

Addicts of Nostalgia

by

Samuel Robert Campbell Drake

2019

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts in the Department of Painting at the Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, Rhode Island.

Approved by Master's Examination Committee:

Craig Taylor, Graduate Program Director, Associate Professor of Painting

Jackie Gendel, Thesis Advisor, Assistant Professor of Painting

Roger White, Thesis Advisor, Critic, Department of Painting

Kevin Zucker, Department Head, Associate Professor of Painting

Abstract

In this thesis, I will reflect on issues of nostalgia through a series of work based upon the landscape where I grew up. I discuss how my paintings stage themes and negotiate criticality towards memory. The writing analyses my engagement towards the collaging of documentary and fictional sources: and how my paintings seek to dispel legibility and embrace slippage. Alongside discussions of personal experiences, I talk about the relationship of distancing in my practice, concerning tangible and geographic detachment. The thesis expresses my adoration for the history of British painting, and my efforts to internalize its traditions. Moreover, this investigation highlights my moral obligations regarding recollection.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

<u>THESIS</u>	<u>1</u>
<u>BIBLIOGRAPHY</u>	<u>10</u>

The group of paintings for my thesis are personal reflections on the seaside town I grew up in. I was born in Brighton in 1993 and was raised in Winterton-on-Sea, Norfolk. The village is located on the pregnant bump of the east coast of Britain. I spent childhood looking out towards what was apparently Amsterdam or Norway. But now, I'm interested in looking back.

I have a deep admiration for the landscape, architecture, and history of East Anglia. However, it is hard to ignore the present events affecting the area in the wake of Brexit and the Windrush Scandal. I'm interested in maintaining both sympathy with people in this area who may feel threatened by 21st century political and ecological realities, and a sense of criticality—especially about the politics of Brexit.

In turn, the thesis will identify how my paintings situate themselves within the pastoral yet yearn to comment on the current mood and attitudes of this region. My paintings are concerned with conversations about realism, the suburban, the pastoral, and the lyrical. Combining fictitious scenes with personal photographs, I use montage and collage to engage with a greater dialogue about the contemporary English landscape. Through focusing on this countryside, the works invites the viewer to engage in a conversation about nostalgia, optimism, and sentimentality.

Winterton on Sea is a historic fishing village in East Anglia, and like most stereotypical English villages it has a local shop, pubs, and schools. I spent my childhood here, and I'm interested in my disorientating recollections and the myths of the coastline. A vast expanse of dunes surrounds the village; the sand slips on to the tarmac and in response the infrastructure finds itself building back into the soft landscape. I return to the dunes every time I'm home; they contain submerged WW2 bunkers, fishing huts covered in black tar-paper, and seaside hotels.

Winterton is located near Great Yarmouth, which was a UKIP stronghold during the Brexit vote. Agriculture and tourism are major players within the economy of Norfolk; moreover, there is a reliance upon the land for propriety which seems almost pagan. Both natives and tourists share a deep admiration and romanticism for the countryside. The landscape is known for its large skies, rural charm, and subdued palette. My paintings aim to capture admiration for the pastoral whilst maintaining an analytical approach towards social feelings of paranoia, defensiveness, and nationalism.

The paintings are concerned with the representation of the poetic and lyrical in the contemporary environment of England, specifically the coastal landscape of East Anglia. Both the execution and subject matter of the paintings look towards the history of painting and English societal painters such as John Constable, William

Hogarth, and J.M.W Turner. The works fixate themselves on ideas of nostalgia and remembrance to produce works that are emotionally resonate of place.

Addicts of Nostalgia

This piece of writing includes a poem and four biographical reflections on Winterton-on-Sea

Black Street

When I walk down Black Street

I start to feel the sand rubbing against the gravel

I walk past the leather fire instruments, see the climbing post.

I then look out to the black monoliths.

This emergence calls upon:

Distractive voices

Dreams of cricket

Reminders of failure.

I return my glance to the monoliths

They are not fishing huts

They are my sister

They are my room

They are the rain

They are the boats

and the evening of the millennium.

#1 Our landscape is subdued and vanilla, there are no skyscrapers, cheap thrills, or Hollywood smiles. I'm not purposely portraying a romantic vision of the rural or the destitute. Instead we share a feeling of the unremarkable. Characters slide with mild, unconsidered grudges, who look towards the pastoral for propriety. We have a desire for transcendence.

The sense of foreboding almost becomes romantic: neurotic notion for hopefulness or change, we or they look, watch and survey the landscape, the figures, the flags and the houses. We push, dial, lean, dig, wait, and confront.

An external view of these fragments bears witness to the cast. Cast wishes, rods, and eyes. I and they seek something from this Kettle chip abundant soil. This hopefulness is stifling and Beckett-like. Are my friends and family topographic to the coastline? What happens when I go, do the dunes change color or does my house grow three more windows? Every time I embrace the house, I ready myself for change. Why do I or they seek renewal?

#2 When I return to the dunes at Winterton I look for the pagan ritual, the cheap booze and spilt condoms but I just see golden retrievers and an array of well-groomed Londoners in athletic mountaineer clothing.

As I walk through the dunes, half buried and pushing through are World War II bunkers; these are now as much of an afterthought of the landscape as is a cup of tea from the Cafe. Their intention and contents of fear and paranoia have gone into remission, much like the wind-blasted iron that protrudes from their framework. Paranoia isn't contained in concrete prisons anymore, it's on a large red bus. The bus promised and convinced us of hope and safety so we would *leave*. But much like the bunkers, promises recede gradually, fresh winds or words blow over and ignite new images but the reality sits well within the submerged.

There is no red bus on the dunes, but I can't stop seeing it. I see rockets in the sky, airplanes and blimps morph into Albert Pinkham Ryder clouds and Donald Sutherland is having sex with his clothes on. In truth the vastness to this landscape helps me breathe. The black monolithic fishing huts are my totems.

#3 The Cricket players finish for the year and head to the *Hermanas* (meant to have some sort of residual connection to the Bahamas). This is located above the dunes surrounded by gimmicky, triangular-roofed, circular cottages. This is the kind of place which makes the employees wear white shirts and waistcoats but serve the cheapest, pissiest lager combined with a misanthropic dining room and toothless punters. I can taste the salt and the deep fat fryer and can predict tomorrow's and next year's meal deals.

To coincide with trans fats and greasy plates we express an overbearing falseness conveyed with our admiration towards these traditional values: this is a masquerade; we don't trust our reflections, we want to sleep with those certain people, and we want and do take, steal and discard.

#4 I look through the gap in-between the cask ale pumps which have illustrations of fox hunters. Through this gap is where my hours of employment are spent surveying the changing composites of a shift. On this particular day I bear witness to a Royal celebration or a forgotten nationalist holiday. I see cakes, union jacks, and an overwhelming sense of the gluttony stirred with sticky beer mats and icing. Maggie is being lectured by an ex-army helicopter pilot Don who has thirst for dark ale. I hear the name Nigel Farage emerge from his lips and immediately tune out. Even on this day, with the emergence of spring and a sense of renewal, we are faced with someone looking back towards the falsehoods of Britannia.

My view rotates between the glass rack to the glass washer—I rise every now and then to look through the ale pumps—

I return to the Glass shelf holding an old Ikea towel swirling it around the rim of the Guinness pint glass—I place the glass down and again rise to look through the ale pumps—

My view is the Pilot hurtling a local carpenter against the mirror next to the pool table. My vision reminds me of the Degas theatre box painting where you see legs and arms dangling and, in the foreground, onlookers are mouth agaped. But my reaction is not of surprise but of boredom and predictability. I don't think about the blood or the cracked knuckles, I've got to clean up that glass in about 5 minutes.

The pub is our church, not in terms of a savior or forgiveness, but as a space for confession, relinquishment, thirst and depravity. My hands touch hands I hate and love under the guise of employment. A pint is held with fingernails containing the remnants of soil and blood attached to a man with an enormous sense of well-being and plastering skills. Under this yellow ochre, nicotine-stained ceiling there is an agonizing sense of forced efforts and undesired reciprocations. My hatred: their hatred, fluctuates as much as the variety of class which crosses the threshold of the Greyhound.

During my time in America, distance and time have played an important role in my recollection and representation of the British landscape. My paintings and writing seek to reference this slippage. The paintings embody ideas of dissolve, blurring, and distortion in order to distance myself from the photographs I use for reference. The paintings have a desire to look back and question the ephemerality of remembrance. As Guston puts it, "Painting... is a kind of war between the moment and the pull of memory."¹ I portray the objects and figures in the landscape that reside with me. I'm interested in familiarity and the readability of gesture in connection to ideas of labor. Furthermore, I'm interested in how much information is needed to convey a mood or setting. I use photographic source material as a jumping off point: then the painting becomes autonomous; I then respond to the painting rather than the source imagery. Improvisation, and self-governing take over.

The history of British painting carries associations of muddiness and muteness depicted in palettes of red ochre, browns, and scruffy blue overcast skies. T.J Clark uses Verlaine's poetry to describe the feeling of the English overcast in Frank Auerbach's work: "Roofs dripping water, walls sweating, grease slick pavements, cracked tarmac, gutters full of sewage, that's my way forward- with paradise ahead."²

¹ David Anfam, *Philip Guston quoted in Abstract Expressionism* (London: Thames and Hudson, Ltd.) 1990, 155.

² Paul Verlaine, '*Ariettes oubliées, III*', in Verlaine, *Selected Poems*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles 1948), 102.

In depicting the coastal landscape, the palette is crucial to reference the mood and weight of experience. In order connect to a dialogue about the recollection of the British landscape, and the painters who dredge from that environment as well, I adopt and transmute the palette and temperament of painters such as Howard Hodgkin and Leon Kossoff. Writer and painter Merlin James states:

I like to think that memory is the mother of the Muses because any form of creativity- any art form- requires a continual internalization of its own tradition, an ever-present consciousness of its past... Each painting contains the memory of painting.³

My work focuses on what James calls; ‘a continual internalization of its own tradition’⁴: I see painting as a conduit for dismantling experience and a place to show the steps of its sentient reenactment.



Sam Drake, *It was once Lords and the Oval*, 2019,
Oil on Panel, 8 x 10 Inches

³ Merlin James, “Merlin James at Sikkema Jenkins” <http://www.artcritical.com/2005/12/22/merlin-james-at-sikkema-jenkins-co/>, (December 22nd, 2005).

⁴ Merlin James, “Merlin James at Sikkema Jenkins” <http://www.artcritical.com/2005/12/22/merlin-james-at-sikkema-jenkins-co/>, (December 22nd, 2005).

The painting *It was once Lords and the Oval* (2019) comes from a photograph of my parents' house collaged with an image of a man in red overalls. The top half of the figure was erased, and his legs were turned into a mown pathway which leads towards the house. I made the painting by allowing a series of stained grounds to dry and then applying a transparent overpainting in cadmium red and alizarin. This painting was made in conversation with Edvard Munch's use of avenues and photographs. According to Viennese art theorist Dieter Buchhart:

Munch's photographic experiments with double exposure...As in *The Murderer on the lane*, ...can be interpreted as a trace of the past, like a memory image, or as a sign of physical movement in the depicted scene. Employing the painter's device of transparency, Munch succeeds in splitting the visual image into two synchronous realities located between past and present, between bygone and future events, between life and death.⁵

The pathways in Munch's paintings inform the viewer of the transition from past to present. The painting I made in response connects to my memories of standing in my parent's garden looking back towards the house. The lawn and house symbolize a personal recollection and remembrance of place. As British art historian and broadcaster Andrew Graham Dixon claims:

Every painting is a surrogate for past experience which also changes and rephrases it and filters it through recollection. It is a collage of forms, marks and gestures that aims to evoke that subtle and evanescent thing we call a memory. But it also aims to outlive it, to transcend it by that of changing and intensifying which is painting.⁶

My paintings recall and recreate moments of experience through both fictional and personal imagery. I combine these elements through collage and use painting as way to fuse these disparate elements together. I have been extending my language of painting in order to do justice to my own remembrances and transfigurations. This has taken form in experimenting within a multitude of surfaces, applications, and erasures, in particular using rough

5 Dieter Buchhart, *Edvard Munch: Theme and Variation*, (Berlin, (Hatje Cantz), 286.

6 Andrew Dixon-Graham, *Howard Hodgkin*, (London, Thames and Hudson, 2001), 93.

materials to work against and into: burlap, drop cloth, and thinly primed surfaces. I'm interested in how these interventions can affect the representation of source material and the distance which can be achieved through various formal transformations.

At Winterton-on-Sea the dunes contain many visible and half-submerged WW2 bunkers. These concrete fortifications were stimulants for me and my friends during our childhood. I return every time I'm home to re-ignite my curiosities. In Paul Virilio's book *Bunker Archeology*, R.G Nobecourt points out:

The Fortress had important psychological value, for it tended to unite the occupier and the occupied in the fear of being swept away; the fortress provided unity and identity where there was none. The socio-political role of the enceinte in the establishment of communal or national sentiment is too often forgotten.⁷

In response to Nobecourt, I'm drawn to the concept of unity and identity in relation to a fortress. Pubs are usually the focal point of community and resides with a particular identity, usually in their name or decoration. I spent the summer of 2018 in the UK during the Football World Cup. Pubs were cashing in on its patriotic values to get more people in to watch Football and purchase alcohol. I was interested and terrified by the sudden adoption of nationalistic values in the wake of Brexit. St Georges flags and pride invaded even the sleepiest villages. I wanted to capture the juxtaposition between the violence and ill-prideful outlook of nationalism against the quaintness of rurality. In response, the pub paintings start with an idyllic depiction which undergoes a physical thawing through solvent or reductive printing. In turn I leave a recognizable structure, bearing a subtle mark of a St Georges cross, as a soft reminder of something unsavory.

Inspired by the scale of these works, I created a wall installation of small paintings. The works feature an array of imagery from Winterton-on-Sea such as concrete bunkers, farmers, pubs, birthday cakes, blimps, fishing huts, cricket players, seafronts, buses and young boy's cars. I applied two formal strictures. The first was that the subject would be tightly cropped so that only part of the landscape peeks through: to exaggerate notions of

⁷ Paul Virilio, *Bunker Archeology*, (Princeton Architectural Press, New York 1997), 37.

claustrophobia and obstruction. Second was the reduction of scale: this diminution was necessary to continue the dialogue of condensing. Moreover, the 5 x 8” sized paintings localize themselves within the conventionality of a postcard. Postcards provide a multitude of imagery which describe and reference experiences of a particular place. The process of making this body of work has enabled me to ask questions about why some paintings are more successful than others, probing whether this is due to the effectiveness of source material or the physical productions of painting. From this line of questioning, the works investigated different intensities of speed, layering and, rendering. in effort to learn both about the methodology and the imagery. As a whole they form a wall of work; they are a barrage of paintings. Their interior structure echoes blockage: the viewer struggles to push through the foreground, painting as a battlefield. But at the same time, these paintings are about the act of looking. The paintings emphasize my role as a witness, and ask: where I am looking? what I am choosing?

I’m critically engaged towards paintings functionality concerning recollection. German Writer and former East Anglican resident W.G Sebald states:

I think how little we can hold in mind...how everything is constantly lapsing into oblivion with every extinguished life, how the world is, as it were, draining itself in that the history of countless places and objects which themselves have no power of memory is never heard, never described or passed on.⁸

Sebald regards remembering as a moral and political act.⁹ As a painter who mistrusts the legibility of the photograph: the act of mirroring is a faulty tool. My moral obligation to stage moments of potent experience has to envelop fragility and discount absoluteness. My paintings are created to capture a temporality and phenomenological experience. Through liquidity and the manipulation of personal and found photography, my paintings engage with the slippage of reminiscence. By dredging and mining various forms of imagery the paintings become evidence for something tangible yet inconsequential. This investigation has suggested ways I can use nostalgia and remembrance as a tool to internalize the traditions of British painting, in order to comment on both personal and external cultural factors. Through this melancholic and poetic lens, the paintings seduce the viewer with convention but leave room for fragmentation and intervention, both physically and literally. In my work,

⁸ Charles Simic, *the emergence of memory, conversations with W.G Sebald*, (Seven Stories Press, New York, 2007), 149.

⁹ Arthur Lubow, *the emergence of memory, conversations with W.G Sebald*, (Seven Stories Press, New York, 2007), 161.

disintegration and mediation serve as obstructions to mirroring the photographic content. Collages are left incomplete to extend the disjointed nature of recollection. The painting has to withstand weathering and condensing to only show the essential. The stripping down reduces the painting of flourish to bring a more direct sense of place. My pursuit for an inward representation of landscape is challenged by the painting's facility to serve as reminders of distance. The paintings are informed by the effects of distance. Distance in terms of my relation to the subject. Distance in my physical relation to the painting in the studio, and the distance of recollection. However, my paintings capture the residue from experience and detachment, they are a platform that restages rupture.

Bibliography

Anfam, David. *Abstract Expressionism*. London: Thames and Hudson, Ltd. 1990

Asendorf, Christoph. *Edvard Munch: Theme and Variation*. Berlin, Hatje Cantz, 2003

Dixon-Graham, Andrew. *Howard Hodgkin*. London: Thames and Hudson, 2001

Lampert, Catherine. *Frank Auerbach*. London: Tate, 2016

Sharon Schwartz, Lynne, *the emergence of memory, conversations with W.G Sebald*. Seven Stories Press, New York, 2007

Verlaine, 'Paul. *Ariettes oubliées, III, in Verlaine, Selected Poems*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1948

Virilio, Paul *Bunker Archeology*. Princeton Architectural Press, New York, 1997