

# CHISENHALE INTERVIEWS: CARAGH THURING

**Caragh Thuring**

**27 November 2014 - 1 February 2015**

***Katie Guggenheim:** I wanted to start by asking about something that you mentioned when we were looking at the paintings in your studio earlier this year. I found it really surprising and it's an interesting way to start thinking about the work. You said that you had been watching a particular snooker player and thinking about snooker in relation to making painting. What was the name of the snooker player?*

**Caragh Thuring:** Ronnie O'Sullivan. The comparison with snooker is a spatial one and about O'Sullivan's particular approach to the task in hand. In both cases, in playing snooker and in making paintings, the territory is factually, simply spatial: it's a rectangular surface and everything has to be contained within it. Within that, everything has cause and effect. When you hit the snooker balls you might clear the table with a maximum break of 147, like doing a really quick painting, or you could have your opponent come in and mess you around and then it can go on for ages. Sometimes you can make paintings that cause constant trouble for yourself and you're always trying to renegotiate that space to try and achieve some sort of result. In snooker it's winning the frame and for me it's the end of the painting.

I don't generally watch snooker but I enjoy watching Ronnie O'Sullivan play. I find him interesting because of his lateral approach. It's really about boundaries. There are all these boundaries but there are also things outside the boundaries: outside influences and things projecting influence from within. In some of my early work I painted shipping docks. Here you have the hinterland and then the strip between the hinterland and the sea, which is where all the exchange goes on. This space, demarcation line, is a whole territory in itself with its own ecosystem.

***KG:** You've installed the paintings in a very particular way for this exhibition, with two pairs suspended, back-to-back, from the ceiling and another painting partially blocking the entrance to the gallery. Do you think that this gives the paintings a sculptural quality?*

**CT:** When thinking about installing paintings, the question you have to ask is how do you make these flat things take up space, how do you get involved with them when there's nothing to enter into, how do you move round them? I used to feel that the early paintings were very much about building. Almost making an installation in a space but on a canvas. In this show I've physically moved them out into the middle of the space. The decision was partly about a desire to layer things in front of each other, which is something that goes on within the work, but partly also about them being as vaporous as they can be, hanging there in the space.

They're also like film screens, that's what I was thinking about, that envy of looking at something illuminated in the space that becomes the space itself so it's just there without anything round the edges.

**KG:** *Yes, it's a very traditional idea, that if you take a painting off the wall then it moves into the realm of sculpture, but I like your reference to projection screens. In moving between these different states – painting, sculpture, screen – you've managed to allow the paintings to just be paintings but without walls.*

**CT:** I wanted them to be the walls, in a sense. If you're going to put a wall in the space and hang a painting on it, well that's what I've done, but without the walls.

**KG:** *The only exception might be the painting that's hung over the entrance, so that you see the back of it when you enter the show. That seems a very different gesture. It's stitched from lots of pieces of linen and you see that from the back, it's not a picture plane, there's no image surface, you see...*

**CT:** The nuts and bolts!

**KG:** *Yes almost literally. And then that encourages you to look more closely at the different materials and processes that are present in the show.*

**CT:** I don't really think about it in that sense. I want people to see the image on the front mainly, and I could have covered the back but that would have made it into an awkward object.

**KG:** *It really foregrounds the linen, you can see the fabric, you can see how thick it is, how soft it is and that it's not a rigid primed canvas, you can see the stitching and there's even a hole in the middle. There are actually a lot of different processes going on in all the paintings: screen-printing, line marker paint, charcoal, spray paint... I think that that introduction encourages you to look more carefully at what's going on in the work.*

**CT:** That's interesting. I didn't expect that to be the case. For me it's almost more like 'don't look'. The linen thing is funny because I forget about it. I do just see it as a piece of paper. I've got away from that whole construction of priming the canvass and making it white, which you then obliterate. It's a whole process but there's no reason to do it. I don't really put that much paint on the paintings – I still have paint that I started using 10 years ago. The raw linen has become a non-space for me but for other people it can be very loud, I think. I can't really worry about that.

**KG:** *You're also addressing some other issues in painting through your use of genres like portraiture and still life. But the portraits aren't really portraits, in the sense that they don't really depict people, they're images of images that*

*you've found from adverts in magazines. They're very self-consciously posed: people as ready-made images.*

**CT:** They're specific adverts that I've had for many years and I've always thought about because they're more ridiculous or uncanny than others. One recent work, that's not in the show, *Soldier Sailor* (2013), is of a very old Hervé Leger advert that I found and kept in the early '90s. *Golf* (2014), the painting with the four upright people, is Ralph Lauren, also from the '90s. These are just such ridiculously perfect images. By making the paintings I'm consuming my envy of those perfect images. Also, I use the figures as a device to create a human presence in the work. The images are idealised, but for some other reason, and then I just appropriate that quality for my own need.

**KG:** *The figures are bricked out, like a grid to measure area or take up space.*

**CT:** It's just about building something physical... building a human presence. The windows, which appear in another group of paintings in the show, are encased in bricks. The windows are also portraits.

**KG:** *The windows come from a series of photographs that you've been taking of picture windows in Dutch suburban homes. It struck me that in this case, and with the magazine adverts, that they're found images. Although you took the photographs of the windows yourself, what seems to appeal to you is the fact that they're ready-made images, which have been composed by the inhabitants of the houses.*

**CT:** I've always taken pictures: I've got boxes and boxes of them. For me, the interest in those windows is the fact that they're faintly strange. These displays of objects in windows are a very typical thing that you see in the suburbs of Dutch towns. Again it's about boundaries. People are presenting themselves on a demarcation line, which in this case is the windowsill. I'm fascinated by the things that people choose as a means to represent themselves. They can be as ridiculous as the representations in the adverts; they're fantasies in the same way. It's very similar to the self-fashioning displayed currently through all the various forms of social media. With the windows there are also the reflections, so you don't know what's inside and what's outside. You can't read the space in a logical way.

**KG:** *That's how the images begin to break down, through the reflections, which create areas of missing information and surreal overlaps.*

**CT:** Yes, they're not readable vignettes. There's very little painting in the exhibition that you can look at and think, oh that's that. You have to look and try and fathom what's there.

**KG:** *The windows are like portraits but you see everything apart from the person: the subject. Like with the paintings of the docks you mentioned, where*

*you see the entire mechanism of the crane but not what is being moved.*

**CT:** Totally, and also the subject or the person might be nothing like the image that they've created to portray themselves through the window. I was thinking the other day about that magazine *World of Interiors* where they show the interiors of people's houses but not the person. I think they're slowly starting to do portraits though, which suggests a desire for the whole story to be told. You don't need the people in pictures because the houses are the portraits. Having the people there kills any sense of wonder.

**KG:** *I guess it's also that you're supposed to be able to project yourself into that space.*

**CT:** Yes it's about fantasy but you're thrown out of the image when you see the person, it shuts down the possibilities.

**KG:** *I wanted to ask you about the way you use portraiture and still life. What is it that you're able to access by tapping into these 'minor' genres?*

**CT:** For me it's about hierarchy: nothing has more importance than anything else. There isn't really anything so fantastic that you can't use it, it's about how you put those things together and what you leave out and what you suggest.

**KG:** *So it's more about a language of everyday things?*

**CT:** They're just signifiers in a way, shortcuts to things. Bricks are a short cut to something, everyone knows what a brick is: it represents building. I've used lots of those volcanoes that are like pyramids made of brick and they're about representing a structure. They're signifiers or symbols... not symbols really.

**KG:** *I like 'shortcuts'.*

**CT:** Yes, 'shortcuts' is the best way of putting it really. It's about thinking 'I want to be over there and that's the most efficient way to get over there'. The meaning of these things is defined outside of the work but I don't want them to represent anything. I pull in what I need in order to get the image I'm trying to make. That's why I make paintings rather than anything else because whatever your intention is it's never fulfilled, but it might take you somewhere else and then you find something more interesting. It just goes on, and that's why you make another painting because the last one couldn't do it all. It's this ever-expanding realm of possibility that just gets more exciting the more you do it.

**KG:** *It's like a language, like a written language...*

**CT:** I sometimes think of it as reading a book; until you open a book and read the words it's just an object and it's very dense. It's about speed: you have to dedicate that time to it. I think a lot about film as well, but more in the sense of

editing, because with painting you just edit – I edit out things that I don't want.

*KG: You're talked previously about the way you're work unfolds over time and it seems to make a lot of sense to liken the processes of making and looking at a painting to filmmaking and editing. There's also the idea of installing the paintings like projection screens...*

**CT:** I didn't want all the work in the exhibition to be seen immediately. If I'd hung all the paintings on the walls you could have just stood at the door and seen the whole show. It's this question of how to get people involved in the work. People can't see anything at first so they have to go round the painting that's blocking the door and then they've already taken a bit more time to get in the space. Then, hopefully, because the paintings are back to back, they have to move through them and around them. It's also about wanting to retain that sense of excitement, which is difficult to do with a painting that's stationary. The work has already been done and I've done it more than anyone else because I've made it, but when someone else comes to the work, they haven't done anything – it's not done – but by just looking at a flat image they think they've 'done' it.

*KG: So it's about how to make looking into an active process?*

**CT:** I wanted the paintings to hover in the space so that the images would cut into other images. You have to make up your own way of looking at the exhibition. If they were on the wall then nothing would break up or interrupt your vision, whereas here it's a bit overcrowded and it's not necessarily the ideal way to look at each individual painting, but it's the best way for me to present the work and enable people to look at the work in the same way that I'm excited about looking at it.

*KG: I think the hang works fantastically well. It gives you a sense of responsibility. When you're moving round you're aware that you're composing what's in front of you depending on where you stand and it sets up these cross contaminations and relationships between the different groups of works.*

**CT:** That's how you make work and that's how you experience the world. Nothing is isolated and that's how I want the work to be digested.

*KG: There is a certain studio-like quality to this way of experiencing the work as well. But if someone had set out to try and recreate the experience of the studio then they would have probably leant and stacked work against the wall and not hung it at all. This is the opposite of that, it has none of those clichés.*

**CT:** Yes, it couldn't be simpler, there isn't anything more empty in a strange way. I've gone through every option, but in the end I quite consciously wanted to make it simple. You have to go through these things in order to get nearer to the thing that you want, but not edit to the point where it's too elegant.

**KG:** *Yes, you have to leave some problems in there.*

**CT:** And the paintings are problems in themselves. They're always problematic and I think it's important for an image to be problematic or it satisfies you and you're left with nothing.

**KG:** *You've also made an artist's book, which is available for people to look at on the front desk. It's a collection of hundreds of images of watches in magazine adverts.*

**CT:** Some of those adverts are hilarious. They're all about legacy and defining yourself, about history, future, image. I noticed the time is always 'ten to two' or 'ten past ten', which is why I started collecting them, I didn't realise it is standard in advertising: it looks positive!

**KG:** *Is that because of the symmetry?*

**CT:** Like an upturned mouth... it's a visual thing that just works.

**KG:** *It's quite funny that watches are marketed as these legacy objects that are to be passed down through generations. It's time as infinity...*

**CT:** They're selling all different tranches of time. That's an interesting thing for me about making painting now: there is no time, and I want to make images that you have to give a bit of time to understand them.

**KG:** *Do you achieve that through withholding information?*

**CT:** It's about how little you can do: what's the least you can do to get your intention across, to make people work a bit and have a bit of imagination. You never want to arrive. It's about maintaining the sense of anticipation about what might be there.

*Caragh Thuring interviewed by Katie Guggenheim, Exhibitions and Events, Curator, Chisenhale Gallery, November 2014. Chisenhale Interviews, series editor, Polly Staple, Director, Chisenhale Gallery.*