Departing from Photography. Place, Space, Non-place, and the Quotidian: Painting from Pictures of the Everyday

Mathew A. Tucker

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Departing from Photography.
Place, Space, Non-place, and the Quotidian: Painting from Pictures of the Everyday

By
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May 23, 2016
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Second Reader

Date

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Dedication

I’d like to dedicate this thesis paper and all the work and effort that went into it to my parents, David and Gerry Tucker, to my sister Rachel, my niece Red and to my partner Laura. The love, support and encouragement they have given me has been immeasurable and for that, I am forever grateful.
Acknowledgments

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When I think about painting it is something that seems inseparable from photography. I grew up surrounded by books, photographs, comics, cartoons, films, colour magazines, television and a landscape full of advertisements. The image was the carrier of so much visual content and it allowed me to experience that which I had not physically seen in person. It allowed for a method of capturing what I had seen, and so recorded my own history in the making.

My father had always been a keen amateur photographer and had an impressive collection of Canon SLR camera equipment that many professionals would have envied, including a Canon AE-1 and the real pinnacle of its day, the Canon A-1. As a child I was always excited to watch the slide shows that various family members would put on during the occasions when we were all in the same country. On the Tucker side we were both eager to document our travels and share our experiences with family and friends, but even more there was a desire to take “good” photographs. It occurred to me years later that these slide shows were as much about taking technically good, beautiful and poignant images as they were about recording or documenting an event or a recent holiday.

Though aware of our white middle-class privilege, we were not self-conscious about recording our trips. Between the age of two and sixteen I lived in The U.A.E, Qatar, Bahrain and St.Lucia and we travelled pretty extensively during those years. The camera was an important part of that experience and I have replayed much of my
childhood at various times through slide shows of a now dying medium of film based photography. We were brought up on a diet of Canon cameras and film was always prized over the idea of the instant camera (Polaroid) and it’s apparent instant gratification, limited input, minimal settings and narrower parameters for error although it was very much an art form within it’s own more confining parameters. A sense of labour, knowledge, skill and patience was instilled in my appreciation for the taking of a photograph. Even if the development and printing was handled by an independent service instead of our own darkroom, there was still so much for the photographer using a 35mm film SLR camera to consider in taking photographs.

There are many choices to be made when taking a photograph; what film speed to use, the ISO setting, the aperture and shutter speed, lighting, lens filters, lens performance, focal range, angle and depth of field, subject matter, context, setting, weather, meaning. What is it that makes a photograph or an image a good one? There are many factors to consider from the technical to the content or subject matter and each has varying degrees of significance given the context or relativity of the piece. In either case it seems important that if one is to make any kind of claim for what is a good photograph, one should first know how to properly use the tools at one’s disposal.

Despite our fondness for full SLR cameras, a good deal of our photographs were also family photographs taken with cheaper, and often disposable point and shoot cameras. They served as a visual history during the time of my childhood and my sister’s, as my parents travelled and worked abroad while raising us. These were often different from the photos that both my father and grandfather took for the slide shows,
but nonetheless they were an ever-present part of growing up and were frequently sent to distant family members and friends through my mother’s regular letter writings. They were also put into family albums that we still occasionally return to with nostalgic eyes and they were shared with visitors who wanted to get a glimpse into what kind of people the Tuckers were. Their beauty, design and aesthetic appeal were not really the purpose of these photos, but their simplicity offered a different kind of truthfulness that was not concerned with technical qualities.

In the documentary “Visual Acoustics: The Modernism of Julius Schulman”, he explains that in documenting modern architecture it was always an art form to light and capture the houses in just the way that he wanted to present them. His photographs had a specific look regarding certain perspectives, formal relations and rich contrasts that the images became more iconic than the actual buildings they depicted. His images were no more or less truthful than our family photos, but they were idealised in a way that perhaps my father and Grandfather strived for when taking photos for the slide shows. For me the technical, aesthetic and formal concerns were the foundations for a good photograph in much the way they would have been for Alfred Stieglitz or Julius Schulman. The fact that they both photographed architecture as a means to achieve these ends is also relevant to my interests. The structure of a ‘good’ image can easily be found in the geometric forms of the built environment.

In talking about photography, it’s important for me to consider my class and ethnicity. I’m aware of what it means to take a photo and the inevitable even voyeuristic, subjectivity of the photographer toward the subject that the photo holds. I know that I come from a comfortable, well travelled and educated white middle class
English family and I haven’t shied away from considering the perspective that this gives me when looking at the world - what is ‘other’ to me, what is interesting, beautiful, exotic, exciting, disturbing, titillating and more. To be aware of myself but take photos that somehow deny this or seek to imply a perspective different than my own would seem contrived. And so today my photographs serve two purposes in much the way they did to me as a child. They serve as documents or records of events and good times often shared on social media and the more technical, aesthetic, formal and considered images, the stuff that has a more poignant sense of purpose or meaning. These images are less about my personal life but rather more universally democratic in the spaces and places they capture, the content that is implied within the subject and the aesthetic and formal values that they hold.

Photography is and always has been a creative endeavour, it captures only the things that we choose to look at and in the way that we contrive to make them seem. When we then choose to make a painting from a photograph we are not only deciding that the image is important and relevant enough to be looked at, but we are also deciding to create something new that is born specifically out of the photograph. As the photograph mediates a real, lived experience, the painting made from a photograph uses this mediation as a jumping off point to make something that is new and experientially different.

The photographs that I take for the purpose of my paintings are of urban places, transitional spaces, the human-made and architectural environment and in particular ‘non-places’. This is a term coined by the French writer Marc Augé to describe places that are not venues in themselves but rather serve as transitional spaces from one
place to another such as airports, subway stations, freeways and terminals of any kind.

So what is it that is important about these places or non-places that I paint? What is the meaning of these images and what exactly am I asking the viewer to consider?

I take thousands and thousands of photos, At the time of writing I have over 42,000 photographs stored on various devices (Apple MacBook Pro, Iphone 6Plus and Canon 60D). I often take several photographs at once, slightly adjusting my perspective each time in a feedback loop with the camera’s screen so that I can get the image that has the compositions closest to what I want. I’m deeply conscious of the fact that I’m controlling the formal elements of the photograph with the full knowledge that I am seeking certain qualities that break the image down into the most beautiful formal framing of what’s in front of me. The real thing, once captured and contained in the two dimensions of an LCD screen takes on a very particular set of shapes that are no longer dependent on depth even if they allude to it. Visually, these shapes are what excite me on a formal level perhaps as much as they might Richard Diebenkorn or Frank Stella.

In the short film ‘Artists: Frank Stella and Larry Poons’ Stella talks about his paintings as a means of solving spacial problems and problems with the back ground... The paintings he discusses are about problem solving more so than represented or descriptive content. Instead, they are about form and shape and they satisfy his sense of making something that is perhaps harmonious, where any visual problems have been resolved or omitted (Frank Stella and Larry Poons the New Abstraction).

I view my own paintings as a set of unique challenges or problems that I have to solve; some of these problems are about how to represent a given image or material
through the medium of paint, and others are more formal and concerned with ‘good’ composition that lead the eye to a certain point or series of points.

Of course shapes can be found in any image or photograph, but I specifically choose urban spaces that may often be described as non-places, transient spaces, or everyday, mundane, public places. This is clearly an important choice and there are several reasons that draw me to them. There is something very democratic about the access that we all have to these spaces. We don’t inhabit them or own them but they are common areas. We all pass through such spaces on our way to some place else and we give them little thought. Defining place or space is dependent on a sense of the other, that is to say, every place is defined by it’s relation to another space or place; a border defines one space from another by means of a line, wall, fence, membrane, but is reliant on the space outside itself in order to be defined at all. I see this definition as both a metaphor for a metaphysical way of thinking about our universe and ourselves. It is also as a way of thinking about my own experience of travelling so much as a child, a strategy for making sense of my own concept of place, in particular of what ‘home’ meant and where it might be located. These mundane everyday urban spaces represent me and my relationship to an ever shifting sense of home, place and self. These human-made environments are also about human presence and the social, shared nature of public space. The I see them as democratic spaces doesn’t mean that they aren’t also full of social and political content of differing sorts, but I deliberately avoid attempts to be didactic about their meaning or suggestive of a particular narrative.
Departing from the photographic source image

Perhaps too much realism in painting encourages the belief that the illusion is indeed real. My concerns are a little more torn between the moment, atmosphere, experience and the formal - the process and the structure of that image/ experience. By deliberately introducing elements that are clearly not realistic, naturalistic, photographic or illusory in my paintings, I attempt to shift the viewer away from being too tied to the reality of the image and hopefully open up another channel of thought regarding in the structure, form and materiality of the painting. The paintings aim at a sort of deconstruction of the image, both as a strategy for making and as a legible visual component of the finished work. I do this by shifting my colours, playing with texture and surface or by flattening areas of the image.

As a painter, I’m responding to the image and searching for a way to make it interesting as a painting. For that to happen it has to operate beyond just the content of the image, and the material of the photograph, but instead has to engage with the medium of painting and it’s process, and the fact that it is handmade. Vija Celmins perhaps said it in a way that more concisely sums up my feelings about painting from photographs;

‘My feeling is however, that often people only look at the image. I feel that the image is just a sort of armature on which I hang my marks and make my art.’ (Myers, R, T. 85).

This is not to diminish the importance of the subject, but simply to state that if it were only about the subject, perhaps the photograph alone would be adequate and there would be no need to interpret or re-make it by other means. Instead, I work
almost exclusively from my own photographs and they are photos that I take specifically because there are elements that I’m seeing both at the time of the encounter and in the moment of looking at the photograph that I have a desire to paint, to remake, to relive and re-imagine. Often I will take numerous photos of the same scene until I have captured the elements that I am especially interested in and have found a particular composition with the formal elements that satisfy or excite me. Then a process of reviewing the images and discarding those that aren’t worthy. Sometimes, I may use elements from various versions in order to create the harmonious whole of the painting because I’m not able to manipulate it so that they all exist in one photo. When a photograph seems to be what I consider too good or perfect in it’s own right, then it becomes hard to re-imagine the image as a painting,
since my motivation often comes from anticipating the transformation the image will undergo.

Painting or drawing from observation is something I’ve enjoyed for years and is something I often consider returning to, but the relationship with time is very different. Painting from a photo allows me to return to a time and manipulate it as if it were real, real because a camera and lens indexically record the thing itself, as opposed to the thing imagined or the thing observed. This indexicality can be reduced, distilled or abstracted in different ways to create something that is still quite believable. Perspective has always been one such indexical element that I have employed while distorting colour and detail. But the inverse also applies - by maintaining ‘photographic’ colour or ‘colour matching’ the photo, the painter is able to distort or abstract other formal elements but still allow the image to seem somewhat indexical, real or at least still deeply rooted to it’s photographic source.

Peter Doig has talked at length about his use of the photograph in mapping out his paintings, using it as a framework or compositional tool for what the painting will become. The artistic invention begins as the painting departs from its subject or source;

‘The photograph acts as a starting point. It is in the actual act of making a painting that invention takes over. The photographic source is often too banal, too limited. It acts primarily in relation to the basic composition for painting. I use photography much in the way that some painters in the latter part of the nineteenth century used photography. I am almost using photography as a map, a way to map out the image’ (132).
The struggle I have had with my paintings over the last few years of investigation has been between the photographic and the imagined or constructed. It is less the moment but rather the structure of the moment captured that seems to appeal to me on a practical level. Working from photographs can also entice the artist to focus on the details and work very tightly from the source image because the photograph has afforded us that ability to examine the most minute details of a frozen moment. Ultimately for my practice, I’ve almost always stopped short of outright mimicry, tromp l’oeil or photo-realism for the simple reason that to cover all traces of the underlying structure of the image never held much appeal. There was no longer anything worth looking at in the painting that wasn’t already available in the photograph. It is my belief that the painting that is composed through photographic source material is required to do something beyond mimic the photograph; this is something that some photo realistic painters like Richard Estes actually managed beautifully, by means of tiny painterly marks that on close inspection become almost abstract yet remain precisely descriptive.

Fig. 2 Doig, Peter. *The Heart of Old San Juan*. 1999. Oil on Canvas, Blouinartinfo, accessed 13th April 2016. [http://www.blouinartinfo.com](http://www.blouinartinfo.com)
In ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’ Walter Benjamin addresses what he sees as the difference between the roles of the photographer and the painter;

‘Magician and surgeon compare to painter and cameraman. The painter maintains in his work a natural distance from reality, the cameraman penetrates deeply into its web. There is tremendous difference between the pictures they obtain.’ (227).

I’m far less concerned with any kind of absolute argument for or against what a painting should be or do, and what a photo is, than I am about finding useful ways of thinking about what it is that I want to create. What Benjamin says about painting gives permission and assurance to the painter to do something that goes beyond literal capture, mimicry or narrative and actually frees us from the confines of the imagery we’re using.

The painting becomes a vehicle for ideas and a means of thinking about a ‘subject’ but without needing to deal with the realism or truthfulness (whether representationally or narratively) that the photograph alludes to. Painting that departs from the photograph gives the viewer that much needed space between reality and fiction in which to enter the frame whether through a sense of drama, the quality of a
cleverly crafted gesture or the atmosphere invoked by the nuanced differences in the painter's choice of colour. Vija Celmins addresses this kind of thinking, talking about documenting surface and translating it, creating something that is in part fiction;

‘There aren’t really rules for painting, but there’s certain facts and fictions about painting. Part of what I do is document another surface and sort of translate it. They’re like translations, and then part of it is fiction, which is invention’ (Vija Celmins).

I have often struggled with art theory’s place in the studio, in the making of an art work. It seems that the art must always come first in order that a theory can be constructed around it. Art is to me a means unto itself made up of infinite languages that are being invented all the time according to a set of codes, signs and symbols, while theory always seems to serve as a means to experience the works through the filter of words and written language, that is neither native to visuality nor equipped to deal with it's unlimited nuances. Theory has provided my own practice with many ‘Aha’ moments, but ultimately in the studio my work has suffered when I try to intellectualise a practical problem. It seems to me that good art lies somewhere between the intuitive and the process of internalising that which is otherwise simply academic. Gerhard Richter's thoughts about this have often helped me to liberate myself from the need to intellectualise a problem, and instead work through it by practical means. There is a great wisdom in taking action!
“Theory has nothing to do with a work of art. Pictures which are interpretable, and which contain a meaning, are bad pictures. A picture presents itself as the Unmanageable, the Illogical, the Meaningless. It demonstrates the endless multiplicity of aspects; it takes away our certainty, because it deprives a thing of its meaning and its name. It shows us the thing in all the manifold significance and infinite variety that preclude the emergence of any single meaning and view” (Gerhard Richter).

Richter’s thinking is that we are entitled to draw upon and respond to the material that is around us, in much the way that the pop artists did and in the same way that the photo realists did. There is an honesty and authenticity in mimicking or appropriating styles, motifs and technologies from our time and culture. The theory around such activity will be formed by the physical output of that which artists come to make. Painting from the photograph is still an act of observation and it’s a relevant aspect of our age as discussed by Robert Storr in the film ‘Chuck Close’ 2009;

‘What the photo represented by the late 70s early 80s was no longer objective truth but in fact something very different, one looked at photographs to find out what their artifice was, their untruthfulness rather

than as an authentic document of something in the real world. The minute you begin to make a painting on a photograph you are making a painting, it’s a different set of expectations, it’s a different relationship with time, both the time of making and the time of looking, that a photograph is made in an instant and preserves that instant and has about it a kind of frozen, rather morbid aspect sometimes and in the case of Chuck’s paintings the amount of attention that’s lavished on that image brings them back into the realm of real time, of lived time in the way that the photograph segregates it from lived time’. (Chuck Close)

This is something that Julian Schnabel also touches upon in the documentary “Picasso And Braque Go To The Movies” (Picasso And Braque Go to the Movies). Time in a painting is very different from time in a photograph or a film. A painting contains the beginning, the middle and the end - the past, present and future. But more than that it has the ability to operate outside of time because the eye can move around within the painting while the painting remains static.

The photograph whether found or taken, printed or accessed through a screen presents the painter the opportunity to create a work that uses the photograph as a point of departure. In so doing there is a relationship to truth, time and reality that is entirely different from the photograph. The time invested in making the painting is different to the photograph and in considering the materiality of that re-invention. There is an inexhaustible variation of readings to be elicited by the variables in a painting.

In re-making the photographic image of an urban place, space or non-place as a painting, there is an attempt to find beauty and meaning in less obvious places. I want to create an experience or atmosphere that may not be present in the photo, one that
Edward Hopper’s work dealt with nostalgia and the uncanny, and he did so by making numerous observational sketches that were then used as blue prints to create the finished paintings we’ve come to know. It is through a similar process that I construct my paintings although the camera and photograph serve to replace the sketch book. There is a certain aesthetic that this creates in the finished piece that ties the work to our way of seeing through the lens and the photographic image. This methodology becomes as much about seeing through the camera as it does about the formal, material and emotive aspects of the resulting painting. But unlike photorealism, this methodology is also about deconstructing the image, revealing the painting’s process and dislocating the viewer into a space between illusion and the painting itself.

In her essay titled ‘In the Blind Field: Edward Hopper and the Uncanny’ Margaret Iversen discusses the uncanny and its relation to nostalgia and its reliance of our awareness of the present in relation to a past that can never be fully recalled or re-lived (Iversen).

Hopper’s paintings became nostalgic or uncanny as what they depicted became tied to a faded past of which he was deeply aware. The images in my paintings do not yet achieve the same sense, as the places they depict are not yet obsolete but by painting them and leaving the process bare, there is a sense that the clock has started ticking and we are already moving away from the moment.
Conclusion

In my paintings I peer into slithers of the everyday, common place, non-place, the banal, overlooked and familiar as a means of finding meaning in the urban structures and spaces that underpin our society, our conventions and our daily rituals. For me, the places that I paint are packed with information about the sociology, anthropology, and the politics of these spaces as well as the definitions of place versus non-place and the transitions between the two.

The images are believable because they represent real places, photographed places, and to this end they are record of a lived experience. The fact that they are so generic is important too, because it frees the viewer to think about the place as a functional space and a formal structure instead of as a landmark, an icon, or a symbol of any specific power or status. They become political only in a broader sense.

Non-places serve as gateways to the more personal and private spaces we call places, and as such leaves the viewer open to consider the journey and the destination. For me this evokes a sense of nostalgia, both for travelling but also for the

Fig. 8. Tucker, Mathew. Gas Facility, 2016. Oil on canvas, 74 x 98”
memory or mental construction of the destination. Furthermore, there is something of a temporal shift when thinking about occupying these spaces. They operate on their own terms and we operate in them with a distorted sense of time that is set apart from time actually spent in them.

Paintings and photographs are static images, the beginning, middle and end are all present at once. Photographic images convey a certain dissociation because they are virtual and their materiality is far more subtle and utilitarian than that of a painted surface. The materiality and physicality of a painting from a photograph adds a physical, tangible and experiential component to the image that can only be activated by the presence of the viewer. The viewer’s ability to visually move around the actual surface of a painting and register it’s contours and topography, however subtle, restores a sense of time to the viewer that the image alone cannot. My paintings are about restoring time and physical, material properties to the image, in unison with their content, they invite the viewer to question our definitions of space, place and time.


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