now, if you want a colour picture bigger than 5 x 7 inches you have to get it scanned and printed as a digital image.

It is clear from your photographs that the point at which the image appears is selected. You say that there is a reduction from the negative, but it's also clear that some are over-exposed and some are under-exposed. The multigrade paper is exposed to have very dark areas, to have a lot of contrast. The black is very highly valued.

IM: This is because I'm pushing back to some of the qualities that I work with in the paintings, moving either towards the light or away from the light.

But coming back to the point you were making about how the analogue photograph is there all at once. This is similar to how paintings can work. As a painter one either conceives and understands the painting all at once, or one knits it together, builds it up out of patches as Cézanne did. I paint by seeing the painting all at once, even if I am working on a part of the painting. My understanding and sense of the painting at any given time is that I am perceiving it and dealing with it all at once. That all-at-once-ness has to be constantly within the painting. Although I haven't thought about this before, perhaps this is one reason why I'm drawn to analogue photography. The image as it develops, both as a negative and as a print, emerges right across the surface.

RD: For me it's slightly more complicated than it was at the beginning, but as a sculptor the notion of the whole object was always what I felt was important. You can always make sculpture by adding bits to it – or by taking bits away – but somehow I thought that the tricky thing was to try and keep the whole sculpture in mind at one

time, which certainly relates to the early 1970s discourse about *gestalt*, something I was evidently sympathetic to. But I also think it's to do with separation and with the complicated dance between you and the object that's in front of you. The extent to which you are attached to it or separated from it, and maintaining its integrity, its wholeness, whether it's as an imagined thing or as a particular volume of material.

IM: On that point I think perhaps you and I work in a very similar way, in that we *hold* the work through the whole process of making – it is held as an entity somehow, in the mind and in the body; not susceptible to an additive process. But sculpture I think is different from painting. I believe it was Rilke who said in regard to Rodin that sculpture ends within itself, something to that effect. There is a containment in sculpture which is not present in painting. A painting does not circumscribe in the same way. There is the construct of the edges of the canvas, which frames it, an artificial imposition, whilst sculpture seems to find its own natural boundaries. The painting always wants to get outside its constraints, be more than it is, yet is somehow always less, ghosting, at least as far as I can understand it. One of the reasons that I'm drawn to take photographs is because they depict something concrete in the world.

RD: In relation to that, do you always use the whole negative for a print?

IM: There may be a nominal crop, but they're not details of much larger negatives, they are the whole negative.

RD: In the process of printing, do you select from a contact sheet, or do you print them all?

IM: No, I go through the contact sheets and select images which I think have something, and then I start working with those, looking for the quality which first drew me to take the photograph.

RD: They're all domestic interiors of one sort or another. A lot are to do with the fall of light and shadow, and in that sense they relate to the earliest history of photography, in that this was the subject of, for example, Fox-Talbot's photographs.

Is the camera always with you, or are these a response to something seen which has made you go and look for the camera?

IM: The negatives are 6 x 7 format, it's a bulky camera, so I tend to have short sessions when I use it, when something has held my attention. Usually in the morning or late afternoon when the light rakes through the house in interesting ways. Living here for twenty years, one gets to know the light. The images are of simple things: a duvet hanging on a banister, the tilt of a stack of cups, the shadow cast by the lean of a chair; things one sees all the time but which occasionally seem to momentarily hold a special quality within them.

RD: Is this the camera you've always used?

IM: For these particular images, yes. It is too bulky to travel with, so for the more frequent, ongoing visual note-making I take a smaller camera.

RD: When did you stop using photographs for your paintings?

IM: In the mid-Eighties. At that juncture I felt the photographs' pictorial qualities were beginning to undermine what I was trying to do with the paintings. Their previous role as a collage element on the canvas which gave me a motif to paint away from started to become a constraint rather than an impetus. The last group of paintings that I made using photographs was *A History of Rocks*, forty paintings. It transpired that approximately the first half of the group were painted over photographs whilst the second half had become pure painting. Since then, although I have continued to take photographs, I have never integrated them into the work: they have remained studio material.

RD: So this is the first time that photographs themselves have come into your exhibition history?

IM: It is the first time that I have considered that there might be something I should consider showing. Perhaps this is because the paintings increasingly have their own intrinsic and for me illusive language, away from the world of 'things'. And also,

because the photographs were taken many years after I made the *Hartgrove Paintings* they cannot be construed as being source material.

RD: The photographs are interiors but I've never thought of your paintings as being interiors. There is occasionally a sense of being inside looking out, but I've always thought that at the back of them was somewhere distant, that they were more landscape than interior, to put it simply. Most of the qualities that I've liked in looking at the paintings have been analogous to an external experience of light and landscape.

IM: Certainly the early work was landscape-based, although after the mid-Eighties increasingly not, and I do not see the *Hartgrove Paintings* as being landscapes. They are exterior in that I am trying to establish something which I can stand against in the world, so in that sense they are outside of myself. But I do not think that they are exterior in the traditional sense.

RD: I didn't want to imply that. But they're not inside either. It would be quite possible to make an abstract painting that reflected an internal state. With Clyfford Still, for example, you could think of that as being a part of the subject of his paintings. But I don't think of your paintings as being internal in that sense.

IM: No, they do not work in the sense of, say, an Asger Jorn painting, which is an exteriorisation of internal conflict. But there is a relationship between interior and exterior, and if one tried to concretise it, I would say that the paintings exist somewhere in the gap between the self and what lies beyond. They are not projections of the self outwards, and equally they are not exclusive projections of the world outside turned inwards: they exist somewhere in the zone between. I do not paint images, nor do I paint concepts; equally the paintings are not abstract in a conventional sense. I paint from what is for me, a very fragile ground, negotiated between the self and the world beyond. The paintings are felt and touched into being.

RD: Let's talk about simple things. Size, for example. You paint a lot in series, and a series generally has a consistent size. Is that something that is narrowed down? Do you hover around and find yourself saying, 'Okay, well I think they're this kind of

size', whether it's near square, portrait or landscape? Do you look for a size you're comfortable with or does the painting claim its own size?

IM: A group claims its own size. I may have certain thoughts and areas that I am trying to work through in a group, and that will dictate a size and a format. It is important to me that the size of the paintings has a relationship to the size of my body. It is something I feel very strongly in your work, actually – that you always retain a very strong relationship to the size of the human body and that seems very important to you.

RD: They are getting a bit bigger, but I'm getting fatter! I can't make giant things, I've discovered that.

IM: I think it goes deeper than just whether or not one can work big. I think the scale of a work is a recognition of the intrinsic nature of what you are dealing with. The work demands a certain relationship to the human body, and once you have transgressed that, you have lost a thread that ties you back to the work. Also, someone else coming to the work has lost the possibility to engage. The thread tying body to body is broken.

RD: Size boundaries are flexible, but there are limits. I'm less sure about where the bottom end is in terms of smallness, which is something that I've been interested in from time to time. Obviously if there's a big limit there must also be a small limit, but finding that is more tricky. With sculpture you have more possibilities, because you can have familiar modules. The sculpture may be quite big but contain a consistent module that relates to a hand or shoulder width, for example.

IM: What is interesting there is that in the making of sculpture I can imagine that there is a point at which the size of the piece can move from the body to the hands, through the body, so to speak, in the sensation of looking at, as well as in the act of making.

RD: Giacometti is a classic example of being able to make tiny sculptures which sustain a relationship with a body – his matchstick-sized figures, which are

extraordinary. You recognise the trick, it's to do with him making figures and their being tiny, silhouetted and somehow in the distance. What you see could be big, but far away. You can never get close. Earlier Giacomettis, which are also quite small, are the opposite. They relate to bodily actions: an object to be picked up, for example. So there are two solutions to that as a problem.

IM: Let me ask you a question. What is your understanding of something like an archetype in what you are doing? Does the notion exist for you? If we can begin with the premise that the forms that you make are not identifiable: they may reference what exists in the world but actually they occupy their own space, which is not *of* something specific in the world. And yet they are collectively building up into something which is more than their individual parts. So the question which interests me is: is one working with some notion of trying to establish an archetype, specific to what one is doing?

RD: That sounds more positive than I think I'd ever be. Most of the decisions that I make are probably negative, to do with eliminating recognisable things. Although I have habits, the notion of finding an archetype implies a degree of search, which I'm not sure that I do. I'm also a little bit lazy in that I don't probe those moments when I think 'oh that's it', whatever it is that makes me feel comfortable with going ahead with something. I think there are differences between the kinds of things I am playing around with and the ideal object that I think I should be making. So I might have an interest in a particular conjunction of two things, the relationship of a cup handle to a cup, for example – it's often very small things that fire my imagination, it's very rarely big things – and within that relationship there's something interesting: the way that the inside and outside are connected together, or an expression of an emotion or a bodily feeling. But that's just a part of what I'm doing. Those are triggers that start me off. The notion of an archetype doesn't seem to work for me in relation to the idea of these triggers, because it implies more intentionality than I think I have. Although I think you're perfectly correct to say, 'Come on Richard, over 30 years there must be common factors'.

IM: In making sculpture you form something concrete. That third dimension, the shift from two dimensions to three dimensions, brings something much more solid into the

world. A painting, on the other hand, is metamorphic; it can only allude to the third dimension. As a painter, one takes the flat surface of the canvas and in painting tries to body it forth, to give it form and substance, a reality in the world which is more than mere surface. However, one never gets to the solidity of the third dimension afforded the sculptor. Painting in that sense remains enigmatic. For me, some notion of an archetype is almost needed to give me a footing in the world, or a footing into painting, perhaps in a way that for you, because sculpture is already so concrete as an object, may not be necessary.

RD: Yes that's possible. But in fact the history of twentieth-century sculpture has been a history of expansion, and of questions that arise out of trying to include other dimensions and other formats within the idea of sculpture, to escape the limiting nature of objects. At the beginning of the twentieth century the deconstruct between lived experience and the pomposity of the majority of academic and memorialising sculptures began to be a benefit, an advantage, and a whole welter of experimentation followed. I think sculpture began to play with ordinariness or stupidity or dumbness in ways that connected to an increasingly material world. Sculpture in a strange way, didn't have so much history.

It certainly doesn't seem a disadvantage for painting, in terms of its history, that it begins with the contradiction you have mentioned: that the painted surface is an illusory construct. And the incredible variety of ways in which that two-dimensional surface can exist in the world is proof of the durability of that contradiction as a generator for thinking.

IM: What is interesting on that level is that when one thinks of painting and photography, the historical premise has been that painting was the area in which pictorial experimentation took place and photography the means by which the world was rendered true. Increasingly the roles have changed. Now the possibilities offered by digital photography, in terms of manipulating the photograph, mean one can create a completely fictitious image, no longer wedded to every-day reality. This has usurped painting's position; I do not think that sculpture has been impinged upon in the same way.

RD: It was to some extent, but verity wasn't the issue. As photography was used in sculpture to document process, so it became imbedded in the practice. Also, sculptors were very early to recognise the usefulness of photography as an aid – Rodin trying out things by drawing on photographs, for example.

IM: Yes, sculptors like Rodin or Brancusi have used photography as another means of seeing their work at a distance, with fresh eyes. But perhaps for the painter it has been, and still is, a more love-hate relationship with photography, because the boundaries can blur so easily. There are now so many paintings informed by photography and vice versa.

RD: I also think that because we as observers have become more suspicious of, and much more adept at reading, the codification of images, the possibilities for painting have been reopened. The field is wide open in a way that it wasn't 40 or 50 years ago when, as you said, the camera had a stranglehold on truth. Changes in technology mean that, as viewers, we are bombarded with sensorial information and different image constructs, and even if we can't make sense of them, we can live with them. It means that we have very sophisticated ways of looking at images or apparent images and we are quite satisfied to spend time doing so. Whereas, I think that sculpture has slightly suffered from its own expansion. Object-making is not a particularly vibrant current practice; there aren't hundreds of object-makers out there. Whereas I know there are hundreds of painters out there.

IM: Maybe one of the reasons for that is the parameters of sculpture have become so broad. It can be anything.

RD: But then it can be nothing as well.

IM: I find that this open ended nature of much contemporary sculpture makes me very restless, often unable to locate myself physically in relationship to the work. I am not sure where to stand. Although when I think about it, most sculpture makes me to some extent restless.

RD: Yes, I think that's true. I've always thought that was a good thing. I think it is uncomfortable. William Tucker called it something like 'homelessness', this feature of sculpture. If you're unsure where you should be in relation to the thing you're standing in front of, whether it's further away, nearer or around the back, then I've always thought of that as a good thing, that raising a slight restlessness in the viewer was a positive attribute.

IM: This I can understand, but for me as a painter there is a strong desire for stillness and to encourage the viewer to stand still.

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