

Small Paintings

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I find myself surprised to have made a body of work like this, even while recalling what led me to this point. Towards the end of 2012, I returned from a residency in Paris where I'd been looking at, and loving, some of the precursors and descendants of the Impressionists (Manet and Vuillard in particular). I was compelled by a vitality of mark-making, a kind of counterintuitive description of form. Looking at the pictures close-up, the categories of abstract and representational seemed to dissolve; I really understood how these painters prefigured the Abstract Expressionists in their focus on the autonomous qualities of the mark itself. I also began to think that an appreciation of the meaning of the pictures had to take into account the conditions of making them from direct observation. My understanding of the pictures was limited if I didn't understand the process, although it was a process with which I was very unfamiliar, having always worked from photographs. At the same time, I felt that my justifications for painting from existing imagery would be less evasive if I had some experience of another way of working.

The first paintings originated from a set of rules I formulated in response to this curiosity regarding painting from life. In Cape Town I started making quick paintings from my fourth-floor apartment, mostly views of the city done at times when the light was changing rapidly. I wanted to give myself a tiny window of time, in order to force myself to work quicker, to select only the most important details, and not to second-guess myself once marks were put down. Accordingly, the pictures had to be small enough that I was able to finish them in about 20 minutes.

I initially had no intention of exhibiting these pictures, but when a solo show presented itself at short notice, I decided to develop this strand of directly observed work into an exhibition which could stand on its own, and to set it apart from my

studio paintings. (Having continued with both ways of working for a few years, I no longer perceive them as entirely separate and am experimenting with showing them together.) At this point it was December, and some of my friends who have moved away from Cape Town were visiting their families. This is often the only time of year I get to see them, yet I didn't feel I had the time to stop working. So, thinking I was confident enough to attempt portraits, I asked my friends to come and sit for me while I painted them.

Having unwittingly strayed into such a rich tradition, I realised I had to again develop a set of rules in order to limit my options. The first was that the pictures had to be made in a single sitting, lasting between an hour and 90 minutes. I felt accountable to the time and limited patience of the sitter, which encouraged a sense of focussed urgency. Immediately after completion, I would photograph the painting and upload it to my tumblr (www.iangrose.tumblr.com). An interesting outcome of these rules was that the physical painting was more or less the same size as the image on a laptop screen. I felt that working this way redressed some of the distortions of scale, texture and time inherent in viewing paintings online.

As subjects, I've used people I know, mostly from university or art school; occasionally the sitting is a result of a casual conversation with a stranger about what I do. At the moment, the subject is more of a pretext for a formal, material experiment than for psychological inquiry, although owing to the difficulty of sitting still for that long, the 'atmosphere' often becomes meditative, and I think that comes through in the picture. Asked to remain very still, they often pick a blank spot and stare at it for the duration of a normal movie, which after some time can elicit a kind of hallucination (a white wall, for instance, becomes suffused with colour) not dissimilar from the type of looking I'm trying to attain in painting them.