

Thoughts on Narrative Painting

There is currently such a buzz around painting – especially what I choose to call multi-figured narrative painting that I have decided to continue previous research & writing into this fascinating subject in order to better understand what it is about history, storytelling and art that fascinates us all.

Delpha Hudson April 2021

We think we tell stories, but stories often tell us, tell us to love or to hate, to see or to be blind. Often, too often stories saddle us, ride us, whip us onward, tell us what to do, and we do it without questioning. The task of learning to be free requires learning to hear them, to question them, to pause and hear silence, to name them, and then to become the storyteller.



I unashamedly make painting works in colour that ‘hold’ stories. They are containers for something larger (and sometimes more mysterious) in our lives. There is a great contemporary tradition in Cornwall for women artists to create ‘personal’ stories in new painting, and I feel I am a part of a generation that enjoys telling stories through paint, colour and form.

Stories are compasses and architecture; we navigate by them, we build our sanctuaries and our prisons out of them, and to be without a story is to be lost in the vastness of a world that spreads in all directions like arctic tundra or sea ice. To love someone is to put yourself in their place, we say, which is to put yourself in their story, or figure out how to tell yourself their story.

Empathy is first of all an act of imagination, a storyteller's art; and then a way of travelling from here to there. We tell ourselves stories in order to live, ...to save us. Stories that are the quicksand in which we thrash and the well in which we drown....a few stories are sinking ships, and many of us go down with these ships even when the lifeboats are bobbing all around us.

I like to think of my paintings as syntactical narratives. Like syntax in language they arrange words, and ideas, using similar 'principles' and processes. There do seem to be rules; in form, composition, use of space, and colour, yet because our perceptions respond differently to visual narrative structures, there is 'tactical' play in rearranging space, and the relationships between figures.

There is movement between each figure, object, colour and texture. Our eyes rove around them, making relationships between them. This is not unlike an eye moving over a page of words, re-ordering the ideas, and creating in some way, a version of meaning, in relation to their own lives and understanding. Whatever the 'syntax' there is always chance and decision. Whatever the personal narrative there is imagination and commonality. They are enigmatic not illustrative, the potential to re-order, and re-version events infinitely – ad-infinitum.

Narrative is one of the four rhetorical modes of discourse. Painted images cannot be so dramatically changed in response to audiences, as a voice, yet discursiveness lies in and around the picture plane. Viewers add layers to the text non-verbally as they naturally ask the question: what is the story here?

The working of personal and communal memory in the writing of history always contains a creative, fictive element. This fictive element is often seen as a threat to history, but as history depends on narrativity and representation, this fiction is unavoidable. Integrating subjectivity in this process of historiography is a positive action. It opens history to the voices of all, and proves that history is not a question of facts alone, but in its essence always a form of narrativity, of story, created by the process of telling.

Painting is a process of telling. Creating and inventing ambiguous stories and puzzles that take us time to figure out, is a timeless process, as we are at once in the middle of the tale with yet unwritten future endings. Narrative paintings hold the potential for new ways of seeing or understanding our lives and the world around us.

This is a work in progress with more ideas, research, writing and links about narrative figurative painting to come. I am also looking for the original references for some of the writing, originally from 2016. Delpha Hudson, April 2021