

THE END OF VANDALISM: a conversation between Mandy Ginson and Katie Lyle

This conversation took place over email between writer and editor Mandy Ginson and Katie Lyle between September 28 and October 9, 2015, leading up to Lyle's exhibition *The End of Vandalism*.

On Surface, Depth and Luncheon Meat

Mandy Ginson - Your paintings register as compositions of sometimes oppositional formal and conceptual forces; I think of figure and representation for example, as two opposing ideas in your paintings....I'm not sure why I'm thinking of the imago, or death mask....I'm thinking especially of paintings like *A Portrait of Two Women with a Yellow Cloud of Hair*, where the face is more fully-formed but very flat, but somehow conveying an entire world operating below the surface, a murky depth sitting just under the skin.

Katie Lyle - The idea of figure versus representation resonates with me, in particular because I think of them quite differently. The figure is something hazy that creeps into the image, like when we recognize a hint of something and start to chase it. While representation, is more of a telling or illustration with paint or line—describing something recognizable for the viewer. I think the flattening of the faces is because they're more about referencing a likeness than individual portraits. I'm thinking about creating a character—like an ad or a cartoon, or an actress playing a part.

Recently, I've been researching radiography and x-ray processes for looking underneath the surface of paintings (this sort of ties in with the sense of *under the skin* that you referred to). When they x-ray historical paintings, they can see how artists like Van Eyck and Rembrandt reused their canvases. I find the images of these x-rays really interesting because they reveal the process of decision-making, of value judgements in the studio, of alterations. The term *pentimento*, specifically describes the process of making small alterations or adjustments to a painting. This is sort of what my paintings are, each painting a small alteration from the last, slight shifts in the shape of the eyes, the turn of the head etc.



MG - I didn't know there was a word for this, interesting that it has a relationship with repentance, with regret. So dramatic! It makes sense to me in relation to your paintings. The slight changes as you mention, but also more overt gestures, like that hand coming through in *Magic, Maybe*, it's the sweeping lines but keeping with this analogy of vertical depth, there's also an oceanic feeling, of elements in a tidal floe, being pulled under and bobbing to the surface...

In some, like *Green Mask*, these "small decisions" are really visible and in others like *End of Vandalism (Green)*, this element feels more integrated, the face comes forward. These have really different energy. *Green Mask* definitely feels vital and energetic, but also maybe more aggressive. Does that make sense to you?

KL – Definitely, there is a conscious, different feeling from different works, relating back to the energy and also this idea of style or expectation. I have been thinking about the paintings as though they are worked on with a different mindset or perspective entirely. The title for the show, *The End of Vandalism*, is about addressing this idea of value judgement as well as different voices on a page, writing over or editing, good and bad. I want the paintings and conversation between the paintings to make visible this ongoing decision-making process, both in the studio and other spaces where we negotiate how to act or how to react.

On Authors, Characters and Elaborated Fictions

MG - When I look at your work, I see these shadowy, obscured and layered representations of women that remain unsteady or intentionally wobbly and weird. It's maybe the colour palette, which often strikes me as sort of 1930s, art deco that for me evokes film noir, and the particular way that faces were lit and portrayed in film at that time, and then the idea of character that here maybe crosses with the idea of a portrait. Can you talk about how you're thinking of this?

KL - The idea of character really interests me and perhaps more specifically the relationship between an author and a character in a novel. The process of developing a role and the ways that that might happen. I am thinking of how an author takes parts of their own life or the lives of people around them, as much as elements that are researched and imagined.

MG - I like this thinking about the author and a character. I think I can see this, as a sort of ongoing relationship, within the paintings, one layer imagining or giving rise to another. There's no unified or principle position.

This is making me think about how we are all such social creatures, that it's hard to see ourselves, or that maybe for some of us at least, there's no such thing as an authentic self, how emotions are shared, how we function collectively, naturally mimic one another etc, and maybe that a sense of individual agency or autonomy is exaggerated.

KL - Thinking about this but also in relation to the expectation (in particular within painting) of unity and wholeness as an end goal. It's almost as though that expectation is another force in the studio that I'm trying to turn into something visible. A personification of doubt or expectations and second guessing...

The Wall, and All the Voices and the Forces...

MG - Thinking still of the author and the character also makes me think of Etienne Souriau—his idea of plural existences, but the idea of decision-making, and other forces or voices entering into the fray...is it maybe not then making a selection or choice, but rather, showing a range of possibilities? If that were the case, nothing to do with those negative things—regret and pain, and more to do with the possible, the virtual?

KL - This is getting to something, plural existences sounds very close to what I am thinking about...not about making choices but rather, a varied voice? I keep coming back to this expectation of a singular voice, or singular personality, and how we negotiate this as artists and also as women I think. How do you mean the possible? The virtual?

MG - There are different ways to think about this but I was thinking about the virtual in the Deleuzian sense. His work on Proust and memory, that memory is not necessarily in the past but rather is real and present, and consequently that there's "a real" that's not actual.

Thinking about this idea of plural existences and varied voice, can you talk about how these things might have figured in the performance that you did this summer?

KL - The performance from the summer that I did with Shelby Wright for Garden Gallery does involve a lot of the same thinking. This idea of posing, how the bodies overlap and collage together. There is also the wall, which in an obvious way is a barrier of communication between the two characters, or two voices from the same person. Also the feeling of being close and far away that is mirrored and I think accentuated when working closely with someone, playing the role of a collaborator and performer vs. artist or friend.

On Evolving Portraits and Ghosts in the Machine

MG - What I've seen from you to date have largely been portraits. In some of the more recent work there are legs and feet and hands and arms creeping in behind or in front of the still primary face. This is interesting, can you talk about these things entering the field or space of the face (but not necessarily being of the body)?

KL - I love that you used the term creeping in because it's literally been a process of thinking about another person changing something in the studio or infiltrating the space of the paintings themselves. I think it's me negotiating this idea of character, maybe I can make characters out of the people making the paintings as well as the subjects in them.

I am also interested in extending the view, from the gaze to contemplating the figure. Through this layering and repainting, the images can reveal more than one narrative, one face or one figure; the processes of applying and removing paint revealing an ambivalence or conflicted feeling in the desire to look and to be looked at.