

PIECE BY PIECE

An Interview with Ben Howe



Dissecting form can see its' definition re-imagined – something Australian artist Ben Howe has authentically established in his exceptional body of work. Moving beyond representation Ben talks to us about what challenges him theoretically and where his practice takes him in developing dynamic work

AP: *In observing previously written articles on your good self it is apparent that your practice of applying paint is really only the culmination of your theoretical process, so can you explain what process you follow from the inception of an idea to the moment you stretch a canvas?*

BH: My work finds its theoretical foundations in ideas surrounding the city and its mechanisms, the nature of consciousness and perception, the body and its relationship to its environment and the construction of reality. I approach a series of paintings through a combination of a lot of reading and life experience, bound in a physical process that seems for me at least, to make sense.. even if it takes a really long time.

I always base my paintings on something tangible – whether It's a sculpture, diorama, collage or sequence of video footage. In this way, much of the process is undertaken before the painting even begins.

I once spent more than 3 months creating the miniature figures that I would base a series of hyper real environments around. I have previously made each bone of a human skeleton out of clay, and a series of heads which were disassembled and reconfigured to form new compositions and meanings. The sculptures are invariably destroyed and remade, and the painting is what is left behind – a kind of 'memorial' to the ephemeral.

I believe in the value of long hours of labour, in not taking short cuts – of the power and agency of the 'authentic'. Immediacy has its place, but not in my work.

AP: *Part of your work comes across as realist in its demeanour, but it is clear to see that there is a surrealist aspect to the way you compose subject matter, can you define how you view your own work and why this approach is important to you?*

BH: Nothing is stranger than reality. My paintings often take aspects of 'the real' and present them in an alternative way. I tend to rearrange the chronology of elements so that they say something axiomatic or make more sense (from a certain point of view). Always anchored in the





real world, they are combinations of documentation and poetry.

To my mind, even the simple act of flattening out an image or an idea to be codified in paint renders it surreal. A painting, no matter how realist, is filtered through the mind of the artist as their notions of design, beauty, subject and unique perspective imprint themselves onto the finished work.

I sometimes think of my paintings as 'hyperreal' – not in the sense of unfathomable detail, but in the sense that they may reveal or highlight something about reality that would otherwise be hidden or ignored. This often comes across as 'surreal', because I overlap moments of time, construct landscapes, bend geographical space and rearrange components of the human form.

How to I view my own work? Perhaps it's a reflection on my experience and thoughts about existing. A strange diary. I don't know. It's largely experimental, which sometimes sits uneasily in the world of figurative painting.

AP: *Being that we're talking all things 'paint' here; what is your thought process behind the actual application of paint? Is a monochromatic palette used to delineate time, or are there other reasons you have formed a body of work that predominates in this way?*

BH: I like the process of trying to get a complex idea across in a static two dimensional form and see paint as a unique tool – It tells a story of movement and provides the trace of a thought process.

I think I could probably get something across in other media such as in writing or film, but painting is what ive grown with.

Part of what makes any piece of art work is what is left out. Any addition has the ability to completely alter the meaning.. giving unnecessary weight to aspects such as detail or colour can detract from the power of an image, and can draw focus towards something unimportant. The lack of colour can also imbue the work with a timeless, symbolic quality. I love colour, but if it is not needed – I leave it out.

AP: *The human figure seems to be a consistent component in a lot of your work, a subject that has seen a big resurgence in recent market popularity, why do you think we revisit this theme so readily, and what do you think it brings to the contemporary market? – in reference to your own work of course.*

BH: The figure is something of a trap. An idea and image which is easy to digest, we associate with it immediately and can project into it a notion of self. A representation of humanity, mortality, pathos etc.. – the human figure is something we can all relate to.

It can also be used as a gateway into the world of ideas presented in an artwork. But it must be used correctly, otherwise it can collapse any meaning outside of itself – and all that is left is an appealing illusion.

I try to use the figure as device to set in motion a process of engagement in which comparison with the physical and psychological reality of the viewer is measured against the one presented in the painting.

One of the ways I approach figures is to strip them of any



discernable identity: abstracting and condensing them into broad representations of a human shaped 'vessel' – I use them in the form of icons or avatars, light traces, or symbols. I usually try to depict universal figures that can't be latched to a particular time, nationality or place.

AP: *You seem to have built a solid timeline of exhibits throughout your career so far, what are the next steps for you, where would you like to take your work in the next few years and where can we next see some of it in the flesh subsequently?*

BH: Trying to imagine where I will take the work in the next few years is very difficult, as I always have at least 5 potential projects floating around in my head. The painful part is choosing which one to follow.. and which ones to put to sleep. There is just not enough time and resources to take them all where they need to go. I am constantly aware of dwindling time.

And there is always the problem of space and materials– I would like to make a crowd of lifesized sculptures. I would like to make a series of huge paintings depicting the psychological imprint of a city. I have many of these works largely created already... in my head... but making them a reality may be impossible.

AP: *Representation has a long history in art, using people and objects to communicate aesthetic theory or possibly a philosophy. What do you see as being the function of representation? Why do you think you choose to predominate realism over abstraction, and what is your opinion on how people should interpret this type of work?*

BH: Representation seems to be our default way of communicating visually.. whether it's a photographically rendered image, an abstraction, or even a passage of text – they are all derivatives of the same fundamental; what we are unable to demonstrate directly through an action we need to project via an idea, metaphor or through the use of icons.



Realism is an interesting case, as much of art has been devoted to attaining the best approximation – or ‘impression’ of the real. The very act of striving for realism has another outcome however – and that is that it will be always married to concept of ‘illusion’. Part of what we do when using this technique is to trick the eye – to create an imaginary space. This element is absent or diminished when using many other forms of communication. No matter how realistic an image may appear – even if it is a photograph, it will be riddled with the artists own perspectives and quirks and can never be a true representation of an event. But art changes and evolves – I think most painters have moved past using realism as an ends in itself.

AP: *Beyond pictorial forms many artists choose to use symbols and text in their work. Do you think this has a place in painting, and is the fact that you don't tend to incorporate these elements into your work a conscious decision or just happens to be how your practise has developed?*

BH: Absolutely – some of the most important works have used or incorporated symbols and text. I tend not to use them often as every decision a painter makes can be read as a statement. If used incorrectly, collaging together too many fundamentals, or being too ‘clever’ can dilute the message or essence of a painting. I prefer to use a limited pallet rather than try to use ‘everything’. I also like to set parameters to work within – those may include form, space, material and concept as an example. I find that a purity of idea can be best navigated in this manner. The resulting image may even become something of a symbol itself.

More recently, I have actually started using devices or symbols very selectively. They can be used as counter-points or as a key to the cypher of a piece or series. A symbol can also be the representation of an idea that recurs – ie: an unexpected absence. This is most evident in the paintings I made in Shangyuan.



AP: *Painting seems to always have the topic of ‘extinction’ hanging over it. What do you think are the limitations of working in paint, and where do you see the opportunities for its’ growth in art for the future?*

BH: Painters have been struggling to maintain the perception of relevance since maybe the 80s. Painting is not new media, and is largely connected to the antiquated perceptions surrounding ‘mastery’ and craft. Things that are scorned in the fast world of ideas. People notoriously enter institutions as painters and emerge as installation or concept artists.

Painting is burdened with history, and therefor with certain expectations and biases. Everyone believes they are an authority because the ‘painting’ has always been there, along with drawing and mark-making. Its very existence is in our DNA. This often makes it an unpopular focus for academics who seek out the overtly new or unexplained.

As a consequence of this history, Painting is also (perhaps unfortunately) linked to commodity. Part of being a successful painter is to sell paintings. This immediately places the embattled painter in a position where they are caught between the bank and unadulterated creative vision.

Personally, I don’t see there being any limitations to painting – certainly no more than any art form. The only limitations are subject to trends. Like the book, painting will always be there. The boundless progression of modernism may be over; the search for broader expression through other media will also run its course. It probably has. And what will be left?



AP: *Influences can be so important in the progression of an artist, is this something you keep in mind? Who or what are the main sources of influence over your work now and since starting your practise?*

BH: In my early carrier I drew influence from everything that interested me. Strangely, it was the sculptors that really captured my attention – I loved Rodin through to Gormely. As a child there was a huge Henry Moore sculpture in the national gallery which followed me through my dreams. There was something basic and elemental about adding and taking away from matter.

In terms of painting I was very effected by Goya's black series and loved the sculptural brushwork of people like Lucian Freud. At university I sponged up huge amounts of more contemporary artists and studiously read all the 'essential' social theorists, but they all float about in a kind of formless cloud now. Things surface when they need to, and it all comes together as a sort of 'intuition'.

A. J. Pügh, May 2016

