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# A search for meaning: continuing the existentialist tradition in painting

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**A Search for Meaning: Continuing the Existentialist Tradition in  
Painting**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree

**Master of Creative Arts (Research)**

from

**The University of Wollongong**

by

Robert Howe, (BCA UOW 2000)

2013

## CERTIFICATION

I, Robert J Howe, declare that this thesis, submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Master of Creative Arts (Research), in the Faculty of Creative Arts, University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. The document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

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## **Abstract**

The challenge of realist painting today is in finding directions that seem fresh and relevant to the modern audience. It must compete, on one hand, with avant-garde art and on the other, with photographic imagery and a long tradition of realism in past painting in order to do this.

The art world today is far more receptive, however, to pictorial representation when compared to a period when realist artists were confronted more directly by the challenge of persuading viewers that their work was visually compelling and pertinent to modern experience. This is the period after World War II when abstract expressionism emerged and American modernist art rose to become a world leading entity, a period that coincided with the increasing popularity of existentialist philosophy across a wide range of disciplines including visual arts.

Research for this thesis was initiated when I became interested in exploring the concept of authenticity. This coincided with an increasing preoccupation with aspects of the human condition in the subject matter of my painting. Themes such as contemplation, angst, despair and questions about the nature of reality began to emerge. The subject matter was invoking elements of the classic 'existential struggle'.

Accordingly, this thesis investigates authenticity as existentialist writers conceive of that term. It goes on to critique how American realist artists (specifically painters working in and around New York in the late 1940's and 1950's, the so-called 'painterly realists') approached aspects of authenticity such as the nature of the real. A responsive body of work that explores existential doubt in a contemporary context supports this thesis.

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## Introduction

Research for this paper began with the realization that I am often drawn to a type of art that I would describe as 'honest'. For me a piece of music, literature or work of visual art is often 'good' when it is 'honest'.

Accordingly, I have always strived to make art that is as 'honest' or 'sincere' as possible. Indeed, I know that this is an explicit goal for many artists working today. For example, in Arthur Danto's review of the 2002 Whitney Biennial, he quotes the curator discussing a change that he noticed taking place in artists' attitudes:

"What I was finding over and over again was artists saying things to me like 'Well, to be honest, what I am really doing is searching for the truth' or 'what matters most to me is to make the most honest statement I possibly can.'" (Danto, 2002, p. 31).

It was my intuitive understanding of these terms 'honest', 'sincere' and 'truthful' that originally led me to investigate concepts of 'authenticity' in painting. I sought to understand the theoretical basis of these terms in order to better recognise and articulate what it is that draws me to work that may be described in this way.

To my surprise, my research in fact revealed that from an existentialist point of view, 'authenticity' and 'sincerity' or 'honesty' are not equivalent or synonymous. Recognising the disjunction between these concepts contributes to a deeper understanding of authenticity, a notion that resists definition. In chapter one I will discuss the existentialist conception of authenticity as a dynamic and revolutionary force. I will examine methods that have been used to identify what authenticity is, including the use of literary portraiture to provide examples of personal authenticity. Finally I will discuss how authenticity requires a social context in order to emerge.

In chapter two I will discuss how American painters working in and around New York in the late 1940's and 1950's were influenced by an increasing awareness of ideas introduced by existentialist writers. I will argue that artists practising a particular style of realism ('painterly realism') were as concerned with existentialist ideas as their abstract expressionist contemporaries. I will show that this is evident in the gestural and painterly approach of these realists, who favoured a representation of reality that focussed on the totality of an object rather than its mere detail. I will discuss how it is also evident in their revolutionary mindset, to the extent that they practised a style of painting that was not favoured by critics of the time. I will argue that for these reasons the work of the painterly realists can be read as genuine expressions of authenticity.

In chapter three I will revisit existential notions of authenticity in the context of my own work and consider the extent to which the subject matter of my paintings and my process support my investigation into aspects of authenticity. In particular, I will draw parallels between the existentialist use of literary portraiture to indirectly communicate ideas about authenticity and my own use of narratives from film and television in the subject matter of my work to explore aspects of the human condition. I will also discuss commonalities between the work of the painterly realists and my own work, in particular, in respect of the representation of the nature of reality, and make comparisons between the processes adopted by the painterly realists and my own process. I will argue that the result of my process can be read as a representation of an original image that is realistic, yet open about the multiple layers of intervention that have occurred between the selection of the original still and the completed work. I will conclude that in this way my paintings reveal a version of reality that is deliberately subjective, an approach that is consistent with the tradition established by the painterly realists.

## Chapter 1. The Search for Authenticity

How can one become an authentic being? What does it mean to live an authentic existence? According to Jean-Paul Sartre, we are essentially free; our existence is of our own making. For one to live an *authentic* existence, then, says Sartre, one has to find one's self, and then live in accordance with this self. (Sartre, 1957, pp. 18-28). Given the highly personal nature of this quest, it is not possible to articulate a definition of authenticity that is capable of universal application<sup>1</sup>. Instead, a variety of approaches have been used to identify the incidents of authenticity. In this chapter, I will examine two such approaches, which I have termed 'negative' and 'positive' respectively. The negative approach seeks to give shape to authenticity by arguing decisively what it is not. By contrast, the positive approach uses literary example to indirectly communicate ideas about authenticity.

In addition, I will show that authenticity must also be understood in relation to a broader social context (i.e. its *facticity*); that is, although authenticity is often forged in extreme existential or 'boundary' situations, it cannot emerge or be revealed in isolation from the world.

### The Negative Approach

In his book *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre describes 'human reality' as "being [that] which is what it is not and not what it is" (1957, p. 58). In his preface to Sarraute's *Portrait of a Man Unknown*, Sartre also insists that authenticity is "something that we are aware of when we flee it" (cited in Golomb, 1995, p. 7). In other words, its presence can most easily be located in its absence, in inauthenticity, and in acts of 'bad faith' (1995, p7).

Others have also sought to define authenticity in the negative by attempting to distinguish it from the terms most often used in congruence with it: 'sincerity' and

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper my discussion is limited to considering a kind of "personal" authenticity as conceived of by Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Sartre and Camus. I do not examine other conceptions of authenticity, for example, "nominal" authenticity which refers to arguments about the genuineness of an object.

'honesty'. Trilling defines sincerity as the state or quality of the self, which "refers primarily to a congruence between avowal and actual feeling" (Trilling, 1972, p. 2). The main criterion of sincerity, then, is "the degree of correspondence between the principle avowed by a society and its actual conduct" (1972, p. 27). (Sincere, in this sense, is synonymous with 'true' and 'honest'). In this way, sincerity can be objectively tested, for example, by checking whether outward behaviour is consistent with the current ethic or with public expectations.

Given that a 'sincere' or 'honest' individual is one whose inner convictions and commitments are compatible with that individual's behaviour, sincerity and honesty can thus be seen as a static state. Authenticity, on the other hand, requires a "...constant movement of becoming, of self-creation. It is a pathos of incessant change, as opposed to a passive subordination to one particular ethic." (Golomb, 1995, p. 12).

In this regard, Trilling's negative approach positions authenticity as "a more strenuous moral experience than 'sincerity'... a more exigent conception of the self and of what being true to it consists in, a wider reference to the universe and [our] place in it, and a less acceptant and genial view of the social circumstances of life" (Trilling, 1972, p11).

### **The Positive Approach**

According to Golomb, almost half the writing of the most influential thinkers on authenticity takes some form other than straight exposition. (Golomb, 1995, p.18). Existentialist writers have used a variety of different literary genres including the lecture, the essay, dialogue, poetry, short story, novel, play, fictitious diary, biography and even autobiography to indirectly communicate ideas about authenticity (1995, pp. 18-19.). The variety of literary styles adopted reflects the key message of the existentialists: that there is no one exclusive or definitive path for one to follow in order to find one's self – as to be authentic means to invent one's own way and pattern of life. Each individual needs to come to his or her own conclusions about authenticity.

The principal aim of these writers is to evoke in their readers the *pathos* of authenticity (albeit without making this aim explicit), rather than defining the concept of authenticity itself (1995, p. 19). Further, Trilling argues that the underlying didactic purpose or “practical interest” of literary works by existentialist writers is to inspire readers to experiment with their lives and values by examining portraits of individuals who achieve authenticity (1972, pp 18 - 35).

In chapter 3, I will argue that the examination of personal authenticity as a means of inspiring or ‘enticing’ an audience to action that is the hallmark of the existentialists has migrated into other forms of popular culture, such as film and music. I will go on to discuss how I have used narratives of enticement found in film and music video in my own paintings.

### **Social context and facticity**

According to Golomb, existentialist writers “hope to shatter our dogmatic beliefs and lure us into giving up blindly accepted norms and ideologies” as a means of assisting us to locate our “true selves” (1995, p. 8). On this view, the path to authenticity consists of “negating the current ethic in overcoming the demands of one’s personal history by not defining oneself according to present or future historical predicaments.” (1995, p. 8).

‘Negating the current ethic’ suggests some sort of rebellion or revolution. For the individual on the search for one’s self, this rebellion involves a rebellion against societal and institutional norms and the social values that we have been conditioned to uphold. Society (and its institutions) provides us with ethical norms and potential sources of self-identity. In Golomb’s view, it is when we are able to shed or reach beyond these constraints that we are on the path to attaining authenticity. (1995, p. 8).

Due to the revolutionary nature of this ‘struggle’, authenticity is often forged in extreme existential or boundary situations. However, authenticity cannot be

achieved outside a social context. Many accounts of authenticity are often modelled on the spontaneous creation of one's self and life. However, it is arguable that no creativity is possible in the absence of a social and cultural context. For this context "provides the raw materials one uses – the conventions, the ideas and institutions against which one must struggle to fashion one's authentic self." (1995, 201).

This idea relates to what is known as *facticity* as defined by Sartre in *Being and Nothingness*. Facticity is the intractable condition of human existence that one's past is what one is, in the sense that it co-constitutes oneself. (1957, p. 112). Sartre's claim is that this is both a limitation and a condition of freedom. It is a limitation in that a large part of one's facticity consists of things one couldn't have chosen (such as birthplace, etc.), but it is also a condition in the sense that one's values most likely will depend on it. However, even though one's facticity by its very nature cannot be altered, it is not, of itself, determinative of a person: the *value* given to one's facticity is still given to it freely by that person. (1957, p. 112). Accordingly, facticity is part of the social context from which authenticity emerges. An individual cannot attain authenticity without addressing their facticity and weighing its value.

## Chapter 2. Aspects of Authenticity in 20<sup>th</sup> Century American Realism

In this chapter I will investigate aspects of authenticity in American realist painting of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I will focus on artists practising a particular style of realism, coined 'painterly realism'<sup>2</sup>, whose work exemplifies the work and ideas of a larger group of painters that were living and working in and around New York in the 1950's. These artists, known as 'second generation painterly realists'<sup>3</sup>, produced work that I am drawn to and that I can relate to.

Although my own work is quite different in both process and subject matter, there are several similarities, most notably a realism that is presented as if it were being viewed directly by the observer - space is not disrupted or severely distorted and elements of the work are generally consistent with the visible world of our experience. In addition to any sense of camaraderie that I may feel due to a shared disposition to painting in a realistic manner, there are other qualities to this type of work that pull me in, in particular the immediacy, freshness and presence of these paintings.

Although I have chosen to discuss the work of certain artists specifically (namely, the painterly realists Fairfield Porter, Jane Freilicher, Alex Katz and Larry Rivers), the 'lineage' of painterly realism can easily be extended further back – many of the painters I have investigated speak of their own influences.<sup>4</sup> By focussing on the so-called 'second generation' painterly realists living and working in and around New

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<sup>2</sup> 'Painterly Realism', a term first used by Gerrit Henry (1987, pp. 112 – 119), refers to figurative artists who, although committed to the truthful representation of the natural world, were also fully aware of the plastic character of the medium they were using (and thus avoided photo-realistic or hyper-realistic renditions of surface appearances).

<sup>3</sup> Irving Sandler refers to the 'breakthroughs' of Abstract Expressionists in the years 1947 to 1951 as 'the first generation' of the New York School. Younger artists who came to prominence in the early fifties are referred to as 'second generation'. In the following decade, this 'second generation' was eclipsed by a 'third generation', innovators of Pop, Op, Minimal, and Conceptual Art. (1978, p. ix).

<sup>4</sup> For example in 1948 a major Pierre Bonnard retrospective at New York's Museum of Modern Art "stunned early-wave artists such as Rivers, Kahn, Blaine and Freilicher, and revealed to them pictorial possibilities for their own work." (1978, p. 52).

York in the 1950s, I do not deny that painterly realism was practised in other parts of the world (or at other times). However, it is this point in time and place that fascinates me; it is as if a cocktail of progressive European thinking mixed with the opportunity and fresh beginnings in America (post World War II) led to a creative explosion in modern art, music and literature.

It was during this period that writers on authenticity mirrored and arguably influenced thinking on painting (Fineburg, 2000, pp. 32, 170 – 171). This was also a period that began with the emergence of a particular style of abstract painting and the rise of American modernist art to world leadership (Ward, 1989, p. 1). However, although it was the group of painters that came to be known as ‘abstract expressionist’ that were championed by influential critics (most notably Clement Greenberg) (Fineberg, 2000, p. 154), the lesser known realists were also developing in conjunction with their abstract expressionist contemporaries and a growing public and academic fascination with existentialist ideas.

### **The rise of existentialist thought**

The 1947 translation into English of Jean-Paul Sartre’s lecture “Existentialism is a Humanism” (1945) helped ensure that his ideas entered into the vocabulary of American thought and culture. In his essay *French Existentialism and American Popular Culture, 1945 – 1948*, George Cotkin provides evidence that Americans in the 1940’s highly valued French ideas, art, and fashion (in Cotkin’s opinion perhaps less for any quality other than the prestige that came with their French label) (Cotkin, 1999, p. 329). Moreover, between 1945 and 1948 major introductions to existentialism appeared in publications such as *Life*, the *New York Times Magazine*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, and fashion magazines *Vogue* and *Harper’s Bazaar*. (1999, p. 330).

In relation to painting, critics such as Harold Rosenberg described abstract expressionism as an essentially existential act in which authenticity mattered more than the crafting of beautiful pictures. (1960, p. 23). Rosenberg characterised Jackson Pollock’s work, for example, as a transformation of painting into an



existential drama, in which “what was to go on canvas was not a picture but an event” (1960, p. 39). Other critics such as Clement Greenberg focussed on abstract expressionist paintings’ “objectness”; it was the physicality of the paintings’ surfaces that was the key to understanding them as documents of the artists’ existential struggle. (1961, p. 67).

As a consequence, the abstract expressionists have come to be seen as the quintessential existentialists, their ‘search for meaning’ evident in the traces of their brushstrokes. However, it is arguable that the painterly realists of the time were equally concerned with existentialist ideas and in particular the nature of authenticity. In the next section I will show that this is evident in their gestural and painterly approach, in their choice of subject matter and in their revolutionary mindset.

### **The nature of the real**

Although some critics argue that the painterly realists “...accepted the legacy of abstract expressionism which called for the act of applying paint as the main concern” and that “the expression, which was personal and subjective, emerge(s) from the paint itself, rather than from the images” (Richeda, N. in Ward, 1989, pp. 93-94), there is still a strong feeling of realism that exists in their works that poses questions about the nature of the real in painting. In this sense their investigation of the real fundamentally differs from their abstract expressionist counterparts.

The painterly realists chose to modestly paint what was in front of them. Their intention was to articulate the appearance of things, and in doing so, their work raises questions regarding the nature of reality. Artist and critic Fairfield Porter wrote of his contemporary Alex Katz, for example, “that you recognise every detail in his painting, and the whole too, though the whole takes precedence and the detail may only be an area of colour, in short, abstract.” (1979, p. 90).

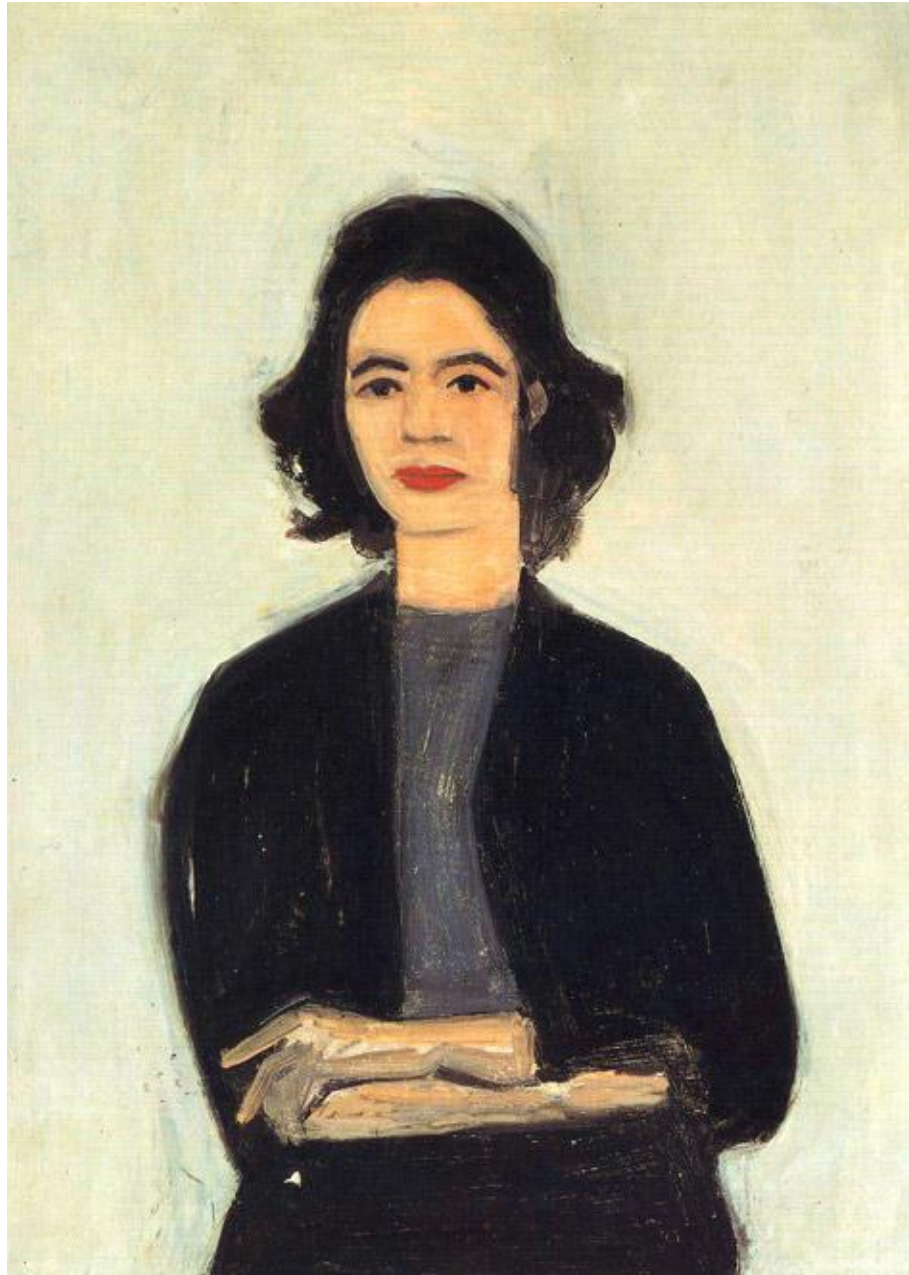


Fig. 1. Alex Katz, *Ada (in Black Sweater)*, 1957, oil on masonite, 61 x 45cm

In this sense, Porter is referring to reality as a kind of *totality* that differs from reality as merely accurate representation. Porter's conception of reality requires more than accurate representation; it requires attentiveness to both outside nature and inner experience. (1979, p. 90).

In exploring the real in paint, the painterly realists were also exploring the nature of truth. To the extent that their work offered the viewer a way of suspending their own pre-existing beliefs regarding the nature of reality through a *totality* of

experience, they were also offering an *enticement* for the viewer to come to their own conclusions about the true nature of being. In this regard, the painterly realists' work can be read as mirroring existentialist writers' literary attempts to inspire their readers to seek authenticity in their lives. Additionally, the painterly realists can be viewed as pursuing their own search for meaning or truth, and in doing so seeking their own conclusions about the nature of reality.

The nature of reality is, of course, like the nature of authenticity, multi-faceted and problematic at best. Echoing the literary existentialists' attempts to define authenticity by what it is not, in 1961, Porter, in a review of a painting exhibition, defines reality (in painting) not by how it succeeds, but by how it can fail: "Reality cannot be faked; unless it is total, it fails to convince. It fails when the idea of reality... is superimposed on, no matter how skilful a technical exercise..." (1979, p. 86). Porter provides an example of this 'unconvincing reality' when describing the painting 'Brighton Beach' by artist David Levine:

"The artist has used his experience of people behind the boardwalk as raw material for translation into something resembling in its craft a painting by Rembrandt, like a school exercise to show how well he has done his homework. You recognise each detail, and you are left with an inescapable conviction that Brighton Beach is a boring figment of Levine's imagination." (1979, p. 86).

This idea of reality being "superimposed on" in painting is perhaps analogous with an approach to painting that is merely 'sincere' or 'honest'. For reality to be represented in a truly convincing or authentic way, something more is required. In Trilling's view (as discussed in chapter 1), what is required is a more exigent conception of the self and what is involved in being true to it, a wider reference to the universe and our place in it, and a less acceptant and genial view of the social circumstances of life (1972). It is arguable that painterly realism, with its insistence on representing a totality of experience over mere accurate detail, fulfils Trilling's requirements.

## **Painterly realism as a revolutionary act**

However a further quality that marks the work of the painterly realists as truly authentic is in a revolutionary sense; these artists were courageously giving up or choosing not to adopt the prevailing ethos of avant-garde painting that was abstract expressionism. Although it could be argued that abstract expressionism never gained full acceptance by the general public it nevertheless attracted champions among critics, dealers, museum directors, and even foreign painters (an unprecedented event). (Ward, 1989, p 9). Indeed, of the seven painters (all of whom, incidentally, either lived and/or exhibited in New York) chosen to represent America in the 1950 Venice Biennale, three were abstract painters (Arshile Gorky, Willem de Kooning and Jackson Pollock), and three were semi-abstract (Hyman Bloom, Lee Gatch, and Rico Lebrun). The one realist (being honoured with a one-man retrospective show) was the seventy-year old John Marin (who was, according to art columnist Peyton Boswell, merely a “leftover remnant of American art’s past dependence on Europe”). (1989, p. 9).

It was against this sort of establishment that the painterly realists found themselves positioned in New York in the 1950’s. The artist Larry Rivers attempted to solve the problem of appearing relevant to the avant-garde by attempting to shock his audience (which was primarily the New York School) (Sandler, 1978, p. 59), and thereby compel their attention. Of his 1953 painting *Washington Crosses the Delaware*, based on a popular 1851 painting by Emanuel Leutze, Rivers wrote:

“I want(ed) to do something no one in the New York art world doubted was disgusting, dead, and absurd... Nothing could be dopier than a painting dedicated to a national cliché... In relation to the immediate situation in New York... (it) was another toilet seat – not for the general public as it was in the Dada show, but for the painters.” (Rivers, L, in Sandler, 1978, p. 105).



Fig. 2. Larry Rivers, *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, oil on canvas, 214 x 275 cm.

Other painterly realists were more humble in their approach, and chose to be revolutionary in relation to how they solved problems of composition. They made conscious decisions about composition, rather than adopting painting-as-discovery or the subconscious revelations of abstract expressionism to solve compositional problems. For example, painters such as Jane Freilicher and Fairfield Porter became interested in capturing a spontaneous impression of a pleasant but ordinary environment as a means of determining composition. In doing so, qualities of space and light come to the fore. Freilicher wrote: "I began thinking of colour as, 'How much light does a picture hold?' ...it can make a picture very luminous. A lot of painters seem to think of it as a matter of weight. This works okay, I guess, but I'm more interested in light." (Ward, 1989, p. 107).

Freilicher and Porter's work also share similarities in their understated execution.





Fig. 3. Fairfield Porter, *Wheat*, 1960, oil on canvas, 85 x 85cm.

The handling of light in Porter's paintings often suggests an airy openness of space, and this contributes to a look of freshness or beginning. Brushstrokes are applied in a matter-of-fact manner, and through these means Porter is able to convey a large amount of information concerning spatial layout and the quality of light, which is permeated by a consistent mood. This combination contributes to the totality of Porter's realistic representation.

Finally, whilst the painterly realists' preoccupation with capturing the "totality" of an image (by means of composition, gestural and painterly approach and in some cases, subject matter), was antithetical to the prevailing tenets of the abstract expressionist movement, it is clear that the work they produced was not in denial of their facticity. Many of these painters studied under 'first generation' abstract

expressionists, and indeed both generations commented favourably on each other's work (Ward, 1989, pp. 69 - 126). The 1948 Pierre Bonnard retrospective that so impressed these 'early wave' realists also "let critics see affinities between it and first-generation abstract expressionists." (Porter, F. in Sandler, 1978, pp 52). Accordingly, to the extent the painterly realists' work can be viewed as 'negating the current ethic' of the time, they did so in a manner that did not deny their past, a condition which as discussed in chapter 1, would have rendered their work inauthentic.

### **Chapter 3. Painting the screen – Exploring authenticity in film and music video**

As I have discussed in chapter one, it has been a common strategy of existentialist writers to draw literary portraits of individuals struggling to achieve authenticity in order to entice or inspire the reader to experiment with their own lives and values. This enticement to experiment is thought to be essential to assist readers to come to their own conclusions about what it means to live an authentic existence. Countless filmmakers and musicians have followed the same strategy with the best producing some (at times) incredibly moving work.

In this chapter, I will situate my own work in this tradition. In particular, I will explain how the body of work represented in the exhibition<sup>5</sup> indirectly communicates ideas about authenticity by representing in paint cinematic portraits of the existential ‘search for meaning’. I will further explain how painting from theatrical film and music video (or ‘film clips’) has been an ideal process for me to explore narratives employed by filmmakers to entice the viewer. Finally, I will discuss by reference to specific paintings included in the exhibition how my process has supported my visual investigation into authenticity in painting.

#### **The role of process**

At times a piece of music or a film has the ability to strike a chord and resonate somehow through our whole being, affecting us in ways that we know will impact how we view both ourselves and the world. The process for this series began by looking at an affective film (or a music video if I have chosen a piece of music), with an eye to selecting ‘stills’ that could potentially work as a painting. This was a wholly intuitive process. I converted the stills into colour photographs and made studies (drawings) of the photographs, which I then used as the foundation for a painting.

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<sup>5</sup> The exhibition *Moments of Truth* (FCA Gallery, University of Wollongong, 6 – 27 March, 2013) represents the amalgamation of the studio research and studies over the period of my MCA – R in Creative Arts, 2010 – 2013.



The body of work itself reflects themes that I've returned to regularly in the past decade, including love, despair, contemplation, isolation and space; coupled with the presence (or significant absence) of the figure in the compositions. These themes are played out in a popular culture setting (in particular film and music), reflecting my fascination with and my acknowledgement of the role of popular culture in shaping who I am today.

I originally viewed my process as a means of engendering some sense of personal investment in my paintings, in the hope of endowing them with the qualities of 'sincerity' and 'honesty' I much admire in other artists' work. As a result of this research paper, I now view my process differently. I see it as a means of exploring aspects of authenticity in three important ways.

Firstly, by researching and reviewing old films and music videos, I am able to identify and review narratives used by film makers to "entice" viewers to consider what it means to live an authentic existence.

Secondly, by choosing a historical record (i.e. film) as the subject matter of my paintings, I am at some level representing a historical 'truth'. Here I mean a film's truthfulness as an object, rather than as an objective record of a specific time and place. I take at face value the 'truthfulness' (or absence thereof) of the situation being portrayed, any subjectivity regarding the position of the camera, and any manipulation (technical or otherwise) of the screen. It is not part of my investigation. Rather, the key is communicating the idea that this image in time occurred and is not forgotten. I am in some way memorialising the subject recording. The artwork produced is concerned with 'authenticity' in that it is my recollection of the reality of the moment captured in that particular still (in its *totality*), irrespective of any objective inaccuracies in the way I have represented it.

In this way, I am exploring the expressive qualities of film (albeit *in paint*), in the same way that the abstract expressionists and painterly realists were fascinated with the expressive qualities of paint.

Thirdly, by painting from drawings of photographs of films I am making explicit interventions between the film and how its reality is depicted in paint. This is a deliberate strategy to avoid cool photorealism in the resultant paintings. My convoluted process can therefore be viewed as an open admission of my own subjectivity and a means of retaining the sense of intimacy or humanity located in the original recording. To the extent that by this approach I am able to represent my version of the film's reality, rather than the static moment, fixed in perpetuity that is captured in the photographic image, this approach is congruent with what Golomb describes as authenticity's 'constant movement of becoming... (and) self-creation'. (1995, p. 9)

The following case studies reflect upon the extent to which my process is effective in exploring the above aspects of authenticity in my paintings.

## Case studies

### Horse Chick



Fig. 4. Robert Howe, *Horse Chick*, 2011, oil on canvas, 40 x 50cm.

The 2011 painting *Horse Chick* depicts a girl on a horse riding along the vast Wanda Beach at Cronulla. It is a pleasant day and the Caltex Oil Refinery at Kurnell lurks in the background.

On its face, this painting is essentially an existential one. It is certainly not existential in its execution, as per Greenberg's description of the abstract expressionists, nor is it existential in its revolutionary approach, as per the painterly realists. Rather, it is the subject matter that gives it an existential theme. There are clues here – a girl, alone with her horse, on a long beach. The space allows for contemplation and the contrast between the natural beauty of the beach and smokestacks in the background makes the scene seem almost surreal, contributing to the mood of the picture. Furthermore, the source material for the

painting is a still from “Puberty Blues”, a film about two girls on a journey to ‘find themselves’ and then finding the courage to live in accordance with this ‘authentic’ self. In this regard, the painting is exploring the “enticement” narrative that runs through the film.

However, of greater significance is my personal investment in the painting. I grew up in the area, I’ve surfed this part of the beach probably hundreds of times. I’ve had strong views about the successes and failures of the film, and this has changed on each of the three or four times I have seen it in the thirty or so years since it’s been released. In my view, my personal connection to the time and place in which the film is set doesn’t give the work a mere sense of sincerity or honesty, but supports a deeper, underlying narrative in the painting regarding my own struggle for identity. In this way the painting is an example of how personal investment in the subject matter can operate to amplify an existing enticement narrative and give a work real conviction.

## **40 Days**

The importance of the process of making studies from stills rather than attempting a more straightforward photorealistic depiction of source material is highlighted in the painting *40 days*:



Fig. 5. Screenshot of music clip *40 Days* (written by Dave Brubeck) being performed live in Germany 1966.

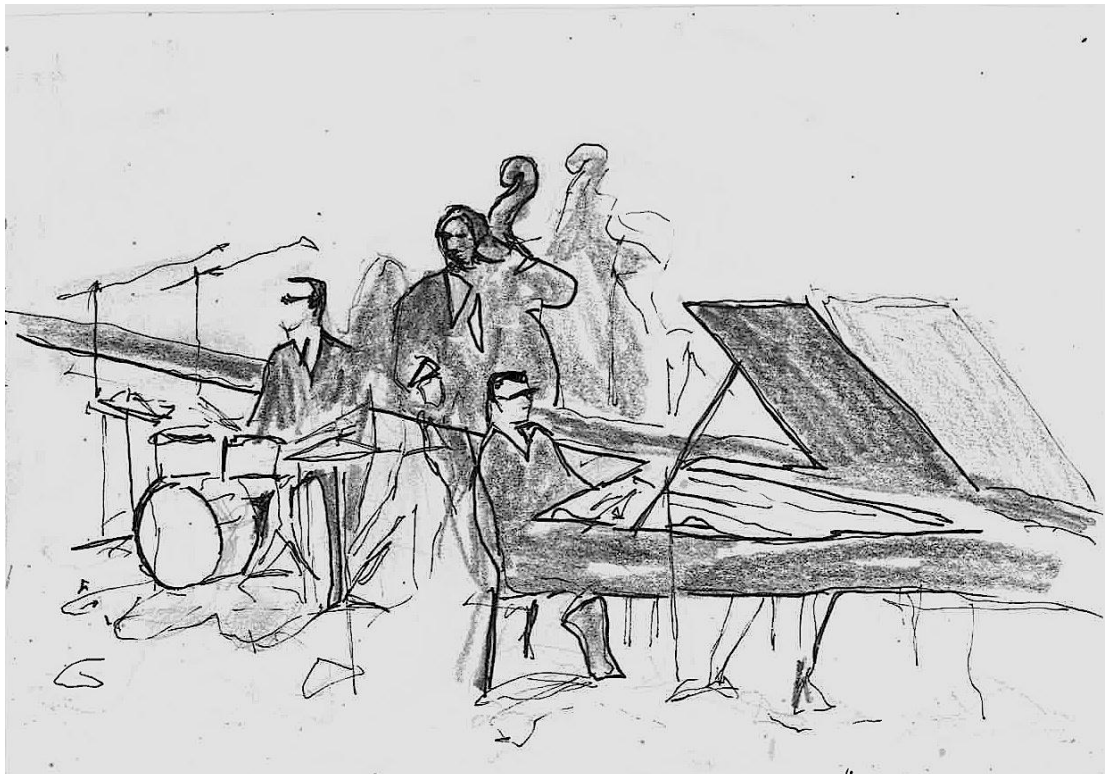


Fig. 6. Robert Howe, *Study for 40 Days*, ink and pencil on paper, 14.5 x 21 cm



Fig. 7. Robert Howe, *40 Days*, 2011, oil on board, 15 x 20cm

In this painting, legendary jazz figure Dave Brubeck performs his composition '*40 Days*' live in Germany in 1966. Joe Morello is on drums, and Gene Wright is on bass. (Not shown is saxophonist Paul Desmond). Again, it could be argued that the subject matter of the painting is existentialist in nature. This epic piece of music references Jesus Christ's forty days and nights of fasting and temptation by the devil in the Judean Desert as detailed in the Christian gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke.

My intention in working from a drawing is to make the painting warmer than a simple replication of a digital image. This serves the purpose of preserving the sense of authentic humanity in the original recording. In these one-off, hand-made paintings I am seeking to retain the intimacy, sense of presence, and vulnerability of the original recording that is otherwise lost when reduced to a photographic still.



## Montag Running



Fig. 8. Robert Howe, *Montag Running*, 2012, oil on canvas, 30 x 40cm

*Montag Running* depicts a scene from the 1966 science fiction drama film *Fahrenheit 451* directed by Francois Truffaut and based on the 1953 novel of the same name by Ray Bradbury. Unlike the paintings *Horse Chick* and *40 Days* the process was slightly different. Several drawings were used and the scene was composed from a variety of stills. To me, this is a straightforward 'existentialist' painting. I am again exploring a narrative of 'enticement'. Here the protagonist is Montag, whose job as a fireman is to burn down any house that contains books (because they are outlawed by the fictional society he belongs to). Montag has just been caught out actually owning and treasuring books of his own, and is running from the police. In doing so, Montag is also running away from the blindly accepted ethical norms and ideologies of his community; running away from the ethos of his time. These are classic existentialist themes, according to Heidegger and Sartre. (Golomb, 1995, pp 7 - 17).

By courageously giving up the values he has been conditioned to uphold, he is on the path to discovering the genuine root of his own *self*, and striving to attain authenticity. What is Montag running towards? *He is running towards his authentic destiny.*

Producing this painting, and coming to an understanding that it was about Montag's 'struggle', caused me to realize that I was initially misconceived about my motivation for creating works like *Horse Chick*. It is not, in fact, simply about trying to be honest or sincere in depicting a subject that has some level of personal investment. It is something deeper than that; it is about the struggle for selfhood. In *Horse Chick*, because of my history, and because of my connection to the time and place in which the source film is set, it is the struggle for *my* self; in *Montag Running*, the struggle is for *his* self. And it's different for everyone.



## Conclusion

The paintings developed for the exhibition *Moments of Truth* evolved concurrently with the research and writing of this thesis. They were created instinctively, and evolved as a natural progression from the processes I had established in my art-making practice over several years.

The research has clarified connections between the type of art that I was producing, my fascination with and enjoyment of paintings of a particular type (so-called 'painterly realism' as it had developed throughout the western world from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century), and, from a philosophical point of view, my curiosity regarding conceptions of 'honesty', 'sincerity', and 'authenticity' (in particular relative to art).

The link that began to emerge was located, loosely, in existentialist philosophy. The classic 'existential struggle', namely, one's search for meaning, revealed itself as a commonality in the subject matter of my paintings. Furthermore, I discovered that the cultural atmosphere of post World War II New York, the period when the painterly realists were active, was strongly influenced by existentialist theory.

Despite differences in both the process and the finished works of the painterly realists and my own work, it is arguable that my work can be situated in the painterly realists' tradition. Our shared endeavour is painting realism in its *totality*, by being attentive to both outside nature and inner experience. However, given that I am working in contemporary conditions (in which the arrival of the internet has caused an exponential increase in accessibility to popular culture), this endeavour cannot help but be defined for me through the lens of popular culture. The works presented in the accompanying exhibition *Moments of Truth*, having been derived from film and music video, exemplify this approach.

I also share an affinity with the painterly realists in that we are both confronted directly by the challenge of persuading viewers that our work is visually compelling and pertinent to modern experience. At a time when American

modernist art rose to become a world leading entity, the painterly realists had to contend with the emergence of abstract expressionism. Similarly realist painters today must find directions that seem fresh and relevant to the modern audience and that can be effectively addressed in the medium of paint.

It was never the intention of this thesis to arrive at any concrete conclusions regarding the nature of reality, truth or *meaning*. I was more interested in examining the nature of the search for authenticity itself, that is, the actual *process* involved in exploration - what one may experience in the quest to find one's self. A concrete conclusion would imply a definitive discovery, however with regards to the self, one's *authentic* self, meaning can never be conclusive and final. It cannot remain a moment, an interruption, or a still. It will always be a constant process of becoming.

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