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SH

I'd like to centre this discussion around your most recent bodies of work 'Temples to the Domestic' (2012) at Clifford Chance in London, 'Living Room' (2013) at the Kerstin Engholm Gallery in Vienna and 'The Fabrication of Pleasure' (2014) currently on show at the Gerald Moore Gallery in London. As a starting point can you reflect on the development of your concerns through these bodies of work?

DBW

In some ways 'Temples to the Domestic' was the most important project for me because in its construction I felt that I was able to bring together all the loose strands of my practice and give myself a focus that I hadn't previously articulated. The central question being 'how do we define space and how does space define us?'

SH

You mentioned in an interview about 'Temples to the Domestic' that your relationship to painting was changing, specifically that it was moving from what you saw as being an 'expanded' notion of painting towards being more about installation. What drives this need to push painting away from being a purely two-dimensional medium?

DBW

I started as a painter so my fascination has always been connected with painting but as I developed my practice I became aware that the artists I found most interesting all seemed to have found a way outside of the limitations of the two-dimensional internal relationship of painting. For me the best work and the best artists have found a way out into the world and then back into the painting so it isn't an isolated introverted form but becomes an extrovert player within the experience.

SH

I want to ask you about your practice's relationship towards modernism and how there are different modernist heritages colliding within that; for example in 'Living Room' (2014) you mention how the installation of a Matisse sculpture, 'Reclining Nude' (1907), in Le Corbusier's 'Villa Stein' (1927) initiated that series of work. Why does this interest you so much?

DBW

I suppose two things need to be stated. Firstly the autobiographical; my grandmother (Elizabeth Benjamin) was a first generation modernist architect and I grew up listening and talking to her about her absolute belief in

modernism as a way forward for humanity, to her dying day she had an absolute belief in that polemic. I, However, had a sense of discomfort with her absolutism, it gave me a way of articulating a critical position at quite a young age that I'm probably going to be working through for a very long time. Secondly there is my interest in the tension between the two types of modernism that you mentioned in your question. If you see the photographs of the Stein's original residence in 1907, 20 years prior to Le Corbusier's design, when they set up this salon and hung their collection of Matisse's work, there is an incredible dialogue between the paintings, the furniture and the way in which the design of the apartment all seem to be coherent; there is a wonderful dance being played out between them. Now jump forward to this amazing photograph of the interior of Villa Stein in 1927 after Le Corbusier had built the house and within this space there is Matisse's sculpture 'Reclining Nude' (1907). To my mind that beautifully enunciates the awkwardness of Matisse in comparison to this highly geometric, system of thinking articulated by Le Corbusier. For me it was a beautiful moment in which I could see two oppositional elements completely clearly and it articulated it to me an exciting point of opposition. I thought "yes. That's it, that's really exciting!" because I know that both of those artists are incredibly important to me.

SH

A lot of postmodern practice dealt with this type of connection in an ironic or parodic way. Whilst it's clear that you are informed by this approach it feels like you've found a way to open up the debate and deal with modernism without the neurosis. How do you see your work's relationship to postmodernism?

I'm interested in this meeting point but not within the terms of postmodernism because we are too much within it to have any critical distance. I would argue that today we are in an ultimate postmodern moment, we are continually out of time and in-between places due to technology, which puts us in a constant state of becoming and unbecoming. It's that temporality that's interesting to me. The work is concerned with that sense of the 'in-between'.

SH

I was struck reading your proposal for 'Living Room' about how Le Corbusier wanted to police the taste of his clients by stipulating what they should hang on the walls of 'his' buildings.

DBW

There's an incredible text by Le Corbusier where he talks about the significance of the white wall and it's a truly disturbing polemic. In my practice I am interested in the articulation of the gallery as the perfect exemplar of the white wall design that Le Corbusier was talking about.

SH

What are your thoughts on Matisse?

DBW

When you talk about Matisse you're talking about a central figure, principally because of his unique combination of ingredients and elements that he brought into the work that was so sophisticated, thought through and pronounced. It's so exciting when a person's reading, writing and thinking is so completely integral to the experience of that work. When I read what Matisse was talking about I can absolutely see that thinking made real in his work. For me, as an artist, I love the way in which Matisse was connecting to such surprisingly conservative subject matter but turning it into such strangely disorientating outcomes, it's a powerful combination. I love the way in which what we take for granted around us is actually deeply strange, I find the possibilities of the everyday to be so exciting and I like to think of that as being part of the thinking process in my work.

SH

I really enjoy the way that the work for 'Living Room' is imagining a conversation between the two of them through their works as channeled through your practice. Didn't Le Corbusier and Matisse actually meet at the Villa Stein in 1927?

DBW

Well it's my interpretation of a conversation that they met for tea at Villa Stein and Corbusier asked Matisse "What do you think?" and Matisse replied, "I am utterly at a loss!" I loved the idea at the time that Matisse's "I am utterly at a loss!" was an incredible indictment of the loss he felt, that he's 'lost' on many levels. The Villa Stein could have been a temple for Matisse but it became a temple for Le Corbusier; it was that emotional loss I was particularly interested in.

SH

The new sculptures feel very painterly and the paintings have a sculptural quality caused by your use of coloured battens to frame the edges, it gives them an object like quality. Is this hybridity important?

DBW

If I boil down the concept it is about returning the personal to the public space. In 'Living Room' I was interested in turning the gallery into a living room, but instead of making it a literal living room I wanted to have a facsimile, so the gallery was quoting another space. Maybe you could argue that where I'm at now is that I'm still trying to find that point between these two quotation marks. What I'm interested in is connecting the space and the viewer within the space to another space that places them outside of the context in which they're in but not within the context that they're out. The idea is that the language continually offers but doesn't deliver. I'm interested in that sense of dislocation but with the possibility always there without being given, that's why the painting is not a self contained object but has the part framing around it

that connects it to furniture and to design logic. Also my sculptures are now mixing the iconography of mid twentieth century modernism with household lamps.

SH

How do you see the recent sculptures as a development from the pavilions in 'Living Room'?

DBW

I felt after 'Living Room' that the pavilions were articulating the same topography as the paintings and in hindsight I wondered if something was lost in the interpretation because it followed exactly the same language and logic. I'm still trying to work that one out and that's why I moved on to making sculptures for 'The Fabrication of Pleasure'; they allowed for a greater personal reading and their ambiguity allows for a greater sense of interpretation. In 'Living Room' the interpretation was more codified as I was looking at two polarities and thinking about how I could find a way through them. With 'The Fabrication of Pleasure' the lens has shifted its gaze into connecting with the idea that modernism was the first truly self-conscious movement through its relationship to photography, because photography played an important part in the logic of modernism and particularly modernist architecture and design. I became very interested in that sense of there being something I could disturb within that.

SH

I'm glad you mentioned photography. Whenever I see archive photos of an early modernist building or other early twentieth century avant-garde works I'm immediately struck by how they are both very near and very far to us. Near because the audacity of the artist's intention still has the power to shock and feel contemporary and yet far because these photographs are faded with the inevitable patina of age, in some cases over a century old. It's quite thrilling how these ideas still have the power to resonate all this time later.

DW

It reminds me of a conversation I recently had with a friend about Le Corbusier. He mentioned that Le Corbusier always wanted to have photographs of his houses with modern cars outside, he wanted the car to reflect the modernity of his house. The funny thing is that now we look at the photos and see the house and go "wow!" and then we look at the car and go "look at the antique!" I really like that strange way in which the viewpoint changes over time. When I was doing my M.A a tutor once asked me whether or not I was envious of my grandmother because modernism was present tense to her and it never could be for me. I believe that is the reason why I'm doing this, because it's not present tense but the ramifications of what it achieved are still being felt, so you could say we're still surrounded by it. I mean it was very successful; we are still surrounded by it and it codified an architectural style and institutional structures that have endured. A fascinating example that I saw the other evening was an interview, currently on youtube,

between John Baldessari, Ed Ruscha and a curator talking about Richard Artschwager. All of them are sitting in Mies van der Rohe chairs with his side tables as further props. It's clear that art institutions are still imposing this type of modernist aesthetic as being appropriate for our age and that's fascinating to me. Personally I find it bizarre, I want them sitting in Ikea furniture because that seems much more appropriate to our age. Maybe that, in a small way, is exactly what I'm interested in; the fact that it's still there because it gives me something to feed off and work with.

SH

Your reference to Ikea brings me nicely to my next question, which is about art in a domestic setting. You are on record as saying Louise Lawler's series of photographs 'Mr and Mrs Burton Tremaine III' (1984) are important to you, why this is?

DBW

I'd also include her photographs of works depicting how works are stored at home, by collectors and by institutions. It's the intimacy of the taste and curatorial logic that I find so fantastically exciting. For example I continually go back to Lawler's photograph of the Jackson Pollock painting against the rococo Tureen, 'Pollock and Tureen arranged by Mr and Mrs Burton Tremaine III, Connecticut' (1984), there is a beautiful connection point there, It makes me think "why not bring back taste?"

SH

I think the role of taste in contemporary art is almost a taboo subject. I suppose that is quite understandable when one thinks about Greenbergian modernism and the relativist discourses attached to postmodernism. Yet I can't help but think taste is one of the great 'hidden' criteria when talking about contemporary painting, so it intrigues me that you want to return it to the centre of the debate. How big a role does taste play in your practice?

DW

I think taste is a key ingredient. The Duchampian notion of the obliteration of taste is completely appropriate to the Duchampian way of thinking, but I like the idea of taste because I like that notion of 'bad' good taste and in this I go back to Greenberg and his essay 'The Avant-Garde and Kitsch' (1939). It makes complete sense to me that taste is centrally important, these things seem altogether unproblematic to me as part of the conversation.

SH

But isn't it problematic that taste is inherently linked to a type of exclusionary elitism that turns art and the art object into an emblem of bourgeois social standing?

DW

I happen to love bourgeois! Maybe it could be said that I'm both enthralled and repelled in equal measure; I think we are currently living in an intensely

bourgeois age, I think more so than I can remember in my lifetime. We are consumer crazy and in the same way there's an intense bourgeois sensibility that is on offer that was always there but was hidden away. I like it because it's so awkward against the cold purity of the institutional space. All of these things seem appropriately antagonistic, It's a mutually antagonistic relationship.

SH

To pursue this idea of the role of the bourgeois further the spaces you depict in the paintings, although fictional, all look like the aspirational homes of wealthy art collectors with prominent depictions of generic 'modern' art (painting and sculpture) that are key elements of the composition. To bring back Matisse, it's like you're creating the room to place his comfy armchair for the businessman to relax in. Do you have a strong idea about the type of people that would live in these spaces?

DW

No, It's not quite as prescriptive as that. It's correct to say that there are art works around but there's also lots of flowers and furniture as well, to me it's a set of ingredients I'm interested in, like film sets, I have a set of characters that I keep on returning to because they're interesting. The quoted paintings are like actors within a set up.

SH

So how do the pictorial elements function within the work as a whole?

DBW

It's the way in which we can read these motifs that is a really important part of what I'm trying to connect to, how we interpret these two dimensional emptied out signs. I like having elements that are immediately readable as iconic modernist furniture. We understand them as a Mies van der Rohe 'Barcelona chair' or a Vitra Eames lounge chair, there's something in art, the way in which these become so everyday and embedded within a shared cultural consciousness that it's all easily readable, I'm not arguing that a kid of eleven can get it, but maybe enough people that I'm interested in talking to will have that sense of understanding.

SH

My next question regards how you technically make the paintings. At first view they seem to conform to a fairly conventional 'flat' painterly language like that of Patrick Caulfield but as one gets closer it becomes apparent that the paint has a real physicality and facture. There are impasto areas but also passages that utilise negative space in a very sophisticated way. I'd really like to hear more about your painting process.

DBW

I'm actually quite surprised that you've not mentioned the grid that sits over the image, because It's the grid system that allows me to localise my mark

making and to think about colour and its influence within these localised areas. By imposing a grid on it gives a false sense of connection and pulls everything together. It applies order over disorder and in the same way the mark making follows a certain logic following that. It means that I can apply a certain type of mark making to one particular area and completely the opposite in another. I'm continually going between these different systems of thinking within the same painting which first came about with the making of the work for 'Living Room'; that sense of compartmentalisation that occurred in living room fed into the grid system that occurred in 'The Fabrication of Pleasure' paintings.

SH

The grid is made through using negative space in that they are not lines painted over the areas of colour but rather 'empty' areas revealing the ground that you have painted on top of. Why do you make the grid in this way?

DBW

When I first used the grid, it was as if I'd found a way of constructing a painting that allowed me a variety of possibilities, a big possibility in my mind being the emptying out of the signs or motifs that then allow the ground to reveal itself. This use of the surface creates possibilities for apparently pristine areas to work against a cacophony potential from the 'painted' surface'. It's this to-ing and thro-ing polarity that I'm interested in.

SH

I'd like to clarify something here, am I correct in saying that you paint on boards rather than canvas with either a black or white ground that is very smooth and often quite reflective?

DBW

Yes that's true. The reflective ground is usually the case when it's black but the white ground is less so. For different works I move between matting the black ground and making it super shiny, I like that variety.

SH

It's interesting to hear your thoughts on that; for me the 'empty' areas where the ground is visible are crucially important. Whilst they give each work a sense of compositional clarity they really have an unexpectedly powerful effect when the work is installed in a gallery and how these areas of negative space quite uncannily activate the three dimensional elements of the installation as well as the space as a whole.

DBW

Well I'm glad to hear that, that's very much my intention.

SH

Can you tell me a bit more about why you enjoy blurring the line between disciplines and historical ideas?

DBW

I like the play between the symbol of the thing and its articulation through a certain language of painting. It's always this act of translation and then what gets lost in the translation or misinterpretation that I find really interesting. It's a very big part of the thinking process within not only the paintings but also the sculptures.

SH

The sculptures in 'The Fabrication of Pleasure' have a real sense of character; the light bulbs and shades built into them appear, to my eyes, to be like comedic heads on 'serious' modernist sculptural bodies. They also lack gravitas by being made on a domestic scale, closer to household furniture than modernist sculpture. To this end they seem to be suffering from the 'Napoleon complex', what is the role of size in your sculptural work?

DBW

For me, their size is inherently important- I can reinterpret an iconic sculptural form but something gets lost in that renegotiation and integration. It's like they want to be taken seriously and put in a museum alongside other modernist sculpture but they also want to be in your home so they're made smaller and in so doing they seem to lose some of that potency but gain it elsewhere. It's as if by placing the work within this intimate space I'm trying to bring modernism back to the personal rather than the political, if that makes sense?

SH

As I mentioned before your new sculptures are featuring actual light bulbs, these are specifically household light bulbs and decorative shades, how significant are these lighting systems to your work as a whole?

DBW

The lamp for me is becoming more and more of a signifier that I'm interested in and it has been for quite a while, going back to my Painting Pavilions in Bloomberg New Contemporaries 2011. The lamp functions as an alternative form of light because gallery lighting generally uses daylight bulbs that give a very cool light, almost blue over red, while the domestic lamp, however, gives you a warmer, red/orange over blue light which gives a more localised glow. I really like that oppositional quality.

SH

My next question may seem a little off topic but I'm intrigued to hear your answer. Modernism is considered, not unfairly, to be quite a macho, patriarchal movement. Paradoxically in art history the genre of interiors is often considered to be a female domain, for example Vermeer, Pieter de Hooch, Bonnard and Matisse. Is your work addressing these gendered notions of space in anyway?

DBW

I'm intrigued that modernism came at a time when women were repositioning themselves within society. I'm really interested in the history of the Bauhaus in this respect. Walter Gropius positioned the Bauhaus as being egalitarian, in that it was non gendered and open to both men and women, but very quickly it became clear that it was a patriarchal system and that women students were more or less pushed into the weaving department; weaving became a way in which women could be coped with within a patriarchal system and how they worked their way through or turned it into something that was advantageous to them is important. So yes I'm fascinated by the development of this new power and yes I see it as absolutely connecting to this location but it's more like background noise as part of my thinking process. In fact this thought has only just crossed my mind but Lilly Reich, Mies van der Rohe's partner, was an interior designer whose influence played a great importance to his work. The idea of the interior as the woman's space and the exterior as being the man's shows how codified these things appeared to be and plays a part in the current works and within the installational logic.

SH

The first time I saw your work was a structure you'd made in a site-specific group exhibition in the showrooms of a London based interior design firm. What was interesting to me was that your work was at risk of being subsumed because the visual language of this corporate space seemed superficially similar to that of your art. It was striking that your work resisted this and actually sparked a really interesting critical dialogue with the space and contemporary interior design. Did it concern you that showing your work in this context that it might lose its power as an art object?

DW

I wasn't overly concerned because what I was trying to do was reconfigure the ingredients. The piece you are talking about was where I'd taken a sort of Ikea shelving system and placed it onto some regency legs then added one of my 'modernist' paintings to the surface and placed a lamp on the top. So I was using certain elements that were around but they were disturbing in their reconfiguration. You've hit on something that is at the heart of what I'm interested in doing though. My proposals for the next few shows I'm hoping to make will be installations within showrooms of key modernist furniture and then from there, bringing the modernist furniture installations into galleries and museum installations, bringing all these ingredients together like a set of musical chairs into all these different outlets.

SH

In a way isn't that just taking the hybridity and blurring of disciplines to the next logical level?

DW

Yes. I've no idea how its going to pan out but it seems absolutely essential to try it as part of the process of making the work. It's like when I talk about how

the spaces define us and how we define the space, it's that process of redefining our relationship to codified spaces and putting one thing within another and reconfiguring the ingredients as being deeply important to the process of my work.