Essay by ***Declan Long*** *from book published on the occasion of Robert Armstrong's exhibition at Kevin Kavanagh Gallery 2007.*

Afterimages

In the introduction to his engrossing essay collection *Side Effects*, the psychoanalyst Adam Phillips begins to relate a peculiar story about that great master of linguistic ambiguity, William Empson. I say 'begins' since Phillips offers only a quirky fragment of narrative, quoting only this short passage from Empson's official biography before moving rapidly on:

> Even as a grown up [Empson] would not forget the secrets of a happy childhood: one day, for instance, to the great glee of a friend's son, he stood on his hands and said the boy could have anything that fell out of his pockets.

Phillips's wish in quoting this oddball incident is to consider the importance of the incidental and the apparently accidental. For Freud, of course, there were no such things as 'accidents' and Phillips aims to propose that what falls from one's pockets, what we understand to be marginal to the main event, in fact goes to the core of what we are about, to the heart of what we are trying to achieve or say or show. "What is said by the way, what is said as aside from the matter in hand, what is said 'off topic'", Philips suggests, "is where the action of meaning and feeling is." It is apt that that this curiously truncated little tale has the feel (in its surprising brevity, its lack of context) of a trivial digression, a whimsical tangent; yet it is what establishes the arguments and overall critical interests of Phillips's book. Ostensibly incidental, the specific use of this anecdote about the minor eccentricities of a major writer formally supports Phillips's central contention that "digression is secular revelation, keeping to the subject is the best way we have of keeping off a subject; of speaking up without speaking out."

There is something extraordinarily appealing in this focus on the incidental: something intriguing in the power and potential of the sudden tangent. Such 'distraction' involves and asks of us a distinct and unorthodox mode of attention, urging a renewed and maybe more incisive way of seeing past the usual order of things. Perhaps another version of such an exercise in attending to the inadvertent or the seemingly subsidiary, and one concerned with the viewing of art, is to be found in subtle, challenging form in T.J. Clark's recent 'experiment in art writing' *The Sight of Death*. In this highly subjective subversion of art historical convention, Clark chooses (via a kind of 'accident': "nothing special was on my mind. I was just looking" to return repeatedly to a room in the Getty Museum in Los Angeles in which two paintings by Poussin are hung facing each other. Here he took abundant notes with no particular 'project' being pursued; rather, his stray thoughts and jotted comments began to form the basis of a diary of his transforming relationship with these two works, becoming "a record of looking taking place and changing through time." For Clark, the implications of this unusual practice of paying attention became slowly clear:

> astonishing things happen if one gives oneself over to the process of seeing again and again: aspect after aspect of the picture seems to surface, what is salient and what is incidental alter bewilderingly from day to day, the larger order of the depiction breaks up, recrystallizes, fragments again, persists like an afterimage.

Questions about the value of revisiting *particular* paintings instantly surface: what does it say about an artwork or other image if it repays such attention, such devotion? Or is it a more matter of *how* we decide to look? Citing Paul Valery, Clark notes that the 'work of art' has been "defined by the fact that it does not exhaust itself — offer up what it has to offer — on first or second reading. Art-ness is the capacity to invite repeated response." So, in this regard, a protracted process of looking may be one concerned ultimately with aesthetic discrimination and the business of judgment. But for Clark, re-examining our modes of being attentive to images — to their effects, their seeming incidentals — might highlight more general and potentially profound concerns about the politics of visual representation. In Clark's view it is all too clear that we are now living through

> a terrible moment in the politics of imaging, envisioning, visualizing; and the more a regime of visual flow, displacement, disembodiment, endless available revisability of the image, endless ostensible transparency and multi-dimensionality and sewing of everything together in nets and webs — the more this pseudo-utopia presents itself as the very form of self-knowledge, self-production, self-control — the more necessary it has become to recapture what imaging can be.

There are potentially high stakes, then, in revisiting and re-evaluating analytical and experiential norms in our relations with the image-world. Returning to images, and recognizing the possibilities and anxieties involved in such a return, is, Clark contends "a form of politics in itself."

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Some version and combination of these concerns — psychological, aesthetic, political — has a good degree of relevance to the recent painting practice of Robert Armstrong.

Over the past few years, Armstrong's ever-complex engagements with the painted surface have been expanded into more broad-based interrogations of the meaning of surfaces, contemplating the appearances of things in a manner not unrelated to Clark's wish to address "all that is hidden and travestied" in the dominant visual regimes of contemporary culture. Appropriately, certain key stages in these formal and conceptual investigations have involved Armstrong's ongoing commitment to painting becoming augmented by exploratory forays into video. The continuing body of work 'Cruel and Unusual' for example, began as a response to archival film footage of an elephant being electrified in an experiment (publicly staged in 1903) by the inventor and motion-picture pioneer Thomas Edison. Armstrong created a series of small, studious monochrome paintings based on single frames from the visual record of this disturbing scene; he then photographed and animated these individual works, showing the sequence of moving images on video alongside the 'frozen' moments fixed on the painted canvases. Here the layering of sources and 'surfaces' becomes increasingly complex, and the possibilities of the return to the image (and *of* the image) more compelling. The frame-by-frame paintings, together with their filmic book-ends, have an absorbing, unsettling and spectral strangeness: Armstrong's forensic mode of (re)viewing having the potential to reveal hidden dimensions in the flickering documentary evidence of this sorry event, capturing incidental elements as the tragic creature falls and falls again to its pathetic, mechanized death.

This protracted process of returning and remaking is itself returned to in a more recent series, which employs other forms of inventively 'repetitive' painterly enquiry. Armstrong has of late embarked on a number of paintings (and should we ask, following Luc Tuymans, if all painting is today in a sense 'late'?) that pay attention to apparently inconsequential aspects of images seized from an assortment of historical and contemporary sources. Often the focus is on fragments cropped out of historically significant, richly detailed and symbolically loaded scenes — we are variously granted glimpses of Dürer, Bocklin, Holbein, Poussin and more. There is, for instance, a close-up view of the central tree found in Holbein's 'Allegory of the Old and New Law', the solid trunk lifted from its semantically intricate context, stripped of its original moral and religious meanings and replanted in a newly nebulous setting. What are we to make of this once sternly meaningful object in this suddenly abstracted space? In being 'quoted' and reconfigured in this way, what happens to once-vital symbolic associations of faith and redemption? Similarly, Armstrong elsewhere cuts a corner from Leonardo's 'Virgin of the Rocks' — a work which is itself subject to persistent debate about originality and re-use since it is one of two almost identical versions of this scriptural scene attributed to the artist — turning the difficult pathway that takes us beyond the foreground of this biblical scene into a wholly cut off and desolate terrain, entirely separated from any grand symbolic schema and so from any implied prospect of transcendence. (Somewhat fancifully, I'm also tempted to suggest that this appropriation of the Virgin Mary's image amounts to both a confirmation and rejection of Nicholas Bourriaud's argument that today's artists no longer create meaning "on the basis of virgin material" …). In another of these absorbing small paintings, Armstrong excerpts a section from Albrecht Dürer's 'Dream Vision' but re-working the material in manner that creates a strong connection rather than an abrupt disjunction — Durer's apocalyptic vision in his odd, uncertain watercolour having a curiously contemporary style and tone. Moreover, we might note that in drawing on 'dream-work', Armstrong's painting brings to mind Adam Philips's observation that dreams too are digressions, they are side effects, a counter-reality that we enter into when we actually wish to sleep

But just as we might begin to play the connoisseur with these paintings, attempting to identify the provenance of each subject (and doesn't one of the Sunday newspapers flatter its readers with a high-culture game of this kind?) we are likely to be thrown off balance. Randomly, we encounter other images that, while carrying strong hints of mythological or symbolic associations or evoking artistic explorations of sublime experience in nature, in fact have their origins in more notionally mundane representational traditions: in illustration, magazine photography or the daily news. So though we see in the series a ghostly image of a remote island that is undoubtedly based on Arnold Bocklin's 'Island of the Dead', we also come across other islands that are not without resemblance to this haunted symbolist icon, but that have unexpected pictorial sources — such the glossy pages of National Geographic. Recognition, then, can be accompanied by disorientation, as the fragments from the art canon are accompanied by mass-media ephemera. Repeatedly, these returns, these diverse 'after-images', prompt fraught questions about how we read surfaces — how we assess their textural conditions and see beyond their masking effects. In one fascinating instance a candy-coloured fairy tale cottage confuses us with its combination of apparently idyllic rural charm and surface blur. What are we seeing here exactly? What is signified in the unexplained presentation of this out-of-the way place? This 'making strange' of a house is arguably 'uncanny' by definition — the 'unheimlich' being a traumatic merging of comforting homeliness with repressed 'unhomely' threats to the secluded domestic realm. The 'back story' of this curious painting — the details hidden beneath the visible surface — is of a bungalow in Count Mayo where a bereft family left a sibling's decaying corpse in a locked room for months without contacting the authorities; yet even without this information, the painting might suggest such a charged mixture of the safe, the secure and the secret. There is a sense of discomfiting mystery to this house made of fairy-tale shades; its soft-focus surface seems resistant to confirmed meaning, as psychologically inaccessible as the impenetrable dwellings in the beautiful bleached-out landscapes of Maureen Gallace.

In many cases, these paintings have heavily worked surfaces so that any possible reference is all but impossible to discern. The coherence and integrity of earlier, 'original' images' is troubled, then, both by separation from a supporting context and by a sometimes intensive process of repainting, reworking. Sometimes too there are crucial subtractions or additions — a key motif from a familiar scene removed, a strange disruptive formal element newly included — and in each case the tendency is towards taking a new direction for the image, digressing in order to imagine the subject and the surface differently. Armstrong's paintings in these ways re-order the fragments of a disorientating image culture. They attempt to penetrate through multiple layers of appearance, offering an incidental practice of looking in which, as Clark proposes in relation to Poussin, the image "breaks up, recrystallizes, fragments again, persists like an afterimage."