

PAINTING ON A HUNCH: IMAGE-MAKING INFORMED BY INTUITION

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ABSTRACT

In this report I will describe my painting process and discuss the role of intuition and memory. During the making of a painting I don't always know what I am doing or why. I am in a sense 'painting on a hunch.' In a bid to articulate and make sense of the origins of my recent body of work I decided to undertake a self-review. I discovered that I use my intuition as a tool to select fragments of memory, both conscious and unconscious, which I then paint into visual narratives. (I use the term intuition like instinct, to describe knowing without 'knowing.')

The reflective process brought to light things on the edge of my awareness.

INTRODUCTION

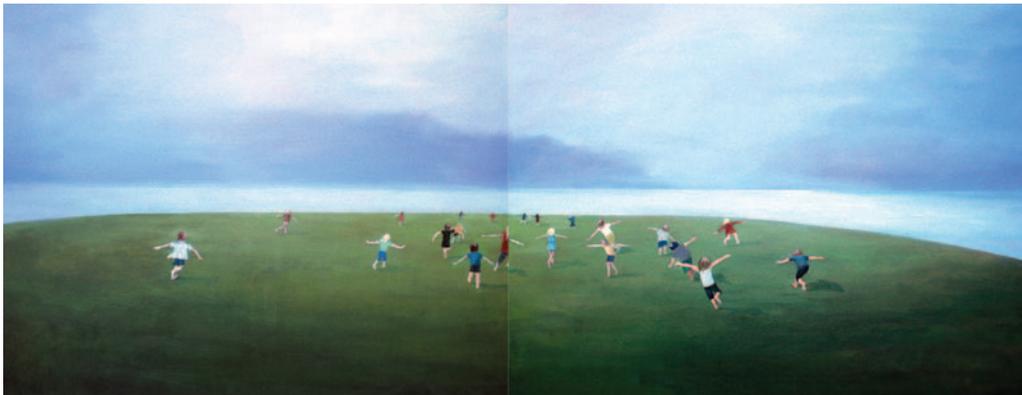


Figure 1. Hannah Joynt, *Landscape with Flyers* (2010), oil on canvas, 180 x 76 cm.

In July 2010 I had an exhibition at the Centre of Contemporary Art (COCA) in Christchurch. "Never Trust Your Cape" was a series of eight oil paintings. The content depicted childhood-like adventures and the phenomena of flying dreams. In *Landscape With Flyers* (2010) and *Big River Crossing* (2010), perspective and panoramic formatting were used to create a sense of endless open space and to include the viewer in the work. In both of these large diptychs, the figures I painted embodied the freedom and spontaneity that naturally comes with being a kid; I wanted to provoke the viewer to remember this feeling. Six smaller works were more like windows looking into snippets of fantasy-type memories. Individual characters have a surreal awareness about themselves, evident in their expressions. Though they are clearly children, they seem to possess qualities that only age bestows.



Figure 2. Hannah Joynt, *Big River Crossing* (2010), oil on canvas, 180 x 76 cm.

My mildly naïve aesthetic reflects my content, as does the very act of painting. Lighthearted tragedy seems to bleed from the works, which echo my inner child and fragments of memory that speak of loss. I paint nostalgically. Painting for me is playful and feels young.

There was a time when I could fly, a time when there was no sense of danger or real understanding of gravity. No self-doubt. The part of my brain that exercised caution had not yet developed. I could go anywhere I could imagine and with enough thought and the right equipment I could even fly. But, at some point I realized the truth; I couldn't fly and I wasn't ever going to. There was a great sadness about this knowing. Reality seemed somewhat dull. I wanted to hold onto my colourful fantasy but I could no longer pretend that I didn't know what the truth was.¹

Although sadly it is impossible to fly unassisted, most of us have a perception of what it would feel like. Dream flight is ageless and notably a favorite dream experience. Memories of my childhood are ones in which imagination and lived experience were enmeshed. "Never Trust Your Cape" was about both celebrating and grieving the loss of the perceptions of a young mind.

Rather than directly illustrating my past times, I constructed paintings from fragments of found images that expressed my left-over feelings. It was during the making that the themes emerged and upon reflection that I saw myself mirrored in the works. The whole process is hinged on intuition, a tool I repeatedly use. Intuition is how I get away from conscious reasoning, to become more in tune with deeper, hidden aspects of my personal narrative. My painting process also serves as a method of enquiry into things such as perception, consciousness and memory.



Figure 3. Hannah Joynt, *Flying with my Favourite Table Cloth* (2010), oil on board, 58 x 58 cm.

Figure 4. Hannah Joynt, *The Flying Dream* (2010), oil on board, 58 x 58 cm.



THE PROCESS

My process is a repetitive cycle that doesn't largely change. There are four main phases: collecting images, painting, exhibition and reflection. These phases don't always occur in a linear fashion – in fact they are often happening all at the same time, though the exhibition is a sure marker of the cycle ending. I will discuss each phase of the cycle as it relates to the main discussion about intuition.

The collection phase has three components: the act of collecting, the collection itself, and selecting the images to be used for painting. I collect images obsessively, regardless of time and place, photocopying, photographing, downloading, borrowing and sometimes stealing. If I see a picture that grabs my attention I have to have it. At the time, I have little or no insight into what I am collecting. Insight comes later. I don't know what I am looking for but when I see it I know that I have found it.

The small 'caught-my-eye' moment represents something far greater than it appears. I see many images every day, most of which are not that stimulating, but occasionally one is. In a split second, the image that 'caught my eye' has triggered a rapid, unconscious response² – and for a moment I feel somehow displaced, caught out, exposed. This feeling is usually accompanied by some short internal dialogue such as "Ooh" or "Hmm?," or "now that's interesting" Like a baby or an animal, this reaction is instinctive and I have no control over it. "It operates – at least at first – entirely below the surface of consciousness. It sends messages through weirdly indirect channels ... It's a system in which our brain reaches conclusions without immediately telling us that its reaching conclusions."³ Knowing but not knowing; working in this way is most enjoyable – maybe one of the key ingredients of creativity.

To insist on the priority of cognitive reason over other forms of knowing and feeling is to make human reason the ultimate measure of things and thus to leave out a vast range of human experience ... this then is why subjectivity is in crisis today, and why many of us seem to have lost touch with any deep centre of self.⁴

I have been collecting images in this way for approximately eight years. Over this time I have accumulated hundreds if not thousands of images. Like some sort of torturous initiation, the fresh images coming along spend a mandatory month or two pinned to the studio wall before getting filed into scrapbooks. I want to study them and remember them so they become ingrained in my memory, ready for recall at any moment. Like my set of paintbrushes my image collection is another tool. It shows me where I have been and, due to the continual arrival of new imagery, where I am going. In one sense I will never get to where I am going because the destination is always changing. And in another I am already there, because the thing that drives the process is constant: intuition.

I flirt with the edges of consciousness, trying to reveal my own hidden mysteries. It is a somewhat vulnerable way to work. Unsure about what may be uncovered, I put my subjectivity on display. (I question the drive behind this somewhat exhibitionist need, though my suspicion is that it comes from a deep out-of-awareness need to be seen.) Even though I deliberately welcome a lack of control in the studio, it has made me question; if I am not thinking about what I am doing, then am I always looking for the same thing? On the surface it appears not – though from a Freudian perspective, perhaps I am always seeking an underlying sameness. Unconscious pathological ways of thinking and behaving due to childhood experiences reverberate in the adult mind.⁵



Figure 5. Hannah Joynt, *Never Trust Your Cape* (2010), oil on board, 58 x 58 cm.

The idea that we have conscious control is a bit of a hoax. It is generally underestimated the power unconscious influences have.⁶ We tend to think of our brains as processing information from the environment in a dualistic way: I am here and the world is there, as separate entities. But the vast majority of the input in our heads comes from what is already inside the brain.⁷ Our experience is informed by perception and memories (both conscious and unconscious) and perception and memories are built out of experiences. "What we see resonates in the memory of what we have seen; new experience always percolates through the old, leaving a hint of its flavour as it passes. We live, in this sense, in a 'remembered present.'"⁸ This brings clarity to the déjà vu-like⁹ feeling in my painting that I may be simply telling the same old stories again and again, but with different characters, colours and formats.

In a way, we are in a continuous state of fiction – reality is a construction of consciousness. Cozolino (2010) writes about the illusions of consciousness through which we construct reality in his book *The Neuroscience of Psychotherapy*. He outlines three misconceptions of consciousness: the first is that consciousness comes together in one place in the brain.¹⁰ Of the four main areas of the brain (brainstem, diencephalon, limbic system and neocortex), it is in the neocortex that most of the components consciousness appears to consist of are located, such as personality, goal-setting, decision-making, concrete and abstract thought, organising and self-monitoring, as well as all aspects of cognitive memory – facts, figures, faces, names, dates, songs, phone numbers, etc.¹¹ It is likely that 'consciousness' is not actually housed anywhere, but is the result of the coming together of many parts and functions in the brain.¹² And the idea that specific parts of the brain are singularly responsible for particular functions is very controversial. The current understanding of the human brain is still largely primitive.¹³

The second misconception is that we are able to be in the present moment. In fact we are always half a second behind. It takes 50 milliseconds for the brain to react to a stimulus (be it internal or external), but it takes 500



Figure 6. Hannah Joynt, *The Great Flying Fox In the Sky* (2010), oil on canvas, 90 x 76 cm.

milliseconds to become consciously aware of it .¹⁴ In the delay, the stimulus is being processed in ways that we are completely unaware of. The information is processed according to a neurological system of pathways, which is automatic and unconscious. Therefore, the third misconception is that we have conscious control over our thoughts and behaviours.¹⁵

As I seek to gain insight into the origins of these 'intuitive' paintings, it is of importance to be aware that consciousness itself is full of illusions. But also that having consciousness does not necessarily mean that one has awareness. In the intuitive moment, realistically it is not 'the image caught my eye,' but rather my 'I' caught an image. My abandonment of conscious cognitive ways of making is rather justified.

The final part to the collection phase is choosing which images I will actually paint – taking the most potent images, the ones that irritate me the most, the ones that resonate the most. The whole first phase of the cycle is very much a process of distilling, through my intuition filter; which sets the boundaries. It gives a flavour to the body of work and helps to locate it.

The painting phase comes next. I generally paint the entire body of work at the same time. With all the paintings on the go, I can better see the threads of narrative and recurring themes and how they inform each other visually. It is difficult to anticipate how the paintings will turn out, as they don't start to reveal themselves until they are near completion. Delayed gratification can be both rewarding and frustrating.



Figure 7. Hannah Joynt, *Prayer* (2010), oil on board, 58 x 58 cm.



Figure 8. Hannah Joynt, *The Girl and The Man are Both Anticipating the Same Thing* (2010), oil on board, 58 x 58 cm.

Beginning with a blank canvas or board I will paint the entire surface with one colour using a large brush. I first look for composition and form within the colour field and imagine my selected images in it, locating them amongst the brushstrokes. Then, following my insight, I map the figures and forms in with a thin layer of paint. Layering, revealing, refining, removing, the figures come to life over the duration of the making. My relationship is different with each work. Some works I struggle with until the very end, and others seem to just paint themselves.

The less I try to control the painting process the better it turns out. I generally focus more on aesthetic qualities rather than the implications or symbolic meaning of the content. Simply looking, painting, and intuitively making decisions, I endeavor to set up for graphic surprise. Graphic surprise is when something happens in the painting that was unintended and unexpected. This phenomenon, according to Schön (1983), is the first stage of reflection.

In their book *Learning Through Storytelling in Higher Education: Using Reflection and Experience to Improve Learning*, McDrury and Alterio write about the three key stages of reflection. The first stage of reflection arises when there is a difference between what is known and what is happening¹⁶ or, as Schön (1991) describes it, the experience of surprise or a feeling of inner discomfort. For me this occurs as moments of frustration, when I know that something is not quite how I want it to be, and as graphic surprise. "We often cannot say what it is that we know. When we try to describe it we find ourselves at a loss, or we produce descriptions that are obviously inappropriate."¹⁷

Sometimes when I'm feeling really frustrated with a painting I will sit in front of it, with one of my scrapbooks, and flick through until I find the thing that is missing. It's like I am looking for friends of the painting. Looking for a match, an ingredient. The intuitive way of working permeates through all areas.

About three quarters of the way through the painting phase, I begin to transition into the second stage of reflection: processes of critical analysis of feeling and knowledge.¹⁸ It is about this time that I am able to see the connections between what I have painted and the significance it has for the links between my past experiences and recent or present experiences. The back-story unfolds, thus confirming my hypothesis that, through the intuitive process, I reveal not only my stories that have been (or are starting to become) lost, but also bringing to light my subjectivity. This work is totally autobiographical. When I leave the studio, I set up the paintings so when I walk in the door the next visit they are the first things I see. Catching myself by surprise, to cultivate reflective practice.

As I make the decision that the work is complete, write my artist statement, as I pick up my paintings from the framers, as I wrap the works carefully with newsprint and bubblewrap, as I make the five-hour trip to the gallery in Christchurch with my car loaded with paintings, reflection is inevitable. I paint autobiographically, with intense attachment, and these steps are a ritualistic part of letting go, and moving to the third stage of reflection: the emergence of a new perspective on the situation.¹⁹

The notion of reflecting on one's life as an ongoing autobiographical narrative? ...while personal meanings constantly shift because they are contingent on context and oneself and others.²⁰

I get to the end of the cycle, having been through self-reflection and reflection on my practice. Back in my now empty studio, sitting on my couch, I think, "Gee, what should I do? Well, I could always paint something." Then I start to look through my scrapbooks.

Hannah Joynt moved to Dunedin in 2003 to enrol for a Bachelor of Fine Arts in the Dunedin School of Art. Since graduating in 2006, she has been teaching drawing and painting part-time in the School of Design at Otago Polytechnic. Hannah has had two solo shows at COCA Gallery in Christchurch ("An Alien Snuck into Class and No One Noticed," 2009, and "Never Trust Your Cape," 2010) and two solo shows at the Temple Gallery in Dunedin ("Grieving Over A Dead Fish; Secret Men's Business," 2011, and "A Small Act or Something," 2011). In addition, she regularly enters competitions and has contributed to numerous group shows.

1 Hannah Joynt, *Never Trust Your Cape*, artist statement (Christchurch: COCA Gallery, 2010).

2 Malcolm Gladwell, *Blink: The Power of Thinking without Thinking* (London: Penguin, 2005), 10-17.

3 Ibid., 10.

4 Veronica Brady, "The Sway of Language and its Furtherings: The Question of Subjectivity," *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art, 'Subjectivity'*, 1:1 (2000), 7-14.

5 Marcia Cavell, *Becoming a Subject: Reflections in Philosophy and Psychoanalysis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 10.

6 Shelley E Taylor and Jonathon D Brown, "Illusion and Well-Being: A Social Psychological Perspective on Mental Health," *Psychological Bulletin*, 103 (1988), quoted in Louis Cozolino, *The Neuroscience of Psychotherapy*, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 2010), 135.

7 James J Gibson, *The Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1966), quoted in Cozolino, *The Neuroscience of Psychotherapy*, 135.

- 8 Adam Zeman, *Consciousness: A User's Guide* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), quoted in Cavell, *Becoming a Subject*, 10.
- 9 Déjà vu occurs when a fragment of a memory is activated by a present situation but cannot be remembered explicitly, so what is happening for the first time seems to be happening 'again.' Daniel Schacter, *Searching for Memory: The Brain, the Mind, and the Past* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), quoted in Cavell, *Becoming a Subject*, 14.
- 10 An idea first articulated by Descartes as the Cartesian Theatre. See *The Cartesian Theater*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cartesian_theater; accessed 1 Nov 2010.
- 11 David Ziegler, *Traumatic Experience and the Brain* (Phoenix, Az.: Acacia Publishing, 2002), 12-14.
- 12 Cozolino, *The Neuroscience of Psychotherapy*, 135.
- 13 Ziegler, *Traumatic Experience*, 14.
- 14 Jaak Panksepp, *Affective Neuroscience: The Foundations of Human and Animal Emotions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), quoted in Cozolino, *The Neuroscience of Psychotherapy*, 135.
- 15 JA Bargh and TL Chartrand, "The Chameleon Effect: The Perception-Behavior Link and Social Interaction," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 76 (1999), 893-910, quoted in Cozolino, *The Neuroscience of Psychotherapy*, 135.
- 16 Janice McDrury and Maxine Alterio, *Learning Through Storytelling in Higher Education: Using Reflection and Experience to Improve Learning* (London: Kogan Page, 2003), 24.
- 17 Donald A Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 49.
- 18 McDrury and Alterio, *Learning through Storytelling*, 24.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Ibid.