

Towards a New Ecology of Time

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Painting in the Dromosphere

Virilio's ideas about the 'dromosphere', by which he means our accelerated techno-culture with its closure or 'pollution' of distances and the contamination of space-time by real-time, are relevant to recent developments in visual culture, particularly and perhaps unexpectedly with regard to contemporary painting. Virilio's insights point us past illusions or delusions of 'progress' and toward the dreadful and dread-filled prospect of a daily reality by which we remain enslaved to an agenda of undiluted speed. According to Virilio, such a programme of hyped acceleration has a built-in downside in the form of the inevitable, unavoidable and infinitely repeatable catastrophic accident.

Pondering this real-time enslavement to the closure of distances coupled with the prospect of collectively experienced disasters, Virilio enjoins us to search for a corrective. This is the significance of a 'grey ecology', his poetic term for processes that engender alternatives to what he has identified as our current apocalyptic condition, one in which we are forced to deny anything that does not take place in an absolute present (Virilio 2009).

Interestingly, the accident enjoys some play in discourses apart from Virilio's discussion of techno-culture. In modern and contemporary art – where the latter increasingly privileges a dematerialised, conceptually driven art over art rooted in the physical realm – the accident has contributed to, and even embodied the creative process. This is certainly the case in modernist mythology, especially in the realm of painting, though this is a narrative that has long been strenuously critiqued, if not entirely abandoned. This narrative describes the first great American art moment of the mid-twentieth century, Abstract Expressionism, and its hero,

the iconic 'artist-genius'. Consistent with this mythology, the lone artist-genius, (usually an angst-ridden white male), when confronted with a blank canvas, spontaneously and 'ingeniously' ejects his creation, whole from his psyche, which, though drug and alcohol addled, and on the verge of self-annihilation, nevertheless mimics the godhead itself by performing and painting primordial acts of creation. The importance of the technology of painting itself is minimised; instead the 'genius' narrative privileges the hand, the brush, the lexicon of splash, stain, pour or drip of viscous and dilute paints, and any flat substrate that holds them, usually stretched canvas. While this technology is indeed a pared-down version of the age-old technology of painting in Western culture, the idea of painting as an explosive, spontaneous, ego-driven creative event, inclusive of 'happy accidents' was a revolutionary departure from all that came before; it emphasised not pre-existing 'texts' or schools of thought, or conventions of an optical or symbolic nature, or even insider art historical conversations, but instead, the notion of a purity of impulse, of spontaneity (and hence brilliance) of the human gesture itself. This important linkage of artistic merit and 'quality' to spontaneity, and, hence, to a speedy if not instantaneous creation, is unprecedented in Western art, with the possible exception of its precursor, Impressionism, and it resonates unexpectedly with Virilio's thoughts about speed, the dromosphere, the accident and the loss of the poetics of the ephemeral to the dictates of real-time.

In light of the technological accelerations taking place since the 1950s, including the Internet, the spontaneity and relative 'speed' of Action Painting and Abstract Expressionism is interesting not least because of its now obvious relative *slowness*, and its necessary attachment to the material world through the human body itself.

This shift in our perspective wrought by new communications technologies allows us to see the modernist myth of spontaneity and speed in painting for what it is; it seems obvious now that processes tied deeply to the human must obey the demands of the body and its innate slowness. We might well ask: how might the art of painting, despite its late, great, failed attempt at transcending representation and hence the limitations of flesh, insert itself now, and perhaps disrupt the hyper-accelerated, dematerialised electronic surfaces and information clouds that dominate our age? Can the outmoded notion of a gestural painting become



Figure 3.1 Joy Garnett, *Predator 1* (2011). Silver acrylic; oil on canvas 18 × 18 inches. Courtesy the artist.

useful in unexpected ways, as we attempt to make sense of our runaway will to accelerate beyond the boundaries of the human body and its ecosystems? Moreover, can we harness this renewed understanding of the painted physical gesture in a way that will point us to the humble preservation of what is left in our culture that remains fully human (as opposed to the physical gesture as an embarrassingly obvious symbol of bravado, human as that may be), and as a step in the direction of a grey ecology?

Virilio's grey ecology calls for a renewal for humankind, one that acknowledges the dogma of acceleration as a pollutant, and moreover treats the poetics of ephemera as a sought-after, delicate and ultimately sustainable cultural process, one we cannot afford to live without. This poetics of ephemera includes activities that



Figure 3.2 Joy Garnett, *Predator 4* (2011). Silver acrylic; oil on canvas 18 × 18 inches. Courtesy the artist.

exude from the slowness and imperfection of human nature and the animal organism. From the point of view of the visual arts, one possibility of recouping this endangered poetics is through the sustained activity of painting itself, which continues to evolve within the broader visual cultural landscape despite its periodic ‘death’ announced by various spokespersons. Deflecting repeated attempts to sideline it critically, painting persists and flourishes, obstinately perhaps, considering the twenty-first century’s technologisation on one hand, and the steady march toward dematerialisation and virtualisation of art on the other. Painting continues to crop up at the centre of the art world as well as at its fringes; its format and methodology, varied though that may be, seems to have adapted to its particular corner of the dromosphere – our



Figure 3.3 Joy Garnett, *Predator 1* (2012). Silver acrylic; oil on canvas 16 × 16 inches. Courtesy the artist.

hyper-accelerated electronic media narrative and image world – in ways that as yet remain unexamined and unexplained.

How is it that painting has managed to adapt, considering the radical changes in our media ecology and the overwhelming dominance of technologies that, at first blush, appear to render its practice nonsensical and moribund? This is a worthwhile direction of enquiry in light of and in spite of Virilio's overwhelming neglect of painting as a viable form in face of the dromosphere and its exigencies (Garnett and Armitage 2011b). If some feel more comfortable sidestepping the apparent un-deadness of painting, they must choose to ignore the inconvenient truth of its resilience. One could explain this attitude by acknowledging that perhaps writing about painting has been exhausted, or maybe writing about painting is



Figure 3.4 Joy Garnett, *Predator 2* (2012). Silver acrylic; oil on canvas 16 × 16 inches. Courtesy the artist.

too difficult for all but poets. But Virilio is nothing if not a strange poet of the dromosphere. Despite this neglect, the art of painting, insisting as it does on the primacy of the flesh and of the human, continues to insert itself, slowing things down for both painter and viewer, revealing meanings and sensations slowly, gradually, through what might seem to us now to be an exorbitant indulgence of time.

Painting the Apocalyptic Sublime

To paint is to resurrect the primacy of the body in a way that flies in the face of our culture's current spectrum of electronic prostheses. It posits the necessity of physical *matériel* as an inevitability

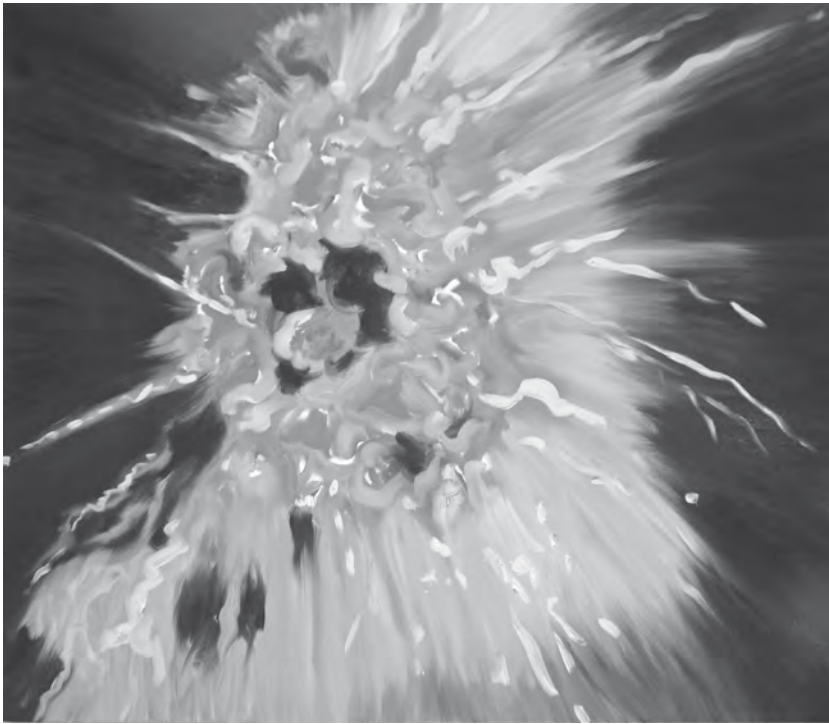


Figure 3.5 Joy Garnett, *Burst* (2010). Oil on canvas, 60×70 inches. Courtesy the artist.

that includes our own demise and death. Where the will to accelerate expresses and propels itself through technology and real-time, the desire to outstrip and outrun death resonates.

Painting invigorates the eye-hand, and like certain other sustaining creative acts (cooking comes to mind), it is invariably linked to the body, even as it employs intellectual and abstract modes, and deploys or exploits contemporary technologies of speed such as the Internet.

My own agenda of painting from found military-derived imagery and image artefacts has brought me to recognise the importance of painting in a digital, electronically speeded-up environment. My process is, overall, one of appropriating and remaking documentary, scientific or technical images to my own personal, intellectual and animal needs. Conventionally, to convey their supposedly 'neutral', informational or documentary significance, these source images rely heavily on technologised modes of

transmission (television; the Internet) and on (supposedly) emotionally detached, mediated contexts (techno-scientific journals; news; military documentation). Painting offers an effective means of infiltrating these contexts and subverting the dromosphere itself. The implication is that creative, abstract processes, enacted in and through the body, are analogous to processes of germination, duration and space-time consciousness in the natural and animal world, the very processes that have engendered the varied creative disciplines that have developed slowly, gradually, over millennia, throughout human culture.

The human dimension that comes to the fore in painting reveals the continuum or feedback loop that resides between tangible and virtual worlds; the pollution of one realm by another results in the relocation of instances of visceral as well as spiritual intensity. In the studio, through the viewer, and over time, the decontextualised source images become something more than fleeting, virtual representations; painting transforms them by humanising them, quite literally, through the hand and the body's interaction with paint technology, and again through the duration of reflection experienced by the viewer.

I am conscious, as a painter and consumer of Internet imagery, of having embarked upon this new ecology of time, implemented through the ambiguity and viscosity of paint, and continuous acts of Internet plunder. Despite what seems to be a dismissal on the part of Virilio, painting involves a continuous Virilian renewal – a grey or temporal ecology – sustaining as it does, numerous processes of reflection and introspection in the face of a hyper-accelerated information culture. I have referred to aspects of this renewal elsewhere (Garnett and Armitage 2011a) in discussions of the 'apocalyptic sublime', an all too human condition whereby a sharp discontinuity or gap exists between what has occurred and what is perceived, and where painting offers a means by which to agitate within these gaps, bringing them to fruition. I have become invested in parsing and repurposing images from the mass media that I experience on the Internet and throughout our image-saturated and mediated visual environment. Once torn from their original contexts and left to 'sit', such images shift and begin to resonate with new meaning; the activity of translating through painting and repurposing these images reinstils the human in them. In this way, painting positively contributes to Virilio's notion of the dromosphere, if not by reversing it, then by infiltrating it with

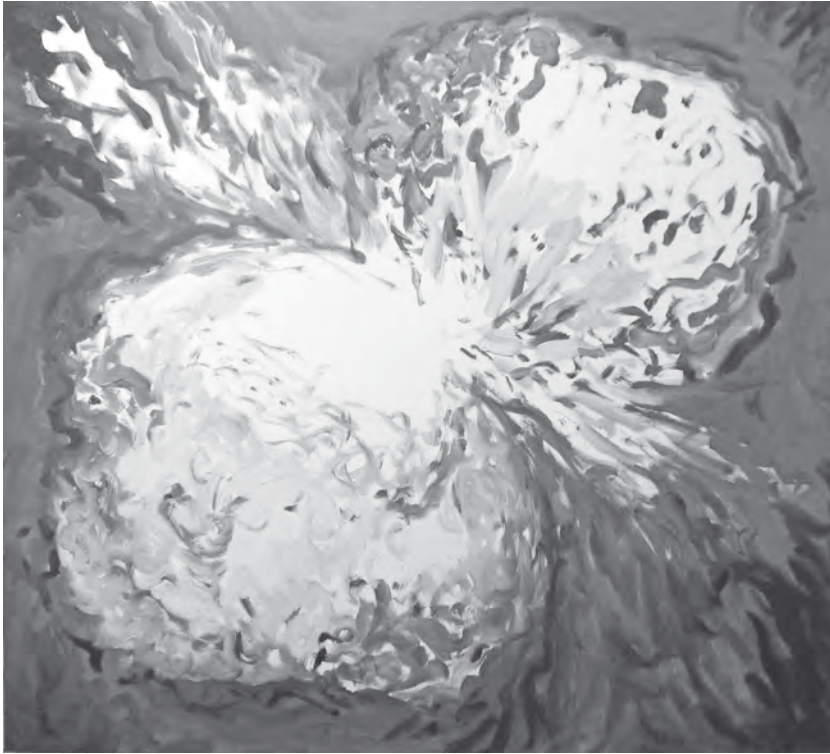


Figure 3.6 Joy Garnett, *Pink Bomb* (2011). Oil on canvas, 54 × 60 inches. Courtesy the artist.

counter-activities that rely upon and hence reinstate a sense of power and renewal through duration. It offers us a glimpse of a new ecology of time, through the reinvigorating engagement with an old, analogue, highly pliant and resilient art.

Shown: a selection of paintings from the series 'Boom & Bust' (2010–11) and 'Predator' (2011–12), which repurpose appropriated images captured and distributed through machine vision, re-establishing them within a human – and humane – taxonomy, through painting.

References

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