That Etiolated Pursuit:
Figurative Painting in the 21st Century, the Berlin Wall and the New Leipzig School

Author: Gale Mason

Affiliation: Edith Cowan University

Phone: 0403992174

Email: jeg60@live.com.au

Biography:

Gale Mason is a current PhD candidate at the School of Arts and Humanities at Edith Cowan University in Perth. She is a practice-led researcher in the visual arts, with the focus on painting, photography, drawing and art history. She is originally from the U.K. but lived for 17 years in Germany, notably through the years of division, the fall of the Berlin wall and reunification. She has lived in Perth since 2004 and majored with 1st class Honours in Fine Art from Curtin University in 2015. Mason has exhibited in various spaces in Düsseldorf and in Perth and has work held by private collectors in England, U.S.A., Germany and Australia.

FIGURATIVE PAINTING AFTER THE DEATH OF PAINTING

SENSATION, THE EVENT AND THE NEW LEIPZIG SCHOOL

FIGURATIVE PAINTING, BERLIN WALL, NEW LEIPZIG SCHOOL, SENSATION, EVENT

Abstract

It is widely accepted in the discourse of contemporary art, that the rise of Conceptualism dramatically challenged the legitimacy of figurative painting in the Western art world, resulting in post-modernist critics proclaiming its death in the 1980's. This denunciation was in part due to this genre being appropriated by the National Socialists in Germany during the Third Reich as well as by the Stalinist Communists, in order to promote their divergent ideological principles. The forced division of Germany in 1945, and the subsequent construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961, caused the nascent individual states to be subject to political and social extremes, bifurcating into largely separate trajectories. One particular effect was the partition of East German art academies from Western discourse. Consequently, they continued to provide classical training with the emphasis on specific technical skills and techniques; and figurative painting continued to be regarded as the country's most important and prestigious art form.

I argue that the concepts of Event and Deleuzian Sensation are made manifest in key works by members of the New Leipzig School, a collective term for a loose assembly of figurative painters, who emerged out of the former GDR after the fall of the Berlin Wall. I want to ask questions in order to understand these concepts and in doing so deepen the trajectory of my own painting practice. Of particular interest is how this historic event impacted on their oeuvre? According to the art historian April Eisman, lingering post-wall triumphalism and a general dismissal of the context in which their works have been created, led to this group being largely misrepresented in Anglo /American discourse. Insights gained from an analysis of the Leipzig painters' work are generated into my own painting practice and its concern with figurative painting as a valid means of expression, particularly against the backdrop of the digital age. More generally, the research examines through their legacy, how the history of art is relevant in contemporary discourse and a crucial factor informing the present.

This paper is a component of a practice-led research focussing on figurative painting and how it continues to be accepted as a valid medium. In order to address these questions, the research interweaves the concepts of Event and Deleuzian Sensation and investigates how they manifest through my painting practice. In the course of this paper, the main interest centres on a loose assembly of figurative painters known collectively as the "New Leipzig School" who emerged out of the former German Democratic Republic after the fall of the Berlin wall. Stringent analysis of their oeuvre will be applied with the aim of providing concrete definitions of the above concepts. As a figurative painter, I intend to investigate how the fall of the Berlin wall as an Event, impacted on their work and how I can use this knowledge as a critical lens to channel into my own practice.

In 1973, Susan Sontag, the eminent author, wrote of living in an 'image-choked world (Sontag 2001, p. 15), contending that the excessive proliferation of the image was now out of control; and therefore, had the power to desensitize the viewer to make an event seem less real. In this case the type of image Sontag was referring to was the photograph. She spoke of 'oversaturation' and this of course, was written before the evolution of social media and mass digital communication. Sontag died in 2004 and so did not live to experience the current image-soaked culture where, through the invention of the smartphone, we create, consume and discard images with little or no concern. I wonder whether she could have imagined just how disposable the photograph would become? My argument as a figurative painter, pivots on this excessive image consumption; I focus on questions of value related to the painted image – which can through its materiality manifest qualities of sensation – and contrast this against digital images which possess no material presence. How can painting further evolve and develop in order to remain any relevance in contemporary art discourse within the digital era? How can one create a painting that is compelling and not just a mimetic representation of the thing it supposed to be depicting? Is it exactly because of its status as a physical object which has a bodily connection to its creator or even as a slow medium, that has afforded painting a renewed agency?

Gilles Deleuze, the French philosopher argued that the problem that confronts painting is not reproducing or inventing forms but of 'capturing forces' or some kind of tension, in order 'to render visible that are themselves not visible' (Deleuze 2003, p. 48). The challenge is how to represent visually, elements such as inertia, weight, movement, sound and instability. For Deleuze, this problem could be solved by the use of 'Sensation' avoiding any form of narrative and painting in a manner as to induce a direct and corporeal response from the viewer (Deleuze 2003, p. 48), a direct transmission, bypassing the brain and inducing a physical

response. As viewers, we are programmed to look for a narrative in order to make sense of what we see, to search for meaning or an explanation. Without it we feel uncomfortable and uncertain. “We demand to know what narrative, what organisation of intelligible relationship renders this response – a scream, a tear, a frisson – a knowable object, a figure that stands against a background of story constituted of other knowable objects” (Daryl Slack 2011, p. 154). Deleuze maintained there were two alternative methods to avoid narrative; progression towards abstraction, which he argued was a cerebral experience and that towards the Figure. Using Cezanne’s definition, he called the latter form, “Sensation”, or of the body, an act upon the nervous system (Deleuze 2003, p. 31). Furthermore, one cannot “think” Sensation”, rather it is an empirical experience, of the senses - one “becomes” in the Sensation (Deleuze 2003, p. 31) which is beyond rational understanding.

According to the theorist Slavoj Žižek, who is concerned with similar phenomena as Deleuze, the Event is not a particular occurrence but rather a philosophical system which is framed as the rupture or unseen force which can only be experienced through its effects (Žižek 2014, p. 2). He goes on to explain that the Event is “something shocking, out of joint, that appears to happen all of a sudden and interrupts the usual flow of things” (Žižek 2014, p. 2). Art historian Moshe Barasch observed that ‘colour appeals to the senses’ (Barasch 2000, p. 355) which supports Deleuzes’ “act upon the nervous system,” colour being one form of assisting the direct transmission. This field of enquiry emphasises painting’s potential importance as a medium, through its material qualities, process and facture, in capturing unseen phenomena such as Evental rupture and sensation, using the form of the mis-en-scene, das Bühnenbild or the staged event.

In addition to the burden of competing with the current image deluge, since the end of the Second World War, painting has had to endure the general consensus within contemporary art discourse that:

> the rise of Conceptualism – with its emphasis on deskilling and displacing aesthetic work from traditional artistic materials like paint, bronze and steel, into the bureaucratic and technical media of text and photography – dramatically challenged the legitimacy of painting,

resulting in post-modernist critics proclaiming its death in the 1980’s (Ammer et al. 2016, p. 11). This criticism of painting is validated by the author Timothy Hymans who, in his review of the book “Art Since 1900” describes a lecture given by Rosalind Krauss, one of the co-authors, at the National Gallery in London in 1999, in which she referred to painting as that ‘etiolated pursuit’ (Hyman 2005). By this she meant that painting, had become pallid, sickly, exhausted and totally obsolete. If painting was acceptable at all, it had to be abstract, (Eisman 2012)

which was “regarded as more spiritually evolved, more advanced than figuration, which in turn was regarded as retrograde (Hyman 2016, p. 9).

However, since the end of the last century, there has been a distinct and persistent resurgence in the interest in figurative painting and much of it seems to pivot around the work of the Leipzig painters. In order to clarify, when I refer to East and West, I am differentiating between the Communist countries of Eastern Europe and the countries in the Capitalist West which the wall sought to divide. The painters chosen as the focus of this research are known collectively as the “New Leipzig School” although they are not part of a formal group. Partitioned from the West, they received a traditional training in painting during the GDR at the Hochschule für Grafik und Buchkunst in the East German city of Leipzig. They are of particular significance to this study as they share technical skill, representational paintings of mysterious and imagined scenarios, a commitment to the mis-en-scene genre, a strong interest in referencing Western art history, as well as a detached attitude to particularly historic subject matter. Further, as I will argue, they share an approach that embodies Deleuzian Sensation and their work encapsulates a response to the Event, in their case, the fall of the Berlin wall.

Extraordinarily, within the Anglo-American scholarship there is a distinct lack of critical analysis regarding these painters and their work tends to be reviewed from a singularly Western perspective. There is usually a predominate and patronizing tone of “post-wall triumphalism” that pervades this discourse and the Leipzig painters have been repeatedly accused of making work that has no meaning (Eisman 2012). Attaching labels to them such as: ‘the painter who came in from the cold’ (Smith 2000) and making assumptions that they were trained in Socialist Realism, the realistic, idealized style of art developed by the Soviet Union, as part of the GDR propaganda machine. The art historian Anne Hamilton agrees, adding that in America in particular, some commentators want, for instance, Neo Rauch, one of the leading Leipzig painters to ‘stand as an avatar for the anti-Communist artist, now freed by the triumph of Western capitalism and its abundant rewards’ (Hamilton 2011).

‘Often in a narrative, it is only through a similar shift in perspective that we get what the story is really all about’ (Žižek 2014, p. 12).

I would contend that these critics ignore the context within which these paintings where created and that if they considered the implications of the sudden collapse of the GDR on the East German painters, they would view them from a completely different perspective. This complacent attitude acts as a barrier, preventing serious study of the Leipzig painter’s oeuvre. These artists have had to watch as their art world disintegrated, become completely subsumed

by the West and then endure the transition from being practitioners of the country's most eminent medium to being denigrated for practising an outmoded art form. Through their experience of the rupture and chaos caused by the GDR's collapse and subsequent vanishing from the world map, they embody the Zizekian Event and I suggest that this is manifested in their work.

It is important to understand that the forced division of Germany in 1945 after the Second World war caused the nascent states to bifurcate into separate and extreme trajectories, politically and socially. The British, French and Americans forces occupied the western sector and saw to it that its surviving inhabitants should collectively bear the guilt of the Nazi atrocities. During the famous Darmstadt discussions in 1950, groups of artists and critics, including Theodor Adorno, Willi Baumeister and Johannes Itten, established that non-objective art was the only way for the newly formed Federal Republic of Germany to turn its back on the past and look only to the future, no longer able to look the figure in the face. Thus rejecting figurative painting, amongst other reasons, for its association with the Nazi's and their use of it to promote their ideological principles (Barron et al.) became part of the process known as "Vergangenheitsbewältigung" or coming to terms with the past (Wittlinger 2006).

Figure 1: Wissel, Adolf, 1939, *Kahlenberger Bauernfamilie*. 150 x 200 cm, oil on canvas, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Berlin. Retrieved from http://galleria.thule-italia.com/adolf-wissel/?lang=en.

“Kahlenberger Bauernfamilie” (Figure 1), by Adolf Wissel exemplifies the kind of artworks favoured by the Nazis. Figurative in style, it depicts the archetypal Aryan family in an idyllic bucolic setting. The figures represent the ideal Germans, according to National Socialist ideology, that is healthy, blonde, pure racial types which in this case are gathered together in a tight family unit.

In the Eastern sector, occupied by the Russians, the message was different. The Third Reich had been a fascist nightmare from which the Russians had liberated the Germans who were presented as victims and the National Socialists were rarely mentioned by name. This resulted in a parallel, autonomous history from the West and a distanced attitude to the crimes committed by the National Socialists. The progress of painting also remained apart. As opposed to West Germany, the academies in the GDR continued to provide classical training, and figurative painting remained the country’s most prestigious art form.

I lived in Germany for seventeen years and so experienced first-hand, life during the division in both sides of the country, the fall of the Berlin wall, and the repercussions that arose during the period of uncertainty that was experienced by the East Germans. The first time I travelled through the wall to visit the eastern side of Berlin, my immediate impression, actually more of a shock, was how bleak everything looked, the lack of any colour as opposed to the western side. Everything seemed grey. During the course of various informal conversations, I have had with East Germans, they generally describe an opposite experience – being confronted with an explosion of colour on their first experience of the West. The source of this vivid colour in the West was usually advertising, but the former GDR suffered from lack of materials which prevented the renovation and upkeep of buildings and surroundings, many of which had remained unchanged since the end of the Second World War. I link this progress from a monochrome environment to the shock of colour in the West to the highly saturated paintings of the Leipzig painters.

Although this segment of a mural on ceramic tiles by Max Lingner from 1952 (Figure 2) is not an actual painting it is a typical example of a Socialist Realist image. It depicts a scene crowded with large, life size, active figures who fill the frame. Pleasant pastel tones help convey the simple message that the country was well on the way to being rebuilt thanks to the labour of the people and that a happy and exciting future lay before them.

Figure 2: Lingner, Max. 1952-53. *Aufbau der Republik*,3 x 7 m, Detlev-Rohwedder Haus, Berlin, Mural on ceramic tiles: retrieved from: http://library.artstor.org.dbgw.lis.curtin.edu.au/asset/APANOSIG_10313580790:

"Schmerz" (Pain), (Figure 3) is a work by Neo Rauch who is the most famous amongst the Leipzig painters. On one hand, there are clear links to the previous images – his paintings are usually large, most of the figures are life size and they are all active. However, as opposed to the Lingner and Wissel works, the Rauch painting is full of interruptions which allude to Žižek's "something out of joint", the "appearance without solid being as its foundation" (Žižek 2014, p. 2). The nature of the figure's actions is unclear, the colours are garish and unreal, there is a strange juxtaposition of German tradition and cartoonish elements. The entire scene is imprinted with a temporal vagueness and protagonists who are hampered in some way, especially regarding the hands, such as the yellow figure on the right, appear often in his paintings. Similarly, another reoccurring feature of his work are figures who merge into something else, either strange shapes, or as in "Schmerz", the surrounding space.

The collection of disparate figures and awkwardly placed incongruous objects appear to have been assembled in a collage-like manner. The presence of several vanishing points and disregard for scale, render the space uncertain creating a sense of destabilisation from the point of the viewer. The figures are connected to each other spatially and through vivid colour, but otherwise remain detached and the tension is increased as the subject matter hovers between the known and the unknown. As in the Lingner mural, Rauch presents a figurative scenario that has little to do with reality. The Wissel and Lingner images sole purpose as didactic models is to convey, through an easily recognisable art form, a clear message and they possess a definite illustrative style. Although Rauch's work is painted in an ostensibly similar figurative manner, the distinct lack of narrative "liberates the figure from the mode of representation" (Daryl Slack 2011, p. 155) and accesses Deleuzian Sensation. Thus, the others do not. Interestingly, although Rauch received academic training, where ordinarily, according to David Bachelor, that colour is 'low down the hierarchy of a painter's skills and resources' (Batchelor 2000, p. 25), it appears to be one of Rauch's main strategies. When

considering the lack of colour in the everyday environment in the GDR, this suggests a further clash with tradition and the emergence of the new

Figure 3: Rauch, Neo 2004 *Schmerz*, Oil on canvas, 274 x 215 cm,
Retrieved from https://libraryartstororg.dbgw.lis.curtin.edu.au/asset/LARRY_QUALLS_10313735435

It is not my intention to emulate Rauch, my context is vastly different. However, by critically studying the methods and strategies he employs and then testing and experimenting with these approaches through my own practice I aim to gain insights into Sensation and the Event. For instance, a quality I am interested in is the use of historical anachronisms to create intersecting worlds of past and present which present a sense of disruption and destabilise the composition, the something out of joint. I create imagined scenes and populate them with figures who act as protagonists, acting out undisclosed scenarios. References to build these compositions are sourced from a collection of film stills, found images, drawings I have made of everyday objects and photographs taken by myself especially for this purpose of building a

painting. In recent examples of my work – in the “Hybrid” paintings, I have employed a limited colour palette to unify the scene as a whole entity and then chosen separate, idiosyncratic elements to fashion a composition in a collage-like manner. Considered use of colour is critical as I link Sensation to colour’s power to induce a corporeal response in the viewer as “colour is the body, Sensation is in the body not in the air” (Deleuze 2003, p. 32).

Figure 4: Mason, Gale 2018*, Hybrid 1*, oil on canvas, 160 x 120 cm.

In both paintings, the figures occupy the same space but remain apart. I have chosen to name the paintings from this series “Hybrid” as they are compositions of disparate elements, similar to Rauch’s work. In ‘Hybrid 1’ (Figure. 4), the figures inhabit a specified interior which appears to be recognisable, but I attempt to manipulate scale and how they are positioned within the frame to render the scene unstable or out of joint. I try to exclude all hints of narrative by keeping the figures isolated and withholding information, such as objects which would reveal exactly what the characters are doing or their reason for being there. I paint in a figurative style, presenting the viewer with a scene which appears to represent reality but upon closer inspection, reveals that it does not. The objects on the shelf are presented unnaturally, they defy perspective and seem to be floating. The ambiguous form on the upper left corner of the

painting, chosen for its shape and the fact that it is out of place.

Figure 5: Mason, Gale, 2018, *Hybrid 2,* oil and acrylic on canvas, 260 x 13 cm.

The figures do not belong together. The three women are from the past while the male is modern, unnaturally large in comparison and is positioned in a precarious and artificial manner. I have used a palette knife to manipulate the paint, breaking up the surface and render the space uncertain. In these paintings, I attempt to create a scene where the rational and the irrational collide. In 'Hybrid 2' (Figure. 7), the interior itself is a conglomeration of separate parts, combining 18th Century architecture with the Brutalist contemporary. These figures are also linked by colour but are otherwise divided by time, scale and perspective. The references used originate from three different time periods. Again, I have applied the paint for the background using the knife to disturb the surface.

This research is still at a reasonably early stage but has benefited from journeying to Germany earlier this year where I was able to study the works of the painters in question and conduct conversations with their gallerists and colleagues from the Hochschule in Leipzig. So far it indicates that through their oeuvre, figurative painting has been given new agency, above all, through its power to convey that which cannot be seen.

Conclusion

To summarise the content of this paper, I suggest that through the rupture, uncertainty and destabilisation caused by the fall of the Berlin wall and the collapse of the GDR, the painters of the New Leipzig School embody the Žižekian Event and this is manifested in their work. Furthermore, through the deliberate absence of narrative, they present their paintings as vehicles of Sensation. Being partitioned from Western discourse and history has resulted in a separate attitude which has realised the production of work that can only have significant impact on the global viewer. The Leipzig painters' oeuvre has provided valuable insights regarding the continuing importance of figurative painting and enabled the development and understanding of the genre within my own practice.

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