

Documentary Realism: Painting in the Digital Age

In 1936 Walter Benjamin wrote his seminal essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. In this he argued that the “sphere of authenticity is out-side the technical” which makes the original artwork independent of the copy. He went on to argue that in the act of reproduction something is removed from the original by this change in context. This he described as the “aura” of the work which he defined by “its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be.”

It was formed, Benjamin wrote, in an effort to describe a theory of art that would be “useful for the formulation of revolutionary demands in the politics of art.” Up until this point, Benjamin felt that the traditional art forms of painting and sculpture had been produced, viewed and consumed exclusively by the ruling elite. With the advent of photographic means of reproduction however, the doors were opened for the democratization of art, and what was lost in the facsimile of the original was more than compensated for in a new egalitarianism.

John Berger expanded on these ideas in his 1972 essay and television series *Ways of Seeing*, in which he outlined a theory that modern means of production have destroyed the authority of art, that “For the first time ever, images of art have become ephemeral, ubiquitous, insubstantial, available, valueless, free.”

This has appeared to become increasingly true with the dawn of the digital age in the 21st century. However, what Benjamin and Berger couldn't foresee was the adoption of the mass media by the ruling elite to manipulate and present key messages for the promotion of capitalism. These messages are presented to us through broadcasting and publishing channels and appear to offer up conflicting views on the economy, war on terror, celebrity culture and the celebration of wealth in a time of mass unemployment, food banks and social poverty. In doing this, the mass media has stimulated a sense of unease; a growing feeling of anomie. This appears to be resulting in a fragmentation of collective identity and a perception of social alienation amongst many groups and individuals. It is a theory that was first illustrated by the French sociologist Émile Durkheim in his influential book *Suicide* (1897) and finds its expression today in the drive to consume and the loss of any effective voice of political opposition to the ruling class.

It is within this context that an increasing number of artists are returning to the “aura” of the authentic art object and claiming it as their own. In doing this they are using the traditional genres of still-life, urban landscape, satire and modern history painting by commandeering the images they find on the internet, in newspapers, magazines and from their mobile phones. They are then reflecting the mass-

media back on itself. In painting what they see in the mass media artists are choosing to slow down the speed of engagement, in order that they can develop a deeper understanding on the nature of the subject. Painting is, by its very nature, a labour intensive undertaking and this time-consuming act makes a painting by turns an act of meditation. That meditation yields a sense of consideration upon the completed art object which re-processes the ephemeral throw-away image into an item of thoughtful contemplation.

Painting is now no longer the voice of the bourgeois speaking to itself as Benjamin once saw it. It has instead been requisitioned for the 21st century by artists like Katherine Russell, Wayne Clough, Natalie Dowse and Wendy Saunders who draw source material directly from the news media in order to create paintings which carry a social commentary. It is as if the landscape we see and picture before ourselves is no longer the physical environment of earth, sea and sky, beloved of Turner and Constable, but is instead a world of digital noise and confusion which we wish to put the brakes on, in the hope that we might gain a real insight into what we're looking at. We see this in the work of Barbara Howey who sources images from the internet so that she can re-connect to her own personal history or Nathan Eastwood who uses his mobile phone to surreptitiously photograph people in workingclass environments in order to conceive paintings of socialist solidarity. Then there is Nicholas Middleton who captures the urban environment on a film camera in order to paint the poetry of the mundane and Alex Hanna who uses a camera obscure he built himself so that he may compose paintings which meditate on the nature of utility which stands in a quiet opposition to the aesthetics of advertising. Whilst David Sullivan subverts newspaper images to produce satirically soaked paintings which the Guardian newspaper's art critic Adrian Searle described as brave, stupid, wildly ambitious and arrogant.

This is a new generation of artists who are creating real objects for an unreal world.

Robert Priseman, January 2015