Afterall 16

Green and Silver
2005, oil on canvas,
231 x 160.6 cm,
installation view

Her Pornographic Imagination
--Monika Szewcyk

DH Lawrence once ventured that the English could not paint because they were afraid ofthe pox.[1] What he meant, of course, was that they were afraid of sex, as this was the main way ofgetting the cursed pox in his day, and that only this secret ingredient - a sexy, dirty, fearless quality - could enable true painting. I cannot help but start with this damning decree when face-to-face with the paintings of Gillian Carnegie, born in Suffolk, educated in London, as English as they come. Carnegie is not only one ofthe most skilful painters ofher generation, but also someone who presents a body ofwork that begs to be looked at in relation to what Lawrence euphemised as 'the pox'. TImes have obviously changed; I will dispense with the euphemism when considering her practice specifically and the life of contemporary imagery in general in the context ofthat ever-present and ever-expanding phenomenon ofvisual culture: porn.
In her essay (and apology for) 'The Pornographic Imagmation', Susan Sontag acknowledged at least three types of pornography, one being'a minor but interesting modality or convention within the arts'.[2] Forty years later, an update or reconsideration of the pornographic imagmary is in order. Today, we are immersed in a culture where (what once passed for) pornography has become the dominant form of imagery exchanged in western culture. It is definitely the most common type of imagery available on the Internet - its primary source of proliferation. But porn also colours much of advertising, reality TV and the news - consider American Apparel advertising, every magazine spread shot by Terry Richardson, most books published by Taschen, Paris Hilton's One Night in Paris (a sex video that has become emblematic of an entire sub-genre of celebrity porn), College Girls Gone Wild, i shot myself.com (and the veritable avalanche of amateur porn); Big Brother, Paradise Island, The Bachelor (all of which most easily break up the utter dullness of 'real life' with promises or glimpses of 'the great event'), not to mention the spectacular fusion of the Millitary industrial complex with/as pornocracy in the case of Abu Ghraib.[3] All these images and more trade on the power of pornographic affiliation. A growing number of artists reflect on this platitude, among them John Currin's latest series of mannerist menages, Marlene Dumas's Pornoblues (1993) and her Striping girls series of paintings with Anton Corbijn at the S.M.A.K. in Ghent (2001), the Click! comics painting by Lucy McKenzie (Untitled, 2005) and her affiliation with Richard Kern, Jeff Koons's Made in Heaven (1989-91) photographs featuring his wife Cicciolina (herself a porn star), Thomas Ruff's recent appropriations of a wide spectrum of Internet porn or much of Paul McCarthy's work, to name just several examples that quickly come to mind. What most of these works prove is porn's ever-widening popularisation in art (which itself is a reflection of the broader culture). And in this context, it is a feat to invoke pornography in a way

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1 Thanks to Peter Schuyff for this anecdote.

2 Susan Sontag, 'The Pornographic Imagination', A susan Sontac Reader, New York: Vintage Books, 1983, p.205. For Sontag, this modality of artistic practice was sperate from the psychological phenomenon (read individual perversion) and from pornography as a leitmotif of social history.

3 Much more coul dbe said about the relationship between the proliferationi of war and the proliferation of porn, which may be traced to the Vietnam era or, if one is inclined to consider the Marquis de Sade to the post French Revolutionary Terror. I have began to explore this eerie symmetry in a short essay published in the journal AS(Andere Sinema), but much more thought is required on the subject. See Monika Szewczyk, 'De Sad's symmetry', AS, no. 177, Spring 2006, pp. 56-57. However, Gillian Carnegie's work is not the site for exploring this futher, as it relates to what may be termed 'the pornocracy of contemporary culture' in distinct ways

that might trigger what Susan Sontag valued in it, namely the promise of'a wider range of experience', often characterised by a 'morbid-mindedness' (after William James). It is here that I turn to Gillian Carnegie, because she uses mild yet mindful allusions to this commonplace porn with some unexpected consequences. I am not only thinking of the bums, but these somewhat impossible views ofthe artist's rear are a good place to start. Impossible, because they could not have been easily seen by the artist herself, and required someone to take a picture. It is never clear whether she herself or someone else has taken this photograph - she leaves this up to our imagination - but what is indisputable is that the work starts with an exercise common to amateur porn. Throughout her decade-long career, Carnegie has been painting small 23 by 33-centimetre studies from photographs of her own bum - the format an echo of the magazine page. The obsessive return to this mildly pornographic motif - perhaps not all bums are pornographic, but the visible strain of her back and the tufts of pubic hair that often emerge are unquestionable allusions to porn poses - confirms one of the structural tenets of the genre: repetition. More bums have been and will always be painted to punctuate Carnegie's installations. Yet, the obsessive repetition may be lost on a viewer who would usually confront a single bum painting amongst less automatically provocative pictures. Thus, despite the allusionary matrix, Carnegie always retains an exit strategy - a kind of reversal or transgression of the transgressive/pornographic imagmation itself.

The bums are simultaneously meta-porn and meta-painting. The similarity of cropping between Carnegie's variously titled bums and Gustave Courbet's The Origin ofthe World (1866) is unmistakable. But what does it mean to show this origin as the inverse of the bushy female genitalia that the 'modern master' exposed? Carnegie's gesture is a three-fold upending of Courbet's 'master stroke'. Her origm is multiplied ad lrifinitum; his was singular. While his approach was origmal in its day, Carnegie transposes the exploration of origmality to the flesh of the paint itself. In place of Courbet's frank realism, she produces a multiplicity of painterly gestures: some bums are peachy and rendered in soft effacing brushwork, others are tectonic described in a few, bold economic strokes; some exploit a dirty brown palette, others emerge from a red light. The possibilities are endless. Carnegie tests her origmality in an earnest, obsessive and exhaustive manner, in the process turning Courbet's singular succes de scandalinto a genre. It was de Sade who linked the extreme erotic imagmation to prayer and other church rituals. 4 (Although he may not have been the first modern pornographer, he certainly was pornography's most philosophically prone advocate, or the 'wicked

4 This inescapability of de Sade's pornographic imageination from the religious imagination is somthing that Sontag saw as a great limitation. See S. Sontag, 'The Pornographic Imagination op. cit., p. 231

philosopher' as Pierre Klossowski called him.) In so doing, de Sade was linking the structures ofpornography to the structures of power, but not in an obvious sense.On the one hand, his writing affirms that our attempts at sexual transgression tend to replicate existing structures of power, or are in fact a produc; of them. Hence they' exhaustive formality ofthe orgies and the didactic, almost,~.ogmaticnature of the stories woven around libertine activity. And hence the repetition - just as church is always there every Sunday, and a transubstantiated God is eaten up as a wafer only to be brought back and eaten again the next week, the orgy will always be there the next day, the wounds inflicted by the libertines on their sex slaves will magically heal so that they can be inflicted again. However, on the other hand, de Sade saw this deeprootedness of a pornographic imagmation in a given power structure as a (paradoxical) path to true freedom - the logic of the sadist insists on freedom as a product of enslavement. Is this not also the pleasure of genre painting? There is great freedom gained from well-formulated rules and limits, especially of subject and composition. Carnegie's process insists on a kind of self-willed enslavement to motifs - not only bums but also flowers, lonely trees, black squares that disguise forested landscapes, landscapes dominated by strobing suns. The latter, while they vary in format and overall composition, retain the blind spot ofthe sun, a hole to fall into and an invitation to look into the sun without going blind. As with her bum, which is something that Carnegie cannot

see in the flesh unless she uses a mirror or a photograph, with the suns, the artist is again drawn to views that are impossible to achieve with bare eyes and yet totallymundane. In the process of constructing each series, what emerges is not a reflectio on the mechanics of repetition or on the regulated passage of time - they are never {to date at least} seen as an uninterrupted series - and we are not invited to compare them to each other, but must always juxtapose them with the other motifs. A sun, for instance, in relation to a bum, cannot but evoke for me the Bataillian solar anus. 'It is clear that the world is purely parodic,' Bataille observes at the beginning of a text

that seems to be an unwitting key to Carnegie's work, 'in other words, that each thing seen is the parody of another, or is the same thing in a deceptive form.'[5] The black squares, which on closer inspection reveal impasto forest landscapes, are quintessential deceptive forms. Here is the dark dark wood (a trigger ofthe pornographic imagmary of Little Red Riding Hood) as a parody of Malevich's Black Squares (1913-30).6 Carnegie's flowers are perhaps the most obscene things of all, but not in the Georgia O'Keeffe or Robert Mapplethorpe sense, and not, in a broader sense, on the level of representation. The flowers don't look like anything but flowers, though light

5 Georges Bataille, *The Solar Anus*, first published in 1927. Available online at http://www.greylodge.org/occultreview/glor_010/solar.htm (last accessed on 10 July 2007). Could Bataille's final line be a summary of the Bum paintings? "The solar annulus is the intact anus of her body at 18 years [Carnegie's are visibly those of a young woman] to which nothing sufficiently blinding can be compared except the sun, even though the anus is night.'

and paint-handling again vary as with the bums. Repeatedly painting the same dying bouquet stuffed in a cut-off Evian bottle for the past six years has yielded none of the suggestive imagery we might expect. And this is where the argument about Carnegie's introduction of obscene elements into paintingmust be complicated somewhat. When it comes to paint, it seems, the most straightforward use of it - the painting offlowers not as parodies of sexual organs, but as flowers, there in the world - is the more transgressive undertaking. To be more precise, Carnegie's use ofpaint, particularly in the case of the flowers, provokes a fresh consideration of the base materiality ofboth flowers and paint.

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6 The symmetry Carnegie draws between her work and that of Malevich's iconic paintings draws out the multiple and strategic deployment of his squares, which are most often dis cussed in the singular. Apropos the Little Red Riding Hood imaginary, it could also be added that Carnegie is a fan of Balthus. (Balthazar Klossowski de Rola), the Polish-French painter of nubile erotica and brother of Pierre Klossowski, whose own seminal study of the Marquis de Sade did much to politicise porn after World War II, especially around the Tel Quel group in France, and also influenced Balthus

What we have, in other words, is a kind of transgression of the simulacrum with the oldest representational medium in the book.

It is interesting at this juncture to consider a gesture by Allison M. Gingeras and Piotr Uklanski in the September 2003 issue of Artforum that seems parallel to the bum paintings. Ginger Ass, a photograph by Uklanski, presented of a closely cropped view of Gingeras's ass, framed very much like one of Carnegie's paintings. In an accompanying essay, 'Totally My Ass', Gingeras, who was then a curator at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, discusses the image as testimony of a transgressive relation between artist and curator, but ultimately as a simple act of striving for beauty that the image ofher ass shares with porn. As such, she also sees GingerAss as emblematic of Uklanski's ouevre: 'Uklanski likes porn. It offers a clear-cut formula for how to create visual titillation using banal subjects and cliched techniques. His ongoing preoccupation with sunsets, flowers, full-moonlit skies, city lights and shimmeringwater goes beyond their photographic depictions in his signature series 'Ihe Joy of Photograpyhy (I996-present).'[7] Although Carnegie's own ongoing series often evidence an affinity for the very same simple subjects, there is little ofUklanski and Gingeras's bravura and easy 'joy' evident in her paintings. Her suns and flowers and black squares always betray a more morbid imagmation. What is interesting, however, is that Gingeras's assertion that her 'crass gesture offers the image the possibility of retaining its autonomy' actually rings truer for Carnegie.8 There is little to no autonomy in the GingerAssimage, as it is heavily conditioned by Gingeras's calculated 'apology' and notoriously not only the work of an artist, but of her lover.

By contrast, each of Carnegie paintings retains an almost unnerving autonomy (understood as a formal origmality, as a physical stand-alone quality of a thing amongst other things in the world and, since the postmodern critique of it, an almost obscene thing to strive for in art). Carnegie seems aware of the problems, and the sovereignty ofher work is established in fittingly paradoxical ways. She insists on contradictory things in her work - painting singular motifs repeatedly and never showing them as series. Placed side by side, her paintings would always be read as parts of a greater whole and would quickly loose their independence. This is not how they are made and never how they are presented. Instead, her installations always emphasise the singularity and materiality of images. Carnegie puts it in an exotically mundane way: 'I prefer to consider the painting as a thing in the world than the painting as a picture of things in the world;

A kind of rescue or reversal of imagery into the realm of things occurs. This was brought home in her most recent exhibitions at Andrea Rosen Gallery in New York, where Carnegie showed a diverse suite: a leafless tree; what I might call a natural bum composed of visible sure strokes and impure pleasing hues; a bouquet in diffuse light with a half-painted wall in the background (all of which of course were plucked out of the larger series); and several unique paintings including a cemetery gate with a tiled floor in front, a geometrically patterned curtain and what seemed to be an expansive green seascape with a meagre grey sky composed from long lazy swirling washes of paint. Carnegie not only presented these carefully distributed paintings, but also, at the very entrance, an old carnival poster - a generic image and not even the real thing, but a photographic print of something the artist found in a market in Southern France. Its inclusion involved a kind ofrescue operation, its displacement out of its regular flow into this context of 'paintings as things'. This prosaic rendering of a parade of wacky manic-eyed jesters, rats, donkeys, big babies and old geezers, pirates, Cowboys & Indians, cops and clowns along a small town street in France evoked another time: a time when the world was not overwhelmed with mediation so hyper and spectacular that it becomes meaningless, but was still able to mark a moment out of regular life.

Carnegie seems to be seeking a carnivalesque gesture in the full knowledge that in this day and age, this cannot look transgressive. Within this project, the bums may be understood to act as punctuations that infuse the diverse spectrum ofher imagery with the possibility of obscenity, but not in the banal sense oftoday's porn. If there is possibility for true obscenity today - for the kind of pornographic imagination

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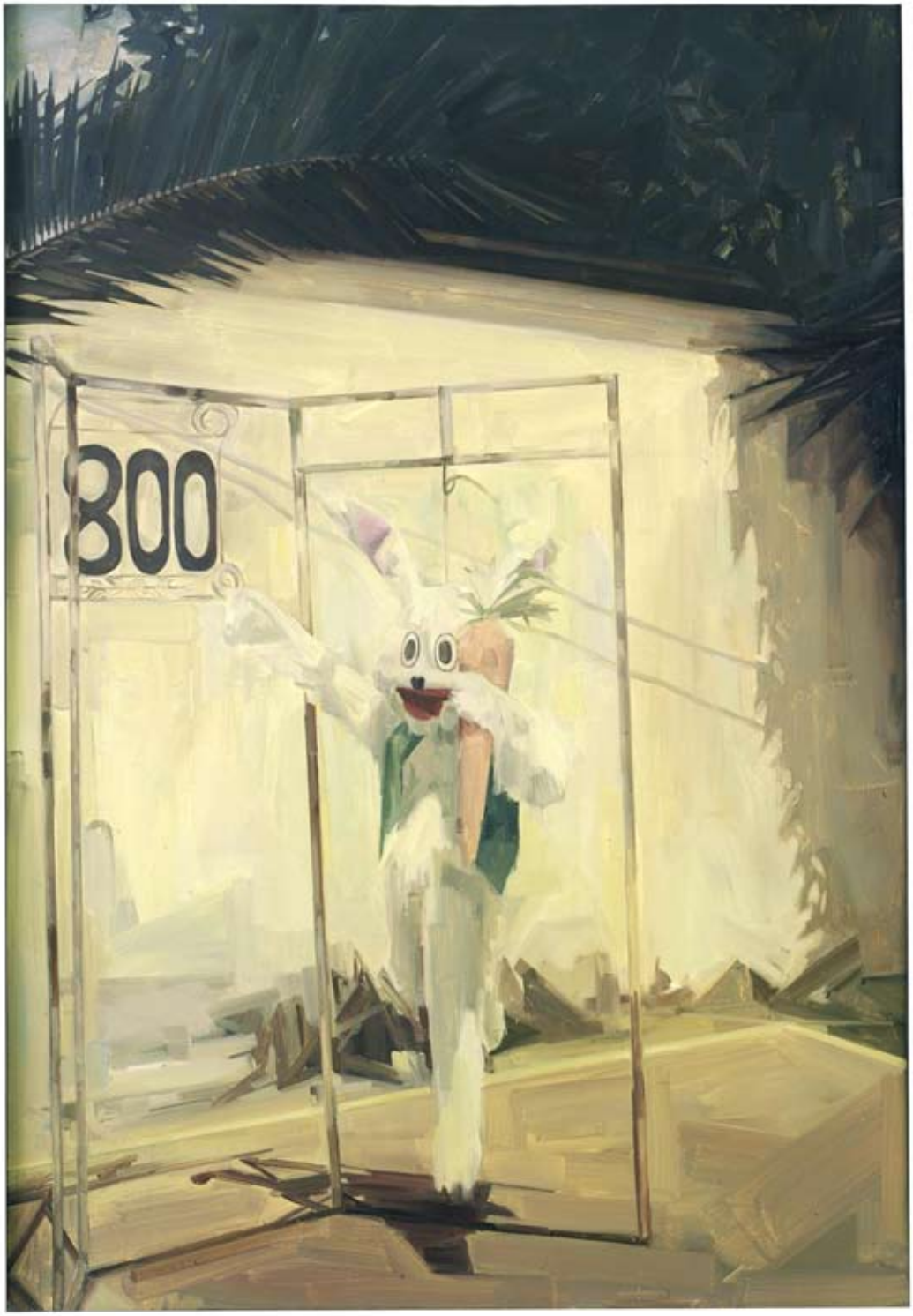
7 Allison M. Gingeras, 'Totally My Ass', *Artforum*, September 2003. Also available at http://findarticles.com/p/ articles/mi_m0268/is_1_42_108691797 (last ac ccesson on 9 July 2007)

8 *Ibid*.

9 Email conversation with the artist, 2 July 2007

that really does open up another, perhaps darker, but also more complete experience of the world - it must arrive as a reversal ofthe world's waning materiality. Pornography, in its earlier days, may be understood to have contributed to a confusion of the represented and the real thing. In his seminal SadeMyNeighbour (1947), one of Pierre Klossowki's main observations about the Marquis de Sade was that de Sade's pornographic imagmation was 'wicked' because it created a crisis of reality: 'Villainous philosophy puts a giant question mark on the decision to think and to write - particularly to think of and describe an act instead of committing it.'[10] If the writing of the 'wicked philosopher' is not understood as 'an act', it cannot be as titillating or as repugnant. This ultimate transgression of representation into the realm of physical/sensual reality is what may have made pornography so fascinating for some, so dangerous for others, once upon a time. Today, we are forever asked to get off on images as if they were no more than images, to forget the material realm altogether. Carnegie's work rejects this, not by rejecting images but by creating paintings as another order ofthings. In the right circumstance, face to face with an audience that is not afraid ofgetting infected by Carnegie's carnival spirit of base materiality, they will have the capacity to restore the question mark on the encounter of a representation and a thing in the world.

10 See Pierre Klossowski, 'The Philosopher-Villain', *Sade My Neighbour*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1991, pp. 13- 40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Pinata, 2004,
oil on paper,
99.1 x 68.6 cm

Critics vs. Gillian Carnegie
-Barry Schwabsky

There seems to be a problem with Gillian Carnegie's paintings - or maybe there are two problems. The first is deciding whether it is right to think that the paintings look old. Ifyou think they do, then the second is deciding whether the fact that they look old means they are old (musty, fusty, conservative), or whether it means that looking old has become a new way to look new.

I was not unaware that some observers ofthe current scene - and I amtalking about savvy people here, not nalfs - have had a hard time coming to terms with just what they are looking at when they stand in front of one of Carnegie's canvases, but I only really began to give it much thought back in February, when I happened to be visiting New York at the time of Carnegie's one-person show at the Andrea Rosen Gallery there. Now, myfriend David Cohen, an English-born, New York-based critic and curator, runs something called The Review Panel at the National Academy uptown - a periodic event to which he invites a number of critics to exercise their craft, not (as they usually do) in writing, but orally. A number of current exhibitions are selected and each critic is asked to visit them; each critic gives his or her 'review', and then they argue out their disagreements, if any, before inviting the audience to chip in with their comments.

I had never witnessed one ofthese review panels, and I had been curious about it if only because there seemed to be something contradictory, maybe risky about the whole thing: aren't writers better at writing than at talking? It is like asking a basketball team to play football. So when I saw that one ofthese would be happening duringmy visit to New York - along with David, who squanders his talents on the rightwingweekly The New York Sun, as well as running the gallery at the New York Studio School and a website called artcritical.com, the panellists were the city's most respected and influential critic, Roberta Smith of The New York 1imes, as well as Carol Kino from ARTNewsand David Grosz, withwhom I was not familiar but who turned out to be one of David's colleagues from The Sun - I decided to go along and see what happened.

What I saw was that I was right to think the enterprise was risky. The speaking critic is exposed in a way that the writing critic is not, and having to speak about a range of exhibitions one might not have chosen to comment on means exposing, in particular, the fact of not necessarily having anything interesting to say - ofnot necessarily being prepared to encounter certain works, whether good or bad. Under these circumstances, the panellists acquitted themselves well, on the whole. Amongthe five exhibitions considered was Carnegie's, and what surprised me was how little prepared for it the panellists were, though they had much to say. Not that David felt he was unprepared on the contrary, he had the sensation that he was too well prepared for what he saw as 'decent, honest, solid, paintings' that, nonetheless, were 'awfully familiar to me as a student of British realism ofthe last fifty years'[1] The challenge for himwas not so much the paintings as their context: what were these paintings, redolent to him of the subdued realism ofthe Euston Road School- the pre-War band of aesthetically conservative but politically progressive painters whose best-known member was probably William Coldstream, though it also included figures like Victor Pasmore, Rodrigo Moynihan and Lawrence Gowing, whose work later went in quite other directions - doing in 'one

1 http://www.artcritical.come/REVIEWPANEL/Rp15/index.htm (last accessed on 15 July 2007

Black Square, 2002,
oil on canvas
76 x 76 cm

of the hippest galleries in Chelsea'? Thus arises a suspicion: 'I thought, ah, I'm missing something here. This is cleverer than I am. This is saying something I'm not cottoning onto, and I'm being dim.' In other words, might Carnegie's seemingly old-fashioned manner of painting secretly amount - for the clued-in, at least - to a new way oflookingnew? In his eyes, the problem with her work seemed to be its refusal to take a stand one way or another, to be either 'real painting', as he put it, or Conceptual art. In fact, all ofthe critics were troubled by a sense ofwhat Grosz termed'denial' in the paintings - something he attributed in part to their imagery of closed gates, drawn curtains, walls and so on, but which more generally seemed to have to do with what one might call the paintings' inability or refusal to coincide with themselves: rather than it being the case that, as Frank Stella once famously put it, 'What you see is what you see', with Carnegie's paintings 'This work is all about what it's not', in Kino's view. 'It's not there,' as Smith put it, 'it's like she's somewhere else.' As a result - here Smith might be speaking for her colleagues - 'I basically end up feeling sort of toyed with.'

David's association of Carnegie's work with that ofthe Euston Road Schoolmay be a somewhat arbitrary one, based merely on the nationality he and the artist happen to share with those painters of the 1930s, but that her work is redolent of some odd, inward - and backward-looking sidebar to modernist painting is inarguable. At best, one might think of an episode such as the'dark period' Matisse went through in the first years of the 20th century, just before the explosion of Fauvism. Actually, Coldstream and his colleagues are probably best seen as belated even in their conservatism, o:he of the last gasps ofthe 'return to order' that sprang up throughout Europe in the wake of World War 1. Indeed, the feeling of estrangement provoked by Carnegie's paintings - 'it's like she's somewhere else' - sounds much like Wilhelm Uhde's reaction to Picasso's turn to a sort of neoclassical pastiche in works he exhibited in 1919: 'The conventionality, the sobriety of the attitude seemed studied,' the dealer and collector who had been an early supporter reflected, 'and it seemed to be repressing some pathetic secret.'[2] This repression of which Uhde speaks rhymes with Grosz's'denial', just as the 'nihilism without repetition' ofwhich Smith accused Carnegie (as distingUished from the 'nihilistic repetition' in Philip Taaffe's paintings, discussed earlier on the same evening) - based on the evident differences amongthe paintings in her show at Rosen, with apparent models rangmg from early Mondrian to William Nicholson seeming to bespeak a lack of commitment - echoes the idea of pastiche as a rejection of any possibility of 'inner pictorial logic' that Rosalind Krauss, building on Uhde's critique, has identified in Picasso's work after about 1915.[3]

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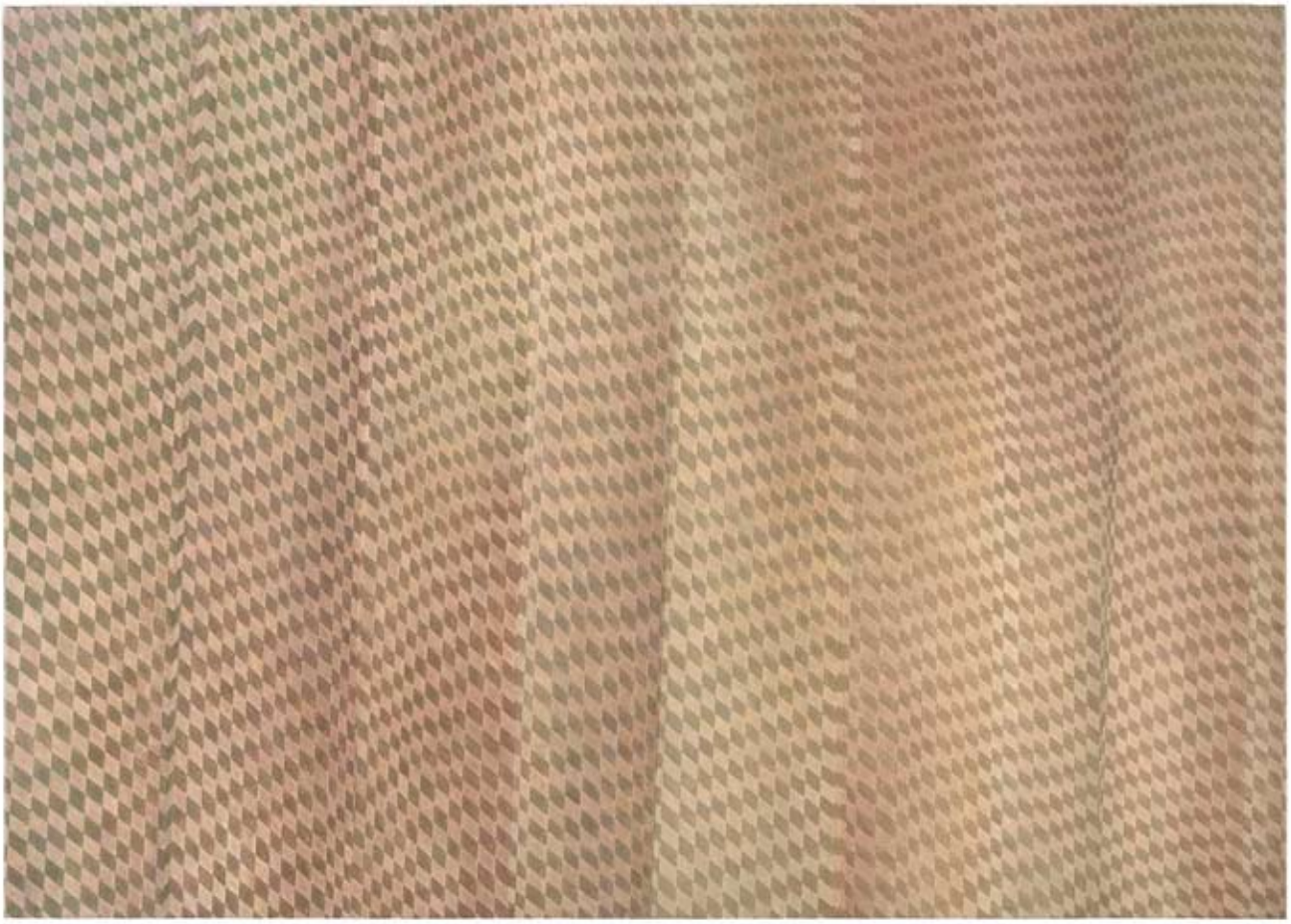
2 Quoted by Hal Foster et al., Art Since 1900: Modernism Antimodernism Postmodernism, London: Thames & Hudson, 2004, p. 160
3 *Ibid.*, p. 163

Krauss understands that neoclassical pastiche and Cubist rigour, anti-modernism and modernism are both connected and opposed - they are dialectically related in such a way that 'those anti-modernisms are themselves conditioned by exactly those features ofthe modernist work that they wish to repudiate and repress'.4 But she does not face up to the other side ofthe dialectic: that modernism is likewise conditioned by that which it wishes to repudiate and repress in anti-modernism. Le Corbusier's purism, or even Mondrian's neoplasticism, for example, also reinterpret Cubism as pointing toward a kind of 'return to order', a clearing out and cleaning up, a new form of classicism. What does all this have to do with Carnegie? Well, I think the informed reader can see where this is heading: Carnegie's work is about abstraction as much as it is about representation, and - for better or worse - takes an equally disenchanted (though hardy unsympathetic) view ofboth. 1hus, Maison Merlin (2005-06),the painting in the Rosen show that seemed to represent the folds of a curtain, is equally a billowing field of abstract rhomboids, almost like a Bridget Riley painting whose crisp antithesis ofblack and



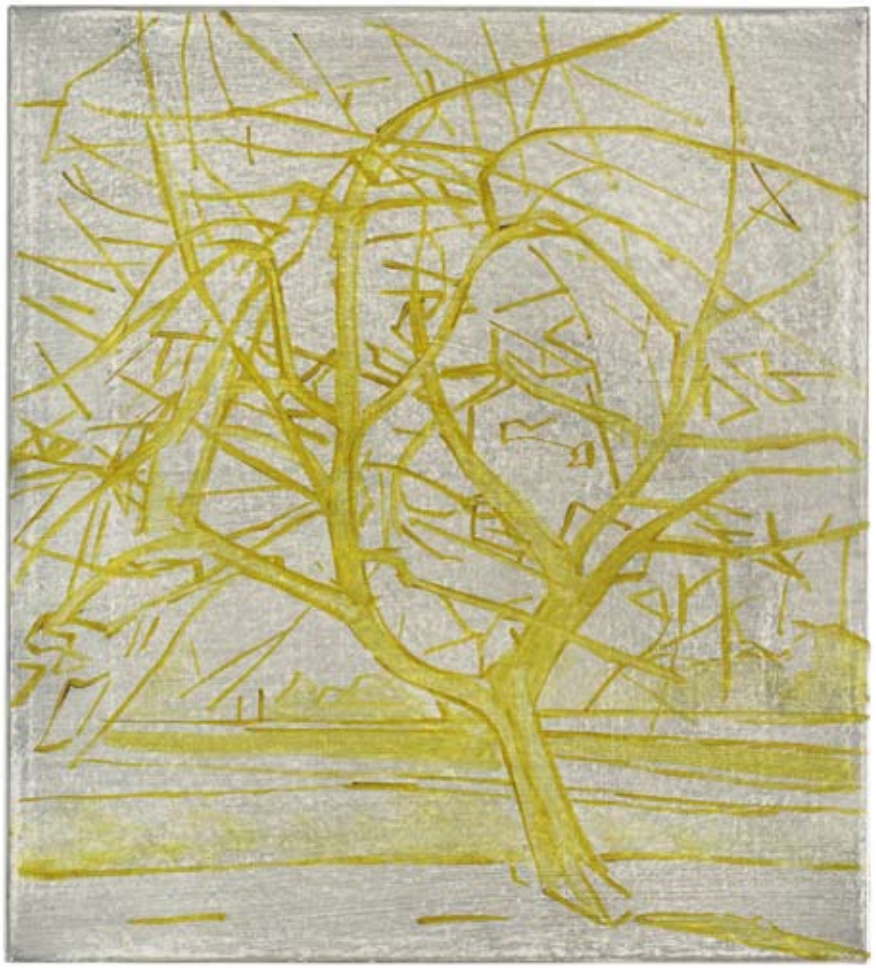
white had been blanched and tamped down to become a faded, sallow shadow ofitself. Likewise, the monochromatic Yellow Wall (2006) may well be taken for the representation of a scene, as implied by the second word ofits title - but where exactly is the wall it supposedly pictures? The receding planes of a certain kind ofrepresentational space are ce tainly there, but to put one's finger on any actual representation is something else altogether. Ifthere is a wall here, it is as much the painting itself as anything in it, something like what Adrian Stokes once spoke of as 'Leonardo's homogenous wall with adventitious marks which, he said, encourage fantasy to reinforce their suggestions', and which was central to modernism, 'an especial spur from the time of the Impressionists'.5 The painting's surface, emphatically textured to the point of scabrousness, conspires with the blindingly close-valued shades of its one hue to conjure an irritatingly resistant sort of abstraction closer in spirit to the work of Clyfford Still- 'infused', as Clement Greenberg pointed out early on, 'with that stale,

4 *Ibid.*, p. 165
5 Adrian Stokes, 'The Luxury and Necessity of Painting', The Critical Writings of Adrian Stokes, Vol. III: 1955-1967, London: Thames & Hudson, 1978, p. 148.

Yellow Wall, 2006
oil on canvas,
231 x 160 cm

No Depression,
2002, oil on paper,
50.8 x 35.6cm

prosaic kind of painting to which Barnett Newmanhas given the name of "buckeye'" , yet for all that realised as serious art. 6 Maison Merlin and Yellow Wall are not necessarily typical of Carnegie's work and not just because her use of pastiche makes it hard to speak of a 'typical Carnegie'. Most ofher paintings don't evade representation in this way, although she has shown what seem to be straightforwardly abstract works as well- for example Maze (2003), which was included in her 2005 show at Cabinet in London. But even that painting could be seen as a form of representation - a plan for the labyrinth of the title - though it would not qualify as pictorial representation in the tradition of Western painting since the Renaissance. In general, her paintings fit easily into traditional representationalgenres: landscape, still life and the nude. Yet her typically wan palette, though redolent of the tonal painting of the Old Masters and some of their modern imitators, works against any sense of faith in her imagery. While they used tonalism for the sake of lending solidity to their depicted forms, Carnegie seems to be draining those forms from within, corroding representation and evoking pictorial illusionism only just enough to establish that it can be quashed by the same means, the tree or flower or buttocks turned back into irreducible bits of paint.



Section, 2006
oil on canvas
457 x 50.8 cm

Carnegie, it might be said, doesn’t so much deconstruct representation as decompose it. And whatever she paints, however she paints it, this decomposition ofthe image is the one thing that seems to happen over and over again in her work. This dogged consistency, of course, is the very opposite ofthe ‘anything goes’ spirit of pastiche as it occurs in Picasso’s work of the late teens just as it does in so

6 Clement Greenberg, “American-Type” Painting’, The Collected Essays and Criticism first published in 1927, Vol. 3: Affirmations and Refusals, 1950 - 1956, University of Chicago Press, 1993, p.230

much contemporary painting, even of kinds that seem as otherwise incompatible as the oeuvres of Michael Krebber and John Currin. Ifthere is anything truly old-fashioned about Carnegie's paintings, it is their self-analYtical rigour, which is something that is almost always out of fashion. It is understandable that her innate scepticism toward her own art of painting can be seen as merely apathetic or even cynical ifwe forget that a compelling doubt can be one ofthe most passionate forms of engagement. And such a scepticism is no more likely to please those who feel secure in their faith that painting has been superseded than it will those who would like to believe the art is too well-founded to need being put to the test. For Carnegie, painting is a process of questioning - not of denial, not of evasion but of relentlessness, a rigorous unwillingness to evade the elusiveness ofthe task of self-consciousness.

Why don't my fellow critics see this? My point in citing the panel discussion at the National Academy is not to set up a rigged competition between the ill-treated genius artist and the purblind reviewers - far from it. But it is curious that while, in the 1950s a critic such as Greenberg could see in Still's entirely earnest employment of what in any other context would have been unforgivable pictorial mannerisms 'the conquest by high art of one more area of experience', four decades of Pop art and postmodernism have made it difficult for us to see an artist's possibly awkward or perverse stylistic choices as anything but a game with the public's expectations.[7] On the contrary, the thought of a public seems rather distant to these paintings, and the incomprehension fthe critics substantiates this distance.

Untitled II, 2002,
oil on canvas,
24.4 x 25.4 cm

7 Ibid., p. 231.

THE NEW YORKER

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CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK
ENERGETIC FATIGUE

It's no cinch to praise works by the gifted young Brit Gillian Carnegie, the most arresting new painter ofthe moment, whose show at Andrea Rosen might prompt zingers on the order of "sensationally dreary." You must see her paintings to appreciate how they are eerily energized by a sense ofthe medium's exhaustion. Carnegie pursues tired modes of still life and landscape with ardent, stroke-by-stroke absorption. Variously styled paintings render leafless trees against drab skies, a vase offorensically detailed flowers, a metal gate that may open onto clinical depression, and a garden path in slathered, unhappy lemon yellow. There's one example ofthe cheeky (in two senses) views ofthe artist's bare rear end which first won fame for an ambition so hushed that it might have eluded notice indefinitely. Past masters Morandi, Balthus, Richter, Tuymans-are evoked, but distantly. Each picture, and each part of each picture, exults in painting's sorcery, braced by something uncomfortably like loathing for its subject.

-Peter Schjeldahl

Painting in Tongues

Gillian Carnegie

Darling, Michael. *Painting in Tongues*. Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 2006.

It is easy to become enthralled by the potent energy and beauty of Gillian Carnegie's paintings, but one can best appreciate the ambition of her undertaking when multiple works are seen side by side. Her subject matter, viewpoint, palette, scale, and handling of paint change dramatically from work to work, building up a catalogue of imagery that is anything but singular. Though many of the subjects recur, the way they are painted rarely does, as one of Carnegie's primary motivations is to keep pushing her craft, often into areas where she feels less than comfortable or secure.[1]

These technical challenges imbue her paintings with a sense of risk, which is especially noticeable when she works within discredited or stale genres. Dusky still lifes such as Waltz I (2004), for example, could almost be seen as objects rescued from a secondhand shop. Featuring a vase of dried flowers against neutral drapery, Waltz I seems to have been soaking up secondhand smoke in a spinster's sitting room for decades. Waltz II (2004) offers the same palette and subject as Waltz I but from a different viewpoint, as if from another of the artist's memories. Beyond their superficial stodginess, Carnegie's still lifes possess painterly energy and compositional vigor, breathing new life into dead forms.

Carnegie's shifting style could be explained as an excavation of memory using various methods to picture a range of times and places, suggesting the instability of perception. Voi (2004) shows a faded vista down a verdant path, painted in a clumpy scumbled style that went out of fashion in the late 1960s, perhaps tying the image to a deeper stratum of the memory bank. Greener (2004) adopts the same vantage point but features richer, more saturated hues and a less decrepit handling of paint, as if to communicate a more easily accessible recollection. Together, the works address the shifting ground of perception, subjectivity, and reflection, a central concern in her practice. The dream quality in Carnegie's work varies, sometimes communicating seemingly innocuous childhood memories as in May Queen Detail (2003), a small work on canvas later revisited in a larger

1. Gillian Carnegie, in conversation with the author, 16 October 2004.

painting on paper titled May Queen (2004). In these two works—as well as a 2003 charcoal drawing of the same title—the artist's technique of zooming in and out on the central female figure features different emphases and degrees of pictorial clarity that approximates the mutating significances of recurring dreams.

Absurdity and the nonsequitur also creep into her work from time to time. Pinata (2004), in which a bizarre rabbit figure is suspended from a stark armature within a vaguely tropical setting, breaks from Carnegie's human and nature scenes while mirroring the unpredictability of dream states and resisting an easy categorization of her overall output. Her visions can be ominous as well. For example, works in the ongoing Black Square series—which reveal considerable variety despite sharing the same title and dominant color—are characterized by an undercurrent of dread that complicates and enriches Carnegie's other paintings. Through powerful and evocative brushwork, the artist conjures trees, bramble, and earth amidst dark dank forests in these muscular and meaty paintings.

Another staple in the artist's repertoire of images is her own ass, which she renders from a number of angles, under different lighting conditions, and with a plurality of painterly touches. One constant is the cropping of the torso below the waist and above mid-thigh so that the frame is filled by her chosen subject with no possible distractions. In Brunette (2004), her cheeks are rendered with warm dappled brushstrokes as if they were Paul Cézanne's apples ripening in the sun; in Nude on White Linen (2002), pale creamy expanses of skin remind one of Edouard Manet's figures; and in Red (2004), lurid slapdash smears more akin to Marlene Dumas's work hint at the pornographic. Doubtless the gesture of putting her bum in the face of viewers is meant to be provocative in both an erotic and anti-bourgeois way, but it also functions as a feminist reclaiming of the contentious "gaze."

If one thinks of Carnegie's work as an ongoing investigation of the fragmentary and fleeting nature of memory, however, these self-portraits also serve as markers of the "now," capturing a state of being before it is dragged away into the past.

Focusing on a cherished aspect of her youthful beauty, they memorialize her body, forestalling the inevitable forces of aging and gravity as only art can. A cynic might be quick to trivialize these pieces as strategic grabs at shock or notoriety, but when they are considered within the entirety of her practice they are shown to be equals in a complicated network of attempts to give visual form to the vagaries of time and memory.

THE INDEPENDENT

June 5, 2005

Gillian Carnegie: Flower Power

Few in the art world know her. Charles Saatchi owns none of her pictures. She is so private that she nearly refused to be shortlisted for the Turner Prize. Yet this 'conventional' painter is on the verge of becoming the nation's best known enigma.

By Marcus Field

'Turner Prize shortlist shocks art world" was the headline in The Independent on Friday following Tate Britain's announcement that a painter was among the four artists in the running for the controversial gong this year. It was the kind of response usually reserved for the latest outrageous antics by one of Britain's mischievous conceptual artists. But this time the surprise was that a woman who makes representational still-life and landscape pictures could be regarded as "outstanding" by judges notorious for seeking out work that challenges both artistic convention and good taste.

Once the initial surprise was over, the next question on everybody's lips was: "Who is Gillian Carnegie anyway?" When I phoned around to quiz the editors of art magazines, so few ofthem knew anything about her that I began to wonder whether she existed at all. Could it be an elaborate hoax?

"She doesn't do interviews and she's not an art world person," observes Charlotte Edwards, deputy editor ofArtReview. "When I saw a picture of her in the newspaper, I was amazed. She looks like she's been caught emerging from a burrow or something." Andrew Wheatley, a director at Cabinet, the London gallery that represents the artist, confirms her existence but says she is an intensely private person - and always has been - whose policy has been to avoid publicity for herself, so much so that she thought very hard about whether to accept the nomination for the Turner Prize and all its media brouhaha.

The biographical facts issued by the Tate offer little help. Carnegie was born in Suffolk in 1971, studied at Camberwell School ofArt and was awarded a Masters degree in painting by the Royal College ofArt in 1998. She lives in North London, is ex-directory (as is her father) and we know she has a boyfriend called Kalvin because she exhibited a portrait of him in her most recent show. Even the specialist art media have failed to learn much more about her.

But the fact that her work is also so little known confirms just how dominant the noisy, all-singing all-dancing forms of conceptual art - unmade beds, sharks and all the rest of it - have become. Carnegie's work has, after all, been on display at Tate Britain as recently as 2003, when several ofher paintings, including close-up views of her own backside, appeared in the group show, "Days Like These". But their impact was drowned out by screeching video installations and the vast, eye-dazzling floorwork by Jim Lambie, her fellow competitor on the Turner shortlist. How, then, did the maker of these small, technically proficient paintings come to be in the running for such a high-profile prize? Enough public nominations must have been received by the Tate for the judges to think it worth making a trip to see her work, although that early stage of the process remains as mysterious as ever. After that, it was simply a matter of the strong impression the paintings made on the panel when they visited Cabinet to look at them back in February.

"There were just a couple of still lives and a portrait. But each one wrongfooted the other," says Louisa Buck, one of the judges. "What look like conventional paintings are anything but. They are actually conceptually rich; they interrogate painting; they make us think about how and why we look at it." What she means, I think, is that Carnegie's rural scenes, naked bodies and rotting flowers are not to be confused with straight representations of the amateur kind, but are academic investigations of a much higher intellectual order.

"She's a painter who talks conceptually," says Karen Wright, the editor of Modern Painters magazine. "She deals with the same issues as Sam Taylor-Wood or Anya Gallaccio - it's about the fragility of life, the desire to return to more innocent times." Andrew Wheatley puts it another way: "She works in traditional genres landscape, still life, portraits - but what she does is unload and reload them. That complexity becomes visceral, their physical nature is quite compelling. And there's pleasure to be had from them, too."

According to the critic Barry Schwabsky, writing last April in the highly respected Artforum magazine: "Carnegie turns back toward the fusty hues of old pictures rotting beneath their own varnish, not to reclaim some former solidity but all the better to verify her forms' ultimate evanescence." Phew. It's arguments such as this that will be invoked to make us believe her work sits comfortably alongside the more "conventional" conceptual artists on the Turner Prize shortlist. But The Independent on Sunday's art critic Charles Darwent is having none of it. "I don't think she's that amazing a painter. I definitely see her inclusion on the shortlist as a nervousness on the part of the Tate selectors who are trying to outSaatchi Charles Saatchi. Because he's getting into painting, they're worried about being left behind. I think painting's so over. It's not like when [Jacques-Louis] David was painting. It doesn't have a frame any more. Itjust feels like corn dollies tome." Darwent does however concede that Carnegie's work has its merits. "She really worries about paint; she uses quite a lot of impasto - it's quite expressive, very live. She's certainly working in a tradition rather than being a conceptualist who works in paint."

Louisa Buck, though, rejects the accusation that shortlisting the enigmatic Carnegie is just a way of chasing the Tate's rival Charles Saatchi, whose exhibition "The Triumph of Painting" is on show at his South Bank gallery. "That's just bollocks," she howls. "We didn't go out to tick boxes or make a big statement about painting. It doesn't need to triumph; it's always been at the centre of debate. This is just work that's very complex and very conceptually rich. That's why it's on the shortlist."

Although one critic I spoke to swore he had seen one of Carnegie's paintings on the wall ofthe Saatchi Gallery, a little bit of research reveals that the advertising mogul owns none of her work (Turner Prize artist not discovered by Saatchi shock!). This is a shame because it means that the artist has eluded the public yet again and that we will have to wait until the Turner Prize show at Tate Britain in October before we can judge her work for ourselves. Will painting triumph when the winner is announced on 5 December? Louisa Buck is not giving anything away. And Charles Darwent is sticking fumly to his guns. "I'm putting my fiver on Lambie," he says. Which sounds exactly like the kind of answer the reclusive Carnegie would be happy to receive.

Turner Prize 2005, Tate Britain, London SWI (02078878008), from 18 October

ARTFORUM
APRIL 2005

GILLIAN CARNEGIE
CABINET

Could drab be the new fresh? You'd swear it's possible after seeing Gillian Carnegie's new paintings. Not only are most of them executed in a palette that ranges from dun to olive, but even her most unqualified whites-the sickly pale skin of the subject of her portrait *Kalvin*, 2004, for example-convey a feeling of grubby impurity. The essential drabness-what I am tempted to call, after Wordsworth, the "visionary dreariness"-of these paintings may be owed less to their color than to the peculiar touch, at once fleshy and mercurial, with which that color has been applied, and this unsettling touch becomes all the more evident when the color lightens.

In this show, at least, Carnegie is at her strongest when the paintings most approximate academic exercise. Surprisingly, given that she first drew attention for a series of (pictorially) impressive close-up views of her own behind, the more inherently striking her imagery. *Pinata*, 2004, a hanging bunny figure with half a leg whacked off-the less disquieting its treatment. We've all been taught that the browns of the old masters were there to model the figure, to create forms of palpable weight and volume, and that the pure hues of the Impressionists initiated the drift toward modernism by sacrificing solidity to the realization of the flat, decorative surface. Carnegie turns back toward the fusty hues of old pictures rotting beneath their own varnish, not to reclaim some former solidity but all the better to verify her forms' ultimate evanescence. Here lies her work's affinity to the cadaverous stink given off by Luc Tuymans's imagery, however little most of her paintings owe to the "look" of his. If there's no red to speak of in the tight little roses found in Carnegie's stililifes *Waltz I* and *Waltz II* (both 2004), it's perhaps to show how the depicted object expires on admittance into painting.

The irony, of course, is that Carnegie is an exquisite handler of paint. The sheer textural variety of these surfaces, not to mention the intuitive rightness of the juxtapositions and modulations with which they are woven, must have been a delight to execute, however successfully they convey a sort of artistic claustrophobia. Even in the landscape *Section*, 2004-one might better call it a sort of portrait of a tree-the sky does not breathe. Instead the eye is caught up in the dense tangle of branches and disoriented by the way the foreground has been thrown out of focus by a series of seemingly arbitrary smears of paint while the branches just behind are crisply and decisively rendered, for all their want of coloristic differentiation. Somehow there is endless space caught up among those branches but precious little around them. The rather Johnsian *Maze*, 2003, is a labyrinth without an exit, making this otherwise seemingly off-message painting, the only quasi-abstraction in the show, an apt summation of its prevailing mood.
-Barry Schwabsky

ArtReview

March 2005

Reviews

Gillian Carnegie

Cabinet, London
(+44 (0)20 72516114)
21 Jan-26 Feb
Review by Pablo Lafuente

What is the goal of painting as a medium? It is not to represent the world; it hasn't been since the moment content lost its preeminence (not just in painting, but in the arts in general). Nor is it to educate, as it was long before art became representation. Even though painting has occasionally been used as both an instrument of instruction and a reflection of what surrounds us over the past 200 years, what is characteristic of the medium itself is the development of its own language through its own means: coloured pigments and a two-dimensional surface.

This (typically modern) definition is tautological and highly pro blematic. But its basic assumption - painting's autonomy - is fundamental to our understanding of what art means today. Without it, we wouldn't be able to tell the practice of painting as art from the practice of painting as a simple technique. But, more importantly, it is this autonomy that allows painting the possibility to be something other than self referential, by guaranteeing itself an space that can somehow be opened to the 'outside' world.

Gillian Carnegie's work is a perfect example. Her exhibition at Cabinet is made up of nine paintings that immediately give the impression of technical mastery. All the works, whether oils on canvas, paper and board or charcoals on paper, are executed with an astonishing skill and confidence. The brush strokes are mostly visible throughout, but somehow it is obvious that Carnegie could avoid them if she wanted to. In fact, it seems that the opposite is true: she really wants the marks and blobs to be there, clearly visible, in order to create both a strong tactile quality and a certain distance between the image and the viewer. This is most apparent in *Kalvin* (2004), a portrait of her boyfriend. The thick, vertical brush strokes are so present that the figure (and the fact that the painting depicts the artist's boyfriend) almost becomes irrelevant.

The same thing happens in the flower still lifes *Waltz I* and *Waltz II* (both 2004). The pot with flowers has appeared so many times in Carnegie's work that it has lost any relation to its origin, and seems to function almost as unspecific raw matter. This time the dark, brownish colours of the flowers meld in with the brown of the background, and only the different width and density of the strokes helps you distinguish the one from the other. The two works titled *Pinata* (2004), one charcoal and the other oil on paper, have a more accessible figuration (something like the sixfoot rabbit in Henry Koster's film Harvey), but the image remains as impenetrable as the others.

Carnegie's mastery of the medium means that all the images work perfectly as paintings. But they also work together as a whole. Within the space, the different textures and compositions come together through a yellow tone that they all seem to emanate. It is here, in the disquieting sensation that the sickly yellow provokes, that painting's autonomy asserts itself.

Above: Gillian Carnegie, Section, 2004, oil on canvas, 50.8 x 45.7 em, detail

Turner Prize

2005

DARREN ALMOND

GILLIAN CARNEGIE

JIM LAMBIE

SIMON STARLING

BRITAIN

TATE




Gillian Carnegie

1971 BORN SUFFOLK
1989–92 CAMBERWELL SCHOOL OF ART, LONDON
1996–8 ROYAL COLLEGE OF ART, LONDON
LIVES AND WORKS IN LONDON

Text by Lizzie Carey-Thomas

Brown Eyes 1999
The Carol and Arthur Goldberg Collection

Untitled 2004
Private Collection

On the surface, Gillian Carnegie wears the mantle of an academic figurative painter. Her disparate subjects loosely fall into the traditional genres of still life, landscape, the figure and portraiture. Her palette is dominated by earthy muted tones and her painterly dexterity highly accomplished. Yet while apparently dedicating herself to the conventions of representational painting, Carnegie succeeds in carving out a space from which to attack preconceptions inherent to its established languages. At once acknowledging and seeking release from the straitjacket of painting's rhetoric, Carnegie refuses to offer the security of an orderly approach to her choice of subjects or a binding sense of stylistic coherence. Instead, she retains the freedom to inhabit a range of different personas and confuse any overriding statement of intent.

Carnegie often works in series, periodically and compulsively returning to the same image or subject but varying her approach each time. She describes her series of 'bum paintings' – fragmented self-portraits cropped at torso and thigh recalling Gustave Courbet's *The Origin of the World c.*1876 – as a 'pause' in her overall production. As such, they follow in the tradition of the nineteenth-century still life, as experiments in composition, light, palette and painterly technique. In *Nude on White Linen* 2002 the pornographic connotations are accentuated, with the figure prone on crumpled sheets, legs spread, back arched and the viewer's eye guided towards the dark void between the buttocks, rendered in a graphic, realist style. In *Brunette* 2004 the strained twist of the torso, artificial hue and loose, vigorous brush strokes combine to neutralise and objectify the figure, dispelling any suggestion of narrative. The exquisite, milky description of flesh in *Odalisk* 2000 appears to pay direct homage to Edouard Manet (1832–83) while *Red* 1997 casts the scene in a magenta hue, one of three works taking their palette from the opening scene of Jean-Luc Godard's 1963 film *Le Mepris*.

Carnegie's decision repeatedly to paint her bum is a complex, provocative and carefully orchestrated gesture. By continually shifting perspectives on this loaded motif, Carnegie simultaneously exploits and negates its many evocations. Embroiled in an ongoing game of charging and defusing her subject matter, Carnegie conducts the viewer's response accordingly. She allows meaning to attach itself fleetingly and then fall away, coaxing you in but refusing to commit.

Carnegie's apparent detachment from her subject matter, which she approaches primarily as a pretext for the act of painting itself, has been compared with Manet who, as described by Georges Bataille, 'insisted on an end to rhetoric in painting' and called for 'painting for its own sake, a song for the eyes of interwoven forms and colours'. Yet there appears to be a calculated perversity at the heart of Carnegie's paintings. This is manifested either through the image itself or the handling of the medium, an obstinate desire to disrupt any visual or narrative resolution that pushes her project into entirely different territory. It is this element of instability, this palpable disquietude and resistance to easy interpretation, that pervades all her paintings despite their formal differences.

This discord is often created by capitalising on the tension between subject and medium. A range of densities and textures often coexist within one canvas, from thickly applied impasto to thin washes, at once affirming and operating independently of what they depict. In *Green Mountain* 2002, the flattened form of the distant peak is engulfed by an encroaching black sticky tangle of hedgerow painted so thickly it resembles tar, neutralising any remnant of sublimity. *Fleurs d'Huile* 2001 is part of an ongoing series of still lifes focusing on a withering bunch of flowers in a cut-down plastic bottle. The petals both meld delicately into the backdrop and are almost obliterated by the built-up mass of paint at their centre. The risk of annihilating the subject by transcribing it into paint is ever present. The muddy, dingy brown palette of *Waltz I* 2004, reminiscent of a discoloured snapshot, exacerbates the general atmosphere of putrefaction and decay. Here, the background drapery breaks down into broad, crude brush strokes, revealing the canvas beneath and threatening to overwhelm the carefully worked vase it supports. In contrast *Black Flower* 2001 throws the bouquet into silhouette against an acidic yellow, translucent backdrop, giving the petals an unnaturally solid, weighty physicality which both asserts their existence and highlights the artifice of their construction through paint. *Section* 2005, meanwhile, focuses on the dense network of branches of an autumnal tree, continually drawing the eye back to the surface through incongruous marks that seem to serve no descriptive function other than to confuse a sense of spatial perception.

This constant vacillation between the two-dimensional and picture surface, between what is being represented and the physicality of the medium, inevitably brings attention back to the personality manipulating the paint. This gives the paintings a charged energy and live presence, despite the stilled nature of the subject matter. It is perhaps taken to an extreme in Carnegie's series of 'black paintings', night-time woodland scenes constructed almost entirely in relief from densely applied impasto. Her

Black Square 2004
Dr Josef Dalle Nogare Collection

Black Squares 2002 and 2004 explicitly refer to Kasimir Malevich's infamous 1913 series of Suprematist paintings, but they invert the macho tradition of the monochrome heralding the demise of representational painting by planting a conventional landscape at its heart. An insouciant retort to painting's tradition of the grandiose statement, these dark, wilfully transgressive works revel in the visceral, excremental materiality of the medium and, paradoxically, only properly come to life when light hits them.

In her determination to resist definitive interpretations and avoid moving into predictable territory, Carnegie adopts a continually mutating stance. Her use of impasto originated from a desire to distinguish her paintings from photographic images. But in a bid to avoid falling prey to a trademark 'gimmick', she has recently begun using thin washes to create a flattened, uninflected surface. This mercurial approach extends to her use of imagery which is often strategically selected to throw things off balance when viewed in the context of her other works. Taken from a found photograph, *Untitled* 2005 depicts a group of Bavarian male dancers, in lederhosen and plumed headdresses, arrested mid movement with one arm and leg raised. It is at once an absurd, unsettling and strangely banal scene, enhanced by the painting's mute and un-worked surface. There is a similar sense of the uncanny in *Girl on Swing* 2002, taken from a recently rediscovered childhood photograph of a prepubescent girl, leg lifted and skirt hitched to waist. Carnegie somehow distils the ambiguous voyeurism of the scene, both sexualised and static, suggestive and evasive, a sort of deadened modern day re-enactment of Fragonard's rococo masterpiece.

Carnegie's creation of a hermetic world seems to reflect the interiorised, intensely personal nature of the painting process itself. Issues of what to paint, how to paint and the historically contested nature of the medium are all bound up in the work. But instead of getting weighed down by the need to justify the act of painting, Carnegie uses these dilemmas to propel herself forwards. Strategic and conceptual in nature, there is nevertheless something profoundly existential in her approach to painting; she asserts her subjectivity at every level. Seducing the viewer into a direct engagement with her work, Carnegie never lets us forget that we are looking at a painting, or who is in control.

LCT

Tate Triennial Exhibition of
Contemporary British Art 2003

DAYS LIKE THESE

Gillian Carnegie

In 1955 Georges Bataille suggested that Edouard Manet's unique achievement was to have forged a new and modern form of art: a kind of painting in which the manner ofthe execution was as, if not more, important as the subject; in which, indeed, the artist would adopt an attitude of indifference to the subject. He wrote: 'What Manet insisted on, uncompromisingly, was an end to rhetoric in painting. What he insisted upon was painting that should rise in utter freedom, in natural silence, painting for its own sake, as ong for the eyes of interwoven forms and colours." He concluded: 'To some extent every picture has its subject, its title, but now these have shrunk to insignificance; they are mere pretexts for the painting itself."

Gillian Carnegie (an admirer of both Manet and Bataille) has found a way out ofthe impasse faced by many young painters - what to paint when, seemingly, everything has already been painted, how to paint when one feels the burden of the history of modernism and its dogmatic enshrinement of the notion of 'progress' - by returning to that year zero of modernism. She has taken Manet's position - as artic lated by Bataille - as a starting point for afree-ranging and undogmatic exploration ofthe fundamental properties of painting. To do this she has chosen to work within the traditional genres of painting. This limitation has, surprisingly, arrowed for greatfree'dom of action. By adopting this approach she is able to address awide range of subjects in avariety of styles.

Carnegie works with landscape, still life, the nude (the 'bum paintings' also functioning as a kind of surrogate self portraiture) and, recently, portraiture. In many respects her subjects are conservative and conventional, but her treatment of them reveals a complex and subversive vision. Her use of the varying textures and densities of paint, brushstrokes that both emphasise and contradict the subject they describe, colour that is on the one hand realistic in the most traditional sense, on the other highly artificial, creates paintings that seem at once engaging and evasive. Whereas in the work of Leon Kossoff and Frank Auerbach (two painters she admires) the thick paint is visceral, an equivalent or substitute for flesh or the matter described, in Carnegie's painting this is never the case. The paint seems divorced from the subject it describes. Her virtuosity is playfully and seemingly to its own ends. The dense excrescences of paint in her Manet-esque still lifes have little or no descriptive value, seeming to erupt in the centre of the painting of their own volition. If anything they provoke a crisis of confidence in the ability of paint to represent the world.

Nevertheless, we should not discount the importance of the subject in Carnegie's work, despite the fact that some paintings seem to approach abstraction. Carnegie works from photographs that she takes herself, and the compositions are often worked out in advance before the models are found, the locations identified and the preparatory studies made. Other works represent a more opportunistic response. In *Green Mountain* 2002, for example, the figure in the lane and the mountain in the distance are derived from different sources; photographs taken many years apart. The subject itselfis ambiguous - who is this figure, are they approaching or retreating - butthe paint is even more so. The thin washes of paint and thick slabs of impasto all contribute to create an image of worrying instability.

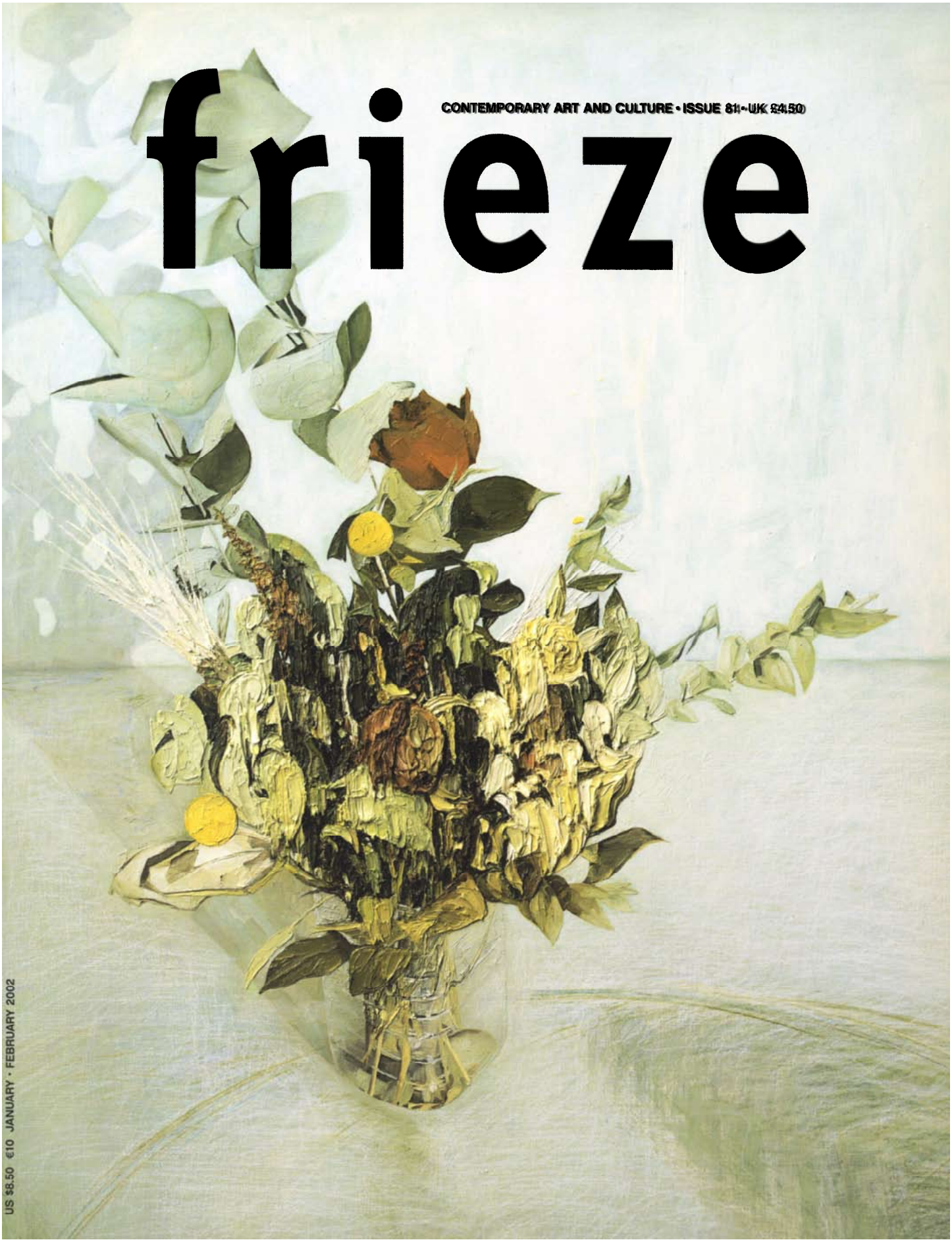
Instability is afundamental precept in her work. In many of her landscapes she fixes on that most cliched symbol of romantic landscape painting, the sunset, but uses it to subvertthe very thing she depicts. She makes the Sublimity of nature appear absurd. In many ofthese paintings the colours are forced into the realm of kitsch and her handling ofthe paint is deliberately overdone. Yet she also creates exihilarating images of the play of light through trees, or across a landscape.

Perhaps the extreme opposite ofthe sunsets and one of the most extraordinary aspects of Carnegie's recent work is a series of black paintings. *Black Square* 2002 is an imposing monolith of paint. At first we see only a solid mass of black matter, quite literally a black square. But closer inspection reveals thatthis is aforest scene, painted afmost in relief, with asurprising amount of colour to be found within the dense impasto - blue in the sky, greens and reds in the forest floor. The original impetus for these works - of which *Honer* 2000 was the first - was the challenge of depicting a night scene, rather than as a conscious referencing of the monochrome tradition in painting. That Carnegie had this historical precedent in mind however, is made explicit by the title. Black Square was the title given by Kasimir Malevich to his ground-breaking abstract Suprematist composition of 1913.' Monochromes, and specifically black or white monochromes, have often been put forward as representing a final advance, or an assertion of the death of (representational) painting. Thus Alexander Rodchenko could claim in 1921, after exhibiting a series of monochromes, that 'It's all over ... and there is to be no more representation' ," and forty years later Ad Reinhardt was still able to make a series of black abstracts that he called the 'last paintings'. Yet the opening up of possibilities that Carnegie's practice entails means that she can approach the monochrome from a radically different direction and playfully subvertthis heroic tradition offinal statements. Her *Black Square* actually contains within itself that most traditional of subjects, a landscape, and a wooded glade at that.

Ben Tufnell

frieze

CONTEMPORARY ART AND CULTURE • ISSUE 81 • UK £4.50



US $8.50 €10 JANUARY • FEBRUARY 2002

Polly Staple on Gillian Carnegie

The finishing touch

There is a crisis with regard to Representation, They are looking for Meaning as if it was a thing, As if it was a girlJ required to take her panties off as if she would want to do so as soon as the true interpreter comes along. As if there was something to take off.

Marlene Dumas The Artwork as Misunderstanding, 1991

Most painters depend on light - those plein air artists couldn't have struck a pose for Modernism without it - but Gillian Carnegie seems to crave darkness. Her themes and subjects are simple enough: genre painting, landscapes, nudes, stilllifes; her style is old-fashioned, her handling of paint even conservative. However, her preoccupation with detailing an arrested narrative of desire makes her work at once both sublimely ancient and fiercely contemporary. Carnegie's paintings reek of sexual menace and voyeuristic obsession; they act recognizes the

as ciphers of darkness, of moments when transgression occurs - occasions when you can lose yourself in some other matter.

But then there's always the brisk clarity of morning. I first saw Carnegie's work in the artificial light of the ICA, London, in a group show of contemporary drawing. Surrounded by a peer group of doodling youths transfixed by the legacy of Sol LeWitt, Carnegie blinded them very elegantly with her arse. Untitled (1998) depicts a closely cropped image of the artist's upper thighs, bottom and lower back. Taken from a photograph and rendered in graphite on paper, the style is clinically accomplished. Although pressed close up, in your face (the pert boyish buttocks, the cocky contrapposto movement), the pose itself is not so problematic. It is the spread legs and the revelation of the prominent fluff of the artist's pudendum that shatters the distance required for aesthetic contemplation. This graphic description of the female form engages with a more challenging pornographic language, yet it is the forced acknowledgement of the artist's personality that makes Untitled such an unsettling image. The restrained academic style seduces you into an engagement with the subject and the viewer is thus embroiled in an erotic encounter with the artist. Before you can accuse the artist of, quite literally, selling her arse she pre-empts the possibility, controlling the viewer's position and bringing the erotics of commodity fetishism to the fore. This is a sophisticated gesture, both an acknowledgement and a testing ofthe limits of the private in a very public sphere. Carnegie's strident exhibitionism

Still Life 1999 Oil on board 23 x 23 cm

obscure shamefulness of yourvoracious desire to look; a disquieting yet not unpleasurable experience.

Untitled serves as a statement of intent for Carnegie's continuing series of 'bum' paintings. (I would prefer to use the word 'arse', though, as it has a harder edge, better suiting Carnegie's project.) The fact that it's difficult to label these pictures reflects the complexity of what they depict what exactly are you looking at? All the paintings pursue the same theme: a cropped rendition of Carnegie's bottom painted from a photograph, but their composition, treatment and effect vary: from the suggestion of a torrid narrative to a purely formal exercise in painting; from the crispness of a Photorealist style to the more recent fleshy abstraction in which the outline of the figure blends with an indistinct background. In one painting Carnegie is depicted lying prone on a couch. You can see the edge of a blue sweatshirt and a green blanket; the lighting suggests a dingy domestic set-up. In another picture a crouching figure is fully lit and set against a flat grey ground.

Sugar Shack (9/99) 1999 Oil on canvas

Except for a couple of images in which the figure is wearing white pants - or half-wearing them, as they're just about to slip off - the paintings draw your eye to the dark cleft of her buttocks. This consistently available motif proves the perfect vehicle for Carnegie to explore the manipulation of paint and the psychological complexities of her subject matter.

The landscapes and still lifes lack the obvious erotic implications of the 'bum' paintings, but they are no less complex and perhaps articulate more clearly the artist's obsession with exploring the construction of potent images from the base materiality of paint. Carnegie's most recent paintings signal a self-conscious move away from a reliance on the photograph. Honer (2000-1) is a virtually unintelligible landscape, the paint so black and thickly three-dimensional that the finished piece is, perversely, almost impossible to photograph: the glistening marks simply reflect the light. *Fleurs de Huile* (2001) is the most successful of a series of recent stilllifes depicting a bunch of decaying flowers informally arranged in a cut-down Volvic bottle. What happens here is very similar to the 'bum' paintings' insistence on the psychological implications of light and dark, surface and depth, submission and dominance. The flowers in Fleurs de Huile are subject to the same intense scrutiny as any of the nudes - the viewer is cast in the same complicit role as a spectator exploring the subdued yet shifting theatrics of the artist's gaze - but in this instance the allegory is clearly articulated through the handling of the paint. The fragile description of the washed-out edges of the flowers implodes to become a built-up mass of paint; just as your eye recognizes the description of 'flowers' you are faced with the mess of 'matter', the oscillating tension between subject matter and material invigorating the faded grandeur of painting's lowest genre. What does it mean to be a painter these days? How do you find a subject and approach the canvas, let alone begin to manipulate the paint? Carnegie's paintings operate successfully as meditations on the nature of pictorial realism - they are concerned with the problems intrinsic to painting itself and, as such, they operate as allegories of their own production. For all its visceral nature, Carnegie's use of paint is remarkably conceptual. Her paintings display all the sulky insouciance of a teetotal teenager entering a room full of intoxicated adults, dancing badly. But, above all, Carnegie's work possesses the arrogance of a girl; one who knows how to get you off, when to put out and when not.

> Carnegie's strident exhibitionism recognizes the obscure shamefulness of your voracious desire to look; a disquieting yet not unpleasurable experience,

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Gillian Carnegie

Bum Paintings

Lisa Panting

Pinned to the wall in Gillian Carnegie's studio is an assortment of images: postcard reproductions, snapshots, phone booth sex cards and newspaper clippings. This isn't a set of influences nor even a representation of things that Carnegie particularly likes but more an assemblage of stuff to be scoured; visual records and art history acting as one giant thrift store within which to make that precious find. Giorgio Morandi makes the grade for his use of palette; Albert Oehlen for his markmaking; Renoir's Boy with cat is just 'good painting', and a newspaper mugshot of Sidetrack, an American mass murderer, provides a frisson of fear. To confront the task of painting, Carnegie immerses herself in the studio with a sense of being detached from the world at large. This portrait of an artist glued to her practice sounds achingly romantic but the way in which she works necessitates this engagement. Carnegie's paintings present an intricate, catholic practice that appeals disarmingly to our desire for an authentic art. This practice doesn't belong to the present climate of cultural production, as their beguiling sumptuousness testifies, through the way in which their images are fixed in the mind's eye of the viewer.

Aside from the 'bum' paintings, landscapes were Carnegie's initial focus: mise en scene of woodlands and riverscapes, a lonely figure, sometimes more than one and sometimes no one at all. These early works evoked a sense of voyeurism, an entering into an eerie world where the natural habitat became the strange and insecure place of the horror movie, where lolling about on a summer's afternoon would never be utterly unobserved. In Ponoka a figure is walking down a country lane. As with the earlier works, this painting summons a narrative. With figures it is hard not to be drawn into the world of storytelling, into a world that speaks of an event. Carnegie has expressed unease at this and it was around this time that she began to move away from using snapshots as storyboards. Her work became radically i mersed in the quality of paint and mark-making. Dark landscapes such as Honer, where the human figure is absent, proffered through the twisting, gnarled paint a drama of its own. The relief of the canvas and the play on night-time woodland light create its own brooding atmosphere.

*M*ilda is a painting of the artist's bottom. Carnegie's 'bum' paintings are painted with the aid of a photograph. These are perhaps her most directly mimetic works, but have no desire to be photographic. The transition from photograph to painting is one that befuddles their categorisation; not pornography and too graphic and specific in their cropping to be classified comfortably as nudes they range from the domestic to the downright explicit. You can see why Carnegie is fascinated by Balthus; the provocative stares from underage girls and the sense of disquiet and perversion that evades actual definiton, all echo with the bum's potential to unsettle. You can't help but feel that Carnegie is enjoying their effect on her public, a once-removed stab at exhibitionism. However, they also function as a dialogue with the still life and landscape works, providing another view of our place within the world. They are the consistent thread through which the rest of the work can be addressed. When seen in relation to a landscape or still life that has been painted at the same time, it is possible to detect a corresponding use of brush and palette. This mix of motif undoubtedly constitutes her signature; within the context of the art world it is the one thing that has allowed her the freedom to experiment with less foreseen possibilities in other realms. You could say it is a fair trade.

Gillian Carnegie
Ponoka 1999

Black Flower is a recent still life painting, the most recent of three paintings of the same bunch of dead flowers in a cut-down Evian bottle. First came *Colossus* followed by *Fleur de Huite*. Each time the use of paint becomes more audacious, each time an alternative solution to parts of the painting were sought. These three works illustrate most clearly Carnegie's obsession with the nature of paint. Despite their indexical link to the same photograph, there is not much else to remind you of the technically reproduced image. *Black Flower* works to destroy its notation, the thick glistening crescendo towards the central Dower couldn't move further way from the recorded image if it tried. Due to its painted structure, *Black Flower* becomes impossible to document successfully, Its scatological logic reeks of decay and death with an almost gothic decadence that sits bizarrely within contemporary painting in general. It is very tempting to read these works through psychoanalysis, but it would only provide a partial account as they are not mere objects through which to illustrate theory. The strength of these paintings is the way in which their meaning is communicated through the material construction of the image as painting.

Soleps is also fairly new and the use of the black paint is reminiscent of the built-up centre of Black Flower. This time the trunk of a tree gets the treatment. Its tactile nature entices you into the composition of a fafrytale sunset. The point of view is a little strained, as the scene is rendered almost flat by the giaring sun. Carnegie recently rediscovered Van Gogh and was bowled over by them for a while. She knew this painting would summon the ghost of Van Gogh and perhaps Munch, Despite this there is an edge which is puzzling as there is a certain cheesinesss reminiscent of a sunset in a 70s cigarette ad. Inscribed in the work is an awareness of the zeitgeist and how to mould it to her own specification. That's why the sun doesn't seem like the timeless motif that it is. The same goes for the dead Dowers in the Evian bottle, inevitably hinting at its place in time through a nod at lifestyle, health and beauty.

All of Carnegie's paintings position the spectator behind her own point of view. In her 'bum' paintings her view is obscured; in the landscapes she has recorded a place and noted the varticularities of it with the lens.

This framing feeds the tension in the work. Here is not the place to demonstrate the history of the photograph and its relationship to painting, but it is an inescapable fact that the photographic index links these paintings and is a condition of the process of their being made.

Carnegie is one of those artists who demands an in-depth account of each and every move she makes, the conceptual language that links the paintings narrates itself through juxtapositions within her teuvre. Currently Carnegie's studio is littered with sketches, some of which become abstracted through built-up paint. What makes her work so exciting' is its unpredictability. Constantly pushing herself on, she is aware of the limitations that exist in recent discourse because of its reluctance to engage with the actual paint surface. Carnegie drags us through this impasse by the scruff of the neck in what in the end amounts to toughing it out and daring to dance to her own tune. ■

Gillian Carnegie is showing in 'EU' at Stephen Friedman Gallery, London from September 21 to October 20 and at Cabinet, London in 2002

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Gillian Carnegie
Soleps 2001

The Guardian Tuesday July 7, 1998

Look at this calm river scene and you'11 spot a man masturbating. Nothing by the New Contemporaries is quite what it seems, says **Robert Clark**

Laddy in the lake

It's Friday morning in art-schoolland. Wood Street, at the heart of Liverpool's shabby, chic regeneration zone, is littered with empty beer barrels, cardboard boxes and night-club flyers from the night before. Second-hand clothes shops, independent record stores, techno joints and art deco wine bars are openingup everywhere amid rows of gloriously derelict and semi-derelict warehouses. In one very dusty old building, the Tea Factory, there's a show of student art.

This is no cheap and ordinary, selfinitiated art student enterprise. This is New Contemporaries, the most prestigious date with imminent superstardom in the arts calendar. Why has the Tea Factory been chosen as the openingvenue, before the show tours to the more classy environs of Camden Arts Centre and Newcastle's Hatton Gallery? Skint young artists initiated this kind ofpost-industrial format out ofbare necessity well over a decade ago. Maybe the established organisations now aspire to a bit of art cred by association with streetlevel muck and the architectural ghosts of past toil. Whatever the reason, New Contemporaries 1998 is a show of brave, if sometimes only partial, unorthodoxy. At first glance, the exhibits seem to offer reassurance to those who still equate proper art with the ability to apply oil paint to canvas and make it look like something familiar. Gillian Carnegie's Withering Blue Thlip appears to be a painting ofa tranquil riverside picnic site, rendered with tasteful Impressionist dabs of the brush. But look again and you spot a masturbating man floating naked on his back in midstream. The painter herself is up to something simple and good, too. She takes the inherited conventions of the medium and interjects an alien into the environment, an element of cultural otherness.

If the best ofour art students don't unashamedly indulge in this kind of liberating perversity, who ever will? After all, fine education is a seriously funny business.Wedemand that students conform to the formalities of the university and yet we secretly hope they will practise wild, ifsubtle, rebellion. We require them to be versed in inherited theoretical vocabularies, but need them to energise us with some previously unseen thing. Besides, these days their lecturers are generally up to something even more weird, spending day after day away from the studios in interminable admin meetings. The very fact that so many students survive the contradictions is in itself wonderfully encouraging.

In previous years, the show has launched

the careers of such Brit Art names as Damien Hirst, Gillian Wearing and Jane and Louise Wilson. Students and recent graduates send their work in and a panel ofselectors takes its pick. In an art climate in which any definable, commonly agreeable criteria for assessment long ago went out the window, this is no easy task.

On this year's panel were artists Phyllida Barlow and Christine Hohenbuchler, curator Eddie Berg and Guardian art critic Adrian Searle. Confronted with thousands of anonymous works, there is bound to be a tendency to go for the odd ones, the ones that appear less derivative than the rest. This year the work is intriguingly varied in character and most of it, to its great credit, is utterly convincing in its cultural awkwardness.

There is a distinct tendency towards low-tee involvement, which may be significant or may simply reflect the impoverishment of student life. There is also a surprising number of paintings. These are done in a spirit of amused amazement at how the representational and illusionistic qualities of this medium can be so seductively ambiguous.

You've Changed is the title of Nigel Cooke's photo-realist painting of what appears to be the mess left on the floor of an immaculately modernist living room by a spontaneous combustion. Many of the photgraphic works also take on painting's compositional tensions. Sophie Rickett presents photographic urban nocturnes that have a precisely composed quality, traditionally held to be more common in painting. Lamp posts thinly traverse the darkness like painted minimalist stripes. The dirt and gravel on the road are picked out like a starry consolation.

John Patrick Clayman's Infinity takes a further photographic step towards minimalism. It's almost entirely a black-and-white photo of whiteness. Painting imitates photography. Photography imitates painting. Against the advice of purist teachers, the best art students have always been good at using a medium in a productively inappropriate manner.

Even Waseem Khan's installation No God Questions seems bent on questioning the presiding authority of new communications media. On a 'IV monitor hanging above a blackboard, an upside down face mouths an indecipherable monologue. The viewer is invited to sit in a chair (the kind they have in university lecture classes), don a pair of headphones and further distort the monologue by means ofa wired-up slide-rule.

The collaborative graduates Jo Lansley and Helen Bendon interestingly didn't go to a college in London. Twenty-six ofthe 33 exhibitors here did. Could this account for the less self-consciously irresponsible feel of their video piece The Sweet Smell Of Success? The pair are filmed breaking into a house, nicking some eggs from the fridge, climbing out of the window, and carefully inserting the eggs, one by one, down their tights. Whether this amounts to a desperately unsophisticated attempt at disguise or an absurd theatre of immaturity, it is left to the viewer to decide.

Elsewhere, Yasu Ichige's video shows a bright-red racing car stop to face an endless grey expanse ofocean waves. The stationary car revs and revs up to a beautiful seaside burnout. This art takes on futile subjects. Most of these artists invent scenarios in which they can act out an inverted reflection of what most citizens would think decent, desirable and sensible. So, despite all the problems, it can be fun being an art student, after all.