

Whilst Anne Ryan's paintings are not exact copies of either photographs or cinematic imagery they nevertheless sit in relation to both these two mediums.

Take Untitled 2001, for instance: the painting suggests a series of operations that can be mentally reconstructed or traced backwards. A painting is made after a photograph that was taken from a moving image and thus cut from the flow of movie time. The sense that the image belongs to another moment is itself doubled by the subject matter. Untitled 2001 forms part of a series of works that derive their content and compositional structure from the genre of the Western. Cowboys, horses, timber frame houses, saloon bars and a repertoire of familiar poses all work in differing ways to stage scenes from the Wild West. As a distinctive genre the Western and its ideologies had its heyday in another era and its imagery, and when it reappears it seems intimately bound to those memories formed in childhood and adolescence. On a first encounter the work can give rise to a déjà vu experience or induce a sense of nostalgia that invariably derives from the feeling of looking backwards. It is, however, the photographic logic that plays a principal and a decisive role in directing what is initially this backward glance.

The photographic moment in

Ryan's paintings is given a prominence primarily through the way they exploit certain classic devices. This is particularly evident in the way bodies, animals and objects are casually, even arbitrarily, cut. In Untitled 2001 a thin slice of figure nearly fills up the entire right hand edge. In Untitled 2001 it is a horse's rump that dominates the edge of the frame. It could be tethered or walking out of the painting. Either way, or perhaps because it can be read in both ways, the device of the cut gives to the image the casual, even indiscriminate quality of a snapshot. There is, of course, nothing new in this compositional device, Degas being the most obvious example of a painter introducing an all over democratic shift that works to put the periphery at the centre of the stage. There is, however, something paradoxical in its use here. Rather than working to establish the appearance of the everyday, the arbitrary cut in Ryan's painting is deployed in the fictional space of a film. Thus it may be more accurate to read this gesture as an unposing of the image. This act is dependent on the picture being read as the fictional space of film where the players, including animals, buildings, even landscapes, are composed to be seen by a camera and where movements are choreographed according to a script. The moment of the cut would refer to a point when filming stops, the drama relaxes and players, in becoming themselves, lose direction. This way of appearing seems evident in Untitled 2001 where the cowboy's vacant expression corresponds with the somewhat awkward demeanor of his pose. The body appears limp. In particular, arms and hands hang aimlessly like those of a child who awaits instruction.

The idea of unposing in painting doesn't quite work, however, since painting never stops being a staging or an artifice of some kind. What, then, would be present when a painting stops acting?

One response may be the play of paint itself; but this is a play that is somewhat different from mute physicality. In painting what persists once narrative deflates and meaning drains may simply be paint, stuff, matter-of-factness. However, what is significant in these works, if not in every painting, is the way in which matter is 'made' present and is not simply given. Paint specificity is not achieved through identity with itself but emerges through a relationship with other parts of the whole. And paint works to quite particular effects in Ryan's work. The paint is applied in thin layers (the artist calls the application 'mean'). The canvas is at times almost visible in parts. One stain of paint sits upon another but both canvas and the coloured layers sit in close proximity. This is similar to the way paint is structured in a watercolor. However, there is something paradoxical in the way translucency works here. Describing Marden's later linear paintings, Yves-Alain Bois comments on their lung-like quality. What he seeks to emphasise, even reclaim, is their optical visual quality as distinct from the more familiar calligraphic reading of the work. This optical breathing or rhythm, he observes, is established between the parallel weaves of lines. In the surface of Ryan's paintings there is also an oscillation between layers, a pulsing back and forth, but in an incredibly shallow space. Heaviness hangs in the atmosphere; the paintings breathe but in a slow and dense way. Only by being thinly applied and translucent is paint brought into contradiction with itself wherein light is also weight. Through a kind of empathy with the body paint, it takes on a depth that goes beyond its presence as quantifiable material fact.

Like a photograph, Ryan's paintings play with an appearance of unity where all the data in the pictorial field appears as though fixed simultaneously. Coherence is supported, further, in the numerous instances

where paintings are composed around a horizon and a vanishing point. In *Untitled 2001*, for instance, there is almost something obsessive in the way the picture is sucked in and zooms out from the centre of the work. But such determined centring tends to throw the painting off balance when an attempt is made to join this movement to those events occurring at the periphery. What this simple observation suggests or what the paintings themselves hint at is a compositional order that is, in fact, quite distinct from the type of unity that is established by a conventional photograph. Particular to this work is the way in which distinct zones or cuts appear to open up within the pictorial field. These are produced not through the use of explicit montage or overt cut and paste techniques but through the workings of what could be described as a 'subliminal montage'.

In his analysis of early cinema Giles Deleuze observes an emergent form of montage that is of relevance here. The shift from the fixed shot to a mobile camera and the use of barely perceptible montage in the editing of a sequence of shots generates a new type of movement beyond human perception. When cinema emerges from its static beginnings a shift takes place from space where actions occur only on a single plane, with no interaction between parallel spaces to a cinema of montage, and wherein a multiplicity of spaces open up in which characters come to interact across planes. He states, "The unity of the shot is produced here by the direct liaison between elements caught in the multiplicity of superimposed shots which can no longer be separated. The relationship of near and distant parts produce the unity."¹

The shift from single plane to a multiplicity of interconnected spaces is one that had already occurred in the history of painting and Deleuze cites Wofflin's *Plane and Recession*



Above: **Untitled - Anne Ryan**
2001
Oil on canvas
(152 x 182cm)

Opposite page: **Untitled - Anne Ryan**
2003
Oil on canvas
(76 x 83cm)

All images courtesy of the artist and Greegrass, London



to this effect. In the context of Ryan's work, what is of interest is the subtle connections formed between aspects of film and certain potentials that inhabit the history of painting itself. In a sense Ryan approaches painting through the optics of another medium in order to re-stage particular potentials from the history of painting, principally narrative painting. In part a move is being made to situate painting in the present and dissociate it from the anachronistic tag that would inevitably attach itself were the painting to reuse or mimic narrative painting directly. Rather than appropriate the past, the work re-stages it. This is achieved through a particular type of montage through which movement is produced and forms crank up into life. In a sense, the pictures become bigger than their parts.²

Certain works use montage quite literally. For example, in *Untitled 2001* tension is not only suggested by the demeanor of the figures but is accentuated by two distinct movements animating the whole. Six cowboys are shown seated at a circular table that dominates the foreground. They are partly echoed by a line of standing men to the left and by the slight distortion of the bar to the right. These concentric formations from table to seated figure to standing men/bar swell and contract from the centre. Simultaneous with this is another quite distinct movement in which a line of sight quite literally cuts through the group zooming from the foreground into an unfathomable distance. Staring in unison, the gaze of the men converges with this line and thus intensifies it. What solicits and captivates their attention is, though, a kind of nothing. Since no point exists on which to hang their attention, the focus becomes susceptible to the swell that emanates from the table. Whilst this simple tension does not progress beyond an opposition between the inside and the outside of the frame, the porosity between the two

achieves a complication wherein conflict is internalised in each of the parts and thus distinct from a montage of overt cuts.

Ryan's use of subliminal montage lets loose visions that are not entirely apparent at the level of appearance. Preoccupations with focus and dispersal and more significantly with the unseen play an important role here. This is most forcefully realised in *Untitled 2003*. Five standing men are grouped in a dark and enclosed room. A table at the centre of the painting performs a prominent role in this gathering. In somewhat similar fashion to *Untitled 2001*, the arrangement of figures echoes the shape of the table. The awkward slant of three of the figures suggests that they are being pulled into the centre. However, their rigidity holds them in place. Consequently, the figures seem to sway as though pulled by some weak centripetal force. The significance of the centre is further emphasised by a line in the middle of the painting that runs down the back wall, both leading and pointing to the table. The horizontal oscillation between periphery and centre is complimented by other movements that run vertically back and forth between top and bottom. The slanted angle of the wooden beams that describe the ceiling is echoed in the stoop of the figures. Both space and figure appear burdened by a downward weight. The figures in particular take on gravity as though it were physically attached to their shoulders. From the opposite direction the table itself acts like a force of nature magnetising the men and drawing them further down into the centre. Such a double binding produces an atmosphere of tension that could be read as a sign of menace. This quality is given further depth since what they attend to remains unseen and thus nothing is given that could make sense of this conspiratorial gathering. This is particularly compelling in that what remains unseen is not



Untitled - Anne Ryan
2001
Oil on canvas
(152 x 182 cm)

All images courtesy of the artist and Greengrassi, London

outside of the frame but is at the very heart of the picture and is filling its space. Bound together by movement and by the force of an unseen presence the figures nevertheless seem curiously separated, even alienated from one another like dummies in a waxwork display. Whilst such frozen photographic poses compliment the pervading sense of controlled aggression in the paintings, such an interpretive resolution ignores other movements at play in the work. Cinematic montage would be one such movement animating the work above and beyond perceptual immobility and narrative closure. Returning to that line which runs into the centre of the table, there is something carousel like between the arrangement of the pole and the disk. Acting as a pivot, both men and painting seem to turn and curve around this structure. The idea of rotation is brought further into play by the way in which figures appear to double one another (a reading which in part is permitted through the lack of facial definition), one

figure echoing and gliding into another. A distinct bond of solidarity thus arises. Here the figures lose themselves, merge into one another and participate with those forces animating the space and which may only exist at the edge of the scene.

Anne Ryan is represented by Greengrassi, London

Notes

1 Gilles Deleuze. *Cinema 1: the movement image*. Trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986, pp 26.

2 Whilst the intentions at work may be different between a Ryan painting and a Jeff Wall photograph, in their respective dialogues with cinema, photography and narrative painting there is, nevertheless, at the level of structure an interesting correspondence between unity and subliminal montage.