

SAM LEACH

THE SCIENCE OF PAINTING

Story Owen Craven
Photography Daniel Shipp

SAM LEACH PAINTS to explore his world. He paints to explore his existence, and that of others, within the broader context of life and the universe. Simply put, his paintings explore the notion of what it is to be human.

Painting within the framework of history paintings and a still life genre, his landscape and figurative paintings delve into the world of scientific and philosophical theories. The work sets out to deepen our understanding of our relationships with the natural world.

Leach commenced a PhD at RMIT University, Melbourne, at the beginning of this year to further explore these questions in his practice. **ARTIST PROFILE** was generously welcomed into the artist's studio to chat about these topics and learn from where these questions originate.





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I want to ask you about the genre of your paintings. You reference openly 17th century Dutch master paintings. Where does this interest come from?

It came through work I was doing looking at the perception of architectural space. The way architecture conveyed a particular message. I was looking at corporate architecture and the way spaces convey the impression of power and wealth but also a desire not to appear too profligate or wasteful. There is a very subtle message that they're trying to get across through architecture.

I was looking at Dutch paintings because of the way they paint atmosphere and space. In particular there was a couple of artists - Gerard ter Borch, who painted some really lovely portraits where he'd just have a figure sitting in a really interesting void, and Pieter Jansz Saenredam - he was one of the architecture painters of the 17th century. There was this strong visual echo between his churches and cathedrals and the corporate foyers I was looking at. When I was investigating what was going on in 17th century Holland, I found there were similarities in the society of that time

and the late capitalist society we had in the late 1990s, early 2000s - before the financial crisis when corporations seemed much more untouchable than they do now.

You're not so much known for architectural paintings though, although space plays an important role in your compositions. How have things moved on for you?

At a certain point, I started looking at the objects in the painting - not just the backgrounds. I really thought it would be an interesting possibility to try and place objects in paintings that would have symbolic meaning and introduce that extra layer of content into the paintings. So as well as it being this pure formalist expression that you could also include content without losing the formalist aspect. That was how I started to put objects in. It turned into a still life genre but still life put into architectural paintings. The still life of that period has a really rich tradition of its own.

How have you reworked the still life genre of the 17th century period to hold a more contemporary relevance? What elements have you developed to allow a contemporary



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audience to access the work?

There is more dynamic staging than you'd find in old master paintings. Part of that is the influence of photography. Photography over the last century has changed the way we expect an image to be constructed. There's probably a more dynamic quality to it - there's a certain looseness that's expected. Whereas things were typically quite orthogonal in those earlier paintings - a lot of verticals and horizontals and more repeating patterns - there's probably less of that now. You have a more unexpected combination of lines and angle. Still, you try and construct it so you lead the eye around a painting in a particular way and also you do think about repeating patterns because for someone looking at a painting it's something that becomes very pleasing to see. Little shapes and marks that get repeated at different scales of the painting are important to put in.

There is a level of control and manipulation that goes on in constructing the paintings. It has to take into account the images have been shaped by technology over the centuries.

How do you feel you synthesize the different shapes and patterns? Compositionally, how do you pull it together?

It's really an intuitive process. I usually start with an image in Photoshop and play around with it there until I start to hit an arrangement I think has a possibility. But then it's in the process of painting itself that the details get sorted out.

Typically, the objects in the paintings - the figures, the animals, the bits of technology - get painted in a particular spot on a canvas fairly early in the piece. But then the architecture and the shapes and the tone and the lines that connect those things in the painting come in later on. Those are the things that really get pushed around to draw the objects together. It's a bit like a puzzle; how to move elements to make everything fit in. It's an intuitive and iterative process.

What comes first? Is it an object that you want to work with? Or is there more a conceptual drive?

That's a hard thing to describe. I take a lot of photos of animals and

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things. I also go through photo libraries and archives and source images. I spend nights and nights looking through images. There are certain things that grab me and, in a way, they get filed away in the mind.

At a certain point, I hear a concept or read something and a connection gets formed. You get the flash of an idea and then you go pursuing that. You need to have, for me at least, a stock of images and then the exposure to ideas and concepts and then allow the subconscious, or unconscious, mind to see where those connections might be and then try bring them up to the surface.

Are pictures composed as stand alone works or do they form part of a series?

It's much more a paning by painting process. But there's a conceptual thread.

I sometimes come across groups of images I see a potential for a group of paintings though. For example, the NASA archives, which I love. I just love the photos of the technicians preparing the satellites in the clean rooms. To me, there's just painting after painting in these things because the guys are half posed but half captured in the process of doing what they're doing. And the technology is exciting and beautiful but the gadgets and gear they're using is strange and has no real reference in our world.

It seems theory and writing is as important to you as images and the act of painting itself in developing your work. Do you consider this a formal aspect of your practice?

I listen to a lot of audio books and lectures while I paint, and I find that a really useful source of inspiration in constructing the works.

It is important because I'm trying to make paintings that have content and I want the content to be meaningful and sophisticated and content that is outside of myself. I really want to deal with

concepts that are 'in the world' and not just talk about my own experiences and emotions. For me, those things are always in the artwork anyway – they're always going to be there. I want to bring other things into the work.

You paint on a small scale and coat a good deal of your paintings in resin. What role does this scale and the resin play in the image? Is this something you feel that distances your experiences and emotions?

I tried a lot of different varnishes and surfaces before I arrived at this material. I was looking for something that was going to take the experience of looking at the painting further away from the idea of constructing the painting. What the resin does, as it adheres to all the crevices, marks and indentations on a surface is give flat reflection off the top of the resin so the pigment looks solid and uniform.

I wanted to find a way to distance myself, as the artist, from the viewer. The resin does form a very physical barrier between the viewer and the painting so the painting appears to be encapsulated in the material and is inaccessible. That was what I really liked about it.

With the scale of the paintings, what I wanted to do was draw the mind into the paintings. Instead of having the entire space exerting influence on the viewer, have the viewer project into the space of the painting. Having a sense of barrier is a way of reinforcing the sense that you (the viewer) need to project your mind into the space.

I'm interested to hear what role the landscape and figures – human and animals – play in your paintings.

When I started using animals they were really standing in for life in general. They quite often stood in for humans. An animal in a particular environment could be read as representing humans





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in a broad sense. It was good to do that because with animals it is possible to paint a very detailed painting of a very individual looking animal but still have a certain level of universality to it because we tend not to read a personal narrative into animals the way we do humans.

The few portraits I've done, you can't help but have a particular narrative of who's actually in the portrait and it's an interesting thing to deal with. What I've typically done with portraits is try to strip down the narrative as much as possible and keep it quite ambiguous so the person, while quite recognizable, is ambiguous.

Other human figures I've painted have been more anonymous – these images of technicians in clean suits – anonymous humans in action. They're in a uniform of sorts, which strips away their identity. It's cleaner.

So you're working with a blank slate to explore other, bigger ideas?

Yeah, you're free to manipulate their actions. You don't read into their background or social status as soon as you see an article of clothing. Although, of course, a clean suit has certain connotations but I'm happy to have people in that context but that you don't know more than that about them. That's been useful.

The Landscapes have really been more an interest in the construction of the world. It's been about the way reality is shaped by observation. Those 17th century Dutch-Italianate landscapes, in particular, were constructed from imagination or a set of stock images: 'there's a way to do a tree, a way to do a mountain, a way to do Italian-ish clouds' and they put these things together to make these paintings.

With that construction of this landscape, there was a desire to control it or shape the world in a particular way that really encapsulates something about how humans relate to nature.

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It's wrapped up in the early development of science and also the development of commercial, corporate culture as we would understand it. Those things are very closely related. To me, it all comes across in these landscapes, which is why I find them very fascinating things to look at.

The worlds of science and art don't often tend to mix but you defy this. How important is the evolution of science in art for you? What do you see art and science offering one another?

I don't really know what art can offer science but I think science can offer a lot to art because it really is the quest for an understanding of the world. Science has a lot to offer art, purely because of the way the world is put together and I think that's important. To me, that is what art is. ■

Sam Leach is represented by Sullivan+Strumpf Fine Art, Sydney and Peter Walker Fine Art, Adelaide.

www.ssfa.com.au
www.peterwalker.com.au
www.samleach.net

01 Nihil Unbound, 2011, oil and resin on wood, 35 x 25cm
 02 Natural History Dwarfs Second Nature, 2011, oil and resin on wood, 35 x 35cm
 03 Griffon in the Clean Room, 2011, oil and resin on wood, 45 x 35cm
 04 3: Cray agent, 2010, oil and resin on glass, 20 x 20cm
 05 Future Loch, 2010, oil and resin on linen and board, 20 x 30 cm
 Courtesy the artist and Sullivan+Strumpf Fine Art, Sydney