

The Triumphs of Painting

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Each time Lucian Freud unveils a new rendition of some celebrity, the gallery is filled with the clatter of critical weapons hitting the floor. Forget about all those, in any case tedious, critiques of painterly expression, authenticity, genius and gender relations, and wallow in the pleasure of the paint surfaces, and the spectacle of that venerable goat wielding his *pinceau* over prostrate, usually female, matter. The sound of critical surrender was heard at Freud's retrospective at Tate Britain three years ago, and will no doubt be repeated in Venice's Museo Correr in June. Freud's current prices faithfully reflect his now bullet-proof reputation.

It was not always so. In the late 1980s, not yet antique but merely old-fashioned, Freud was shunned by the museums and his practice seemed to have reached a dead end. And while there are particular circumstances that explain Freud's resurrection—above all the simple fact of his survival which illogically confers on a career the stamp of authenticity and sincerity—it is also linked to the much remarked upon revival of painting in the last few years. To touch on a few symptomatic examples, there was the extraordinary reinvention of Gerhard Richter as a conventional expressive genius at the Museum of Modern Art in 2002; Damien Hirst has taken up apeing that newly minted master in a series of cack-handed but commercially successful canvases shown at Gagosian in New York; and a prominent dealer in the UK launched a series of speculative shows under the telling slogan, 'The Triumph of Painting'.

It is a not unfathomable curiosity that each time painting 'triumphs', which it does with some regularity, its previous victories and crises are forgotten, and its new fate is considered bound to a mysterious shift in the *Zeitgeist*. There is a simpler explanation: painting is still the most readily saleable form of art. It is flat and thus easy to store and display, unique, and is most assuredly, recognisably and eternally Art. It is no accident that painting is most prominent in times of economic boom, and particularly when the richest are getting richer, and weakest at times of recession, when other forms populate its surrendered space. In the last sustained global boom, the victorious period of neoliberalism in which the wealthiest did indeed become markedly wealthier, US and German painting—much of it simultaneously grandiose and ironic, a perfect reflection of the ideology of the time—attained a thorough dominance of the art world, as its prices soared, apparently unstopably. There followed, of course, the slaughter of those neo-expressionist dinosaurs as the art economy imploded in 1989. The effect can be crudely judged by looking at *Artforum*: through the mid to the late 1980s well over half its covers were given over to painting; by the early 1990s, less than a third.

Since then, there has been no such sustained global revival in the fortunes of the economy or in painting, although the effects of the dot.com boom in the US did lead to another bout of critical speculation about the liveliness of the medium, and much general rumination about beauty. Recent painting booms have been local and short-lived. There are a number of reasons that the new triumph lacks strength: the first and most obvious is that while the expected recession was made shallower by an exercise of imperial Keynesianism, and the wealthiest individuals in the US have benefited from Bush's tax cuts, extraordinary dangers

throw a shadow over the US economy, with its unprecedented levels of state and consumer debt. Saatchi's bet in his current series of shows is that the economy's revival will once again bear the prices of painting aloft, and with it particularly the values of the younger painters who ride the coat-tails of his established stars. Secondly, photography, which filled the need for large, colourful, flat objects in the years following 1989, has evolved to capture many of painting's advantages, and benefits from appearing accessible to a wide public. Thirdly, since the boom and bust of the 1980s, the art market began to diverge from the movement of stocks, and a new wave of institutional and individual investors now look to buying art as a means to spread risk in their portfolios. This new mass of investors will have many effects on the art world, and one of those is that they may tend to weaken the old links between share prices, the general state of the economy and the prominence of painting.

We may, then, glimpse in the current revival of painting something other than a reflex economic matter, though there is still a strong element of that. The new imperialism has triggered various reactions in the art world, from the sophisticated political consciousness embodied in *Documenta 11*, to a range of fainter, mainstream engagements with the 'political' across a range of art works. Another response, however, is to seek reassurance in the secure heartlands of Western culture, in painting, and particularly in the edifying sight of some male genius in utter command of his material. So perhaps it is more than a merely poetic analogy to see in the brush hovering above the reclining female nude an image of the machine-gun barrel over an arid, alien landscape.