FIGURE

conversation with **CHRISTOPHER PAGE**

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Winter Garden (Detail), Oil on canvas, 170 × 170 cm, 2022.
Courtesy of Dirimart, Istanbul and Ben Hunter, London.
Photographer: Damian Griffiths.

JORDAN DERRIEN *in conversation with* CHRISTOPHER PAGE

JD What do you represent?

CP I imagine that you are asking what my paintings represent, or depict, in which case the short answer is that they are illusionistic depictions of framed paintings, windows and mirrors. But they are not direct representations, they depict a kind of visual shorthand, they are representations of representations. So the more accurate short answer might be "framed paintings", "windows", and "mirrors". In the paintings of "framed paintings", shadows often appear to be cast across their surfaces.

JD All these objects are related to the medium painting and its history. They also have a specific function. They relay and frame detailed information and imagery related to a specific context and point of view. In your work, the "visual shorthand" that you mentioned seems to subtract

Interior–Anterior, Oil on canvas, 115 × 100 cm, 2022.
Courtesy of Dirimart, Istanbul and Ben Hunter, London.
Photographer: Damian Griffiths.

or simplify their visual demonstration and content. Where should we be looking at?

CP Yes these objects, or framing devices, do engage certain histories of painting. Indeed they glance a long way back, to some of the western origin myths of painting. My mirrors might recall the myth of Narcissus—the "inventor of painting" according to the Renaissance painter and theorist, Leon Battista Alberti. My windows might remind us of that same Alberti's injunction for the painters of his time to imagine the canvas not as a mirror but a window. The illusory shadows I paint might call up the myth of the Corinthian Maid who is said to have invented painting by tracing the lines of her departing lover's shadow on the wall. From these myths onwards, one can find paintings through the ages that depict windows, mirrors, frames and shadows in order to make the viewer reflect on the act of viewing.

While the framing devices have a long history, the "visual shorthand" I paint within them—the sheen in the mirror, the smooth skies through the window, even the drop-shadows cast by the frame—speak both to the history of painting and to the visual world we inhabit today, with its endless digital illusions. And so in my paintings I collapse very old and very new kinds of simulation, which I hope produces a complex visual temporality.

My intention is not to produce totally lifelike *trompe l'oeil* paintings, but second-order simulations. And in these simulations I want to highlight the margins, the frame, the ambient light, those elements that are normally ancillary to the central representation in a painting. I want to disperse the gaze of the viewer across the picture plane and out into the room, and even

The View, Oil and acrylic on canvas, 140 × 190 cm, 2022.
Courtesy of Dirimart, Istanbul and Ben Hunter, London.
Photographer: Damian Griffiths.

down through (art-) history, in the hope of precipitating a self-reflexive moment of "seeing yourself seeing". My ultimate purpose is to encourage reflection on the visual artifice that surrounds us, and our willingness to be taken in by it.

JD Indeed, the work seems related to a sort of semantic of painting and its deconstruction. By doing so, you create the condition for observing a painting at a specific stage. The consciousness of looking, therefore the thickness of the surface and its several layers. Once you said to me that you like "seeing at the surface and seeing through it". Sometimes, the painted edges disappear and you paint directly on the wall of the gallery. I am curious to know if this has a different impact? How does it feel to you? How does it happen?

CP You have isolated two important axes in my work: edges and depth. In terms of edges, my work questions the threshold between itself and the world around it. If actual frames are supposed to insulate the artwork from the real world, my illusory frames—as well as the simulated ambient light and reflection—make my work bleed out into the world. When I paint directly on walls and ceilings it's similar but in reverse: the world starts to seep into the work, the room or gallery becomes implicated in the painted fiction. The border between what is "real" and what is the artwork blurs, problematizing the distinction between "real" and "fake".

As for depth, I am fascinated by what we are doing when we look at a painting. Are we looking at the surface of a painting, or through it? Renaissance painting wanted us to look through it, like a window, while high modernist abstraction encouraged us to look at it, like a wall. Neither were necessarily successful—perhaps we are always doing both. And so in my

“Shadows and Relfections”, Exhibition view at Ben Hunter, London, 2021.
Courtesy of Ben Hunter, London.
Photographer: Damian Griffiths.

work I like to play in the strange twilight zone between depth and flatness, conjuring something like the shallow and contradictory space of a computer interface, but with the thick stuff of paint. I have written more about the contradictions of pictorial space in an essay titled *In Praise of Drop Shadows* published in BOMB magazine in 2019.

JD Whether you paint on the wall or on a canvas, are the processes and the techniques you use similar?

CP My canvases and wall paintings are rendered quite differently. The canvases are mostly oil paint, while the wall paintings are completely acrylic, and these paints have different temporalities: oil paint takes at least a week to dry enough to apply the next coat, and I apply many coats to the canvases using very smooth brushes to achieve the soft light effects. For the wall and ceiling paintings I use an airbrush, which might give them an even more digital feel. But I hope the two modes work together in a kind of disorienting harmony. For my exhibition at Dirimart in Istanbul, I combined canvases and wall-paintings to create a kind of mise-en-scene.

JD For this total *mise-en-scene*, it seems that you also painted the wall of the gallery separately to the mural work you just mentioned. Can you tell me more about the choices you made for the exhibition but also more generally the use of colour in your work?

CP Colour is absolutely central to me, both phenomenologically and theoretically. Colour itself is paradoxical: objective and subjective, objectively stable and yet subjectively context dependent. On top of these fundamental paradoxes I like to overlay my own perceptual contradictions—what seems like block coloured surfaces (the frame, the mount-board) are actually soft gradations of hue and value; what looks like a simply brushed painting is a layered

“Fading Light in the Picture Gallery”, Exhibition view at Dirimart, Istanbul, 2022.
Courtesy of Dirimart, Istanbul and Ben Hunter, London.
Photographer: Nazli Erdemirel.

illusion. Combinations of palettes are also very compelling to me, such as mixing more sombre, classical hues with the intensity and artificiality of fluorescence.

For the exhibition at Dirimart in Istanbul "Fading Light in the Picture Gallery", the entire gallery space is transformed using colour. The main space is a sombre terracotta-red with very tall painted "windows", Georgian in proportion, through which you can see a fiery sky, like an apocalyptic screen-saver. The specific red of the walls is called "Picture Gallery Red" because picture galleries in England were painted that colour in the Georgian era, the reason being that Pompeii was being excavated at the time. Why picture galleries? Because framed "paintings" are a major theme of Roman frescoes. What is fascinating is that these "paintings" in Roman frescoes are in fact illusions—paintings of paintings. Indeed, I started painting my own 'paintings of paintings' having just returned from Pompeii for the first time.

So this exhibition is a mise-en-scene that is also a mise-en-abyme: a gallery within a gallery containing paintings of paintings, that—through colour and form—echo down through the history of painting. But in reaching down through art history they never reach solid ground, only more representations of representations.

JD Among all Pompeian fresco styles, although each category applies to your research, whether we are talking of Incrustation, Architectural or Intricate style, I guess what you refer to is the Ornamental version (20-10 BC) that we can specifically recognise by the geometry involved and its own way of depicting illusionistic devices, is that correct?

CP The whole sweep of Roman wall painting is very interesting, as it strikes me as a kind of micro-

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history of painting, especially in regards pictorial space. While we must bear in mind that the separation into four distinct styles is a modern invention, it is true that in a few hundred years Roman painters went from schematic trompe l'oeil surfaces to rendering deep perspectival space, only to then reject that for a much flatter, almost abstract style, and finally collapsed all the previous styles into a wild collage. (I like to see in this development a presaging of the movement from pre-modern painting through Renaissance depth to Modernist abstraction and finally to their Postmodern cannibalisation). But you are right, not all the styles are equally interesting to me. The Third and Fourth styles—the so-called Ornamental and the Intricate styles—are mainly where we see the 'paintings of paintings'. In so many Roman frescoes you find depictions of paintings hanging on walls, with little shadows to render their shallow depth, just like my own. I find it perplexing and amazing that such self-reflexive representations of representations were so prevalent in painting from 2000 years ago.

The Second style—or Architectural style—is also fascinating, and a big inspiration for my wall paintings. After all, it too is very 'meta'. Not only does it turn real architecture into fictional architecture, but scholars believe the architecture that is depicted is actually drawn from theatre sets—which again means it is a representation of a representation. At all turns in Roman painting we are encouraged to question the reality of what we are seeing.

JD Talking about fictional or false architecture, bring us back to the "visual shorthand" we talked about earlier, especially to the notion of artificiality that I would like to develop with you here. An aspect immediately detected

“Interior (Evening)”, Installation view at Blue Montain School, London, 2021.
Courtesy of Blue Mountain School and Ben Hunter, London.
Photographer: Damian Griffiths.

Day, Oil on Canvas, 180 × 120 cm, 2021.
Courtesy of PPOW, New York and Ben Hunter, London.
Photographer: Damian Griffiths.

in your studio once I saw which source of light was in use: neon light. Not that you do not have the choice but because you prefer it. Why is this important to you and how does it affect your work?

CP There is an assumption that painters want to paint by natural light perhaps especially those who are trying to capture the falling of light in their paintings. And yes it is funny that there is a window in my studio that could truly cast the light in the paintings you saw. But I am not trying to capture natural light. The light in my paintings is, you might say, pre-processed—processed through the mind, through the computer, through culture. So I have covered the window with paper, and I use neon lights in the studio. Besides, English weather is far too changeable!

JD That's true! What about the painted elements and details?

CP Nothing I paint is drawn from life. The light, the colours, the forms, are all at one remove. They are aggregates of other images, images absorbed from meanderings through the built environment, through art-history and cinema, through the internet. So artificiality is important to me, though I want to be precise about why. I am not a postmodernist who worries about "simulacra", wishing for an authentic reality that has been lost somewhere along the way. The theoretical backdrop to my work is psychoanalytic theory, according to which fantasy is not something we can readily dispense with. The artificial world we have built tells us about ourselves—it is a collective hallucination that shows us so much about our desires and our blindspots which is not to say it doesn't also impose desires and blindspots on us too. It seems to me that we have to live in one collective hallucination or another—though of course not all collective hallucinations are

Winter Garden, Oil on canvas, 170 × 170 cm, 2022.
Courtesy of Dirimart, Istanbul and Ben Hunter, London.
Photographer: Damian Griffiths.

Interior, Still Remains, Oil on shaped canvas, 75 × 95 cm, 2022.
Courtesy of Dirimart, Istanbul and Ben Hunter, London.
Photographer: Damian Griffiths.

equally happy ones, and the one we live in is, well, apocalyptic. The illusions of art (as opposed to, say, advertising) can help us reflect on how we, as desiring beings, need illusions—how they keep us desiring. Art might even point the way to better illusions than the ones we live under today! The domestic interior is particularly interesting to me as a space that is as much psychological as it is architectural. Hence we talk of our "psychological interiority".

JD It is interesting to see how talking about artificiality can lead us to talk about domesticity. In fact, an interior is a transitional space between the outside world and our psychological side. It is an image, a representation of our own interiority. Two concepts that flourished at the same time when the rising middle class of the 17th and 18th century got access and developed the "bourgeois interior" while at the same time, progressively arose self-awareness, a consciousness that considers our own mental space. In 1835, with the help of German chemist Justus von Liebig, the manufacture of mirrors strengthened this notion of interiority. A few years later, in 1854, Psychology appeared for the first time, defined as a field of experimental study.

Talking about interiority, and if we refer to the artificial world you are building within your practice, it doesn't say much about yourself, in fact, I feel a sort of self-effacement, for example, when you depict a mirror, we only see the reflection effect of the surface but no reflections, as if the mirror could exist on its own, although we all know it is always defined by what surrounds it. Is there a quest to find a third person narrator/painter process in your work, as a way to remove any sort of personal anchoring/position into the work?

CP The parallel development of the bourgeois interior and modern psychological interiority (or alienation) is one of those exemplary cases of subject and object transforming one another over

“/Cloud”, Installation view at Ben Hunter, London, 2018.
Courtesy of Ben Hunter, London.
Photographer: Damian Griffiths.

Mist, Oil and acrylic on wall, 193 × 112 cm, 193 × 181 cm, 193 × 112 cm, 2016.
Courtesy of Foreign & Domestic, New York, Ben Hunter, London.
Photographer: Damian Griffiths.

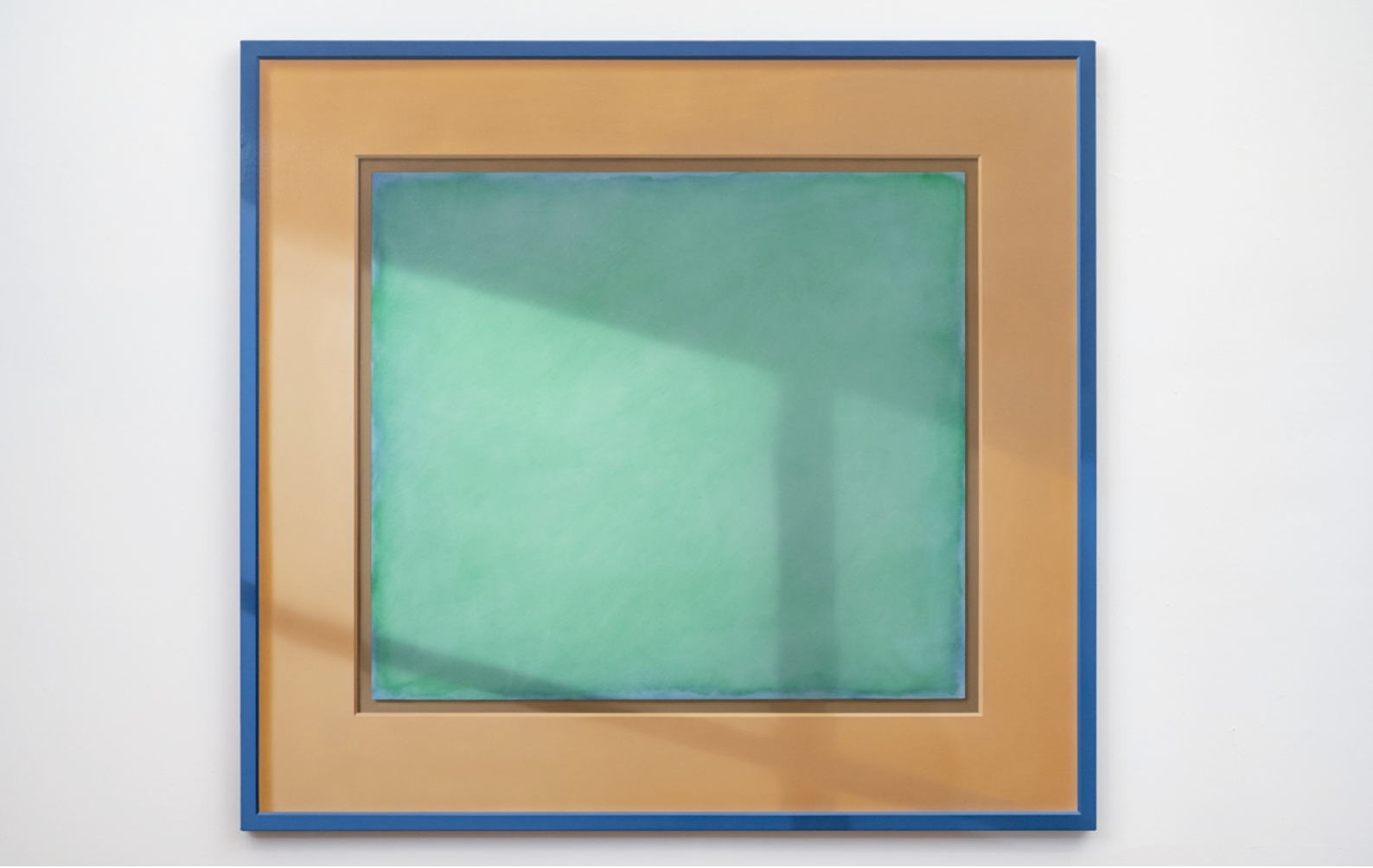
time. As we made the outside world more private and shut off, we increasingly exteriorised our psychological interiority, making those private spaces into ever more refined reflections of ourselves. Walter Benjamin talks about furnishings as fortifications, the domestic interior as a crustacean's shell.

Thinkers have even drawn a link between the overstuffed interiors of the 19th century and the "hysteria" that developed in the women that were trapped within them, which aligns the interior directly to the emergence of psychoanalysis. So for me, the interior is absolutely bound up with psychology. But that is not to say that the interiors that I loosely conjure in my work are reflective of my own psychology.

Or more precisely, I am sure they have everything to do with my own psychology, but I see the psyche as a product of history, on the micro and macro levels. The self-effacement that is evident in my paintings—most explicitly in the blank mirrors—is, I hope, a collective effacement too, an attempt to make us confront the illusions of our egoic fantasies that are so encouraged by the individualistic fantasy-world we live in.

Despite the theatrical aspects of my work I do not tend to think in narrative terms, but perhaps there is a sense of being in the 'third person' point of view when viewing my work—a disembodied, depersonalised vantage. For all the emphasis today on embodiedness and the sovereignty of the individual, I think disembodiedness and depersonalisation can be emancipatory.

“The Four Seasons”, Installation view at Bill Brady, Miami, 2019.
Courtesy of Bill Brady, Miami, and Ben Hunter, London.
Photographer: Zachary Balber.



Pastoral, Oil on canvas, 120 × 130 cm, 2022.
Courtesy of Dirimart, Istanbul and Ben Hunter, London.
Photographer: Damian Griffiths.

Christopher Page, Figure Figure 2022
Courtesy of the artist and Ben Hunter, London

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