

*Extracts from 'Painting, Writing and not Going Gently' written in 1999
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Finding out how to Paint

In my own case I had developed as a painter by fits and starts. I was lucky enough to have come across Oliver Warner's book on British Marine Painting at the age of nine (my brother's art prize), and with my new Rowney's oil painting set I copied the reproductions, working out how to paint waves in a storm. As a student at St Martins in the sixties I didn't settle on a style but worked my way through the available options. The younger tutors were keen on what was called 'procedure', ways of programming the painting process to exclude the arty frills of an earlier generation. The soft abstract/landscape equivocation of the St Ives painters was laughed at. The vague and poetic was out. Now it was hard-edge and transatlantic. Nevertheless I spent much of my time studiously painting still-life or from the model. I used oil paint when many preferred the synthetic and industrial feel of acrylic.

At St Martins I decided I was really a sculptor - only for a term. I just overlapped with Gilbert and George, Richard Long, and others who broke away from the canon that had built up around Caro's teaching. I absorbed a sort of wisdom from Caro and William Tucker's matter-of-fact way of searching for ideas, improvising something out of nothing. This has served me well in later years. There is a big difference between the intellectual and the pseudo-intellectual, but at the time few critics had the wit to burrow into the amateur metaphysics. I preferred Caro's easy-going humanism, the directness - art came from the everyday, it didn't have to be bizarre or pretentious - to the cramped self-consciousness of process art. Like Heron, Caro seemed to have this direct line to Picasso, Matisse, who weren't remote and historical, but vivid and breathing the same air.

I was briefly a student of Leon Kossoff, whose teaching was more about heart than head, and at odds with the prevailing 'objective' orthodoxy. While the model was taking her break he would leaf through Rembrandt reproductions and point out their glories. He taught us to empathise, even when what we were looking at was a building-site - always called a landscape. The Swiss Cottage Swimming Pool paintings he made at the time are as monumental

now as they were then. Neo-dada elegance was also appealing. I produced a Fluxus-style magazine with Jon Thomson - later a central figure in the Goldsmiths phenomenon - called Jam. I can't have looked consistent or committed, and a tutor advised me that I didn't have a future in painting - no feeling for paint. (Years later this tutor was kind enough to send me a card after an exhibition I'd had saying they had been wrong.) I did feel seriously under-educated, especially in philosophy and aesthetics - and painting. So I spent two not altogether comfortable years at the RCA re-educating myself, and painting. I had to find my own studio. After leaving I became aware of 'the art scene'. I had worked for Sol Le Witt for a couple of years executing his wall-drawings, and I visited New York twice. Gradually I got going, initially influenced by David Novros, but after six years I began to find a way of working that felt right.

The actual look of the paintings I began to make in 1977 was the culmination of all these tentative beginnings. It wasn't to do with 'taking a stand' for this or that stylistic position. I felt I had discovered my own way of putting a painting together. When I saw what other painters in the studios were up to - I was in the same block as Gary Wragg, who more than anyone was the pioneer - I realised we were on the same mission. Stage by stage they shed the



The Hayward Annual 1979: paintings on left by Gary Wragg, on right by James Faure Walker



Exhibition '1979' held in 2005 at the Bloomberg Space, Finsbury Square. James Faure Walker's 'Lazy Afternoons' on the right, with works by Bert Irvin, Nicholas Pope and Garth Evans



Exhibition 'James Faure Walker', Whitworth Gallery, Manchester, 1985

controls of method painting - grids, spray-guns, masking tape - and found they were drawing intuitively, freely improvising, and scattering marks on the canvas, inventing organic shapes without any given structure to guide them. It was like discovering live music for the first time. I tried to encapsulate the sense of it all in an article called Fertile Forms, an idea I had pinched from Harold Rosenberg's essay on Miro.

A Digital Renaissance

My romance with the computer went through several stages. At first I loved the abstractness, the complexity, the speed, the visual promiscuity. Even with a mere eight colours and a print smaller than A6 - the first machine I used intensively was an Apple II, then I bought an Amiga - I was being more adventurous than when I was using paint. But I also soon discovered that the shock of this apparently instant creativity could go two ways: as a fantastic stimulus, or as a mind-closer. The gallery I showed with was uncomfortable about showing this work. It was computer-generated, and ergo not art. I would drive around with a set of large works in the back of the car, and though I could see that the gallery people's eyes were tuned in they couldn't make the leap. It lacked the validity of printmaking, or painting, but they would only rationalise this rejection by raising questions about paper thickness and paint facture. This was what gave 'real' art its numinosity, its spiritual dimension ... what they really meant was that it made it marketable. My unexpressed argument was that if art material fetishism was top of Leonardo's list we would never have heard of the Renaissance. How could you talk of imagination and vision and not be hooked? If diaries and sketchbooks are a guide then Turner, Delacroix, not to mention Moholy-Nagy or Klee would have been agog. Rejecting technology because it is unfamiliar and not Real Painting is actually quite a modern idea. Still, the problem with a prejudice is that it's a prejudice.

In 1989 I had begun teaching part-time at the RCA in what was then the Computing Department. My hunch about this being a tremendous gift to art education proved correct. Students broke free of their inhibitions, and the divisions of departments became irrelevant. It wasn't possible to produce substantial digital work, but they could carry over the insights and methods to their studio work. By 1993 this department had been closed. It dawned on

me - in some ways it was my Artscribe experience all over again - that innovatory ideas don't necessarily win a round of applause. I remember bringing slides of marvelous digital work by students to their professors who simply refused to look. So much for art being visual.

In my studio it took years to feel my way towards methods that really worked. Transitions between the digital and the physical and back again are always more subtle than I anticipate. The computer may open up a new visual world, but creating clear melodies means building up a whole new sensibility. It is like adding a few extra chapters to a painting manual - but without any guidelines. The language looks the same, but it isn't. If you draw a great deal with a program as good as Painter 5.5 you can train your eye and hand, rehearsing how a motif might go, how it might combine with other apparently unrelated images, how one palette of colour might contrast with another. You are not restricted to painted marks, but can with ease bring in photos - I use a digital camera - text, patterns, whatever you need. All this helps when I come to improvise with the same motif on a ten foot canvas. I have already visualised several combinations, and I can afford to forget them and risk something extra. I cannot say I am painting any better than if I relied only on a set of gouache studies, but my reflexes are trained. Digital painting, where any move can be undone, or processed through endless permutations, gives me the confidence to go with the smallest intuition. It is a little like psycho-therapy: you learn to feed from what you overlook, you play unfamiliar roles. Digital art isn't overshadowed by its history, so the painter can work without the constant and self-conscious foot-noting of other people's styles, and without relying on intellectual props. These days I am much more capable of making a visual statement and just letting it be. I don't try to correct it or improve it. I have learnt a few tricks that will make the mishaps look deliberate.