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Mixed media: Moving between painting and writing

Abstract:

This paper describes and critically reflects upon an experiment I conducted into the creative possibilities resulting from a process of moving back and forth between two expressive media – writing and painting. In essence, it documents how, in response to my interest in visual and narrative representation, and the area of Critical Animal Studies, I selected two paintings: George Stubbs' *A Horse Frightened by a Lion* (1770) and John Constable's *The Hay Wain* (1821), and brought these together, first in a painting of my own, and then in a short prose narrative. This process was in part inspired by aspects of *Textual Intervention: Critical and Creative Strategies for Literary Studies* (1994), in which Rob Pope discusses creative written 'interventions' into an existing prose text as allowing for a greater engagement with that 'original' text. The process presented by Pope involves deciding, 'how far you are prepared to write 'with', 'against' or 'across the grain' of what seem to be that text's dominant preoccupations and major strategies' (Pope 1994: 2). In the case of my intervention into the two 'original' paintings, I discuss the quite conscious elements of subversion introduced in my painting, and in the additional prose narrative that emerged from that process.

Biographical note:

Jane O'Sullivan is a Senior Lecturer in the *School of Arts* at the *University of New England, Australia*, and a member of the *Posthuman Literary and Cultural Studies Research Group*. Her current work explores the possibilities offered by a critical and creative exchange between processes of prose, painting, film, and other visual representations of non-animals, and bringing these to bear on cultural constructions of human-animal interactions. This mixed media approach also informs a creative nonfiction piece about representations of pigs in cinema, ("Picturing the Pig in Pork and Porky" in *Antennae: The Journal of Nature in Visual Culture*, Issue 25 – Summer 2013, pp. 45-48) and a series of photographs and short creative nonfiction reflections on animals as I have observed them in various zoos in Australia, England and Ireland, ("Zoo-illogical Exhibition" in *Animal Studies Journal*, 2(2), 2013, 91-98).

My ongoing and interrelated teaching and research interests in literary studies, film, popular culture, and critical animal studies inform this work.

Keywords:

Interdisciplinarity — painting and writing — Animal Studies

In *Textual Intervention: Critical and Creative Strategies for Literary Studies*, Rob Pope discusses how various reading and writing practices can enrich engagements with, and possible revisions of, a work of prose fiction. The exercise I am documenting here is one in which I sought to adapt Pope's writing strategy, which he refers to as one of 'textual intervention' (Pope 1994: 1), to suit the incorporation of a quite different medium – that of painting. In essence, Pope is concerned with a pedagogical approach to literature that interrogates the purpose and outcomes of such textual representations of the world. In essence, this is an approach geared to an exploration of the capacity of such representations to bring about social change. In this paper, I record how I set about writing a relatively short piece of fictocriticism that would trouble the representation of animals in art by questioning how paintings have served to confirm a culturally constructed species hierarchy of human over non-human animals. In this instance, I wished to focus on the authority of humans over horses, and the associated set of entitlements implied and, to an extent naturalised, in such paintings.

Rather than begin with a writing process, I decided to first experiment with making a painting. Of course, the appeal of turning to another, quite different creative process in the hope of providing greater impetus in an already familiar practice is not new. Drusilla Modjeska has discussed this in some length, observing that, '[T]he attraction for a writer of working with paint and colour and texture and form, has to do, I think, with the materiality of the work, the bodily strength and movement that is required: a kind of envy for the artist's studio with its space and its utensils, its smells. Writing reduces us to a desk; our muscles tighten and shrink, joints ache' (Modjeska 2002: 59). In my experience, this change of physical space and exertion did allow for the incorporation of an additional form of creative expression.

I began my experiment not by starting from scratch, but by selecting two well-known, existing paintings and replicating aspects of them in a modified form. Essentially, in reconfiguring the paintings and constructing a new relationship between the two of them, I would be making a major 'textual intervention', employing the tools of painting rather than those of prose. Through this painting-process, I gained greater insight into some of the ideological work done by those 'original' paintings, and found a way to question those cultural assumptions. Initially, I did this in my own painting (*Horse frightened by a hay wain*), and then in the fictocritical piece of writing I had first envisaged ('Horse frightened by *The Hay Wain*'), and to which I returned, even before the paint of my intervening painting had dried.

In discussing a pedagogical strategy for developing an understanding of how a written text actually works, Rob Pope (1994: 1) argues that an effective method is 'to change it: to play around with it, to intervene in it in some way (large or small), and then to try to account for the exact effect of what you have done'. Here, Pope is anticipating the possible concern that this process may lead away from the 'original' or 'base' text (1994: 2), and argues that, on the contrary, 'with every tool at your disposal – critical, analytical, theoretical and historical – [you will be] forced back into it' (1994: 2). Pope proposes two questions that one must ask when embarking on such a textual intervention: *What if the text were different?* (1994: 4), and - after by some means making it different (which I thought of as the *What did I do?*) - Pope's next question

is, *Why did you make that particular intervention?* (1994: 5). These suggest a critical reflexivity similar to that signalled in Catherine Cole's view of 'the what if, what would I do, how would I feel – of the writer's creative practice' as key to preparing 'the creative mind to open its unconscious to possibility' (Cole 2007: 7). I use Pope's questions to structure the following account of my process of intervention.

What if the text were different? (Pope 1994)

In clarifying the import of this question, Pope adds the instruction that those employing his intervention-process must, 'intervene in the text in some way so as to 're-centre'' it, thereby deflecting and re-directing its dominant 'ways of saying' and its preferred 'ways of seeing' (1994: 4). He goes on to indicate that interventions can be "subtle'... [or] 'outrageous'" (1994: 4) and, as will later become apparent, I chose the outrageous. The particular subject matter, and associated 'ways of seeing' I selected for my intervention, concerned the representation of horses in art. In essence, in my writing I wanted to disrupt the traditional assumptions underpinning the human/animal hierarchy by questioning such associated assumptions as the human 'right' to harness and exploit the life and labour of non-human animals – specifically that of horses. In this respect, I would be giving expression to the view articulated by Randy Malamud, that '[a]n animal's existence today – its appearance, its life, its relation to people – is heavily attenuated by the frames imposed upon it and the tableaux arranged inside these frames' (2012: 3). My goal was to intervene in some such selected 'frames and...tableaux' in order to question our 'iron-fisted sense of entitlement and control...[as] the cultural hegemony' (Malamud 2012: 3). I also sought to countenance the view that horses, as sentient beings, are entitled to a subject position, and to be credited with a perspective or point of view. In my painting, and resulting written work, I hoped to gesture towards giving expression to these aspects of equine potential, even whilst knowing that my efforts would be limited by my human perspective, and to the always-approximate language of anthropomorphism. I decided that the paintings I would select as my 'base text[s]' (Pope 1994: 2) for the purpose of 'play[ing] around with' (Pope 1994: 1) should be well-known and loaded with cultural cache. First to come to mind were the canonical works of George Stubbs and of John Constable.

George Stubbs is well known for his numerous paintings of horses, and from these I selected one particularly haunting one, *Horse Frightened by a Lion* (1770).



Figure 1. Horse Frightened by a Lion - George Stubbs, 1770 (oil on canvas, 100.1 x 126 cm, Walker Gallery, Liverpool, UK)

According to Konstantin Bazarov, ‘Animal terror and violence in nature haunted the imagination of Romantic artists’ (Bazarov 1981: 88) and, as noted in Terry Riggs’ (1997) commentary located on the Tate Gallery website, *Horse Frightened by a Lion* (1770) is one of at least seventeen works by Stubbs in which a horse is depicted confronted by a lion. The setting is the limestone cliffs of Creswell Crags, on the Nottingham-Derbyshire border, and the image of the lion is probably modelled on a caged lion housed at the Tower of London, or on those in Lord Shelbourne’s menagerie on Hounslow Heath.

Tamsin Pickeral shares this view, and adds that Stubbs ‘used one of the king’s horses at the Royal Mews as his model for the white horse pictured’ (2009: 218). Riggs comments that in the series of paintings, the horse’s ‘(eventual) submission to his inevitable fate suggests the heroic, moral overtones of stoical Roman virtue’ (2009: 218). To me, this interpretation is consistent with a devaluing of animal lives and potential through the deployment of their images as signifiers of human attributes, and as mere allegorical figures within largely human-centred narratives. I wanted to remove the human from the story, and to make the horse the subject. In an attempt to do this, my first intervention was to eliminate the lion, as I saw it as largely evocative

of 'the British lion', and such related epithets as 'king of the jungle' and of Britain's 'natural' authority over its empire. Of course, this decision to remove the lion from a painting with the title, *Horse Frightened by a Lion*, constituted a major intervention, one which, as Pope would have it, involved deciding 'how far you are prepared to write 'with', 'against' or 'across the grain' of what seem to be that text's dominant preoccupations and major strategies' (Pope 1994: 2).

I had decided to completely reorient the horse's situation and perspective, by replacing the lion with a quite different image that may, to such a wild horse, also constitute a vision of horror – that of a horse in harness. The ideal image was that of John Constable's painting, *The Hay Wain* (1821).



Figure 2. *The Hay Wain* - John Constable, 1821 (oil on canvas, 130.2 x 185.4 cm, The National Art Gallery, London, UK)

In the foreground, two carthorses cross the River Stour in Suffolk, near a mill-house that is nestled in the shade of several oak trees. The painting constructs the scene as peaceful. The man and the horses work as one within, and part of, a natural landscape. But the horses are harnessed and hitched to a hay wain under the control of the man who holds the reins. I had briefly considered John Constable's painting, *Flatford Mill: Scene on a Navigable River* (1816-17), in which the landscape is ordered, divided into sections by fences and pathways. The river has been channelled into a canal, and its flow is controlled by locks and sluices. In the foreground, a carthorse is shown, dragging the barge along the canal, but the overall depiction of the landscape conveys an image of a time when the mastery of human culture and the rendering of the horse-as-machine, seems irreversible. I wanted to work between two images in which a haunting impression of a less restrained equine existence could still be glimpsed, and

this was the case in the idyllic, though pastoral, setting in *The Hay Wain*. Having made this decision, I brought the two paintings together on one canvas, and in so doing, brought Constable's horses-in-harness into clear view of Stubbs' white horse.



Figure 3. Horse frightened by a hay wain – Jane O'Sullivan, 2013 (acrylic on canvas, 92 cm x 40 cm, private collection)

Why did you make that particular intervention? (Pope 1994)

In order to make it explicit in my painting that the white horse was reacting to the prospect of horses in harness – in effect, that it was a horse frightened by a harness and hay wain - I positioned my version of the Stubbs' painting (*sans lion*) on the right-hand side of the canvas, and then painted 'my' Constable on the left. Labouring the point, I addressed the space in the centre of the canvas, and painted a large image of a horse's head in bridle and blinkers. In rendering this image, I 'played around' with various media and techniques, including a fine outline inscribed in impasto medium, given emphasis by the addition of a glaze of shellac. The effect of this was too solid, leading me to replace it with an outline of translucent white, which was more evocative of the kind of ghostly spectre that would be capable of rendering my white horse so 'frightened'. At this point it became apparent that this explicit signposting of my narrative was imposing a far too singular 'meaning' on the painting – something at odds with the expressive and open dimensions that I like about paintings. It was time to turn from the canvas, and engage with the page.

In essence, the short fictocritical piece contemplated the great length of time that these horses had stood, captured in oils and trapped within Stubbs' and Constable's painted vision, and how the fearsomeness of the lion that was posed in an eternal pre-pounce attitude must have lost much of its capacity to frighten the white horse. Below is an extract from the resulting fictocritical piece in which I characterise a connection between the indifferent response of Stubbs' horse to that impotent beast, and that of

the torturer's horse in Breughel's sixteenth-century painting, *The Fall of Icarus*, as it lumbers along, untouched by the fate of the young boy:

And yet, as the painted horse has shied eternally before that tawny beast, it surely must have become accustomed to it – largely unmoved, like the horse in Breughel's *The Fall of Icarus*, in which, head bowed beneath the weight of the plough, it ploughs on regardless of the fallen child, or in an attitude of numbed indifference resembling that of the torturer's horse who 'Scratches its innocent behind on a tree' in Auden's poem, *Musee des Beaux Arts*. And so it is with Stubbs' white horse. It rears up still, as it must, but unconvinced by the lion's truncated leap. ('Horse frightened by *The Hay Wain*', O'Sullivan 2013)

A realisation that the vision a life in harness was perhaps more horrifying for a horse than the suspended animation of a lion, led me to bring white horse and carthorse together in a story in which a major art gallery decides to hang an exhibition entitled, 'The Horse in British Art'. This allowed for a situation in which the two paintings could be brought together in the gallery, and hung in such a manner that Stubbs' white horse could see the carthorses, and be characterised as finding them so much more 'frightening' than any flea-bitten remnant of human hubris, and imperial ambition:

And now, picture this, the white horse and his lion allocated a new corner in a special exhibition – 'The Horse in British Art' – and afforded a new prospect, that of Constable's *Hay Wain* (1821), a celebration of humankind's harnessing of Nature in all her forms. And what a sight these carthorses are, force-focused on another's destination - more shocking by far than any dislocated, long-toothless, signifier of o'er leaping imperial ambition. What must it be like for those carthorses to labour through centuries of daylight hours, so blinkered, cut-off from the comforting sight of others of their kind, and of themselves, reflected in those matching eyes? ('Horse frightened by *The Hay Wain*', O'Sullivan 2013)

In essence, my story sought to privilege the horse's view of the harnessing of their species' greater potential, and in so doing, question some assumptions about the entitlement of humans over this animal 'other', and represented in so many canonical images within Western art tradition.

Unlike me, a fully-fledged visual artist would surely want her painting to stand alone, and to have the last word. Indeed, if the desired outcome of my experiment had been an aesthetically and intellectually satisfying *painting* (a tall order!), I would have removed all material trace of the 'ghostly spectre' of a horse's head in harness. In so doing, I would have sought to reclaim the open landscape between the two 'scenes' (carthorses and white stallion) as a space into which a viewer could speculate or make an imaginative intervention, to - in effect, formulate an interpretation. Making allowance for such textual space for a reader of prose is something with which I am much more familiar, given my background in literature and writing, and the relative lack of such a background in the visual arts.

As an exercise in mixing media, my painting served as an experiment in an interdisciplinary approach to writing, and this did help me to find new perspectives on, and within, two 'original' visual texts. The outcome of this was the production of two written texts. One of these is a short work of creative nonfiction, with the title,

'Horse frightened by *The Hay Wain*'. The other is this personal essay that, in its account of my experiment in paint and prose, argues for the possibilities of a truly interdisciplinary application of the critical and creative writing strategy of textual intervention.

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