

Graham Crowley

in conversation with Judith Tucker



Graham Crowley
A Love of Many Things
2019
Oil on canvas

value judgements, would say that it was ultimately because they liked or disliked a thing or notion. Actions intended to shut down discussion. Art education is a matter of knowledge and judgement and shouldn't be reduced to a matter of taste. A potentially damaging aspect of art education is the way that students seek approval. I feel that a situation in which students are having to constantly second guess has no place in an open and mature form of discourse. I hope that has changed now. My discomfort with the idea of Art is particularly acute when it addresses issues of identity.

JT: You refer to yourself as a painter and not an artist. Ideas of Art with a capital 'A', imply taste, especially 'good taste'. These are, of course, loaded terms and as you suggest, we all need to be careful of value judgements. The way you talk here invites us to challenge the status quo, it invites us to consider who makes what, for whom and why and how this is tied into ideas of power – certainly an approach I use in discussion with my own students. The idea of the paradoxical seems to be a significant aspect of your work, for example, you use the ultimately bourgeois medium, oil paint, and somehow manage to use it in an anti-elitist way.

GC: It's the paradoxes that fascinate me – anthropomorphic still lifes and monochromatic flower paintings are just two examples of my obtuse thinking. I'm constantly frustrated and perplexed by my paintings, some are plain irksome. I work against good sense, consensus and sometimes reason.

JT: This way of thinking about painting means that we no longer worry whether a painting is figurative or abstract.

GC: Absolutely. As far as I'm concerned that's that's an archaic and irrelevant preoccupation. A

JT: Your essay, *I Don't Like Art*, ends with the statement "I may not like art... but I love painting" which sounds paradoxical but that's not really the case is it?

GC: *I Don't Like Art* was an attempt to outline a critical methodology that has enabled me to 'think better'. To challenge my sense of orthodoxy and habitual ways of thinking. It doesn't matter what I like – only why. Goethe said that we should "seek out what is, and not what pleases us." My essay was intended to challenge complacency and assumptions about the legitimacy of taste. The days of Berenson and Clark are gone.

Whilst teaching, I became frustrated by tutors and students who, when pressed about their



Judith Tucker

Dark Marsh: Winter Tangle

2020

Oil on linen

the freighted history of oil painting chimes with many of your recent works. In another of your recent essays you wrote '...the kind of painting which refers to a condition rather than an object. A remembrance of paintings past. Painting as discourse.' This seems to be key and it would be helpful if you could expand.

GC: I'm referring to second order meaning – a major component of postmodernism and appropriation.

Appropriationist paintings were regarded as unoriginal. Nowadays, if someone says your work is original, it's a sign of their ignorance. The condition is cultural – an intellectual space. The term 'remembrance of paintings past' is an appropriationist nod to Léger whose early work I referred to in paintings like *Head 2* (1977). My paintings at that time were not only described as lacking in originality, but as nostalgic pastiche – guilty as charged. It was about facing up to painting's alleged shortcomings – and my own. I was beginning to develop a weakness for the kind of painting that is perplexing.

false distinction. Painting is invariably synthetic to some degree or other.

JT: Listening to some of your interviews, I enjoyed the idea that we don't have to defend painting any more.

GC: That's right. It's a level playing field now; levelled, ironically, by the legacy of conceptual art. I'm adamant that conceptual art was one of the most significant things that happened to painting in the 20th century and painting that has embraced that legacy has become better for it. Post-conceptual painting.

JT: This idea of contemporary painting which has taken on board all that conceptual art has to offer and challenges our normalised assumptions of



Graham Crowley

Orford Ness Study 3

2018

Oil on canvas



Graham Crowley

Head 2

1977

Acrylic on canvas

JT: So, this opens up another question about the idea of what that kind of perplexing painting might be, and how it might challenge the doctrinaire, the orthodox and the academic norm?

GC: Orthodoxy is by its nature ubiquitous. Nothing epitomised orthodoxy better than that old 'painting is dead' chestnut. Even the term appropriation has now gained an unwarranted respectability but what fascinated me was the fact that painting could be both behind the curve – that is reactionary and nostalgic – and ahead of the curve for the painters who seemed to acknowledge the legacy of conceptual art. The idea that conceptual art and painting were in opposition was an entirely false dichotomy spun by the middlebrows of media and academe.

JT: It's often easier to think in these sorts of binaries and much harder to understand these notions as being on a continuum. I think of the 70s and 80s, when you were formulating these approaches as being when there was a major rethink in terms of the effects of modernism on our society, including of course, art and culture. There was a rise in neoliberalism then, so at that time who could you look to for support in your subversive task?

GC: Whilst at the Royal College in the early 70s I received most support from student peers, particularly Michael Major and David Wiseman, along with Professor Peter de Francia and tutors Alan Miller and John Golding. On leaving, I got to know the philosopher Richard Wollheim.

As for writers, it has to be John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* (1972) and *Landscapes* (2016) and then there's Gaston Bachelard's influential *The Poetics of Space* (1957) – I borrowed this as a title for one of my paintings; David Hickey's *Air Guitar* (1997), Richard Wollheim's *Art and Its Objects* (1968) and his collection of Adrian Stokes' essays *The Image In Form* (1972) Susie Gablik's books *Has Modernism Failed?* (1984) and *The Re-enchantment of Art* (1991) and Jenny Uglow's book *Nature's Engraver* (2006) – a biography of Thomas Bewick. I found Ray Monk's biography of Ludwig Wittgenstein *The Duty of Genius* (1990) utterly inspiring. It wasn't so much a biography of an individual as a history of European thought during the first half of the 20th century.

It's important to remember that at one time the art world and the art market were quite independent. Now the art market has absorbed the art world. The two are now synonymous – with dreadful repercussions for the nature and quality of art writing and the teaching of fine art.

JT: Once painting had lost its privileged position might it then become an act of disobedience? Was painting seen as a provocation?

GC: Absolutely. To paint represented a rejection of a febrile kind of late modernism and a challenge to the orthodoxy. There are other ways to irritate though, nothing irks conventional thinking more than the idea that esotericism had influenced modernist thought. But that's what happened and is exactly why theosophy interested me then as it did Mondrian, Kandinsky and Malevich 50 years earlier. The idea that mysticism had influenced the course of modernist painting was considered utterly unacceptable. So much so that it has been entirely redacted from mainstream art history. I subsequently discovered the profound influence that the theosophist Rudolf Steiner had had upon Joseph Beuys – and that of Madam Blavatsky upon the thinking of Jackson Pollock and Philip Guston. For them the esoteric and the political were connected, something that today has become regarded as almost untenable. Recently, I learned that Buzzcocks quoted P D Ouspensky on their 7" EP *Spiral Scratch* (1977). I was delighted by the seeming incongruity. The industrial



Graham Crowley
Flower Arranging 7
 1998
 Charcoal & resin on canvas

outfit Coil maintained the practice into the 1980s with albums such as *Remote Viewer*.

JT: This incongruity reminds me once again of Léger – he was interested in the quotidian and drew on shop window dressing to inform his paintings. In your most recent paintings, it seems you've returned us to some of those values in a different idiom via some of the ideas formed in the 70s and 80s – to a contemporary vernacular.

GC: You're right, the vernacular has always been an important part of my work – in both subject matter and form. Whether that be due to the legacy of pop art or plain curiosity about the world around me. I've always been fascinated by different forms of visual language – style.

JT: The notion of style sounds as if it's referring back to those appropriationist ideas you mentioned earlier, and aspects of your very recent work confounds our expectations of surface and depth in your use of local colour in relation to grisaille and glazing. Through your materials and processes but also through your ostensible subject matter you subvert the ordinary. Within the idea of discourse is the idea of power – inherent in the idea. I'm thinking of your most recent paintings, those depicting a garden, West Cork or

places that you're familiar with. This idea of working with the local, very ordinary.

GC: Yes, making the familiar unfamiliar. My early paintings rapidly became unsustainable and were followed by work about home and family. I was attracted by the (then) preposterous



Graham Crowley
 1974. 3
 2018
 Oil on canvas



Graham Crowley

Kerry Moon

2019

Oil on canvas

Academic painting seldom addresses an audience of more than 20 people and I wanted to address a much larger one – and much broader issues. Which is one of the reasons that I became involved in site-specific projects during the early 80s. These works were shallow reliefs made from stove-enamelled aluminium. Two still exist, one at Chandlers Ford Library and the other at Dorset West General Hospital. Sadly, a third which was located at Brompton Hospital Chest Clinic, no longer exists.

JT: Accessibility to your viewers remains important to you and looking at your work (and through this conversation) I have a sense that you are bringing disparities together to see what happens. This might be radicalising or reworking popular genres like flower painting and landscape. Through that you are making challenging work that is also accessible.



Graham Crowley

Rose Arbour

2020

Oil on board

idea of still life, spurred on by the way in which 'Kitchen Sink' painting of the post war years had been dismissed. If that wasn't perverse enough, I decided to paint 'against the genre' – to use your term – courting disruption and inviting disapproval. Institutionalised modernism had become an alien "country" in which ambition was measured in square yards and artists when interviewed would seem to be struck by some mild form of dementia. Here's the rub; I effectively taught myself to paint. I felt a constant need to expand my vocabulary – and to do that I set about 'reclaiming' practices that had become obsolete – most significantly, the use of glazes.



Judith Tucker

Do Not Park on The Grass

Verge

2019

Oil on linen

neo-romantics were 'differently modern'. Of course, this was written about another generation of painters, might this apply to you?

GC: I'm not sure but if by 'differently modern' you mean a mistrust of orthodoxy, a lack of complacency, scepticism and a sense of curiosity – then the answer is, yes!

If you mention that you paint flowers, people immediately assume that you have no ambition – or burst out laughing as it's commonly regarded as the reserve of the amateur. This is where casual – if not downright lazy – notions associated with radicalism fall short. At this juncture the idea of the 'differently modern' becomes relevant. As far as I'm concerned, it's about thinking in a counter-intuitive manner – and frustrating expectations – particularly your own. One of the most significant criticisms levelled at flower painting has been its apparent sense of dominion. Contemporary issues demand a different approach to the natural world – and therefore colour. Similarly, flower painting has always exuded a sense of the funereal – the transient and the mortal. The 'differently modern' demands a different way of thinking.

GC: You mentioned flower painting. As far as I'm concerned, painting is impossible beyond genre. It's a fact of life – like gravity – non-negotiable. I decided to embrace the issue of genre and – to use your expression – 'work against it'. Genres are 'vehicles' for convention and that fascinates me. In the flower paintings I explored prejudices and frustrated expectations. They looked 'wrong' but in a significant way.

JT: This resonates with Alexandra Harris' assertion in the concluding section of her book, *The Romantic Moderns* where she makes a clear argument against Englishness and modernism being antithetical, arguing rather, that British artists such as the



Judith Tucker

Why Destroy a Thing of Beauty?

2019

Oil on linen



Graham Crowley
Blackbird
 2020
 Oil on canvas

Tom Thomson & The Group of Seven and the landscapes of Rembrandt are all relevant to my practice. The fact that some of these are regarded as marginal or omitted from official art history is invariably politically motivated and makes them even more fascinating. The majority of them were never touched by celebrity or commodification and 'product identity'.

I always imagine Altdorfer looked out of the window and saw things 'differently'. The landscape had always been there but now it would be 'framed differently'.

JT: There's the idea that a painting oscillates between the thing itself, the material and being a sign or image. That's what I find interesting about your landscapes, they hover somewhere between all these ideas.

GC: That's the intention. In paintings like *Kerry Moon* (2019) it's the familiar that is made unfamiliar. The means are intentionally direct, lo-fi but luminous. That luminosity is brought about by glazing which lends the work its sense of inner light and space. The imagery is summoned out of the paint – not imposed upon it. The image is located entirely in the glaze. Any lapse in concentration results in a very different kind of painting.

JT: This idea of the marginal and of lo-fi resonates with our earlier conversation about the overlooked and the local. That also reminds me of the lack of distinction between Design and Fine Art that emerged in the inter-war years, the utopian dream with no hierarchy in terms of craft, skill and thinking. Then later, they became separated once more. I work in a School of Design as a Fine Artist and enjoy the various synergies that offers – I see that in your work. You bring strong design principles into your paintings along with a limited palette – we share a liking for Payne's Gray – I'd like to hear about that.

GC: I use Payne's Gray because of its shifting appearance and values. I use it for its luminosity, it is simultaneously synthetic and highly illusionistic. It isn't really a grey. It's a mixture of Prussian Blue, Yellow Ochre and Crimson Lake. I'm thinking here of the duality of Corot and Manet. It is connected with modernism's legacy: that of efficiency and economy of means. Minimalism. Engineers and designers get this. There is a democracy of understanding and accessibility.

The intention is to make work that is simultaneously visually complex and physically powerful. The paintings of Fernand Leger and Stuart Davis have always exemplified these qualities. This manifests itself in monochromes as in the Flower Paintings and the duotones in the recent landscapes, whilst referencing low low-tech forms of reproduction and



Murnau Oflag Camp Post
 woodcut stamp

JT: Yes, temporary floral memorials are everywhere now and seem to draw on that latter aspect of flower painting, that of memento mori. I went to the Harewood House show, heard you talk and saw your monochromatic flower paintings. Naively, I anticipated a rather conservative, predictable show, but it turned out to be a very exciting exhibition with all sorts of works reconsidering that genre. That extraordinary setting, exhibiting uncompromising contemporary art within a stately home and its grounds, reminds me of the other genre that you work with and against and I wonder which landscape painters have affected you and how might this become radical?

GC: Altdorfer, Segers, Palmer, Constable, Turner, the Ashcan School,



Murnau Oflag Camp Post
woodcut stamp

representation – rather like the woodcut stamps of the Murnau Oflag post. Regarding colour, the duotone is about being spare and lends the subject matter a sense of impoverishment – it suggests austerity without being explicit.

I was commissioned to design stamps for the 2018 TT Races on the Isle of Man. When my stamps (which were fairly austere duotones) went for official approval one of the panel described them as rather 'Stalinist'. I assumed this was intended as a criticism but I took as a compliment.

I don't know of anyone who doesn't respect the work of early 20th century Russian artists and designers and their brilliant applied fine art. Working on both murals and stamps has informed my painting. I admire skill in all its forms, whether it be that displayed by carpenters, model makers, engineers or fabricators. I find it's the work of model-railway-scenery-builders, a group who are generally held in low esteem, that gets me thinking about what we're we're doing, and why we might be here. Theirs is a breathtaking mix of the exquisite and the trivial.

JT: I think this is really important and returns us to your idea of painting as discourse and the related ideas of subverting culture, power and class. This brings to mind, the late David Walker Barker who integrated hobbies into his painting practice – bottle and mineral collecting. Perhaps this consolidates another disparate pair of apparent differences: hobbies and work, in your case motorcycling and stamp collecting with painting?

GC: That's very interesting territory. You must remember that for some people painting is a hobby and this really reveals the fallacy of hierarchies. Hobbies are much needed displacement activities which can temporarily take our minds off thoughts of death. I find objects that are the product of obsession are not only fascinating but infinitely more powerful than almost all expressionist work which relies on rhetoric.

Graham Crowley

Tiernan's 2

2020

Oil on canvas



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