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Thesis

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Painting from Life and Photography



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Painting from Life and Photography

For more than ten years the genre of still-life has allowed me to work from something actual in front of me. I enjoy the process of translating my perception of reality into a two-dimensional illusionary equivalent. My most recent work sets out to explore working from photographic imagery and in so doing considers representational painting's contemporary reliance on photography as the primary medium through which to view the world.

As an intriguing challenge for a realist painter, I have long been interested in painting objects that might carry two-dimensional printed or photographic images such as postcards or mugs bearing paintings. However, I have always been wary of working directly from a photograph.

For me a photograph is a fully constructed image. The camera has already undertaken the translation from the three-dimensional real world into a two-dimensional fabrication. Although I truly admire the work of many artists who work from photography, this procedure has always felt restrictive to me, as though the photograph sets out the footmarks around which I am supposed to dance. Although there is room for the artist stylistically to interpret and respond to a photograph of a 'view' this is not the same as an artist constructing an illusion of that 'view' – creating a representation out of nothing. At the risk of sounding like Eric Cantona, however much the cat flings and tosses around the dead bird, I imagine it can never quite recapture the thrill of the hunt. A photograph is not a magical portal into reality, it is a flat object that bears a static illusion.

Still-Life with Stuff and the *Camera Phone Still-Lives* are the first paintings I have made directly from photographs. The chosen photographs are deliberately low quality digital images, which allowed me to depict the characteristic pixilation and fringing inherent in a digital print. This examination of the two-dimensional construction of the images is reinforced by the inclusion of the pencil line grids (traditionally used by painters to square up photographs) and hopefully draws attention to the idea that a photograph is primarily an object, albeit a very thin flat one.

Still-Life with Photo Frames, also deliberately objectifies the nature of the photograph by painting representations of photographs of friends and family contained within heavy three-dimensional photo frames. *Still-Life with Champagne and Two Orange Beakers*, shows the actual objects from a picnic, 'within' the fictional space of a multi-photograph constructed landscape. *Still-Life with Blue Lamp after J. D Fergusson*, combines my transcription of Fergusson's similarly titled artwork, which I painted from life, with the representation of painterly marks taken from a gridded up photograph of Fergusson's actual painting.

In these three paintings I am perhaps suggesting the precedence of the actual over the photographic. However as the paintings are themselves illusions that seem capable of depicting both 'real' objects and photographic 'lies', I believe it is the scope of painting itself that I am championing.

Jonathan Chapman, October 2007- Senior Lecturer in Fine Art at The University of Northampton.



Still-Life with Three Cards and Three Pails, Oil on Canvas, 1999, 62 x 62 cm

Front Cover Still-Life with Stuff, Oil on Canvas on Board, 2006, 61 x 61 cm

Jonathan Chapman: The Concatenation of Form

One's initial tendency when reading the paintings of Jonathan Chapman entails attempting to align them with a received history. In this case, such a process of identification would no doubt encompass painters who have attempted to render the genre of still-life somehow connotative of a broader set of themes or resonances.

To this end, whilst Juan Sánchez Cotán's still-lives involve a highly sophisticated choreography that works to inscribe the objects he paints within an intricate web of palpable tensions, Giorgio Morandi's more plain spoken juxtapositions tend, at the very least, to anthropomorphise form, if not inflect the various jugs, vessels and bottles he places side by side with an overt psychology.

However, there is an additional dimension to Chapman's paintings, a dimension which is given through a series of tendentious juxtapositions of the real and the imagistic. In the case of *Still-Life with Art Mugs* (2004), actual mugs are decorated with signifiers drawn from the received tradition of artistic modernism: a Cézanne landscape, a Macintosh chair, etc. These mugs are, in turn, then placed on what appear to be two metal tins, each carrying the resolutely populist image of Monet's poppyfields.

Whilst such a reading manages to establish the basic set of interpretive co-ordinates the painting is organised upon, the potential for such a work to be rendered, in effect, explicable immediately becomes qualified by what Fred Orton has called, apropos Jasper Johns, painting's "aporetic effect." Namely, the moment when one isn't entirely sure what it is one is looking at and what status it should necessarily be accorded.

In Orton's case, this sense of doubt stems from the question as to whether *Flag* (1954) is a painting of a flag or is in fact, a flag. (Orton eventually decides that it is both). With Chapman, a comparable aporia is given through the painting's unwillingness to entirely yield to either the imagistic or the actual.

Instead, the interplay within the painting of various 'texts' creates a form of syncopated rhythm, (one might equally describe it as a form of concatenation; or, perhaps, more pointedly, a concatenation of form) that works to entwine the actual and the imagistic in a highly intricate and intriguing manner.

As it is then, and by way of returning to the original dilemma educed by Johns, *Still-Life with Art Mugs* is neither technological fact nor culturally bound image; rather it is somehow ineluctably both.

Dr Craig Staff, October 2007 - Artist, Writer and Course Leader for the History of Art degree at The University of Northampton.



Still-Life with Art Mugs, Watercolour, 2004, 51 x 73cm



Still-Life with Photo Frames, Oil on Canvas, 2007, 91.5 x 120 cm



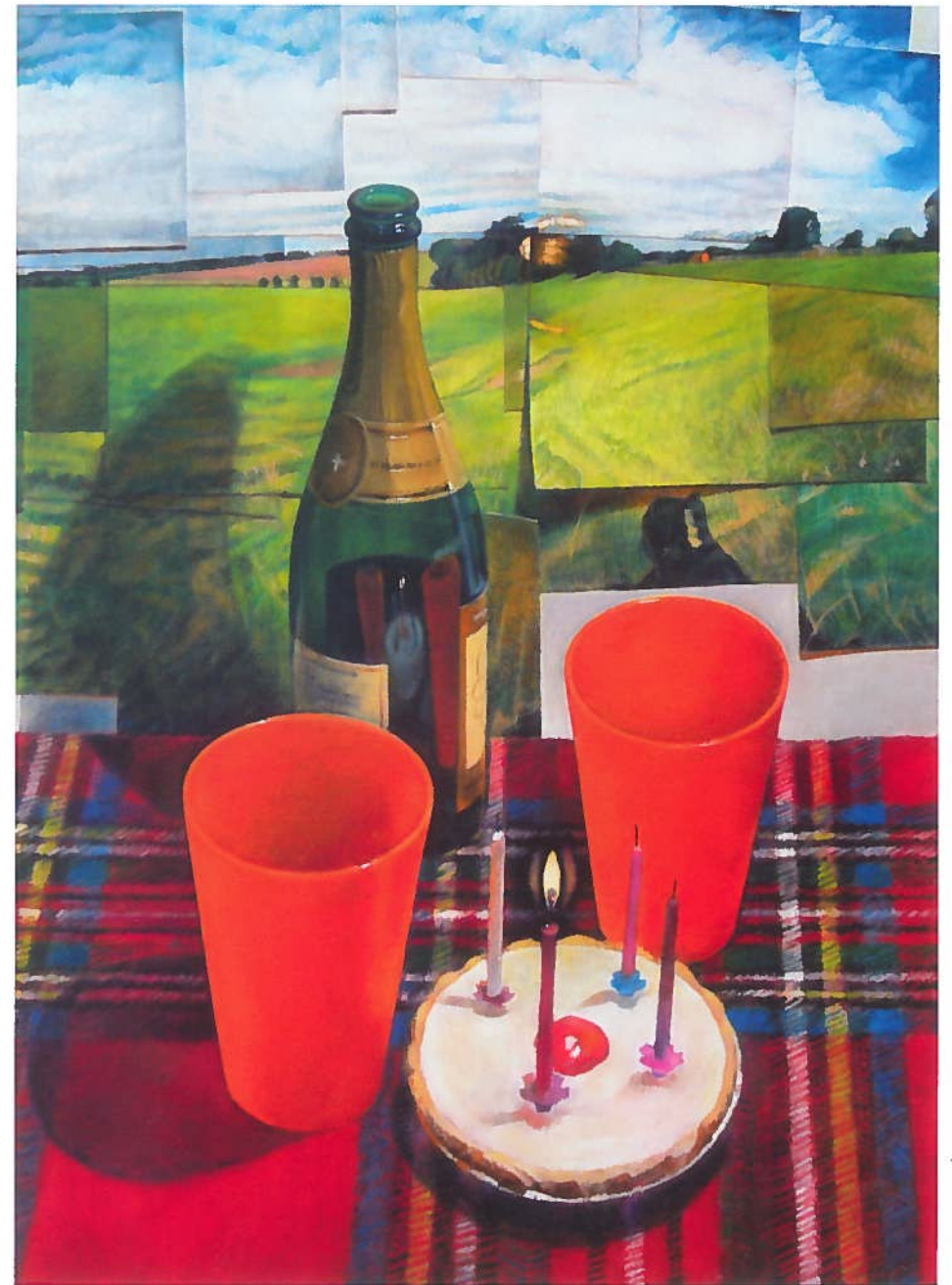
Camera Phone Still-Life 1, Oil on Canvas, 2006, 46 x 61 cm



Camera Phone Still-Life 2, Oil on Canvas, 2006, 46 x 61 cm



Still-Life with Blue Lamp after J.D. Fergusson, Oil on Canvas, 2006, 90 x 78.75 cm



Still-Life with Champagne and Two Orange Beakers, Oil on Canvas, 2006, 109.25 x 78.75 cm

Back Cover Still-Life with Fruit Photo Mugs, Oil on Canvas, 2003, 92 x 121 cm