



A response to an exhibition

NowHere Factual Nonsense

Jeff Gibbons

Curated by Jo Melvin

16 November– 4 January 2020

JOANNE LAWS
ARTS WRITER
IN RESIDENCE
2017– 2020

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INDEXICAL VARIATION – A CONCISE BUT EXPANDABLE COMPENDIUM TO ENCOUNTERING THE ARTWORKS OF JEFF GIBBONS.

“Art Comes Out of Art”[i]

Baldessari will be remembered as a pioneering prankster and a conceptual interrogator of language. Image and text, picture and script, diagram and instruction, icon and mantra. Art was created for the eye and hinted at through words. A form of self-referential commentary, Baldessari’s art had the inbuilt capacity to cast public scorn upon itself.

Concrete Poetry, as a linguistic device, titillates the written word. Typographical arrangements (with freefalling letters) conspire to enhance meaning.

Dialogue of Two Moons in Exile. There is a ghostly resemblance to “Eve’s grieving upturned face.”[ii] We envision the uncontained moon as silver-gilded lake – as the shimmering embodiment of poetry.

Expanded Painting reflects transient states of being. Some say it concerns a ‘post-aesthetic discourse’, attuned to an uncanny tension between the presence and absence of painting. Interpretation, we learn, may be possible in the gaps between these planes of exposure. Hoisting works above the viewing plane transforms the gallery itself into an “exploded painting”. [iii] All works are brought into relation, making us aware of our own verticality – of painting as a spatial encounter.





Flowers blossom everywhere, as universal signifiers of beauty. Fleshy fists of paint merge with impasto whirlpools, in hues that are saccharin sweet. Mallarmé grappled with the possibility of portraying an idealised or pure flower: “I say: a flower! And, out of the oblivion into which my voice consigns any real shape, as something other than petals known to man, there rises, harmoniously and gently, the ideal flower itself, the one that is absent from all earthly bouquets”[iv].

Gene Beery was a conceptual painter also drawn to language. A satirical ‘Pitcher’ (painted in homage to Gene) interrogates the moment of aesthetic encounter.

History – Being so cheerful keeps me going (2005). An effervescent rebuff, a hopeful antidote to personal surliness and a grim collective history of war, death and imperialism. A similarly melancholic disposition extends to other paintings, like *Seven Last Words*, featuring the nihilist phrase: “There is no point in being here”.

In Search of the Miraculous (1975) / *Homage to Bas Jan Ader* (2019). A tender raft of white roses floats upon a dusky pink void. On 9 July 1975, Ader sailed out of Cape Cod harbour in pursuit of The Netherlands, concrete truth and the elimination of artifice. His vessel, Ocean Wave – the smallest boat ever to cross the Atlantic – was recovered 10 months later, but his body was never found.



Judgement (2019) – The artist enters wearing a judge’s wig. He traverses the perimeter of the former courtroom holding a burning wick, before lighting the central candelabra. A comically hyperbolic Dickensian character, he channels Victorian morality, his performative gesture a visionary act, serving to illuminate the darkness.

Knowledge of art historical practices informs the subtle recycling of images and words through humour. A large-scale canvas devoted to books attests to the source of references and the discovery of meaning. In many ways, he plots his own endeavours as a painter against the language and history of painting. ‘Homage’ – featuring prominently within titles and upon canvases – gestures towards an often out-of-reach history of visual culture.

Looking at a Painting – “A shadowy part to play: Here are the main bits to observe.” A dysfunctional diagram to mock the over-theorisation of spectatorship in art, which historically denies painting the autonomy to speak freely to its viewers.



Moon (2004). When astronauts first landed on the moon, rather than a luminous white entity, they encountered a dark, rugged terrain, the colour of fresh, grey concrete. The fact is the moon is only ever illuminated on the side facing the sun. The other half remains in constant darkness, unseen from earth. Orbiting us, controlling our oceans, the moon – in a perpetual state of partial disclosure – has been known to us throughout human history, yet it never fully reveals itself. There is something rather melancholic about that.

NOWHERE (2018) – Now Here / Nowhere. The artist acknowledges the opacity of history and the slipperiness of time. This Quantum-like proposition anchors our one-and-only body. It gives us the tools to organise reality in the present moment, as we see and experience it. We find that the past, like the future, exists as a spectrum of possibilities.

Objecthood is central to art historical debates in aesthetics. Michael Fried's famous critique of emerging art practices in the 1960s centred on artworks that were indistinguishable from everyday objects and materials, thus deviating from the normal conditions of art. These works, according to Fried, required the presence, intellectual engagement and theatricality of an audience, in order to be considered art objects.

Past painting. Still Alive. All painting is modified by the past to exist in the present.

Quotidian objects masquerading as sacred artefacts. Crockery, bottles and flowers recall Dutch interior painting and art historical tropes, later subsumed by modern advertising. Manet's nineteenth-century claim reverberates: that still-life endures as the "touchstone of all painting".

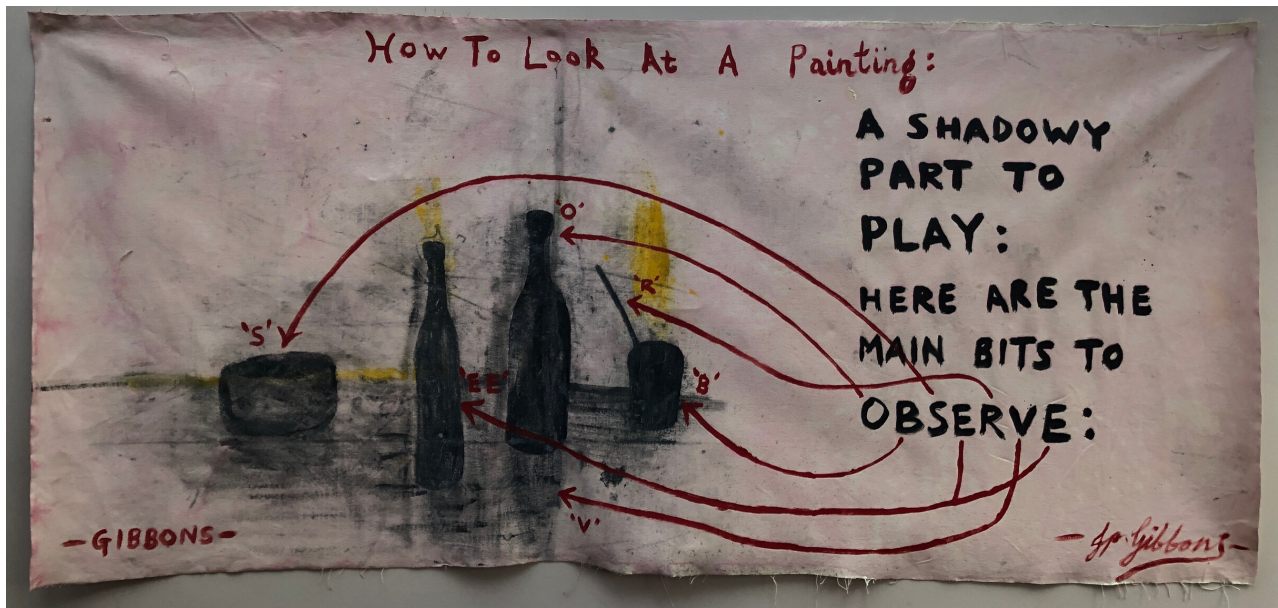
Roses bloom all around. There is a *Dawn Rose* and *Night Roses*, *Seven Manly Roses* and one *Homogenous English Rose*, collectively channelling a sense of enduring romanticism.

Salon-style hang refers to a seventeenth-century system for the floor-to-ceiling display of paintings. The format was criticised, rejected and gradually dispersed (due to associations with the elite and conservative academy), only to be revived as an embodied form of contemporary critique.

The artist's signature – painted in a swirling, cursive fashion – dominates much of the canvas. Occasionally it even takes the form of an anagram. Artist signatures have galvinised the art market since the early Renaissance (attesting to provenance, authorship and value) yet they are swiftly becoming outmoded. Henceforth, new digital systems like Blockchain will track physical works through cryptographic links, based on verifiable data.

Umbrian Umbrella (2017) conflates notions of pageantry and pilgrimage. Along the ancient Roman trade route, the umbrella doubles as a mobile art gallery, with paintings pinned to its interior. He wears a straw boater hat, associated with Venetian merchant sailors and still worn in a performative capacity, at political conventions, rowing events or barber shop quartets.

Visual syntax is achieved through word-image arrangements. Clichéd images are accompanied by familiar phrases, creating a pithy commentary on the language between objects. A floral painting, emblazoned with the epigram 'Abstract Expressionism', is just one an example of ironic signposting.



Wordplay is underscored by humour at every turn. Many titles describe a way of thinking through painting, using word association and visual puns. Oxymoronic statements, like 'Factual Nonsense', hold seemingly contradictory positions together in creative confluence.

Young dove (2017) recalls the iconography of religious painting. Traditionally portraying the Holy Spirit, doves appeared frequently, most famously in *The Coronation of the Virgin* (1645), painted by Velázquez as an altarpiece for the Alcazar in Madrid.

[i] Timothy Emlyn Jones, 'Art Comes Out of Art: A Conversation with John Baldessari', *The Visual Artists' News Sheet*, July/Aug 2006.

[ii] Gertrude Gibbons 'Dialogue of Two Moons in Exile: A Response to Jeff Gibbons' painting *Moon*'.

[iii] Jo Melvin in conversation with Gertrude Gibbons and Joe Walker, *The Dock*, Carrick-on-Shannon, 4 January 2020.

[iv] Stéphane Mallarmé, preface to René Ghil's *Traité du Verbe* (Paris: Giraud, 1886).



Image of gallery by Paul McCarthy

Joanne Laws is an arts writer, editor and researcher based in county Leitrim. She has recently been appointed Features Editor of The Visual Artists' News Sheet. Joanne is a member of the International Association of Art Critics (AICA) and a regular contributor to international arts publications including Art Monthly and Frieze. She was previously assistant editor for the online resource publicart.ie and coordinator of the Roscommon Visual Artists Forum (RVAF). Joanne won 'VAI/DCC Critical Writing Award 2012/13' for her extended essay 'Commemoration – A Forward Looking Act'. She has previously developed research reports and policy documents for organisations such as 126 Artist-Run Gallery, Kilkenny Arts Office and Youth Work Ireland. Joanne Laws website www.joannelaws.wordpress.com

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Gallery Opening Times:

10:00am - 6:00 pm Monday to Friday

10:30am - 5:00pm Saturday.