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Finding Time: How it is Made Visual Artists Newsletter

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HOW IS IT MADE?

Finding Time

BRIAN FAY OUTLINES THE PROCESSES AND CONCEPTS UNDERPINNING HIS PRACTICE



Brian Fay *Vermeer Girl With a Pearl Earring: Radiographic layer and cracks c1665 - 66*
Digital Print on Paper, Dimensions (framed) 40cm x 30cm 2006



Brian Fay 'Some Time Now', Installation view, The Lab, Dublin. Photo Michael Durand

IN recent years my art practice has been almost exclusively drawing based – using drawing as a vehicle to record and mark time. My current work is focused on the cracked surfaces of historical paintings and distressed film stock from early silent cinema. The intention being to record the effect that time and history has had on their materials and supports.

I arrived at drawing through a process of stripping down to the essentials of exactly what interested me in terms of looking at and making art. Removing everything else and focusing on line enabled me to see more clearly the areas and issues that I could concentrate on and work within. I began to work on process-led repetitive drawings – reiterating lines within a given formal constraint; and where time was revealed through the act of drawing. While this was a necessary stage, it became somewhat reductive; and so I began to look at ways of making the line refer to something outside of itself – some thing or form, whereby time would already be present and referenced.

Sometimes, when you are using reduced means, it can be the little things that can have a major affect. I noticed that if I broke up a line it began to resemble the dots and dashes of Morse code. At the time – February 1999, Morse had just been officially declared a dead language – having been superseded by GPS tracking systems. On researching Morse code I found that its inventor Samuel Morse was quite a successful painter, receiving commissions from the American Senate and House of Representatives in the early 1840s, before returning to his interest in electro-magnetic systems. Having had its roots in a fine art context, I thought there would be scope to explore and develop this recently designated obsolete form of communication through drawing. I took key phrases in the history of Morse and repeated them, such as the first ever transmission "What hath God Wrought" and the last communication from Ireland "Slán libh go leir". For a show at The Proposition Gallery in Belfast I transcribed in Morse the names of ships built in the Haarland and Wolf shipyard including Heroic 342 and Graphic 183.

This body of work with Morse led to *enCODEd* a two year collaboration with composer Donal Siggins. We were fortunate to win



Brian Fay *Vermeer Lady Writing a Letter with Maid c1670* Ink on Paper.
Dimensions (framed) 80cm x 60cm 200

a Sound and Vision competition organised by the Context Gallery and the Contemporary Music Centre. *enCODEd* employed form-generating processes within drawing and sound media using Morse. Monochromic drawings and a computer generated score presented tiny fragments of material, which underwent a process of mass-iteration in order to create large-scale self-replicating visual and musical structures. For my part 30 large graphite drawings on paper repeated the word 'encoded' in Morse across compositions derived from the graphic presentation of my voice pronouncing the word encoded. Donal created a further spatial dimension where individual sounds moved independently of one another through eight separate loudspeakers. The piece attempted to explore fluctuating relationships between the visual and aural and the use of new and old technologies. The show toured from the Context in Derry, to the Project, Dublin and finally the West Cork Arts Centre – and each time the piece changing significantly in response to each venue.

As this collaboration continued I started to look at other forms denoting time that could be examined through line. During this period I noticed the cover of an Irish Times magazine depicting a detailed reproduction of the face of the Mona Lisa. It was used for a feature on David Hockney's book *Secret Knowledge*. Hockney, with his collaborator Charles Falco outlined the argument that artists like Vermeer, Holbein and Van Eyck would use projections or camera obscura to transfer images to the painting surface. The use of optical technologies seemed to have a resonance with my own working process, which had increasingly shifted to using digital technology to inform analogue outcomes.

I kept returning to the 'craquelure' on the face of the Mona Lisa and began to look at methods that would allow me to most accurately record them. I scanned a reproduction of the Mona Lisa and traced all the visible cracks onto a layer in Photoshop and then removed the original image. The result was a latticework of lines of different width, weight and density. What emerged was evidence of the gradual deterioration of the original painted image and object over time. It seemed that you were no longer just looking at an image of a painting; but rather a recording of times action since the painting was made. The digital drawing was then projected on to paper and redrawn. For each of finished pieces in this body of work, there are at least two stages of drawing. And as the drawings exist in a reproducible digital format, they can potentially have infinite 'other' existences. The process of projection has allowed me to experiment with issues scale, space and context. The drawings that I have developed range from small works on A4 or smaller sheets of paper, to wall drawings and animations of up to three or four metres square. I have realised some drawings a couple of times – and in each context they manifest themselves very differently. I'm still learning from; and responding back to what is actually happening with these possibilities.

A body of this work entitled *Web* was exhibited in a solo show at The Butler Gallery in 2005. This series of craquelure drawings intended to juxtapose notions of hand-drawn lines with the more impersonal computer or 'virtual' lines. The title being a reference to both a spider's web as well as the phenomenon of the World Wide Web – a juxtaposition of a spider's manual creation of an intricate web of fine lines in real-time, with the global connections and networks made the virtual space and time of the digital realm.

This show coincided with the commencement of *Art-Watching*, a collaborative devised by myself, art writer Niamh Ann Kelly and designer Brenda Dermody in association with Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane and The National Gallery, London. A limited edition book being published in association with Dublin Institute of Technology, and will consist of digital drawings and texts reflecting the collections at The Hugh Lane Gallery and The National Gallery, London. An earlier manifestation of *Art-Watching* appeared as a supplement in CIRCA magazine (issue 116 2006). We included an essay, W*atching Over Art – Thoughts on Art and Art Criticism*, and a selection of digital drawings responding to specific works at the Hugh Lane that will shortly appear in the *Art-Watching* book. Secondly, and specifically for the supplement, we invited 12 art writers, critics, historians curators and conservators to submit a short reflection on the subject of 'watching art'.

I've been undertaking further research into the subject of craquelure – in particular how it is recorded and imaged with conservation technologies. I was fortunate to speak with Joanna Shepard, Head of Conservation at The Hugh Lane and she set me in the right direction in order to track down the relevant sources. Increasingly the sophistication and accuracy of radiographic imagery and infrared photography is offering conservation new avenues to explore – in particular the x-ray. I have started to incorporate images derived from x-ray analysis of paintings into my drawings – thus tracing a further element of time into the works – revealing of the layers beneath the finished surface of the work, showing the time before the painting was completed.



Brian Fay *Da Vinci The Virgin and Child c.1507-08 Gunshot 1987* Ink on Paper.
Dimensions (framed) 80cm x 60cm 2007

Conceptually, I find myself returning to Henri Bergson's notions of time as simultaneity of both 'presents' and 'pasts'. Edmund Husserl, developed this idea further with his treatment of experienced time as containing competing hierarchies of time and memory –between recollection, retention and pro-tention. This notion of time as a multi-faceted experience seems to correspond well with the increased layering of line and imagery in my drawings – and it certainly informed my thinking for my most recent show 'Some Time Now' This facilitated a shift in my choice of sources, while I was still using works by artists such as Vermeer, I extended my references to include 20th century modernist painters such as Mondrian and Malevich; as well as film stills from early silent short Buster Keaton films. My aim now is to add new work to this show as it tours, that will particular relevance to each specific venue, but just like the content of the work it is all a matter of 'finding' the time.

Brian Fay

1) 'Some Time Now' is currently on show at the Mermaid Arts Centre, Bray and will travel to the Solstice Arts Centre, Navan in November.