

Post-Conceptual Art Practice: New Directions – Part One

Foreword

When public spaces are created they are often used by the people who work in them to stop, think and take a moment out of their everyday lives to re-charge their batteries. Placing Fine Art into these spaces gives the audience the chance to channel what they are thinking about and gives a point on the horizon to focus on.

Fine Art in this form is there to give its audience an alternative to the norm: it may be challenging or simply something else to look at and think about, but nonetheless it is available for the audience to engage with if they want to.

The work in this exhibition has a balance; the sculptures by William Henry are minimal and serene with a metaphor embedded, and the paintings by Angus Pryor, by contrast, are colourful and chaotic with a sense of narrative illuminated within them.

The works of both artists lend themselves to such urban environments, people flow through the space effortlessly. If this exhibition challenges one viewer to stop, think and to take a moment out of their everyday lives, it will be deemed a success.



Paul Jackson, April 2010

Introduction

The relevance and criticality of contemporary painting and sculpture are ongoing issues facing a post-conceptual generation of artists who grew up in the aftermath of Modernism and the neo-avant-garde debates of the 1960s and early 1970s. This exhibition showcases recent work by two artists both of whom are exploring distinct, but related themes within contemporary practice.

Although Angus Pryor's canvases reference the gestural work and legacy of Philip Guston, his aesthetic engages with allegory and mark-making as a conceptual language. A graduate of Bath College of Higher Education and the Kent Institute of Art & Design, where he completed his MA, Pryor's studio practice stems from a keen sense of art history's resonance for contemporary painting. These concerns are informed by a belief in the intrinsic and professional value of Fine Art teaching informed by practice, ideas which were formative in establishing the Ashford School of Art & Design and the subsequent development of a Fine Art Department and curriculum at the University of Kent.

William Henry's aesthetic has developed from an exploration of the Duchampian legacy of the readymade and the pared-down aesthetic associated with Minimalism and with post-Minimalist abstraction. Deploying the techniques of casting and blowtorching, and using materials such as concrete and plaster, he melds the clean, clear lines of Modernist design with organic-looking sculptures.

The transformation of sculptural objects revises and updates Modernist tropes of the readymade, transposing the genre as a metaphor for the body and its physical and cognitive limitations. Although the social or political is not directly foregrounded in Henry's sculptures, the purposeful manipulation of materials renders these works strangely mutable, becoming, in the artist's own words, 'dysfunctional' or 'functionless objects'.

Texts by Dr Grant Pooke, School of Arts, University of Kent.

Curriculum Vitae – William Henry

Education and Qualifications:

2007 South Kent College (University of Kent)
BA (Hons) Fine Art Degree (First Class)

2004-2006 Ashford School of Art & Design
HND Fine Art (Distinction)

2004 Ashford School of Art & Design
ABC Certificate in Art & Craft Studies

2004 Open College Network Kent Medway
KAES (Tonbridge) Art & Design

2003 Tonbridge Adult Education Centre
Foundation Programme Art & Design

Exhibitions and External Submissions:

South East Open Studios, Otford, Kent 2009

Kent Art, Ashford International Train Terminal 2007

“Best in Show”, University of Kent, Rutherford College 2007

Three Degrees Show, Ashford School of Art & Design 2007

“Best in Show”, University of Kent, Rutherford College 2006

End of Year Exhibition, Ashford School of Art & Design 2006

Space to Think Show, Charter House, Ashford, Kent 2006

82 Show, Ashford School of Art & Design 2005

“Commendation”, Margate Rocks 2005

Email: williamhenry16@btinternet.com
or view: www.locate.uk.com/williamhenry/index.htm

Statements of Practice and Intent by William Henry 2009/10

My aesthetic is developing and my roots are formalist; they flow from an interest in form, line, texture – the essential dialogue between materials. I’m more of a constructionist, having dismembered a readymade, I try to use it as an abstract form.

My works have been fabricated – they are fabricated from readymades. Their surfaces are derived from the construction and adaptation of an original readymade.

Meaning is derived from the process of making. I’m trying to transform a familiar type of form into a self-contained object with its own sculptural language.

I have always resisted the need to formally name my art work. Applying titles feels like “leading the witness”.

Re-fashioning the Readymade – New Work by William Henry

Art is a state of encounter
(Nicolas Bourriaud, 2002)¹

William Henry's readymade practice has developed from a sustained engagement with the legacy of Duchamp and with the Minimalist process-orientated practice of the 1960s and 1970s. But the move into sculpture and installation was accidental and began during his time at art college whilst experimenting with spatial dynamics arising from differing perspectives and viewing angles. Coming across some dis-used car tyres and breeze blocks (the Ashford School of Art & Design site at Henwood had once been a Caffyns Garage), Henry fashioned an entire micro-environment which galvanised an interest in more robust forms of object-based practice.

By his own admission, Henry brings an empirical and practical sensibility to thinking about and appropriating the readymade. An investigative approach to the intrinsic properties and effects of the medium or process melds with a more creative and lateral take which re-situates objects, associations and the contexts of display.

Strands within post-conceptual sculpture have frequently been associated with found materials, reminiscent of the neo-avant-garde aesthetic of 'Arte Povera' and the iconography of mass culture. For example, contemporary British artists, Sue Noble and Tim Webster are known for their composite assemblages, comprising found objects and other detritus, which, by adept and imaginative manipulation, are used to form and project highly detailed silhouettes. In what has become a signature style, their contemporary, Sarah Lucas, has also adopted a grungy aesthetic which is aptly used to objectify some of the stereotypical clichés and casual sexism of contemporary society.²

By contrast, Henry's readymade aesthetic is pared-down and Minimalist. Meticulously sanded and smoothed concrete and plaster are used as principal mediums, bringing to these sculptures a decorative, but typically sensual exteriority.

As he has noted at interview 'My aspiration is for an aesthetic which is clear, clean, simple, but with a touch of irony and a sense of the unexpected'.³ Earlier interventions and explorations of process by Henry suggest a lateral take on appearances, conventions – and a sense of humour.

With the temporary, site-specific work *Untitled (Suit in Concrete)* (2007) he went onto a City of London building site and encased the work in the unset concrete screed of a basement floor. The intervention was inherently ambiguous; was the suit sinking or emerging; was this a work of transient archaeology, ethnography or a 'happening' in the tradition of Kaprow or Beuys? The detour and site-based intervention to the City of London, one of the engines of laissez-faire capitalism, also suggests a gentle and subversive appropriation of earlier Situationist tropes of the 'dérive' and of 'détournement' – the use and navigation of the urban environment to fashion aesthetic and social interventions.

Other lateral takes on personal and shared social experience resulted in *Untitled (Wasted)* (2009), a re-fashioned snooker table but with a hump, a conceit suggestive of Maurizio Cattelan's surreal and anarchic installations. The piece referenced an episode in the artist's earlier career in the City during the time of the previous recession. With shares in freefall and screens turning red, traders spent hours of frustrating downtime playing snooker.

Henry's *Untitled (Too Late)* (2009/10) are an ambitious series of cast urinals, works in which the Duchampian readymade is re-appropriated and re-fashioned. As with other sculptures, the process is carefully and methodically undertaken. Firstly, a gelflex mould is made of the urinal which is then wax cast; the wax is then melted-off using a blowtorch. The shape is then filled with plaster which is rubbed-down and smoothed in order to give the patina and appearance of industrial enamel. The resulting object is then sprayed in white enamel paint to give the patina of ceramic or vitreous china.

The bending and manipulation of otherwise unyielding materials using casting and blowtorches extends the idiom of Henry's work in new and unexpected ways. Although the modernist readymade tradition is not principally associated with the organic, the manipulation of materials renders these forms strangely

mutable, becoming, in the artist's own words – 'dysfunctional' or 'functionless objects'. As Henry notes:

I take an object and amend it in such a way to make it dysfunctional.
I go from one readymade and manipulate it into a self-contained object
with its own sculptural language.

These, and similar works such as *Untitled (Strung Out)* (2010) reference a formalist and Minimalist vocabulary, a sense amplified by the artist's ambivalence towards foregrounding conventional titles for these appropriated readymades. As Henry puts it, articulating such a conscious intention behind his objects might 'lead the witness'. Instead the activated spectator is left to speculate on the intuitions and metaphors suggested by and through the work.

Henry's readymade aesthetic does not foreground the political or social. But there is a recognition that selecting otherwise contingent and ubiquitous objects for casting, is itself, an experiential and socially-based activity. At the outset, the act of making was, for Henry, one of catharsis. As he notes:

I'm broken and the object is broken, but it is not rendered useless.
I'm not making statements on politics but about personal illness;
they are often metaphors for broken-ness.

Henry's resulting readymades follow the conviction that objects and forms can justify themselves aesthetically and formally through difference and distinctness, rather than through conformity with prevailing canons of beauty, however culturally defined or mediated.

As the cathartic and the immediately personal inflexion to Henry's aesthetic has receded, it has been replaced by a broader and recurrent engagement with entropy and stasis – the slowing down and eventual cessation of all natural phenomena. These issues were among those faced and explored by an earlier generation of practitioners such as Eva Hesse and Robert Smithson, both of whom worked in very different registers of scale and material. If there is a tacit social commentary in Henry's readymades it might be read through their

apparent mutability and vulnerability, indexing perhaps a new moment of fragility and dis-equilibrium as governments (and people) take pause to re-think the 'finite-ness' of objects, resources – and even of the time around them.

- 1 Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, Translated by Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods, les presses du réel, 2002, p18.
- 2 See for example: Amna Malik's monograph, *Sarah Lucas: Au Naturel* (Afterall Books, 2009).
- 3 Discussion and interview with the author, August 2009.



Untitled (Sympathy) 2007 Ceramic



Untitled (Conflict) 2007 Ceramic



Untitled (Washed Out) 2007 Metal



Untitled (Strung Out) 2010 Ceramic

Curriculum Vitae – Angus C.M. Pryor (b.1966)

Fine Art Background:

Art & Design Foundation: Wimbledon School of Art 1985-1986 (Distinction)
Bath College of Higher Education 1986-1989
BA Hons. Fine Art
Kent Institute of Art & Design 1989-1991
Interdisciplinary MA in Art and Architecture
University of Greenwich 1989-1991
PGCE/Cert. Education

Teaching Experience:

Director, Fine Art, University of Kent (2006 -)
Head of Ashford School of Art & Design (2003-6)
Head of Division of Art & Design/Media (2000-3)
Head of Division of Art & Design, Media Studies and Performing Arts (1997-2000)
Manager Art & Design at SKC (1996)
Co-ordinator GNVQ Advanced, South Kent College (1995)
Lecturer Foundation Art & Design, Croydon College (1993-4)
Part-time Lecturer BA Hons. KIAD (1991-1995)

Curatorial Experience:

Elwick International Symposium (2002)
Metropole Gallery Degree Show (2002)
Tournai Art in the Town (2003)
ESSAT School Show 'Chez Rita' (2004)
Ashford School of Art & Design Shows (2005-7)
University of Kent Inaugural Degree Show (2008)

Art Based Project Work:

Established Fine Art Programmes at the University of Kent and
Ashford School of Art & Design (2002/2006 -)
Project work, Ashford International Centre (now Turner Contemporary) (1996)

Plastic Propaganda: A Manifesto by Angus Pryor 2010

My canvases are large and vernacular in character. I am a painter dealing with subjects I don't enjoy, made with objects I don't respect on oversized canvas that is difficult to work on. I use semi-industrial paint which is impure and colours that refuse harmony. My paintings resist institutional appropriation. In their refusal of the Duchampian readymade as object, they critique its ubiquity within contemporary practice. But in late modern fashion, I recycle and incorporate the readymade back into the made through the visceral practice of painting.

I use the readymade to create images in paint on the canvas: these include representations of people, toys, large inflatables and roadkill. But once pressed into the canvas they are all described and signified through the language of paint. Reacting together, the process of their realisation actually disappears and all that remains is the relationship of one mark in juxtaposition with another. The surface of the canvas is delineated by spots of paint, plasticine, cookie cut-outs and bubbles which tie the objects together. These motifs create a tension as if the work has become infected and these painted pustules are the plague that affects the purity of the objects depicted and our own visual acuity.

The finished paintings are discursive narratives which explore atomisation, fragmentation and the diminishing sense of social responsibility and connection within contemporary life. They explore image-based social clichés such as sex, war, our relationships to self and to each other; the alienation of domestic bliss.

I'm a colourist. Artists like Veronese, Tiepolo, Yves Klein, Philip Guston and Jeff Koons have been formative for my work, as have the Assyrian Friezes in the Metropolitan, New York. But underneath the lush surfaces, these paintings depict a corruption of sensibility. I often paint over seemingly successful segments in order to create a whole, integrated image. The results are an anti-aesthetic displacement. The viewer is left with a lot to take in. The works set out to be difficult to look at. They are not easily accessible or instant images, but paintings which demand time to reveal themselves to the viewer.

Paradigms for the Post-Conceptual: Paintings by Angus Pryor

Painting...has no fixed conceptual concerns, or conceptual limits either. Nor is it a language in any simple sense.

More a loose collection of vague and continuously evolving quasi-linguistic possibilities at work against an historical and social background which is, itself, characteristically unstable.

(Jon Thompson, 2004)¹

Discussing the dilemma faced by contemporary painting, curator Jaime Stapleton has succinctly put it this way: 'How does one move beyond the perception that all serious painting is merely a footnote to the endgame of abstraction'?² Likewise, addressing the genre's broader cultural status, the art historian Griselda Pollock has formerly questioned whether painting actually occupies anything other than 'critical limbo' having been superseded by a plurality of more recent cultural forms like video and installation.³

It is the refusal of this premise and an ongoing self-criticality which situates a range of contemporary painting practice. In addition to the central examples of Sigmar Polke and Gerhard Richter, this generation of practitioners includes names such as Cecily Brown, Gillian Carnegie, Nigel Cooke, Ian Davenport, Stanley Donwood, Martin Maloney and Fiona Rae. Some of these painters have developed a dialogue with a formalist Modernism or with earlier and marginalised traditions within avant-garde modernist practice. Others tangentially explore aspects of mass culture and the relevance of place, landscape and memory. But what this otherwise disparate listing of artists share is a commitment to painting as an open and expansive genre, rather than a medium which is circumscribed by the legacy of Modernist dogma and the history of the Academy.

More broadly, such a wide-ranging commitment to sustaining a discursive and relational painting practice reflects the concerns of critical theory which, as Hal Foster suggests, has stood in as a tacit continuation of 'modernism by other

means' after the defeat of radical politics in 1968 and the decline of abstract formalism. Like the examples of Polke and Richter just noted, many contemporary painters are receptive to the genre's hybridity; its implication within historical avant-garde gestures and its critical purchase within contemporary cultural theory.

This, and contemporary painting's status and viability were among the concerns of *Hybrids: International Contemporary Painting*, hosted by Tate Liverpool and curated by Simon Wallis (2001). Central to the exhibition's concerns and its linked conference, was the outcome of these interactions and fusions – the 'hybridised' painting. As David Green, one of the contributors to the associated anthology of essays noted, the juxtaposition of these terms was itself paradoxical.

Whilst the idea of painting was associated with the 'singularity, specificity and autonomy' of modernist art, hybridity had postmodern connotations of 'heterogeneity, intertextuality and contingency'.⁴ In discussing the unattainability of a pure and autonomous painting, a principle asserted by the Modernist critic and theorist Clement Greenberg (1907-1994), Green made the point that the practice of painting cannot be somehow hermetically sealed off from a wider culture, other visual technologies and practices. Rather, that it was implicated with everything else in a 'dialectical' relationship.⁵ Painting's hybridity, its responsiveness to broader culture has defined its history and underwritten the genre's ongoing viability.

As the curators Alex Farquharson and Andrea Schlieker have recently noted, such cultural referencing is part of a process whereby Modernist ideas have been adapted in relation to more recent concerns and values:

Unexpected hybrids result from these experiments: fusions of different media; combinations of abstraction and figuration; the eroticisation of the rational...Often what these have in common is the attempt to translate specific moments of Modernism into individual and private spheres of experience.⁶

Regardless of high Modernism's demise, the durability of post-conceptual painting suggests that its practitioners have been re-fashioning and re-defining the medium with some of these earlier histories and aspirations in mind. For a post-1950s generation, such a 'reconstruction' of painting is not just an act of random cultural archaeology or ritual nostalgia. Although conscious that painting is no longer a privileged medium, its practitioners continue to explore the genre's relationship to a constellation of interests. The characterisation of so much recent art practice and theory as symptomatic of the 'return of the real' suggests a recognition that genres such as painting are contributing to new cultural directions.

An engagement with the medium's hybridity and a renewed sense of ambition for the genre situates the work of Angus Pryor (b.1966). It also informs the convictions which underpin the sentiments of 'Plastic Propaganda' – a statement of his views on practice which introduced this commentary. A revision of the Modernist tradition based on the gestural and colour field abstraction of the 1940s and 1950s and a sensitivity to allegory and broader social narratives are the principal sources of his aesthetic.

Pryor's canvases are large and highly tactile surfaces based around what he calls 'disguised narratives' which foreground the use of pigment as both the medium and the subject of the work. *The Deluge* (2007), one of the canvases reproduced in this catalogue, is typical of his working practice. Based on a visit to Venice, Pryor combines the apocalyptic motif of Noah and the Ark which is under water, with that of Venice which floats on top. This chaotic reversal of fortune is themed by the dominant palette of crimsons and reds. The canvas is saturated in multiple layers and skeins of paint (household undercoat mixed with oil paint) to which is added caustic builders' caulk which raises the surface to ridges and buttons of pigment. Discussing his method of painting, Pryor notes:

There's a dialogue between the surface and the mark ... overpainting of the mark where there's a line which is a definite and then another mark goes on top. It stops it [the painting] becoming an illustration of a mark and starts to be something else.⁷

There is a permutational excess to Pryor's surfaces. His motifs are worked and re-worked; earlier mark-marking is covered over, revised or obsessively repeated. Within some images there are small, almost incidental islands where the weave of the canvas is just decipherable under a wash of light colour; a foil to the avalanche of mark-making, but these are occasional. Pryor describes his work as an 'opulent cornucopia, an assault on the visual senses enough to elate or turn your stomach'.⁸ Across the surfaces of these paintings there is a temporal collision of multiple narratives, associations and ideas:

Everyone grew up being told stories, linear narratives are part of our everyday consciousness. My paintings are real narratives. They exist in settings where a multitude of experiences are happening at once. Like the hieroglyph in archaeology everything has a meaning.⁹

In his manifesto 'Plastic Propaganda', Pryor asserts that painting should re-claim its vanguard status, trading not only on the medium specificity of Modernism – the 'language of the mark, gesture and surface', but that it should be equally receptive to motifs taken from contemporary culture and older narrative traditions of image-making, including those of the Venetian artists Veronese and Tiepolo. Despite this collision of influences, Pryor is keen for his paintings to be seen as imaginative and discursive prompts for the spectator:

The paintings border on abstraction and figuration, letting one's gaze refine memories and letting the viewer bring their own directed memories to the work.¹⁰

More recently, in the polyptych of large canvases featured here, Pryor explores the limits of the painted surface. In a half joking reference to the pretensions of the YBAs and the objectification of mass culture, 'Doliphilia' (2009/10) titles a densely worked series of paintings which meld the biographical with the anecdotal and the personal. Pryor has described these images as 'narratives of the personal'; experiential attempts to image emotion and observation in painterly form. In doing so, they suggest that painting can carry a new vocabulary which is hybrid, grungy and visceral.

The outlines of writhing bodies offer a nod to Yves Klein, but Pryor's all-over compositions self-consciously refuse any definite hierarchy or ordering of motifs. Casts of fruit and vegetables, referencing the overlooked genre of the still-life, underline a Duchampian engagement with assemblage and the re-use of found objects, appreciable in work by William Henry. Ejaculating penises suggest and satirise Dionysian play, whilst biomorphic shapes are reminiscent of Surrealist automatism. Pryor's densely worked surfaces offer discursive space for juxtaposition and irresolution.

Jonathan Harris has drawn attention to painting's 'relational definition', that is the extent to which it acquires meaning through its difference and distinctness from other media such as photography and video, whilst nevertheless sharing with them a contemporaneous 'time and space'.¹¹ Pryor's hybrid canvases seem to reference this point of cultural ambiguity; both the genre's distinctiveness and its engagement or implication within the dense cultural vistas of the Altermodern. Their highly tactile surfaces feature demotic and diffuse imagery which melds allegory and abstraction with themes from mass culture. The ambition of their size and scale suggests a commitment to public and institutional display, rather than the 'private symbolic space' which Nicolas Bourriaud has associated with the legacy of Modernism.

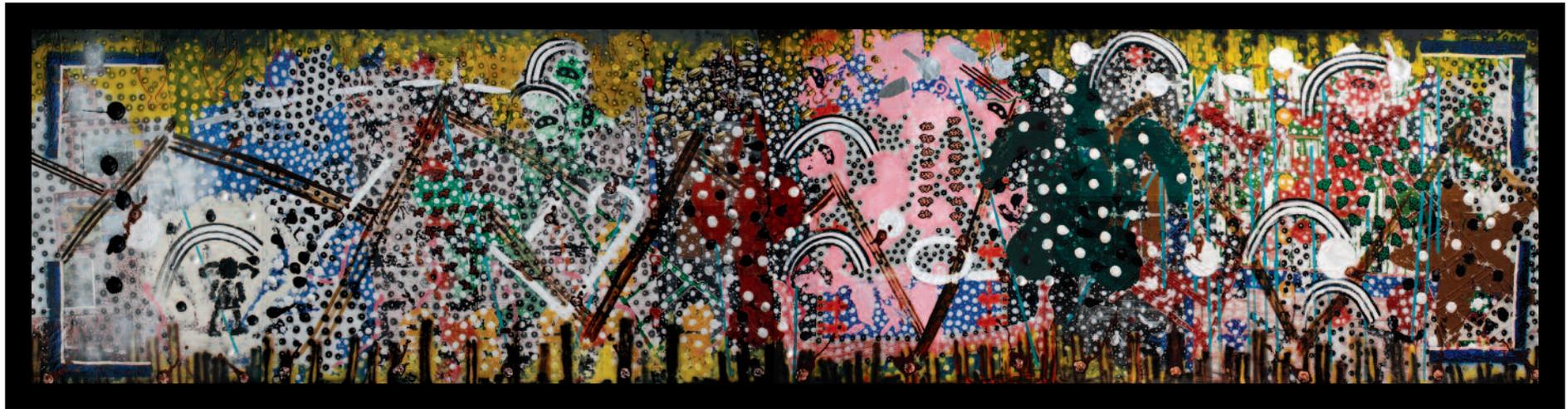
In the mid and later 1980s, oppositional Postmodern culture was principally associated with what Hal Foster called 'anti-aesthetic' practices – photography, film, installation and text-based interventions. Whilst these media have since become mainstream within contemporary art (witness the ubiquity of the installation), painting has regained both cultural relevance and legitimacy. If anything, it has become one of the default options for a range of issues within contemporary culture. Although no longer culturally privileged, neither is painting judged as an intrinsically conservative or reactionary aesthetic form. Pryor's canvases stand as a testament to that conviction.

Grant Poole's *Contemporary British Art: An Introduction* (Routledge) is at press.

- 1 Jon Thompson, 'Life After Death: The New Face of Painting', in *New British Painting*, Ros Carter and Stephen Foster (Editors), John Hansard Gallery, Southampton, 2004, pp5-7.
- 2 Jaime Stapleton, Text commentary on Juan Bolivar from *New British Painting*, John Hansard Gallery, Southampton, 2004, p15.
- 3 Griselda Pollock and Alison Rowley, 'Painting in a 'Hybrid Moment'', in *Critical Perspectives on Contemporary Painting*, Jonathan Harris (Editor), Liverpool University Press and Tate Liverpool, 2003, p38.
- 4 David Green, 'Painting as Aporia', in *Critical Perspectives on Contemporary Painting: Hybridity, Hegemony, Historicism*, p81.
- 5 Green, p83.
- 6 Alex Farquharson and Andrea Schlieker, 'Revisitations: Ideology, Fiction, Style', in *British Art Show 6*, Hayward Gallery Publishing, 2005, p54.
- 7 Angus Pryor interview by the author, Tyler Hill studio, June 10th 2008.
- 8 Artist's statement to the author, July 11th 2008.
- 9 Artist's statement to the author, July 11th 2008.
- 10 Artist's statement to the author, July 11th 2008.
- 11 Harris, *Critical Perspectives on Contemporary Painting*, p18.



Doliphilia, 2009/10 oil based media, plasticine on canvas, 8.5m x 2.5m



Stack, 2009 oil based media and plasticine on canvas, 14m x 3m



Love and Death, 2009 oil based media on canvas, 4.8m x 2.4m



The Deluge, 2007 oil based media on canvas, 2.4m x 2.4m

Acknowledgements

This joint exhibition has been made possible with the help and support of many people. We should like to offer our genuine thanks and appreciation to the following:

Canary Wharf Management Limited Paul Jackson MD, Victory Land

University of Kent Press Office Livingston Art Founders

Richard Archer

Jennifer Blackwell

Mavernie Cunningham

Gel Creative

Lesley Farr

Marc Fletcher

Jez Giddings

Kevin Goddard

Chris Lancaster

Anita Oakley

Grant Pooke

John Smith

Gavin Thomas

Angela Whiffen

Dave Williams

Post-Conceptual Art Practice: New Directions – Part One

William Henry and Angus Pryor

**West Wintergarden
25-40 Bank Street
Canary Wharf
E14**

19-30 April 2010