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Jonathan Wateridge: Being Seen, in Between

Gilda Williams

The difference between tragedy and comedy, for Aristotle, has nothing to do with humour or dramatic intensity. The distinction lies only in this: in a comedy, a sympathetic lead character enjoys a positive rise in their fortunes, whereas in a tragedy the hero sees the reverse, a downfall. In Jonathan Wateridge's painting *The Architect's House* (2009), the viewer observes a baffling overlap of the tragic and the comic. A gentleman (presumably the Architect) has been fatally shot in the eye; his body is slumped lifelessly in a chair – and he grins. Obviously this is a moment of pause in the making of a movie, between takes. At the painting's centre costumed 'police' chat amicably with the fatally wounded architect; to the left a badge-wearing actor, the 'chief of police', converses with the co-lead, the architect's wife; to the right, the director turns in response to the cinematographer behind the camera. The centre of the scene is brightly illuminated; the man toying with death is framed by a glow of light reflecting off the policewoman's blouse and an architectural model erected in the background. Only in the centre of the image do light and colour – the electric blue of a swimming pool, the upholstery of the orange chair, assorted undefinable objects of bright red and yellow – exist in abundance. Wateridge concentrates most of our visual attention on this central figure who hovers uncannily between life and death, tragedy and comedy, real and unreal, photographic truthfulness and painterly (or cinematic) license. With the partial frame of the architectural model that the architect has constructed, the lead character has built for himself a kind of stage where numerous in-between ontological states co-exist. Such liminality or in-betweenness is the essence of these seven, important new canvases by Jonathan Wateridge.

It is evident that the paintings making up this series, 'Another Place', are so skillfully painted as to mimic photography, especially now that – since the mid 1980s and into the 1990s, as Boris Groys has written in *The Promise of Photography* – photography increasingly behaves the way painting used to: gaining in scale, adding colour, relishing in surface texture, becoming monumental. The photo-based work of Jeff Wall, among others, experimented with photography's potential to imitate the attributes of figurative painting in the tradition of great easel painters from Poussin to Manet. Wateridge can be seen as reversing this process by paradoxically asking painting to mimic 'painterly' photography, though without lapsing into the excesses of hyperreal painting. By referencing movie-making as well, the artist draws parallels between the large expanse of painted canvas and the vast screen of the cinema, another site which permits grand figurative imaging in the way painting used to -- albeit at a speed of about forty frames per second. These paintings are not cinematic images, however, nor are they movie stills: they are overlooked images, moments which no one would bother to photograph or record. Not even included in the heap of rejected frames lying on the cutting floor, the chosen images mark invisible, in-between moments, unfilmed and unseen -- yet here they are, immortalized in painting.

How are viewers meant to position themselves before these lifesize, accidental tableaux? In *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot*, Michael Fried brilliantly

conceptualizes the shift in painting that took place in the 18th century when the illusional space of the canvas changed from being a kind of stage where painted figures performed for the beholder as if at theatre (say, *The Ordination*, Poussin, 1647) to another kind of quieter, unrehearsed vision exemplified in such intimate paintings as Chardin's *House of Cards* (1737). In Chardin's painting, the card-playing subject is as if captured in an absorptive moment, oblivious to both our and the artist's presence, caught 'naturalistically' in the throes of everyday life. This crucial difference that Fried recognized, between the theatrical and absorptive ontological states of painting, was famously adopted in the 1980s-90s by photo-based artist Jeff Wall, who tested whether these two kinds of moments could be transferred to large-scale colour photography. In Wall's work, the camera can produce grand, theatrical, painterly images (*Dead Troops Talk [a vision after an ambush of a Red Army patrol near Moqor, Afghanistan, Winter 1986]*, 1992) or can 'stage' the illusion of an absorptive moment (*Adrian Walker, artist, drawing from a specimen in a laboratory in the Department of Anatomy at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver*, 1992). The camera, we know, is an image-making machine able to catch its subjects literally unaware, framed in the 'candid' shot. In painting, in contrast, such obliviousness is necessarily false: the subject is complicit, profoundly aware of the painter labouring over her portrait, or she has been conjured from the artist's imagination or memory; therefore the painted work can never reflect some direct interface with 'reality'. Wall points to the artificiality of *both* media, painting and photography, in staging these two kinds of moments. That is, the absorptive and the theatrical are *both* performative, constructed in works like *Adrian Walker* which result in a paradoxical photograph that is both staged and candid.

In the painting *The Architect's House* (2009) Jonathan Wateridge pushes these same questions further, introducing another possible position for the beholder of his figurative paintings, a position which is neither fully absorptive nor theatrical though bearing elements of both. In *The Architect's House*, on one hand we catch a glimpse of people immersed in their activity, 'unaware' of the painter's intrusion; on the other hand, recognizing this place as a film set, we know that everything is false, deliberately positioned for cinematic effect. Subjects are 'characters' rather than people; interiors are 'sets' rather than homes, as at theatre. Our human eye on the scene is not the true eye meant to be capturing this scene: it is really only intended for the massive mechanical eye on the right of the painting, the camera lens, which will resolve all the errors and interruptions that we are witnessing and re-envision them into a seamless sequence – a moving picture of solid, flawless, complete images like those that painting used to produce. *The Architect's House* is neither fully theatrical nor absorptive but invents some other hybrid moment, an interrupted moment in between painting's two traditional ontological states, between the subjects knowing they are being looked at and being caught unaware: Wateridge's paintings strangely combine both. As if to question our place in this spectacle, Wateridge has inserted one character – the police chief in the grey raincoat to the left – who alone has caught sight of us and disrupts our illusion of an absorptive scene to which we have magically entered, unseen and undetected. He is, after all, a kind of detective: an investigator whose role it is to notice intruders like us.

Modernist painting, for Fried, did away with both conditions, the theatrical and the absorptive, shifting the painting's ontological state to 'objecthood' – a state which the beholder could approach on equal terms: having shed all traces of illusionistic space, the painting occupies the same space that we do. Wateridge invents a further, after-Modern mode of looking that moves past the divisions among absorption, theatricality and objecthood to invent another state for painting: an in-between, dead time, an uneasy, interrupted moment caught between painting's earlier conditions. It is a place on the edge – just as the scene in the architect's house is on an edge: the edge of the swimming pool, and the edge of darkness. This strange space seems to float before a void, an expanse of glass made black by the night, occupying some ungrounded place. In the glass we glimpse the shadowy outlines of the actors – perhaps the uncanny side of Modernism, as Anthony Vidler has written in *The Architectural Uncanny*. Dark shadows are the unforeseen excess that remains unresolved but emerges unwanted at night, out of the clarity of Modernist expanses of glass: the shadow is blurred and hovering, as if between life and death. The contrast between life and the possibility of death is also played out in the many human hands on display in *The Architect's House*. Hands are emphatically foregrounded in this painting; some wear bright white gloves to draw our attention to them. Most are active, gesturing hands, whether pointing (the assistant, the director), holding (the chief of police), or writing (the detective). In contrast, the architect's left hand -- occupying almost the exact centre of the painting -- is manifestly limp, and is the strongest signal of this player's staged death. Its life has stopped just as the mechanical eye of the camera has stopped; only we, the viewers, continue perversely to watch this scene bordering between cinematic life (on film) and death (an unfiled, 'non-existing' time).

This and other strange coexistences prompt the steady sense of unease and disruption that we experience in looking at these paintings. They are images about to move and be corrected on the instructions of the director -- on the verge of becoming 'right' -- but suspended, 'wrong' forever yet immortalized in these monumental paintings. Another such interrupted moment is the odd temporal site of *Eye Network News* (2009), in which a newscaster awaits instructions or a go-ahead, about to interview an older man who stares at her with a mixture of impatience, doubt, perhaps incipient lust. She is prevented from looking by her left hand which shades her view, and she becomes an eyeless figure ready only to receive and to listen, emphatically holding the listening machine (the microphone) in her hand. In the background, a disinterested figure whom we recognize as the architect sits in the back of a car: again, only the camera (held by another eyeless figure) can 'see' in some capable, unjudgmental way, indifferent to either the theatricality or the absorption staged by the image. The camera is the perfect viewer locked inside the frame, whereas we – unwelcome and watching a view not meant for visual consumption – are all wrong in our watching. *Eye Network News* leaves us, the viewers, somewhere stranded in the California desert, in the darkness of this lonely non-site, observing strangers at work. Wateridge's paintings don't just ask the question, 'why would a painter apply such attention and skill to immortalizing so uncertain a moment?', but also, 'where am I, the viewer, in this scene?' Is this image even meant for me, or was it only ever

intended for the selective eye of a camera? The newscaster seems oddly vulnerable, standing stiffly, camera-ready and posing -- like painting's pre-Diderot theatrical body -- yet absorbed by the demands of her job. She is struggling to see in the darkness, and is herself obviously here to *be seen*, on a television screen. As with *The Architect's House* much of the picture's light surrounds the central character, the physical and narrative centre of the scene -- and yet she is not meant to be seen *just now*. Wateridge's invention of this hybrid, interrupted moment of looking heightens our perpetual sense of uncertainty; images on the verge of resolving into a finished sound-and-picture 'reality' for the camera instead languish forever, in our eyes, unresolved, silent, wrong, in-between. The subject matter of 'Another Place' can be said to be ways of seeing: mechanical seeing (the camera); interrupted seeing (the cameraman); impaired seeing (the newscaster); or judgmental seeing (the interviewee) to which in *The Architect's House* added blindness (the architect, 'shot' in the eye), and vigilant, suspicious seeing (the chief of police).

The act of looking is also at the fore of *Pool Party* (2010), in which a group of 'guests' pause at a staged cocktail party, awaiting offset instructions, or a camera re-load, or some attention-worthy event just off set. Again, the image is at once theatrical (actors set up at a party) and absorptive -- the players are in-between shots, abandoned in a moment of suspended expectation, markedly refusing to meet our gaze but emphatically looking away, stage left. Of interest here is that they are actors (we recognize the man standing near the centre as the same previously cast as 'the architect') and thus working in a profession defined by total absorption by the job, by being completely immersed in the identity of another being -- and yet they are at the same time literally theatrical, playing roles. As in *The Architect's House*, in *Pool Party* we are poised on the edge of an urban expanse in an exposed modernist space which offers no real protection to these alleged revelers, who remain as if unsupported and roofless. They are suspended in time and space equally, between takes, on some indeterminate plane as if floating above the city (LA, we can guess -- city of false appearances) in the distance. Almost all the most prominent figures stand in a *contrapposto* posture, all leaning most of their weight on one leg as figures regularly do in classical sculptures -- as well as in the 'classical' large scale colour photography of, for example, Rineke Dijkstra. The little girl at the centre of *Pool Party* so places all her weight on a single foot that the other hardly touches the floor at all and her shoe flips up: she must be as if supported by the 'mother' who holds her. The sense again is one of imbalance, of being only partially grounded -- in space, time, and medium (photography, painting, cinema, sculpture), watching actors straddling states between their 'real' self and the character they play. Hands again take on special significance: idyll guests (except for children) all actively hold glasses while the 'waiter's' hands are idle. Holding champagne glasses is indeed these subject's *job*: we are reminded of the professional falseness of the players whom we observe. Silence is absolute in this interrupted moment: it is a pause in time, punctuated by silence or off-stage words that we alone can not hear. Our eye is constantly drawn to surface textures -- gleaming patent leather, the dull corduroy of a jacket, the lamé sheen of the waiter's cheap vest, or the frothy tulle of a woman's skirt. The emphasis is on surface and a refusal of depth -- we can no more fathom what is capturing everyone's

attention than we can penetrate the stretch of opaque, flat water stretching almost completely across the painting.

Qualities and differences in modes of seeing are also the focus of *In-store Security* (2009), in which we witness a night security guard who has stumbled on the slippery floor of an empty, dark department store. The unseeing eyes of a group of mannequins look down on him as if they are alive – some in mockery, some suggesting a kind of seduction. The guard is equipped with various means to assist his looking – a flashlight, a ‘seeing-eye’ dog – but, although his job is to pay attention he dismally fails to do so, abjectly occupying the floor at a level that’s even lower than the small pedestal on which the 1970s-ish fashion mannequins look down at him in overt disdain. We can not see why he fell: did these haughty beauties somehow magically trip his step? He is down, in defiance of the escalator behind (and the abstracted sign that can be glimpsed in the background) that suggests movement upwards. This is the most uncanny and unwelcoming of Wateridge’s spaces, filled with ghostly mannequins who seem to smirk at the elderly gentleman (perhaps too old for the job) and who seem much more able to see than he is -- despite wearing sunglasses in the dark, despite being giant dolls, despite the fact that he is actually being paid to keep an eye on things. In an episode from Rod Serling’s *Twilight Zone* titled *After Hours* (1960) an attractive young woman is locked out of hours in a department store and begins to feel haunted, as if the mannequins are coming to life – only to discover that she too is one of them, and the time has come for her to return. Like the living doll in *After Hours* wandering the empty shop floor, we sense that less formed, ghostly mannequins are coming to life from out of the shadows – one with pale phantasmic legs to the left, another leggy beauty emerging into view to the right – are as if they are forming out of the darkness to join in mocking this man’s slapstick embarrassment. The mannequin was a beloved trope of the Surrealists, who idealized these feminine figures as perfect surrogates for their female objects of desire. Here the Surrealist’s muse has multiplied and been vindicated, doing all the looking themselves rather than being looked at. The mannequins are obviously staged, occupying a kind of small retail plinth, while the man is meant to be absorbed by his invigilating job. Both these moments have been interrupted: the man has fallen, unable to protect anything, while the mannequins seem on the verge of leaving their posts and rousing to life, stepping mercilessly over the elderly gentleman with the glazed, stunned look on his face.

All five senses are engaged in *Night Kitchen* (2010). A man (the same actor who played the waiter at the *Pool Party*) listens over the phone; the smell of wine and coffee are suggested; we feel the strong tactile specificity of primary-coloured Lego toys which a little boy plays with on the floor. Our sense of taste is tempted but thwarted: food on the table has been replaced by cardboard (a pizza box). Sight too is impaired: all three children in the *Night Kitchen* have lowered their eyes as if unseeing, or uninterested, or angry, or shamed. This painting seems at first the most fully absorptive in ‘Another Place’: the ‘family’ seems genuinely unsettled by the evening’s mysterious events and absorbed by the interruption to their dinner routine – except that Wateridge has left a series of clues revealing that this too is a set. The floor ends abruptly and unevenly to the front, and the back wall confesses its falsity as it comes to an unnatural end to the far right. Wateridge’s painting skills are so precise he can transmit the difference between the

fake (stage-set) stove with its painted wood surface, its false knobs and phony hobs, and the genuine washing machine to the left which has been painted with astounding recognizability. The bizarre, upward reflection of the lights under the cabinets tell us that there is, in fact, no lower shelf to these 'cabinets': they are false, hollow. At first glance all is 'authentic' here, but Wateridge's staging and skill as a painter permits these miniscule betrayals of reality to return the image suddenly to theatricality. It is a staged tableaux, by no means an absorbed 'real' moment but a performance resulting again in some unforeseen, uneasy position of viewing: it is hyperreal yet utterly unreal at the same time. We remain uncertain witnesses: is this tense family moment part of some scripted drama, and this some kind of production still? Or is it some other kind of interrupted gap, between takes, the actors genuinely absorbed by some quiet conflict centring on the uncomfortable young girls and the voice on the other end of the phone?

On the floor of *Night Kitchen* a small boy stages a kind of pint-sized apocalypse: crushed buildings and overturned cars are dominated by this all-powerful primary-school Superman who creates a chaotic urban miniature under the table. We enter a similar cataclysmic landscape, now enlarged to life size, in the painting *Directional Interchange* (2009). While a makeup artist is deeply absorbed by her work, painting a terrific wound on some rugged actor's back, the image is overwhelmingly about the false and theatrical nature of the disaster movie obviously in progress. We are again catapulted into an in-between space, between observing the everyday workings of filmmaking and a contrasting, implausible moment of drama and destruction. *Directional Interchange* brings to light discrepancies of scale that coexist in the image; here the artist most overtly confesses that the disaster scene in the background is a miniature, a set piece constructed in the studio, with the 'real' figures painted in to render believable the pocket-sized, tumbling Mercedes and the toy-like crumbling concrete. Wateridge can resolve these discrepancies of scale ahead of time with the aid of a computer, but our eyes are not fooled. The expanse of flat black emptiness under the bridge or the diecast quality of the car's metal wheels and doors patently disclose that this is not a filmset but a painted inscription of living figures into a false, tabletop set. Wateridge is relentlessly true to his original almost with the unwavering veracity of a camera, yet he celebrates the materiality and non-mechanical vantage point afforded only by painting. The artist has explained that it is important to him that he remains faithful to the actual physiognomies of the real people -- friends and professionals -- whom he has cast in his pictures. He is not content to present a plausible-looking human being; no, the portraiture must respect his subject, bearing a truth-to-the-original that we associate with the mimetic role of painting before the advent of photography.

Discrepancies of scale at work in a single image become even more evident in *Valley Home* (2009), whose background is consumed by the enlarged miniature of a single-storey house. We are vaguely aware of the rudiments of its architectural detailing (a too-perfect gutter pipe to the right; an unweathered pattern of tiles on the roof) which contrast with the exquisite realness of the display of objects littering the foreground. An elderly woman takes a hesitant step towards us: she seems to be emerging from the painting, almost to join us in our same space. This sense is more than not just a reference to the illusionistic

skill with which, for example, 17th century still-life painters enjoyed pushing grapes or flowers out a painted frame to ‘spill’ into the viewer’s space. It’s not just this sort of uncanny, painterly *trompe l’oeil* that effects us: it’s more a social thing. We are terrified that she is boldly approaching us to demand that we buy something from this collection of unhappy household excess. Is this a charity appeal? Is she a victim of Katrina, or the Haitian earthquake -- or some other unforeseen, post-apocalyptic, future disaster, judging from the futuristic (miniature) of soaring car ramps incongruously occupying the right side of the painting like the ruins of 1960s urban ambition? Massive leaves of a potted plant to the right also suggest some mutant future, when the only sign of vegetation is this hideously overgrown monstrosity with an unnatural sheen.

There are numerous small episodes of still life within the overall composition assembled on the lawn. A diminished Jesus statuette steps forward to welcome us to the misery collected behind him; a wolf figurine and his naturalizing, perfect shadow howls not at the moon -- the pale, flat sky over *Valley Home* shows no such signs of heavenly life -- but a satellite dish overhead. Their owner may not actually be leaving this place: she is selling her luggage too, for which she evidently has no need. There is little comfort in her life; the one comfortable chair is occupied by a lampshade, and it may already also be occupied by her ghost, a transparent being wearing a pair of identical white slippers which we see lying casually on the floor. To the right two more ‘ghosts’ levitate: a headless, legless female figure in a white gown and a phantasmic seated gentleman in a black jacket – worn garments belonging to family members who are emphatically absent now, uncannily returning to preside over this unhappy sale. What is the effect of the woman’s intelligent, questioning face, painted with spectacular vividness, her eyes matching and meeting ours at level? Uniquely in ‘Another Place’, whose predominant painting genre is group portraiture, *Valley Home* and its accumulation of forlorn objects gathered in the yard is mostly concerned with still life. The still life is usually, by conventional definition, a genre which excludes the literal depiction of a human being. As Norman Bryson points out in *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting*, it is an example of rhopography, a depiction of the trivial or the everyday rather than higher genres of heroic or allegorical painting. *Valley Home* combines both to extraordinary effect: coexisting here is the commonplace randomness of unwanted objects, and a woman whom we sense is some kind of heroine, or sage, or survivor. For Bryson, the nature of the still life is to occupy the viewer’s own space by presenting fruits, foods, and household object as if at arm’s length, ready for us to reach out and literally hold. The objects in *Valley Home* are on offer -- yet oddly out of reach, underfoot, sloppily accumulated in such a way that it would be difficult to choose one without knocking over or stepping on another. It is the elderly woman, instead, who feels completely and uncannily within our reach, a thoroughly real presence moving towards us, slightly off balance but relentless. This is yet another reversal at play in this work: a still life is meant to be a genre which – in addition to exhibiting the class of the objects’ owner, as this one certainly does – presents a comforting image of homeliness, free of heroism or passion; yet the lead figure here emphatically embodies both those feelings. Is this a comedy or a tragedy? Does the woman’s possessions gathered for sale suggest her downfall (tragedy), or a positive change in her fortunes (comedy) as she

leaves this empty, lifeless house behind and steps, as she seems on the verge of doing here, into some new space – our own?

The temptation is to think of Wateridge's paintings as a throwback to Old Master or historical paintings, but close attention suggests an astounding and thoughtful move away from the conventions of the past, placing our viewing in a perpetual state of becoming and in-betweenness – between the spectatorial and the contemplative, between takes, between genres, between media, between familiar moments in time and space. The woman in *Valley Home* is almost the only figure here whose gaze meets ours, whom we can see as well as she can us. Literally stepping between our space and the space of the painting, between the fiction of painting and the life-like expectations of photography, like us she is caught in the many suspended spaces of 'Another Place'.