

# NICHOLAS THOMPSON GALLERY

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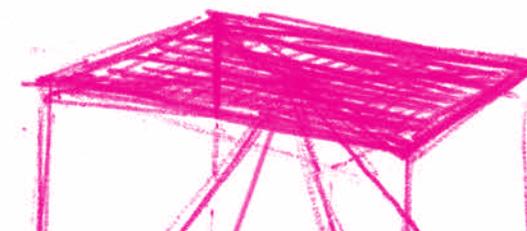
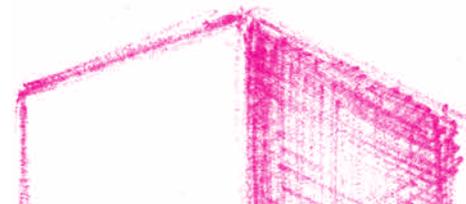
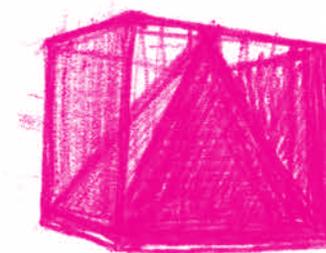
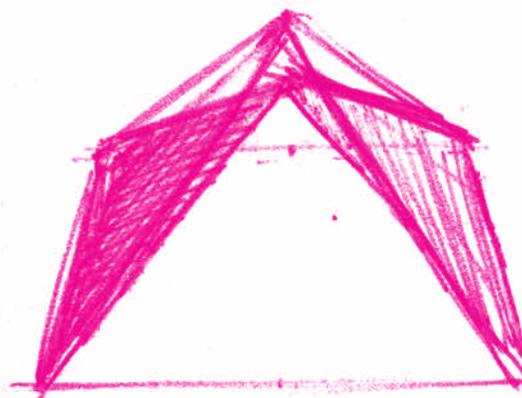
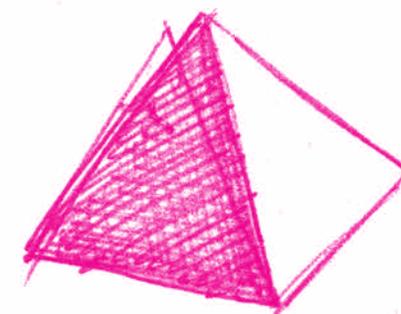
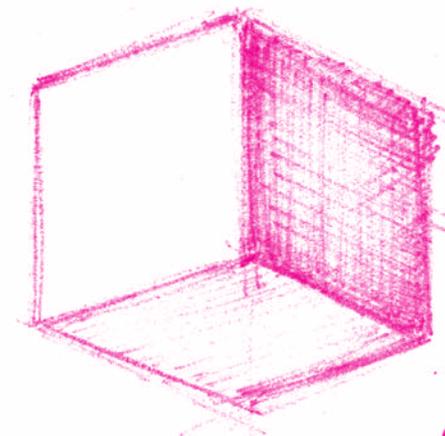
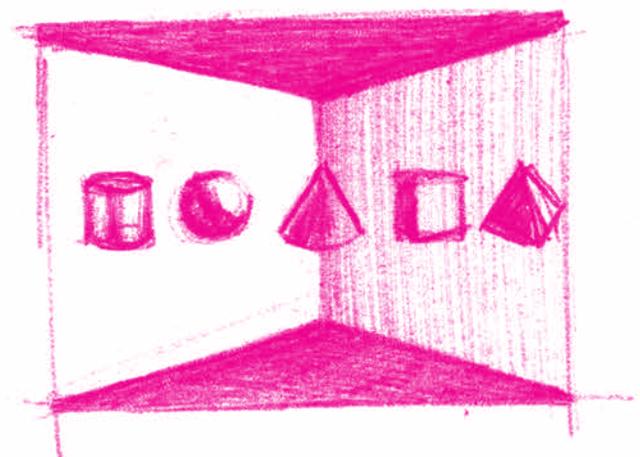
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# RELATIVELY SERIOUS PLAY: REASONS TO CARRY ON

Sean Lowry

What has changed following the exodus of ambitious positions, grand oppositions and, finally, even cool ironic detachment, from the practice and discourse of painting? Although these kinds of questions were arguably exhausted decades ago, they still linger in the so-called post-internet era. Despite the many ways in which our relationship with painting remains indebted to the moves and countermoves that once constituted the 'game', any prospect of assuming and defending 'positions'—sincere, ironically doubled or otherwise—feels especially incongruous alongside the omnivorously voracious appetite for information that bloats our present. Meanwhile, real shit is still mounting up around us. So, what are our options? Are there simply too many to meaningfully consider?

Against this backdrop, Su Baker sees value in forging a relationship with painting that is grounded in ‘serious pleasure’.<sup>1</sup> But what does this mean? Can we really unashamedly seek gratification in sincere and ongoing engagement? Or, given all that we have been through and now face, is Baker’s seductive evocation limited to a state of relative seriousness and relative pleasure? This text discusses some of the kaleidoscopic implications of these questions within the context of a relatively serious yet playful discussion with the artist herself. As part of this discussion, we revisit postmodernism’s ‘after-party’<sup>2</sup> of the late 1980s to early 90s—a time in which even ironic detachment was either treated with suspicion or unconvincedly reformulated as sincerity. Are we still at this ‘after-party’ today—albeit now armed with faster access to information and the means to produce new versions and remedialisations? With painting clearly no longer capable of standing alone, can its often-oblique reflections of surrounding contradictions still offer an implicitly critical and sensorial value?

One fairly consistent feature of much recent painting is a fluid and omnidirectional remediation of physical and digital imaging processes—typically accompanied by a playful ambivalence towards the primacy of either. Significantly, Baker was an early adopter of now well-established attitudes towards

the endless reproducibility and mutability of materials availed by the digital. After witnessing painting’s rebirth as a sign in the ungainly passage from modernism to postmodernism, Baker would soon endorse its emerging relationship with the digital in the late 1980s and early 90s. In one particularly defining moment on 14 November 1989, Baker used an early MacWrite program to scan a black-and-white reproduction of a painting by Andrea Mantegna. She then ‘enlarged the dots’ from one corner, after which she reproduced them ‘over and over’.<sup>3</sup> Next, Baker transformed these flattened, pixelated dots into ‘blobs’ and then into ‘volumes ... floating in space’.<sup>4</sup> By ‘repainting the scanned abstracted images, making stencils’ and then converting them back into ‘images in themselves’, Baker had effectively translated imagery into information and then back into imagery. Repurposing both abstraction and a mutant variation of automatism as contemporary tools of production, Baker turned the ‘dots’ into ‘objects’ and then returned them to a ‘pre-modern pictorial space’.<sup>5</sup> For students of recent developments in so-called post-internet painting, Baker’s approach to painting in the late 1980s and early 90s is certainly very familiar.

To find a suitable language with which to describe Baker’s reiterative remedial approach to making paintings a quarter of a century ago,

we need to turn to criticism born in the digital age. As Alex Bacon recently put it, for example, the key question for painting today is that of ‘object versus image’.<sup>6</sup> ‘If there was ever a firm line between abstraction and representation’, it is now at an ‘all-time low’. Moreover, Bacon stresses that contemporary distinctions are ‘not simply blurred or reversed’ but rather ‘operate in the same functional reality’, despite maintaining ‘a nostalgia for their former ontological separation’.<sup>7</sup> This last point is key. Although Baker doubts whether an engagement with painting can ever be entirely divorced from the legacies of orthodox modernism, she has long understood that the game of ‘making advances’ and ‘claiming territory’ only made sense ‘when we knew where the front was’. Once it became impossible to identify a ‘single front’, the emphasis shifted ‘from “being right” to “feeling and looking good”’.<sup>8</sup> But, like a lapsed believer set adrift in a relativist quagmire, can we really *believe* in new possibilities while we remember the old rules of the game? Will we ever completely escape that feeling of being weighed down, as Baker puts it, by the ‘overblown, grandiose rhetoric’ once required ‘when talking about painting’?<sup>9</sup> Will we ever transcend a sense of burden before we even begin to paint—especially given that, as Thierry de Duve once put it, even the blank canvas ‘belongs to the tradition of painting ...

before it is touched by the painter’s hand’?<sup>10</sup> Somehow we still need to feel confident that we know what we are doing before we dare entertain the vulgarity of self-expression.

Perhaps, as Baker suggests, there is value in simply adopting a different attitude towards painting. Perhaps an awareness of the depth of painting’s history might instead open up a sense of possibility commensurate with the breadth of our present. Could seemingly unlimited access to historical accumulations that have expanded in girth beyond anything that can be consciously processed actually avail a new freedom? Maybe, now that we are free from any reasonable expectation to be ‘across it all’, any feeling of either optimism or pessimism is more likely a consequence of discrete editorial filters and systems of informational organisation than any real reflection of our true predicament. Clearly emboldened by the seemingly endless options now available to the painter, Baker welcomes ‘free-form complexity, multiple genres and eclectic reference points’ as means to exploiting the ‘silent, visual and libidinal economy of painting with a sense of intellectual gravitas’, and with which to ‘empower the scopophilic enjoyment of making and looking with an underlying seriousness’.<sup>11</sup> If it is indeed possible that painting can intelligently accommodate multiple formerly oppositional approaches, why were we so

distracted for so long by the lingering rules of the ‘game’? Can we avoid assuming ‘positions’ while at the same time maintaining a healthy balance of sincerity, irony and criticality? What, and how much, should we hang onto? Perhaps we should do another quick stocktake before moving on.

Although irony always runs the risk of eliciting detachment, on occasion it can still advance a form of criticality that shouldn’t be completely discarded. Given that we seem to persist in wanting to believe in *something*, perhaps irony remains useful insofar as it prevents us from naively believing in *anything*. But irony can also prevent us from actually *doing* anything. Somehow, it seems that we now desire a disposition within which we can simultaneously muster doubt *and* passion. Clearly, when taken alone or on face value, neither sincerity nor irony suffices. Although irony is a frustratingly ambiguous form of critique that can only be recognised in direct relation to larger pre-existing formations, it is still ‘a great device to highlight contradictions’. Unfortunately, irony is also ‘a bit of a dead end, and in many cases shuts down any further play or explorations of an idea’. There is, as Baker succinctly puts it, a productive ‘tension between the sincerity impulse and the effect of closing off the options’.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps it is preferable, and especially in an often

dumbly skeptical era, to nuance our disposition via critically attenuated forms of sincerity. Accordingly, Baker hopes that we can assume ‘highly developed ethical positions without moral imperatives that exclude others’, but at the same time remember ‘there is also a time when you have to believe in something and be prepared to defend it’. For Baker, ‘That should never be in doubt. That is the realpolitik side of me.’<sup>13</sup>

Although we can no longer conclusively claim that some beliefs are better than others or some actions right, it is also clear that there is a time and place for refusing relativism. The problem is how and when. Perceiving oneself as a skeptic or a believer clearly influences the way that one makes art. But is a strategically liminal dance within the irony/sincerity dialectic really a suitable disposition within which to make paintings? Or, is it time to imagine a different kind of question? Can we, as Baker hopes, ‘keep options open and allow a full range of libidinal speculation and free-range play’? Painting has long served as a fertile ground on which to stage a dynamic play between literal registers of information and culturally projected fictions. For Baker, this dynamic play resonates with the way in which fictocriticism ‘keeps things open and not didactic or declarative.’ Accordingly, Baker’s ‘instinct’ is to somehow ‘collapse ...

the material and abstract with the sentimental and evocative’. Although ‘sentimentality has always been a limitation and irony was supposed to help deal with that by doubling it somehow’,<sup>14</sup> Baker, like many artists, recognises that overplaying this tension is ‘like explaining a joke ... spoiling the surprise’ or falling ‘flat without nuance or subtlety’.<sup>15</sup>

On one hand, our propensity for maintaining seriousness within painting still feels at least partly attenuated by an omnivorous post-medial relativism (within which we see painting as something other than itself and as only part of an all-permitting and ever-expanding aggregate of digitally augmented options). On the other hand, our propensity for pleasure still feels at least partly attenuated by a residual self-consciousness raised in the now digitised shadows of painting’s towering edifice of contested histories. Is Baker simply inviting us to carry on *as if* ‘serious pleasure’ is attainable? Is this all that is needed? For Baker it comes back to attitude: ‘Why does seriousness need to be dull and bloodless?’ Baker has long preferred to imagine herself as ‘a minimalism meets the baroque on a moonlit night’ accompanied by ‘Jimmy Scott singing “My Foolish Heart” kinda gal’.<sup>16</sup> If this description paints a picture, it is one that is intelligently playful. It also, importantly, generates a feeling that it is worth carrying on. If we accept

that it is worth carrying on, it is probably sensible to mindfully avoid repeating strategies that previously led us into many a cul-de-sac. Accordingly, we should neither wholly accept nor negate the now deflated posturing and counter-posturing that characterised both the modern and postmodern eras. Alternatively, by playfully activating the metaphor of a belief–disbelief dichotomy, we might instead consider adopting an ‘agnostic’<sup>17</sup> approach. For the author, a critically attuned yet playfully irreverent agnosticism is a useful disposition within which to simultaneously summon doubt *and* muster passion.<sup>18</sup>

Having expanded far beyond its internal concerns, painting has certainly lost much of its former coherence. Fortunately, some of its best moments have formed in wanton crossbreeding. In any case, the influence of the digital is never far away. After all, as Alex Bacon puts it, painters are ‘automatically involved with ways of looking, thinking, and acting that are conditioned by technology, even if their work is not ostensibly dealing directly with technological concerns’.<sup>19</sup> Clearly, at least somewhere in the chain from conception through production to dissemination, the digital is now incontrovertibly linked to all painting. Yet this undeniable connection is also now so ubiquitous as to be boring if too explicitly foregrounded. Unlike its evolutions

within modernism, painting has traded medium-specific categorisations for dynamic and discursively networked themes understood as transitional modules linked within larger networks and understandings. Informed by contemporary conditions of ‘the imagistic, material, display, circulation, and reception situation’<sup>20</sup> and at the same time by its internal historical concerns, painting can be remedialised into virtually anything else. Alive to the danger of painting becoming something other than itself, Baker gently resists its obliteration and, in doing so, continues to love painting—despite its record of prejudices and promiscuities. There is still a material pleasure in painting that only becomes dumb when it denies either its own history or the impact of the digital. Baker has enjoyed a long, slow (and sadly often institutionally interrupted) dance with both painting and the digital. It is high time she renewed her vows in this seriously pleasurable ménage à trois.

1 — Su Baker, ‘My Stockholm Syndrome, or Learning to Love My Captors!’, an essay in this publication.

2 — Sean Lowry, *The After-Party: The Retreat and Concealment of Strategic Appropriation in Contemporary Art*, PhD dissertation, University of Sydney, 2003.

3–5 — Su Baker, quoted in ‘An Asynchronous Interview with Su Baker by Sean Lowry’, extended interview conducted in a single email thread between 5 May and 15 June 2016.

6–9 — Alex Bacon, ‘Surface, Image, Reception: Painting in a Digital Age’, *Rhizome.org*, 24 May 2016, <http://rhizome.org/editorial/2016/may/24/surface-image-reception-painting-in-a-digital-age/>, accessed 27 June 2016.

10 — Thierry de Duve, *Kant After Duchamp*, October Books/MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1998, p. 250.

11–13 — Baker, ‘My Stockholm Syndrome’.

14–16 — Baker, quoted in ‘An Asynchronous Interview with Su Baker by Sean Lowry’.

17–18 — Lowry, *The After-Party*.

19–20 — Bacon, ‘Surface, Image, Reception: Painting in a Digital Age’.

