

Conversation, Joe Scotland and Hayley Tompkins, 2013

This conversation took place between Hayley Tompkins and Joe Scotland in Hayley's studio in Glasgow, February 2013. On the floor there are plastic trays filled with paint and photographic prints of yachts in wooden boxes.

Joe: I was thinking recently about how the internet has greatly changed how we consume information—both in terms of the amount available and the pace at which it happens—and the sense of pressure there is to be kept informed about everything that is going on. With your practice I can see a slowing down in order to mediate given information. I wondered what relationship time and pace has within your work?

Hayley: Time is there, embedded in everything. It is like the data of the work. I have a sense that what I am doing is mostly about looking and seeing into something or between things. Looking for a likeness. I agree with you, there is little stillness anymore, no stopping.

J: My brain just doesn't keep up with the amount of information available to us, and I think that's one of the reasons why I like being made to look and experience things at a different pace. This reminded me of when I first came across your work. My mind had to adjust to a different time scale so I could engage with it; I had to make a commitment.

H: The size was often very small, but when I was painting works on paper they appeared bigger because of my physical proximity to them. They weren't details, they were whole things that just happened to be small. I felt I was trying to define a very particular thing each time. The installation of them allowed for a much bigger use of scale, so the wall or room became critical to the placement of the individual parts. When I put them in a room there was another layer of work as there were always lots of these pieces. I would often arrive with over a hundred different elements. Like pieces of a language, letters from sentences of things.

J: It's interesting that you saw them as pieces of language, because I feel it's like you have to learn how to read them. I think with your work you have to learn that the space around the objects is in some way equal to the actual object.

H: Yes, that's right. I look to create an atmosphere, or a blurring of meaning surrounding the objects. When the works were made on paper, they were always about the piece of paper, they were always objects. In retrieving them, holding them, handling them—to put anything on them became another layer of meaning, another surface. So as a viewer you are already dealing with two things.

J: So when you are making work, are you consciously thinking about someone else viewing the work?

H: I think I have a room in mind with a person in it. I think 'How is this going to feel to somebody?' I am the first person in the installation, working through ideas and positions. With my work there is a really big change between the studio and the gallery. I rarely practice hanging anything in the studio. There are moments of moving things up and down on the wall but mostly it is off the floor and onto tables. I have recently been making work with plastic trays and acrylic paint. I'm focusing on the event of color and its appearance, making these things that are saturated and full. I think a lot of the work I make is very frontal and it's about a surface. Apart from the chairs I paint, and recently my use of potted houseplants, the other things attach themselves to the wall. You are only given one view of them, one position in which to stand.

J: With these pictures of yachts that you have on the studio floor, where have they come from?

H: These are bought photographic prints of yachts at sea. I am going to combine them with other images that I am going to take myself. Initially, I wanted to have images to do with water, reflections and

the sky. Recently, I have thought, 'Well, what exactly can I take a photograph of?' Previously, I have taken pictures of things that belong to me. Here, I want to take a perspective of things that are quite different. They are generic, and slightly mundane but still exotic at the same time.

I liked the idea of using an image like this in Venice, where there is a slight absurdity built in. Venice feels private, circuitous and enclosed, whereas these are images of yachts on open sea, unfettered, free. What I intend to show with them is a set of images of mine that are much more like stills from a film. Instead of just taking an image of an object straight on, objective and quite matter-of-factly—the way that I have taken images before—these will be pictures that are about doing things, recording an activity in a very simple way. I have been thinking about how you put a plug in a wall. You know, when you have the Christmas lights and you have to unravel loads of wire. I was looking at an activity like unraveling something and finding the end and then putting the plug in. Something mundane but ritualistic.

J: Domestic?

H: Yes, but technological as well. The idea of energy and electricity and plugging into something. And offsetting that with images of water and light. There is a risk or jeopardy suggested then. Within the whole exhibition, I am thinking about quite essential, platonic elements, like water, light, color, fertility, ways of being. And then something completely modern like the idea of electricity. It's quite mystical, unseen, invisible but it's there. Previously, when I have used mobile phones, images of keyboards or Apple products, I liked thinking about how they combined with the paintings on paper, the painted knives, hammers, mallets, and clothes.

J: In your use of imagery, it seems like there are two different types: stock imagery—such as the images of yachts, and those taken from magazines—and the imagery you create yourself. Is there a hierarchy between the almost clichéd stock imagery and the more personal material?

H: It's funny, the last installation I made I used only images that I had taken. As I was arranging these images of batteries and sunglasses, I was thinking 'Is there anything that is out of bounds?' I thought 'Is there a subject matter that I would feel uncomfortable using?' Apart from obviously transgressive material, I thought, 'Could I use a photograph of a dog? Could I use a photograph of a yacht? Could I use a photograph of an apple or a naked body?' These images

are bought online, they were seen online and picked out. I am really trying to dismiss the hierarchy, to ignore it and democratize everything. Maybe that's to do with the paintings as well. Which colors are deemed beautiful, or which colors are rare or which color is very ambiguous or I'm feeling ambivalent about.

J: Does the approach of appropriating found images correlate to your use of found objects?

H: Yes, it feels like the same action of taking or pirating existing material.

J: Are they aspirational in some way? They seem to relate to desire in some way.

H: I agree, they are definitely about an attraction to things, a need to look and enjoy. They are not related to any personal history of mine, the field is wider and more open. With the yachts I think perhaps it's to do with scale. Typically, I record smaller things that are hand-held or kept close to the body—possessions, extensions of myself. This is more like a view, like a landscape. I was thinking about photographing buildings, like Bernd and Hilla Becher did, looking at types. Where that puts them, as the subject standing in front of a building taking photographs of buildings. It offers a completely different view, a different world view.

J: I think the potted plants are quite ambiguous. They seem to sit between both corporate or domestic spheres.

H: Yes they do, they are awkward like that. Perhaps what you were saying about the images of the yachts, the plants work in the same way. A plant is like an interval, but it is also something that you recognize from Marcel Broodthaers' installations, corporate foyers and in the home.

J: Can you tell me more about the trays, and how they might—or might not—be read as paintings?

H: I'm not sure how I would describe the trays with paint inside. They feel close to films or skins. There is nothing unseen, they are very open and they are trying to define themselves as things as well. Essentially they are going to be like events of color, in a space. That sensation is the experience. I also like the link between the trays and photography, when I made the trays I have thought about that. I mix the paint, then pour it in, so they don't have any brushwork. Then I move it around, shift it, like exposing photographs in a darkroom. I then leave them to settle and dry. Somehow the painting cultivates itself or it is grown; it emerges like a photograph.

I think they will be read like paintings, due to their scale and orientation. They also feel to me a little like television screens. They are a step away from the way I would normally make paintings. Of course because they are realized in acrylic and I have never used acrylic paint before, they still feel like paintings but they are different to make, they are linked to a downward, falling motion. It is not easel painting or painting at a table.

J: I think throughout your work there always seems to be an element of slippage ...

H: ... Between being certain and not being certain of things?

J: ... Well, I mean for example, your paintings on paper are never just a painting, there is always the dual thing of it being an object. I know when you look at a painted object like the hammer, the same thing is going on. It's something you'd have in everyday life but it's making you aware of the object's duality, of it also being a painting.

H: When I first started making paintings they were often linear and calligraphic. When I was painting with a line, whether making an image, producing a text or depicting something gradually, the lines got less and less. I was dealing with space and I found it difficult to fill the space within the lines. I began painting firstly on wood, then misshapen parts of wood, then more prosaic objects like mobile phones and knives and hammers and bottles. That was quite a transition. The paint became a distinct thing in its own right, there was no seepage into the paper. The material nature of the paint was liberating. It became much freer and I felt I could have covered anything. I like the fact that it's still, the layer of paint that's in these trays is still a covering, is still a skin. A surface. I didn't want to make images. The idea of water and paint is really interesting to me—a fluidity connects these images, of boats and water. And also somehow, are an embodiment of us, given that we are mostly water.

J: A relationship to the body seems important, even with how you install the works. There seems to be a close association between your body and what you are looking at.

H: It's true, I tend to measure things out, to my height and reach. Things are always hung quite low. But I also quite like to ground things in a way, to place them near the body. I ask the viewer to look onto objects and into paintings, rather than to step back and observe.

J: There is something interesting in the idea of reading them as a form of language. I struggle with written language and verbal

communication. I always find there is such a disparity between what is happening in my own head, or what I am physically experiencing or seeing, and then how I translate or communicate that.

H: I think translation is really important in the whole process. I picture something in my mind I would like to make and then I have to make a translation into physical terms. A painting gives you a particular moment of stilled time, unlike music or film. The fact is, there was this history that came up to that point and then there's the decision to keep it like it is. It then has appearance—alive with energy and momentum. I approach my work very much as someone who is looking at the world and the things I see and experience and try to translate that but in a language that other people understand. There's this private thing that happens and then when I get to the gallery I really want to share it. The whole thing, as we mentioned earlier, is about trying to share something with somebody, learning about the world. A curiosity and joy in things, a liking of things, liking the appearance of things, liking things as they are. Then wanting to build things or see how things look in the studio that I have not seen before. Not epic plans, it's more like 'I haven't made a green painting so I want to make one.' It can be quite a simple instruction but there is a definite need to produce something that wasn't there beforehand.

J: In a really obvious way, do you want the viewer to see things 'new' in some way?

H: Yes, I think so. To re-see something, to repeat the act of looking. The first time I think that happened was when I painted mobile phones. People seemed to respond to them quickly. The tangibility of it, the recognition of something people knew. When I was painting the phones, I was thinking 'Why don't phones look like this?' How do things look the way they do? How do we live in a world where things are made in a certain way? We accept that, when actually you can take an object and present it in an altered state.

J: Do they become in some way a stand-in? A painted knife becomes a stand-in for a knife?

H: Yes, by spelling it again, saying 'This looks like a knife but it is not a knife.' When I look at figurative painting and there is what I think is a painting of a tree, it is telling me it looks like a tree, but it is not a tree, it is a painting of what looks like a tree. Like painting a knife on top of a knife or a hammer on top of a hammer. That duality—it's hyper-reality. It's like there's a double life.

J: Phyllida Barlow describes her work as bad versions of reality.

H: Ah, I like that. I have been thinking lately about these paintings and my choice of imagery. There is something slightly mocking. Not a mocking attitude, but a replay. It's definitely a reflection, a repeat or a re-enactment of something I have seen, so could be considered theatrical but it's not dramatic. It's always something I have seen or something I would like to see. Recall and memory, firstly, creates the work. A feeling of how interiors have felt, a recreation of being in a place, but also standing in front of some artworks, some photographs, remembering how I felt standing there in front of certain things. The idea of an equivalence, something that is like something it is not, but is equivalent to it in meaning and value. Somewhere at the baseline of everything, somewhere in my psyche I want to explore this, myself and who I am.

J: I sense you are slightly allergic to the word 'archeology' being used in relation to your work?

H: Yes, as I feel more of a consumer than a person finding something that has been embedded or hidden. Less of a searcher. I was reading about how a baby learns through language. To use a word, a child has to hear it at least three hundred times. I thought that was interesting, learning through repetition. Again and again and again. There's this thing about my work that has this 'again' nature. In order to make a procession of things or a length to go through. There is something attached to the word archeology that makes it feel nostalgic. It is an analysis of something that has happened, a memory, but the actions I do don't feel archaic, they feel present, in the moment.

J: I think you kind of get a sense of the painted objects, that their surface has a patina of age or has been encrusted. I have found it, particularly when I saw the mobile phones. It was like I was being presented with an object in the future and this is how they have naturally aged.

H: I think that is absolutely right. That was almost an effect that happened that I wasn't intending. The painting and the method of painting were quite loose and mosaic-like. At the time I was thinking a lot about butterflies, and the colors that you see in nature. How to affect a multicolored-ness across objects. I wanted to try to paint like light shining on an object. Light changes color.

Each thing is inherently about time. If it is talking about life, then it can't avoid it. I am aware of my body producing and working in cycles of time. I am already timed, as a woman, it is built in to our bodies and we cannot deny it.