

TRAVERSE: an email interview with Hazel Ann Watling by Anna Dezeuze

Anna Dezeuze: Among the starting points for this exhibition figure two stories – Edward Lear’s *The Owl and the Pussycat* and Aesop’s fable (better known in France in Jean de Lafontaine’s version) of the town mouse and the country mouse. What drew you to these stories?

Hazel Ann Watling: I’m currently interested in the idea of crossings, which ‘have the power to enchant’, according to Jane Bennett’s *The Enchantment of Modern Life*. Wonder, she argues, can be found in the shifting variations of hybrid forms.

I’ve titled this show and residential project ‘traverse’ in English, because I’m concentrating on the idea of ‘travelling through’. Just as we can travel through a story we can also voyage mentally or spiritually by using images.

The Owl and the Pussycat and the city/country mouse fable are lodged in my consciousness as stories and as illustrations. They are a part of my childhood memory, the fabric which once helped, and continues to help me make sense – or nonsense! – of the world. These stories are about crossing over.

These stories also relate to my actual situation in residence at the Galerie des Petits Carreaux. Saint-Briac-Sur-Mer is on the North coast of France, a boat ride away from my motherland. It is a strange place for me, filled with luxury boats and well-kept private lawns, interspersed by farming land. The nature is sublime, it is rich in colours, the sky and the sunset are beautiful. This countryside reminds me of where I originally come from, in the North West of England, but here it is much wealthier: it is not the same, it is new.

AD: Both stories are about mismatched couples, but one ends in marriage, and the other in separation. Are the mismatched couples in these two stories metaphors for the relation between painting and the digital in your current work?

HW: Painting and digital are two very loose terms. Painting is an expansive field that assimilates or appropriates, so the digital has naturally become incorporated within it. Meanwhile, the digital incorporates painting through new paint software, or through the infinite reproduction of paintings as products, and as vehicles for distribution and visibility.

There is no binary between digital and painting. What is interesting to me are the similarities and dissimilarities between them. I try to mine their characteristics, to see how they can be married, or how they can be kept at a distance from one another.

I personally see the digital image as a part of an ever-growing collective consciousness/intelligence. Whether it was a photo I uploaded or one I gleaned from the internet, it is one element of something bigger. At the same time, painting is a loaded medium that gives direct access to human history, dating back to cave-dwelling civilisations.

My interest in painting came first. The digital was initially introduced in the form of collages from magazine pages. As technology developed, through smartphones, Photoshop software and social networks, it became more anchored in my daily life and artwork.

AD: In what ways do the digital and the pictorial interact in your work?

HW: I would describe the relationship between painting and the digital in my work as reciprocal. One feeds into or responds to the other. Sometimes they play different roles, sometimes they play the same. My painting practice is absorbent – everything in my daily life or environment is absorbed into it. Like a sponge. I guess that's why I often use a technique of raw fabric which absorbs the acrylic or ink or the digital print.

I am not looking for the specificity of paint or the digital. I am embracing the hybrid/heterogenic. I think of how I can combine digital printing and the painted picture. For example, I paint directly on supports (commercial products or advertising) which already have a ready-made printed motif. I also order my own digital compositions as sublimated prints on different types of fabric before continuing to work on the image with paint or ink.

AD: Is the space that they share the unifying surface of the canvas/fabric?

HW: The surface and the support are major considerations for me as an artist. The tangible image can be almost forgotten, or made very viscerally present. The image is something we can voyage through, it is a window, a porthole, a mirror. At the same time, the material presence of a surface or support can also be considered in terms of a volume, of its physical presence within an installation space.

AD: Aesop's fable explores the opposition between two kinds of economic regimes – capitalist luxury in the city and simple rural lifestyle. While some of your works appear at first sight to allude to the combination of violence and opulence that the field mouse flees, the exhibition as a whole does not reflect this polarity. Rather than an 'authentic' country lifestyle, would you agree that your works point to the ways in which fantasies of nature (whether the sea or the countryside) also feed into the capitalist economies of desire?

HW: I think the binary between city and country is represented in our news and daily political views, as a social identifier. But both city and country are marked by class and wealth differences. Wealthy countryside life vs. a peasant's experience vs. a city slicker's lifestyle vs. a struggling unemployed city-dweller, or a homeless person living on the city streets.

Capitalism is something that antagonises me, it is something I find hard to understand or accept, and yet I live it and function within it. What drives my thinking and my work are the paradoxes of the human condition. This is why I'm drawn as much to stories, as ways of organising information and orienting oneself, as to the modernist abstraction of colourfield painting. I see abstract colour fields or lines as connected, beyond the specific, to forces that exceed us.

AD: Is kitsch one of the spaces in which most of these fantasies – of city and country - are produced?

HW: Once the idea of city or country becomes the object of exaggeration and fantasy, we enter into the realm of stories, films, cinema, illustration, theatre, popular imagery ... and kitsch.

I live in an environment where kitsch advertising is powerfully present and influential, be it attractive or repulsive. The tensions created between popular imagery or aesthetics and high art such as colourfield painting drive much of my work.

AD: Would you agree that the material rubs between paint, printed photographs and fabric embody the frictions between reality and fantasy?

HW: I think this combination of different materials, and the shift between the pictorial and physical qualities offer wide and rich possibilities.