

National College of Art and Design

Painting Department: School of Fine Art

Painting in the Digital Age: To Move Fast or Slow?

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National College of Art and Design

## **School of Visual Culture**

I declare that this **Critical Cultures Research Project** is all my own work and that all sources have been fully acknowledged.

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## Introduction

This text will explore the two opposing movements appearing in contemporary painting, zombie figuration in contrast to slow painting, as two by-products of the same occurrence, both interlaced with the rise of technology and social media, although manifesting themselves through polar ideologies. It will explore the work of Sam Mckinniss who has made his name through recreations of celebrity culture, often working quickly to immortalise the latest celebrity deaths and images of the moment. It will then explore the work of John Currin in contrast, who adopts the slow painting approach, using the medium to render provocative and socially challenging works “residing on the double-edged sword of desire and disgust” (John Currin Paintings, Bio, Ideas, n.d.) works that are executed with fine skill and are rarely as they seem at first glance. . At the heart of this text is the question of how these conflicting movements or trends are driving culture in different directions, and examining how they both stem from the same source. Zombie figuration is as much of a symptom of the rise of technology and social media as slow art, the only difference being that to paint slowly is a calculated stance against the grips of a consumerist induced numbness to sustained observation, “capitalism exploits our craving for speed” (Reed, 2019)- perhaps the word for it would be boredom. Through this text we will begin to reflect on on the types of paintings circulating within the art market for very different reasons and to ask ourselves whether we should continue moving with the speed of modern society that breeds paintings born into zombie figuration, embracing speed accelerated by digitisation, or whether it is in fact an appropriate time to slow down and revert back to the ways of painting and viewing

before we became entranced by technology. This is a text about preserving the power of painting through craftsmanship, the time stored within a work, its ability to contain worlds within worlds waiting to be uncovered time and time again and it's defiant expertise in holding our attention in an age where attention is easily lost.

In his 1863 text, poet and art critic Charles Baudelaire stated that "Modernity is the transient, the fleeting, the contingent; it is one half of art, the other being the eternal and the immovable." (Baudelaire and Charvet, 1972). Both halves are necessary to sustain the life of the other, after all "we can have no meaningful experience of slowness, cannot grasp it, without a sense of how fast feels" (Reed, 2019). It is within these two distinct factions of fleeting and eternal, fast and slow, that we can begin to look at art, specifically painting in this case, in a way that questions the necessity of the two. Although undoubtedly we have undergone exponential developments throughout all sectors of life since Baudelaire made that distinction, the words still hold immense prevalence to modernity as we know it. The fleeting, in the context of Baudelaire's time, we could comparatively relate to a kind of art that is mimetic of the fast paced culture we are situated in currently, driven by consumerism, technology, online realities and the relentless and continuous consumption of imagery. This faction of contemporary painting can be understood through the term zombie figuration, the child of zombie formalism; a way of painting in which capitalism's tight grip on the art world in the marketing, commodification and production of creativity, can be seen identified in the work as it avoids political identity and favours palatable generalisations that are reproducible and profitable (Shlolette, 2011). In direct response to the fleeting cultivates the emergence of the slow art movement, working as "antidotes to our computer screen worlds" (Reed, 2019), a type of art that requires "a certain kind of

attentiveness, one that could be at odds with modes of behaviour common in contemporary life” (Westfall, 2018).

### Zombie Formalism and Zombie Figuration

The origins of zombie figuration stem from Walter Robinson who first coined the term “Zombie Formalism” in his 2014 article ‘Flipping and the Rise of Zombie formalism’, using the imagery of half dead, clunky figures to draw in comparison to the diluted message in the works of art hanging, lifelessly, on the walls of galleries at the time. A horror show of a specific kind of painting that, much like the undead's inability to utter full sentences, doesn't say much, except for maybe what we already knew; the works exist to serve the art market as a thriving and profitable industry. In Robinsons own words he declares zombie formalism as art consisting of a “straightforward, reductive, essentialist method of making a painting” (Robinson, 2014). His frustration with contemporary formalist abstraction unfolds due to two key reasons; their simplistic approach that lends itself well to high end interior design and the illusion of originality contained within these works. Robinson points out that unlike the trends in art history that celebrate artists for doing things that had never been done before, now we can only turn to innovations of the past in order to achieve true authentic originality in our postmodernist era. (Robinson, 2014). It is due to this that he describes zombie formalism with the expression “a series of artificial milestones” (Robinson, 2014)- An attempt to be the first in an age where firsts might not exist has resulted in vapid simulations of abstraction.

Since the origin of term zombie formalism, the commodification of art and its creation has only been amplified by the increasingly tumultuous global social upheaval pushing creativity into

higher esteem (Shlolette, 2011) and the onset of social media that now combines art with content, created with a new kind of audience in mind; the algorithm. Zombie formalism was just the beginning- six years after Robinsons initial analysis of contemporary art, in July 2020 Alex Greenberger extended Robinsons diagnosis of formalist abstraction to figurative painting, having noticed that the genre of figuration had become somewhat stuck, struggling to progress beyond its own comfortable remits. The term zombie figuration is now understood to describe the shallow extension of figurative art becoming increasingly common among contemporary painters. However, unlike zombie formalism, zombie figuration seems to be entangled with exponential technological developments and online realities\*, as it has become increasingly evident that platforms such as instagram have changed the way we view and produce paintings, which we will examine further on. Greenberger proclaims that the once fresh and exciting merger of surrealism, pop culture references and figuration, has failed to progress despite the extreme transformations in politics, current events and social movements. It has seemingly forgotten to catch up with the new way of life, advancements across sectors and unprecedented political shifts (Greenberger, 2020). The works Greenberger refers to under the umbrella of zombie figuration are no longer acting as a catalyst for forward movement, the lifespan of the trend “unnaturally extended”. Whilst zombie formalism derived from abstraction and processed based ways of making, zombie figuarion displays the undeniable influence of surrealism; the influence of artists such as Leonor Fini and Dorothea Tanning ever present in the contemporary painters attempt to deconstruct social norms. It is a trend that appears to be signified by the superficially random and incoherent synthesis of imagery (Greenberger, 2020).

### Zombie Figuration and Technology

Social media is a curious space where newsfeeds display memorial posts for dead relatives in succession with cat memes and overpriced brunches, each with equal importance and equal irrelevance. It is a consistent outpour of visual information, imagery blending into one long scroll that feels mindless, yet our minds must be processing an absurd amount of information in that time. If surrealists like Dali were around today they might well class the absurdity of an instagram news feed or explore page as surreal, not to mention television adverts that feature oddities such as the gorilla playing the drums. So as this Bombardment of fragments, disjointed imagery and content stops being surreal and starts becoming a part of daily life, it is understandable that this new way of living has secreted itself into art. The orchestrated chaos of the works described as zombie figuration seem to be somewhat mimetic of the jumbled imagery we see daily. This accumulation of visual stimulus is reminiscent of Guy Debord's definition of the spectacle as capital "accumulated to the point that it becomes images" (Debord and Knabb, n.d.). The instagram statistics for May 2020 revealed that the average time spent daily on the app for all adult users was 30 minutes, double the amount of time recorded in January 2019 (Deyan, 2022), so at the time Greenberger introduces the idea of zombie figuration and its unfulfilling simulation of both surrealism and figuration, it could be argued that the unnaturally long lifespan of the trend is in fact a symptom of the exponential growth in the usage of social media platforms, in which the incoherent amalgamation of colour, image, video and text from celebrities and loved ones alike has become embedded in how we live.



A key indicator of zombie figuration that relates specifically to the digitalisation of culture is the appropriation of mass media imagery, a playful commentary on pop culture but as Greenberger points out, it is “unclear what any of this artistic thievery is meant to achieve.” (Greenberger, 2020). Greenberger hints that it is a betrayal of painting in the way that painters have the ability to cultivate originality through the nature of the medium. Contemporary figurative painters, perhaps due to the increasingly tight hold social media and the new technologies have on most of the population, have at times sacrificed this very aspect of the craft and surrendered to the digital age. As platforms like instagram crave content, the production must increase. Documentation and imagery must be churned out in order to maintain relevance, a marketing of life (Graw et al., 2016) and of creativity, a cycle of content and consumption. In their book ‘Navigating the art world: Professional Practice for the Early Career Artist’, Delphian gallery, a gallery based in London, dedicates a chapter to social media and the art world, a now necessary topic for the emerging artist to study. Under the heading ‘Social media is reshaping artists’ they explain that “Artists are adjusting to showing their work in digital forums, often subconsciously...The desire to put out more and more attractive photos can quickly turn authenticity off in favour of the kind of calculated pop sexiness that pulls in large audiences.” (Delphian, 2020). It cannot be disputed that social sites, specifically instagram due to its image based format, have altered the way artists produce because it has altered the way we view. Undergoing a societal fascination with attractive images that cultivate ‘pop sexiness’ (Delphian, 2020) paired with the ability to endlessly scroll creates a competitive nature in which an image must overtly and immediately offer some form of entertainment.

### Exploring the Work of Sam McKinniss

Sam McKinnis, an American figurative painter, is an artist that Greenberger himself admits to the band of painters whose work can be classified as zombie figuration, using the example of McKinniss's Lindsay Lohan painting titled 'Lindsay', as seen in fig.1, to explain this admission. Greenberger describes the painting in a way that does not dispute its humour, but denounces its standing as art that has much deeper meaning than what is presented on the surface, especially in the curatorial decision to display it next to a painting of a younger, less emotionally damaged Lohan in the parent trap; he admits "It's sort of a funny gesture, but is ultimately vapid, and even a little cruel." (Greenberger, 2020). It is clear that McKinniss sources his imagery from google (n.d.) and puts a certain level of attention into capturing likeness and representing the image. His work ranges from celebrities like Prince and Dolly Parton to movie characters and faces that represent a culture that is relevant to his time, and of course, relevant to the digital age. Its undeviating reliance on mass media imagery is why it so greatly represents zombie figuration, painting what is already popular with no alternative perspective or admission of further commentary feels like pandering to the crowd rather than creating the crowd, and it's never been in fine art's interest to abide by the status quo.

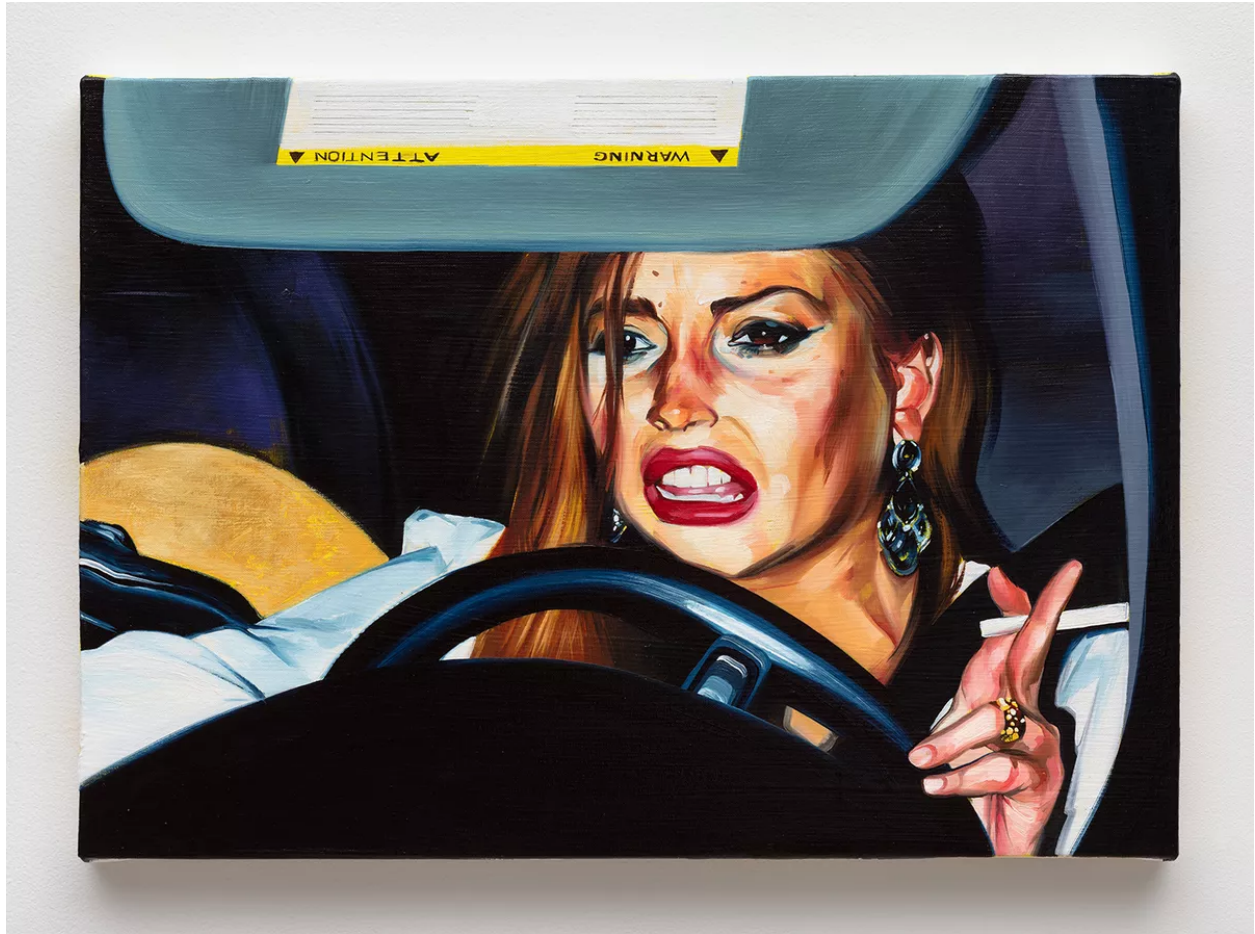


Fig.1, (Benton and McKinniss, 2019)

Donald Kuspit in his book 'The End of Art' discusses the nature of reproduction in relation to the paintings of Cezanne, and the notion of reproduction is extremely prevalent to the concept of zombie figuration. Kuspit is of the opinion that a work of art is "tamed by being reproduced", the reproduction being a more palatable and comforting version of the painting and the real power that it holds in its potential to permeate our consciousness (Kuspit, 2005). He then goes on to say that "we become sentimental about normalising reproductions but not de-normalising the real thing, which grates on our nerves and unsettles our consciousness. Thus, reproduction is a

double castration; it castrates the work of art and the consciousness of it- consciousness in general.” (Kuspit, 2005). Although the painting of Lindsey Lohan is an original work, the theme of reproduction is so prevalent in the practice McKinniss and painters classified under the umbrella of zombie figuration, that as Kuspit alludes to, creates tame work that is comforting to us because it does not attack our consciousness in a way that unsettles our current perception. In this case, the original image of Lindsay Lohan taken by the paparazzi possesses the shocking impact that was desired and the grandeur of controversy as it lay sprawled on the front pages of newspapers, comparable in this case to the original Cezanne. McKinniss’s literal depiction of the same image only offers the viewer to refer to a memory of a feeling, a diluted emotional response kept half alive through the painterly rendition. This is the reproduced Cezanne. To include the words of Clement Greenberg: “Let painting confine itself to the disposition pure and simple of colour and line and not intrigue us by associations with things we can experience authentically elsewhere” (Fuller, 1980). Or to quote Gregory Sholette, “cryptic mimicry is an art of the weak” (Shlolette, 2011). To evade the exploration of less harmonious facets of our collective obsession with fame, celebrity and influencer culture in addition to the idealistic portrayal avoids disruption. Individuality brings with it the threat of disruptive non-conformity” (Shlolette, 2011) and perhaps McKinnis’s work is an indicator of compliant conformity, an embodiment of “capital accumulated” (Debord and Knabb, n.d.), exactly what Greenberger feared when he declared that contemporary figurative painters were failing to embark on works that drive the genre out of its own remits. This raises the question as to whether the painter is being ironic, or if he has found that in abiding by trends and what is already popular there is a profitability and a loophole to staying relevant. The market of ‘pop sexiness’ (Delphian, 2020) and the art of reproduction.

In a review of his solo show 'Egyptian Violet', named after the purple hue that runs through each of the works, it was described by Art City that the point of the show was unclear (Colucci, 2016), fig.2 shows an installation shot of the show in Team Gallery, New York. This is exactly the tone of Greenberger's statement mentioned earlier, that he is "unclear what any of this artistic thievery is meant to achieve." (Greenberger, 2020). There are subtle elements in the work that could be interpreted as the voice of the artist, the purple hue alluding to themes of death (Colucci, 2016) and the commonality in colour threading the images together "like fragments of a generational imagination." (Wetzler, 2020), although they fall short in separating themselves greatly from the source image to offer anything drastically new about these perpetuated pieces of online information (Wetzler, 2020). This vague social commentary feeds superbly into zombie figuration, not saying much but being appealing enough to harness brief attentiveness.

Reproducing images in the public realm discourages viewers from spending time with the painting as they are so literal it's a challenge to look beyond the subject matter. "Who looks twice at Marcel Duchamp's moustached Mona Lisa, L.H.O.O.Q (1919)?" (Reed, 2019). Writing for Art In America, Rachel Wetzler commented that when she looked at the paintings, she "couldn't help but see the original images in my head, and the comparison didn't always work in the paintings' favor." (Wetzler, 2020). This is reminiscent of a sentiment in T.J Clark's book 'The Sight of Death' where he ponders his own wonder at two specific paintings by Poussin, asking himself why it is that he has become so fascinated with their image that he returns time and time again, writing "can it be that there are certain kinds of visual configuration, or incident, or play of analogy, that simply cannot be retained in the memory or fully integrated into a disposable

narrative of interpretation” (Clark, 2006). What is lacking here, confirmed by Wetzler's experience of viewing the work, is an aspect of the painting that prevents the viewer from discarding it with a singular and explicit interpretation, thus deeming the painting an object that never demands a return of attention. Clark speaks of Poussin's paintings with a tone of wonder at their mystery and their incubation of something beneath the surface that is not revealed instantaneously (Clark, 2006). In ‘Lindsay’, you see the painting and you see the original source in one feeting apparition and the story of the troubled child star is recalled, the middle man between image and artist's vision has been diminished in lack of authenticity. This half dead form of figuration speaks of a society in which “the actual production of art has come to resemble a form of outsourced manufacturing or ‘just-in-time’ creativity.” (Shlolette, 2011). As a result artists like McKinniss have developed a painting practice that is “devoted to manipulating the situational or performative nature of content rather than inventing new content” (Joselit, 2013).



Fig.2, (Team Gallery, n.d.)

## Slow Art

In the underbelly of the digitalisation of painting sits slow art, a term first coined by artist Tim Slowinski and was first introduced as a website created in 1995 called [slowart.com](http://slowart.com), leading to him creating a fine art and production company under the same name (The Meaning of SlowArt, n.d.). Since its creation “the pace of life continued to accelerate. Faster computer and Internet speeds combined with hand held devices and apps to draw human consciousness deeper into the electronic reality.” (The Meaning of SlowArt, n.d.). This led to the movement emerging around 2008 when Phil Terry, founder of the nonprofit Reading Odyssey (ARTDEX, n.d.) first came up with the idea to introduce slow art gallery days. During these days, participants are guided to look at a painting for 10 minutes before moving onto the next and invited to sit together and discuss the work (ARTDEX, n.d.). Whereas zombie figuration and zombie formalism work in tandem with social networks and online lives we have adopted in the current age, slow painting acts as a rebellion against speed and short attention spans. The antithesis of zombie figuration, slow painting emerges as a call to be fully present with the work for prolonged periods of time. Terry himself said that “Visitors often see art from their phones. Slow art is an antidote to that. By slowing down, it helps us see art in a new way that energizes rather than demoralizes.” (ARTDEX, n.d.).

Slow art is a movement that reverts back to a perhaps more traditional approach to creating in the sense that it knows no algorithm and feels no immediate rush to produce for an easily distracted audience, therefore, is defined in nature by the necessity to be fully present in the viewing

experience, which is as much a crucial element of slow art as the making process. “Slow art lets us imagine, for a spell, that we could taste pure presence. In fact one way to gauge slow art is its power to persuade us momentarily that our experience is all-consuming. Presence is shaded however, because we also ask whether the work beckons us back after we leave it.” (Reed, 2019). So a slow painting must hold our attention and demand that we return to it, a painting that “engages with the arc of time itself: from the continuum of art history, to wider cultural and political histories, to the cosmic.” (Southbank Centre, n.d.). Slow art is also a way of working that emphasises craftsmanship and skill, a slow painter will take their time in the making process and the attention, apparent care and diligence imbued in the work translates to art that demands the time spent with it. “The expanse of time invested by individual artists into the production of the paintings exerts its effect upon the visitor via the unique experience of sustained deceleration.” (E-flux, 2009). The slow creation delegates slow looking and the process of mindful observation is one that technology and social media rarely create space for. “The Slow Painter openly courts time as a partner in the process of distributing paint on a surface and as an arbiter of style.” (Westfall, 2018), time is a tool as much as any other material used to enhance the work. Slow painting can then be defined as something that requires measured and attentive craftsmanship and measured and attentive viewing. ‘Compared to digital media, painting is always slow.’ (Westfall, 2018), in which case it begs the question as to why there is any point in trying to compete with rapid production and to warmly embrace the idea that painting is of a different nature entirely. ‘Painting has been, and remains to be, the privileged format for negotiating attention, for exploring the regulation and deregulation of affective time in an era of massive image production and circulation. In other words, modern painting formats the marking



and accumulation of time both in its scenes of production and consumption.” (Graw et al., 2016).

One major distinction to the movement that would be classified as zombie figuration would be that its premise of slowness is best relayed through in person viewing. Whilst attention grabbing, slightly surreal and oftentimes novel paintings are effective in instilling a short humorous or wonderous burst in the viewer, working perfectly with the nature of the likes of instagram, it could be argued that to really view a painting with the full, undivided attention and observation required to sit with the work for at least 10 minutes, it would most likely have to be viewed in the flesh. The viewer would have to subject themselves to the “excessive and maybe ludicrous” (Clark, 2006) act of experiencing a painting by giving someone else’s imagined world their undivided attention (Clark, 2006). Being with a painting physically allows you to become absorbed with tiny marks which store time and hints as to how the artist created the piece and observations in varying viscosity and subtle differentiations on hues and tones that bring the image to life. “The sense of liveliness we get from painting results from the fact that life and work time of the respective artists have been spent on it”(Graw et al., 2016)- indicating that the life in painting cannot be rushed, it is born out of the sustained investment of steady tempo.

### Slow Painting and Technology

The screen acts as an unhelpful mediator between viewer and image, as the technology dictates through pixels and screen settings how closely you can look, how accurately you can see. After coming back to view the same two paintings for months, Clarke admits “no slide will ever get

right the implied distance between the running man's hand and the washerwoman's... the camera tends to melodramatize the difference between surface and depth" (Clark, 2006) Small subtleties in tones of flesh may be lost or partially sacrificed through digitalisation and you will never be able to use your own physicality as a measure for scale and the sheen of the glaze will be replaced with the glare of tempered glass. So spending time with the work allows you to become accustomed with the authenticity of creation and with the creator. It became apparent through Clarkes accounts that the weather on a particular day could influence what he saw in the painting or how well even he was able to see, whether the climate did the work any justice. He questions what it is in the work that "compels the truth" (Clark, 2006) and manages to generate new reflections upon looking again and again- in fact purposefully persisting through resistance to looking, as if training his retina like a muscle to not succumb to boredom.

### Exploring the Work of John Currin

John Currin is an American painter that first became known in the 90s, with great controversy his career and character throughout his time has encountered deep analysis due to the works contentious personality, specifically his unconventional depictions of women, as a male painter. When he first recieved recognition his work contained caharacters that seemed to "act out the traditional fantasies of the white American male as expressed in the kitsch culture of pornography, advertising and magazine photographs. The excessive sickliness of these images contrasts with the emptiness of the personalities portrayed, producing a psychologically unsettling effect." (Tate, n.d.). More recently he is known for his use of traditional oil painting

techniques, which give his work an aesthetic resemblance to European painting from the Renaissance and Baroque eras (Chambers, 2021).

There are two key aspects of Currin's work that define him as a slow painter: the first being the work's satirical contextual approach and societal commentary with the aim of questioning our beliefs through the artist's quest to explore his own. "Currin's paintings of people, genre paintings mostly, are not so much specific portraits as they are a composite of his world view. The reductive and bombastic criticism that Currin objectifies or reduces women to sexual objects as his *raison d'être*, I think, misses a fundamental point: Currin doesn't consume people or things to fuel his art. He uses art and its bottomless potential to see the world more clearly (Patterson, 2019). This exploration of the world as he experiences it, using portraiture to uncover self reflection and internal likeness to himself through his subjects, encourages the viewer to reflect upon their own perceptions. Themes of misogyny arise when a man paints women in a way that exaggerates the features most desirable to the male gaze, which is perilous, as it opens his own character to critique. Nothing ever changes without being challenged, and whilst Currin's paintings might not be conceived out of a desire to transform modern society into an idyllic utopia of equality, he certainly does create a space for conversation around topics of idealism and gender roles. It creates space because the skill cannot be ignored and demands attention, drawing the viewer in with undeniable mastery of the medium, and because it does not hide behind neutrality. It is bold in humour, subject matter, beauty, absurdity. For example his painting 'Thanksgiving' shown in fig.3 is a prominent example of this marginally comical narrative, who's exquisite oil paint application requests reciprocity of refinement in the attentiveness of the viewer who becomes embedded in a "subtle sense of unreality" (Chambers, 2021).



Fig.3, (Currin, n.d.)

The second aspect in Currin's work that is indicative of slow art is the skill and execution of the paintings that hold a history within them, so refined that until closer inspection you could mistake the work for being of a bygone era. "Consciously or not, beholders register the length of composition, so that the time of making can prolong the time of viewing" (Reed, 2019). In his painting 'Honeymoon Nude' in figure.4 for example, "The figure's loosely tousled hair, body, and mien bring to mind the Classical muses, nymphs, and goddesses of artists like

Botticelli.”(John Currin Paintings, Bio, Ideas, n.d.), however, “there is a breathless, seductive quality to her expression conjuring the wanting ingenue or fragile waif immortalized by contemporary fashion models of the time such as Kate Moss.” (John Currin Paintings, Bio, Ideas, n.d.). The dedication to refinement and admiration of their mastery of skill encourages the attention of the viewer, and the convolution between contemporary and historical adds a mysterious quality: it is both recognisable and distant. And so you want to come back to the painting to understand this distance and to try and pinpoint what it is that feels familiar. This contrast between past and present, historic and contemporary aids in driving the nuance even further and cultivating an absurdity that grows with time, the first glance is not long enough to really understand why there is something beautiful yet off kilter about the rendition. His work is an aesthetic experience, and as Kuspit highlights ‘an aesthetic experience leads to the realisation that social identity is not ingrained’ (Kuspit, 2005)- it disrupts and challenges the consciousness of the viewer. In the age of social media, images are not often tended to disrupt as much as to appease, as the aim of the game is to gain a following. And so as warned in delphian galleries handbook, it can be tempting to avoid social identity shattering disruption and become accustomed to attention.



Fig.4, (Currin, n.d.)

### Fast and Slow Looking

There is a comparative aspect between the work of McKiniss and Currin as they both dance around the topic of beauty ideals and the American dream. It's the contextual and personal cross-examination and satire contained in the works that require a more pensive approach to viewing in order to understand the image from more than one viewpoint and to try and pinpoint whether that perceived viewpoint correlates or conflicts with your own, slow observation. It

does not shy away from socially challenging topics that demand conversation, contemplation and time in doing so. Perhaps social media is too much of an opinionated habitat to risk being ‘cancelled’ with a painting that someone could label off the cuff as damaging. Currin himself insists “he doesn’t welcome provocation the way that he used to, mostly because people get mad in such a flat way now, asking simply never to hear from you again rather than expressing their objections with the opportunity for you to argue back. “What they’ll say is, ‘Why do we need another...?’”” (Tashjian, 2019). This observation of the current culture relating to non-conformist disruption by someone who has sustained a career through the exponential rise in technology, indicates that social media and its decisive rejection of things that may be deemed unsettling prohibits creating work with too much controversy, for fear that people will simply decide it is not worth their attention, rather than stopping to understand the perspective of the creator and allow a conversation, an insight as to why McKinniss’s work shys away from personal standpoints other than images circulating during the span of his lifetime (Noor, 2018). This is indicative again of social media’s effect on our viewing process, everything is so fast paced, from good news to scandal- we move onto the next when we lose fascination with the first, there is not even the time given to explaining why a work of art is not appreciated. This is fast looking, derived from a digital induced dissonance between real and reproduced.

### The Case For Slow Painting

Clark imagines “such a viewer especially now, in our current circumstances of image production, when stasis and smallness and meticulous coordination are by and large the opposites of the qualities- the kind of world making- that visualisations are involved with...ultimately these

entries are my way of arguing with the regime of the image now dominant” (Clark, 2009). Whilst the paintings considered zombie figuration are a marker of our time, slowness, slow painting and slow viewing, is an act of rebellion against the pace of modern society. “Each age has its characteristic rhythms, impacted by all manner of developments- technological, ecological, social, political- and varying with place, class, and so on” (Reed, 2019). Our age is characterised by the accelerated and the instantaneous, the growth of technology and social media and the way we are becoming accustomed to spending more and more time online. Zombie figuration is work that appeals to the congestion of imagery social media brings with it and is alluring in its momentary glamour or humour. Mastery of the medium and craftsmanship are not prioritised in the same way that paintings from artists like Currin are, possibly due to the lack of necessity in technical feats that will be diminished in the viewing process through a small screen in a small square and for not very long. It appeals to the speed of our capitalist postmodern era, where paintings become commodities, an age of mechanical reproduction. “Some works seduce us, others require our active pursuit” (Reed, 2019), Slow painting requires our active pursuit which requires a defiance, as perhaps the path of less resistance would be to favour speed for skill and the cumpsumption of more instead of a considered few. Where shifts occur, personal and societal, are in instances in which our consciousness is momentarily disrupted and by lending ourselves fully to the true presence of a painting and experience of slowly looking, we can open ourselves up to the power painting possesses to bring about those shifts. How can a world view be challenged or contemplated or looked at through a new lens if you don’t give it the time to do so? Or if you, as an artist, fail to give your work the time it takes to build an image founded in authenticity rather than reproduction. So it could be argued that this is why Greenberger became so frustrated with the genre of figuration becoming ‘stuck’ (Ggreenberger, 2020), as he



understands the potential it has to address the dramatic changes in society, politics, way of life, and to help the world become unstuck, not the other way around. If zombie figuration is stagnant, then paradoxically, being still and present is what is needed to regain the consciousness of contemporary figurative art.

### Conclusion

To conclude, as culture becomes increasingly digitised and we race towards technology, embracing the deep intertwining with our real lives and social media platforms, this pull is felt too by the artworld. There is no doubt that the rise of technology and social media in our capitalist postmodern era has greatly impacted the way we produce and view paintings, with two distinct ways of making becoming dominant in contemporary figurative painting. The first way of making and viewing, given the name zombie figuration by Alex Greenberger in July 2020, describes the phenomenon that arises in solidarity with social media platforms and the digitalisation of culture. This can be classified as works of art that are eye catching but ultimately vapid, sidestepping political commentary and acknowledgment of societal shifts in favour of depictions of mass media imagery, and simulation of the spectacle. Encouraged by the nature of social sites that entice artists with a “pop sexiness” (Delphian, 2020) that occurs with trends and followings, the fast way of producing is then a result of, and subsequently dictated by the fast way of viewing that we have become accustomed too. An artist referenced to encapsulate the qualities of zombie figuration is Sam Mckinniss, who made his name reproducing mass media imagery with little differentiation to the source taken from google, meaning that the viewer finds it difficult to separate the painting from the original photograph and leaves questions as to “what

this artistic thievery is meant to achieve” (Greenberger, 2020), being that the creators own voice is so diminished through the focus on reproduction. McKiniss's work, it could then be argued, is representative of a culture that finds comfort in reproduction and the way the non-confrontational imagery provides short entertainment before moving on to the next. His work thrives in the fleeting viewing time allotted by the Instagram algorithm, yet does not provide any mystery that seduces the viewer to return time and time again and to see anything other than the original image at the forefront of their mind.

In an act of rebellion against our “computer screen worlds” (Reed, 2019), slow art emerged in an attempt to achieve pure presence and to resist temptation to become engulfed by our fast paced way of life in terms of art. The reason being, as most prominently described by T.J. Clarke, that a slow painting contains something that compels you to come back to it, that demands your attention, and his accounts of the time he dedicated to coming back to the same two artworks months on end, reveals how unusual it has become to gift a painting with your undivided attention (Clark, 2006). The slow creation of the work in turn delegates the slow viewing, as emphasis on skill and craftsmanship in an almost renaissance fashion, a characteristic of slow painting, demands the same return in time from the viewer. John Currin is an excellent example of slow painting, with pieces like *Honeymoon Nude* that depict modern women in Botchelli-like scenes, often blurring the lines between beauty and disgust. But it is this alluring oddity that draws you back to find something new in the work whether that be contemplation of technical application or ruminating on her gaze. Imbued in a controversy that is not always palatable with social media, his work refuses to conform. So the time spent on a work or the apparent attention to skill dictates how long the viewer wishes to spend with it, the viewing and the creation are

dependent on each other. Painting has the ability to store time within a work and it is this accumulation of time that brings painting to life; bypassing slowness, in both execution and the viewing experience, fails to honour paintings most distinct credit, to permeate our consciousness in ways that argue “with the regime of the image now dominant” (Clark, 2006).

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