

KEVIN COSGROVE
JUST THE USUAL

JUNE – JULY



WORK IN PROGRESS

I recall a friend of mine who worked as a mechanic once lamenting the gradual obsolescence of his trade, pointing out that as automobiles increasingly relied on computer systems, his training in manual repair was becoming redundant. The shift in expertise meant that he was left working either with cars predating the technological shift or 'skilling up' to acquire programming knowledge and, in the process, sacrificing a holistic awareness of the automobile's overall workings in favour of specialisation. His interest, however, was based precisely on the entirety of the car, the way in which an accrual of basic cause-and-effect actions combined to produce automation, so that, over time, he found himself delegated to working only on older models, classic cars and the like; in other words, another form of specialised knowledge.

The contemporary 'realist' painter can perhaps appreciate this predicament, confronted as they are with the ubiquity and mechanical accuracy of the camera (not to mention the digital image, granting an ironic solidarity between the painter and the photographer in any claim to objective representation). This is not to suggest that painting has become outmoded but, at the same time, neither can one proceed without acknowledgment of photography's 'presence'. In this light, the photo may serve as a tool to painting, a commonplace accessory that allows the artist to get back to 'work'. Derived from such photographic images, Kevin Cosgrove's exhibition *Just the Usual*, of four new paintings and one charcoal drawing, represents the places of manual labour itself: garages, workshops, studios.

In *Workshop (with blue bench)*, a shelf is lined with tools, masking tape, overflowing tins of oil, various boxes and cases. It can't help but recall an artist's studio, as if refracting Cosgrove's own practice through the substitute of the mechanic's garage. Perhaps it's a boy thing. A row of photographs of bikini-clad girls, of motorcycles and models, are pinned above a murkily opaque window, while the painting has a quietude and concentration that evokes the whiling away of weekend afternoons, fiddling with spare parts and fittings while a paint-splattered radio emits classic rock. In discussing the series, Cosgrove has mentioned the reluctance of his subjects' wives or partners to allow him access to these cluttered and disorganised, predominantly male, places that act as a respite from day-to-day domestic life.¹ Solitude, introspection, introversion: aren't these qualities also associated with a certain cult of modernist abstract painting?

It's notable, after all, how the work falls between a loosely gestural approximation of everyday objects and the slickly dazzling surfaces of photorealism. In *Workshop (with hydraulic lift)*, the twin pillars of the titular apparatus neatly frame a backdrop of cabinets and toolboxes, fluorescent lights and discoloured puddles of motor oil. Against the far wall, intersecting these vertical beams, stretches a wooden shelf, lined with additional containers and compartments. The setting appears more professional – wider space, bigger tools, better organisation – yet it still bears an individually idiosyncratic order, as if only the owner would know precisely where everything belongs. Similarly, despite the structural clarity of the scene, the painting oscillates between the polished sheen of the (foregrounded) hydraulic lift and the casually gestural

brushstrokes denoting wrenches, pliers, cabling and brickwork. While the work betrays its photographic origins, with certain objects 'in focus' and others receding into blurriness, the coexistence of these two painterly approaches in the single frame implies that exactitude and expressiveness are necessarily contingent upon one another as a means of effecting representation. The painting therefore hinges upon an allocation of disorderly experimentation and labour, an underlying haphazardness that is subsumed, yet never completely repressed, within the finished work.

Workshop (with saws) 2 demonstrates this tension. There is an order to the arrangement of hammers, paint rollers, crowbars, spirit levels and saw blades, each accorded its own position on the workshop wall, that verges on the obsessively meticulous. In fact, one might wonder if its organization is as much a product of photographic legibility as its owner's personality. Yet, upon closer inspection, a number of subtle cues indicate its status as painting: the word 'nails' that appears literally scratched onto a box of fastenings, the brown and white smear of a paint can that could represent either the overspill of its contents or the brushstrokes of the artist, and the gradation of shadow obscuring the image's details as it spreads onto the right-hand corner of the canvas. There is more here than just reproduction, than an articulation of one medium through the conditions of another. Cosgrove has also spoken of his paintings in contrast to what he casually determines as 'cool painting' and while this offhand remark would seem to refer to fashionability, it's worth remembering 'coolness' as both a description and criticism of much post-modern photorealist painting (a genre that is also caught up with painterly representations of photographic surface qualities). In this way, Cosgrove eschews the associations of both the expressive mark's auratic presence as well as the disorienting submission to a coldly spectacular hyper-reality.² As Benjamin Buchloh has noted, these two seemingly dichotomous approaches are revealed as one and the same, an obfuscating cover for what is essentially a labour of contemplation, experimentation, deliberation, tweaking and tinkering.³

Nor can the works be said to merely reproduce his source photographs, whether taken from extant publications, specialist websites or by Cosgrove himself. As the images are scaled up, the artist is forced to peer into shadows and recesses, to make the indistinguishable distinct (or to plunge it into painterly darkness) and to improvise where information is lacking. This is particularly evident in the drawing *Charcoal (for blue bench)*, extensively a reverse image of the painting *Workshop (with blue bench)*, where the edges of the composition soften and smudge. Much as one imagines the mechanic at the end of the day, rigorously scrubbing his hands clean with a turpentine-soaked rag, the smut of charcoal has been effaced from the blackened surface, only giving way to the occasional glimmer of white blankness when a metallic glint or patch of sunlight is required. This subtractive method again incorporates an element of physical perseverance as densely applied charcoal is gradually lifted off to illuminate its finer details. The result resembles Cosgrove's delicate treatment of sawdust in the painting *Workshop (with blanket)*, a powdery residue of pigment that is scattered to reveal the boot prints of the artisan. There is only the trace of his presence. A freestanding mitre saw, cabling and electrical outlets, a smear of pallid grey paint representing a dust vacuum; the carpenter is represented



Charcoal (for blue bench) Charcoal on paper 108 x 150 cm 2011
Workshop (with blue bench) Oil on linen 120 x 140 cm 2011

not by the finished creation but simply by the objects of his labour, the tools of his trade.

'Just the usual', states Cosgrove, as if modestly self-deprecating his practice. Or perhaps in reference to the 'business as usual' signs that stand outside buildings under renovation. I'm actually reminded of the phrase usually attributed to the character of Detective Joe Friday from the television show *Dragnet*: "Just the facts, ma'am". In both cases, the terms imply a moral sensibility, a distillation of the unnecessary and the trivial into the essential. Not that this is a formal reduction; Cosgrove's compositions are full of clutter and complexity. Instead, it seems to align artistic endeavor with the routine of the labourer, whose satisfaction relies as much on the relentless honing of one's skills, the compulsion to take on (and accomplish) more challenging tasks, than on any end product. It's a working method drawn from practice, in its vernacular sense of a gradual refinement of skill, and one that carries the Aristotelian directive that virtue derives from, and informs, habituation: "men will become good builders as a result of building well, and bad ones as a result of building badly. Otherwise there would be no need of anyone to teach them: they would all be born either good or bad."⁴

Chris Clarke

¹ From a conversation with the artist, June 11, 2011.

² Fredric Jameson notes this tendency, remarking on "the extraordinary surfaces of the photorealist cityscape, where even the automobile wrecks gleam with some new hallucinatory splendor" in *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991) p. 32-33.

³ "Excited brushwork and heavy impasto paint application, high contrast colours and dark contours are still perceived as 'painterly' and 'expressive' twenty year after Stella's, Ryman's, and Richter's works demonstrated that the painted sign is not transparent, but is a coded structure which cannot be an unmediated 'expression'. Through its repetition the physiognomy of this painterly gesture so 'full of spontaneity' becomes, in any case, an empty mechanics." Benjamin H.D Buchloh, "Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression: Notes on the Return of Representation in European Painting" reprinted in Brian Wallis, ed. *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation* (Lincoln: David R Godine, 1996) p. 120.

⁴ Aristotle, *Ethics* (Hammondsworth: Penguin Books, 1983) p. 92.





Workshop with saws 2 Oil on linen 100 x 130 cm 2011