

Painting-as-Discourse conversation #2

'ReconFigure Paintings' by Andrew Bracey

'ReconFigure Paintings' is an ongoing series of work that features *parasitic*, geometric painted additions to the human figures that appear within historical figurative *host* paintings. I create new works that are symbiotically challenged by, celebrate, are overwhelmed by and/or can alter the perception of the original paintings. The size of each ReconFigure Painting corresponds to different forms of reproductions of the original painting, such as postcards, prints and pages from books.

Parasite as metaphor

I am interested in using the parasite as a metaphor for contemporary painters that use existing paintings by other artists in their work. I can be seen as a parasite painter¹ in this perspective in my art practice, but the metaphor can be also be applied to other artists. I have identified 4 different categories of the parasite to use in this way. There is the traditional parasite that causes harm to a host; two classes of symbiont - the commensal who does not cause harm to a host, and a mutualist relationship of mutual gain for parasite and host. Finally there is the parasite that causes harm to the host, but through this causes gain for the wider ecology. I am applying these categories of biological parasites as metaphors for a way of viewing the (dirty) appropriation of paintings by artists. So the contemporary (parasitic) artist could be seen to cause harm or gain to an original (host) painting through the *lens* the metaphorical position.

The figure is usually the focus of the viewer, or interpreter, of a figurative painting. When viewing a painting I usually look in different ways to this; scanning the surface of a painting up-close, to revel in, and *feed on* formal qualities or seemingly incidental details in the background. In ReconFigure Paintings my painted additions act as crystalline-like cocoon over the people depicted in the original paintings. More recently (foreign to the original painting) patterns have started appearing. The painted parasite structure offers potential new speculations for the painting. The viewer can recall their memory to compare to the original painting's figure(s), or can draw their attention towards other *background* aspects in the original painting², or

¹ I first used the metaphor of parasitical painter in a different way than ReconFigure Paintings in 'Palette Parasites' in 2008, curated by Anneka French. This was a series of interventions on the exterior walls of 4 Galleries in England (The Collection, Lincoln; Cornerhouse, Manchester, Ikon Gallery, Birmingham and Wolverhampton Art Gallery).

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² In Conservation studies, students are taught to ignore the main subject of a painting, i.e. the figure, and to focus on the background details to focus on how these can give the the

imagine someone, or something below it, or they can concentrate on formal, abstract qualities of the painted mark in isolation from or in relation to the *host* painting, etc.

The original and the reproduced painting

I have a strong interest in the original and the reproduced painting; in what is common and what is different about them. I like the lineage of the ReconFigure Paintings in this respect. The original painting is first photographed to lead to a reproduction in a book, print or postcard. I then use this reproduction to make my own original ReconFigure Painting. Sometimes I scan my original and blow it up as a print to the size of the original painting, created a complex *see-sawing* and blurring of original and reproduction.

I do not cause harm to the paintings themselves, only to reproductions of the paintings; the original painting, or indeed other reproduced images of the painting still exist. I am interested in using existing images of paintings to reach beyond established notions of appropriation. The act of *doing* something to existing paintings opens up questions over value, re-imag(in)ing, distortion, re-use, rejuvenation, re-evaluation and originality.

Colour

Colour is an important factor in the work and is arguably the single biggest difference I make to each ReconFigure Paintings. The colour choices vary with each painting in order to do something *to* the original painting. Sometimes the colour is drawn out from something in the original painting; whether in the background or in the figure that is covered over, though never the exact colour underneath the added triangle. Or it might be something completely alien to the original painting; or refer to the colour palette of another painting, or simply to respond differently to the last painting I made. There is an inconsistency to the approach, but the consistency is that I am trying to create something different each time that I paint over the figures. This is amplified in each triangle being coloured in an unique blend, sometimes the shift in colour mixing creates a drastically different hue and sometimes this is very subtle, mixing in a tiny amount of a colour from the tube to my mixed colour creates a almost imperceptible difference.

Triangles

The triangle has been a constant within the ReconFigure Paintings after experimenting with other possibilities have been rejected. The triangle was selected as simplest (sided) shape that can create a complex structure³ and

conservator/art historian an understanding about the times. From this approach ReconFigure Paintings could be seen as helpful to allow the conservator to ignore the main subject.

³ This is also the reason why the triangle is used in mesh modeling in digital gaming.

also that it is a man-made structure and does not appear in nature. The painting of triangles continues until all the flesh, hair and clothes of the figure have been completely covered⁴. The repeated nature of painting of the triangles can be seen as a form of meditation.

Choice of *host* paintings

At the heart of the project is a desire to spend more time with (historical) paintings, both for myself and to encourage this in others. I have a personal propensity to the canon of western painting, specifically towards Renaissance and Baroque period, Italian and Spanish paintings. However, with this series I attempt to expand beyond my own taste. ReconFigure Paintings started by trying to understand Pre-Raphaelite painting to a greater extent, something I did by spending time in galleries⁵ with the paintings, reading about them and by painting over them in the studio. The position of *close-looking* and *looking-attentively* was central to this position. Over time I have tried to extend beyond my taste by asking others to select paintings to use, painting over every figurative painting (and print/sculpture/drawing) in an historical survey of art book⁶ and by working with the collections of galleries⁷. This has allowed for a greater range of *host* paintings in terms of geography, historical period and moving away from the (white, male, Western) painting canon. Any painting featuring a figure can become a ReconFigure Painting.

Difference in the recipe

I have created rules⁸ for the ReconFigure Painting as a structure that allows for a consistency of approach across the series, but also allows for flexibility to allow difference between individual paintings. The rules are actually more like a recipe, something that can change, rather than being absolutely fixed

⁴ However there have been occasions when triangles have been left for elements of the figure in the painting to come through in select ReconFigure Paintings; and sometimes adornments such as jewelry, crowns or objects held, that are usually left visible, are covered over.

⁵ Specifically Manchester Art Gallery, the National Gallery, London, Birmingham City Museum and Art Gallery and the Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool.

⁶ The 'Art Treasures of the World' series of ReconFigure Paintings, from the book of the same name.

⁷ Specifically The Madsen Bequest at York Art Gallery and Nottingham Castle's collection.

⁸ In an interview 'Reconfiguring Vision' with Helen Wainwright in 2014 I identified the rules as follows: 1 -The chosen painting must have a significant focus on the figure in it. 2- The original painting should not be too gestural/of pre 20th century.3 -I will only paint over the figure, specifically flesh, jewellery and clothes and not anything being carried, such as swords, baskets or flowers. 4 - I will paint over the figure with triangles. Only the figure should be paint over and should be completely covered.5 - The triangles should remain roughly the same size, irrespective of the size of the surface of the reproduced painting. 6 -The paintings should be painted on a reproduction of the original painting that is widely available, be it a postcard, museum print, catalogue page, poster etc. 7 -Each ReconFigure painting must be different from every previous one, in order to be an individual.

in place. They allow me to keep going by using a structure that allows difference and sustains interest across the series.

The structure of the triangles usually emerges organically, with no order. The placement of coloured triangles is usually scattergun so that the overall 'filling in' of the figure(s) is seemingly haphazard. However sometimes I impose a different approach and build the structure up in an ordered and more logical order.

The paintings are usually made with colour being applied directly on top of the image, without a primed layer. This means that I spend time with the image of the painting as I cover it up. However sometimes the paper type is too resistant to the paint (or is it the original painting that is resisting?), resulting in a layer of primer being applied.

I use reproductions of original paintings to make the ReconFigure Paintings. However I have made my own printed reproductions and I have used original paintings for one particular body of the series⁹. This creates a difference in how the paintings appear and how I approach my painting, both from a sense of responsibility (both to the original painting and to make the *right* choice when applying colour) and to using oil paints instead of gouache.

The paintings are usually made in the studio. However sometimes I paint them at home, or on residencies, or in galleries in front of visitors. The setting does affect how I feel about the painting process, the studio is my preferred place to work, but the difference usually inspires the biggest changes in the way I approach the paintings.

The above text was sent to Kate Buckley, prior to a 'Painting-as-Discourse' conversation on 8th March 2019 at General Practice, Lincoln.

This version of the text has been written in response to 'Painting-as-Discourse' conversations with: Andrew Bracey, Jayne Cooper, Josephine McKenzie, Beverley Purdy and Sian Kirman-Wright.

Andrew Bracey is an artist. His PhD by Practice research is exploring the parasite as a metaphor for contemporary painting that uses existing paintings. He is also programme leader of MA Fine Art at the University of Lincoln.

Jayne Cooper, Beverley Purdy and Sian Kirman-Wright are artists and current students on the MA Fine Art course at the University of Lincoln. Josephine McKenzie is a conservator and current PhD student at the University of Lincoln.

⁹ ReconFigure Paintings over original paintings and prints were created for the exhibition 'Finding the Value' at York St. Mary's. This was part of a project arising from the Madsen bequest to York Art Gallery. The complete collection of Peter Madsen was given to the gallery; some items entered their own collection, some were sold at auction and the gallery curators decided to give some to artists to create new works with.

