

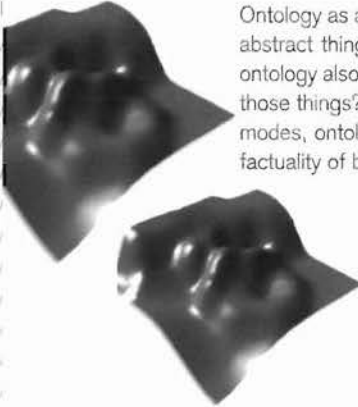
{ Mark Titmarsh }

☒ **Feeling the Rub:**
making an ontology of painting



[AN ONTOLOGY OF MAKING]

What would an 'ontology of making' be other than an unlikely coupling of two words? Each moves in opposite directions, one asks 'what is' and the other is concerned with 'what does not yet exist'. □□□□□□



Ontology as a mode of enquiry asks what kind of things, including abstract things, can be said to 'be'. And then quite audaciously ontology also asks, what is the fundamental quality of the being of those things? Heidegger called the difference between these two modes, ontological difference, that is the difference between the factuality of beings and the riddlesome opacity of being itself.

CAN IT BE SAID THAT THE PROCESS OF 'MAKING' DEMONSTRATES AN ONTOLOGICAL DIFFERENCE?

Is there a difference between making something in particular and the universal nature of all making? When I make a painting is there something common to this kind of making as when I am making a fuss? In one case I am making an object and in the other an emotional event in process. In both cases I am bringing something into being by virtue of my engagement with the world.

Making is such a simple everyday word, that it tends to resist analysis. Making wants to hide. As such, I make my breakfast every day, I make it on time to the bus, I make things in the studio, I make headway with this essay, I make time for meetings. There are simply too many ways to make. It is a verb that can be applied to almost any kind of doing from love to war, from material things to immaterial events. 'To make' is as primordial as 'to do' and 'to be'. In fact my fundamental way of being is a way of making worlds. When I make something I disclose a particular world which establishes that made thing within a particular set of relations. When I make something I also take an ontological perspective on a world of possibilities. An ontology of making coincides with a making of ontologies.

Yet I can't make anything in just anyway. I can't make a wooden frame in such a way that it is weightless or that it reveals a world of utopian relations. The world is already established and I must conform to it even if I wish to challenge it. The resistance of the world, the friction and grain of things reciprocates by shaping and making me.

Consequently making has a dual existence which is indicated by the dictionary definition of the word, "to bring into existence by shaping material". One aspect of this duality is concerned with bringing something into being, the other is its shaping. Shaping could be cutting and carving wood to make a painting stretcher with dovetailed corners and bevelled edges. The stretcher is brought into being once I have shaped the wood according to its particular way of being. Wood can do things that metal can't and vice versa. The wood offers resistance to being cut but also cleaves in a certain way that is conducive to my frame building. I establish a know-how with wood on the basis of an economy of physical resistance.

IN SHORT, AN ONTOLOGY OF MAKING
WOULD BE AN ANALYSIS OF THE NATURE
OF MAKING, BASED ON THE DIFFERENCE
BETWEEN ACCOMPLISHING SOMETHING
AS A MADE THING AND THE PARTICULAR
RESISTANCE EACH THING GIVES IN THE
PROCESS OF ITS MAKING.



[DIGITAL CRAFTING]

To make a thing such as a chair or a painting involves various levels of physical and conceptual behaviour, involving intentional activity, pre-reflective knowhow, and a dialogue with the specific material qualities of a medium. The grain and knot of the wood determines whether shaping is easy or difficult, whether the wood will shape the outcome more than the tool. The chaotic turbulence of paint resists or accepts being directed in certain ways. The ongoing dialogue of events between the material and the maker results in the work. The resistance of the material informs the maker and shapes the outcome.

- ☒ THE EXPERIENCE OF WORKING A
- ☒ MATERIAL LEAVES A BODY MEMORY AS AN UNTHOUGHT BACKGROUND PRESENCE WE CALL

‘KNOW’
HOW.

When wood and paint are worked on by hand they tend to display a crafted look as opposed to a machine made or mass produced look. There are of course many situations where the roles are reversed for commercial or conceptual reasons, as in say photo-realistic painting or the addition of analogue tape hiss in digital sound recording.

When work is hand made on a regular basis it tends to be made in a special place set aside for that kind of making, most typically the artisans workshop or the artists studio. (Fig. 1) In such a place, there is a spectrum of activities occurring simultaneously. The space is constructed especially so that things can be left in various stages of completion. At first glance the artist's studio appears chaotic with an occasional appearance of a completed work.

THE STUDIO IS ITSELF AN IMAGE OF PROCESS, A GLIMPSE INTO THE DOMAIN OF MAKING.

Those who work in the digital domain also call their workplace a studio. The digital studio is inherently different in appearance since it is framed by the technological construction of hardware and the electronic connections between its component parts. The look of the studio is the look of moulded plastic monitors, grided keyboards, glowing processors and shielded wiring to audio technology, servers and so on. The very look of the digital studio challenges notions of manual 'making'.

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*Fig. 1 An artist's studio,
(my own), March 2006*

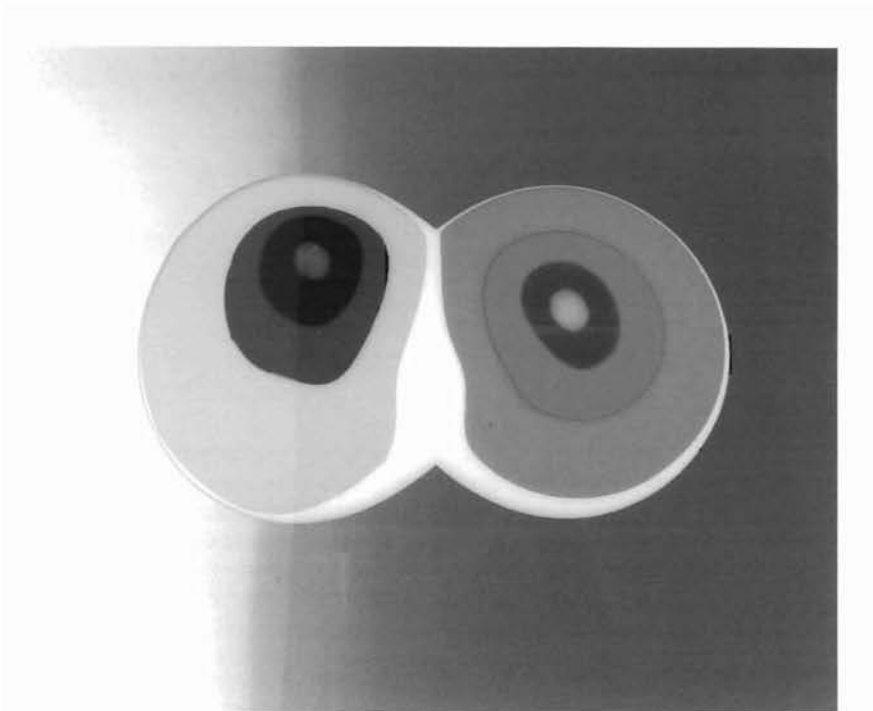


Fig 2. DXM, 2004, acrylic and resin on aluminium, 85x105, photo by Ian Hobbs.

AS A HYBRID FORM OF
CRAFT BASED
“KNOWLEDGE,”
“DIGITAL
CRAFTING
TREATS THE COMPUTER
AS MORE THAN A TOOL
FOR DRIVING AUTOMATED
OPERATIONS.



When making a three dimensional object in a software driven virtual environment, the object being made offers no material resistance. The distance between the conceptualisation of a virtual thing and its appearance on the screen is not readily understood in terms of physical energy or material resistance. There is no material that offers resistance but rather a free interplay between willful projection and an infinite number of 'soft' combinations.

The infinity of combinatory operations generates a sense of exhilarating possibilities until a new kind of conceptual resistance arises. When no resistance is offered the rapid production of material results in an enormous number of outcomes that are all equally interchangeable and each struggling to generate a sense of meaning and authenticity.

Yet a computer screen is not all free play. It is also a physical interface within an environment that requires the use of hand and eye skills to operate the mouse or stylus in relation to the screen. As a hybrid form of craft based knowledge, "digital crafting"¹ treats the computer

as more than a tool for driving automated operations. Instead it becomes a medium for digitally re-embodiment the richly dimensional experience of bodily sensations into a felt link between the physical operation of the digital interface and the abstracted data.

THE MEDIUM USED IN **madeKnown**
IS A FORM OF COMPUTER AIDED MANUFACTURE
KNOWN AS **RAPID PROTOTYPING.**



The process of production begins with the creation of a virtual 3d object in an appropriate software platform which is then realised by a 3d printer. The printer uses a 'fused deposition modelling' process, whereby layers of liquid plastic are extruded in successive cross sections until the object matches its digital counterpart. The jet nozzle that extrudes the liquid plastic is very similar to the type used in a traditional ink jet printer. This reinforces the notion that the rapid prototyper sits within the context of printmaking from woodcutting through screenprinting to contemporary digital reproducibility.

Rapid prototyping was initially used for creating prototypes of tools for newly developed technological products. It is evolving towards a self contained device that can assemble small electronic items, such as a mobile phone, in a single pass, or print its own component parts for the purpose of self replication.

[DIS-PLACE-MENT]

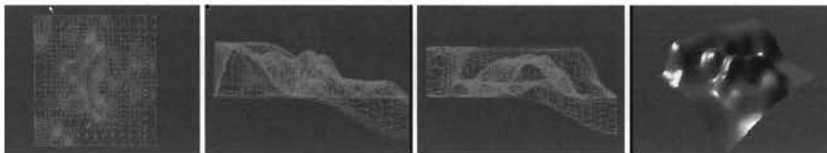
☒☒ a technical term inherent to software jargon but also has a broader cultural and poetic resonance.

The first step in making Purple Reflex, the work shown in the 'Madeknown' exhibition, was to develop a virtual 3d image based on one of my paintings, DXM (Fig. 2). I began by mapping a digital photograph of the painting onto a flat virtual surface in a 3d software programme. The flat surface was then displaced according to the luminosity values across the surface of the painting. Dark tones pushed the virtual surface down and light tones pushed it up. The result was something like a landscape that had been shaped by the intensities of light rather than the earth's geological pressure.

'Displacement' is a technical term inherent to software jargon but also has a broader cultural and poetic resonance. Within software operations displacement enables speculative visualisation to take place between previously incommensurable environments. In fluid mechanics, displacement occurs when a solid object is immersed in a liquid. The solid pushes the liquid out of the way and takes its place, literally dis-places it. Similarly in psychology, displacement is an unconscious defence mechanism, whereby the mind redirects emotion from a fearful idea to a safe object.

Digital displacement enables the infinitely thin surface of a painting to be mapped into a non-Euclidean synaesthetic geometry of sight and touch. The original painting, DXM, had been created by allowing paint to mix and flow according to its own dynamics with as little influence as possible. By using gravity rather than a brush, the essential physical nature of paint as a liquid comes forward. The revealed nature of fluid dynamics are further reinforced by the biomorphic undulations that occur in the displaced outcome.

fig 3. *Purple Reflex*, 2005, screen capture showing orthogonal and perspective views



DIGITAL DISPLACEMENT
ENABLES THE INFINITELY THIN
SURFACE OF A PAINTING TO BE
MAPPED INTO A NON-EUCLIDEAN
SYNAESTHETIC GEOMETRY OF
SIGHT + TOUCH. ☒☒

Once the virtual model was finalised it was transmitted to the printer. After being printed as a 3d plastic object, it was sandpapered, sprayed with putty, sandpapered again, sprayed with undercoat, then sprayed with automotive lacquer and polished. The intense colour and highly reflective surface give it an un-touchable 'fetish finish' look commonly associated with automobile culture and minimalist sculpture.

[THE ACT OF MAKING]



Fig 4. Hans Namuth, 1950, Pollock painting.

In an age of convergent media² the rapid prototyper functions as another point within the matrix of multimedia and hybridised forms. From the point of view of painting, the technology becomes another mode of production to be incorporated into expanded possibilities of painting. New technologies and new production materials have always influenced the look of painting and the reality of the painter's studio. Consider the impact of plastic, as a container for paint and acrylic as a medium of colour.

DEVELOPMENTS IN TECHNOLOGY SHOW US THAT THE WAY OF MAKING A PAINTING IS AT THE VERY LEAST AS IMPORTANT AS THE LOOK OF THE FINAL OUTCOME.

The act of making as a kind of world building becomes overt from the time of Jackson Pollock (Fig. 4). Pollock's method of painting is not something lost behind the appearance of his work. His whole process has been thoroughly documented in the film and photographic work of Hans Namuth. These images show us that Pollock laid the canvas on the floor of his studio and that he made the works through a kind of dance, moving around the perimeter of the canvas, sometimes stepping into it and flinging paint directly from a stick.

THIS LIBERATED SPATIAL PERFORMANCE
BECAME AN 'ONTOLOGY OF MAKING'

THAT GENERATED A NEW SENSE OF
BOUNDARY SHIFTING. □ □ □ □ □ □

As a result Allan Kaprow developed a hybrid painting practice that became more and more performative until all that remained were events or happenings. Richard Serra adapted the same performative element into the medium of sculpture by throwing molten lead and composing a repertoire of doing-verbs that could be the 'score' of sculpture events: roll, crease, fold, bend, twist, crumple, tear, chip cut, drop and so on.

By turning the activity of making into a score or set of basic processes that could be isolated or recombined in various hybrids, painting became a core practice that could establish links to other media and generate hybrids such as performance and installation. ☒☒

In my own practice I have reduced painting to its constitutive elements and asked the question, how much of painting can you take away and still have painting? If the primary elements of painting are colour, composition, flatness, shape, line, texture and so on, do all have to be present, how many can be absent, can any one of them function on their own, how can other media substitute for some of these components?

□ Some of the work takes the form of string, resin sheets and video installation. The string work hangs in large arcs from the ceiling but not touching the floor nor any other section of string. The string (Fig. 5) occupies a large three dimensional space by running continuously up and down and back and forth through the gallery space. The string is fluorescent builders string and has an optical impact based on fluorescent shimmer and the flickering contrasts between orange, yellow and pink. Moving around the work there is also a parallax shift between near and far arcs of string.

COLOUR. COMPOSITION.FLATNESS. SHAPE.LINE.TEXTURE.

Some resin works are in the form of sheets that look like fresh spills of paint, one on top of another (Fig. 6). Other resin works are casts taken from abstract corners of blister moulds found left over from children's birthday parties or shopping expeditions (Fig. 7). A video installation shows a panning image of freshly poured paint, forever wet and reflective (Fig. 8). While the video image creates a recognisable image of paint, it is just that, an image where the presence of paint has been reduced to an electromagnetic signal (Fig. 9).

Fig 5. *The Thing*, Artspace, 2004, fluorescent string, installation view. Photo by Anthony Kelly.

Fig 6. *The Thing*, Artspace, 2004, tinted resin sheets, installation view. Photo by Anthony Kelly.

Fig 7. *Turbulence*, Elastic Creative, San Francisco, 2004, resin casts, installation view. Photo by David Mackie.

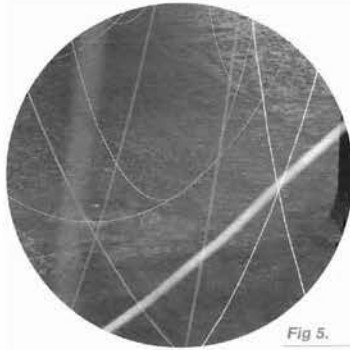


Fig 5.

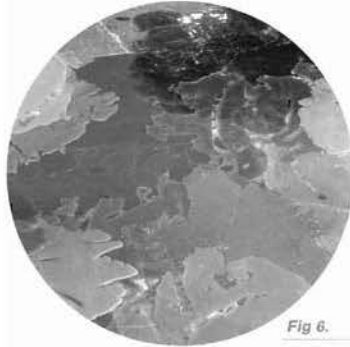


Fig 6.



Fig 7.

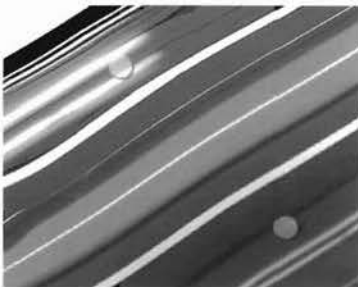


Fig 8. The Thing, Artspace, 2004: miniature video monitors, installation view. Photo by Ian Hobbs.

Fig 9. The Thing, Artspace, 2004: screen grid from video component.

Cameron Tonkinwise discussed this cluster of works in the following way: "The pocket televisions seem to draw attention to the ubiquity of broadcast images, these electromagnetic non-things surrounding us wherever we are. This is our sky, the air we breathe, but perhaps also the trace of our lost divinities, broadcast from who knows where and when. The strings, mapping a region, a clearing of sky within a building, are

VIDEO IMAGE

=
AN IMAGE WHERE THE PRESENCE
OF PAINT HAS BEEN REDUCED TO
AN ELECTROMAGNETIC SIGNAL.

builders' strings, for measuring and levelling, for staking out property, determining the common scale of the things we own, things we worship and so tie ourselves to over our mortal lifetimes. And the resin sheets, so reminiscent of the lolly coloured blob casings that are currently styling our communication and information technologies, lie on the floor, revealing in their deceptive translucence, the earth, the impenetrable concrete that stretches beyond the gallery to the road outside and to the other buildings and the whole city and beyond. Like chewing gum or vomit, these undigestable, unsustaining surface stains, turn the ground into a canvas, revealing what we rest on, what we take for granted — as opposed to the airy strings and the almost interplanetary images of moving (over) paint."³



[THE BEING OF PAINTING]

While formalism searched for the purity of the medium it limited painting to an intrinsic flatness and an aesthetics of appearances. Expanded painting tends instead towards total painting, an absorption and "synthesis of all the arts under painting"⁴. In expanded painting the emphasis thereby shifts subtly from 'what is painting' to 'how is painting'. How a painting "is", the nature of its being, is partially determined by

1. tools such as paint, canvas and brush,
2. the history of what has been done in painting up to the current moment,⁵
3. an analysis of the concept of 'medium', as a grammar or family of concepts that cluster around the medium of painting.

“FLATNESS ...
OUGHT NOT TO BE
THOUGHT OF AS THE
‘IRREDUCIBLE’
ESSENCE OF PICTORIAL ART”

Up until very recently the question of what was and was not a 'painting' was not so complex. The dictionary still reassures us that 'painting is' the practice of applying a pigment suspended in a medium to a surface.⁶ Since the time of easel painting, brushes did the applying, paint carried the pigment and canvas was the surface. These were the three members of painting's quorum. The flat surface of painting provided a place for paint to dwell, differentiated it from sculpture and created a division between the world of the viewer and the world of painted content. Greenbergian formalism made the flatness of the surface the apotheosis of painting. Michael Fried refined the point by saying, "flatness ... ought not to be thought of as the 'irreducible essence of pictorial art' but rather as something like the minimal condition for something to be seen as painting."⁷

Contemporary expanded painting has made the boundaries of the medium "infinitely malleable" such that "rather surprising things have come to be called"⁸ painting. It is the very 'isness' of painting that becomes the primordial question for painting.

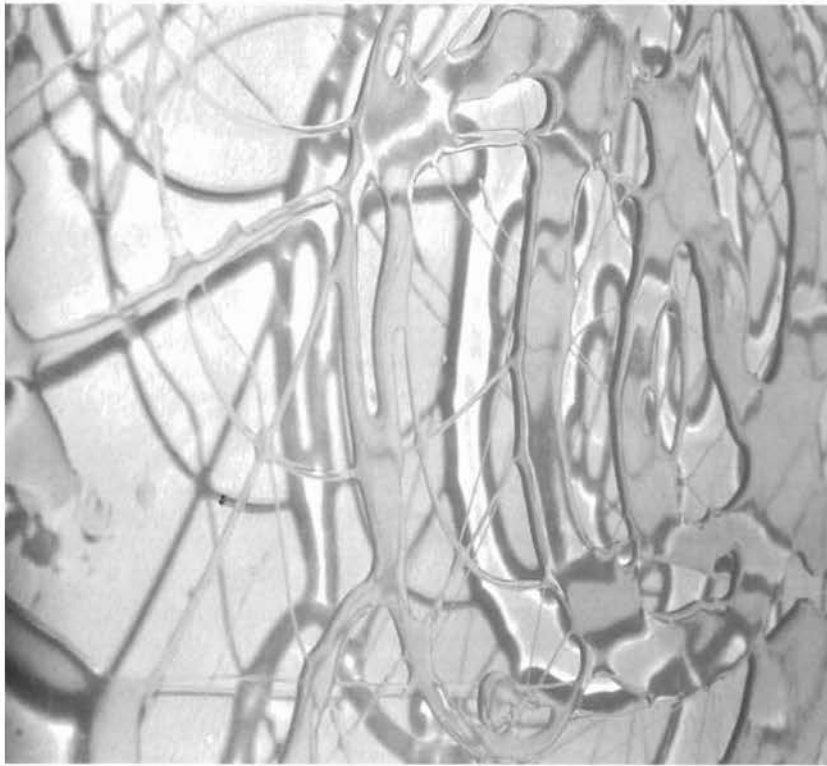
IT IS PAINTING-NESS
AS AN ONTOLOGICAL
DILEMMA THAT DRIVES
CURRENT WORK.

BY INTRODUCING AN "AGGRESSIVE PHYSICAL DIMENSION INTO PICTORIAL SPACE" PAINTING ASSERTED ITS OBJECT STATUS OVER ITS PICTORIAL FUNCTION.⁹

The resulting conflict between painted space and physical space resulted in a whole tradition of assemblage and constructed painting. The final stage in constructed painting took place in Lucio Fontana's work where surface wounds in canvas symbolised a violence to, and an escape from, the surface of painting. Stripping elements away from painting, and rejecting painting for another medium has become a contemporary rite of passage.

TO ABANDON PAINTING IS THE MOST RADICAL MOVE A PAINTER CAN MAKE.

- While abandoning sex might result in the end of a species, abandoning painting results in a tantric transmogrification of painting. Barry Schwabsky notes in "Vitamin P: New Perspectives in Painting", that to 'not paint' has become a "fully institutionalised practice".¹⁰ Young artists are thrown into painting practice where 'not painting' is their starting point. The primordial 'suchness' that allows painting to 'be' is an existential riddle or zen koan that makes painting practice appear uncanny, obsessional, infinite, in flux, riddlesome, spatio-temporal, and ultimately uncontainable by common sense definitions of the medium



detail of **OTD**, 2002, acrylic and resin on acetate,
90x110cm, photo by Arthur Gevorgyan.



"The essence of painting is not something irreducible. Rather, the task of the ... painter is to discover those conventions that, at a given moment, alone are capable of establishing ... (the) work's identity as painting."¹¹ Works are identified as painting not on the basis of flatness or canvas or brushwork: but by a hermeneutics of painting: what at an historical moment can be proposed as painting and received within contemporary discourse as painting.

EXPANDED PAINTING is not just a variation within the definition of painting. It is instead a discovery of an open space where a play of possibilities can occur. How painting 'is' in an open field, involves a questioning towards the 'being of painting'. The being of painting cannot be confused with the tools of painting, such as canvas, paint and brush. The medium of painting expands toward total painting as artists continue to examine the primordial nature of painting's 'thereness' and the conceptual grammar by which painting functions as a medium.

**EXPANDED PAINTING
TOTALISES, MAKING
EVERYTHING AVAILABLE
FOR THE PROJECT OF
PAINTING.** 

Colour, composition, form, texture, luminosity and flatness were once the indivisible atoms of painting. Painting is now "all edges, everywhere hinged, both to itself and to what it adjoins, making itself out of such relations".¹² Those primary elements of painting are not lost but function independently or as radical hybrids. Colour in the form of large quantities of dried paint become graspable solids rather than an infinitely thin surface. Composition becomes a general principle "through which a work holds itself together and makes itself visible"¹³ whether it be on a flat surface or by the placement of objects in a three dimensional space. The surface of painting becomes a place rather than a window or a barrier. At the surfacing of painting objects gather and events take place. □□□□□□

Painting's "ability to hold itself together, to show itself as painting, includes and structurally depends upon an internal detachment that makes its departure from itself a dimension of its achievement".¹⁴ Painting continually opens out beyond itself while resting on the historical ground of what it has been. The riddles of expanded painting show us that painting is not one thing but two, always separated from itself by the dynamic tension between its thingliness and its discursiveness. The inherent division within painting continually displaces it into other ways of being itself.

[PAINTING CONTINUALLY OPENS
OUT BEYOND ITSELF WHILE
RESTING ON THE HISTORICAL
GROUND OF WHAT IS HAS BEEN.]

[PAINTING DIGITAL MAKING]

The very first cave painting was both the creation of a technology, perhaps by dipping fingers into the wet earth, and an extension of the human world onto a conceptual surface. The technological extension of painting through digital media is another manoeuvre in the historical development of painting from that point.

- PURPLE REFLEX CARRIES THE TRACES OF ITS ORIGIN IN THE ARTISAN'S STUDIO THROUGH TO THE DIGITAL STUDIO AND THEN TO ITS COMPLETION BY HARDWARE TO APPEAR AS A MANUFACTURED THING.

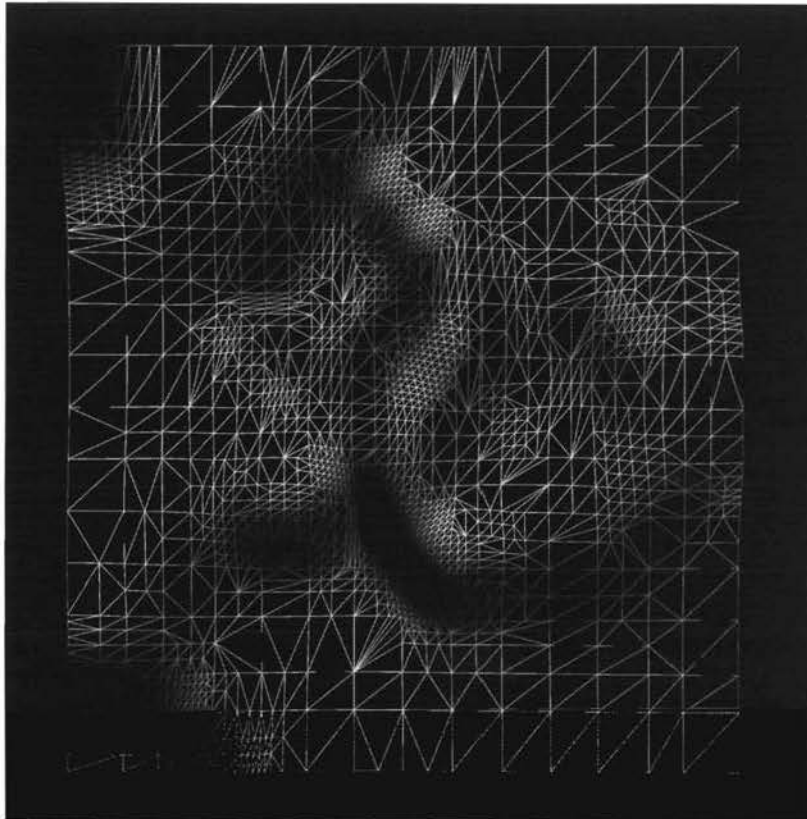
☒☒ This three part process is the grammar of its making. If the grammar of painting is hinge like, then its ability to make syntactical connections is exemplified by its linkage to digital media.

Despite its digital makeover, Purple Reflex continues to look like a painting since it is coloured and quadratic in shape. But it also looks like a bas relief sculpture, which is a sculpture that ambiguously imitates painting. Finally it is an abstract thing that projects traces of its digital making through its biomorphic styling and manufactured finish.

Painting is a way of making among many others. The most prominent form of making today is manufacturing, in particular the mass production of objects and images for consumption. The traces of making tend to disappear in mass production and this disappearance functions as a sign of being 'well made'. The reverse is true in painting, where foregrounding the process of making demonstrates a critical attitude to instrumental modes of production. As such the inherent earthiness of painting continually pulls it back from being lost in the all consuming world of digital media. □ □ □ □ □ □

PAINTING STRADDLES THE ARTISINAL STUDIO AND DIGITAL STUDIO TO DEMONSTRATE AN INHERENT OPENNESS TO HYBRID FORMS OF MAKING.

At the same time a subtle friction occurs, with neither media succumbing to the other. Nor is there a synthesis into a third term, a new medium which is neither the one or the other. From this tension a showing takes place, not as an aesthetic display of objects but as a hushed appearance of the world upon its own stage.



Purple Reflex, 2005.
wireframe render; from above



[endnote]

- 1/ Malcolm McCullough, *Abstracting Craft: The Practiced Digital Hand*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1996 and Shoshana Zuboff, *In the Age of the Smart Machine*, Basic Books, New York City, 1988
- 2/ the process by which previously separate media converge towards hybrids and synergistic connections, best exemplified by the mobile phone which is really a hand held computer with phone, camera, music, gaming and internet capabilities.
- 3/ Cameron Tonkinwise, 'A Sense of Things not Being There: Writing about Mark Titmarsh's 'The Thing' in relation to the Thinking of Martin Heidegger', in *The Thing*, Mark Titmarsh, Artspace Monograph, Sydney, 2006.
- 4/ Stephen Melville, *Philosophy Beside Itself: On Deconstruction and Modernism*, Minneapolis, Uni of Minnesota Press, 1996. p10
- 5/ Since "one can paint only out of the history of painting", *ibid* p. 16
- 6/ Wikipedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org>, accessed 7 June 2005
- 7/ Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood", in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*, Chicago, Uni of Chicago Press, 1998, p. 169
- 8/ this is the wording of Rosalind Krauss when discussing Expanded Sculpture in her essay "Sculpture in the Expanded Field", in Rosalind Krauss, *The originality of the avant-garde and other modernist myths*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1985
- 9/ Curt Barnes, "Travels along the dialectic", *Art Journal*, Spring 1991, p.26
- 10/ Bary Schwabsky, "Painting in the interrogative mode" in *Vitamin P: New Perspectives in Painting*, London, Phaidon, 2002, p. 7
- 11/ Michael Fried quoted in Melville, *Philosophy Beside Itself: On Deconstruction and Modernism*, *op cit*, p. 10
- 12/ Stephen Melville, "Counting/As/Painting", in Philip Armstrong, Laura Lisbon and Stephen Melville, *As Painting: Division and Displacement*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 2001, p. 21
- 13/ *ibid* p. 7
- 14/ *ibid* p. 23



[madeKnown]
DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES &
THE ONTOLOGY OF MAKING

☒☒ EDITED BY IAN GWILT

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