

## 6: PAINTING THE FIGURE: A CONTEMPORARY PRACTICE PERSPECTIVE

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Broadly speaking, there are three approaches to painting figuratively: from life (having a model present in the room throughout the painting process); from photographs (both 'found photographs' and those taken specifically for the purpose); and from memory / imagination. This essay is about the strategies I use as a contemporary painter, when painting the figure.

Over my career I have employed all three approaches. How a painting is painted has a direct bearing on how it will finally look. Moreover, each approach has a context within contemporary painting, affecting how a work is read and what traditions it relates to.

Rather than writing in the abstract about the three approaches, I will illustrate the processes with examples from my practice.

### LIFE

Painting the figure directly from life, rather than from a photograph, is increasingly rare among contemporary artists. Over the last thirty years the most influential painter working directly from the model was Lucian Freud, who died in 2012. David Hockney continues to paint portraits from life, but over his career has explored a great range of approaches, including working from photographs, from a **camera lucida**, and from memory. On the whole, contemporary painters have eschewed working directly from the model in favour of using photographs as a starting point for their work.

For my MA show (Central Saint Martins, 2009) I decided as an experiment to work entirely from life — with oil paints and canvas, on an easel. I visited the bedrooms of friends and family, and worked in their rooms, painting them alone in their personal space. I asked sitters to recall a memorable event or incident that occurred in that space; often this was the basis for the **composition** and mood of the painting.

The Wedding Dress was painted of my wife, about a year after our marriage. I asked her to recall a memorable incident — she remembered waiting for her mother to collect her for the church, and the half-hour wait as her mother was late. Recreating the scene for this painting was the first time



she had worn her dress since the wedding, and seeing her wearing it again created a particular emotional charge.

Working from life means you are bound in a temporal relationship with the sitter. The longer the painter spends, the longer the sitter has to stay still. There is an unspoken obligation to work quickly, and not to put the sitter through unnecessary discomfort.

Working from photos I had found the endless time one could spend on any work problematic. It took the edge of concentration away (unless I was working to a deadline), and meant I would often over-work a piece, or keep polishing it until it became more photographic but lost vitality as a painting.

I chose to work on The Wedding Dress in one sitting. It meant working fast and intuitively, and accepting any distortions or representational inaccuracies, rather than trying to correct them. The legs of the chair and the pointing feet splay out somewhat incongruously. There is something awkward about the way this area is resolved, which adds a playful air to the work. The painting does not aim at **photorealism** — which might have given a more commercial cast to the piece (akin to wedding photography). Here the intention is to capture the intensity of waiting, rather than to catch the likeness of the sitter.

I was working during the afternoon, in a

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Images:  
Matthew Krishanu  
The Wedding Dress, 2009  
Oil on linen,  
50 x 40cm  
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sunlit bedroom in Brighton. I knew I had about three hours before the light would fade and there would not be enough to continue the painting by daylight. During this period I had made a number of paintings in the evening, by Tungsten light. All of those works had a brownish tinge: it was hard to keep colours bright and clear — the yellow light made it hard to judge tones truly, and the result was often unexpectedly sludgy.

The speed with which I had to work was central to the vitality of the piece — the face is painted quickly and directly. All the colours were mixed on the palette, and applied thinly. Only the white of the wedding dress is thicker — it was painted last, in a flourish, to get the full buoyancy and brightness of the material. The dress shimmered in the afternoon rays.

The painting surface was a smooth, primed linen. The linen has a very fine grain, so was ideal for quite a delicate painting with a thin layer of paint. The white of the canvas primer shines through the semi-transparent ochre of the background, and provides highlights for the face and arms. In this respect, the oil paint is used like watercolour. The thicker (opaque) white of the wedding dress is the brightest part of the painting, and also catches light that shines on the canvas surface, as it is slightly raised. Often the white of a painting in 'old master' works is **impasto** — it catches the light shone directly on the painting, sometimes creating shadows on the surface.

Most of all with this piece, I wanted to portray the intimacy of watching someone

thinking. Unlike a photo which captures only an instance — the briefest of expressions — watching the sitter pose over the course of the afternoon allowed me to approximate her expression, then make slight adjustments to it as she sat. Her face has an openness, as well as anxiety. I have enjoyed hearing the range of interpretations of her mood that viewers have suggested to me. I do not think I would have caught this particular face and mood, had I worked from a photograph.

#### PHOTOGRAPHS

In my recent work I have chosen not to work from photographs I have taken expressly for paintings, but have used old family albums of my childhood as source material for my work. Here I am using material that is personal to me, and relates directly to my memories, but is not constructed by me. As a painter, that means surrendering a certain degree of control in terms of composition and subject matter, and accepting the particular language of photography, and of family 'snaps' (for instance, the people in a photograph are often posing casually, in a manner quite apart from the formality of figures posed for life painting).

The majority of contemporary painters in the early twenty-first century use photographs as source material — whether as direct transcription (projected onto a canvas, drawn, then painted — for example Franz Gertsch), commentary (as with the work of Gerhard Richter, Luc Tuymans, and Wilhelm Sasnal, which sometimes uses blurring and white borders to show explicitly its photographic origins), or inspiration (as with artists like Karin Mamma

Andersson, Peter Doig, Chantal Joffe, and Marlene Dumas, who use the photo as a starting point for painterly interpretation).

For *Two Boys*, the source photograph was of my brother and me as children playing in a ruined water tank in an old town in West Bengal, India. We used to have free rein to play amongst the ruined buildings and overgrowth. I have a strong nostalgia attached to these times — my past is like another country to me, and the painting operates as a window through which to look in on that world.

I worked on board, with a smooth, white surface. It is only 21 x 30 cm (A4), and relates directly to a standard size a photo might be enlarged to. For the first layer of paint I worked quickly, with diluted oils. At first I worked directly from the photograph, to sketch out the composition. In my painting the boys are larger than in the photograph — they dominate the space, and are placed centrally.

Once the initial layer of paint had dried, I returned to the painting, but this time did not look at the photo again. I was working from the memory of the photograph, which mingled with specific memories of the scene, and more general recollections of what my brother and I look like.

Working from memory for this period allowed the brush strokes to be freer: often when working directly from a photo I find myself playing 'spot the difference' between the images, and trying to replicate the original. With the photo out of sight, distortions and spontaneous decisions come into play, much as in the process



I have described above, of painting *The Wedding Dress* in one sitting.

Putting away the photograph allowed me to invent colours. The sky is far bluer and more vivid in my painting; the orange-brown of the water tank is brighter and complements the blue. I was able to let my hand lead, rather than following the instructions of my eye and head (which often happens when I am comparing a painting with a photo).

I played freely with the textures of the paint. Unlike *The Wedding Dress*, where the skin was painted in a transparent brown, here the boys' skin is mixed with white — with a strong tonal contrast between shadow and highlight. Other areas of contrast are between the opaque solidity of their hands and the partly transparent surface of the water tank. The background and foliage is roughly brushed in, with the brightest parts being the light of the sky behind them, and a thick impasto spike at the top of the church spire.

Having worked for a few sessions without the photo, I returned to using it again in order to finish the work. I found it useful for checking the details — the angle of the edge of the water tank, the position of the boys' hands — but overall most of the painting was resolved without the photo in view.

alone among ruined buildings in India, coming across a statue of a bull's head, and being terrified as I watched the statue turn to face me.

I worked initially with thin oils on a postcard-sized piece of card to sketch out the colours and composition. I then researched the look of bulls' heads (including old sculptures), to inform how I painted the statue. I found a photograph of myself as a child in a similar position to the pose in my sketch. However, when I used it as a reference for the painting, I found the figure was too stilted — it operated like a cipher of a person, rather than having a life of its own. I found that the best way to make the painting unified was to paint all parts from memory, and to invent the pose and expression of both boy and bull.

For the bull I used a palette knife and impasto paint to sculpt the forms and shadows of the bull's head, using black with a few streaks of white. I varied the brush strokes of the plinth, sky, and grass, using light opaque paint (colours mixed with titanium white) over a darker layer below, which shows through in parts. Finally, the face of the boy was blocked in with loose strokes, giving him an ambiguous expression as he faces the bull.

*Boy and Bull* has the brightest colours of the three paintings discussed. This is partly

Working from life is potentially the most intimate method of painting: an ideal way to spend extended periods of time with another person, and to access the emotional content of memory.

For autobiographical material I find working alone with photographs, drawings or just my imagination is the best way to create images that resonate for me. Photographs allow me to enter the past, although I find I often get lost in the detail of the image — the particular scene framed by the camera, rather than its emotional charge.

Perhaps the purest form of painting autobiography is without a visual aid of any kind — to paint a face or scene as it is remembered, with all the distortions and inaccuracies that memory contains.



## MEMORY

All my work is concerned with memory, and how to explore and evoke memories through paint. Contemporary artists use memory and imagination to create fantasy worlds and scenes (for example, Neil Tait, Amy Cutler, and Marcel Dzama), but also to create portraits of imaginary people — as remembered from experience and observation (Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's paintings of people are all from memory, with no photographic reference). Sometimes I use a quick sketch from memory as a starting point for a painting.

The subject of *Boy and Bull* is a vivid dream I remember from my childhood, of being

because the scene is dreamlike — it is meant to be an image recalled or imagined — and also, as I didn't use a photo or model, I was most free to choose the colours that suited my intentions.

In the past I have found that whenever I formulated a set way of working (for example painting directly from photographs), the paintings lost vitality. I need to alternate my methods in order to relinquish some control, and allow the paint to be unpredictable, and surprising.

I have found that working with other people's stories and personal material requires a close involvement with the sitter.

Left image:  
Matthew Krishanu  
*Two Boys*, 2012  
Oil on board  
21 x 30cm  
© The artist

Right image:  
Matthew Krishanu  
*Boy and Bull*, 2012  
Oil on board  
21 x 30cm  
© The artist

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