

Model pictures: James Lynch, Amanda Marburg, Rob McHaffie and Moya McKenna

Opening remarks by Chris McAuliffe, director of the Ian Potter Museum of Art

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February 2011 has been a tumultuous month.

Just last Monday, a headline in *The Independent*, an English newspaper, proclaimed our time 'A new age of uncertainty, with no end in sight'.

What is it like to make a painting in such an age?

In the 19th century—like ours, an age of uncertainty—artists responded by retreating into their practice.

As the American critic Michael Fried framed it, the trajectory of modernist painting was one of:

the gradual withdrawal of painting from the task of representing reality—or reality from the power of painting to represent it—in favour of an increasing preoccupation with the problems intrinsic to the medium itself.

Are the paintings in this exhibition exercises in withdrawal? Certainly many of them embody forms of isolation. Images are isolated on blank fields, excised from their original context. Vistas are broken into fragments, narratives are broken into disconnected incidents. Time becomes a staccato succession of incidents rather than a continuous flow. Painters hunker down in their studios, limit their attention to tabletop scale.

The question is whether this isolation is a result of the artists' disengagement. Is it the artists who are withdrawing from reality, or is it the case, as Fried suggests in that incidental and contradictory aside, that reality is moving beyond the artists' reach?

Certainly, in these paintings, reality is fleeting, flickering and unanchored. In painting, representation is always a form of surrogacy, always a set of marks standing in for something else. Here surrogacy is announced repeatedly in plasticine models, tabletop props, casts and moulded objects.

But these paintings don't retreat from the world, they refer to events in the street, non-events in lounge rooms, to movies, myths, friends and family. The artists want to connect with reality, it's the question of how this is achieved that's at stake.

I think there are two responses evident in this exhibition.

The first is something of a defence mechanism. Making the model a prelude to a painting gives consciousness time to regroup. Metaphorically, the gestures are those of the IT and communications technologies that propel the image of the real at such a dizzying pace: pausing, replaying, buffering data, time-shifting, saving and saving as.

The second is a new articulation of affect, of emotional engagement. The model for the pictorial field might be the 'flat screen' of the television and computer but that doesn't mean the paintings are digital. They are vibrant, energetic, playful and seductive. They are about relationships, emotions, stories, places and experiences. They are made by artists who are curious about the world, who want to be both *in* the world, and *of* it. The most striking form of affect is the artists' enthusiasm for the idea of making a painting, even if it is founded in forms of deferral and distancing.

Thirty years ago, with the advent of postmodernism, 'pictures' was a word heralding the confounding of affect. As Douglas Crimp suggested in his catalogue essay for the 1977 exhibition *Pictures*, 'The picture is an object of desire, the desire for signification that is known to be absent'.

All of the artists in this exhibition are striving to recover the analogue from the digital, to replace nihilism with painterly affect.

To understand something of what they are doing, we should reflect on a question that every exhibition asks us to pose; 'What does it mean for a painter to think?'.

Certainly the artists are thinking about precedents: about photorealism's sterilisation of the image, about the *Pictures* generation and the suspension of affect, about postmodernism's love affair with the fragment.

But that is more about position than practice. In these model pictures, the artists are thinking about ways they might put a world together, how they might speak of it. How do things connect? Do they touch? Do they fuse? Do they cluster and clump? How do you declare that something is important to you? By repeating it? By playing with it? By sharing it?

And when, for example, you've successfully connected things and declared their importance, how does this say something more than that they were simply interesting to you? That is, how is a painting you and far more than you? How does it speak to the world, rather than just of the world?

This exhibition shows James Lynch, Amanda Marburg, Rob McHaffie and Moya McKenna thinking carefully—thinking *in* the making of the paintings—about what kind of relationship a painting can have with the world. That relationship is modest, momentary, buffered. That is sufficient. This exhibition is not about big statements, new generations or emerging isms. It's about what it is like to think with paint. In this case, to think about painting in a new age of uncertainty, with no end in sight.