

A class at The Prince of Wales Drawing Studio 2002

Glenn Sujo asked me to develop a remark I made in which I questioned the English attitude towards painting, that is to say, it's obligation to nature – nature as subject matter and nature within the artist that is manifested in the marks he puts on the surface. Or in other words: the painting should refer to life and be lively in it's manner of, I don't dare to say execution, in this context better to say, Making. I said that such a straightforward relation to life is impossible in my work. I don't experience either the world as simply existing or myself as present in front of the painting in the moment of work. Something is always there between me and the world, me and the work of art, a kind of death creeps in.

The play Oedipus by Sophocles ends in these words: "Sons and daughters of Thebes, behold: this was Oedipus greatest of men; he held the key to the deepest mysteries; was envied by all his fellow-men for his great prosperity; behold, what a full tide of misfortune swept over his head. Then learn that mortal man must always look to his ending, and none can be called happy until that day when he carries his happiness down to the grave in peace."

This small paragraph contains some crucial paradoxes inherent in western culture. It is as if to be happy this happiness must reach the end, happiness appears here as a kind of frame that adorns life while terminated. Life is considered here from the point of view of someone else, of someone that knows. Someone's happiness is a matter of someone else's knowledge and not something that exists within him in a given moment, it is a question of the whole, and this whole is possible only through meeting the end. Western man probably gives priority to Knowledge upon Living. It is not enough to be happy, you must know whether your life could be called Happy. You have to carry happiness down to the grave.

A somewhat similar idea appears in a book that was very important for me many years ago – Nausea by Jean Paul Sartre. In the paragraph I shall read he compares the lack of meaning of mere existence to life described in literature (reading p.61-63).

But you have to choose: live or tell. For example, when I was in Hamburg, with that Erna girl I didn't trust and who was afraid of me, I led a funny sort of life. But I was in the middle of it, I didn't think about it. And then one evening, in a little cafe in San Pauli, she left me to go to the ladies' room. I stayed alone, there was a phonograph playing "Blue Skies." I began to tell myself what had happened since I landed. I told myself, "The third evening, as I was going into a dance hall called la Grotte Bleue, I noticed a large woman, half seas over. And that woman is the one I am waiting for now, listening to 'Blue Skies,' the woman who is going to come back and sit down at my right and put her arms around my neck." Then I felt violently that I was having an adventure. But Erna came back and sat down beside me, she wound her arms around my neck and I hated her without knowing why. I understand now: one had to begin living again and the adventure was fading out.

Nothing happens while you live. The scenery changes, people come in and go out, that's all. There are no beginnings. Days are tacked on to days without rhyme or reason, an interminable, monotonous addition. From time to time you make a sum-total: you say: I've been traveling for three years, I've been in Bouville for three years. Neither is there any end: you never leave a woman, a friend, a city in one go.

And then everything looks alike: Shanghai, Moscow, Algiers, everything is the same after two weeks. There are moments—rarely—when you make a landmark, you realize that you're going with a woman, in some messy business. The time of a flash. After that, the procession starts again, you begin to add up hours and days: Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday. April, May, June. 1924, 1925, 1926.

That's living. But everything changes when you tell about life; it's a change no one notices: the proof is that people talk about true stories. As if there could possibly be true stories; things happen one way and we tell about them in the opposite sense. You seem to start at the beginning: "It was a fine autumn evening in 1922. I was a notary's clerk in Marommes." And in reality you have started at the end. It was there, invisible and present, it is the one which gives to words the pomp and value of a beginning. "I was out walking, I had left the town without realizing it, I was thinking about my money troubles." This sentence, taken simply for what it is, means that the man was absorbed, morose, a hundred leagues from an adventure, exactly in the mood to let things happen without noticing them. But the end is there, transforming everything. For us, the man is already the hero of the story. His moroseness, his money troubles are much more precious than ours, they are all gilded by the light of future passions. And the story goes on in the reverse: instants have stopped piling themselves in a lighthearted way one on top of the other, they are snapped up by the end of the story which draws them and each one of them in turn, draws out the preceding instant: "It was night, the street was deserted." The phrase is cast out negligently, it seems superfluous; but we do not let ourselves be caught and we put it aside: this is a piece of information whose value we shall subsequently appreciate. And we feel that the hero has lived all the details of this night like annunciations, promises, or even that he lived only those that were promises, blind and deaf to all that did not herald adventure. We forget that the future was not yet there; the man was walking in a night without forethought, a night which offered him a choice of dull rich prizes, and he did not make his choice.

I wanted the moments of my life to follow and order themselves like those of a life remembered. You might as well try and catch time by the tail.

I am about to suggest that what gives us a sense of liveliness in painting is the fact that we see the whole scene simultaneously, a whole life is folded into this rectangle, we see life framed and we are content to know what was in the end. Each painting has a pretension to be a whole world, and life condensed and encapsulated into this small format arouses us. Paintings that serve this idea explicitly, are those of 'Three ages of men' – one of the most famous of them is the three headed man of Titian in the national gallery.

The juxtaposition of 'Life room' or painting from life, and 'still life' or 'Nature morte' brought to my mind Manet's great painting in the national gallery "Music in the Tuileries Gardens". This painting that appears to depict a flashing moment in city life, in the standard impressionist way of thinking, seems to me more of an intended arrangement, characteristic of Still life, even a kind of 'Vanitas'. The front center is occupied by two young girls absorbed in their play which is a kind of futile activity of filling and emptying small buckets, small containers, with earth. To their left are two women, probably their mothers that are aware of the spectator, or the painter, aware of being watched, they form a kind of a mirror image (a common Vanitas object) or even a double headed body. I read once a book that interpreted many of Manet's paintings as essays in self-consciousness, showing the gradual awakening of

consciousness through the different images that represent its levels— an animal, even a sleeping animal, a child, an adult, sometimes reading or listening. In this painting the highest form of consciousness is represented by the image of Manet himself walking into the picture frame on the far left and by his erect figure and another man's very much like him, a kind of a twin, as if framing it, closing the painting firmly on this side. In contrast to these three couples that form a kind of arc, a quarter of a circle, on the front left, and is somehow protected by the black tree trunk that bends leftward from the center, in the other half of the front, the painting turns to be a Still-life of sorts – a parasol, a back of a chair and an empty chair with a minimalist still-life arrangement - there is a stick there in the traditional angle of a knife on a table, and an empty circle. It is as if this crowded picture is drained gradually towards the right, and is summarized in an empty circle. Filling and emptying is what I started with concerning the activity of the girls in the middle front.

Last week I visited the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford and saw the exhibition of American artist Ed Ruscha. I read these words of his in the exhibition guide: "I wanted to make pictures but I didn't want to paint. Some painters just love to paint – they get up in the morning and grab a brush, not knowing what they are going to do, but they just have to have that hot brush moving those colours. But I was more interested in the end result than I was in the means to an end."

It so happened in the 20th century, perhaps even more so in its second half, that a split occurred between conceptual thinking and painting. Painting became associated more with the unconscious, with free imagination, with personal expression via style, with the internal. Conceptual thinking, on the other hand, found its routes of articulation in other, more dry and functional media.

In my work I would like to combine these two, namely, to make conceptual painting, to be conceptual in the medium of painting. In our times it involves awareness to the crisis that painting was suffering in the technological-atheist era. I find it most challenging to deal with this crisis from inside, to demonstrate painting's shortcomings through painting, which is a forgotten or dormant skill nowadays.

In my last series of landscape paintings I have relied on photographs I took in the mountains within Jerusalem and around it, into which I have transplanted landscape details from reproductions of the old masters. These Flemish or German or Italian paintings originally intended to illustrate Jerusalem, the background of Christ's Passion, but of course were based on the fertile lands of Europe. The combined new Jerusalem of my paintings has become the dwelling place for small porcelain figures, mainly from 18th century Germany.

In these paintings I work exclusively from photographs enlarged in laser machines that distort their colours and produce strange effects. I plan everything in advance, and work with the help of grids. Photographs are available and easy to handle source for me. I find subject matter the most important and try to find the shortest way to achieve what I want to say. On the other hand I find myself interested in traditional techniques.