"The Night Watch" and The Importance of Being Glib
by Jonathan Schouela

Jack Worthing: I am sick to death of cleverness. Everybody is clever nowadays. You can't go anywhere without meeting clever people. The thing has become an absolute public nuisance. I wish to goodness we still had a few fools left.
Algernon Moncreiff: We have.
Jack Worthing: I should extremely like to meet them. What do they talk about?
Algernon Moncreiff: The fools? Oh, about the clever people, of course.
Jack Worthing: What fools!

It all started with a mundane coincidence. I had downloaded two albums by Fleetwood Mac on my smartphone because I like some of their songs. A couple days passed and I hadn't listened to any of the songs yet. Then one day I was in my studio and I heard Fleetwood Mac playing from somewhere else on the floor. Immediately I thought it was a sign of the zeitgeist. Be it the zeitgeist or a product of the marketing effort to promote their upcoming reunion tour, a fact which I was soon informed of, regardless, I was inspired to make this benign coincidence about a band I hardly knew, the focus of my artistic production.

Where I think a lot of art fails today, particularly painting, is in its experiential qualities. An art show is foremost a show. It is not a display of merchandise. The problem with painting is it lends itself so conveniently as such. The experience of a work of art is a direct function of the expectations of the viewer. A great painting is able to transcend its material limitations to visually transport the viewer to another world. This transcendence is achieved by providing the viewer with an image which significantly disrupts the familiarity of the context. In recent years displays of technical virtuosity have been challenged and eroded to the point of near extinction. In its place we see a generation of artists making art 'that anyone could do'. Art that destroys the hierarchy of virtuosic labour in favor of the concept. With my painting, "The Night Watch", I look to swim against the current and provide myself a physical challenge. For this reason I did not project the image on the canvas nor use a grid to systematically ensure proportionality. I painted the image directly from the screens of my laptop and cellphone.

Algernon: "one has to be serious about something if one is to have any amusement in life"

In Oscar Wilde's seminal play "The Importance of Being Earnest", Algernon Moncrieff is a prototypical Victorian Dandy. He is a man of leisure. He is frivolous, irreverent, smug and witty. He is more preoccupied with eating cucumber sandwiches and crafting interchangeably profound and nonsensical remarks than with any matters of social importance. He values the

superficial above all else and entertains himself with the sport of lying. Faced with the opportunity to assume a false personae, named Ernest, to seduce his friend Jack's attractive young niece, Cecily, he is happy to oblige. As it happens, Cecily is exclusively attracted to men named Ernest.

The play was written to subvert Victorian values. To be seen as *earnest* was of utmost importance in Victorian society. To *be* earnest, is to be serious; a demonstration of sincere and honest conviction. Algernon's character is meant to represent Oscar Wilde himself (if not for his sexual preference). Wikipedia quotes Wilde as saying the play's theme was "That we should treat all trivial things in life very seriously, and all serious things of life with a sincere and studied triviality." While the play is undoubtedly a classic piece of world literature and a marked success at the time, Wilde's personal story did not end well. He died poor and miserable and scorned by society, history's way of saying he was ahead of his time. Perhaps, in a more macro sense, the moral of his misfortune is that the life of a dandy should not be condoned during a crucial period of industrial development, as was the case at the turn of the 20th century.

What I have come to ponder is whether dandyism is more applicable in a time like now where we are closer to living in a world post-labour? Humanity is witnessing widespread automation across all fields. While there is still a lot of room to go, it is conceivable that the majority of jobs predominantly attributed to manual labour will become obsolete in the face of a completely automated industrial and service infrastructure. This would prove to be the ultimate spoils of technology. The net effect should be a lot more *spare* time for the human race. Spare time to pursue our passions and interests no matter how frivolous or time consuming they may seem. This opportunity should filter down to all the social and economic classes as the cost of 3d printers and robots will become more accessible over time. Ultimately, the universe could become an all-inclusive vacation for the masses.

One of the most interesting aspects of this inevitability will be the effect on our concept of time. The question is why spend time doing anything a machine could do better. To reproduce a photograph using paint in the age of mechanical reproduction, photoshop, and high quality printing, is pretty much certifiable. Consider painting over printing. I can only do it worse and slower than a machine. I will agonize for hundreds of hours and yet my product will be filled with many proportional and colour errors. The differences will lie in the limits of my abilities to replicate the image and present a finished product that satisfies my taste. So to spend time on such a task should be considered both frivolous and gratuitous.

There appears to be a common thread in art today. Artists seem bent on avoiding skilled, manual labour. I've identified three prominent "movements" in contemporary art which seem to adhere to this concept, and considering the context of a conceptually planned obsolescence of labour, it is difficult to argue their relevance. I've described them in terms of aesthetic and philosophy;

    1. Process based abstraction (Now commonly referred to as Zombie Formalism)

Aesthetic: Generally neutral tones or monochromes in all over composition. Chance based/drop cloth aesthetic. Cool.
Philosophy: Anti-painting. Exploration of new ways to apply pigment to canvas. Use chance to create image. Populist in that anyone could do it.
*Mischievous formalism describes a sub group of process based abstractionists who create similar all over compositions using methods or materials that can be considered more innately subversive.

2. Science fair art

   Aesthetic: anti-aesthetic craft. Exposed wire, decaying materials, flowing water, moving parts. Glass, black wires, exposed metallic jointery. Experimental hardware.
   Philosophy: Pseudo science as art. Vision of the future where artistic processes develop technological advancement. Rigors of science are not necessary for innovation. Fusion of fields.

3. Post internet

   Aesthetic: Gradients, digitization, iridescence, virtual kitsch. Futuristic and apocalyptic.
   Philosophy: Art for the network, art for everyone. These artists are flaneurs of the virtual world. Digital reproduction and distribution. Produced in volume.

I do caution a major issue of having trends and popular aesthetics is that stylistic nepotism begins to develop in the art world. While some artists continue to create valid and interesting explorations, many artists, gallerists, curators and, of course, collectors merely hop on for the ride in an effort to chase the work which seems "important". What develops is peddling of soulless also-rans. Work that looks like what it is supposed to look like. Trendy merchandise validated by pretentious, pedantic write-ups inflating the work in the context of art history. It seems as cyclicality in the art world revolves and movements become defined, gallery walls and reception desks become flooded with a pervasive glibness.

Glib /glib/
adjective
fluent and voluble but insincere and shallow. Or similarly; said or done too easily or carelessly : showing little preparation or thought.

As my first oil painting, inspired by a mundane coincidence, and named after one of the greatest masterpieces by arguably the greatest painter of all time, 'The Night Watch', is proudly quite glib. When I first encountered the picture in a Google image search, I immediately knew I had

to paint it, and paint it on a large scale. It was warm and saturated but at the same time completely alien. Only after I was well into the process of painting it did I realize the uncanny resemblance of the band's attire in the photograph to that of the main figures in the Rembrandt painting, unofficially known by the same name; i.e. the dominant figure in black suit, black hat and red satchel; another in a pale vest and hat; a figure in all red; a frail and fair female figure in fleshy colours with a shaul. At that point I felt obligated to make it the namesake of the painting.

The inspiration for the painting may have been spontaneous but the execution certainly was not. Painting can be a very slow medium. Considering the size, detail of the work and my lack of technical experience, this was a long and painful process. It left plenty of time for people to walk into my studio and ask why on earth I was painting an eight foot picture of Fleetwood Mac. Almost invariably I would answer, "because I like some of their songs." As I knew virtually nothing about the band, including the names of all the members, I was painting from a place of seeming insincerity. It is an intentionally dishonest painting. I was painting in a performance, mainly a one liner performance but a performance no less. Effectively, "The Night Watch" is an elaborate and laborious prop.

By not adding anything to the picture I was resisting any creative urges to compensate for the fact my image will be less true than the original. The piece is thus less of a painting and more of an object in that it is a pure reproduction. As a rote reproduction, this act pits me in direct competition with a computer. In an automated world, we will have to find ways to transcend the abilities of computers in our daily pursuits, otherwise life will have no meaning. This will require a revolutionary change in the relationship between man and machine, and a heightened level of self awareness.

Initially, the resistance to virtuosic labour in art was meant to destroy the hierarchy of supposed physical talent. However, over time a new hierarchy developed where virtuosity is seen as tasteless and crass. While it may not have been my conscious intention, this painting challenges the overly didactic socialist reasoning which has inhibited the use of virtuosity and physical labour in art today. To borrow a term from my career in finance, this work is a contrarian speculation, in effect, it contradicts all of process based abstraction (zombie formalism), science fair art, and post-internet art, by acting as formalist realism, mall art and/or fan art, and slow-internet art, respectively.

In the opening scene of Wilde's play, Algernon is playing the piano when in walks his good friend Jack Worthing whom he knows by the name of Ernest. Jack is a responsible English gentleman who lives in the countryside on a substantial estate with the wealthy family that adopted him as a child. In order to escape burdensome social obligations he pretends to have a reprobate younger brother named Ernest who lives in the city whom he must periodically save from his degenerative ways. However in reality it is Jack himself who lives the lecherous lifestyle in the city as an alter ego named Ernest so as not to be discovered by his Victorian socialite peers. It is only when he decides to propose to Algernon's cousin Gwendolen, that his fraudulent urban personae catches up with him. She too is exclusively attracted to men named

Ernest and is quite concerned by the spelling of his alleged legal name. As the story unfolds and the consequences of Jack's adoption are investigated, they discover his real birth name to be Ernest after all. Despite the best of his abilities and intentions, Ernest was in fact being earnest all along.

Jack: Gwendolen, it is a terrible thing for a man to find out suddenly that all his life he has been speaking nothing but the truth. Can you forgive me?

Above:

"Militia Company of District II under the Command of Captain Frans Banninck Cocq"
Rembrandt van Rijn 1642, oil on canvas, 142.9" x 173"

"The Night Watch"
Jonathan Schouela 2015, oil on canvas, 68" x 96"