

CHRISTOPHER
OLDFIELD//
ONTOLOGICAL RELATIVITY

Obsessed, bewildered

By the shipwreck
Of the singular

We have chosen the meaning
Of being numerous.

GEORGE OPPEN, *Of Being Numerous*

1.

The figures in Christopher Oldfield's current body of work rarely exist in isolation. Instead, they can be more commonly found cheek by jowl in a crowd. If not dancing ecstatically at a 1990s *Happy Mondays* gig or spellbound at an Elvis concert, then, in a violent manifestation of the collective impulse, they are embroiled in a street fight. Oldfield's figures have, to quote American poet George Oppen, "chosen the meaning/Of being numerous" and this necessarily involves losing themselves both figuratively and literally. In Oldfield's paintings the boundary between self and environment is often porous, identity is frequently unstable, the individual is lost to the crowd.

The perfect synchrony of a crowd at a rock and roll concert is expressed in *The Audience*, a painting based on a still from an Elvis Presley tour video. Oldfield's composition inexorably slides from semi-figuration to total abstraction, or vice versa, depending on how one chooses to approach the work. The viewer is placed in the position of performer, object of the audience's gaze. It is impossible to isolate the exact point at which the individual is lost to the crowd, or alternatively, reemerges from the seething mass as a distinct person in their own right. To convey the audience's rapture, Oldfield employs a dizzying array of techniques: scraping the paint off of the palette before splattering and flicking a variety of colours—from near black, through scarlet and Prussian blue, to the purest white—directly onto the canvas. The painting pulses with irrepressible energy, its surface wild but coherent, perfectly conveying the crowd's shared psychological state. Over the picture's thick *impasto* the artist has added a layer of translucent resin. As well as unifying the pictorial space, locking the composition into place, this technique also places a transparent barrier between viewer and audience. Looking at the painting is akin to peering into the past, apprehending a scene in which human figures are petrified, caught like insects in amber.

Oldfield's paintings can frequently be found in groups, too, with three, twelve, or even sixty pictures hung together under a single title. For the artist, seriality is a means to paint time, and in these works distinct moments co-exist side by side. Of the current body of work, *Ontological Relativity* and *The Fight* can be considered flip sides of the same coin. Each individual painting

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can be read as a still, a freeze-frame from a low resolution film, unfolding chronologically. Which is indeed what they are, at least in part, since the source for these works is manipulated footage found online. The artist has chosen as his subject two of the most extreme manifestations of the crowd—the party and the punch-up—as recorded by the unblinking gaze of 24-hour surveillance. In *Ontological Relativity*, we observe human forms pared back to their essentials, expressed with an economy of means and acid palette which lends them the appearance of bacteria in a petri dish. As the viewer's eye moves horizontally through the series of intermittent moments in time, writhing, globular forms seem to be engaged in an endless cycle of either reproduction or destruction, emergence or dissolution, it is impossible to know which. The success of these paintings relies on deliberately unresolved tensions in which the human form is frozen in transit, identities paralysed in flux.

In the *Graduation* series, Oldfield forgoes the crowd for a pair of figures, but once again multiplicity is his theme. The *Graduation* series faithfully squares up onto separate canvases three separate stills from the 1967 feature film, *The Graduate*. The selected scene is shot from the point of view of the main protagonist, one in which he is submerged underwater in a swimming pool. The abstracted nature of the paintings is due, in part, to the fact that in the original film the pair of figures are viewed through his scuba mask. Consequently, as his head is pushed further and further underwater, the successive images become increasingly difficult to read representationally, less obviously legible as human forms. Oldfield is repeatedly drawn to the boundary at which representation collapses into abstraction, exploring the indeterminate zone in which a figurative picture disintegrates into a series of abstract marks.

Oldfield has given his current body of work a title that is both a literal description—the largest series of paintings in the exhibition is called *Ontological Relativity*—and one that is almost identical to a 1969 work by the American analytic philosopher W. V. Quine, *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays*. Quine's ideas form the intellectual foundation of this exhibition. The philosopher wrote extensively on ontology, the study of the nature of being, and his theory of ontological relativity has proved one of the most radical and enduring ideas of Twentieth Century philosophy. In *The Pursuit of Truth*, Quine argues that “there are various defensible ways of conceiving the world”, and that any given collection of empirical evidence, has many different theories able to account for it. In short, what we consider to be a fact, what we understand by the meaning of a word in a language, is relative to our conceptual scheme, or, to paraphrase Immanuel Kant, the pair of glasses we require to make sense of the world. For Oldfield:

Quine was a jumping off point. I remember reading some of his essays and they are so brilliantly expressed that they flip your way of thinking, they jolt it, and you think you see how language relates to the world for a moment, and it's to do with the meaning of a word being relative to its conceptual scheme. But Quine is no relativist. That said, somehow you've got to tread the line, because things aren't all relative to each other, but they are a bit.

The artist's final sentence is illuminating. Oldfield's practice occupies that strange but compelling space in-between where “things aren't all relative to each other, but they are a bit”. Similarly, Quine manages to negotiate a philosophical position which has no need to jettison truth or facts, whilst still acknowledging the intractable web of relationships between things. For Quine:

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There is no absolute position or velocity; there are just the relations of coordinate systems to one another, and ultimately of things to one another.

Quine's emphasis on the interdependence of things provided Oldfield's impetus for the paintings, particularly the serial works:

It's Quine's point that something only has meaning in context, and so one of those images on their own doesn't have much meaning, but in the context of the larger group it is related to the one before and the one after. They're all related like words in a language, which for Quine is an interconnected web.

Oldfield has created series' of paintings which unfold through time when read sequentially, like words on a page. Regarded in isolation, the paintings are aesthetically compelling but less obviously representational: fragments of a lost language pregnant with unknown significance. That said, the forms within isolated paintings are clearly susceptible to their environment, too. It is frequently impossible to identify where one form ends and another begins. All things are bound together in an "interconnected web", Oldfield seem to say, regardless of whether we consider them individually, or as part of a larger group.

2.

Oldfield has said, quoting Francis Bacon, that his aim is to "make idea and technique inseparable". His practice attests to this ambition. Whilst making the work for *Ontological Relativity*, the artist's technical approach remained fairly consistent in order to achieve the effects that he desired. Whether the final works consist of a series of sixty or a single painting, without exception they have either a photograph or a film clip as their source. Although the subjects vary from a portrait as seen through a pint glass to CCTV footage of football hooligans, the cohering factor is that there is, to a greater or lesser extent, a degree of abstraction in the original sources: Oldfield has no reason to manufacture the ambiguity of the image, to make it up. If abstraction is not present in the original source then the artist achieves the effects he requires uses a digital editing package. This is essential to his practice, and is the point at which he can isolate the frames he requires, manipulate them by resizing them, and subsequently alter their contrast, exposure or saturation. Using photographic sources is for Oldfield, "a way to make a truthful mark", as the images used to make the work already sit somewhere between figuration and abstraction.

This particular use of photography has an impact on the emotional tenor of the works. Images originally captured in the 1990s proliferate in the exhibition—the Happy Mondays concert series, the triptych of Bez, *The Fight* series—a time at which the artist was a young child. "I feel nostalgic for a time when I wasn't conscious", he says of the allure of this period. For the artist, the 1990s were a time in which he was, like the figures he paints, in a state of becoming, still inchoate as a human being.

Christopher Oldfield's appropriation of digital imagery and use of computer editing software may position him squarely as a 21st century painter, but he is keenly aware of his antecedents. Oldfield cites, amongst others, Rembrandt, Walter Sickert, Francis Bacon, Frank Auerbach,

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Richard Hamilton and Philip Guston as artists who have shaped his artistic frame of reference. As he expresses it:

Why am I doing it? Certainly looking at those Richard Hamilton pictures of people on the beach was a big one, which are very cerebral and cold. It's not painterly expression. The figures are emerging out of abstraction and he's almost taken the artist's hand out of it completely. And then there's other school coming at it from a completely different angle: when does something start to mean something? I think that Richard Hamilton and Gerhard Richter are really interesting, but they are not my tribe. They are so cerebral and I want some of the messiness. My tribe is more painters rather than artists. It seems to me that I just can't abandon paint, psychologically I wouldn't be able to do it.

Although, like Hamilton, there is clearly a programmatic element to Oldfield's practice, his work elicits a far greater emotional response. This is due, at least in part, to the fact that he is actively exploring the messiness of both paint and life. The artist sets great store by the value of not overdetermining the creation of a work, and concurs completely with Philip Guston's thoughts on the subject set out in his essay *Faith, Hope and Impossibility*:

To will a new form is unacceptable, because will builds distortion. Desire, too, is incomplete and arbitrary. These strategies, however intimate they might become, must especially be cleared away to make room for something else—a condition somewhat unclear, but in retrospect becomes a very precise act. The “thing” is recognized only as it comes into existence. It resists analysis—and this is probably as it should be. Possibly the moral is that art cannot and should not be made.

Guston's solution to the intractable problem of “willing a new form” was to go on twenty four hour painting binges in an attempt to free himself from the tyranny of self-consciousness. Francis Bacon, on the other hand, relied on accident and tricks of technique. Oldfield's use of photography and squaring up (the process by which an image is scaled up to a canvas using a grid), align his current practice with Sickert, late in his career. By tightly controlling the initial stages of making a painting, by reducing the number of variables—for example, colour choices are frequently dictated by the source—the artist is free to explore paint, his chosen medium. The absence of pictorial information in the original sources has led the artist to develop a broad range of technical solutions, each of which are specific to the painting, or series of paintings, he is making.

Like late Sickert, Oldfield frequently leaves the squaring up visible on his canvas—often repainting it back late in execution—but to very different ends. In Sickert, the presence of squaring up reiterated the artist's programmatic means of production at a time when the use of photography was regarded as cheating. But, in Oldfield's work the effect often creates a tension within the painting which alters meaning. In *The Fight* series, the reintroduction of squaring up using paint appears to keep the figures' spontaneous outburst of violence caged off behind bars, safe at a distance like wild animals in a zoo. In *Ontological Relativity* the effect is quite different and seems to lend structural support, act as an armature for amorphous figures being endlessly swallowed up by their neighbours. This is echoed by *The Graduate* paintings in which the scaffold of the grid becomes increasingly visible as the series slides into abstraction. Here, the

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squaring up is scored into the painting's surface, etched into the final image—now no longer identifiably a pair of human beings—acting as a residual trace of previous order, a memory of lost coherence.

Oldfield's work and practice have at their heart a restive push and pull between seemingly irreconcilable positions: intention and accident; intellect and instinct; subjectivity and objectivity; representation and abstraction; individual and crowd. The artist, it could be argued, demands the impossible of himself and his pictures, and it is this deliberately unresolved tension in every work that gives them their peculiar power and emotional resonance.

3.

...Crusoe

We say was
'Rescued'.
So we have chosen.

GEORGE OPPEN, *Of Being Numerous*

In *Of Being Numerous*, George Oppen renders the unforgettable phrase “the shipwreck of the singular”, and it would seem that Christopher Oldfield has painted his single portraits with this phrase in mind. His individual figures are Robinson Crusoes all washed up by booze and drugs, or, visibly disordered, their facial features blown off course by the tempest raging in their heads.

Although he was unaware of the Oppen poem, the artist has titled his portrait seen through a pint glass, *Shipwreck*. Rembrandt has been a constant point of orientation during the creation of this painting and the wider body of work. The artist says:

In Rembrandt's self portraits every mark has been seen and felt because the source material—the painter's own image—is there all the time so he doesn't have to invent. This gives him him an infinity of potential, you can always go deeper and deeper. You get this with digital images, too, you can always zoom in further and further. If you are going to look and look again in limitless way you've to find a way technically to build on the previous layers of paint—which is a product of looking—rather than just obliterate them. One of the techniques Rembrandt uses in the late self portraits is to build up a surface early on, and once you've got that three-dimensionality you can build upon it. Every mark is a truthful mark.

For this portrait, Oldfield once again refuses to “make it up” and has used a photograph as his source. The choice of image is crucial as the reflection has been pushed to the limit of representation, the composition warped by the optic of the glass. It is a whirlpool of an image: the refracted figure apparently being drawn into a vortex of liquid, or possibly sucked down a plughole. The use of varnish and low-toned palette recall Dutch old masters, but this use of colour also acts as a counterpoint to the blue accents used throughout, their duck egg hue lending the picture its strange aquatic resonance.

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Similarly, Oldfield's *Bez* triptych (the dancer and notorious hedonist from the 90s band, *The Happy Mondays*), sees the artist further explore the disordering of the self. Consistent with the other paintings, the abstracted nature of the images is present in the artist's chosen source material: a series of shots of Bez taken from a Happy Mondays television documentary. Most easily readable is the central painting in which the subject stares directly out but does not meet our gaze. His cadaverous face and hunted expression are painted in a bruised palette of greens and blues, and even though his face appears to be decomposing in front of us, his eyes betray the fact he is a living human being. Flanking this central image are two portraits in which the respective figures are disintegrating, their faces smeared across the canvas, to haunting effect. By laying out three consecutive moments in time side by side in a non-hierarchical way, there appears to be a proliferation of selves, all in various stages of collapse.

With Oldfield's work we find ourselves in a position where the more isolated the figures, the more prone they are to distortion, both physically and psychologically. Extreme isolation often contorts an individual's sense of personal responsibility, warps their view of the wider world, leading to nihilism, self-destruction and madness. Alone, human beings too easily find themselves shipwrecked on the rocks of reason.

Ontological Relativity sees Oldfield cast himself as both painter and cartographer, mapping the dangerous seas in which we can find ourselves both individually and collectively. Although the artist is well aware that the centre cannot hold, he is compelled to explore this seemingly impossible place, over and over. A place which demands perpetual renegotiation and re-evaluation: of the interface between self and other, and, ultimately, of our place in the world.