

**DEXTER DALWOOD INTERVIEWED BY CHERRY SMYTH**

The London-based artist discusses non-places and spaces, digitisation and deceleration, disconnection and distance.

Hard 2018



# PAINTINGS ABOUT PAINTING

**Cherry Smyth:** This new series of work, 'What is Really Happening', is starker and darker overall than your previous paintings. Paul Celan once said that poetry 'releases the poet, its crown witness and confidant, from their shared knowledge once it has taken on form'. Do you feel that an accumulation of weight is transferred from you to the painting and leaves you changed?

**Dexter Dalwood:** I hope that is what is happening. The shift for me is trying to build an experience of thinking about looking at a painting while looking at the painting. I hope that the experience becomes more internal for the viewer because the difference with these paintings compared with my earlier work is that I am not quoting other artists directly to say 'think about all these different references extending out into the relationships with other artists in the past', it's more thinking about my experience right now. What do I want a painting to do?

Because the art historical quotes from other artists, from Francis Bacon to Gerhard Richter, that have previously distinguished your practice are now more subtle or not there in the same way, would you say that a kind of scaffolding has been removed, leaving a more raw and vulnerable experience?

Yes, a friend said that the new paintings are much more accessible to the individual rather than having to get through my 'mesh' – it's not a checklist of things. It's also how I have come round to making these in a slightly different way. I have gone back to wanting to make decisions in front of the painting rather than building up to the idea of making the painting through using collages as a basic template for the painting. It has been a deliberate ploy to avoid the logic of representation, so now every decision is made for the painting and it alone. That has been a big shift.

That is very apparent in the 2018 painting *00:43*, where nothing is reliable in the visual plane of a bedroom interior. The reference to Patrick Caulfield's lampshades is less jokey. The space for a painting on an intense blue wall is blank. You have often played with perspectival construction but this feels more of a personal rather than social loss of balance.

That is the first painting in the series. I was on a residency in Mexico in 2017 and when I came back I did a whole series of paintings based on the title



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'An Inadequately Illustrated History of Mexico'. I thought I would have a go even though I wasn't really entitled to. That painting references the 43 students who disappeared in 2014. The chalk outline was going to be used to paint a section of Édouard Manet's *The Execution of Maximilian*, the 1867 version, and then I realised that it didn't need it. That mood prevailed in the whole series of these more recent paintings.

It captures the difficulty of representing state crime: the students' bodies were never found. There is a sense of claustrophobia and strangeness, while with *Kent State*, from 2005, the trail of blood taken from a newspaper photograph makes it explicit. This is a quieter aftermath here, where you leave more of a gap which the viewer's imagination has to jump across.

If that's what you got from it, I'm very pleased, but much of the work is also to do with time and age and what one is interested in and attracted to. Historically, I think of some paintings as examples of a young person's art – Michelangelo Caravaggio, Egon Schiele and Jean-Michel Basquiat. It's a different thing for late, or later, work. The question I continually return to is, where does painting sit now? What do I want to make that I don't feel I see so much?

Transition is a huge theme in this work, not only in technique but also emotionally, culturally and intellectually. *Snow Screen* presents a large, blue cinema screen teeming with what could be tiny shreds of torn-up paper that we read as 'snowflakes'. The two rows of seats are sterile and uninviting. To me it suggests the slip in the cultural currency of cinema, which has lost its sense of luxurious expectation. And also the politics of nature at a time of accelerating climate catastrophe, where all we may have left is a simulation. You seem to be quoting Hiroshi Sugimoto rather than Jean-Luc Godard. I wonder how representation and mark-making are changed by viewing on a tiny, handheld screen.

For *Hard*, *Lux* and *Snow Screen*, all from 2018, I went back to look at the origin of post-Impressionist painting and how someone like Vincent van Gogh looked at Japanese prints as a new way to simplify things. In Utagawa Hiroshige's prints, like *Sudden Shower over Shin-Ōhashi Bridge and Atake* of 1857, the idea of weather as an element is a 'real thing' but also a signifier of 'snow' or 'rain'. It's not an experience of being in nature but an experience of looking at what's enough to say 'snow'. Also, where do you find this place of contemplation and solitude, given the fact that I don't get it in nature? I'm slightly nervous in nature but when I travel and am not connected to Wi-Fi, I can spend a lot of time thinking. That's an experience that hasn't really been translated into painting. It's a peculiar thing because interiors of transport in the 20th century are so central to film. So, for *Snow Screen*, I made a silkscreen and tessellated it across that expanse of blue. I used the same silkscreen for *Lux*.

*Hard* shows a car dashboard, a windscreen full of black vertical rods of rain and, in the rear-view mirror, nothing but a blur of horizontal brushstrokes. The future is unknowable and the past obscured, so the sensuous, elliptical details of the dashboard force us to be in the present. The handling of the texture and curves of colour point to the body and the feminisation of cars, the love of

speed. It's hard to decouple from that appeal and yet we have to, so the painting has an elegiac sense of losing a loved body.

These things are tricky to discuss, but I experienced an enormous amount of loss in 2016. It was a strange place from which to make my way back to making paintings again. In Mexico, I recalibrated internally what I wanted to do.

There is a move from the public and social trauma in earlier works, like 2008's *The Death of David Kelly*, to something more private in 2009's *Hard 2*, which depicts the banal, pink tiles of a 1960s or 1970s bathroom and a running tap.

It goes back to a painting I made a long time ago when I was depressed and found myself lying down thinking but looking at the ceiling. I made a series of paintings of ceilings as a response to the idea that what is in your field of vision isn't necessarily what you are thinking about – a middle-distance stare, like when you're running a bath. How could the image embody that?

**The tiles with their slightly uneven grout suggest that the formalist grid is not enough and the soft, reflected shadows almost stand in for human presences, a more embodied response.**

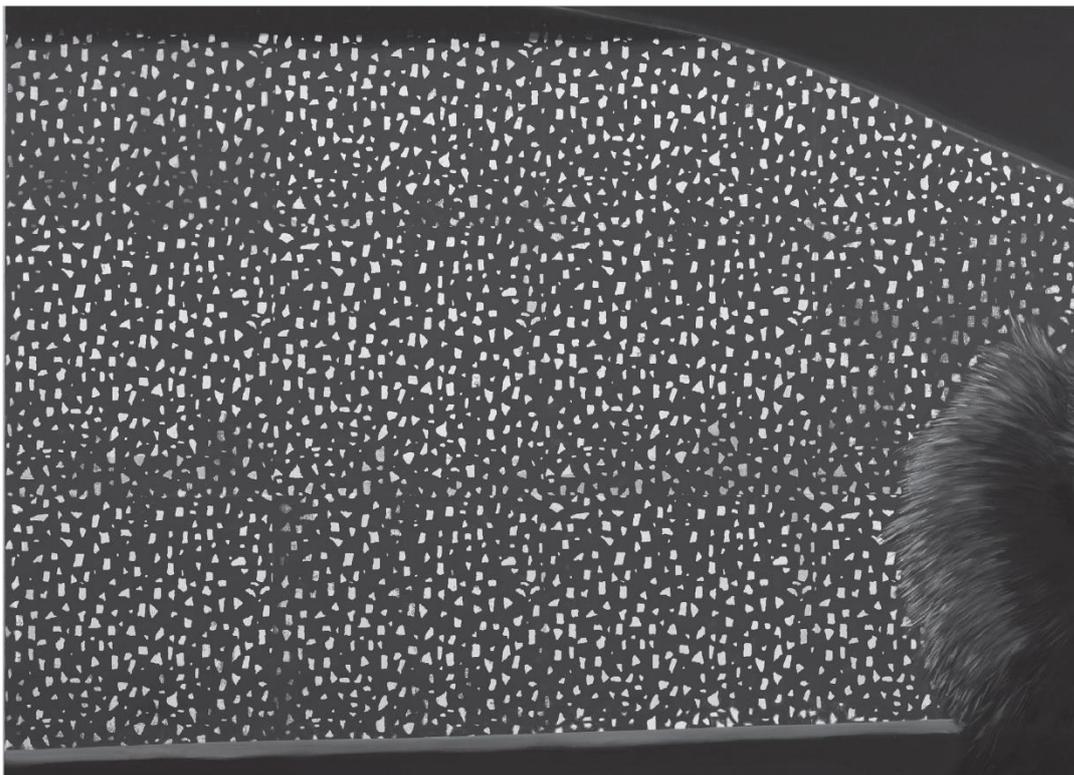
Underneath it all, the paintings are about painting. How can you make a grid painting that's acknowledging where it is from but is also a potentially interesting thing to look at? In the new painting *Laid Out*, I was staring at the back of a headrest: it was an easyJet flight and I saw this little pattern and thought,

'Is this finally where the black square ends up?' That whole hard-core project of abstraction boils down to this motif that can be placed anywhere. I was thinking about that in relation to Paris being the birthplace of modernist painting.

**Yes, the body of French painting is 'laid out'. The Arc de Triomphe is toy-like, lacking in majesty. The painting gives off an air of post-Empire, post-Europe. The truncated exit sign in last year's *Coming Down* says simply 'Ex' in English and Arabic and we can't read that without thinking about the false promise of the exit that has subsumed our thoughts for more than two years: the fall of our future. It took a while to notice that the interior of the aeroplane was black – they are never black – such is the seduction of those visual codes.**

It is all those things. With these paintings, I have a moment where I plan to do this or that to them and then days or weeks go by and I don't do anything. The dialogue is ended not through completion but through realising that I have hit a resonance that I think is enough. That is a new thing and a much more exciting place to be. It's back to a much more metaphysical experience of what I am experiencing when I'm looking at the painting and not forcing another element into it. It's something I have taken a long time to learn.

**The seduction of the expansive view from the aeroplane window has been replaced by the digital screen and how it reorders our sense of agency and where our body begins and ends. You have spoken about the pleasure of the solitude of non-places and aeroplanes being one of the last social spaces where we can escape connection.**



Fire  
Lux



Marianne Moore once said that the best cure for loneliness is solitude. A composer I'm working with has renounced his smartphone and gone back to a Nokia to protect a creative and enhancing solitude.

Yes, it's the whole idea of where art is going in the speed of the digital: what do we want from technology and how is art going to change in response to it? Privacy is going to be the hardest thing to have – maybe it will only be available to the really wealthy – and we will all struggle to carve out that space. The work is not against that but there is a deceleration within it, like a shot in a film where someone is standing still and everything is rushing past, and thinking where can I find a place to operate from and how can I hold it.

As well as the dislocation of night and day, of time itself, there is a feeling of statelessness in the work. With the national suspension of belonging, and growing alienation, the work seems to say that where you belong is the painting, the moment of its painting. This lively, engaged presence gives the series hope.

Maori culture has the concept that you walk backwards into the future – a fantastic notion. In 2018's *Lufthansa* I imagined flying over an old black-and-white reproduction in an art book of a Paul Cézanne painting. I painted the whole of Mont Saint Victoire but then that part of the composition just flew out of the top – in that, formally, it didn't work. So I brought the window shade down over it. We are leaving the

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old values, and that sort of painting – the Greenbergian trajectory – is receding faster and faster into the past. To make a black-and-white version from a reproduction of a Cézanne, you can't just flip it into black and white on a computer and make the image from that because of how Cézanne painted and used colour, the hue of the colour – tonally the colours are often exactly the same so that when painted in black and white a yellow can be the same as the green. So you have to invent from the colour reproduction which is an incredible lesson in making a tonal painting from another painting, and having to do the work of that painting to do it. When I was 25 I didn't understand that about Cézanne. It takes a long time of looking and thinking to appreciate the work he did in painting.

The mood reminds me of *Flights*, a novel by Olga Tokarczuk, in which the characters try to escape the encumbrances of identity through travel or fugue. She writes, 'When you're traveling ... you have to keep an eye on yourself and your place in the world. It means concentrating on yourself, thinking about yourself and looking after yourself. So when you travel all you really encounter is yourself, as if that were the whole point of it.' Yet 'free movement' will soon only be available to the very rich.

The painting *Fire in a Limo* from 2018 presents a serious concern: what are we going to do about the rich? As the Dutch historian Rutger Bregman asked at Davos, when are

billionaires going to pay proper taxes? I have just written about the Fernand Léger show at Tate Liverpool and noted how well he carved out a space against totalitarianism through a conceptual approach to painting. He tried to believe in something. Surely that is what artists are meant to be doing.

**As cusp paintings between life and death, between singularity and collectivity, these new paintings both split and cohere the self. The human figure is absent, merely suggested by the containers we have designed around us, whether a hotel room, a taxi, a cinema or an aeroplane. These are anonymous yet familiar places on a global level. Would you say that these paintings give a refuge for an interrupted belonging, a dis-belonging, that has been distressingly amplified by Brexit?**

We are now in a situation where the kind of thinking that 20 years ago was absolutely marginalised and seen as nutty has become mainstream within British society. Disgruntled right-wing voices that couldn't have had such a wide constituency then are now regularly heard, predominantly because of the access and amplification that the internet has enabled. And in many places outside London things have changed very little since the Margaret Thatcher era in terms of infrastructure. You can see this total disconnect generally, with people asking 'what am I really a part of... where do I exist?' I went to art school because it was free. I couldn't have gone in my circumstances at the time if it had been fee-paying. All that has now been dismantled. Even art education – a place that was free and a place *to be* free – doesn't feel like that any longer. It also feels a bit retrograde to be medium specific. There has never been a reverse gear in terms of my engagement with painting, but I do wonder whether artists can find that now. What would it have been like if I could have Instagrammed all the paintings I was making while I was at art school? Because when you're a student, you make five or six paintings on each canvas. With this new response level, how can you belong to a practice-based art form? It's not a question of being reactionary and privileging how it used to be, but painting doesn't go away. People still want to look at and think about painting. ■

**Dexter Dalwood's** 'What is Really Happening' was at Simon Lee Gallery, London 1 to 30 March 2019.

**Cherry Smyth** is a poet and art writer. Her new collection *Famished* is published by Pindrop Press and touring as a performance.

*Lufthansa* 2018

*Kent State* 2005

