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ONLINE EXCLUSIVE

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Interview with Caragh Thuring

When I first visited Caragh Thuring in her east London studio, there was an old man lurking in the corner. He was bearded and curly haired, with orange cheeks, peppery eyes and bright lips that were puckered into a small red beak. He looked surprised, maybe a little embarrassed and, although this won't mean much to you, a little like my dad, which is how Thuring and I continue to refer to him. 'I couldn't tell you where he came from', she said, looking over his fading features (which I should mention were rendered once on linen, and again to the left on a dog-eared piece of paper). 'I was going to stick him on top of another painting, but I thought that would be a bit much, so I'm saving him for later.'

This approach is indicative of Thuring's painterly methodology, one characterised by reclamation and continuation. A healthy disposophobic, Thuring hoards imagery and ideas from all walks of life, and then rolls them out slowly, revisiting certain particularities from linen to linen. Her latest works, on display across Thomas Dane's twin London spaces until January, are informed by Ardyne Point, a now-derelict development to the southwest of Dunoon in Scotland which, framed by towering oil rigs, once sought permission to manage the nuclear waste from decommissioned submarines (the application was withdrawn following protests from local residents). Contrastingly, her exhibition at London's Chisenhale Gallery last year involved a number of serene works inspired by the 'picture windows' of Dutch suburban homes, their white ledges interrupted by smatterings of leaves and spotty ornamental vases.

In spite of their seemingly unrelated starting points – from the residential to the rigs – the two bodies of work remain visually linked. Brickwork, for instance, a leitmotif that Thuring adopted shortly after leaving college in 1995 as a ‘shortcut’ to signify construction, lurks in the background of both – previously, these bricks have been painted, now they are woven into the very fabric onto which the paintings are built. Silhouettes of figures, too, fade in and out, as do man-made structures, graphic patterns, and expanses of untouched canvas. The immaculately titled ***He Who Drinks the Juice of the Stone*** (2016) provides the most compelling case. The large canvas, scrawled with looping red text chronicling every church that stands defiant within London’s financial district, is a near-exact replica of a previous work, ***Map*** (2014). The new iteration is dissected by a belt of black text cataloguing the band of comically named skyscrapers (Cheese Grater, Gherkin, Walkie Talkie) that fight against the area’s history.

This desire to reconstitute, reposition and reconsider is integral to Thuring’s wider belief in what painting should do. She is not an artist who aims to faithfully represent, to provide the comfort of readability. Rather, she offers suggestions of suggestions of suggestions; hints, nods and whispers of meaning that encourage you to lean a little closer and think a little more. A volcano, for instance, a familiar feature in many of her earlier works, can be just a volcano. But it can also connote frustration, masculinity, paroxysm, natural power, and anything else that you can come up with. The same goes in the latest works. Submarines, foliage, tartan, shadows: all these forms are referential, to an extent, but what they will signify for each and every viewer is undecided. It’s open. It’s all up for debate.

I didn’t see my dad for a few days after sitting down with Thuring, but then I ran into him twice in quick succession. Firstly, under the guise of ***Rose Pouchong*** (2016); secondly, painted onto the two-tone brick wall of ***Enlisted Wives Club*** (2016). A week or so has passed since that point, so the memory of him is fading, but knowing Thuring, I’ll see him again. In what form, I don’t know, under what circumstances, I couldn’t tell you, but he’ll be back.

Q

THE WHITE REVIEW

– You described the paintings of strangers’ window ledges in your Chisenhale show as portraits. Your new works make use of a number of images lifted from your childhood – can we refer to them as self-portraits?

A

CARAGH THURING

– Those earlier paintings were definitely portraits of other people, but I wouldn’t say that these amount to a portrait of myself – not explicitly, at least. They’re more an accumulative portrait of my environment; a strange summing up of everything that I’ve made, and a number of things that I’ve experienced, but I don’t want them to be taken as historical or nostalgic. I don’t want them to be wrapped up in memory. The imagery that I’m using

now, for instance, the McAlpine oil rigs, the submarines, the sailors, the names of the ships: I saw all of that. They may have moved on from that location but they still look the same, we are continually negotiating their function and relevance. The works show something closer to an image of condensed time – a lateral portrait.

Q

THE WHITE REVIEW

– That is underpinned by the fact that, despite these early memories, much of the imagery that is built into your recent work is ‘found’ material: photographs of sailors, submarines, the names of ships and, as with the pieces you showed at Chisenhale, models from fashion campaigns. Why do you think you are drawn to appropriate this pre-existing material?

A

CARAGH THURING

– These particular advertising images – it’s Hervé Legér here, and at Chisenhale it was Ralph Lauren – have a strange effect on me. I have used these very same images over many years. It’s the same feeling as when you see something that’s almost ridiculous; something that is uncanny or that throws you off balance. For the most part, this advertising imagery becomes meaningless, but every now and again you will see something that is quite strange, that leads you to envy whoever was able to create that image. You covet it.

As a child, the adverts on TV were my favourite things (apart from documentaries about making things), because they were so *obvious* – people were supposed to believe these things? I used to find that perversity quite exciting, somehow, and funny. The women included here, and the man in ***Aggregate Man*** (2015), are ridiculous, but they’re also quite fantastic, and so I build them into the paintings as basic representations of humans. It’s an appreciation, as much as anything, but it’s also an appropriation. In these new works they also reference some photos that I found of women in hard hats posing in front of the oil rigs near my home in Scotland. You find imagery in whatever you’re looking at or experiencing or thinking about, and then you edit it, as if you were working on a film, and use it to your own benefit.

Q

THE WHITE REVIEW

– And when did you first become interested in this relationship between man and nature that is so central to so much of your work? When we’ve spoken before we’ve talked about it as ceaseless and perhaps fated, but also, in that ceaselessness, quite funny?

A

CARAGH THURING

— It represents a pathetic battle – it could be a pillow fight! A constant oscillation between these two things. It's the same with the volcanoes and it's why the bricks exist in the paintings. They're a very perfect example of those two forces coming together: a shape constructed by man, out of earth, to be piled up again on top of the earth.

Q

THE WHITE REVIEW

— I ask because you have previously talked about the 'nothingness' that sits at the heart of painting as a medium – that while physical sculptures carry the baggage of being physical, representative objects in a room, paintings always spring from non-existence, and that provides a certain level of freedom. If that's the case, why do you choose to work from recognisable ideas and peddle what could be looked at as magical realisms? Why not take full advantage of the nothingness and deal in pure fictions?

A

CARAGH THURING

— A piece of wood is, and always will be, a piece of wood. You know what it is: it has its own baggage. A painting is freer, and is a place where you can cover quite a lot of ground, so you collect fragments of facts and put them together in your own way. That's your story, but it's not a completed story. You're responsible for a certain part of it, but you allow it to breathe and build itself into its own thing, and that's where you can let it go – that's where you eschew responsibility.

You can hint at so much in painting, and painting, for me, is about having an awareness of that idea, that images can nudge people towards various different associations and meanings, about subtly trying to permeate the works with it. On the one hand, you can't be dictatorial about this imagery – you can't make a reading too obvious. On the other, you can't close it off or complete it, because then where do you go? There's nothing left to do. It's about triggering through suggestion, in the most efficient way possible. Someone else can make up their own story from there.

It's why I use cut outs instead of incorporating recognisable figures, and why I put together these brick structures that are completely improbable. I try and build what you might be looking at, and not what you actually are. That's what's interesting. That's the challenge: trying to make something happen without referring too directly.

Q

THE WHITE REVIEW

— It's like holding people poised, I suppose. Providing just enough to draw someone in, but not so much that they lose interest.

A

CARAGH THURING

— Too few people exploit painting's potential; they don't recognise that you can take people to all sorts of places without making things explicit. People are just so keen to spell it out, and that's so dull. It can, it should, just go on endlessly, without being completely evasive.

Q

THE WHITE REVIEW

— When and why did you decide to leave behind the unprimed canvases that have become so characteristic of your work, and paint onto your own bespoke tapestries?

A

CARAGH THURING

— After my last exhibition, I didn't want to go back into a studio with a load of bare linen canvases. I wanted something else. I decided to build a layer of imagery into the surface to be painted on. Not use found materials or fabrics but appropriate my own images and so be fully intentional from the start. Conversely it was also a way of reneging a certain amount of responsibility. I found the weavers and asked them to replicate my old paintings. I said, 'I want you to take these bricks from my paintings, and they have to be diagonal and the figures have to be this scale and these are the colours they have to be,' but I then left the weavers to get on with the process they were skilled in.

Q

THE WHITE REVIEW

— It strikes me that your paintings have always been quite 'honest', in that fact that they don't deny what they are: constructed, built objects. The sections of canvas that were left untouched at your show at Simon Preston last year, for example, or the struts that are visible through the bare linen of *The Silent Service* (2016).

A

CARAGH THURING

— It's not about being honest or dishonest. You're just opening things up, putting things down, and letting them do whatever they do. They move. They start moving around this flat surface like when you're watching a film, and then your brain starts moving, starts working. That's it.

I'm not denying what a painting is, of course. The woven fabric 'pretends' to be printed or painted bricks, and I'm sure that some people might leave the exhibition thinking that that's what they are. But if they look at the sides of the tapestries, for example, they'll see the bars of colour that have gone into producing them. I thought about hiding that initially.

That particular dialogue – 'the treachery of images' – has been done. We're all aware of it, there's a whole history of it, and we continue to engage with it, but I want to make the image that will be seen. That's what excites me, that's the embarrassing activity in all of this.

Q

THE WHITE REVIEW

— In what way is it embarrassing?

A

CARAGH THURING

— It's just embarrassing to make things, isn't it? To look at these things that you've made. You sit in a space on your own coming up with these works... I don't think you can do it without being embarrassed, even if that's quite uncomfortable. If you don't feel embarrassment at some point during the process, I'm not sure how really engaged you are in what you're doing. You're trying to avoid it or using someone else's dialogue – relying on something else.

Q

THE WHITE REVIEW

— Do you still find it uncomfortable?

A

CARAGH THURING

— I do. I think the least embarrassing bit is probably putting it on the wall, because at that point you've done it – you're over it. It comes again, obviously, but in a different way.

To come back to your previous question: painting has a certain mystery to it that you can't unearth. It's like reading a book. Unless you read all the words in the book, you don't know what it's about. It sits there, closed, and until you've completed it you won't have any idea what it means. You can pick up on ideas, you can get the feeling of certain passages, but you're never really going to get a sense of what it is.

Q

THE WHITE REVIEW

— But your paintings offer multiple entry points. Prioritising the visual over the concealed meaning doesn't necessarily diminish the impact of the work, it just allows it to occupy a slightly different space. Partial readings can be interesting, too.

A

CARAGH THURING

— Well, that's good! There has to be that partial interest. You need that way in. If you can't provide that you've failed, because no one will engage with it any further. You have to understand that the first thing people meet is a very flat, unmoving surface. In that sense, you haven't got much to play with, even though the opportunities from that fixed point are infinite. I love that polarised position that making a painting holds: it's infinite, but you've also got nothing to go on before you begin – nothing to entice anyone. And I wouldn't say that these are seductive paintings, either.

Q

THE WHITE REVIEW

— In what way are they not seductive?

A

CARAGH THURING

— Well, they're almost drawings, simple drawings, and they frequently avoid certain devices that others might find useful: colours, lushness of paint, completeness of the image, the comfortable way of looking at something and immediately recognising it. I suppose I do aim to seduce, but mine is a slow seduction, an interrupting seduction.

Q

THE WHITE REVIEW

— It's interesting that you don't see the predominantly brown palette that you've employed recently as particularly seductive. Not far from here at Gagosian Gallery] there's an exhibition of new paintings by Ed Ruscha, all of which carry the same shade that you're working with now. He describes it as 'the colour that forgot it was a colour'.

A

CARAGH THURING

— I understand that, and I don't. The reason I started using linen was because I didn't want to have a white surface to paint on. I didn't want something that oppressive, something I've become too familiar with, and this particular shade just seemed like nothing. It's not that it's a *non*-colour, because it clearly is, but it was still, for me, the most neutral thing that I could work with. It's a manufactured material in its raw state

Q

THE WHITE REVIEW

— You said that the seductive nature of your works is more interrupting than luscious. Where do you think that desire to interrupt the flow comes from?

A

CARAGH THURING

— I want it to get in people's way, I suppose, and demand something of a viewer, someone who's bothering to look at it. After all, why should anyone take time to look at it? It's asking a lot of someone to come and be with someone else's work. So I feel I need to coax them into the quagmire.

I don't want instant gratification. I suppose it stems from my own desire to see what else might be on offer, rather than what is immediately obvious. I don't want to think, 'I know what that is.' I'm intrigued by what's behind it, what's not being represented, and what I can mine out of a situation. So I try to do the same: I'm motivated to make things to interrupt and to drag people behind the work.

Q

THE WHITE REVIEW

— Could you talk a little about the 'fakes' exhibition that you staged for Question Centre at Westminster Waste earlier this year?

A

CARAGH THURING

— I sent JPEGs of my own work to China, to a community of painters who make fakes of Old Masters or family portraits, and got them to send me back a series of forgeries. There were probably a lot of people making the same fake, which was interesting to me: different layers, different people interpreting the same image on different computer screens.

Q

THE WHITE REVIEW

— And where did this concept come from?

A

CARAGH THURING

— The idea arose when I was thinking about the scale of my work, and the way that it gets seen in other situations, through a JPEG, for instance, when everything is condensed and it's a completely different experience. I was also thinking about the value of things. People make fakes of items that have an inherent value, whether monetary or personal. And I was thinking about the relative values of my works. I wanted to have made some irrelevant fakes.

Q

THE WHITE REVIEW

— Were you happy with the ersatz versions?

A

CARAGH THURING

— Some of them are very good, some of them, less so... I actually couldn't accept the first bunch because a problem with the calibration of the screen led to all of the linen turning purple... I started recognising a few as my own paintings. They became very much my own things. There were only a few that jarred with me, where I thought: that is not my painting. But some of them I saw and just thought, yeah, I know that, even though they were all wrong.

I was also surprised to see that the large paintings could work on such a small scale, they presented themselves as a completely different idea and I could never have made those particular pictures at that scale myself. They became little jewels.

Q

THE WHITE REVIEW

— To pick up on this idea of integrating technology: I was wondering why, and how, you thought that, in the face of rapid technological advancements, painting still persists?

A

CARAGH THURING

— Because it does something that nothing else does. It does its own thing. Technological change really affects the way that paintings are viewed, transferred, disseminated or distributed. But as speed and distraction becomes exponentially relevant, I think that paintings are just as, maybe more so, loud and relevant.

Q

THE WHITE REVIEW

— To break this question down a little further, and because we have talked about the idea that you might one day make a film, I'll ask something that might sound simple and reductive: why do you paint?

A

CARAGH THURING

— With painting, it's strangely impossible to achieve what you want to achieve, and I like that sense of endless continuity. It's like mining. You're constantly going through this rock face to get to this unseen thing and, occasionally, you hit against a nugget of something. But it's not just the pleasure of discovery, it's about that labour, about that mystery of never knowing when you're going to hit on something.

Q

THE WHITE REVIEW

— Is that not frustrating?

A

CARAGH THURING

— Of course. When I look at the things I think: ‘How can I make that into paint?’ It doesn’t work, it never really works, not perfectly, but I like that. It’s almost like the subject I’m painting is wholly removed from the thing that I’m thinking about, but that’s fine. If you’re looking at those things, thinking about those things, then somehow they get in there, in some form. You’re not illustrating, you’re not defining: it’s a strange, mysterious way of doing something.

Q

THE WHITE REVIEW

— I think that inability to complete carries across to the act of viewing your paintings. They present so many fragments and suggestions that it never feels like you’ll make your way to the finishing line. You’re always left scrambling.

A

CARAGH THURING

— You can never complete them. If I look at a painting or watch a film, I don’t want it laid out on a plate for me. I want to be intrigued, so that I’ve got something to enlarge upon later. I don’t want to be spoon fed. That’s why I can never think of my paintings as complete – they’re all either preparatory drawings or failures. They’re all failed works. It’s a constant failure. If it’s not, you wouldn’t be able to make anything else. Everything is a preparatory drawing for the next, which is why I ‘recycle’ my works and carry the imagery across shows. It’s like mining, again: you can never know where you’re going. You can never finish. There’s always more rock, more nuggets to be found. It’s constant.

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