

<H>ART is a young and fast-growing Belgian print magazine for contemporary art. It wants to keep up with the contemporary expressive art scene in an alert and accessible way. Now in its third year, <H>ART starts working more internationally. That's why we offer a <H>ART International section, with contributions in English or French. Therefore we selected some good international writers and/or critics, who use their expertise to report about the contemporary expressive art in their region or country. It wouldn't be only the reviewing of a certain artist or exhibition (although it is allowed when it is particularly interesting), but the critical pointing to new artistic trends and evolutions in the art scene the critic likes, linked to social, political and economical context. On the other hand, Belgian photographer Jean-Pierre Stoop pictures the most relevant and interesting contemporary art events of the Belgian contemporary art scene.

The London art scene moves away from Big Money Conceptualism

## PAINTING RE-EMERGES

Looming over me, stretching round, half-shaped brush-strokes flit in and out of focus. Flecks of paint, layered up textures, backgrounds half-stripped away. Desperate to tease out some element of something 'real', my eyes drive through the paint – catching fleeting glimpses of waterfalls, armies, colossal cloud formations. These works draw the eye in to what seems like some mystical world, some Eden beyond, before finally frustrating the search for the figurative.

**It's January 2008, I'm in Standpoint Gallery, just off Hoxton Square in London, and I'm staring at a painting called 'Penelope' by Sussex-based contemporary artist Nadine Feinson. Her work possesses both grandeur and delicacy. It's instantly arresting, and yet repeatedly challenging, engrossing, and, in many ways, demanding.**

Allure and resistance: there's a sense of something untenable, or in Wordsworth's words "something evermore about to be". Time is the thing you want to spend with these paintings, and time, I think, is key, perhaps now more than ever.

### CREDIT CRUNCH LONDON

They say, of course, that time is money. But in today's cash-strapped London, people, thankfully, would rather spend time than money. Artists spend time to produce work, viewers spend time viewing, and investors want something they can appreciate time and again.

The recession has played a major part in this. In tough times, people want to invest – emotionally and financially – in substance, as opposed to the latest fleeting fads. Art founded upon skill and hard graft is of an intrinsic value that, say, a dead shark is not. In a sense the longer something took to produce and the more skill involved in the production process, the more reliable its value is, because it is more resistant to the whims of fashion and less dependent on the notion of artist as brand. And so, at last, London is beginning, finally, to emerge from the shadow of the YBAs (Young British Artists). Admittedly the brash celebrity decadence that placed London at the centre of the art world has been fading for some time, but nobody seemed quite sure what exactly was going to replace it. Until now.

Now painting is back. Painting is hacking out a new path through the tortuous jungles of sub-Deleuzean art theory, a path along which technique, pro-

cess and skill are emerging – alongside ideas – as the criteria on which art is now to be judged.

Of course, the economy is not everything. Back in October 2008, 'The Future Can Wait' – an art fair held in the Old Truman Brewery just off Brick Lane in East London – showcased what director and curator Xavier Ellis termed 'The New London School'. Of course such terms – essential for salesmen and marketeers – must be taken with a pinch of salt. But there was a definite feeling, even then, that the London art world was beginning to move in a different direction. Yes, big shock-art was certainly present, but it was the paintings and carefully wrought sculptural works that really caught the eye.

Feinson exhibited at 'The Future Can Wait', alongside the likes of Gordon Cheung, Emma Bennett and Tim Ellis. Cheung's work is particularly relevant to this move away from big money conceptualism. Utilising ink, acrylic gel, oils and spray paint, Cheung paints directly onto stock listings from the Financial Times. His work – on display again at Nettie Horn back in August – fuses the traditionally figurative with a hyper-real computer game aesthetic: these are big, immersive works, rich with symbolism, layers of colour and intrigue. Painstaking technique covers up the endless number-crunching of the (art) market: time here is more than money.

Since 'The Future Can Wait', artists such as Gavin Nolan have seen their careers go stratospheric. London has continued this development with exhibitions of work by the likes of Fiona Murray, Ilona Szalay, Steven Neder-

veen, and Kysa Johnson all contributing to an increased interest in painting. Solo shows such as Jon Wealleans at Francis Kyle Gallery and Elisabeth Peyton at the Whitechapel have confirmed this new direction.

Why might this be? I spoke to Nadine Feinson to find out her own take on this shift. "I think there is renewed interest in the many levels of complexity that painting offers," she says. Although the recession has played a factor, perhaps there is something intrinsic to the medium that has ensured its return to art's vanguard? Feinson agrees: "The economic shocks have clearly affected the art market place – there is less easy money chasing easy art! Painting is capable of being a multi-dimensional art form of extreme subtlety which can play out over extended periods of time and clearly this requires skill and technique in order to bring these aspects into play".

Amanda Moss, London-based painter and the brains behind both Corsica Studios and the Elephant Rooms, attributes painting's renaissance to a loss of love for technology, and the repetition that it engenders. "Perhaps our love affair with technology is waning. Painting for me has never been dead but has found it hard to compete with mechanical reproduction. Walter Benjamin talks about the aura of a painting and how this alters when we start to reproduce mechanically the same image over and over again."

Certainly, this seems apt when you compare the personal specificity of an individual painting produced by an individual artist to the mass-produced works by the likes of Damien Hirst or Japanese super-brand Takashi Murakami. Surely something is lost (personality, respect, integrity, depth of feeling?) when art is churned out like toys for the rich? Interestingly, earlier this year Jay Jopling's White Cube showed an exhibition of paintings by American artist Fred Tomaselli. And now, even Hirst has opened an exhibition at The Wallace Collection consisting entirely of paintings, made alone by Hirst himself. Well, who better to ask about all this than Stuckist co-founder, champion of painting, and notorious YBA-baiter, Charles Thomson?

### STUCKISM

Stuckism was founded in 1999 by Thomson and Billy Childish (who later left the group in 2001). The movement's aims include the promotion of figurative painting over conceptual art, but they are perhaps best known for annual protests against the Turner Prize outside Tate Britain. So does Hirst's return to painting represent a victory for Stuckism?

"In 1999, when Saatchi and Britart ruled with the promotion of fish and animal carcasses in preserving fluid, we said painting was the way forward for art, and were called hopelessly naive and reactionary. This year Damien Hirst announced the way forward for his art was painting. Curiously, no one has turned round and said, 'The Stuckists were right,' or called Hirst reactionary. This shows the complete lack of integrity and critical



NADINE FEINSON, 'PENELOPE', OIL ON BOARD, 90 X 120

objectivity in a superficial art establishment controlled by fashion and commercial self-interest."

According to Thomson, "Hirst is a relatively superficial person. He plays the art world and he plays the art market. He has been very successful in these activities, and a key component of his success is his superficiality... It is predicated on commerce and promotional opportunism, not any durable inherent quality of worth." Interestingly, Hirst himself seems not to disagree. Earlier this year he stated: "I'm happy where they [the paintings] are right now. I went through some weird shit to get here, and they seem like they can work in this market. Who knows? They are very different to my other work. It feels very odd to be painting on my own." It is the market that is Hirst's ultimate arbiter of success, not any sense of passion or integrity. This is Thomson's criticism, and this, I think, is what people are tiring of. The fact that Hirst's paintings have been given a near-universal critical mauling seems to confirm this.

And yet, for all I (and many others) agree with much of what Thomson says, Stuckism always seemed rather too dogmatic to provide a viable alternative to the YBAs. Their strict insistence on the superiority of figurative painting is both limited and limiting. Stuckism often seems simply about satire, and satire dies when its target withers.

Just as Nadine Feinson demonstrates the power of abstraction, so many artists in London today are producing work that shows skill, dedication and emotional depth without the need for a paintbrush. The likes of Tessa Farmer, Juliana Cerqueira, Sarah Bridgland, Laura Culham, Anna Barribal, Abigail Reynolds and Rosie Leventon work across a range of media. Dead woodland creatures, folded paper, plastic flowers, old botany books – all are utilised in the works of this diverse list of artists. It doesn't always take a paintbrush to prove technical skill, emotional depth or artistic integrity.

### NARRATIVE

So wait. There are a couple of other mitigating points that ought to be

made before declaring anything too decisively. Placards declaring "Conceptualism is dead" or "Painting rules OK" might be a little rash at this stage. Firstly, painting never went away. From Francis Bacon to Peter Doig, painting has thrived across decades of conceptual hegemony.

Even throughout the era of YBA domination, there were many painters associated with the movement – Angus Fairhurst, for example, Glenn Brown, Ian Davenport, and Jenny Saville. That figurative art and YBAism were somehow mutually exclusive is a myth, one perpetuated to some extent by the Stuckists. Take Michael Landy – most famous for burning everything he owned in 2001 – who has been doing pretty much nothing but meticulously detailed (figurative) drawings ever since then. Likewise, conceptualism has not died – artists like Richard Ducker are driving a new wave of theory-led art, in London at least. What is being identified here is not a wholesale art revolution, but rather a shift in emphasis. Art now is less about the bold statement or the incomprehensible press release. Rather, we in London now prefer art that rewards repeated viewing, that continues to give even after the initial impact has been nullified. The best art is now literate, intelligent and knowing, but also passionate, emotionally intense and produced by people with integrity and technical skill.

It is not quite true to say that technique and theory have fused. Rather perhaps that today art springs from the cracks between the two. Whether it is weeds or roses that grow here is not possible to judge quite yet. I come back to the paintings of Nadine Feinson – both literally and in terms of this article. Viewing 'Penelope' again, 'that Eden beyond' seems about right. The search for a single ideological answer is always likely to be a frustrated one. Art today is about provoking a search, a search that demands time and effort, but – unlike Eden – cannot guarantee rewards. It's about time.

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CHARLES THOMSON, 'SIR NICHOLAS SEROTA MAKES AN ACQUISITION DECISION', 2000, OIL AND ACRYLIC ON CANVAS