



Limited Edition DVD of the exhibition. Includes a walk through of the exhibition, images of all the works, and a commentary by Simon Morley.

Classic Japanese Movies

The late 1940's and early 1960's have been called a 'Golden Age' of Japanese cinema, even a kind of 'miracle'. From intimate domestic drama to epic, and from hard-hitting depictions of contemporary Japan to retellings of ancient Samurai tales, Japanese cinema in this period shows extraordinary diversity. In part, this was due to the fortuitous coming-of-age of such brilliant directors as Yasujiro Ozu, Kenji Mizoguchi, Akira Kurosawa and Mikio Naruse, but just as important was the existence of a flexible studio system very different from, say Hollywood, that allowed for consistent pooling and collaboration between acting and technical personnel.

Now, thanks to digital technology, many of these great films have become readily available to the West in newly re-mastered editions put out by such companies as Criterion, Artificial Eye, the British Film Institute, Eureka and Wild Side. It is these fruits of digitalization and globalisation that serve as the sources for my new paintings.

In one group of works the style and packaging of video and DVD's of Japanese films destined for the Western market have been translated into the language of painting. The normal conventions of figure-ground contrast are replaced by more subtle variations between surface and text and image. These variations are composed of small shifts in colour hue and tone, and in differences in surface texture. As a result, the viewer/reader is obliged to engage in a more detailed and 'quieter' mode of perception and cognition.

My work as a whole is motivated by an interest in renewing the language of painting through an exploration what happens when certain dislocations occur between media and when new connections are made. In previous exhibitions I have broken text up into letter-fragments and made facsimile paintings of books. In working now with video and DVD packaging I am opening up my work to the image, incorporating not only text but also the pictures found on the packaging cases. I am interested in the way in which word and image interact and modify the ways we employ and understand different sign-systems. Here, the images we see are stills from the films themselves. But what has determined which particular still-image is chosen, or how they are made to interact with the typography? How is an image able to sum up or encapsulate a whole film?

Painting, it can be said, works within a dialectic of *presence* (colour, size, texture, composition) and *absence* (the kind of referents conjured-up by the reading of the signs used by the artist and shared with members of the same culture). In the case of my new work the *present* share is signalled through the sensual, aesthetic allure of the paintings, an allure that is potentially meaningful in its own right as a formally autonomous and visually pleasing object. This dimension has two principal aspects: colour and texture. The colour of my new paintings is determined by a number of considerations -

the colour of the source artwork, the 'mood' of the film, and the desire to create a visual harmony between the different paintings. Texture within individual works varies: the text is thick and even embossed, while the image is painted quite thinly.

But this aesthetic quality already leads away from pure presence towards what is absent. For painting also has its own history, and my paintings consciously invoke the history of the modernist abstract monochrome and the quest for the pure and essential work of art, a quest that historical consciousness must by its very relativizing and self-conscious nature serve to negate, thereby throwing the experience of painting itself into the field of absence, into the realm of memory, association, imagination and desire.

In this sense, as in all painting, a kind of absence is produced in my paintings by an overt awareness of the history of painting itself. But in these new works the more obviously absent quota is Japanese cinema, or more precisely, the commercial packaging used to retail Japanese films in the West. It is the style and syntax of this kind of graphic design with which we are invited to engage, and only through this mediation are we then directed towards the films themselves.

So, beyond the history of painting itself, there are actually two other levels of absent referent in these new works. The first is the DVD or video case upon which the paintings are based, while the second - which is also far more elusive - is the actual film itself. The former kind of absence is accessible to us through perception and cognition and is based on the shared and understood conventions of product packaging, while the second kind of absence - that of the film itself, (rather than what we might have read about the film or be able to infer from the packaging) - can only be accessed through personal memories and/or imaginative speculation. We are taken on a journey that leads from the physical, phenomenological facts of the paintings to the world of Japanese cinema of a specific period and the way in which they are presented and interpreted in the West today.

My favourite Japanese director is Yasujiro Ozu. In Ozu's work I appreciate the stillness and strangely pregnant emptiness. I am drawn to the impeccable precision of the camerawork which seems to absolutely control the means of cinema. I respond to the rituals of repetition and restrictiveness, the economy of construction and careful calculation that seems almost the antithesis of the romantic idea of the expressive and intuitive artist. I empathise with the mood of sad resignation that pervades Ozu's stories, a mood that his formal style seems to perfectly embody.

In the three new 'Noriko' paintings based on film-stills taken from Ozu's great trilogy starring the actress Setsuko Hara as the character Noriko - 'Late Spring' (1949), 'Early Summer' (1951) and 'Tokyo Story' (1953), I move into more stridently visual territory. The still-images, grabbed from the films' thousands of frames, is reduced to a simple, abbreviated language of dark and light, flat and impasto. The near-whiteness renders the whole

difficult to visualise, forcing the viewer to work more actively in order to turn raw perceptual information into a cogent sign. Here, white also signifies the qualities of negation, emptiness and void that lie at the heart of Ozu's work, qualities that are understood in the West as signifying a fundamental lack. In contrast, in traditional Eastern thinking, such qualities imply the untapped and untappable potential out of which all things come. In this context, the thick surfaces of the paintings suggest materiality, the present and tangible moment of the painting itself as an object through which the void may be perceived. I have chosen to depict moments when the Setsuko Hara faces the camera and seems to be addressing us directly, a characteristic device of Ozu's, and the text-fragments included in the paintings, which are taken from the English language subtitles - imply some kind of message or narrative that can either be amplified and understood through an actual knowledge of the films themselves, or may remain more enigmatic.

Veiling has always been an important aspect of my work. 'What is not revealed cannot disappoint', someone once said in relation to the paintings of Mark Rothko. In these new paintings, as in much of my work in general, image and text seem to be struggling to define themselves against an all-absorbing chromatic field, but nevertheless still remains visible and legible. Meaning has been derailed and redirected towards some more obscure end. The content is not entirely defaced or concealed and the intention is not to hide but to allow content to exist as potential signs rather than fully-realised ones. Perhaps amongst other things, then, my work is about coming to terms with inevitable disappointment. Indeed, the character of Noriko herself, as Ozu depicts her in his films, seems to be the embodiment of a gracefulness and freedom that is maintained despite the knowledge of life's inevitable disenchantment and suffering. As Noriko herself says in my painting based on a still from 'Tokyo Story': *It is true. Life is full of disappointments.*

Simon Morley
January 2007

Painting as Remediation

“The ultimate goal of film history is an account of its own disappearance, or its transformation into another entity. In such cases, a narrating presence has the prerogative of resorting to the imagination...”

The Death of Cinema: History, Cultural Memory and the Digital Dark Age
Paolo Cherchi Usai

For nearly a decade Simon Morley's painting practice has employed strategies of media migration. His early book paintings (e.g.: *The Collected Works of George Orwell and other paintings* Percy Miller Gallery 2001) transcribed the title pages of texts into subtle monochromatic colour fields (in the case of the show cited the paintings were actually pale grey on white) and thus the clearly delineated contrast of text and page in the original typographic design was transformed into subtly floating figure and ground, the ambiguity of the implied spatial relationship producing a fluctuating, dreamlike dissolution of the picture plane. In this way a page often flicked over carelessly in a book as a threshold to a narrative experience became an object of contemplation in itself, an object both conjuring the presence and marking the absence of the text of the title.

However this remediation could be seen as something that we can absorb without too much strain, for in the media maelstrom we now live in both the printed book and the hand crafted painting share certain attributes and associations: both requiring certain contemplative forms of viewing, certain traditional skills to decode.

Morley's new paintings signal a more radical encounter for him: a process of media dislocation apparently enacting an encounter between cinema and painting. However closer scrutiny makes clear that the process of remediation is more labyrinthine, more multi-layered than it might at first appear. Because the cinema that Morley represents is a cinema that itself has been displaced and remediated into the digital exchange of images. For the majority of these paintings are not direct remediation of Japanese films, or the experience of viewing these films, but rather of the graphic packaging of the European DVD re-issues of particular Japanese films.

Perhaps Morley is drawn to cinema precisely because it is in the early 21C undergoing it's own small death, no longer the rapacious devourer of other media that it was in the mid-century 20C when the majority of the films he addresses were first created? Perhaps he is attracted by the fact that cinema is now part of other more ruthless media food chains, and consequently is gaining a new aura, a kind of melancholy patina of technological obsolescence?

If you put *Simon Morley text paintings* into the Google search engine you get a potential 120,000 hits offered up for your examination. Investigating these you will find after the first 500 URLs or so the search algorithm starts

to deliver various random combinations of the four text elements and the citations might or might not be related to the painter and his paintings.

If you Google *Ozu film* you get 762,000 possible URLs. I reached exhaustion point in my checking process before they became random. There is, as yet, more information circulating in our mediascape about Ozu than Morley, yet even so the information delivered to us about the films and filmmaker is quickly repetitive and abstract, giving us very little of the experience of sitting and attentively watching a film by the director of whom Paul Schrader in his book *Transcendental Style: Ozu, Bresson Dreyer* said, "*Like the traditional Zen artist, Ozu directs silences and voids. Silence and emptiness are active ingredients in Ozu's films; characters respond to them as if they were audible sounds and tangible objects*".

In many manifestations of the vortex of information we are currently experiencing, images and films are rapidly migrating across medias, re-appearing in different forms and on different delivery platforms, and the paintings of Simon Morley with their strategies of re-mediation are no exception to this current cultural imperative.

What makes them unusual is what I would describe as the trajectory of their migration. Consider watching the Ozu film 'Tokyo Story' projected in the cinema, (perhaps an experience now often idealised), imagine how the spectator in the dark, the large high quality image, the uninterrupted viewing for the duration of the film come together to create a particular intensity of experience.

Now consider viewing that film on DVD as inevitably a different, less formal experience, noisier with distractions, domestic interruptions, often the viewing of a single film split into convenient sections.

Now consider the design of the packaging for that remediated film/DVD the strategies of graphic design that must survive a myriad of competitive contexts and attract the short attention span of the shopper on the physical or digital store shelf.

Now consider that DVD cover itself scanned and positioned as a single illustration on a crowded web-page within a complex and cross-referenced shopping site in the internet. (It is in fact from this last context that Morley downloaded many of the digital stills that he took as a physical starting point for his particular remediation: reworking the downloaded images digitally until they could serve him as sketches, as starting points for his severely simplified monochrome paintings.)

Each of the remediations described above give less and less attention to the particularity of the experience Ozu attempted to create, and are further and further away from what Schrader describes when summing up the magnitude of Ozu's achievement as "*...that silence, that invisible image, in which parallel lines of religion and art meet and interpenetrate.*"

The fact is we live in a cultural situation where the vast majority of remediation of cultural objects is undertaken is to increase the speed, and facilitate the ease, with which the transposed cultural object can be circulated and consumed. And further, that these dizzying layers upon layers of remediation take the experience of an artwork further and further away from what Schrader describes when he says, "*Transcendental style can take a viewer through the trials of experience to the expression of the transcendent; it can return him to experience from a calm region untouched by the vagaries of emotion or personality.*"

It is in the reversal of this cultural trajectory that Morley's paintings are significant.

By remediating the packaging of DVD reissues of films into subtle colour field paintings, by transforming unambiguous graphic designs into floating ambiguous picture planes in which the figure and ground advance and recede against each other without coming to any final rest, he draws on a powerful range of associations that a particular tradition of abstract painting has in the West - a context ranging from Mondrian to Rothko - and by inviting us to spend time in contemplation in front of these tranquil colour fields plucked from the frenzy of remediation and accelerated digital circulation he seeks to create a "single still moment" a "moment of silence" and emptiness. And in doing so offers us paradoxically, a fuller, richer experience of looking than the consumption of remediated image as information.

In *A History of Narrative Film* David A. Cook describes. "*It often happens in an Ozu film that the characters leave a room to eat or to go to the bathroom or to bed, and that the camera will remain behind them in its stationary position to record for a while the empty space that the actors have created by their departure. ... Ozu's 'still lives' which appear in each of his major films, are an integral part of his transcendental vision of reality.*"

Morley's paintings intervene in the processes of remediation in a similar way, using painterly traditions of representation, and the traditions of contemplative viewing fostered within a gallery context, to create within the tumult of the global digitisation of media and the ensuing accelerated circulation and commodification of images, a small silence, and empty space in which some echo of the transcendent might still be faintly heard.

One might say of these paintings as Schrader says of Ozu's films, "*Stasis is the end product of transcendental style, a quiescent view of life in which a mountain is again a mountain.*"

Simon Pummell
February 2007