

Entanglement and the Extended Present

In 1604, Flemish painter, poet and theoretician, Karel van Mander's, *Het Schilder-boek*, a lengthy treatise on painters and painting was first published. Van Mander's publication was a response to Giorgio Vasari's *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, published in 1550, and while both have a great deal to say about the technical methods employed by painters of the 16th and 17th centuries, it is Van Mander who constructs an explicit relation between technique, time, and space.

For Van Mander, attention to detail and mastery of technique were the means by which a painter might petition the eye and mind of an audience in order to extend the time spent in front of a painting - an extended present wherein the painting and its audience become, as Van Mander described it - entangled.

Not only is entanglement a question of stretching the time of this encounter between painting and audience but one that also relies upon a painting's ability to catch an audience's interest from a distance and to maintain it up close - both a temporal and spatial entanglement. Van Mander makes this explicit in *Het Schilder-boek*;

...and when the image retains its appeal *both from afar and close by*; such things *entangle* [the viewer] and through his insatiable eyes, makes his heart cleave fast with *constant* desire.¹

Nearly four centuries after *Het Schilder-boek's* definition of entanglement, Dutch cultural theorist, Mieke Bal, in language that closely echoes that of Van Mander, discusses the kinds of image that 'hold the viewer, enforcing an experience of temporal variation. They

enforce a slowing down as well as an intensification of the experience of time.' Bal's neologism for this type of object is the *sticky image*.²

Sarah Gilman's recent and meticulously crafted paintings, I would argue, fall into the category of images that promote what Van Mander's described as entanglement and instantiate what Bal defined as the *sticky image*. It is, therefore, no surprise that Gilman has decided to call her most recent exhibition *Entangle*. What is also unsurprising is Gilman's interest in 17th century Dutch still life painting and particularly the use of *trompe l'oeil* techniques designed to fool the eye. This use of illusion is one, but by no means the only strategy that Gilman employs - techniques borrowed, so to speak from the work of 17th century Flemish painter Cornelius Gijbrechts. It is fair to say that Gilman's encounter with the work of Gijbrecht in Copenhagen's Statens Museum for Kunst in 2017, has played no small part in the development of the paintings showing in *Entangle* at St Helens' Beechams Gallery.

Gilman's *trompe l'oeil* paintings such as *Red Tape #1* and *#2*, for example, not only acknowledge this long tradition of illusion in Dutch still-life painting but allow it to resonate in a contemporary situation: the artist's studio. These images seem to say something about the by-products of a painting's production - a grid work of post-production masking tape left on the studio wall, apparently employed at an earlier stage in the making of another painting. It is, however, Gilman's decision to focus on the studio wall's detritus as the starting point for painting that allows her work to transcend the historical use of *trompe l'oeil* and locate it firmly amongst contemporary discourses of representation. These paintings, for example, also employ a matrix - or grid - the

¹ Quoted by Celeste Brusati, "Perspective in Flux: Viewing Dutch Pictures in Real Time", *Art History*, Vol. 35, No. 5, November, (2012), pp. 908- 33. Originally in Karel van Mander, "Den Grondt der Edel vry Schilder-const", *Het Schilder-boeck*, (Haarlem, 1604).

² Mieke Bal, "Sticky Images", *Time and Image*, edited by Carolyn Bailey Gill, (Manchester and New York: University of Manchester Press, 2000), p.79-99.

armature upon which the majority of modernist abstraction hangs.

What is explicit in Van Mander's *entanglement* and Bal's *sticky image*, is paintings ability to make time its business by decelerating the gaze - to slow down the act of looking. Gilman's use of *trompe l'oeil* does this without recourse to the kinds of cliché often associated with illusion by employing what I will refer to here as the three times of *trompe l'oeil*.³ Gilman's audience will first perceive the illusion of masking tape protruding from the surface of her paintings, intruding, so to speak, into our space. Secondly they will be drawn closer to the painting in order to appreciate the artfulness of the illusion, and thirdly, and this is critical - the third movement of *trompe l'oeil*, having exposed its artifice in its second, now focuses our attention on the construction of this artifice to arrive at the conclusion that *trompe l'oeil* are illusions constructed in paint on a two dimensional surface. The third movement of the *trompe l'oeil*, therefore, defamiliarises the gaze, and in doing so forces a visual re-engagement with paint as material process. In this sense, *trompe l'oeil* is not simply the use of visual trickery - an epistemological loop, but is a self-critical process, and is, to adopt a phrase from Caroline Levine, 'the most realist of artistic projects and the most ironic antirealisms'.⁴

The work presented by Gilman in *Entangle*, can therefore, be read as a contemporary response to signals from the history of painting - specifically those that address the problems of representation and illusion that find their earliest transmission in the questions posed by the work of fifth century B.C. Greek painters Zeuxis and Parrhasius.

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Red Tape #1, 2018

Oil on board, 25 x 35 cm



Red Tape #2, 2018

Oil on board, 30 x 40 cm

³ James Quin. *The Temporal Conditions of the Static Image: Repetition as an Engine of Difference*. PhD Dissertation. Newcastle University.2017.

⁴ Caroline Levine, "Seductive Reflexivity: Ruskin's Dreaded Trompe L'oeil", *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 56, No. 4, Autumn, (1998), pp. 365-75, 365.