

Simon Callery – Field Work

29. May 2021 – 10. July 2021, Opening 28. May 2021 2–7pm

What do you think about the latest announcement of the death of painting? What new characteristics do you find in painting?

Announcements of the death of painting are quite common. If you care about painting the only announcements worth listening to are made by the painters themselves. Almost 100 years ago in 1927, Miro said he wanted to ‘assassinate’ painting and 50 years later the American painter Steven Parrino wrote; ‘I came to painting at the time of its death, not to breathe its last breath, but to caress its lifelessness’. What these words reveal is that serious painters have always known that painting must evolve to stay alive. Established conventions must be attacked and overthrown. New strategies must be invented to deal with the threat of ‘lifelessness’. I have written the word ‘INVERT’ in capital letters on my studio wall in charcoal. It is there to remind me that if I want to be a painter then I must challenge the tradition I belong to.

Over the winter I have been working in the dry riverbeds and on the banks of the Stura di Lanzo on the periphery of Turin in North Italy. I throw down my lengths of coloured canvas and I crawl over the fabric and mark it with graphite. I cut and pierce it with a knife and scissors where I feel contact with the stony geological surface underneath. I am not interested in making an image of this place. I want to work with it physically and the marks and cuts in the canvas record the points where I touch the material landscape and where it touches me. It feels like a collaboration. All the canvas is taken back to the studio where I begin a process of stitching and assembling. Everything takes place on the floor. At the front of my mind is the thought that I am trying to make a painting that can operate on a physical register. I think of these works as ‘contact paintings’.



Stura di Lanzo. Traves, Piemonte. February 2021

How would you describe the relationship between images and contemporary society? How does your work react to it?

Western culture is emphatically visual. We surround ourselves with images and everyone is capable of producing and sharing images. We work and we play in an image-based world. For a painter, this is as significant as the invention of photography in the 1830's, which as we know, generated the first murmurs of the death of painting. We are visually sophisticated but there is now such a stress on the visual the other senses are left out of many activities. Something is missing and we are out of balance.

I have worked with archaeologists for many years and on many different sites in Britain. Witnessing the process of excavation offered me an education not on the curriculum at art school. Excavation sites are places where the relationship between time and material (the hidden central concern for the painter) is revealed most clearly. I learnt quickly that if we have questions about our relationship with the landscape then relying on what we can see does not take you far. A deeper connection calls for an involvement of all the senses. Through archaeology and the landscape as a model, I have grown sensitive to the physical world and to materiality. I feel little need to produce images or make pictures since everyone else is already doing that. What I do want to do is to make paintings that are for the body as much as for the eye.

Could you elaborate on the 'inside' and 'outside' surfaces of your paintings and its connection to landscape? What qualities you find in landscape and what can we learn from it?

When I started to work outside in the landscape (or the urban environment) I stopped using conventional stretched canvas. I now use long lengths of loose canvas I can roll up, throw over my shoulder and work on, as I go from place to place. I stitch these sheets together to construct paintings with an internal space or void, giving the work a 'body'. I equate this body with the open body of the excavated landscape and its role is to seek a connection with the body of the viewer of the painting. I have replaced many of the traditional mark making processes found in painting with a physical equivalent; for line, I make a cut or I sew a line; for the illusion of depth, I construct an actual space, and for narrative, I leave evidence of how the work has been made.

The function of all of these counteractions is to establish a language for painting based in materiality. The paintings do not operate a static single viewing point. I encourage a viewer to move, from the external front face of the painting over to one side, and then across to the other side to investigate the internal space of the work, moving seamlessly from the outside to the inside. Working in landscape taught me that all our senses are alert and balanced when we are in motion.

Interview with Simon Callery by Laura Felicitas Sabel, spring 2021

Simon Callery, b. 1960, London, UK. Lives and works in London and Torino. Graduated from Cardiff College of Art in 1983. Exhibitions include: 'Young British Artists III', Saatchi Gallery, London (1994), 'Sensation', Royal Academy of the Arts, London (1997), Nationalgalerie im Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin (1998) and The Brooklyn Museum of Art, New York (1999), 'ARTNOW 19' solo, Tate Gallery, London (1999); *Paper Assets*, British Museum, London, UK (2001); *Touchstone*, Salisbury and South Wiltshire Museum, United Kingdom (2010); *Soft Painting*, Bonington Gallery, Nottingham Trent University (2015); *Boundless Encounters*, Hangzhou Triennial for Fiber Art, Zhejiang Art Museum, Hangzhou, China (2019); *Textile Abstraction*, curated by Jens Hoffmann, Gallery Casas Riegner, Bogota, Columbia (2018); December Mostra. British School at Rome (2018); *De Fils ou de fibres*, Abbaye Saint André. CAC. Meymac. France (2018); *Stasis Frenetic*. Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea di Torino. Italy (2020); *INELIGIBLE*. Miec. International Museum of Contemporary Sculpture. Santo Tirso. Portugal (2020)

Curated by Doug Bailey & Sara Navarro. *

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