

Up until now, Will Bradley, 2013

As a student at The Glasgow School of Art, Hayley Tompkins began painting fragments of photographs, jewel-like watercolor miniatures floating on a raw white rag-paper ground. Her mature practice soon replaced the fixed parameters of these early successes with an open-ended investigation of the conditions that made them possible. Using the same simple materials—watercolor paint and paper—she began to explore how painting works, and how she thinks; how the world, and her situation in it at a certain moment, affects the way she thinks about how painting works; and how the way she paints does or does not capture these conditions, or alter them.

All of Tompkins' work since seems to spring from this moment of consideration. It seems as though she must have asked herself all of the most difficult questions, about how and why she made paintings in the way she did and, not content with the answers she found, decided to strip the process back to its beginnings and start afresh, every time. The image of the artist facing the blank sheet of paper is both a truthful metaphor for the freedom to choose among infinite possibilities, and one of the oldest clichés in the cultural representation of modern art. In this respect, it captures the

situation Tompkins has consciously placed herself in very well: she seems to demand of herself an awareness of both the very real moment of existential choice, and also its impossibility for a human being entirely embedded in a given culture and history, physics and biology. When she talks about the way she makes her work—which she does convincingly, very thoughtfully, and with great precision—she often refers to the competing personal interests, unthought impulses, theoretical questions and external conditions that come together to produce a finished piece.

The fact that Tompkins has been, in this formative and generative period of her practice, so focused on the conditions of one medium—not simply painting in general, but small-format watercolor painting in particular—might seem to connect her work to an older idea of modernist reduction, of truth to materials and the search for the defining qualities of the medium. However, this perspective fails to illuminate much at all about her work. Her questions are always less connected to the definition of the medium than to the possibilities for action, and the idea of this chosen self-confinement. Tompkins is not seeking the essence of painting, or the purity of painting, but almost the opposite. She is studying the social question of art, experimentally devoting herself to its practice and reflexively concerned with the ways in which an individual, situated in time and space and culture, might conclude that a brief sequence of marks on a sheet of paper constitute a valid contribution to human society. When Tompkins titles an exhibition ‘Optical Research’, as she did for a show in New York in 2009, the strong impression is that she is concerned to emphasize not the particular visual qualities of the works themselves, but more the underlying idea that material reality presents itself to us first of all as a surface. By accepting certain confines, Tompkins effectively discards the modernist debates around the medium in favor of the more immediate questions that might be addressed from the viewpoint of practice. If the starting point is the process itself, rather than any given goal or target, then each move must be tested against the complex of issues and influences it produces, or that arise in the consideration of the work’s future context, or in the course of everyday life, at any moment, from all directions. This disinterested relationship to purity is underlined by the moves that came next in Tompkins’ practice. Moving away from flat watercolors, she took a step towards contemporary sculpture, with a series of works she calls **Metabuilt**. The **Metabuilt** are found objects, sometimes altered or assembled together, often painted, occasionally with

photographs or fragments of photographs included in the whole. They are quite different from Tompkins' watercolors on paper, in that the formal decisions have moved from the two-dimensional question of image-making to the three-dimensional question of how to paint existing objects. There is no longer any sense that the act of painting makes the form. The **Metabuilt**s are also quite different from the things that might otherwise seem to be their art-historical forebears; Duchamp's Ready-Mades, or Rauschenberg's assemblages. They are certainly no Ready-Mades; they are treated as things-to-be-painted, not surrogates for the blank sheet of paper but alternatives to it that offer their own set of complications and possibilities. Nor are they assemblages, exactly, though the distinction here is finer. A **Metabuilt** might sometimes be simply a fallen leafy twig, encased in pigment. Where Rauschenberg took a car tyre and threaded a whole stuffed goat through it, Tompkins might take a shredded fragment of discarded rubber tread, paint it and fold it back on itself. The emphasis is not on collaging chunks of the world together to produce a new artistic phenomenon, but on the way her process of painting, once again, involves close attention and myriad decisions. Tompkins may not be strictly concerned with the minimalist idea of the 'least gesture' but she is concerned with decisions and events on what is perhaps a more domestic scale. She chooses objects and materials from her everyday life as the raw material for decisions that similarly emerge from a process that has no grand narrative or endpoint.

These works make evident Tompkins' commitment to considering painting-in-the-world, painting as a process of thinking and exploring rather than painting as a means to produce paintings. And further, at this point in her practice, painting becomes something more: a practice with real results, a gesture of negation. Technological artifacts, from simple kitchen knives to mobile telephones, are painted over and have their purpose radically altered. They cease to operate, but take on a new life as objects, as images uncoupled from their previous life as either tools or consumer commodities. This transformation is, perhaps, the meaning of optical research in Tompkins' practice, the uncovering and foregrounding of secondary characteristics in the material world.

In Tompkins' most recent works, particularly her installation in Scotland's exhibition at the 2013 Venice Biennale, we see a radically transformed re-engagement with her starting point, fragments of photographs. In the nineteenth century, photography transformed painting with its ability to represent the world immediately, in

perfect perspective. Tompkins' earliest work was still in thrall to the idea that painting, in order to become contemporary, should respond, should index, or annotate, or otherwise reprocess photography. One thing that has happened in the two decades between Tompkins productively and presciently abandoning this debate and her recent return to the photographic medium, is the shift from the modernist idea that one takes photographs, to the current situation in which there simply are photographs.

Tompkins' work is nothing if not a process of research and understanding, and she now approaches photography from a completely altered perspective. Photographs are no longer part of an infusion of media imagery that might revitalize painting, or mined for subject matter to complement a certain position or technique. Instead, it seems as though painting was, ultimately, the means through which the photographic image could be comprehended at the moment of its transmigration. To Tompkins, the photographic world is now seen as possessing a fundamentally dual character. On one hand, it is digital light, transient but also infinite, momentary but also endless. On the other hand it is something almost archaeological, or even geological, to be understood not as image but as process, accretion. Time, light, shape and color are part of the sediment of everyday life, and the mute reality of the image world has begun to take on the same mineral quality as the colors mixed by the painters of the past.