

Does process matter?

Saturday 29 November 2014, Christchurch Mansion, Ipswich.

Panel discussion facilitated by artist and art therapist Emma Cameron with artists: Molly Thomson, Jane Frederick, Claudia Böse, Hayley Field and Jacqueline Utley.

Emma

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Today we are going to focus on the idea of process in the life of the artists and the viewer. The process of painting is not only about the interaction between the painter and the canvas or the ground. There are countless other aspects that contribute to it and these might include the mental processing that forms the kernel of an idea for an exploration in paint, the selection of the paint and of the grounds, what you are going to work on, all are part of the process, clearing the space, the physical space to work in and the mental space that we need; and time to paint, all very important and part of our process.

The artists awareness of their potential audience, this varies from artists to artist and also different times in one's career; how much you have the audience in mind, the artists motivations for painting, why are we doing it is part of the process and of course the artists sense of being rooted in or not in a tradition or a contemporary context of art making and lots of other aspects are all part of the process of painting. We can also think about process in a wider sense which takes us into thinking about the process of living and being alive and how we process what happens to us in our life, how we turn our experience into narrative and into art and how experience and conscious and unconscious meanings we make out of our experience determine our choices in living and in art making.

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I thought we might start by asking the panel how your early art school experience of becoming an artist has influenced and informed your journey as an artist?

Molly

I am just thinking about the accident of starting when I started in Edinburgh, doing the course I did, in the year that I started in 1971, with the tutors that I started with, and since then I found myself wondering how the habits of my working were effected by that particular choice of starting point .

I was doing a course that was half theory half practice, I started thinking I was going to be a painter, and I ended up doing sculpture, and I was taught by a tutor who had been a pupil of Bomberg, so it was a particular language that was taking place there and I find it interesting that I have migrated back to painting just kind of how my visual language was determined or determined by that first experience both in terms of how I absorbed it and also how I perhaps rejected it and somehow that experience has shown itself through the years and I could imagine with a very different start I would have been a very different kind of painter but I think that how you actually start is, and what's round, what's current at the time gives you a very specific way of beginning and so it is just as we were talking, just how we were thinking about that journey and what the nature of that starting point is. That was my sense of surprise that I had in encountering the making of objects, the feel of materials in a context where the painting school was very much about making very delicate pretty drawings. And I realised at that point that I could do that and I wanted to be able to

do something I couldn't do. It seemed that at that point that informed my choice to do sculpture. And I think I carried that sort of need to make things I couldn't do forward into the rest of work.

Hayley

That links to what I feel is my most influential moment on foundation course. It was quite a shock to my system. The tutor we had very deliberately did a lot of exercises with us that were about us not being allowed to kind of demonstrate your skill but doing the other, doing the difficult thing, doing the thing you didn't want to do and the kind of not knowing, not knowing if you were any good at it, not knowing what the results would be, just being with that, opening up. I know that that's been the thing that I hang on to because that's so exciting, and the resistance of the kind of ego of showing off your skill was something really freeing about that as well as being quite hard. I liked that, I liked the hardness of it.

Jane

I glad to hear Molly's comment that she instinctively wanted almost resist or reject perhaps the things her tutors were advocating. I had a very different experience. I remember starting art school at sixteen and feeling very disillusioned with my previous life at school and walking into art school feeling an enormous sense of relief actually and thinking, ah this feels like the right place for me start to find out who I am. I was given permission to do that. I had a tutor who was absolutely fantastic. She came from the Slade. She came out from the traditions of William Coldstream and Euan Uglow so on one hand her teaching had come from quite a limited analytical way of working. What she did teach us all as a group was not to draw like Euan Uglow at all but to think about three things actually. She used to say 'be bold, be loose, be accurate'. And I remember she come and drummed this into us. We didn't think of it like a mantra and weren't trying to apply to a particular exercise but it was a way of approaching everything you do in these three different ways and it made you pull back and I am very grateful for that start because it gave me a lot of confidence early on. She is still behind me every day in the studio. Actually not perking or bullying me but she is there in a kind of very reassuring way and that's something I will carry for ever with me.

Jacqueline

I was at college with Hayley. We were both at Chelsea in the mid 80's. I think we both have similar experiences. Some of them were not that fruitful but at the same time it kind of made the discipline, the longevity of a practice, it probably started there. I suppose me, in relation to this show, having feelings I had as a young art student came up again, such as the lack of women in the art school in the 80's. I ended up doing a bit of performance art as a lot of people did then because I didn't know and didn't see, whether I should paint.

Claudia

I went to Art College when I was 15 or sixteen in Germany and I decided after three month, although it was really quite good, that drawing bottles was just not quite the right thing for me. I decided I need to find out something about the human condition. I did some psychology and came to England when I was really young to do a psychiatric nurse training to find out about the human condition. I don't know how I did it, I shake when I talk about this. As soon as I finished with the training I got a

really interesting part time job but went straight back to doing art then. I did my foundation course here in England though and it felt very different to doing it in Germany. So I then cottoned on after finding out about the human condition and the teacher on my foundation course was very significant as well. I think it was that it was work doing art. My skills could be applied in the way as I tick as a person. I could feel it. She used to say 'you can do better than that, come on, you can perfect this line'. Push yourself to who you really are. That was also quite significant.

Emma

How do your ideas for a painting come about?

Molly

Through muddle and fumble. Through not knowing what to do. Through having something that may be hot and in the back of your head. Through picking things up and just doing something to stop the paralysis setting in or the anxiety about what you are going to do. Sometimes I make objects, make them out of rough materials, cardboard, whatever, collage, things just to loosen up the thinking and don't try to look at my ideas straight down the middle. And then things sort of emerge out of that. Also a place where nothing seems to exist.

Claudia

I clean my studio a bit. I never mean to but I get the floor clean, tidy up, and when I really get enough of that, I just think I better get on with some work now. I think it is wiping things, cleaning things and then I need to make a big mess but I feel very often that tidying up beforehand is important whether I like it or not. That gets me first in and then I get going.

Jane

It is funny you talking about cleaning up because last week I had my hoover draped across the lawn, it went into the studio and I knew that the process I was going through was like an emptying out, it was a declustering from my mind to be able to start again. Just reorganising work sometimes or turning some things away from you so you don't see them for a little while, these little changes can just trigger and create new synergies between things that you have around you all the time. I think it is really useful what you are talking about, for me certainly.

Claudia

I picked it up because Molly mentioned clearing and cleaning in your very first statement, I wrote it down, it is really important to me.

Jacquie

I tend to have quite a lot, about three to four series of works on the go at the same time. When I am going to my studio there is something that I can be working on. I always have a still life set up as well because I am quite a slow painter. If I had just one painting on the go at the same time I would produce about three works a year and with the drying and everything, so to work in these clusters works for me.

Hayley

A bit like Jacquie, I am very slow. What is working better for me nowadays is having quite a few paintings on the go. As far as starting point goes sometimes like at the

moment I don't really have anything in my mind I am casting quite around a lot. It used to be a terrible moment not having anything but I actually quite like it now. I know that there is an inevitable finding out of something new coming. Quite often if I have something quite specific I have seen I alight on. And I was trying to think what is it? I think it is something that has surprised me visually, that is the thing that gets stuck in my mind and sometimes I can't describe what it is, that is what gets me going.

Molly

Ideas come before process or process comes first? I am not sure if it is so neat and tidy as that. When I begin I feel like I have the ghost of an idea in my mind ... I might take for instance the rejected fragments from other processes that have less preciousness about them and attempt to start a conversation with that so whether in a way it is the ghost of an idea leading the process but then after that the process of assembling things or putting things into that conversation with one another ... that really starts the idea grow.

Emma

How important is it to have a studio to work in, separate from your living space?

Jane

Well, absolutely crucial for me. Life becomes complex doesn't it? Things that we have to deal with. Sometimes they can be helpful and some artists enjoy that bit. I certainly need to be able to cross the threshold where I know that I can pick up the thoughts from a previous session of painting or reading or whatever it is I am doing at the time and knowing that it is some uncontaminated space which is completely mine and under my control absolutely. But I know a lot of artists don't like to work like that but it is certainly for me.

Jacqueline

Yes it is important for me that you have a space where you can just go in to, that is away from your domestic space and you don't have to talk to anybody and you can just get on with your work

Molly

It is especially true of painting as a practice. I am sure there are different kinds of practice that aren't so dependent on what I see is on the stage or the theatre of the studio where things can exist in different kind of physical space and I can't imagine making the moves that I make without there being that kind of defined space.

Claudia

I agree with all this but also I am terribly aware of its privilege at this time and age. That is all I want to add. It overwhelms me, that space.

Hayley

I feel the same. It is important for me to have a space to make in. It is interesting there is a kind of crossover when I am making some paintings. I really love kind of going to bed thinking about it. There is that space that is not about the physical paint but I love just purposefully going to bed, to think about that. Although I don't know what that achieves. There is something really special about that kind of weird

imagining space that you have, that you are kind of holding what you have done and thinking about the possibilities of it, just all in your mind.

Jane

This week at college we have been talking about how the studio can frame the way that we think and the way we are looking. We have been looking at some writing by the artist Daniel Burren, which he wrote in 1971 about the studio. I just wonder how you feel about one of the comments he makes, that a true authentic artwork can only be made, in his opinion, in the studio. That the work is the portable thing and the studio is the fixed part. I just wonder whether you ever think about it that way for yourselves.

Molly

I am not quite sure what you mean about the authentic art work.

Jane

I think he is aiming at something that is coming from the truth, that feels sort of real, I mean instinctive and raw from within you. Because you are in that as Claudia has just said, privileged space, I think that this is what he is getting at.

Molly

I am contaminated by other pressures or expectations.

Jane

I thought it was an interesting thought and idea and I just wondered if you had any ideas.

Hayley

Maybe I feel a bit uncomfortable because I guess I don't like the exclusivity. The sound of something might not be if is not [from a studio]. I don't like the assumption that everyone can access the studio to make their art work. Yes, that's the main thing it brings up for me.

Jacqueline

I agree with Hayley. It is [happening] outside of that space as well.

Emma

Claudia when we first met ... you did not have a separate studio, you were working at home.

Claudia

Sometimes I project myself to the age of eighty or ninety. I might not have access to a studio anymore. I might be in a care home or sharing with other people. I am preparing for it in a funny sort of way like egg tempera might be better than oils then.

Molly

It's a porous space; things come in and then go out again. It is about recollection and tranquillity. You need that space for reflection, but the thing comes in is processed and then comes out again, so it is not, it is a temporary holding place; it is a sight of thought. I don't think it is the same for everybody, not everybody has that way; it

may simply be even practical, you need time to actually do it; you might need a certain physical condition around you in order to do, not a sacrosanct space. It is a practical thinking space and allows the external to be processed and sent back out in one form or another.

Emma

How do you begin a painting?

Hayley

That's a very good question. When I thought it was in a really literal way I couldn't pin that down. A wash ... I don't really know what I am doing but before that it is much more open. There is one way I do that. I guess I am a very literal person so I begin when I start painting. I might have lots of thoughts and ideas.

Molly

I am not sure when I am beginning because I work in quite a fragmentary sort of way. I like to creep up on things and sort of things may simply be fragments of something and may or may not end up part of a larger constellation of what is a whole work. It just seems necessary to have that kind of creeping up because I find it quite difficult making something I already know before I have started.

I am looking for that little lead into it and thoughts that will surprise me. That requires quite a lot of starts and erasures and putting to one side. A group of things start to speak to one another and the beginnings and endings are not straight forward. It raises the question of how do you know when you began work.

Jacqueline

I have started the last few years with collage as a way in to some of the painting and bringing things together from multiple sources on paper and then doing drawings and watercolour and then working on painting. But it still ends up something completely different. I never quite know how it ends up until I am in there, doing it.

Jane

When I am going about my creative process I am not really thinking about beginnings and endings at all. It is a sort of continuum. The starting point for all my work is the experience of space. I am always thinking immediately when I am in a space how the sensory experience can be useful. I am thinking about painting even when I am thinking about colour. It's always a continuum of things.

If I allow myself to think that painting is a purely practical technical exercise that would all fizzle it out really.

Emma

Painting can be a messy process, what are your thoughts?

Molly

I can be messy. To refuse to do what you want it to do.

The mess or the times when you seem to fail or the way in which the unexpected happens. In order to do or what you thought you were intending to do but actually end up with something that is more interesting as a result that is the interesting challenge. Sometimes it is just what just grabbed the whole thing out and it is sticky stuff that is like glue, you know, but I still think at the same time I welcome this. The

stuff is stubborn and refuses to glib me which sometimes involves too much our proficiency, the things that we think we can do well and it opens up a sort of self-seducing.

These can be things that are not very interesting. I think you have to ask those difficult questions or things that will turn our expectations on their head.

So even if messy is not very nice at the time. I think there comes a point where it triggers something that you want to resolve. Your capacity to observe and respond to what is emerging which is in itself obscure, isn't it?

Where you recognise the potential of what is emerging and have the courage to go with it. Then you can start directing. Other artist might have strict and stringent rules. You must stick to the rules and that is what is interesting about it. It carries it through to an almost unbearable degree and that is also an interesting process. People have strategies in different ways.

Hayley

Yes, I don't quite understand but the composition does seem to be quite a fixed thing. It sounds like I know what I am doing. It is the shapes I kind of know where they are ... but I have realised the colour is the thing I am casting around for and as far as mess goes I think I look for things, for methods of not having control over what you are doing to try and find things ... stencilling or masking or scrubbing away ... the different techniques of breaking up a surface again ... Sometimes it can be really unsatisfying what the mess is about. I don't think you have full control. It is only through that you are finding out something.

Claudia

I thrive on it. How much mess can I cope with? What can you paint after the Second World War? I was brought up with this but that is another subject. The studio space and how we work ... we take for so granted. For people who don't paint the studio is quite something. And the way we live our lives and what we think and do.

Jane

Mess can be a very pleasurable thing and it is so essential. It is this brilliant thing with paint, it can be either liquid or it could be matter, it can be dry and it can be shiny. I love the point where it is still wet and it is still refusing to kind of stabilise. It is that kind of moment where you can still push and mess and manoeuvre that is so thrilling. The point when you know ... you know that you hold the cards ... and you can say, 'right it stops here' and pull back or free something or work against something. For me it is like a game.

Hayley

I am really intrigued because sometimes I really love fresh work that does not look overworked. I just can't let myself to be that. Sometimes I hope I am sick of that and be bit lighter. I am still slightly addicted to the punishing aspects. I realise it feels like an addiction.

Emma

What happens when a painting goes wrong, when it is all ruined?

Jacqueline

I used to think I try to make them work but now I just bin them or edit them quickly rather than thinking I can make it work. I feel more confident about that.

Hayley

I am quite the opposite, I am quite relentless. I won't go there. I am sure it does not come with the best results but I will just carry on. Sometimes I use it as an underneath and sometimes I like working on top. I like that it is there, that it is coming through. I tend to not let go.

Claudia

I keep a lot of my paintings and quite recently I integrate it with my new work. I have current and old work. Old work on top or the other way round. Something I tried ten years ago only makes sense with something I made now. The first marks were ok but it needs a friend to go with it. It is reinforced and then it makes sense.

Molly

The moral is never throwing any work away.

Claudia

I do but with some I know there is something interesting, something there. It is like a word I write down and it is not poetic but then I add another word and it makes all the difference. I have got a lot of patience. ...

Molly

In my head I am interested in the idea of things that fail. Except it is not a very nice feeling when it happens. One strategy I have is simply to stop trying to make the work succeed. And actually I make work out of all the things that I have thrown out. Things that were in my rubbish bin, things I often cut up. I make them out of detritus and the debris. It is incredibly liberating, the things that a peripheral, the things that are of no consequence. It can actually start to be the seed of something with a lot more potential than the things you try to look nice.

Jane

Sometimes the failures are work you are not ready for yet. It can be helpful to turn it away and live with it for a while ... disasters ... I have kept them and then gone back and done something completely radical to them. It is not working at that moment and that radical change, if you like, can be the thing that I thought I was working towards. Sometimes of course they just go in the bin.

Audience

Question about audience for *Obscure Secure*.

Hayley

You put your work out there and even then you don't know.

People keep asking me 'how is it going'? I don't know. Unless I was sitting in the gallery every day listening in how do you know how people receive it? It is quite an odd thing. Which is what is lovely about doing more than that, doing events and trying to have other ways to engage with people because you can't control or really know much about that bit.

Emma

When you look back at your painting what do you see?

Molly

A piece of work reflecting back to you. You are its first viewer or observer?

Emma

One writer has talked about three different stances one might have with one's own experiences. One being embeddedness, so you are just in there, in the moment, so you might be in the painting process, similarly if you are dancing or having sex. Another stance is reflectiveness, with a little bit of distance; again we can do this within a painting process or out of it or perhaps both. And then there is mindfulness, right here right now, what is this, what is me here and now? I think painting helps us with all of those. He is not writing about art but therapy but I think it is very relevant.

...

Molly

There is something in pacing around, like thinking and reading. We were talking about struggle. If one has in one's mind the idea that somehow one is labouring all the time in quite a romantic way, forcing something to happen. In fact my process is much more one of pouncing, a gesture, it is incredibly spare, so it is surrounded by waiting.

Jane

Can I pick up on a comment made by the audience on flow? I think about what that means when you think about painting. A lot of trust is involved at that point, isn't it? You are perhaps in the middle of making and are enjoying being in the moment. And it is trusting and with that experience you have something interesting and valuable and something will come of doing that. That is how I see flow. It is a relaxing into it, and enjoying it and we haven't talked about the pleasure and sheer joy of painting yet.

Emma

There is something about making art, finding a resonant form or creating something that feels there is a resonance between something vital. ...
Sometimes it is a shock of revelation.

Molly

It looks back at me like it has metaphorical eyes.

Jacqueline

Maybe not quite knowing how something happened. You don't know how that painting happened but it happened.

...

Emma

Would you say there is a formula or protocol for creating your work?

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Molly

I am interested, we talked a lot about things happening and encouraging things to happen that we don't expect. It is also quite interesting to think about the way in which we might set the parameters to action. That you might set up rules. Whether it is your initial reference material or it might be sets of procedures that kind of set the limitations.

One could say that having freedom leads to nothing and to chaos. In different ways we set up those parameters even so we might be very different kind of artists. Or it is whatever it is to contain and concentrate what can happen.

I might do it by temporarily setting a limit using very similar formats and using just black and white ... or to have just cardboard pieces ... a pair of scissors and masking tape ... Whatever it is, you are just going to do such and such and you are not going to go outside of that and see what happens. Others are having quite exacting rules. I find it quite interesting to think of people who do.

Jane

I am quite greedy when it comes to finding something. I like to come upon it in an open and playful way. When I find something that I like and will want to do it again many times and it may be for many years.

And I can think of certain examples of a particular mark or a way of mixing the paint that I really enjoy and again I want to use it again because it works for me.

...

Molly

Sometimes they are temporary parameters. I am not interested in defining myself and saying this is the kind of artist I am. ...I think people can probably work out a few things about me. For instance always trying to escape my tendency to want to have everything under control. I am interested in control. ... I have incredibly neat handwriting and I hate it. I wish I was different.

I know I might have the tendency to make elegant things and I mistrust it. It is not that I don't think I could use some of those qualities but sometimes they are more to do with the side of me that wants to be good, like a good girl.

...

Emma

Perhaps we can talk a little bit about the Obscure Secure exhibition and what you said about vulnerability. We have got three artists here who make themselves vulnerable by not only showing a selection by other peoples work but also their own work. How about that experience?

Hayley

I felt more vulnerable because I was putting my work with other peoples work. I also felt there was a level of making decisions for people who were not there, the artists that were dead. So I got more vulnerable because of that. Then there were the others I was of working with, Jacquie and Claudia, which was obviously a very supportive thing that you could feel a bit braver about it.

Claudia

There were moments between all of us were we thought 'oh they don't like me anymore'. When we talked about it everybody would say 'I felt the same'. This happened quite regularly to the point where I thought I ought to leave the group now.

We had to check this and find edges to push and pull and getting feedback from each other.

Emma

Today you were hoping for some feedback from the audience about the exhibition and about your process as an audience.

Claudia

What did the exhibition activate in you, seeing it? Activate. The ladies we are showing with could be our grandmothers. I have never shown with a dead person next to me. It is quite challenging.

Audience

I was inspired by the work on the wall. I want to know more.

Jacqueline

We planned to hang the work like this even before we knew it was a wall. We were talking about process and putting the work in close proximity to highlight the different processes in a physical way between the works. We have had comments that it is on a wall and people were thinking that it was an exhibition hung in a room.

Audience

I am impressed. There is a connection and a flow, kind of universal and not what I expected. It is much unexpected but I really enjoyed them. How has this experience affected you?

Claudia

For me it means a different way of working now. I will work on my own but also with other people the same time. Life is too short to always work on my own. I want to share it and keep sharing it. For the first time ever when I read our artists histories, I could see myself there. They are painters, I am a painter. We are carers and they were too.

For the first time it was about life. Getting painting in, somewhere, making it work somehow. And that felt normal for the first time. The majority of us just have to get on with it, do it and make it as connected as possible.

Hayley

It was a really enjoyable experience for me and really inspiring. I just feel I want to carry on working like that. It is so different to just making our own work and trying to find a way of getting it out there. It is so different looking at other peoples work and opening it up and doing that collectively.

It is just a wonderful experience for me. Basically I would love to do more of that kind of work. That was completely new for me and I'd really like to do it again.

Jacqueline

I will just repeat what Hayley and Claudia said. Yes it has been really exciting going in and working with a collection, finding out about the women's life and their struggle to carry on painting. Working collaboratively and having these events has been really good.

Emma

I'd like to thank you for being an amazing audience having so much to contribute and to the panel having a wonderful depth to what you have been talking about. Very many thanks to everybody. I hope that this discussion over the exhibition of Obscure Secure encourages us all to honour the artist within ourselves, to find resonant forms that allow us to be fulfilled and fully alive. In the creative process we can allow ourselves to be, constantly transforming and adapting in response to the ever changing circumstances of our lives. Here a quote from Hayley which is in the catalogue and poster '*This is a special place we allow ourselves to be in: privileged, challenging, brave, indulgent*'. Very profound. Yes, process matters, is the conclusion and you may wish to continue the process by talking about process and looking at the exhibition. Thank you all very much.