

# KATE MACGARRY

## PAINTING AS CRITIQUE

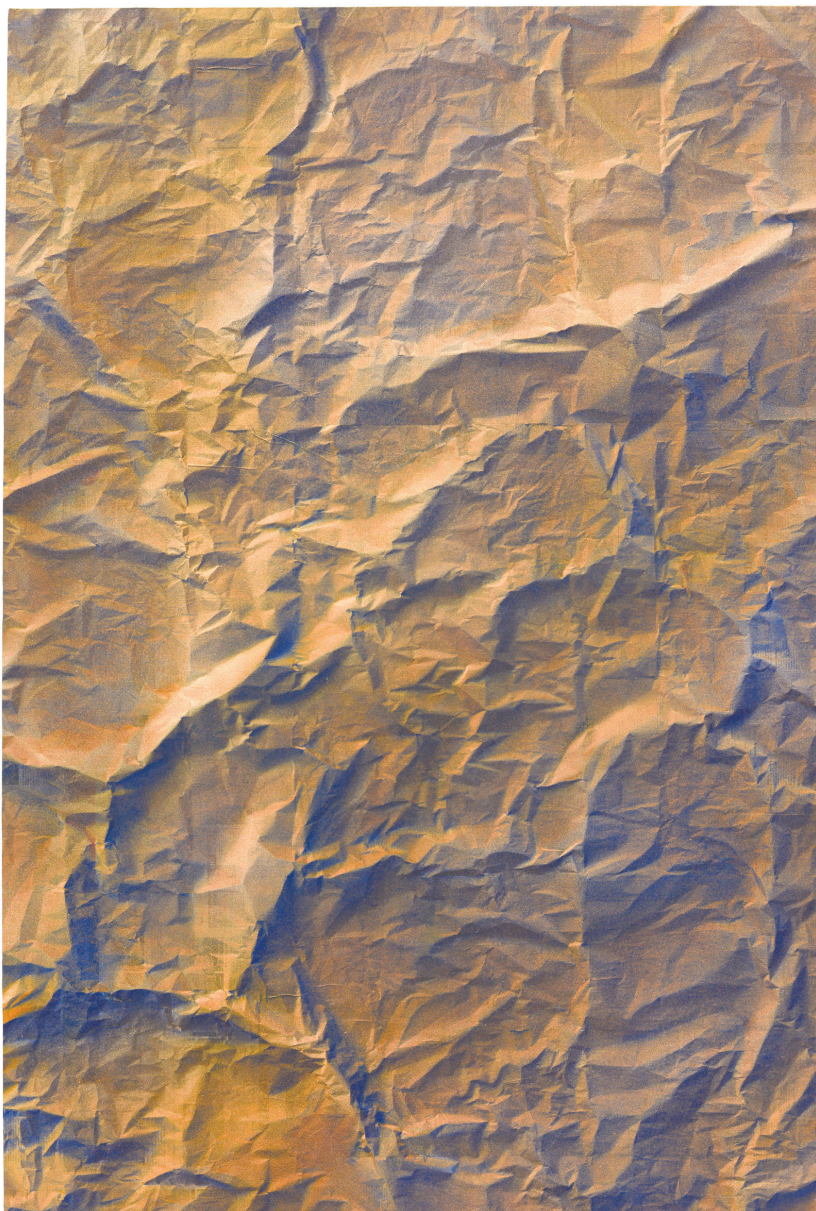
Alex Meurice

There is an interesting parallel between today's fixation on the screen and the 'Daguerreotype-mania' of Paris in the late 1850s. In 1859 photography was admitted into the Salon for the first time. That same year the critic Ernest Chesneau remarked that the majority of artists in Paris were painting directly from daguerreotypes. The question of painting's legitimacy, once Nature could be reproduced exactly through photography, dominated the artistic debate of the time. Although Baudelaire fulminated against these technologies as 'ruining what might have remained of the French genius,' by 1862 the highest appeals court in France, in the context of a copyright infringement case, had ruled that photography be considered a legitimate art form. As Alexi Worth argues in his article 'The Lost Photographs of Manet' (*Art in America*, January 2007), the reaction of painters to the problem of photography took one of two forms. In the majority were the 'Salon painters' who created an academic, post-photographic style that emulated and competed with the mechanical exactitude of photography, and went to great lengths to conceal their artifice under a smooth and uniform finish. Against them, Manet formulated a 'counter-photographic' style which co-opted and subverted the photographic look and began to free painting from its dependence on verisimilitude. In this reading, Manet might have drawn on studio photography but he also introduced sly inconsistencies and hierarchies into his paintings that slowed the act of looking and questioned the nature of painting itself. Sharply modelled elements are juxtaposed with areas of looser brushstrokes, figures flattened by a harsh frontal light seem pasted onto more naturalistic backgrounds, and Old Master tropes are introduced into scenes of modern life. The crisis in painting precipitated by photography arguably continues to this day, and the rapid ascendancy of digital screens is another, more intense, chapter in the same story. So it is perhaps worth reflecting on the contemporary artists who are combining traditional media with a screen sensibility in an attempt to find new modes of perception and possibilities for painting itself.

Alex Ball (poster in *Ambit 216*) image-making addresses the connection between tactile and optical perception. In an initially sculptural process, Ball moulds objects from wax, paper or silicone, before photographing selected object arrangements as the basis for his meticulous paintings and screenprints. Evidence of the hand, and therefore the subjectivity, of the artist is simultaneously absent from the hyper-flat surfaces of Ball's paintings and prints, yet manifest in the image content itself. This representation of a frozen, virtualised gesture engages both our tactile and visual imagination with respect to the represented object – we alternately 'hold' its weight, 'feel' its texture, or 'mould' its contours. Further, Gordon Cheung's *Screw* series similarly elides the distinction between texture, volume and depth on a flat surface. These topographies are twisted, wrinkled and crumpled from copies of the Financial Times which are spray-painted, then ironed and collaged onto the canvas. They cannot be resolved straightforwardly as near or far, deep or shallow. Tangible ripples and



Right: Alex Ball  
*Marks II*, 2014  
Oil on linen  
29.5 x 22 cm



tears on the surface of the collaged paper, along with subtle transparencies revealing the newsprint underneath, undermine the illusionistic force of these works. It is difficult to see anything as purely abstract, so our vision persists in reading depths and textures into their smooth surface despite this evidence to the contrary. The illusion of texture in the works, and their status as images or objects, greatly depends on the relative position of the viewer in the gallery space. Cheung turns a sculpture into its own image in a way which requires the viewer to manoeuvre their body around the work, much like a sculpture in the first place.

Addressing the perception of space by confusing the properties of objects and images is at the centre of Thomas Hutton's work. Here, images take on the weight of objects, and in turn the object is flattened and dematerialized. *Hearth* is flat piece of plaster masonry on Dibond which replicates the drawing of a chimneypiece. The blocky monotones of pigmented stucco lend the work a graphic quality that evokes its origins as an eighteenth-century drawing. However, there is no shadowing or trompe l'oeil in *Hearth*, putting it at odds with its surroundings, as if it had been edited into the installation after the fact, a kind of digital intrusion into the gallery space. The object's dissemination as a digital image is also anticipated: *Hearth* exists in a series, each version has a slightly different aspect ratio, tone of grey, and design layout in order to disrupt their re-photography and integrity as digital images. On close physical inspection, however, regular patterns in the pressed plaster suggest a marbling effect, a subtle skeuomorph which captures Hutton's ambivalence around the visual and material properties of the object.

Christopher Page's *A Party in Seville* is composed from interior renders and elements of graphic design spliced and rearranged into an ambivalent whole. Ostensibly, it depicts the back wall of a room, drenched in the evening light of Andalusia, with a frosted glass screen obscuring our view into another interior space, just glimpsed through an open crack. Page's exquisite trompe l'oeil and pristine textures operate on a similar kind of desire to the computer-generated advertisements for kitchen appliances or luxury hotels. Yet the spell is broken as the viewer approaches the painting and the artist's hand reveals itself through slight imperfections and spatial incongruence. In this way, Page reintroduces the body, routinely excluded and alienated from screen-based images, of both the artist and the viewer.

Left: Gordon Cheung  
*Exile (Screw #3)*, 2014  
 Financial newspaper collage and acrylic on canvas  
 150 x 100 cm

Next page  
 Left: Thomas Hutton  
*Hearth*, 2014  
 Plaster masonry on Dibond  
 60 x 100 x 0.3 cm

Left: Christopher Page  
*A Party in Seville*, 2014  
 Acrylic on canvas  
 225 x 190 cm





Luke Rudolf's latest work also combines a wide variety of digital processes with the freedom of analogue mark making. At first, texture maps developed to simulate material surfaces in digital media are printed on the canvas before Rudolf manually layers lines, planes and splashes into the foreground. His line is especially uncanny, drawn in Photoshop with a mouse before being painted onto the canvas. In *Seated Figure*, digital objects are entangled around analogue marks, sharply resolved lines contrast with blurry bitmaps, and the painting is poised between legibility and formlessness. By frustrating the viewer's attempts to resolve a figurative image out of the complex mix of abstract elements Rudolf presents his paintings as both image and object.

Manet was seven years old when Louis Daguerre published the details of his photographic process in 1839. The artists discussed in this article were all born between 1975 and 1985, so they experienced the rapid transition to computer screens, digital image processing and related technologies at a equally formative age. The 'lack' of photography, which Baudelaire resisted and Manet transmuted, was its rigorous exactness, the asphyxiating absence of hierarchy in its images. Digital screens, on the other hand, produce and transmit images that are dematerialised, decontextualised and disembodied.

The artists discussed in this article are co-opting the language of the screen and in the process blurring distinctions between traditional image-making mediums, either through the haptic qualities of Alex Ball and Gordon Cheung, the play of volume and image in the work of Thomas Hutton and Christopher Page, or the hybridity of Luke Rudolf's mark-making. In their hands, painting is a polemic for a more embodied act of perception, with a chance to escape the commodification of the screen.

Right: Luke Rudolf  
*Seated Figure*, 2014  
Reactive dye ink and acrylic on canvas  
210 x 145 cm



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