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Construct of Reality:

Through the Photo Realistic works of Richard Estes

Masters of Arts in Fine Art by Dissertation and Exhibition.

March 2019

Tanja Brnic

Student number: 557017

Supervisor: Professor Jeremy Wafer

A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Arts in Fine Art by Dissertation.

Johannesburg, 2019

Declaration:

I Tanja Brnic declare that this dissertation is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Master of Arts in Fine Art in the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination in any other university.

Signature: _____ (Tanja Brnic)

Date: August 2019

Abstract

In this research I explore aspects of the work of the Photorealist painter Richard Estes as a lens through which I examine aspects of my own practice as a painter. Estes works from a multitude of photographs of everyday urban scenes as a fragmented "mirror" of a visual or perceptual reality in a way which parallels my own practice. As an artist, in my own practice, I am challenged constantly with transforming the external three dimensional visual world on to the two dimensional surface of the canvas. I paint from photographs as a means of capturing a specific moment in time and place. The process allows for reflection of my own reality, my everyday experiences and thoughts.

This study does not claim to make an original contribution to our understanding of Realism or Photorealism, so much as to synthesise some key ideas and perceptions and apply these to the understanding of my own processes as a painter working in this mode.

I will focus on the concept of "the construction of reality" as the interplay between what is "real" and what is perceived through photorealistic paintings of reflections and distortions. Painting, in my and Estes' practice, is a means of transforming a temporary moment into something more permanent.

Through a close analysis of a selection of Estes' realistic paintings of everyday scenes of New York City which he manipulates, visually changing the original, I am able to discuss and contextualise my own painterly processes. I then extend this case study focus to a wider consideration of a number of art historical and theoretical perspectives on Realism and Photorealism. The aim is to engage in a dialogue with my series of work, discussed more fully in the final chapter, that represent in two dimensions, my own construct of an experienced three dimensional reality.

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Introduction:

The intention of this paper is to traverse the relationship I have as a painter with my experienced "real" world and the concept of Realism, and to locate my own work within the larger scope of Realist painters particularly in the Western tradition. The term "reality" within the parameters of this paper is taken to be the visually observable world which exists, and which we are surrounded by in our very real everyday human experience.

Realism as a modern art movement from 1840 until the 1880's had the aim to construct an impartial, truthful and objective representation of the visual world, through conscientious observations of "contemporary life" in an attempt at "maximum verisimilitude" (Jakobson, R. 1987:20). The iconography, importantly, favoured observable scenes of "ordinary" working and middle class people engaging in everyday activities. These new paintings contrasted particularly with the idealised, illusionistic paintings of classical mythology or heroic historical events that had come before which "often appeared artificial and removed from real life" ("Realism – Art Term," n.d). Realist artists sought to depict the customs, ideas and appearances of their time using scenes from everyday life, making the present and ordinary the main emphasis of their paintings. This could be, and was, seen to be as much a social and political position as an innovative art practice.

Forming the core of this study is a series of paintings made over the course of two years. My work focuses on capturing my immediate surroundings, firstly by photographing familiar three dimensional scenes in urban Johannesburg, and secondly by recreating this in paint on a two dimensional canvas. The process allows me to record and reflect upon my own everyday observable reality.

An example of one of the paintings from this current series toward the final exhibition is entitled *Relucence* (figure 1). The photograph (figure 2) I made and used as a reference is that of a revolving glass door at the entrance to a commercial building in Sandton which houses my ex-husband's lawyers' office which I had been visiting over the course of the past two years while going through a divorce.



Figure 1: Brnic, T. ***Relucence.*** 2018. Oils on canvas. (130x90x4cm)



Figure 2: Brnic, T. ***Relucence.*** 2018. Referential Photographic Image.

The revolving doors reflect and displace visual forms from inside and outside the building. In its reflection the forms get inverted. The interplay of the interior and exterior space is also, for me,

a reflection of the divorce procedure, where everything which once was private within the marriage has now had to become a matter of public process.

I have created this series of paintings to reflect and re-construct my own real experiences. The process of painting has allowed me to capture everyday moments which trigger certain experiences, memories and emotions for me. The camera offers me the ability/freedom to distance myself from the subject matter, but at the same time it brings the same subject matter closer for retrospection in the re-constructive process of painting.

A key issue here is that the recording and re-presentation of these scenes of an "everyday" environment uses photography as the prime source for observing a subject, selecting and framing an image of this subject and then using this as visual reference in constructing the painting. In this respect my work parallels that of Estes' Photorealist work in which the photograph, as the basis of the painting, could be seen as the prime subject and the "scene out there" as once removed from that.

In the first chapter of this research I examine a number of historical, theoretical and critical perspectives as outlined by Nochlin, Barthes, Jakobson and Fried, which elucidate contentious areas surrounding the ambiguous relationship between reality and Realism in art (Nochlin, L. 1971. Barthes, R. 1982. Jakobson. Fried, M. 1990.) According to Nochlin, (15) one of the greatest objectives of art has been to try and capture one's own (visual) reality. Paintings that are often times confused for photographs play with a type of Realism that imitates the cultural discourse of photographs themselves. This is because the absolute truthfulness of photographic images is debatable. The photograph itself as a representation of reality is not static. It has been abstracted by the photographer as it is framed in the camera and "translated into a flat sign system" (Perreault, J. 1980:4). The information the painter sees in a photograph is only a small portion of the information she then takes in and converts into a painting (Perreault, 4). She translates this information into brush strokes, marks and patches on a flat surface which further deforms it (Perreault, 4). So even though the finished painting looks similar to the photograph itself, it has gone through a process of editing and transformation of what the artist initially saw in the photograph

In the second chapter I focus more particularly on the contemporary Photorealist painter Richard Estes and his methodology of painting from photography. His technical mastery of depicting highly reflective surfaces such as chrome, glass and aluminium creates the illusion of his

paintings looking like photographs. A distinctive aspect of his work is that he utilises a number of photographs as referential material rather than only one (figure 3).



Figure 3: Estes, R. ***Untitled.*** (Date Unknown). Photo by Dennis and Diana Griggs. Online: Architect Magazine: Urban Reflections.

This has given him the ability to alter vanishing points and perspectives of the scene so as to offer a different view of the buildings and alleyways to what they may look like in reality. Multiple photographs of the same scene at different times of the day enables him to portray a variation on the way the light impacts one building to the next in an attempt at creating a harmonious final visual product. With multiple images he is also able to represent details which are normally unavailable to the naked eye.

Estes' detailing escalates the banal scenes depicted, offering remarkable verisimilitude, and hence a heightened sense of reality. His paintings from the 1960's and 70's are predominantly of the urban cityscapes of New York City from an inhabitants view on ground level. Estes would aim to omit figures and any visual signs of pollution or grime found in the original photograph. Estes believes these would distract from the structure and architecture of the cityscape itself. His aim was to create a more harmonious and balanced "ideal reality" unlike the Realists of the 19th century, who rejected the ideal and focused on "real life", representing their surroundings accurately and truthfully (Meisel, L.K. 1986:35). Arthur, J. (1980:68) states that significant

paintings such as Estes' enchant and alter our "response to reality and examines our relationship with it".

In this editing process Estes has ultimate control in the construct of the final painting which for him creates focus and clarity, providing an intense visual experience for the viewer. The focus of his paintings are multifaceted, especially in his reflective works offering a fragmented matrix, a kaleidoscope of sorts depicting his perception of his own observable reality. His work depicts the duality of "true life" and the more controlled/constructed idealised reality as he changes the elements found in an observable everyday scene, and the other which embraces the chaotic "human experience" in the fragmented matrix of the more reflective works (Canaday, J. 1978:10 and Meisel, 35).

In the third chapter I document and discuss a number of my own paintings done as part of this study. The process of representing my own visual observable reality is something I have been grappling with in my own work, a means of establishing a connection with the viewer by representing something familiar, mundane and every day, but which, perhaps for this very mundanity, is not normally closely regarded or considered. In my experience there is an emotional connection people feel for these representations of everyday familiar buildings/scenes such as that found in Johannesburg/Sandton/Parkhurst that trigger memories or which link to personal experiences of being in a specific place and time.

In the 19th Century, Realists painted familiar surroundings and people experiencing the pleasures or turmoil of everyday life which resonated in the viewers mind. The paintings would convey a sense of authenticity and "realness" with which they could identify with. We are able today to capture our immediate surroundings at a touch of a button, with the aid of cameras on our mobile phones. The artist creates a painting that is imbued in experiences and limited by her own perception of reality surrounding her, be they personal or external. The painting will eventually reflect every aspect of the duration of time it takes to create it. The artist is not sealed off in a vacuum, replicating the photograph exactly. One could attempt to paint from the same photograph and each time the result will be different. Artists are not and cannot be replicating machines. There would be no point really as we have printers and mobile phones to do that nowadays.

A photograph may be seen as a reflection of our visual reality, proof of a real moment and a real space. Gerhard Richter as cited in Rugoff, R. (2007:10) stated that "I did not take the photograph as a substitute for reality but as a crutch to help me get to reality".

Unlike a photograph which captures a moment and represents a thing, a painting differs in that it embodies the passage of time. It has a feeling of time, (all that one feels, sees and goes through is condensed into this one painting over time). A painting is a confrontation with you as an artist over a period of time in its construction. It deals with that passage of time, and not an instant elusive event like the camera does. The camera takes what is outside and reflects it on the inside, the same as when one observes an image. The eye takes the image and reflects upon it inside the mind. So too the artist takes the photograph and reflects it upon canvas. The process of painting is a means of transforming a very real but fleeting moment into something more permanent. The painting embodies the passage of time. It embodies the whole two or more months it takes me to paint a piece, there will be variations in my mark making to the consistency and texture of oil paint due to its exposure to air as it sits on my palette (figure 4).



Figure 4: Brnic, T. ***Window Shopper palette.*** 2019. (Photograph).

As indicated above, in the last chapter of this research I discuss my own practice in relation to the somewhat broad overview of the critical and theoretical writings on Realism and to the work of Richard Estes. I attempt to make links and distinctions between his work and my own to expand upon and gain a deeper understanding of my own painterly processes. Estes tends to edit out elements of the "real" as in the grime and pollution found in the photographic source. In my own work I include every detail as insignificant as it may seem. For me to eliminate the "everyday" taint or wear and tear is to take away the very "realness" and tactility of the experience of life.

Chapter One – Theoretical Frame

> *"I do feel an affinity with all realist painters; I don't really consider someone a painter unless the individual is a realist. I love realist painting no matter what it is, but it's certainly got to be a painting of something."* (Estes, R. as cited in Canaday, 38.)

This theoretical framework is a broad summary, selection and distillation of a number of critical and theoretical perspectives of art historians, critics, literary theorists and philosophers. I do not aim or claim to make any original contribution to this body of knowledge but have used this material as a "tool box" to work with investigating and understanding my own work and that of my comparative example Richard Estes. Providing an historical and theoretical backdrop to a close reading of paintings by Richard Estes are Nochlin, Barthes, Jakobson and Fried's perceptions of constructs of reality and critical interrogation, elucidating contentious areas surrounding the ambiguous relationship between reality and Realism in art (Nochlin. Jakobson, Barthes, Fried, and Deleuze, J.W. as cited in Parr, A. 2005).

The research focuses on the re-construction of a visual reality by examining in painting how perceptions of one's own reality can be constructed/recreated through painting directly from photographs. By means of investigating Richard Estes' photo realistic paintings and how the notion of Realism and reality is conceptually and visually engaged, I attempt to gain a deeper understanding in relation to my own practice.

My interest lies in producing highly detailed paintings by referencing photographs of familiar subject matter in an attempt to capture my own familial observable reality. Questioning what Realism means in both photography and painting, I use the word Realism to question photography's relationship to the "real" world and the painter's ability to capture the "real". "Real" here is taken to refer to the everyday observable world. This is clearly a contentious definition and I do not claim that "reality" more broadly understood is limited to the empirical realm of visual sense experience. My focus however, for the purposes of this discussion, is to the notion of the real as manifested for instance in the art movements Realism and Photorealism.

Realism

Realism as a dominant art movement from 1840 until the 1880's, had the aim to construct an impartial, truthful and objective representation of the real visual world, through conscientious observations of the "contemporary life" in an attempt at "maximum verisimilitude" (Nochlin, 13 and Jakobson, 20).

American art historian Linda Nochlin's text from 1971 entitled *Realism: Style and Civilization* provides a useful and succinct discussion of the concepts surrounding Realism in art and its ambiguous affiliation to the "highly problematic concept of reality" (Nochlin, 13). Critics of the Realist movement were and are of the opinion that Realism "sacrifices a higher, more permanent for a lower, more mundane reality" (Nochlin, 14).

The Realists imperative aim was not just to depict their environment, but to portray the truth of the time. The means by which they could achieve this was to paint their subject matter candidly and frankly in all its detail. This included common people as well as the more successful sectors of contemporary life. This resulted in work that captured the customs, thoughts and look of the era of their own time. The Realist of that time tried to abstain from making any moral comment in his work but at the same time he had a moral commitment to: "the values of truth, honesty and sincerity" (Nochlin, 36).

According to Nochlin, (15) one of the greatest objectives of art has been to try and capture one's own (visual) reality Artists have been painting images of familiar subject matters for a long time. This is because these are most accessible, familiar and important to most people. The visual familiarity is a way of engaging the viewer, but also a means of recording a visual reality of current time and space.

Courbet's painting entitled *The Meeting* (figure 1) depicted the indigenous vegetation, the atmosphere of the area, himself, Bruyas and his servant with incredible accuracy emulating a photographic record of the event (Nochlin, 17).



Figure 1: Courbet, G. ***The Meeting.*** 1854.

This painting referenced another image entitled *The Wondering Jew* which was held as a popular archetypal image (figure 2).



Figure 2: Artist unknown. ***The Wondering Jew.*** 19 century.

In this way Courbet had taken a popular image rooted in time and added himself along with details into the scene to recreate his own perception of reality of that time. He has achieved this by adding realistic renditions of foliage and of the surrounding atmosphere, making the image more realistically convincing in appearance. This work was for a long time seen as an "objective, almost photographic, record of an actual event" (Nochlin, 17).

In 1861, Courbet and the Realists declared that painting was a concrete art and can only depict real and existing visually tangible things found in the world, it is a "completely physical language" (Nochlin, 23), one where only the current events describing its own present day customs are depicted.

The Realists of that era kept reaffirming the need of the lower classes to hold literary and artistic status, a privilege formerly denied by earlier artists and history. The stone-breakers, rag pickers, beggars, street-walkers, laundresses, railway workers and miners were depicted in the center stage of paintings as the focal subject matter (Nochlin, 34).

Essentially, the Realist formula according to Champfleury, 1867, as cited in Nochlin, (36), was "sincerity in art". Manet considered his own work as, above all, sincere. The sincerity lies not in the idea that the work is a mere re-representation of the photographic image, but in the idea that the artist produces work that is tainted with flaws and faults of his own creation. In 1867, Castagnary, as cited in Nochlin, (36), called the naiveté of vision a mind that is "free of prejudice of education". To be an artist who was untainted by education or any formal training was seen as a positive trait. In this way the meaning of sincerity affiliates itself more closely to the modern existentialist concept of "authenticity" (Nochlin, 37).

Courbet declared that that "art could not be taught" and Pissaro himself said that the Louvre should be burned down (Nochlin, 36). Laforgue further proposed a more radical action that art "academies be shut" (Nochlin, 36). Estes at the time of the interview with Canaday, (19) in 1978, concurred with this thought. He stated that the art schools and universities carried a "rarefied atmosphere" and were "out of touch with reality" (Canaday, 19). Authenticity, in this view, stems from the self, and a self-interpretation of one's own reality lived and occupied, not one tainted by others ideals.

In this way one can interpret Realism, as a movement where the artist's main agenda is one of portraying and interpreting his reality authentically, truthfully and sincerely. Authentic in the

way the artist is truly genuine and sincere in his rendition of visual reality, one untainted by other ideals and dogma or pedagogy. It is not faultless work, and the artist does not say come see my faultless work, but she says come and see my sincere work (Nochlin, 36).

The Realists placed a high positive importance on depicting honestly the "low, the humble and the commonplace, the socially dispossessed or marginal, such as the peasant, laundress and the prostitute to the middle/working class café" (Nochlin, 34). Courbet as cited in Nochlin, (34) stated that the ultimate goal of a Realist painter was to capture and translate the everyday customs, ideas and the appearance of his own time in his art, "thus the social dimension automatically acquired importance".

The social dimension here for the Realist painter referred to what was more "real" socially and politically, as in a depiction of an ordinary working class person versus a portrait of a King. The task is not that of merely depicting what the eye can see in a very realistic manner, but depicting what they deemed socially important.

Burton, S. 1972, as cited in Perreault, (5), offers another definition of the term Realist, as a two dimensional but otherwise fully illusionistic depiction. The depiction is created by "transparency of picture plane, internal illusion of space, of volume and distance, representation, with consistency of convention, of the light and colour of the real world" (Perreault, 5). The Realists themselves treat a painting as an object of neutrality, this is emphasized with their preference for pictures of easel size and not mural or miniature size.

In Realist paintings, the depiction of a subject offers an unusually high degree of specific information (Perreault, 4). So much so that the viewer is convinced that the subject portrayed really did exist at one time or another. The relationship between space and scale are accurately observed and depicted. The artist uses all the tricks of his craft to convey volume and depth in a convincing manner, matching light, colour and texture of the observed subject matter found in real life.

Art history as a discipline has tended to view Realist paintings of any period as if they were nothing more than accurate transcriptions of a reality outside themselves (Fried, 3). According to Fried, (3), in *Courbet's Realism,* works by Realist artists such as Courbet or Eakin's have not been looked at as intensely as others, owing to their imagined pivotal dependence on reality itself. Thus the subject matter and scenes are attributed to reality rather than art, which may have lessened the value of reflection and analysis of the works (Fried, 3).

Courbet as cited in Perreault, (4), referring to Realism, declares that the art of painting can only consist of the representation of objects which are visible and tangible for the artist. The Realist would attempt to capture and express the truth in his subject matter. The way he achieved this was to paint familiar subject matters frankly, and honestly in all their misery and ordinariness. This yielded in work that captured and in the same time rendered the customs, thoughts and look of the era of their own time.

One criticism of Realist artists is that they simply mirrored everyday reality (Nochlin, 14). What makes this view problematic according to Nochlin is the belief that perception of one's reality is objectively "pure and unconditioned", and that it is not affected or restricted by time or place (Nochlin, 14). This thought that vision / perception lies in a sealed off container is of course misleading and inadequate. Vision is objective to a point, just like the camera. Perception on the other hand is more subjective as it involves memories, choices, interpretations, experiences and intentions.

Perception and Sensation

Sensation according to Townsend, L. and Greenop, K. (2008:185) is a "passive process during which the sensory receptors of the brain receive information from the environment. Perception, on the other hand, is a process that entails actively choosing information from sensation, organising it, interpreting it to make meaning of the world". Sensation happens when the brain acknowledges/registers the signals it receives from the eyes in the form of lines, shapes and colours. Perception on the other hand happens when one creates meaning from these lines, shapes and colours. This process then allows us to see something that is in front of us, such as a car or anything else that exists in the world and to "make sense of it". Without this we cannot "see".

Townsend describes the process of seeing and perceiving something that exists in our reality as occurring in the following steps. Energy signals in the form of light waves in the environment:

> *"Hit the specialised receptor cells in the eyes. These specialised receptor cells turn the energy signal into an electrochemical impulse as part of a process called transduction. The impulse is then sent to the brain regions responsible, and sensation occurs. The brain makes meaning of the message, and perception occurs"* (Townsend and Greenop, 185).

The human process of perception is not detached from the world but is "rooted in and actively engaged in it" (Kant, I. 2000:3). An artist, as any person, is influenced by memories and external factors, experiences, frailties, temptations and situations, by their subject position formed through class, race, gender, education, upbringing and so forth. These are internalised for her own meaning and value making process of creating and existing.

> *"Memory takes root only half in the folds of the brain: half's in the concrete streets we have lived along"* (Abrahams, L. as cited in Vladislavic, I. 2006).

Baudelaire as cited in Derrida, J. (1993:47) attributes the origin of painting to memory, rather than perception. Painting is described by two elements. The first is an intense effort of that initial memory which evokes a memory that says "Arise, Lazarus", and the second is the "intoxication of the paintbrush to extract the synthesis itself pinning it down, not to lose the phantom" (Derrida, 48). This second action gives rise to the fear of losing that memory, the trace equating it to the mastering of the unconscious and spontaneous desire to control the way the hand recollects and pins down the memory before it is lost. Memory is a natural reserve, one which is selected, chosen, filtered a "naturally sacrificial matrix of a visible order" (Derrida, 48).

As each artist's perception is influenced by the passing of time and location, it is further limited by the very real physical properties of paint and knowledge of painterly techniques (Nochlin, 14). I will discuss some of ways in which the properties and technique of painting effect this translation from observable reality to its re-presentation on the canvas in the final chapter which documents and discusses my own painterly work. According to Perreault, (4) all observation and representation by the artist himself is not value free. Perception is in part determined by context, history, biography and even mood. "There are variants in the organisation of the nervous system and in whatever processing procedure takes place within the marvellous soup of chemicals and electric charges that we carry around behind our eyes" (Perreault, 4).

The information the artist sees is only a part of the information she seeks and is able to assimilate. This information goes through a further process of deformation and editing when it is translated into marks or patches on a flat surface, as in the process of painting.

Within Realist painting, it matters not how innovative or honest an artist's perception is, she is still challenged with transforming the visual world "to the flat surface of the canvas" (Nochlin, 14). As an artist attempts to re-construct his observable reality, she is inevitably challenged to create a three dimensional world upon this two dimensional surface. Within the work of Richard

Estes the boundary or separation between this two dimensional representation and the three dimensional "real" thing is less easy to discern (Savedoff, B.E. 1999:12).

The tension in the image is between the flat two dimensional canvas plane and the three dimensional illusion of space Estes depicts by painstakingly reproducing familiar and highly detailed observations of reality (Savedoff, 12). Our response is what makes the image seem close to actual visual experience, such as interpreting a gesture of a person to mean something other than a collection of brush strokes on a flat surface (Savedoff, 12).

Magritte's *Attempting the Impossible* as an example (Figure 4) illustrates this ambiguity in an extreme way (Savedoff, 35). Magritte paints himself as the artist in a suit painting a naked figure into thin air. He makes use of perceptual ambiguity in that both the woman and man are painted in similar brushstrokes, technique and colour palette (Savedoff, 35). Although the woman is being portrayed in the realm of the image as a painting, her appearance is very similar to the man painting her (Savedoff, 35). In addition there is no canvas represented upon which the artist is painting her. The paint must be imagined to become flesh as it touches the air. The painting is constructed in the most disturbing way by challenging and asking the viewer to interpret and perceive the image as being real (Savedoff, 35).

According to Wolffin as cited in Vidler, A. (1990:5) one interprets the external world according to the expressive system with which one has become familiar, through one's own bodies and actions, such as in the act of painting. So to understand something externally one takes it in, internalise it and make sense of it. The viewer experiences a painting as the eye consciously tries to perceive format, scale and detail of a flat image depicted as it moves across the picture plain.

Jakobson, (21) further suggests that it is imperative to learn the conventional language of painting in order to see and understand a painting. But once this association becomes so common place, the picture is no longer perceived. In an attempt to break with this anomaly and achieve a closer approximation of reality, Jakobson, (21) suggests doing the following: the artist may depict his own reality by painting unessential or superfluous details. In this way the lazy eye is disrupted and challenged to look more closely at the image. The depiction of reality becomes more palpable. This construction of visual reality when the artist paints superfluous details is also echoed in Roland Barthes' text, *The Reality Effect*.

The Reality Effect

The Reality Effect is a textual ruse identified by Roland Barthes, which refers to the data or descriptive details which the author includes within a narrative structure as "notations" (Barthes, 11). Barthes refers to these details as "superfluous" because they have no function and are not an integral part of the narrative structure. When the detail is found to have no signifier and no real narrative purpose in the text, it becomes "the true signifier of reality", creating the "reality effect" (Barthes, 11).

In other words the addition of "superfluous" detailing which adds nothing to the narrative gives the writing atmosphere, making it feel authentic. Barthes' analysis of superfluous details lies in the narrative representation of reality. I would like to propose that a similar way of altering a painting is possible in the attempt at influencing its representation of a visual reality. This would suggest then that Estes' finely executed renditions of highly detailed observations of scenes is what makes them a "signifier of reality" (Freudenheim, T. 2014 & Barthes, 11).

During the fifteenth century an artist who also included "excessive" detailing in his paintings was the inventor of oil painting, Jan van Eyck. In his painting entitled *"The Righteous Judges and the Knights of Christ"* (figure 3), he meticulously reproduces every little detail upon the panel of the Ghent altar (Gombrich, E.H. 1950: 170). His observations and depictions of such intricate detailing led him to entice us as viewers into believing that we can see every single hair on the horses' manes. This patient addition of detail upon detail would create a picture that acted like a "mirror of the visible world" (Gombrich, 172).



Figure 3: Van Eyck, J. ***The Righteous Judges and Knights of Christ.*** 1432. Ghent, St. Bravo.

According to Gombrich, (172), Van Eyck had the intention of "holding up the mirror to reality in all its details". The way he was able to go about achieving this was by cultivating his painting technique. Van Eyck was dissatisfied with the egg tempera method of the time and found oil to be a far more superior carrying medium for colour pigments to achieve a translucent effect through the application of glazes. This allowed him to work more slowly, merging colours into each other, replicating the visuality of reality far more accurately than had ever been done before (Gombrich, 173).

Deleuze, the Real and Unreal

Deleuze, as cited in Parr, (223), disrupts the concept of "real". He highlights the difference between the real and unreal. The real according to Deleuze "exists independently of our ways of thinking about and perceiving ", the unreal on the other hand is dependent on us, our perceptions, thoughts and sensations of the thing (Parr, 223).

In other words the real is something that is actual and exists without our thoughts of it, and the unreal has to be imagined or thought about. Parr, (224) finds fault with this philosophy in that we should say more or less real instead of the independent real, as the real is not truly complete without ones thoughts of it. Also the unreal is dependent on the real to exist and vice versa.

In my opinion a good illustration of this is a painting that has been created from a photograph, for example of an entrance way to a building in Sandton city (figures 1 and 2) entitled *Relucence* (2018). For the artist to create the work he needs a reference of the scene he is to paint, so the one is dependent on the other. This does not make the painting unreal, just differently real. The real thing exists but not as completely without our experience of it. So to experience it is to make it real.

Furthermore I am of the opinion that this genre of work is more real with having been thought about in an unreal way such as ideas and different intensities of sensations and experiences one has of the scene which are then translated into a painting of this scene.

From this idea, one could conclude that painting a scene which one has previously experienced themselves makes the painting more real than simply a scene as it exists independent of our thoughts or experience of it. Parr further reiterates that "reality goes hand in hand with ideal and emotional effects" (Parr, 224). So the emotional effects one feels when experiencing a scene which one wants to paint come into play in the final product. The artist paints a painting of a reality which is differentially real, one which has already been emotionally experienced.

Photography

Photorealists utilise photographs as source materials from which to paint, and their works retain a photographic look, they imitate photographs to the extent that they may be mistaken for photographs (Perreault, 3).

The invention of photography transformed the way artists were able to recreate/paint their immediate environment. A photograph fixes a visual moment in time as an image, never to be replicated again, something painting from real life cannot achieve as the scene is temporary, ever changing and fleeting. The process of capturing an image in photography as much as it comes close to the transparency of depicting visual reality as it is, has obstacles (Nochlin, 15). The obstacles come between the object itself and the final image that is eventually chosen (Nochlin, 15). The photographer decides what to capture as a focal point, and is limited by the rectangular framing/cropping effect of the lens of a camera. In addition, the lens distorts reality because it only offers a one point perspective of what is being looked at (Nochlin, 15). As opposed to how the human eye sees in multiple perspectives as we move around and perceive the "real world".
The first and most profound contribution to photography was made by Eadward Muybridge in 1872 (Maclean, C and M. 1970:88). In the *Galloping Horse* (Figure 4), he managed to "freeze" movement in real life and capture the image of a galloping horse (Maclean, 88). Muybridge set up cameras along one side of a racetrack and built reflectors on the opposing side. Edward attached threads to each of the shutters and laid them across the horse track. So that when the horse ran by he would break the thread and set off each of the cameras in turn. In this way a series of photographs were created that captured each step of the horse's journey (Maclean, 88). Each image freezing time and so capturing a visual reality.

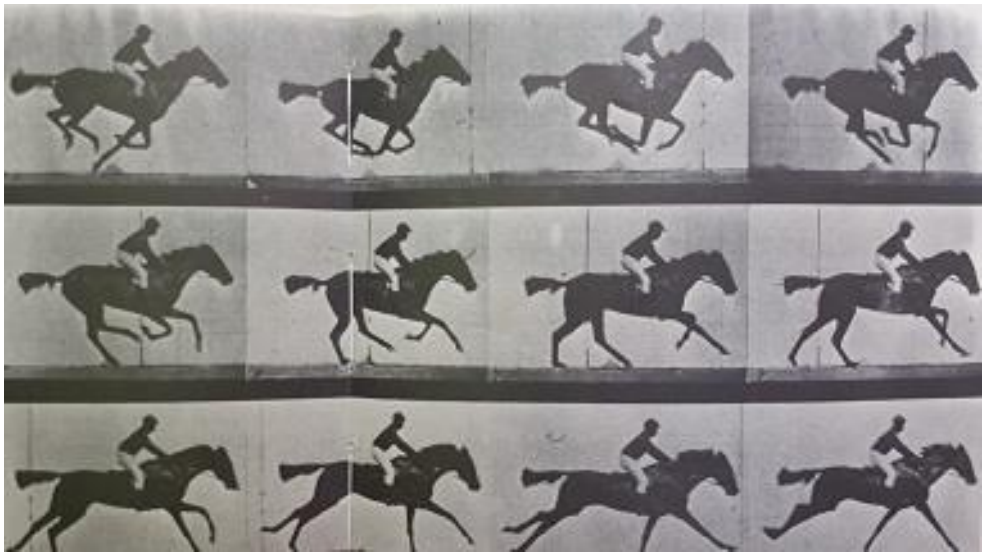


Figure 4: Muybridge, E. ***Galloping Horse.*** 1872.

Sontag, S. (1979:10) states that there is this increasing dependence on the camera, "as the device that makes real what one is experiencing". There is a sense of instantaneousness with a photograph which is the moment "the shutter is released" (Mulvey, L. 2007:36). Painting on the other hand has the power to create an illusion of a past, present and future. The manipulations of original perspectives etc. by Estes which could not co-exist in the world is where the power lies in a painting.

Every time the photographer looks through a lens, she has a varying choice of viewpoint, time of day, length of exposure, size of focal opening. The photograph itself offers an immediate view of visual reality in that it captures the now, here, and the present real moment. In addition, the camera can offer an image of the random, the changing, impermanent and unstable (Nochlin, 28). This according to Nochlin, (28) offers a truer experience of present day visual reality than ever before. When previously, artists' main agenda was to depict the imaginary yet stable, balanced and harmonious past. Photography offers the Realist painter a way to capture the transient moment, the visual concrete fact as a means of illustrating an event, eliminating any traditional moral, abstract or psychological values (Nochlin, 31).

By painting from photographs the viewer is convinced that the subject matter portrayed existed in the real world at some time somewhere (Perreault, 4). In this way the Realist artwork looks realistic and is more like the subject being depicted than other forms of representation (Perreault,

4). The photograph functions as an intermediate source between painting and reality (Perreault, 2).

Realist paintings recognise the photograph as a transitional source. They have been used by artists as a source of representation since its invention in the early 19th Century (Perreault, 3). When the Photo Realists use a photograph of the everyday reality we are faced with in a direct way, they offer a fresh new view of the world and of photography itself (Perreault, 3). "The flattened stability of the photo source can provide a heightened sense of reality", a visual depiction of the outside world offering information that is not always accessible (Perreault, 4).

The flatness as an ideology of modern art is perpetuated in Photorealistic paintings by artists painting two dimensional subject matter such as signage, newsprint and flags upon the already flat canvas plane (Perreault, 3). Furthermore the flatness is emphasised in an even, all over surface application of paint. Photorealistic paintings visually and physically become themselves photographically referential in nature. This leaves the viewer to experience tension. The tension is created visually by both the flatness of the canvas and the artists painterly technique of creating a three dimensional form.

The photograph provides a candid view of one's visual reality by capturing every detail in an instant. But as cited by Champfleury in Nochlin, (36), "the artist is not a machine and is incapable of rendering objects mechanically". So in some ways the photograph denies the artist a means by which to embellish, idealize or elevate his subject. But this only to a point, as the artist is not a replicating machine, but is limited and enabled by his skill in imitation. With the aid of the photograph, the artist is able to recreate his own reality in explicit detail although filtered by his own biological limitations. "The reproduction of nature by man will never be a reproduction and imitation, but always an interpretation" (Nochlin, 36).

Chapter Two – Applied theory / Richard Estes

I endeavour as an artist to create Photo Realistic paintings. Since I paint from photographs, an artist whose work I have admired most over the years is Richard Estes. Estes creates exceptional Photo Realistic paintings of everyday scenes found in New York City. By altering the perspective, positioning and vanishing points in his referential photographs, he is able to reproduce/re-construct the perceived visual reality of the urban landscape. His paintings emulate and trick the eye initially into believing that they are in fact photographs. This play between what is real and not has intrigued me to delve deeper into the manifestations of the observable real in painting from photographs.

Richard Estes (born in Kewanee, Illinois in May 14th, 1932), works from a multitude of photographs of a scene (figures 9 a,b and c, and figure 10) (Nochlin, 14). As a contemporary Realist, Estes paints from his own visual reality, predominantly the inanimate, infinitely reflected, clean looking urban cityscapes of New York City. A man-made environment from the point of view of its inhabitants. "You look around and paint what you see" (Canaday, 19)

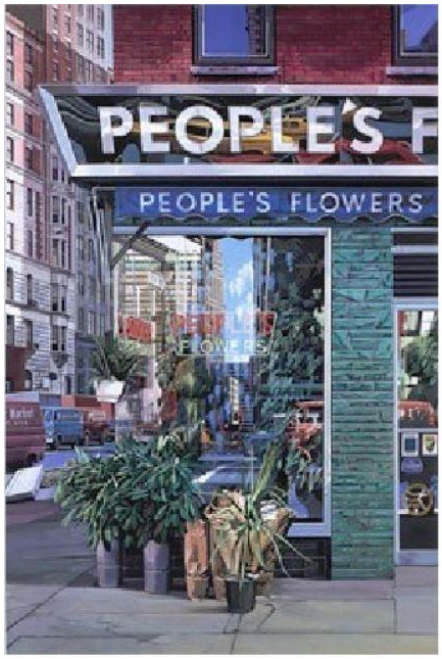
According to Canaday, (1978) the artist's main function is to reveal the world around us. Nochlin, (1971) concurs in this notion that one of the greatest objectives of art has been to try and capture one's own visual reality. As I pointed out previously in chapter 1 above, in the 19th century, artists such as Gustave Courbet would paint their immediate environment. This gave the work a type of immediacy which one could relate to. The ordinary and the mundane of everyday life forms a part of our visual world which resonates in every one of us.

Most Realist and Photo Realist artists such as Estes are interested purely in how things look. This depiction of objects as they are, is what according to Perreault, (4) gives paintings an edge of rawness and truthfulness that no amount of conventional depiction of scenery with the use of schemata can ever achieve.

Canaday cites in Meisel, (32) "Never before have there been cityscapes exactly like these, where the haphazard conjunctions of commonplace details are transformed into a matrix that would be violated if any of its multitudinous bits and pieces were exercised from the mass", we are fascinated by his revelation of the world around us.

Estes' subject matter and focus of the majority of his works is everyday American iconography found in New York such as cars, motorbikes, interiors of buses, stores and other commercial establishments. The storefront windows carrying keywords depicting the American consumer

culture (Figures 1, 2 and 3) such as: “People’s Flowers, Prescriptions, Jone’s Diner, Brew Burger, and Coca Cola” (Volz, J. 2007:88). The titles of the paintings often carry these same keywords. It is not so much an affirmation or commentary upon American materialism or consumer culture, as a direct representation of it. The relationship between people and the scenes depicted is not a priority for Estes as with any other photorealist painters (Volz, 88). He opts to eliminate the human figure from his works, to ensure the focal point remains the architecture and urban environment itself.



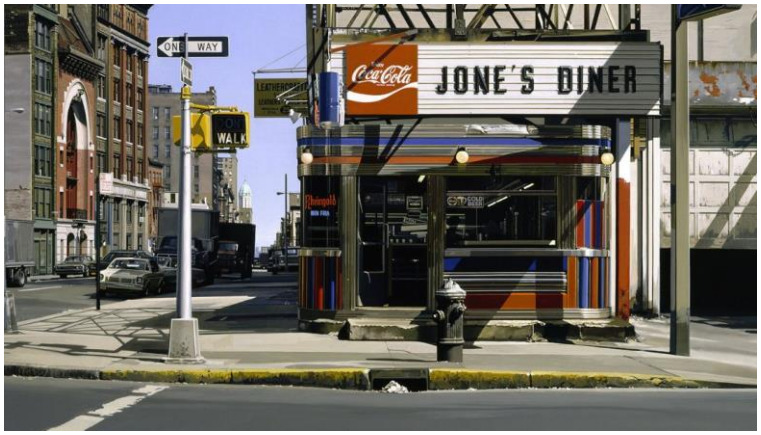


Figure 1 (left): Estes, R. ***People’s Flowers.*** (1971) Oils on Canvas. (36 x 22”).

Figure 2 (right): Estes, R. ***Jone’s Diner.*** (1979) Oils on Canvas. (36 x 48”). (Private Collection). Marlborough Gallery/Smithsonian American Art Museum.



Figure 3: Estes, R. ***Downtown (Close up).*** (1978). Oils on canvas. Austrian Ludwig Foundation, Austria.

The difference Estes brings to the traditional cityscape paintings in America is that he emphasises each and every detail of every visual aspect of the photographs from which he paints. Estes does this in a way that creates a matrix of chaotic experiences which is the "human experience" (Canaday, 10). By him taking photographs with a "soft, hazy light" it allows for more detailing in the highlights and shadows (Canaday, 20). In *Jone's Diner* (figure 2) the incredible depiction of the variation of shadows and the intensity of the light highlighting the diner sign is compelling and masterfully achieved. Painting each detail found within an everyday scene and depicting the common human experience reinforces his affiliation with the Realism movement of the late 1800's.

In 1861, Courbet and the Realists declared that painting is a concrete art and can only depict real and existing visually tangible things found in the world, it is a "completely physical language" (Nochlin, 23). A good illustration of just such a "concrete" artwork is The *Candy Store, 1969* (figure 4). In the painting we can observe numerous meticulously painted details of each salted

nut and each chocolate laying in the trays strewn about in the store window (Canaday, 1978). As discussed in chapter 1 above this inclusion of superfluous detailing was named *The Reality Effect* by Roland Barthes, in which he refers to the data or descriptive details that the author includes within a narrative structure as "notations" (Barthes, 11). Barthes, (11) refers to these details as "scandalous" and superfluous, because they have no function and are not an integral part of the narrative structure.



Figure 4: Estes, R. ***The Candy Store.*** (1968-1969) Oils and Synthetic Polymer (fluorescent paint) on Canvas. (47 x 68"). Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

The addition of superfluous detailing which adds nothing to the narrative gives the writing atmosphere, making it feel real. While Barthes analysis of superfluous details lies in the narrative representation of reality, I propose that a similar way of altering a painting is possible in the attempt at influencing its representation of reality. This would suggest then that Estes' finely executed renditions of highly detailed observations of scenes is what makes them feel more real (Freudenheim, 2014).

By manipulating the perspective in his work, Estes is able to unify and clarify subject matter within a scene such as this one of *The Candy Store*, unlike a photograph which would present

the same image as a mess of objects all strewn together. In the underpainting, Estes often alters perspectives and proportions of buildings, shifting locations of objects and structures (Arthur, 68). He does not simply copy what he sees directly from a single photograph, instead Estes creates collages (figure 5) of multiple photographs combining differing perspectives and vanishing points from which he rearranges elements to create a new composition highlighting characteristics he considers would be most effective in the final composition.



Figure 5: Estes, R. ***Untitled.*** (Date Unknown). Photo by Dennis and Diana Griggs. Online: Architect Magazine: Urban Reflections.

He is a master manipulator of perspectives, rendering any scene that has a multitude of objects into a cohesive composition. The photograph in this way is helpful as it offers a clarity in focus throughout a scene, unlike the eye which tends to focus upon one aspect of what we are observing at all times (Canady, 10). This creates an interesting ocular stimulant for the viewer as Estes wants you to look at everything in the same way, depicted in a clear and realistic way. He creates an interplay between the two dimensionality of the patterns "on a flat surface" and the three dimensional volumes in space which define the object being illustrated (Canaday, 10). This creates visual complexity for the onlooker.

In *The Candy Store,* Estes uses both dimensional planes in his rendition of the fluorescent light tubes on the ceiling (figure 6). This is created by the slashing of two dimensional pattern created by the lights and at the same time keeping with the "rectilinear purity" of the three dimensional scheme (Canaday, 10). This painting is a medley of visual activity, there is no time for lethargy. He offers and extraordinary view of something that is mundane and ordinary.

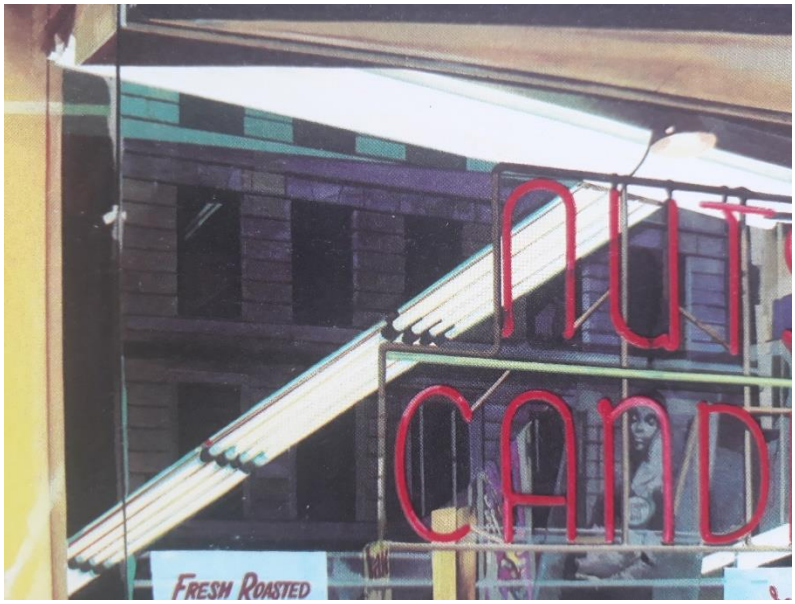


Figure 6: Estes, R. ***The Candy Store. (Close up).*** (1968-1969) Oils and Synthetic Polymer on Canvas. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

With so many active elements in this particular painting and painstakingly rendered detailing, it may have you visually mesmerised for hours at a time. There is a complex interrelation of the multitude of transparent glazed and reflective surfaces, rendering the image incredibly realistic (Canaday, 10). The interplay between the different surfaces, textures and colours aid in this mastery.

Canaday, (10) terms the purifying polish which Estes gives these surfaces as "preternatural polish". This simply means a polish that is beyond what is visually normal or natural. Estes's Realism according to Meisel, (25) "is more than realistic: it is realism that achieves some of its most startling effects by non-realistic means". It is a simple technique that Estes utilises to simplify and purify his surfaces, rendering the work as an example of "super-realism" (Canaday, 10).

I have found with my own paintings that these types of surfaces are incredibly difficult to depict. There are numerous intricacies and details showing the variety of textures, patterns both 2 and 3

dimensional, shades, hues and colours. To look at one tiny section of the work (figure 6) one is able to observe so many different depictions of volume, colour and patterns, visually "boggling" the mind.

There is a subtle play of reflections and volumes of objects inside and outside of the candy store. Some of the windows of the buildings across the road are reflected upon the display window intersecting with the fluorescent light fittings from the interior reality of the store. There is a back-and-forth of visual objects varying spatially in depth and flatness. The reflections of the building from across the road in the close up detail demonstrate Estes' great "illusionistic" control of tonalities and intensity of colours used (Canaday, 10). Similarly to other Realist painters, Estes pays extreme attention to reproduce these variations in every millimetre of the work. Estes takes the interplay between reality and glowing reflections more seriously in some of his later works such as *Bus Window* and *Bus with Reflections of the Flatiron Building* (figures 7 and 8).

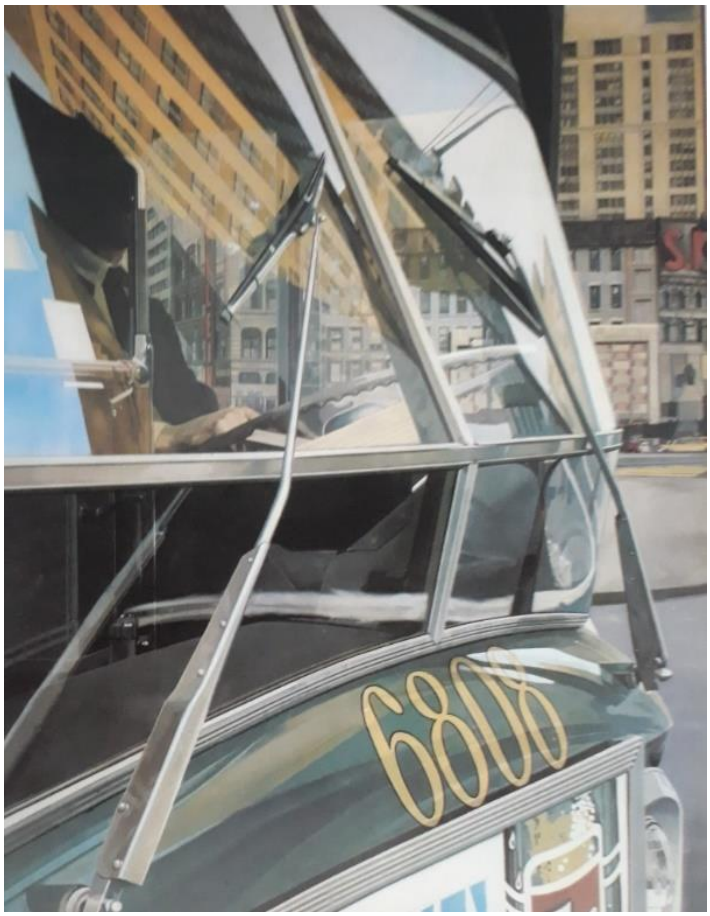


Figure 7: Estes, R. ***Bus Window.*** (1973) Oils and Synthetic Polymer on Canvas. (48 x 36") Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

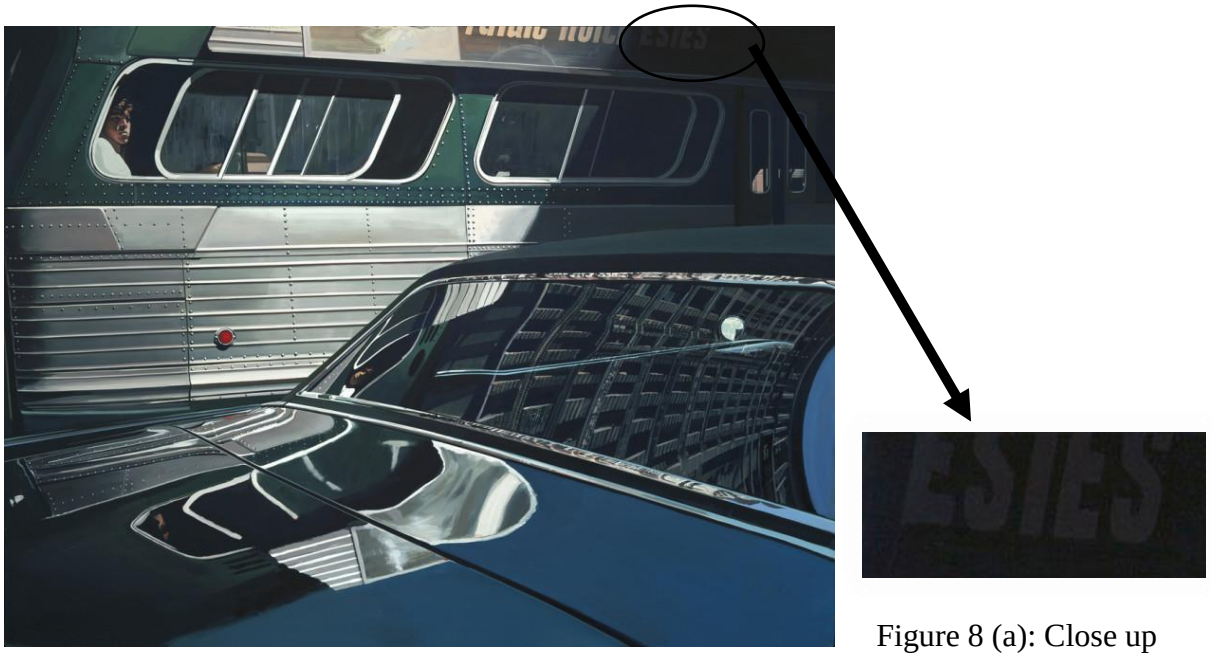


Figure 8 (a): Close up

Figure 8: Estes, R. ***Bus with Reflection of the Flatiron Building.*** (1967). Oils on canvas. (36 x 48”). Malborough Gallery, London.

The reflections of reality and reality itself become all but indistinguishable from each other, until even though there are “rigidly explicit factual details”, reality itself becomes a type of fantasy (figure 14) (Canaday, 14). His mirrored representation of our visual reality displaces banal and familiar subject matter from its acceptable original position. Once a form is mirrored, it is somewhat distorted and displaced visually, creating confusion for the onlooker. The reflections create an optical illusion as can be seen in the top half of the *Bus Window* (figure 7). This makes the images a lot more attractive and intriguing in that one can look at the piece for longer trying to decipher what is happening.

When we look upon his intricate and fragmented paintings we attempt to piece the puzzle back together. The effect of reflections in this painting is that the once recognisable objects/forms and textures have exploded and fragmented visually into a million shards. This intermingling of intersections and overlapping walls, floors, windows, doors, glass and metal surfaces allow him to recreate man’s “reaction to his self-created environment” (Canaday, 14). Luckily there is some relief, there are areas in the work of non-reflected reality that anchor the image in recognisable space, which allows the viewer to get his bearings (Meisel, 26). These for me are in the form of text, as in the names of the places he paints such as *People’s Flowers* or *Jone’s Diner* (Figures 1 and 2).

For the last five decades Estes' subject matter has seldom varied. It has remained shop, car and office windows reflecting the city around them seen from the side so as to magnify the number of reflections in the glass of the surroundings. William C. Seitz as cited in Volz, (87) comments upon Estes' paintings as precise and masterfully nuanced close ups of commercial modernism that seem to endure in an "eternal vacuum". Just as the Realists did in their time, he depicts information about the time and place, making the painting function just like a time capsule.

In *Bus with Reflections of the Flatiron Building* (figure 8) we observe a green and silver bus reflected, twisting across a blue car in the bottom half of the composition. The back window of the car reflects the Flatiron building sideways curving/bending to the shape of the glass itself. There is a lone figure of a man peering out from the open window of the bus. Estes wanted to portray exactly what he saw and how people in the city were.

While Estes seldom depicted human figures, when he did so, as in this painting, they remain as emotionally detached and isolated from each other as they are engrossed with the burdens of everyday living (Canaday, 1978). Examples are the almost headless outline of the bus driver in *Bus Window* (figure 7) and the solemn figure of a boy looking out into the distance from the back window of the bus in Bus with Reflections of the Flatiron Building (figure 8). Estes tends to refrain from painting figures at all in his cityscapes, and also edits out any distracting grime or pollution which may have appeared in the initial photographs. He took photographs early on Sunday mornings to avoid figures, depicting the city as a lonely place. His reason for leaving out figures is that they distract from the scenes and create what he felt to be an unnecessary narrative element. In turn this forces the viewer to look at the architecture and street scape itself, which he found more interesting than people (Canaday, 23). Estes was fascinated with the clean inanimate surfaces (steel, chrome, glass and mirrors) and the intricate complexity with which they reflected their immediate surroundings, and the challenges of recreating these in his final paintings.

In *The Candy Store* (Figure 4), according to Canaday, (10) the onlooker struggles to distinguish between what is reflected from in front or behind him. With this type of perspective looking directly at the image one would normally be able to see one's own reflection, but Estes paints the final image ignoring this pertinent reflection. This makes us feel ignored as if "atomised" or "disembodied" (Canaday, 14). Going against the perception that the scene depicted by Estes is of reality, Seitz criticises the set up as virtually impossible to be habituated by people. Estes reveals his world and the city as a lonely place. I liken his depictions to an almost post-

apocalyptic city devoid of people or life, whose sole visual preoccupation is with the structure and reflective material surface composition of the modern world.

Estes conceals any emotional content in the work, almost eliminating any trace of himself. Even to the extent of eliminating his signature. An example of this is in the *Reflections of the Flatiron Building* (figure 8a), where his signature "Estes" is disguised as part of the signage at the top right hand corner of the bus.

Another means by which he achieves an objective almost impartial rendering of the scene is by applying his paint with flat, cool brush strokes with no real blending (Canaday, 1978). This technique makes the painting similar to the reflective surfaces he paints, such as glass and chrome. Nochlin as cited by in Meisel, (30) terms this "the noncoincidence of tactile and visual reality". That is to say that Estes intentionally paints his paintings to look just like the surfaces he is trying to depict both in a visual and tactile way.

The process of capturing something exactly as it is in nature, having the image act as a mirror in its reflection of what is being observed is called the "reflective approach" (Hall, S. 1997:24). According to Hall, (24) "Language functions as a mirror". The language of painting in Estes's paintings "works by simply reflecting or imitating the truth that is already there and fixed in the world" (Hall, 24).

In addition to this technique, Estes according to Volz, (86) differs from other Photorealists approach to painting in that he changes the final painting from the referential photographs. An example of this is when he changed the colour of the curtain to red in *Cafeteria* (1970), (figure 9). Estes did this because he thought the original storefront was boring. In general his alterations were minimal except for correcting the distortions the camera lens creates and keeping the entire image in sharp focus.



Figure 9: Estes, R. ***Cafeteria.*** (1970). Oils on canvas. 41 x 48". Private Collection. New York.

In the early 1970's he began painting from a multiple number of photographs to manipulate the way the three dimensional spaces were viewed. An example of one such painting is *Downtown* (figures: 10, 11 a,b,c, 12 and 13).



Figure 10: Estes, R. ***Downtown.*** (1978). Oils on canvas. (48 x 60") Austrian Ludwig Foundation, Austria.



Figures 11 (a,b and c): Estes' Photographs on which ***Downtown*** is based.



Figure 12: Estes' Photographs on which ***Downtown*** is based.



Figure 13: Estes, R. ***Downtown (Close up).*** (1978). Oils on canvas. Austrian Ludwig Foundation, Austria.

By using a number of photographs Estes plays with perspectives. He is able to construct a visual reality unlike any other. He adds the spaces and the feeling of the spaces and air in between the objects seen in the photographs themselves. The only way he can do this is by painting objects/places he is familiar with (Meisel, 1986). Estes paints from his perception of his familiar visual observable reality. In addition to capturing the familiar scenes, the camera stops time and freezes the weather. This offers Estes the freedom to re-construct exactly what he desires from the scene back in the studio.

What makes his paintings such as this *Downtown* work different from the mere representation of the actual photograph is that he adds "depth and spatial clarity" (Meisel, 21). The camera lens only captures a one point perspective, one vanishing point and one horizon line. Our eye on the other hand moves around and our perspective shifts as the eye moves over a scene. The combination of multiple perspectives offers him the ability to capture and construct a reality more real than the one point photographic perspective offers. He makes changes in his final painting "in order to make it closer to what it really is" (Meisel, 27).

Unlike some other work where the space is layered, in *Downtown* (figure 10), the space is complex in the way it is composed (Canaday, 17). He manipulated the way the light impacts the middle building of the scene (figures 11 a,b and c), he also altered the size of this middle building in relation to the other buildings to bring about a balanced composition (Canaday, 1978).

Everything is manipulated to have some visual order. Because the streets go in different directions, so too there are multiple vanishing points. He doesn't follow any rules as such, but sometimes implements a diagonal which would bring order to the perspective. Estes manipulates the image so as to give importance and interest to every part. In this way he is able to show the viewer a different view of a familiar scene.

An example of keeping the final work in overall sharp focus is *Café Express,* 1975 (figure 14). Here Estes has avoided any distortions that the camera may initially have made. According to Volz, (86) humans have binocular vision, the eye is not able to focus of two planes at the same time, which makes us capable of wandering across a scene and choosing what to focus upon. Because Estes's work has an overall focused look it gives us the ability to scan across the image and choose what to focus upon with ease. In this way he simulates our own binocular vision.



Figure 14: Estes, R. ***Cafe Express.*** (1975). Oils on canvas. 24 x 36". Private Collection.

In an interview as cited in Volz, (86) Estes claims to not want to control what the viewer is meant to be focusing upon. He refuses to make certain parts in focus and the rest not, offering the viewer an option to what he would like to look at as he focuses and scans over the painting (Volz, 86). So in effect everything in his paintings is in focus, and by offering this choice/freedom to the

viewer Estes's aesthetic is centrally concerned with the activation of the viewer making the viewer active and in so doing, making the work visually interesting and engaging to experience. By liberating the viewer, Estes also destabilises the hierarchy of the image. In so doing according to Fluck as cited in Volz, (87) a tension is created between "defamiliarized" and the familiar as the eye oscillates over the image from one area of focus to the next.

This process of offering the viewer a familiar and an unfamiliar view creates a surface whereby the artists effectively "refuels the viewer's interest and curiosity" (Fluck as cited in Volz, 87).

As briefly noted above a further way he engages the viewer and their imagination is by creating scenes that are neutral and void of people, dirt or pollution. John Perreault as cited in Volz, (87) is of the opinion that this neutral depiction of scenery by Estes is in fact "fertile ground", it is expressive in that anything can happen on "these naturally theatrical streets within the opera spaces of Estes's invention". The deliberate omission of people or traces of people in his work has critics describing his world as "aseptic and cold", non-habitable where neither decay nor life can occur (Volz, 87).

John Perreault as cited in Volz, (86) calls the paintings of Photo-Realists the "photo look", because the paintings look like the photographs from which the artist has painted from. Estes claims that we see photographically, and that today we accept the photograph and its distortions within paintings as real. Linda Chase as cited in Volz (87), argues that historically when Degas initially made use of photographic distortions and perspective "it was considered a bizarre way of seeing and depicting the world, an aberration".

"Today their photographic aberrations are so commonplace that we can look at a paintings that employs extreme distortion and out-of-focus areas and comment on how real it looks" (Linda Chase as cited in Volz, 87). Today we are so used to seeing distortions as a representation of the real world with the advent of the camera that the Photo Realistic paintings which recreate reflections and distortions of buildings in windows or bonnets of cars and buses are easily taken to be representations of our everyday visual reality (figures 7 and 8).

Familiar objects depicted in his work appear to have a "double life": existing simultaneously as three dimensional volumes in space defined by perspective and as two dimensional angular patterns on a flat surface (Canaday, 10). He is continually preoccupied with the interplay of reality and reflection, without letting the image disintegrate into visual disarray, focusing and replicating visually what is in the scenes, just like a camera would (Canaday, 10).

Reflections

> *"On the reflective surfaces, the tactile and the visual poetry do not coincide for they overlap. Since all objects reflect, glass and chrome, only more so, they show how we think they are. Thus, the reflection becomes reality."* (Estes, R. 1968, as cited in Canete, R. 2015).

The reflected surface is similar to the Realist artist in the way it interprets and reflects its/his immediate visual reality. The reflective surface reflects the environment in which it exists. Just as the artist takes his visual environment in the form of a photograph, and reflects and interprets it upon the canvas.

The surface acts like a photograph or the human eye in capturing and reflecting its surrounding in accurate detail. The artist uses his eyes to take in his surroundings capturing it initially with the aid of a camera. He then uses his acumen in the field of painting to reflect and perceive the scene. Estes uses all three tools, namely the reflective surface, the camera and the eye to then assimilate, perceive/interpret and render his own chosen scene upon canvas.

In 1967 Estes discovered that the camera was able to capture the ever elusive reflections, from here on most of his paintings focussed on reflective surfaces, (figure 15), (Meisel, 1986). These paintings Meisel, (36) describes as "abstract", but in a representational way. He represents three dimensional forms three dimensionally on a two dimensional canvas. A very flat plane which plays with illusion of three dimensionality of slices of reflections and refractive surroundings upon glossy/shiny metal/glass surfaces. Some distortions of subject matter reflected happen as they visually interact with the physical reflective material.

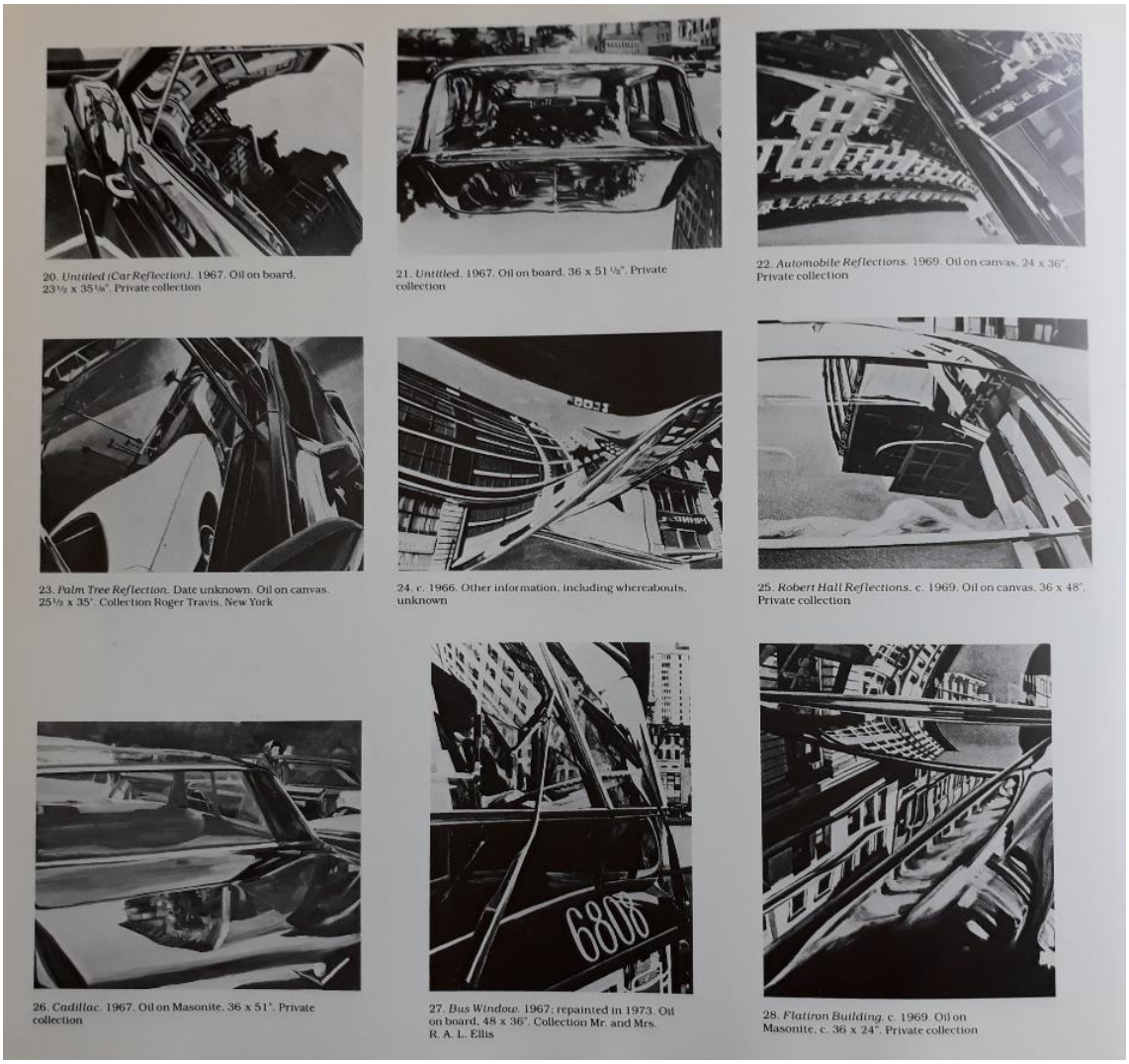


Figure 15: Estes, R. ***Numerous paintings of the reflective series.*** 1966-1967. Oil on Canvas. (Varying sizes).

Estes found reflections to offer a more exciting and stimulating subject matter to paint (Canaday, 1978). The abstract "quality of reality is far more exciting than most abstract painting I see" (Canaday, 40). There should always be a struggle within an image, for it to not be boring, some parts of the work don't really work with imperfections showing, others are ordered and abstracted visually. One such "non boring" work of Estes' is *The Miami Rug Company* (figure 16). This particular Photo Realistic painting of the urban landscape looks just like a photograph. The portrayal of three dimensional depth through perspective is uncanny in tricking the eye into thinking that it could be a photograph of a real scene found in New York.



Figure 16: Estes, R. ***Miami Rug Company*** (1974). Oils on canvas. 20 x 54". Private Collection.

The interplay between two and three dimensional spaces creating ocular stimulation for the viewer, creates interest that lasts beyond just the initial gaze into an exploration of forms and subject matter presented in this Photo Realistic work. With the advent of digital photography, the photographs initial connection to the real world is questioned. Technology such as digital photography alters the resources of art, it enhances our power of depiction but it also suppresses some powers which photography traditionally laid claim to (Savedoff, 188) though our awareness of the enhanced capacity of digital photography to be manipulated, altered and rearranged. The indexical and hence "truthful" relationship between the focused on subject, reflected light and the light sensitive emulsion of the negative has been blurred.

Richard Estes manipulates the photographic material in an intuitive way seeking out visual balance and order in the final work. He is concerned with structure, and constructs his work by augmenting the original elements the camera captures. He offers an organised sense of reality, a type of balanced, harmonious and "ideal reality". As life itself is fuzzy and not really ordered as

in a book which “has a beginning a middle and an end” (Meisel, 35), Estes strives to achieve this in his work by omitting people or distractions of the scene such as garbage found along the pavements and signs of pollution on the buildings (Canaday, 19).

His paintings look very realistic, “but the subjects don’t actually exist in this way” (Meisel, 35). By implementing changes in his final painting, the image becomes more clear and real to himself. The way he perceives his immediate visual reality, one which altogether seems embodied in a timeless vacuum yet not. Not as in the way it offers a real view of a scene of multiple vanishing points, imitating the way our real eyes see things and not that of the cameras point of view. Estes tricks the viewer by creating a smooth, cold, flat surface to the painting which visually echoes the reflective surface of the object he is painting. With the addition of superfluous detailing, changing the light and shapes of buildings and altering vanishing and perspectival points with the aid of multiple photographic references, he constructs a reality that is more real than our observable visual reality itself.

Chapter Three - Painting

In this chapter I discuss my own practice over the last few years. In relation to a selection of works of Richard Estes, I attempt to draw links between his work and my own to expand upon and gain a deeper understanding of my own painterly processes. As a central part of this study I have made a series of Photorealistic paintings based on photographs I have captured of everyday scenes I interact with on a regular basis. They are all easel sized, oils on pre-stretched canvas on frame, 130cm wide by 90cm in height by 4cm in depth. Each of the images depict reflective intermingled forms, there is a visual interplay of interior and exterior shapes, textures, patterns, colours and forms. The paintings are entitled: *Autonomous, Push Happy Pills, Relucence, Window Shopper and Mundane* (Figures: 16, 20, 26, 31 and 33).

The photographs from which I paint allude to an elusive moment which has passed. The time I have spent re-constructing these images on canvas has allowed me to reflect upon each scene and the time in which it was first recorded. This echoes with the 19th century Realists as they painted familiar everyday scenes rooted in their time. Unlike Estes, I paint predominantly from a single photographic source of a scene taken either by my single-lensed reflex camera or mobile phone.

In the process of constructing my own optical sense of reality in paint, I am aware that there is a constant interplay between what is "real" and what is imagined. For Estes there is no such thing as a "realistic painting", the work is essentially a construct albeit closely associated with an observed situation or subject. (Meisel, 30). He plays with the subjects dimensions, making some bigger, some smaller in an attempt at overall clarity of the final image (Meisel, 30). A construct.

In my own practice as I am challenged constantly with transforming the real external three dimensional visual world onto the two dimensional surface of the canvas. I use painting as a means of reflection upon my own reality, my everyday experiences and thoughts. I will delve into my own subjective perception of reality, and the means by which I grapple with the very real process of reconstructing this reality in paint. I find myself engaging into a dialogue between what I do and how I perceive time. There is an interplay between two and three dimensions of the work through the two dimensionality of the material itself (canvas) and the three dimensionality of our very own perception and interpretation of that which we are looking at, the painted image/surface (painting).

The depiction of a three dimensional world is created by “transparency of picture plane, internal illusion of space, of volume and distance, representation, with consistency of convention, of the light and colour of the real world” (Perreault, 5). The artist uses all the tricks and limitations of tools and skill at his disposal to illustrate texture, volume, depth, colour, shape, patterns, light and reflections of his visual reality in a way that is convincing to the viewer.

In this practical body of work I tackle my own vision of reality as it is distorted through the lens and the reflections created by different glass surfaces/windows/rotating doors. Furthermore there is the process of perceiving that which is “real” and outside ourselves into a two dimensional work. Perception is influenced by our own state of mind and is in part determined by: context, history, biography and even mood. By expressing your own perception of observable reality you become more aware of it. You begin to reflect and dissect it, slowly through the process of painting one delves deeper into it. It is a serene place to be.

We do not come into the world with a pre-programmed logbook of meaning. We are shaped by the experiences we encounter within different places. My family and I are in constant flux, in search for a better, safer environment, a continuous journey.

Courbet as cited in Kendall, A. (1981:4) states that the art of painting can only consist of the representation of objects which are visible and tangible for the artist. I have taken this as a guide for my own work as an artist. By painting familiar scenes surrounding me, my aim is to grasp onto my own perception of my everyday reality. I set out to achieve this by recording my visual world with photographs and then re assessing them and reliving them in some way by painting them on canvas. One of my most influential art teachers Johan Conradie would reiterate that I must always paint what I see. I have never wandered too far from this advice, and had been painting my surroundings, the Johannesburg cityscape, for a number of years before beginning my journey at the University of Witwatersrand in 2011 (figures 1-4).



Figure 1: Brnic, T. ***Jozi 06.*** 2007. Oils on Canvas.



Figure 2: Brnic, T. ***The Observer.*** 2010. Oils on Canvas.



Figure 3: Brnic, T. ***Jozi 10.*** 2009. Oils on Canvas.



Figure 4: Brnic, T. ***Sandton Square.*** 2008. Oils on Canvas.

Sandton Square (figure 4) was a commissioned piece by the liberty property group. I completed this piece back in 2008 which took close onto 4 months. I returned to the Sandton Square site and as I walked through the square, it felt as if the painting I had been working on had come to life and I had stepped straight into it. We as artists submerge ourselves in the making of the painting that we experience it in such an intense way, we can't help but be impacted by it, just as the painting is impacted by us over the duration of its construction. I painted myself and my ex-husband sitting on the steps to the left of the Nelson Mandela sculpture.

This ability we have to alter the original photographic source is what makes painting so much more malleable than a photograph.

After a stage experimenting with various different mediums from sculpture, installation, printmaking, video to photography (figures 5-9). I eventually returned to painting in 2014

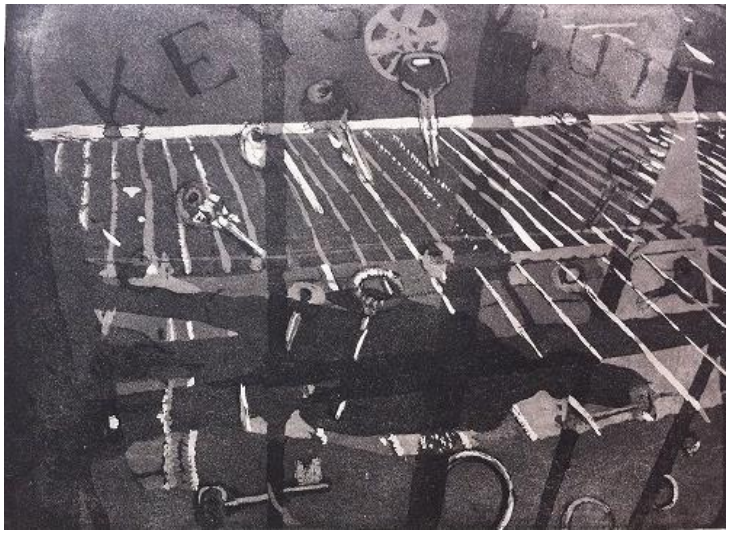


Figure 5: Brnic, T. ***Keys.*** 2012. Etching Print.



Figure 6 : Brnic, T. ***Absent Presence***. 2014. Photography

In 2015 as part of the initial stages of this study, I began work on a painting which emulates the fragmented mirror as a construct of reality employed by Estes (Figures 12, 13). This piece I completed in 2017 is entitled *Autonomous.*

Autonomous - displacement and relocation

"Where is the axe?" - *"Under my bed."*

This was my father's answer a few months prior to his passing, on the request to chop down one of the tree branches that weighed heavily with ripe walnuts, prevented our security gate from being shut properly. It is necessary here for me to provide some family biography to locate my particular and personal motivation for this and, later, other work.

My father was born in Bosnia and met my mother while working in Austria. They both left for South Africa in the late 1970's in search of his father. His mother had passed away when he was two and it was rumoured that his father was a German soldier from the Second World War who

later relocated to South Africa. The search went cold once he arrived in the country and shortly thereafter my parents left in the early 80's seeking out a better life for us in Yugoslavia. Due to the many socio-political and economic instabilities in that country my father was unable to find work and returned to South Africa. At the end of 1989 our family left Yugoslavia anticipating the war which erupted and divided the country.

The continuous search of a "good place", a better, safer place for our family has influenced my graduate and post graduate work thus far. My father passed away while attempting to pursue some men raiding a neighbour's factory in an industrial area of Germiston. In response to this traumatic experience I made a self-portraiture sculpture/installation of clay tackling concepts of death and memory (figures 7a and b).



Figures 7 (a,b): Brnic, T. ***Self Portrait.*** 2012. Clay. Photographs of final installation by Brnic, T.

The factory stood dormant for five years, becoming a "capsule" of memories, and a place to preserve them. Using the factory as a studio, I created paintings from the materials I found there. The paintings became a way of confronting the fear and trauma of loss and a means of trying to move on. My mother insisted that the building should be dust free before I could bring any potential agents in to sell it so with the continuous cycle of sweeping and dust settling, the dust began to represent the difficulty of moving on for me. In my final undergraduate year of study I worked with this dust which had accumulated (figures 8 and 9).



Figure 8: Brnic, T. ***Dust Conveyor Line.*** 2014. Photograph of installation by Brnic, T.



Figure 9: Brnic, T. ***Dust.*** 2014. Video Still by Brnic, T.

As part of the final installation in the factory, I made a photo-realistic painting of the interior, which became a record of and a homage to what the space and my father meant to me (figures 10 and 11).

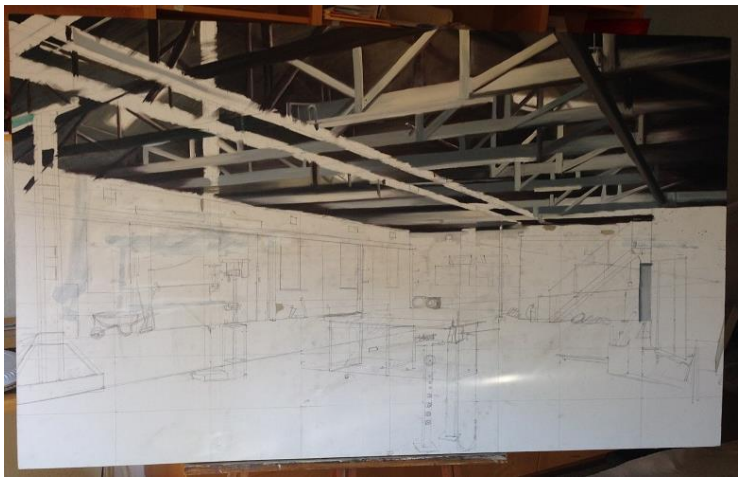


Figure 10: Brnic, T. ***Factory in Construct/Progress***. 2014. Oils/Graphite on Canvas.



Figure 11: Brnic, T. ***Factory***. 2014. Oils on Canvas.

In addition, I created a series of videos, photographs and installations intending to draw attention to the absence within the space (figures 6, 8 and 9). Through the medium of photography and painting I engaged in a dialogue with what my father used to do and my own work.

The search for a "good place" has uprooted and displaced my family for many years. A few years back my mother was uprooted when we sold her home of 17 years in Primrose Hill in anticipation for her retiring to the United States where my brother is currently living. In the preparation for the move I would drive her to various government offices to have health certificates and police clearances done. This image (figure 12) I recorded outside a medical centre in Bedford View while I was waiting for her to have her certificate done.



Figure 12: Brnic, T. **Autonomous,** 2015. Referential Photographic Image.

The photograph is of the exterior of my car window reflecting the surrounding buildings. The image resonated with our experience of constantly having to be uprooted. The distortion and reflection of the medical building intermingled with all the exterior and interior elements of the car. This interplay with interior and exterior reflects the act of looking and perceiving a moment in time. I cited Kant, (3) in Chapter 1 above as explaining that the process of perception is not something that happens externally, it is internalised as we experience a moment in time. The reflections of the forms found outside the car are visually distorted, relocated and displaced to appear to be intermingled with a myriad of elements, textures and forms of the interior. In the process of applying for a green card we had to disclose the duration and address of every place we ever lived in. The number came to 13. This constant uprooting and relocation is reflected conceptually in this work (figure 13).

A painting is a work which if it were a camera, has a shutter that is open for days, weeks and months at a time. Perhaps the shutter never closes as it is seen and reflected upon eventually by the viewer. A photograph offers a "way of certifying experience" (Sontag, 10). It becomes a kind of memento of an event. The photograph allows a snippet in time, that once you look upon it, there are little hidden messages or signs that are blurred by our everyday experiences. It stops time and lets these be uncovered.

Construction

The practice of capturing a certain reality and freezing that moment visually by photography is in my opinion similar to the physical process of painting. Just as the digital photograph transforms visual aspects of reality which we see with our naked eye, so too the artist transforms what she sees into physical materiality of paint particles composed of pigment, carrier liquid and occasionally brush bristles. The act of painting for me is like magic, traces of turpentine (from cleaning brushes) mixed with pigment and solvent touch the material canvas transforming the image from experienced visual reality into a painting, a new object.

It is a highly developed and intricate process which allows us to make meaning of the environment around us. As I discussed above in chapter 1, when we look upon something, this visual information out in the world makes its way through our eyes, then follows sensory pathways to the brain. The neurons in the brain fire off and we perceive the object we are looking

at. Energy signals in the environment in the form of light waves collide with the specialised receptor cells in our eyes. These receptor cells in the eyes then transform these "energy signals into electrochemical impulse as part of a process called transduction" (Townsend, & Greenop, 185). Sensation happens when the brain registers the signals it receives from the eyes in the form of lines, shapes and colours. Perception then happens when we create meaning from these lines, shapes and colours. The process allows us to see something that is in front of us, such as the painting as it exists in the world.

The process of painting for me is merging shapes and colours, blending of the past with the present. Painting from photography is a reflection of a reflection of a reflection. And a further reflection as I eventually place the pieces up for display in the final exhibition. There are numerous filters that the work goes through for this final chapter to be made possible.

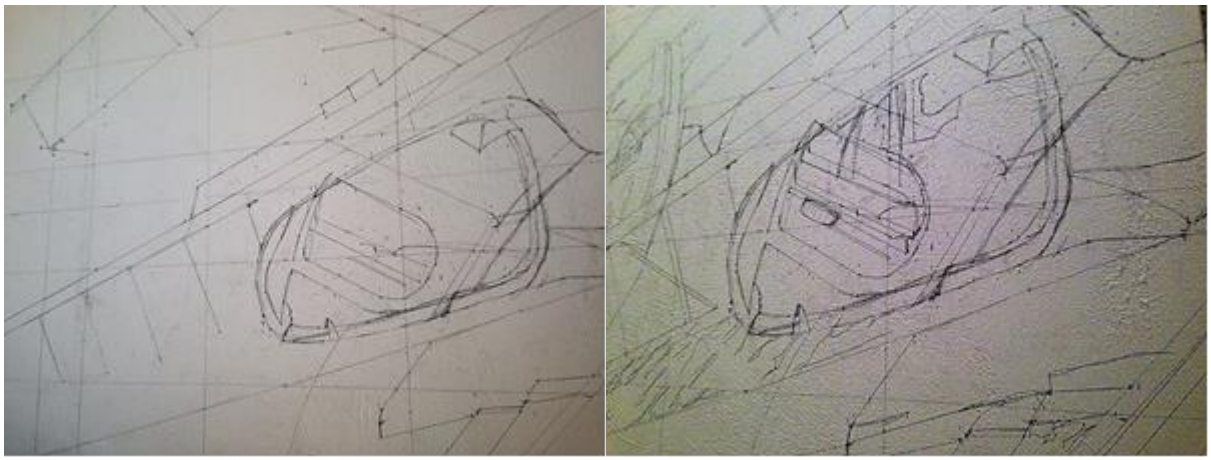
Going through all these filters raises a number of questions: how close is this to the original source, how authentic is it to what I thought of the subject at the time etc. But what is the real if not rendered through introspection and the filtering system itself. So by cycling the visual environment through all these filtering processes, we may question if this makes the painting even more real?

The construct is built up in stages, from the filtering of images taken of subject matter which one wants to interpret and represent the external world. To selecting a canvas provider upon which the image is recreated. To the final destination of display for the viewer to reflect upon for themselves. The process is labour intensive if broken down into its constructional elements. It is not a simple mirroring process as some critics may interpret. The artist is not a machine, what would the point be in recreating the visual reality exactly? We have cameras for that. We are laden with faults and limitations, and at the end of the day all an artist can do is be sincere in his representation and recreation and construct of reality. A means of portraying one's own reality through the visual medium of paint.

The constructs of a visual reality within the scope of this study evolves around the analogy of an external mirror, as in: the refracted, kaleidoscopic versions Estes creates by painting scenes photographed from reality perceived as displaced and fragmented. In this process of painting and reflecting, the scenes are approximated and familiarised.

Estes would spend one week constructing the underpainting in acrylic, and then two months for the oil overpainting (Canaday, 42). For me each of these paintings take more than two months to complete. My construction method in the beginning before I began using a projector used to

take more than a week to complete. I would print out the referential photograph and then transfer the image in pencil using the grid method. Millimetre by millimetre I would translate each referential distinctive intersection of each form. Working out the ratio difference between the initial image and my final canvas, I would apply this ratio to the point of reference and then continue plotting out each point in pencil on the primed canvas (figures 13 a,b and figure 14). With the aid of a projector I am now able to sketch out the foundational work within a day.



Figures 13 (a,b): Brnic, T. **Autonomous,** 2015. Drawing. (In construction).

Once the foundation sketch is laid (figure 14), if the image allows for it normally I begin painting from the top left hand corner and finish off in the bottom right (Figures 15 a,b and 16). The simple reasoning for this would be to allow for the paint to dry before tacking the next section.

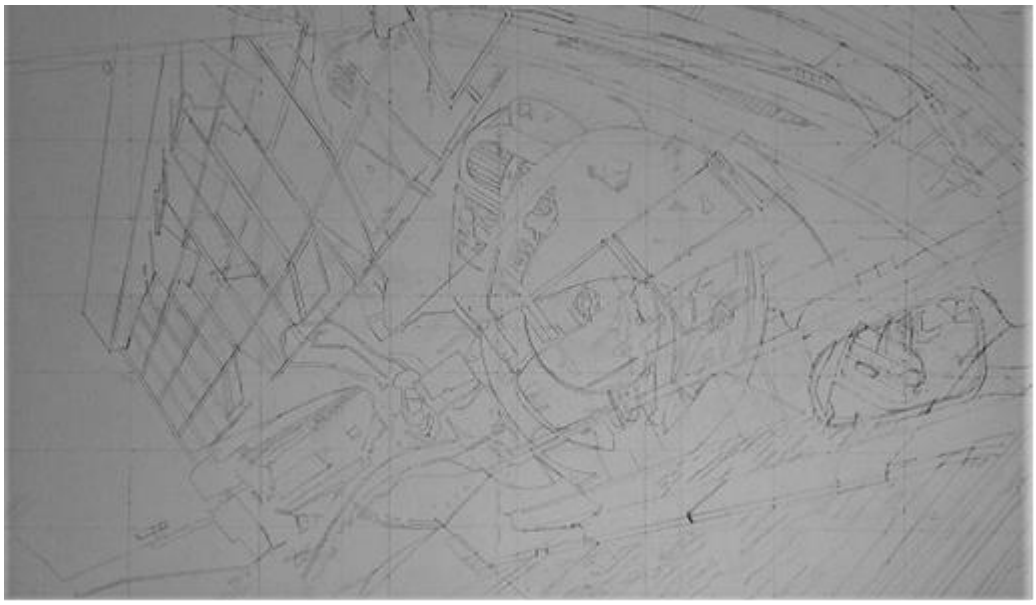
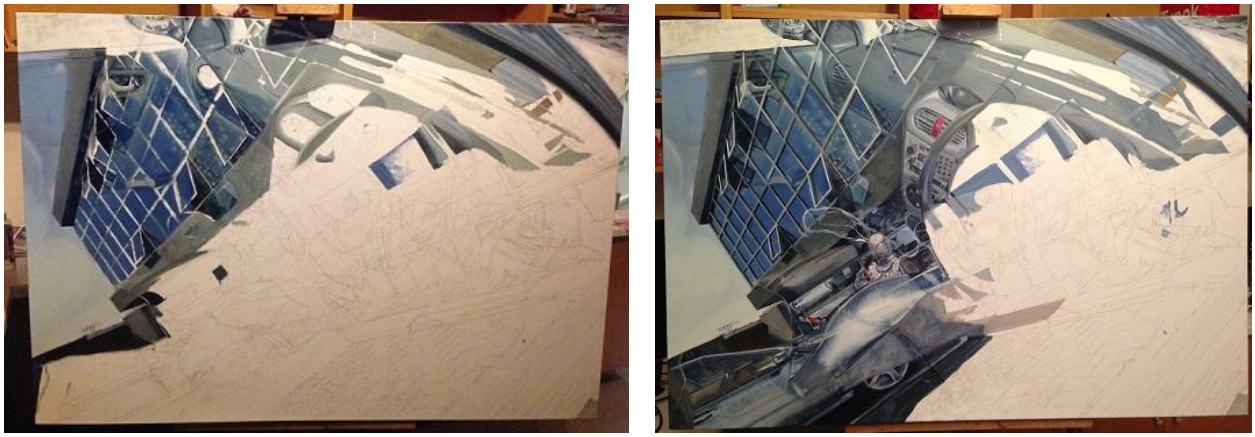


Figure 14: Brnic, T. **Autonomous,** 2015. Drawing (In construction)



Figures 15 (a,b): Brnic, T. **Autonomous.** 2015. Oils on Canvas. (In progress photos.)



Figure 16: Brnic, T. ***Autonomous.*** 2017. Oils on canvas. (130x90x4cm)



Figures 17 (a,b): Brnic, T. ***Autonomous.*** 2017. Oils on canvas. (Close ups).

The second painting *Push Happy Pills* (2018) (Figure: 18 a,b and c) I worked with painterly colour hues, so working all over slowly building up areas where colours were the same. In this way the final product seems more cohesive having similar hues spread visually more generally over the canvas, with the aim of constructing a more cohesively integrated image.



Figures 18 (a,b,c): Brnic, T. **Push Happy Pills.** 2018. Oils on Canvas. (In progress photos).



Figure 19: Brnic, T. ***Push Happy Pills.*** 2018. Oils on canvas. (130x90x4cm)

Push Happy Pills

Real life is often times merely a blur of images as we move through it. The camera offers me as an artist the opportunity to capture a moment in time. This particular scene is of the Jolly Roger Bar in Parkhurst, Johannesburg, (figures 19 and 20) a place I would frequent on the occasions I had something to celebrate. It is a place that triggers happy memories, a place I wish to revisit and re-experience.



Figure 20: Brnic, T. ***Push Happy Pills.*** 2018. Referential Photographic Image.

Kant, I. acknowledged the limitations and scope of human experience, his Copernican Revolution is that human consciousness is not detached/separate from the world but rooted in and actively engaged with it (Kant, 3). So man is not detached from reality and the world, but very much engaged in it.

> *"Just as there are no places without the bodies that sustain and vivify them, so there are no lived bodies without the places they inhabit and traverse"* (Casey, E. 2009: 25).

Tuan, (1977) as cited in Davis, P. (2011:21) describes place as a space endowed with meaning and value. What begins as undifferentiated space, becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value. So as one frequents a space on a regular basis, eventually the place gets coloured with personal meaning and memory. There is no knowing or sensing a place except by being in that place, and to be in a place is to be in a position to perceive it (Casey, 18).

The process of re-constructing the space from this image offered me an opportunity to re-experience this "happy" place in my own painterly way.

The process of painting on such a large scale allows me to get lost physically in the work. There is something intangible about the scale of the wooden window frame. It is larger than real life. Getting lost in scale, colours, shapes and paint textures. The swirl of paint and the sheer pleasure of creating something from nothing, guided only by the solidity and physicality of the referential photograph.

Sorting through the numerous images I had taken of the day, the words from the photograph "Push Happy Pills" struck a chord. I was prescribed an anti-depressant/anxiety drug called Lexamil in 2015. During that year my ex-husband had physically threatened me in our marital home and the pills became a crutch or a bridge to endure these particularly traumatic experiences. These pills helped me cope within a toxic home environment over the next few years. The meaning of the word happy is again echoed in the word "jolly" in the top right hand side of the image. The words "jolly, happy and free" resonate with the experiences I have had in that space/place so counter to my experience of other aspects of my life.

Just like the "pills" the iconography of alcoholic drinks in the image such as the "Vodka" and "Red Bull" (figure 20 a,b) have also become another means of coping with the reality of certain real life experiences for me. The double blurry image of the cars being reflected in the left hand side of the window frame is reminiscent of the "happy" tipsy feeling of drinking (figure 20c). This is further re-enforced by the inverted blurred writing of the name of the liquor store across the road: "Kramers". As I mentioned previously where Estes avoids painting figures, I tend to do the same.







Figures 21 (a,b,c): Brnic, T. ***Push Happy Pills.*** 2018. Oils on canvas. (Close ups)

There is a blurred outline of a hand in *Push Happy Pills* directly under the push sign, and there is a solemn outline of a figure with his arms crossed being reflected and standing outside the rotating doors of the painting below entitled *Relucence* (figure 22). Reminiscent perhaps of the inaccessibility for us pedestrians of some of these grandiose super reflective buildings which drape our ever changing skyline.



Figure 22: Brnic, T. ***Relucence.*** 2018. Referential Photographic Image.

Relucence and Reflection

Relucence is that movement of "reflecting back", according to Vinegar, A. (2014:251) in his text entitled: *Reluzenz: On Richard Estes*: "The German word Reluzenz is a translation of the Latin word reluceo, in English relucence", translates as "reflect a gleam". In early Heidegger, as cited in Vinegar, (251) "the word Relucence is a way of articulating how life and the world are not two separate conditions but rather imbricated and equi-primordial".

In other words the external world is not something detached and outside our own reality, but forms a part of our own experience of reality. "Life and world (visual reality) are intertwined" in that we are a part of it as we are reflected in and by the things that we ourselves are involved with (Vinegar, 251). Our appetite for life sometimes reflects back at us if we stop and look. As mentioned in my previous chapter, in 1967 the photograph offered Estes a way of capturing these ever elusive reflections, such as in his 1974 painting titled *Miami Rug Company* (figure 23).



Figure 23: Estes, R. ***Miami Rug Company*** (1974). Oils on canvas. 20 x 54". Private Collection.

In the *Miami Rug Company* Estes bisects his composition visually in a way playing with the duality of reflection. On the right of the image one can assume is the "real" depiction of the scene. On the left the slight blur and intermingling of shapes and colours gives away visually that this is the reflected section of the real scene (the unreal). Estes does not reveal any deeper meaning to any of his works, but just through pure observation of this particular scene one could astute there is a duality at play between what is real and what is not.

The discrepancy herein lies in that the actual thing we are looking at is not itself real but is merely a representation (digital photographed copy of an image in my referential book) of a representation of the original painting, which ultimately is again a representation by Estes taken from a photograph (or numerous photographs) of a street scene that exists in the world. Essentially what we are looking at is something three or more times removed from reality, a reflection of a reflection of a reflection of a reflection. It is a construct in of itself. And in its final form presented here it is once more reflected by the ink as it taints the paper upon which this paper is printed.

The focus of Estes' paintings are multifaceted, especially in his reflective works offering a fragmented matrix of familiar everyday forms, a kaleidoscope of sorts depicting his perception of his own observable visual reality. He re-constructs the duality of the chaotic and the mundane

scenes of New York City (revolving doors, store fronts) themselves and melds them into something more harmonious and visually spectacular for the viewer.

Art history as a discipline has tended to view Realist paintings of any period as if they were nothing more than accurate transcriptions of a reality outside themselves. But reality does not exist as something that is detached/outside us, it is very much rooted, reflected and influenced by ourselves. And no matter how hard some artists like Estes try to eliminate the hand of himself/the artist in the final painting, he is never totally detached from it. He is the designer/surveyor/architect/contractor/builder when it comes to the construction of the final piece. He decides on which image to take and ultimately re-construct. This is not an automated process which happens in a vacuum. The artwork is influenced by the artist from its initial conception, realisation and eventually final display. It takes meticulous observation, perception and ultimately the skill necessary to recreate and illustrate ones external observable and visual reality.

As a result, the artist's imitation and depiction of nature means that a slice of real life unexpectedly gets "fixed on to a panel as if by magic" (Gombrich, 173). The reflections of reality and reality itself become all but indistinguishable from each other, until even though there are "rigidly explicit factual details", reality itself becomes a type of fantasy (Canaday, 14). The fantasy for me can be equated to that of a memory. When one looks at a photograph or a painting of a photograph, certain memories and emotions are evoked of that particular time or scene. Perhaps painting acts like a time capsule or a time machine, transporting one back to this particular moment in one's own reality.

This photograph (figure 22) I took on a pedestrian outing in Sandton city. There are many reflective buildings that are not pedestrian friendly at all. The only access is either the underground car park gate or in this particular case a grandiose revolving door entrance. This building houses my ex-husband's attorneys' offices. I am currently going through an extended and difficult divorce process. This has been a harrowing journey in which I have found my reality turned upside down. My own physical and emotional displacement and abandonment is echoed in the images reflecting a fragmented and shattered view of reality. The shards of broken reflected forms are much like my experience. Everything that once made up what was at one time a harmonious marriage is broken down into pieces and gets reflected upon by the attorneys and court system. In the image, the glass revolving entrance doors reflect and distort forms found on the inside and outside of the building, creating a visual disarray. The blur of colours and

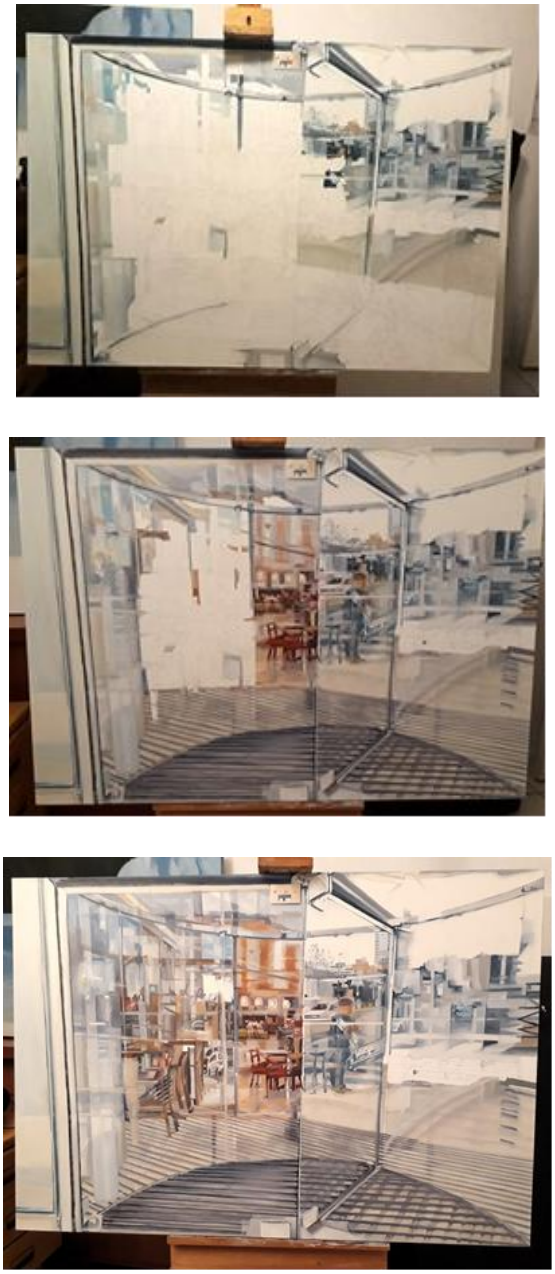
shapes echoes the fleeting evanescent glimpse of a scene (figures 24 a,b). A reminder perhaps that this experience is temporary too.



Figures 24 (a,b): Brnic, T. ***Relucence.*** 2018. Oils on canvas. (Close ups)

The real forms found in the scene are distorted through reflections in glass/mirror/shiny surfaces. Visually the painting depicts shards of broken reflections. The image both reflects and distorts forms from the inside and outside of the rotating glass doors.

To begin a piece of such intricacy is to commit oneself to a journey. A journey of time, thoughts, reflections and constant engagement with the original source, the photograph. I first decipher which form to tackle first, followed by numerous successions of layers upon layers depicting the intermingled reflections (figures 25 a,b,c).



Figures 25 (a,b,c): Brnic, T. **Relucence.** 2018. Oils on Canvas. (In progress photos.)

The trick is to be persistent every day, this I found yields in a good final visual product (figure 26). Also one should not get lost by the outline of the shapes, as the brain keeps wanting to make sense of the unfamiliar distorted and displaced shapes, colours, intersections of lines and forms. To stay in the field of abstraction is what helps me progress and shift the painting forward toward eventual completion. A lot of patience and persistence is required day in and out. It is not a process that occurs sealed off in a vacuum. It is one instilled in memories, time, experiences and mood, context and history.



Figure 26: Brnic, T. **Relucence.** 2018. Oils on canvas. (130x90x4cm).

Two examples of paintings by Estes which are visually similar are the *Revolving Doors* and *2 Broadway* (figures 27 and 28). Both are paintings of glass revolving doors reflecting both the interior and exterior environment.



Figure 27: Estes, R. ***Revolving Doors*** (1968). Oils on Masonite. 20 x 48”. Collection of Dr. Jack E. Chachkes.



Figure 28: Estes, R. ***2 Broadway*** (1968-69). Oils on Masonite. 48 x 66”. Neue Galerie der Stadt Aachen, Aachen. Germany. Ludwig Collection.

The smooth and cold treatment of Estes’ paint on the canvas emulates that of the coldness and smoothness of the glass reflecting, making the work more tactile (Meisel, 30). Looking at the

glass as a material object which exists in the world itself, it is transparent, reflective and distortive all at the same time. This is similar for me to the process of constructing my own reality through the medium of paint. It is transparent in that once painted there is a trace of me as an artist in the final image. My hands and brushes leave a mark behind in the work, which leads to a form of transparency. A physical manifestation of my reality is left behind on the canvas through the physical and very real process of mark making and brush strokes. Estes in a way emulates the camera in his production in that it is difficult to pin point any brush marks or strokes in the work itself. Even so we are privy to his viewpoint of the world be it austere and desolate. The clues are left for us to decipher and bring meaning to in his decision to eliminate certain elements found in the original photograph of the scene.

Transparency of the glass allows the viewer to look into another space altogether both privy and removed from reality. The physical composition of the glass plane in reality acts as a barrier between the self in body and that of the very real scene being looked at. This distancing from reality is also emphasised by the physical materiality of the two dimensional canvas plane.

The photo realistic painting tricks the eye of the viewer into believing that she is looking into another space which is untouchable physically, only manifested visually. This manifestation allows the artist to play with the concept of what is real and not in the mind of the onlooker. Tricking the viewer visually leads to manifestation and reflections of different realities. The process of self-analysis in writing this chapter of the thesis is similar to that of the reflective properties of glass. It both draws you closer to your reality and distances you. The glass and canvas act as access disruptors and deniers.

As glass reflects, so too the digital camera captures and reflects one's own visual reality instantaneously and permanently transforming photographs into digital pixels. I paint from the screen of a computer, this allows me to zoom into details I would not normally be able to pick up by looking at a printed photograph. The digital photograph I choose to work from is displayed on the computer screen in the form of pixels. The clarity of the resolution of the image zoomed upon is dependent on the size of photograph taken, resolution settings and on the size of the computer screen. This will determine the clarity of the image and the detail to which I can zoom in on. Having the ability to zoom in on an image allows me to depict enormous details if I so wish, unlike working directly for a printed photograph.

There is beauty in slowing down, taking heed and concentrating on each pixelated digitally reflected detail.

Window shopper

Shopping for many people is a means of escape from reality, every now and again one catches a glimpse of one's own reflection in the store window. A sudden moment of realising where you are. With this type of perspective looking directly at the image one would normally be able to see one's own reflection, but Estes paints the final image ignoring this pertinent reflection, this makes us feel ignored as if "atomised" or "disembodied" (Canaday, 14). I opted to include a reflection of myself in this work as means of locating myself within the painting: a double self-reflection.

This is an image I took a few years back of a shop store front inside the Sandton city shopping centre. I took the image as a colour palette reference for a piece I was working on for a commission of a skyline of Johannesburg at dusk. Now years later I am using the image for a very different purpose in my exploration of reflective surface in this dissertation.

In the photograph (figure 29) as with most of Estes' reflective work the onlooker struggles to distinguish between what is reflected from in front or behind him. I decided to use this image in particular because it has a painting in the window of a skyline, not unlike the work of Estes. I have manipulated the original to reflect a skyline of Johannesburg, situating myself in my home city. It is also a means of reflecting some of my earlier work of skylines of the city. It is a way of familiarising and bringing in my own reality into this painting. Estes would manipulate his original city scenes through the use of multiple photographic images. He would eliminate people and objects which would distract from the main focus which was always for him the architectural structures of downtown New York.



Figure 29: Brnic, T. **Window shopper.** 2015. Referential photographic image.

In referring to Johannesburg Vladislavic states that “the city we agree is a mnemonic, the buildings evoke a sense of reality, acting like a mnemonic” (Vladislavic, 31). I have always been fascinated with the city of Johannesburg, trying to find a language to describe the feeling when looking upon some of the landmarks. Throughout my career I have constantly been recreating the city in painting from photographs. My two passions in life and my earlier academic study of architectural technology and now fine arts have hopefully integrated in this body of work.

Furthermore I have eliminated the central face found in the original image. In the referential photograph it acted as the main focal point (figure 30) but I find that it distracts from the rest of the image I am trying to recreate (figure 31). Estes would often leave out figures in that he said they also distracted from the structure of the buildings he was trying to feature in the work.



Figures 30: Brnic, T. **Window shopper.** 2019. Oils on canvas (In progress photos).



Figure 31: Brnic, T. **Window shopper.** 2019. Oils on canvas. (130x90x4cm).

Serenity in the mundane

This is my final piece. I have entitled it *Mundane* (figures 32 and 33).



Figure 32: Brnic, T. **Mundane.** 2017. Referential photographic image.



Figure 33: Brnic, T. **Mundane.** 2019. Oils on canvas. (130x90x4cm).

There is a sense of serenity in the mundaneness of everyday life and ordinary day to day activities such as house chores have really helped me re-centre my emotional and physical wellbeing. For me the sense of serenity comes from the repetitiveness of mundane everyday chores, offering a sense of belonging, the physical means of expressing myself in the day to day activities such as washing and cleaning my immediate environment. There is beauty in the everyday, which the Realists saw and recreated.

This photograph was taken in my mother's kitchen (figure 30). The white tiled wall and the black grocery list black board reflect the interior and exterior of the kitchen. The interior is of the kitchen sink laden with dish soap bottles and the exterior is the drying yard. In the distance is the metal door to the laundry room. All these spaces are utilised for everyday chores. The serenity within the act of chores helps one ground themselves. There is once again as in the previous pieces this repetition of intersecting external and internal forms, textures and depth of transparent spaces. There is visual interplay between the inside and outside worlds, two and three dimensions in each of the paintings in this series. It is conceptually indicative of the process of self-reflecting.

Our version of reality is a selective one, reflecting and perceiving subject matter that is familiar to us, a means of situating ourselves in the world. The photograph allows us to distance and bring our reality closer to us. Distance in that we can engage with it visually and recreate it objectively through our skill of manipulating paint to depict three dimensional volume, colour and perspective.

The paintings in this series work allegorically in that each has a deeper meaning in my endeavour of re-constructing my own visual reality. Depicting the real from selected photographs and then reflecting upon them in this paper has brought me closer to a sense of where I am now space and time wise. A self-reflection of my reality, one laden with the physical and emotional displacement I have experienced whilst creating the work.

So these moments of scanning the environment through the lens of the camera are amplified and brought into the current through the process of painting. Giving a single moment of passing by an elevated status, drawing the viewer's attention to the simplicity and beauty of the moment of no real significant importance. There is nothing obviously profound to be seen in this work, just the simplicity of drawing ones attention to something temporary and giving it a permanence, hopefully drawing the viewer to look at the banality/mundaneness of life and moments which surrounds us on a daily basis. The banality of everyday life is where I think lies the beauty of utilizing a camera to capture everyday scenes we pass by unawares.

I titled the work *Autonomous* as in the freedom to move independently, as in the movement of the car we are as a family free to move when we are not safe or in search of something better. “Auto” also as a play on words because the image is of the reflections created on the “auto” mobile.

The reflective images in the photographs I have taken displace the scenery around me, elements both inside and outside. This visually emulates the sensation of being displaced oneself. As in getting a divorce and being stuck between two places: past and future. The car as in the work entitled *Autonomous* for me is a similar type of place, here and nowhere. If you find yourself in a car, you are most likely between places.

Being between places, being displaced just as Estes conveys in his intersecting, kaleidoscopic mirroring of forms found in everyday reality is ultimately the human experience. In my opinion the everyday mundane and familiar details which draw our attention visually are valuable in the construct of our own visual reality upon canvas. For me the places depicted in Estes work as to my own are lived and experienced, so they intermingle meaning and subject matter. Although the camera stops time, it inevitably moves on. In the process of re-constructing moments from photographs in paint, one is given the opportunity of reflecting and reliving the moment. Ultimately I think the visual reality is best constructed by depicting a visual reality of the mundane and familiar.

I have created a dialogue situated within my own painterly practice of the last few years. I paint from photographs taken of my immediate mundane environment. These images are always a snippet of a scene of my everyday as a means of capturing an observable real moment in time. The process of painting/re-constructing a familiar scene allows for reflection of my very real past and present everyday experiences.

Conclusion:

The existing interpretations and studies within the art historical and theoretical writings in relation to Realism and reality have assisted me in establishing the theoretical foundation of this research project, whose main aim is to examine how perceptions of one's own observable reality can be visually depicted by painting from photographs.

I set out to explore the means by which Realist and Photorealist artists such as Courbet and Richard Estes re-constructed their own visual observable three dimensional reality by painting it onto a two dimensional canvas.

In the first chapter I touched upon the theoretical frameworks as outlined by Nochlin, Barthes, Jakobson and Fried, and their elucidation of the contentious areas surrounding the ambiguous relationship between reality and Realism in art. The criticism of Realism in art is that it is simply a mirroring of an everyday reality unaffected by external influences, as if sealed off in a timeless vacuum. According to Nochlin (14), this criticism is problematic and misleading. Perception of one's own visual reality is not "pure and unconditioned", or value free. It is variable and influenced by time, mood, context, history and by the very real limitations of the artist own painterly skills (Nochlin, 14).

Realist artists such as Courbet would engage in their immediate environment making the observable everyday mundane subject matter the main focus of their paintings in an attempt at maximum authenticity. Realist artists would place positive importance on capturing the commonplace and the socially dispossessed, unlike the artists that came before who would paint illusionistic and idealised subject matter which was far removed from "real life" ("Realism – Art Term," n.d).

When the camera was invented, photography offered artists a way to capture the very transient, elusive moment, the visual concrete fact as a means of illustrating an event, eliminating any traditional moral, abstract or psychological values (Nochlin, 31). The photograph functions as an intermediate source between painting and reality (Perreault, 2).

Furthering my exploration in chapter two I looked at the works of Photorealist Richard Estes illustrating the process of capturing the immediate environment surrounding us, perceiving it, then recreating it in a Photo Realistic way. Painting directly from numerous photographs of his immediate environment was a means to get in touch with and a means by which to familiarise with an observable reality in all its reflected distortions.

The camera may offer an image of the random, the changing, impermanent and unstable (Nochlin, 28). This according to Nochlin, (28) offers a truer experience of present day visual reality than ever before. The photograph acts as a transitional source, freezing time and offering only values of light and darkness. Estes takes the photo and enhances it by constructing additional lines (figure 6), spaces, multiple vanishing points and varying perspectives. There is no fixed line of horizon, because the eye does not see the same way that a camera would (Canaday, 23).

Estes, according to Canaday, (10) recreates a scene in a way that creates a matrix of displaced chaotic experiences which ultimately is the "human experience". Ultimately we are fascinated by his revelation of the visual world around us (Canaday as cited in Meisel, 32).

Estes finely executes highly detailed observations of everyday scenes. He would leave out people in the final product as they created an "unnecessary narrative" (Estes as cited in Canaday, 23). The highly rendered details in his paintings, with no real narrative purpose is what Barthes, (11) calls the "reality effect". These details are what makes his work a "signifier of reality" and the image itself seems to come alive (Freudenheim, T. 2014 & Gombrich, 172).

Estes goes on to change visual elements found in varying photographs of a single scene taken over time to gain a clearer, more cohesive final product (Freudenheim, 2014). Taking photos at different times of the day would show him how differently the light plays and interacts with buildings he wants to paint. He is able to create a work that is spatially mutable and interesting for the viewer. The boundary between the two dimensional representation and the three dimensional "real" thing is not so carefully observed (Savedoff, 12). The final result is that the painting imitates a photographic image.

He replicates the feel of a photograph as he omits the artists hand almost entirely from the painting. Estes achieves this by applying his paint in a smooth, flat and cold technique with very little blending. Furthermore he does not sign his paintings in a traditional way, but purposively obscures his signature. Just like in a photograph the elements found in his paintings are all in full focus.

By creating a painting where everything is in focus and eliminating figures he activates the viewer. This happens as the viewer is given the option/freedom to search for a focal point as he scans over the painting. By omitting figures, there is also the thought that "anything can happen", activating the imagination of the viewer (Volz, 87). The final paintings depict a visual reality that exists in real life, but that have been constructed to be more "real". Proudhon as cited in

Venturi, L. (1947:197) is of the opinion that if an artist eliminates the real from his work "he ceases to be an artist". In addition Deleuze as cited in Parr, (224) reiterates that the real is not truly complete without ones thoughts of it. So the unreal is dependent on the real to exist and vice versa. From this, one could deduce that for a painting to be experienced as something real it should be perceived first.

Researching Estes' painterly techniques has shown me that by manipulating vanishing points and perspectives of the original photographs one is able to re-construct a scene in reality into a clearer, more cohesive final product. He offers a view of a scene as a person would normally see it and not one that the photograph offers. This is the beauty of painting, it is malleable, and it has the power to create an illusion of a past, present and future. His finely executed renditions of highly detailed observations of everyday scenes is what makes them feel more real (Freudenheim, 2014).

As an artist I am constantly engaged in the world reflecting and recreating it visually by photography and painting as a constant dialogue between what is real and what is not. The photograph enables the artist to freeze time and capture an immense amount of visual detail that the eye itself is unable to. The detailing is what makes the painting feel more real. By illustrating images of my own familiar and immediate environment and reflecting upon them in this dissertation, I am slowly facing the real. By re-constructing any scenes photographed, they become approximated and familiarised to the artist. Thanks to the invention of photography we are able to halt time and capture an image representing our own reflections, displacements and distortions. The process of painting from a photograph has enabled me to take the time necessary to reflect over experiences which come in dealing with a real situation presented to us as we traverse life in all its difficulties.

I made some brief comments on the invention of photography and its influence on painting. The very real processes of sensation and perception.

During the Realist movement the idealised and illusionary works of the past were replaced by the mundane and ordinary in all its warts. Thus representing the true reality of the time and not the more popular reflective imaginary illusionary works of the past.

Realists have depicted their own era in full detail for future generations. Relaying the facts of the time, not unlike a photograph. Estes takes this further in re-constructing the scene in order to make it closer to what it really is and not just what the camera sees. The process of painting is a means of transforming a very real but fleeting moment into something more permanent.

So by utilising the photograph as a source for my painterly work it allows me to depict my own subjective visual reality in that particular space and time. Such as in the *Autonomous* painting I made in in 2015 when my mom was in an unsettled space in her life, which impacted my own existence here in South Africa. The threat of displacement felt was palpable and real.

The second piece *Push Happy Pills*, a reflection of where I was at in early 2018 being prescribed "Happy Pills" and having to deal with a personal displacement once again. The displacement I feel physically/mentally is reverberated visually in the work by the fragmented displacement of familiar forms of bottles and cars throughout the image.

Relucence deals with the idea of reflections and how the external visual world is not removed from our own perception of reality, "life and the world are not two separate conditions but rather imbricated and equi-primordial" (Vinegar, 251). An artist's perception is not detached from the world, but is "rooted and actively engaged in it" (Kant, 3).

Window Shopper is more of an experimental piece whereby I manipulated the original photographic source and using Estes' technique of eliminating certain forms which interfere with the overall composition. I have added a familiar Johannesburg skyline as a homage to my early work but also to engage the viewer in a sincere and authentic way by offer them something familiar to perceive.

Mundane, is the last piece in this series where I re-construct the everyday mundane scene, engaging the real as the Realists did in the 19th century. In an attempt at maximum verisimilitude. The painting is a composite of fragments of reflected mirrored reality as well as space of mundane recognisable forms. It is in these non-reflective identifiable spaces where one can get their bearings. So by painting the banal everyday mundane reality we are able to ground ourselves and connect to our very own perception of reality. Ultimately by expressing your own perception of reality you become more aware of it. The artist is the designer/surveyor/architect/contractor/builder all in one when it comes to the construction of the final photorealistic piece.

Painting from photography melds the two forms of artistic expression into a new form of expression, that of Photorealism. Both mediums depict a visual reality in one form or another. Furthering on the concept of real and not in photorealistic paintings, is the tension artists create in perpetuating the photographic flatness of the two dimensional canvas. In their rendering, the Photo Realists would treat the process of painting the canvas same all over. This creates a visual

tension between what is rendered in three dimensional form and that of the flat canvas itself and the unchanged overall treatment of medium. So by painting directly from a photograph, depicting something realistically upon a flat surface, the Photo Realist plays with perceptual ambiguity of what is real and what is not real.

The camera is able to represent a snippet in time. The painting on the other hand depicts a large chunk of time over which the artist engages in the process of constructing an artwork. A journey in of itself, the very real process of self-reflecting and piecing together a puzzle. As the viewer standing in front of a painting may do in their mind, I do in the physical act of mixing paints to best represent the portion I require to progress the work. Furthermore I apply the paint on the paint brush relevant for the amount of detail to be depicted. With brush strokes I apply the mixed hue of paint onto the physical canvas surface itself. Limited to my own set of skills and time available to complete the piece.

As the artist creates a painting, she is never really sealed off in a vacuum devoid of emotions, sensations or perceptions. She is influenced by time, memories, etc, limited by his skill in the marks she makes on the canvas. Just as the brain takes energy signals from the real world and constructs meaning, so too the artist takes paint and re-constructs his own visual reality upon canvas. Both are constructs born out of the process of transformation limited by physical composition of real elements that exist in the world.

All in all a long journey of transmutance of dimensions visually, through the senses and finally through the mind for the purpose of self-reflection. My practice is a very personal journey into exploring and rediscovering where I stand in relation to other Realist painters in the world. I am truly grateful for having art and the skill of painting and reflection to assist me on my way forward in my own very real experiences dipped in a little linseed oil to help it along the way.

According to Perreault, (4) all observation and representation by the artist himself is not value free. The camera can only reproduce, it is up to the artist to augment the image to offer a journey for the viewer. By offering an interesting and rich visual landscape, the viewer can get lost in and seek out his own focal points for the time she has with it. Estes is a master manipulator of perspectives, rendering any scene that has a multitude of objects into a cohesive mass of identical clarity once observed. A balanced composition constructing a visually ordered reality, for Estes “Painting is when he is happiest” (Meisel, 98).

Photo Realists utilise photographs as source materials from which to paint, and their works retain a photographic look, they imitate photographs where they may be mistaken for photographs

(Perreault, 3). Champfleury as cited in Nochlin, (36) states that “the artist is not a machine and is incapable of rendering objects mechanically”. “The reproduction of nature by man will never be a reproduction and imitation, but always an interpretation” (Nochlin, 36).

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