

Club Silencio, a group exhibition at Bermondsey Project Space.
Text by Danny Leyland, 2024.

We enter the Club Silencio in David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive*. On the stage, Rebekah Del Rio steps out amidst a quiet, expectant atmosphere. A lull in the tempo of the night's performances.

Del Rio begins to sing a transcendent acapella song, 'Llorando', her mature voice heavy with emotion. We cannot help but be greatly moved, as only the human voice can move us. Then, incredibly, the singer collapses halfway through her performance. But even after the singer falls to the ground the song continues to play! Suddenly we are aware of the sham – the music continues without the singer, the voice amplified across the theatre's sound system without the presence of the body we thought to be producing the noise.

All paintings are illusory and all painters are illusionists.

- This is our starting point, our way into the paintings included in *Club Silencio*, an exhibition presented by artists from the Royal College of Art's Painting programme (2023-2024), involving students from Colombia, South Africa, the United States, Ireland & Japan, and the UK.

What matters for the purposes of my text is what takes place *within* the frame of the pictures - not beyond the frame. After all, paintings such as these are nothing more than a square or rectangle on the wall. But these little magic boxes just keep on giving. In fact, in order to receive all their gifts we absolutely require their rectangle-ness. As with the confines of verse forms – a sonnet, say, with its strict box of text in which the poem infinitely unfolds and speaks to itself – the deliberately cropped dimensions of a painting's edge are the very limitations which necessitate the limitless possibilities of the painting.

So let us step into these magical new worlds, to see the possibilities of the imagination as described by Prospero in *The Tempest*, 'The cloud capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces / The solemn temples, the great globe itself...'

We might well be familiar with the worlds depicted within Gus Monday's paintings, where the well known and even beloved architecture of the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum are directly quoted. But these facades exist within a parallel universe. Alike, but irrevocably apart. The spatial compositions are interrupted by painted objects from the traditional gymnasium, such as a springboard and hoops. We cannot be sure why these objects have been presented to us, as if to seem in some way significant, to suggest an elusive symbolic language, but there is a nod to surrealism in the way of their being found out of place. The objects in the paintings also form a relationship with the gallery space; we, the viewer, feel as if we could leap on the springboard platform, or grab the ring holds, and so become a part of the painting itself.

Julian Lombardi's paintings fluently conduct our gaze across their pictorial expanse. Through continuous metamorphoses the primary subject of the paintings are allowed to emerge, softly, at the most tentative feathered-edges of raw reds and sulphurous whites. Lombardi repeatedly conjures tubular forms, rounded and organic (are they bones, poles, some form of musical notation?), which seem to form a kind of relationship with the vertical poles painted by Pollock. We can imagine, when we look at these large abstract compositions, another world deep underground where light flickering from battery torches or from flaming branches illuminate the undulating surface of a cave roof, charcoal and ochres deftly capturing the loping canter of the aurochs, the muscular form of the bull negotiated against the complicated rock surface by the hands of palaeolithic artists.

Cayetano Sanz de Santamaria's painted work retains from the Flemish and Dutch masters a fascination for textured surfaces made real through painterly illusion. In his complex tableaux, every surface from the scales of fish to the dimpled surface of oranges have been skilfully rendered with gleaming liveliness. Betwixt and between the tangible reality of the Cartagena market scene, peering out of baskets, and clambering in from the edges of the composition, strange demonic creatures stretch our apparent hold on the reality of the situation. There is an allegorical quality to this work, too, like that of Hogarth, with comparable levels of witty social observation, but in Santamaria's painted narratives the boundaries between the worlds of the human and the animal are dissolved, so that, in looking at the monkeys and other animals painted with such charm and personality, the words of Whitman occur to me: 'I wish I could turn and live with animals, they are so placid and self contained/ I stand and look at them long and long. / They do not sweat and whine about their condition...'

Beginning with a photographic image or a drawing, Berkery's paintings repeatedly re-visit the image through a process akin to that of memory. The multi layered and textured application of the paint serves to mask areas of the image, keeping the viewer at arms length, alerting us to the apparent impossibility of complete recollection. The formal depiction of the environments in the paintings appear staged, and constructed. Their observational specificity - a lightbulb, a brand of sneaker - only creates a further tension and imbalance of comprehension between the viewer and the painting. The human figures in the paintings bulge out of their forms, drawn in ochres with whiplash line work, but with features remaining indistinct, their fleshy construction complicated by rough textures combed into the paint. The vaping figure crouches like a bruised boxer at rest between rounds, the young man climbing the escalator turns "towards camera" like a young movie star.

And my work... Ah it is so awkward to write about one's own work! I have formed these paintings around my response to an initial drawing or photograph, a thing chosen for the particular way in which it invites a relationship to an experience, my own or from elsewhere, a poem for example. I subsequently build a "world" into and around the image, adding additional elements of visual information, and combining multiple perspectives. I am looking for moments in the paintings which promise a sense of imminence, whether of dissolution or contact. Such moments for me act to collapse history upon itself, forming points of slippage where visual instances from different times and places can occur in the present. The paintings openly acknowledge their sense of imaginative construction, for example by using the simple pictorial device of a painting within a painting. The idea of performance, illusion, and disguise is echoed in the character of the figures themselves, whose poses and clothing are drawn from re-enactment and replica versions of historic events as much as from records of events themselves.

... Let us return to the Club Silencio. Rebekah del Rio has collapsed to the floor, but her pre-recorded song continues to fill the auditorium. Our sense of tension has been flattened by the realisation that the whole performance was a sham, and that our emotional response was also a sham. We convinced ourselves to be swept along by something that wasn't even real. Or was it? If our response was real - and you could measure it in quickened pulse, beaded sweat, hair raised - how could the event of the experience itself be denied?

We fully comprehend the real artistry of the moment only after we have seen through the trick. Now we finally realise what exactly it is that we wish for more than anything: to be hoodwinked again. To be initiated once more into the illusion of Del Rio's performance.

The promise of the painter is to seem to offer to the audience an opportunity to experience new realities, such as that found at Club Silencio. As the artist R. B. Kitaj wrote, 'Mystics are said to discover a new world, very different from our familiar one and that is very much one of the things I hope a painting can do in its unlikely correspondences and citations based on sensation.' (1994) In this way the painter can be said to act in the way of a *paraclete*, (*paráklētos* in the Greek), an interpreter of heavenly truths, an intercessor charged with the revelation of things still veiled. It's a clichéd observation perhaps, but the stereotypical character of the artist and the prophet in popular culture share many traits; both may be charlatans, tricksters and narcissists who use their charisma to hoodwink others into believing their conjured realities.

Earlier I quoted a fantastic vision described by Prospero towards the end of *The Tempest*. Prospero describes how this vision is constructed out of a 'baseless fabric', and constitutes only an 'insubstantial pageant', for it is the end of the play, and everything must melt 'into air, into thin air'.

The potential for the visionary promise to fail, whether it be a promise of paradise or apocalyptic destruction, does not completely erase the thrill of the believer. On the contrary, it is precisely within the charade of illusions, disguises, re-enactments, and the masque - the pretend version of things in other words - that we can best approach the truth of a thing. This is not because people secretly enjoy being deceived by others, it is because of people's curious ability to convert the act of faith into the state of faith itself.

It takes a mental shift, a certain effort of self will, to open and lay bare the auditorium of the imagination in order for it to be receptive to the marvellous illusion - whether it be in art or music or performance. I'm sure something like this performance of self-trickery is enacted by the sports fan who, despite knowing deep down how all the odds lie against their team, still attends the match with a cheerful countenance and a heart brimming with expectation. Even when inevitably the team comes to a crushing defeat, the fan retains deep down the secret flame of their belief. - And even when Rebekah del Rio lies unconscious on the stage floor, one part of us keeps the lamp trimmed in expectation, retaining the dangerous thrill that is our willingness to be deceived by the illusion.