

Ruth Waller
School of Art, Australian National University

Open to Influence: Exploring art history in practice

Keywords: Studio Teaching, Painting, History, Influence, Affinity, Lineage, Resonance, Affect, Alhambra, Matisse, Piero della Francesca, Guston

This paper discusses an approach to studio teaching I have recently introduced to our Painting undergraduate curriculum. At ANU we remain committed to discipline-specific studio teaching programmes at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, and in Painting we have recently introduced new undergraduate course options designed to deepen and intensify our students' engagement with the specificities of the material base and processes, the formal devices and conventions of painting, and the operation of optics, perception and affect in the reception of paintings.

This course, *Open to Influence*, began as an intuitive impulse prompted in part by my concern at the scant knowledge of art history evident in most contemporary high school graduates. I hoped to spark their curiosity about the history of painting by suggesting a 'way in' grounded in their own interests and practice. I also wanted to illustrate how the painters we now consider historically significant were the radicals of their day, and demonstrate the fact that new perspectives and emphases in the writing of art history often reflect how *artists* have looked freshly at, and drawn influence from, hitherto overlooked figures, historical periods or cultures. Strikingly distinctive conversations about painting emerge when talking with fellow painters. We each bring to such exchanges particular enthusiasms, insights and intuitions and analytical and interpretive frameworks developed over years in the studio, and years of looking at paintings in museums and galleries. Most importantly, such conversations are firmly grounded in our common experience of, and passion for *making* paintings. This process of studio-based reflection and exchange is conducive to lateral, associative thinking: to artists creatively bringing together references, thoughts and possibilities in often unconventional, counter-intuitive or idiosyncratic ways.

Some years back, I came across painter Timothy Price, then in his Honours year at ANU, working in the studio with two images juxtaposed beside him: one Fra Angelico's *Coronation of the Virgin*, the other a Bridget Riley Op work from the sixties. When I queried this pairing, Tim responded that he didn't know why he had brought them together, he just felt there was some kind of connection. The painting he was making bore no obvious resemblance to either image, but there was, and

continues to be, in his work a vibration between qualities of chromatic luminosity and abstract pattern with elements of narrative realism set in unstable, free-floating picture spaces.

Intense conversations between painters persist, in spite of (as Jed Perl puts it) painting's 'fall from grace' in recent decades (Perl, 2013). In fact it may be that now, as painting finds itself somewhat marginal to the mainstream of contemporary art, our exchanges are driven by a greater sense of conviction and a more intense level of reflection, speculation and curiosity. And there is something releasing about being off-centre, out of fashion. Our students still find painting compelling, perhaps precisely *because* painting involves a quality of immersive engagement and a relation to a deep and wide history which is material, bodily, slow and in so many ways out of step with mainstream culture and its technological drives to speed, virtuality and mass image proliferation. And perhaps the painter's most effective response to its somewhat marginal status in today's biennale circuit is to tighten our focus on the qualitative specificities of painting, on *Painting per se* as painter Merlin James put it in a recent essay (James, 2002). So, in designing this course I hoped to foster an appreciation of the specific kinds of insights and practice-based knowledge we bring as painters to our encounters with painting and its history.

Open to Influence is a studio-based course. It begins with a lecture series designed to open up a sense of possibility and curiosity, leading each student to identify and research their own sense of lineage, lines of influence or affinity. They then explore in the studio the practical ways in which this might enrich and invigorate their own practice, drawing on qualities in the paintings, and the processes and philosophies, of the artists they had chosen.

Of course I was initially overwhelmed by choice as to the lineages I could construct as models for such a course. There are so many fascinating examples I could have used: Picasso's variations on past masters are comprehensively surveyed by Susan Galassi as ranging from the influence of African art to that of Ingres and Velasquez. (Galassi, 1996). I was fascinated to discover how, in strikingly different ways, Picasso, Jean Helion and De Kooning were all influenced by work of the currently relatively overlooked seventeenth-century painters of peasant life, the Le Nain brothers (Galassi, 1996; Perl, 2005. Pp.105-119).

A lineage of social and moral narratives runs from Romanesque sculpture through trecento and quattrocento predelle, to the crowded picture spaces of Breughel, Hogarth, Max Beckmann and Paula Rego. Leon Golub's adapting of formal aspects of the Roman wall paintings of Pompeii in exposing of the atrocities of US foreign policy in the seventies is another compelling example; a series which continues to resonate powerfully with contemporary political culture.

Significant and various cross-cultural influences have inflected the art of painting in Australia. This traffic of forms, concepts, materials, imagery and process flows both ways between Australian painters from the European colonising culture and Indigenous painters, *and* between Australian and Asian traditions and pictorial conventions. Much recent Australian painting (from artists both Indigenous and non-Indigenous) reflects an appreciation of the place of painting *across* cultural traditions and how meaning and affect are embedded bodily in motif, process and materiality. Key to this is the quality of immersive affect in painting: an immersive quality experienced by the painter in *process*, and in the viewer in the *sensations* generated by painting's surfaces and spaces.

Given the wealth of possibilities, it seemed the best place to start was with some of my own enthusiasms. The beauty of the artist's lineage as opposed to the art historical lineage is that it **is** in the eye of the beholder; it is a creative process in itself. When you sense instinctive or intuitive links between artists, artforms and periods, you find in them some new sense of your own potential. One might focus on a single line of influence, or follow an inclination to hybridise seemingly disparate influences just to see what happens.

I will focus here on summarising my approach in two of lectures which in 2014 introduced this course: *Patterning, the decorative arts and Orientalism in European painting*, and *What is it about Piero?* (a survey of painters' persistent fascination with Piero della Francesca).

Patterning, the decorative arts and Orientalism in European painting from the Alhambrah to Memling, from Memling to Matisse.

Having recently visited the Alhambra, the astonishing patterning of tilework and the intricacies of its domed palace rooms were fresh in my memory as I explored potential trajectories of this lineage. I suppose I shouldn't have been surprised to discover that Matisse visited the palaces of Granada in 1910 and found it a transformative experience, writing to his wife: 'The Alhambra is a marvel. I felt an intense emotion there.' Co-curator of *Matisse and the Alhambra 1910-2010*, Maria del Mar Villafranca puts it that 'the Nasrid decorations were perceived by the artist as a convulsion, leading him to assert, "My ideas have been here."' (Jauranta & Villafranca, 2010. p.31)

I began by discussing how Islamic geometric tile patterns and the vegetative, animal forms and geometric features in textiles (carpets in particular), were incorporated into the paintings of the early Italians like Giotto, Duccio, Ghirlandaio, Crivelli and Lotto; while in the north these patterns become a striking feature in the paintings of Van

Eyck, Memling, Holbein and later in Vermeer. Indeed subsequently, carpet types took on the names of those early painters who, in depicting them, provided the best record of the styles of the period, and so we have the *Memling Gul*, the *Crivelli*, the *Lotto*, the *Holbein*, and the *Ghirlandaio* carpet types. (Gantzhorn, 1998) This transporting of patterned imagery from east to west, from one world to another, has been thoroughly analyzed as a cultural phenomenon related to trade and travel by art historians such as Rosamond E. Mack, (Mack 2002) but little discussed in terms of their phenomenological impact or affect within a painting. This was what I wanted to consider. The intricate geometry of Islamic and Eastern carpets and textiles can be seen as contributing to the visual resonance of these Renaissance altarpieces, fascinating the eye and contributing a formal and optical complexity to their iconic symmetries and to the construction of a particular quality of pictorial space. An abstract geometric order is embedded in the furnishings of the sacred scene; patterns imply a prescribed order which locates and projects from the central figure of the Madonna. Thus patterns can be seen as *generative of*, and *residing in*, the Christian narrative as conceived by 'God, as the master painter' (a traditional Christian motif). An abstract order is instantiated in sacred narrative. In northern painting in particular this is to deliver abstract pattern via illusions of highly specific materials- woven rugs, brocades, tapestry, silks and velvets.

Georges Didi-Huberman's consideration of Fra Angelico's use of 'fictive marbling' was key to my entering into this kind of speculation about ways early painters may have engaged painting's formal and material effects to generate as sense of theological metaphoric resonance. Didi-Huberman suggests these splattered surfaces of *marble effect* are 'performative' in an anagogical sense and he allows himself to be led by them 'into a labyrinth of evocations, analogies, infinite associations'. (Didi-Huberman, 1995. pp. 81-101)

So, as painters, we consider these paintings speculatively, based on our immediate sensory and bodily encounter, unconstrained by art history's demands of historical contextualisation or hard evidence. We are looking in different ways, and for different things.

In the nineteenth century the publication of Owen Jones' *Grammar of Ornament* coincides with a new fascination with the exotic cultures of the Orient. Gerome, Alma Tadema, Lord Leighton, Delacroix and Gustave Moreau, each in their own way, adopt imagery of the orient as a means of engaging painting's potential to *transport* us to realms beyond, to experience ways of "being" outside the cultural norms of Europe. We are transported, not in the sense of travel and trade, but in the poetic sense, the sense of reverie, myth and dream. Of these painters, Moreau is of particular interest, having taught Matisse.

Matisse's radical re-invention of painting was significantly driven by his passion for textiles which (as Hilary Spurling so beautifully recounts) sprung from his early life in Bohain in French Flanders, then a very lively centre for innovative textile design and manufacture. He collected textiles throughout his life and carried his favourite pieces around with him, and we find them recurring in his paintings across the years. This association was marvellously brought to light in London's Royal Academy exhibition in 2004 and the beautiful catalogue publication: *Matisse, His Art and His Textiles: The Fabric of Dreams*. The visual pleasures of patterning generate a radical sensuality in his work, seemingly imbuing these fields of colour with a visual pulse which takes on an erotic charge most overtly in his odalisques. Such patterning also contributes significantly to modernism's democratisation of the picture plane. For Matisse, the patterns of carpets, wallpapers, screens and draped fabrics operate as fields of animated colour, as picture plane and picture space, line and plane, motif and form, fuse into a shifting, vibrating and luminous exchange. As Markus Brudelin puts it, modernism saw *The Tendency of Painting to Become Fabric- The Tendency of Fabric to Become a Painting*, a chapter in the catalogue publication for the Kunstmuseum Wolsburg 2013 exhibition *Art & Textiles : Fabric as Material and Context in Modern Art from Klimt to the Present*.

What is it about Piero?

Here I explored painters' continuing fascination with the Early Italian Renaissance and Piero della Francesca in particular, beginning with young contemporary New York painter Eleanor Ray, who has with a very fine painter's eye, constructed in her essay *In which we look under the shadows of natural objects*, her own lineage of resonance through Giotto, Piero, Masaccio, Manet, Morandi, Guston and senior US painter Stanley Lewis. (Ray, 2013)

Di Chirico, Morandi, Philip Guston and Robert Mangold each in their own way absorb something of Piero della Francesca. Later in this paper I recount David Reed's story of his early associations with both Piero and Guston. (Reed 2014)

It is Guston's lifetime of reflection on his fascination with Piero which is perhaps the most profound and persistent probing of the power of the 15th-century Italian's work. In 1971 Guston told students at the New York Studio school how, throughout his life, wherever he lived, he had reproductions of Piero's *Baptism* and *The Flagellation* on his kitchen wall. He liked to look at them over his breakfast or while having a drink at night. He describes how his relation to Piero develops over time: 'But no matter how I paint, I seem to be superficially less influenced by (Piero's work) but actually more influenced by it if you know what I mean'. Guston declares in 1966 that he would rather look at those two Pieros 'than any modern painting'. His reflections on them

are fascinating, radical and run right against the grain of most commentary on Piero, and they shed significant light on his own practice:

I think they are on the verge of chaos. I think they are the most chaotic, disorganised pictures now. They're like trembling- they're just posed there for a split second before they want to become something else. They're the most peculiar paintings ever painted I think... Piero is a great inspiration to me. And even though my work used to be very influenced by him superficially, I didn't know what I was seeing. I see something else now. Maybe I'm seeing it for the first time.

Guston's sense of this lineage goes back further still, vigorously endorsing Roberto Longhi's observation that there is 'something Egyptian', 'something archaic' about Piero, 'like a messenger from all time come to earth'. (Guston in Coolidge, 2011)

An underlying objective of *Open To Influence* is to introduce students to the insider's perspective on the creative process and to the ways artists go about finding an appropriate context for themselves- a sense of how their practice and their interest and sensibility might relate to the history of painting and "fit" in the broader contemporary field. In particular I want to highlight those significant moments (which we don't always understand at the time) when we encounter works from times and places and cultures remote from our own, and experience a powerful sense of affinity, a visceral sense of connection or resonance. Such experiences can have a whole range of different kinds of impact in the studio: this may be overt or subtle, direct or indirect, conscious or subconscious, rational or intuitive .

The lecture series introduces the proposition that in responding to an encounter with the work of an artist with whom we feel some curious and powerful affinity is, effectively, to analyse the operation of *affect* as we experience it in that work. As Susan Best has observed, the affective and phenomenological properties of art have long gone under-recognised or analysed by art historians and commentators. I broadly accept that, as she says, drawing on Merleau-Ponty, for the viewer 'the activation of affect... proceeds from a bodily encounter, the trigger of which in the first instance, and often forever after, remains just below the threshold of consciousness.' (Best, 2007) Certainly, our viewing of a painting is an extraordinarily complex, simultaneous compounding of processes. While it is solely via the eyes that we receive paintings, the sensations they trigger involve activating a whole range of bodily, neurological, intellectual and emotional responses. But perhaps for the painter-as-viewer, in responding to a visceral experience of *communion* or affinity with another artist's work, we seek to activate the workings of affect into consciousness. The artist's curiosity is galvanised in such encounters. We try to understand how the work is working on us. Back in the studio this response is

processed and translated via the particularities of our practice. The impulse is not to make a work that *looks like* that of the artist with whom we identify, but to engage in a translation of affect, to make a work that somehow in our own terms *feels* like, or is somehow resonant with, that work. This may happen in any number of ways: as a consciously framed process or a loosely improvisatory one. But whatever the approach, an underlying idea driving this course is that the process of creative influence is driven by an artist's curiosity as to how, in practical studio-based terms, affect works. The experience of a sense of affinity, resonance or curiosity about the work of another artist, period or culture thus prompts an exploration of the specific material, formal, perceptual and/ or iconographic qualities of that work and in this process one's practice opens to influence.

An important aspect of our Studio teaching is to lead students in group reviews structured in two stages. We begin by a process of objectively *describing* a given work in detail, identifying materials, compositional and spatial devices, imagery or motifs, palette, paint handling and so on. We forbid any interpretive response. Only when we feel we have comprehensively described and formally and materially analysed the work before us, do we turn to interpretation, asking: how does it make you feel? (physically, neurologically, emotionally); what questions does the work pose for you? And what do I think this work is about and why? We thus separate out the observable 'objective' properties of the work from the experience of affect. The experience of affect in painting is often expressed in metaphoric terms: we use poetic terms to translate the sensations evoked by a painting: conveying how a visual experience can be resonant with other sensory or bodily feelings or experiences. In linking the process of pictorial analysis to the exploration of affinity and influence, I'm interested in the potential of such a course to equip students to open up greater understanding of the specific processes by which affect is generated by paintings.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, once I formed the idea of a course focused on the idea of artists constructing their own lineages, I found that others have been thinking along similar lines. New York curator, Raphael Rubenstein declares: 'One thing that is sorely missing from the current realm of painting is a sense of genealogy, or, at any rate, a refreshed sense of historical development'. (Rubenstein, 2005) In conversation with painter and writer Joan Waltemath, he proposes the idea an 'alternative genealogy for contemporary painting' calling for 'a larger painting history and more subjective approaches' citing painter Davis Reed's idea of '*a street history* of painting that painters share with each other, a set of references and concerns, a sense of where they've come from and where they're going.' Significantly, Reed observes of this painting sub-culture: 'This street history almost never gets into official versions. Art historians and museum curators don't seem to have much

interest in it.' These are histories for the studio, and constitute rich potential material for our studio teaching. (Waltemath, 2013)

David Reed tells the story of how he put his work up for review at The New York Studio School in 1968 when Phillip Guston came by for a crit session. He describes his series of small thickly painted studies of trees made while he was living out in the desert. They were vigorously delivered like Van Gogh or Soutine. To Reed's amazement Guston singled them out for praise, saying they reminded him of trees in the work of Piero della Francesca. Reed writes:

How, I still wonder, with the dissimilarities in surface and style, could Guston have recognised Piero's influence on my painting? How could he see from my paintings that while I was living in the desert I was obsessed with Piero's paintings?

He goes on to tell how later the two of them went off together to see Sergio Leone's *Once Upon a time in the West* and were struck by the similarities between Piero's landscapes and the landscapes in the movie and the violence depicted in both. Reed illustrates this with Piero's *The Slaying of the Son of Chosroes* in Arezzo. (Reed, 2014) Artists do find affinities and lines of influence in seemingly unlikely places. American painter Carroll Dunham also observes that 'there are all kinds of parallel or shadow histories of the twentieth century that are constantly being reshuffled and rediscovered'. (Perl, 2013)

'The painter', writes Jed Perl, 'is always simultaneously in the community of painters, of the present and of the past'. (Perl, 2013) In the studio, all art is contemporary: what was history is present as a field of possibilities. The history of painting across time and cultures delivers us evidence of the whole gamut of things that painting can be, do, mean and represent and the affect they can have upon us. And as artists respond subjectively and intuitively to their heritage, sensing affinities across time and space in particular and idiosyncratic ways they imagine new possibilities and explore ways of radically reinventing, time and time again, the practice and potential of painting.

REFERENCES

- BEST, S., 2009 *Rethinking Visual Pleasure: Aesthetic and Affect*.
<http://tap.sagepub.com/content/17/4/505> (Accessed March 10, 2014)
- BRODERLIN, M., (ed). 2013. *Art and Textiles: fabric as material and concept in modern art from Klimt to the Present*. Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg
- COOLIDGE, C., (ed). 2011. *Philip Guston collected writings, lectures and conversations*. University of California Press.
- DIDI-HUBERMANN, G., *Fra Angelico: dissemblance and figuration*, Trans. Jane Marie Todd. Chicago, 1995
- GALASSI S., 1996. *Picasso's Variations on the Masters*. New York
- GANTZHORN, V., *Oriental Carpets*. Koln, Germany, 1998
- JAMES, M., 2002. *Painting per se*
<http://www.mummeryschnelle.com/pdf/Paintingperse.pdf>
- JARAUNTA, F. and Del Mar VILLAFRANCA, M. 2010. *Matisse and the Alhambra 1910-2010*. The Alhambra and Generalife Trust
- MACK, R.E., 2002. *Bazaar to Piazza: Islamic Trade and Italian Art, 1300-1600*, University of California Press.
- PERL, J., 2013. *The Rectangular Canvas is Dead, Richard Diebenkorn and the problems of modern painting*. <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/114422/richard-diebenkorn-and-problems-modern-painting> (Accessed 14th August, 2014)
- PERL, J., 2005. *New Art City: Manhattan at Mid-Century*. New York
- RAY, E. 2013. *Temporary Equilibrium*. <http://thisrecording.com/today/2013/11/20/in-which-we-look-under-the-shadows-of-natural-objects.html> (Accessed March 3, 2014)
- REED, D., 2014. *Soul Beating*. <http://artjournal.collegeart.org/?p=59>
- RUBENSTEIN, R., 2005. *A Quiet Crisis*, Hard Press Editions
<http://www.hardpresseditions.com/hpeaia.html>
- SPURLING, H., 2005. *Matisse his art and his textiles, the fabric of dreams*. Royal Academy of Arts, London
- WALTEMATH, J., 2013. Raphael Rubenstein with Joan Waltemath.
<http://www.brooklynrail.org/2013/07art/raphael-rubenstein-with-joan-waltemath>
(Accessed 14th August, 2014)