

## **Distance – the Studio, the Big House, and Painting: John Beattie at Prehen House**

Overtly and on a narrative level, John Beattie relates closely to the myths surrounding Prehen House. John McNaughton, suitor of the daughter of the house, Mary Ann Knox, was hanged in 1761. As his execution was only successful on the second attempt, he is known as Half-Hanged McNaughton. It would follow then that Beattie's wooden construction of a double gallows with suspended white box (to occlude his own head) would find in this story its most plausible explanation and final interpretation.

By contrast, I would like to argue in this essay that the primary concerns of Beattie's multi-part exhibition at Prehen House circle around nothing quite so direct: distance, the artist's studio, the genre of painting, as well as an ambivalent relationship of an artist in his twenties, who is from Donegal and resident in Dublin, to one of Ireland's Big Houses and its inhabitants. The overall project, curated by the Context Gallery in Derry, has its timely merit in attempting to address (if not bridge) such distances – and that is true also of Beattie's specific contributions. And yet, Beattie's current exhibition raises many pertinent questions without arriving at a facile, celebratory answer: the distances encountered – socially, politically, culturally and art-historically – are vast. They occupied Beattie clearly but obliquely and are worth charting here.

Beattie's work has so far most prominently included video projections of a drawing or painting process in the public realm, where the camera was attached to the artist's body or an extended brush handle and the "canvas" was the street. Beattie's interest thus lies in exploring a traditional genre and its currency in spaces outside the gallery and studio environment. Predecessors from Francis Alÿs to Banksy come to mind. The traditional is married to the high-tech, the privacy of the studio to the footpath, and the traditionally static outcome of the

painter's craft is rendered as a process in time, akin to Hans Namuth's films of Jackson Pollock painting.

Now, Beattie's head is shown boxed-in under the double gallows. The "head space" of the studio that many find liberating obviously shrunk and needed to be interrogated.<sup>1</sup> The artist has been photographed inside this sculptural contraption in yet another white cube space: his Dublin studio, as well as between the Custom House in Dublin, a prominent Classicist building, and the Irish Financial Services Centre, placeholder for the Irish Republic's economic successes. The "headless" artist turned heads – and chose for the display of his performance's photographic documentation the family portrait gallery of Prehen House. This was possibly an intrusive gesture, but one that also juxtaposed what is closed in, the interior space of Big House's staircase, with the outside, in which Ireland's colonial past is also prominently visible: the Customs House. Beattie's "headless" "portrait" of the young artist, in an image that contains markers of its currency, joins many family members who are deceased and depicted in styles of painting and drawing, which Beattie through his artistic approaches obviously rejects.

With the "mini studio" around his head, Beattie took up base in Prehen House's gardens (among the chickens). The box was equipped with an interior monitor and the artist held a long staff as if he was literally (and not just figuratively) walking a tight rope. On its end was again attached his video camera and a pencil. With the help of the projection of what he was drawing, he set about sketching what he claims was a tree on a canvas board supported by an easel. Tradition and current art practice are again intimately intertwined. The circuitous approaches of Simon Starling and others in reaching their aims find an echo in this concept.

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<sup>1</sup> Beattie's work complements independently and interesting ways the many other contemporary approaches to the studio collected in the Hugh Lane Gallery exhibition "The Studio": Dublin 1 December 2006-25 February 2007.

This circuitous route is then continued, as Beattie, it seems could not possibly have exhibited the ensuing “drawing” of rather involuntary-looking lines. Although it did not really show “nature” but foregrounded “culture” (the awkward pencil lines), he felt the need to enhance the distance further. He scanned the drawing and projected the DVD on a monitor framed like a painting, where the lines quiver and seem to hover somewhat, as if a digital Robert Rauschenberg was expected at any time, ready to erase the pseudo Willem de Kooning drawing. Needless to say that this digital “painting” and the monitor of the drawing process take on the appearance of otherworldly manifestations in the drawing room of Prehen House, beside the grand piano and among the memorabilia of India and other artworks and artefacts. The appropriation of high art (drawing and exhibiting in a frame) for the purposes of questioning its premises and current validity joins the appropriation of artefacts from around the world for display in the colonialists’ home. This juxtaposition is a thought provoking one – and one that eschews simplistic short cuts and especially allocation of blame.

At this point, Carola Peck needs to be introduced. The lady of the house is responsible for the renovation of Prehen House, which had fallen into disrepair under ownership of the British state from the First World War until 1971. Opening the doors for guided tours, cultural events and exhibitions like the current one is obviously part of a strategy not only to preserve the estate, but also to establish links between the local population and the house. Apart from a long and colourful history, the family can boast much artistic inclination and also humanitarian engagement. Carola Peck’s late son Rory was an eminent war reporter, filming the Mujahiddin in Afghanistan, when he was himself photographed towards the end of his life. He was shot dead filming the 1993 October coup in Moscow. His mother painted the group portrait with her son in Afghanistan, as she had painted him as a boy. Trained in Paris and New York, Peck is a capable painter, whose murals of bacchanalia adorn the dining room, while exotic landscapes and other varied work can be seen on bedroom walls and around the house.

Trained as a painter and still investigating this practice, John Beattie devised a three-screen video work that extends a quasi-journalistic probing to the painter herself. Echoing her son's practice, he shows her cleaning his childhood portrait, priming a canvas, speaking about the Afghan painting and her son, as well as about her knowledge of painterly media and techniques. The quiet work oscillates between a documentary of extinct craftsmanship and a personal work that is concerned, as Beattie is, with memory – that of a discipline and that of a person – and carrying this into the present day. The colouring of the sumptuously shot work is in its chiaroscuro certainly reminiscent of both old masters and young video and film artists, in whose neighbourhood Rory Peck suddenly appears in the viewers' minds. Despite its gentle documentary style, however, the context, Prehen House's dining room with its Grecian frescoes, is a reminder of the aspirations of Academic, Neo-classical art, its association with power and stake in status and class – and why, presumably, Beattie has abandoned the practice of "painting", which has the prized original's auratic nature and academicism as its epitome. Further distances open up and it becomes clear that Beattie will always remain a painter but never "paint".

Distances are what Beattie chose to make visible, in order for them to become subjects of research, the viewers' study and questioning. Layers and layers are placed between the "draughtsman" in his "gallows"/white box and the piece of paper on the easel; between the drawing's journey via the scanner and the monitor to the "frame" that displays it. Distance between the portraits of Prehen House's (deceased) inhabitants and the (headless) artist on a Dublin street. That distance also extends between the traditional white cube gallery space and Prehen House, which with its swags and tails and memorabilia or trophies is far from an easy exhibition space, but also arrests time. In his new book, Brian O'Doherty has observed that "Studio time is defined by a mobile cluster of

tenses”<sup>2</sup>, whereas works “are socialized on the gallery walls. If the artist is the first viewer, the first stabilizing factor is the studio visitor.

Prehen House, while now a “gallery”, is also Carola Peck’s studio. And it looks rather different from Beattie’s (photographed and thus juxtaposed) white cube one and it is possibly even more a time-bound work in progress than the empty gallery-like studio. This, Beattie transports into Prehen House’s demesne in the shape of the box suspended from the gallows: the back-and-forth metaphors and figurative allusions accumulate to such an extent as to eventually require urgent attention: what is the purpose of all these distances and layers?

Such distance could also be called estrangement, or, using a more politicized term: alienation. Departing from Karl Marx’s analysis of industrial or capitalist societies, alienation brings with it suffering: it tears apart what belongs together. So why would John Beattie break the intimate, harmonious relationship that a painter can have with his or her canvas, relinquish the control that is part of this immediacy and allow division of labour to occur? One could answer that he analyzes what he wishes to point out as a difference between him and an artist like Carola Peck: that she creates work that functions as self-actualization, while he mirrors the objectified (headless) worker in capitalist society. Although logical, this would, incidentally, contravene Marx’s assumption that the propertied class also shows self-estrangement and is content in this state. The distance between contemporary Derry and Prehen House is clearly evident, as is its incongruity with stereotypically impoverished artist’s studio: “the bourgeoisie [...] consigns its alienated imagination not only to the artist, but to the magical space where art is pondered and brought into being.”<sup>3</sup> But pronouncements on contentment are far from unambiguous, and such an interpretation would also mean narrowing Beattie’s work down in a way that would mean instrumentalizing him in one direction.

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<sup>2</sup> Brian O’Doherty. *Studio and Cube: On the relationship between where art is made and where art is displayed*. New York: Buell Center/FORuM Project, Columbia University, p. 18.

<sup>3</sup> O’Doherty, p. 6.

Estrangement or alienation in art also point into a more fruitful (and related) direction: Bertolt Brecht's A-effect (alienation-effect, German V-effect), which can be translated also as distancing effect. As such, artists (actors for Brecht) remind their viewers that they represent reality and do not show reality itself.

Exaggerating, enhancing process-based aspects and especially leaving the (gallery) stage and entering the public realm: all these are strategies, which Brecht had recommended (among showing placards and breaking out into song). With his Prehen House project, Beattie may have added the Brechtian historicization to his toolkit: telling stories from another time, in order to enable a critical transfer to contemporary issues and questions. In this case, one would need to add that in Ireland, the past is always still more present than it seems elsewhere.

While I am not maintaining that Beattie is illustrating Brecht, his practice is certainly a socially conscious one. Brecht has also – in Claire Bishop's *Participation*<sup>4</sup> – been identified as a major source of inspiration for contemporary artists working with participatory strategies, and hence Beattie does not and could not lay claim to raising certain questions uniquely. What is rare if not unique, however, is what he can achieve by maintaining the vital link to the genre of painting that most of his “relational” colleagues have been rather quick to shed. It is remarkable that he can establish a relationship, engage meaningfully with a colleague across the generations (and other divides), maintain a keen social and professional interest in order to secure most valuable documentary and artistic material – and hold his own as a painter with a diametrically different practice, where he operates across many media and employs multiple means of display.

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<sup>4</sup> Claire Bishop. *Participation*. Documents of Contemporary Art. London, Cambridge, Mass.: Whitechapel, The MIT Press 2006. See index for Brecht.

Beattie's engagement is a balancing act of drawing at a distance, in order to penetrate the genre of painting in several exceedingly well conceptualized ways. Rather than McNaughton – or even Beattie as a tightrope walker – it is clearly painting itself that emerges as “half-hanged” in the artist's work.

It seems that in this way only, Beattie can most credibly describe the experience of colonial art and culture in a context, in which alienation, the distance from the “authentic” is painfully obvious, but in which it is also imperative to seek an understanding of what others experience as self-actuating authenticity. If Gerhard Richter was the first in painting to convey such distances by means of layering techniques and adding the photograph into the process, John Beattie goes further and operates at one further remove after another in terms of additional media, stepping back, extending his drawing implements, looking at monitors instead of nature or artwork, boxing in himself rather than the work ... He thus interrogates distances, revives what is relevant about painting, and keeps us, his viewers, thinking.