

Immediacy and the Noughties

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The old saying “Don’t just talk, do something!” is one of the most stupid things one can say, even measured by the low standards of common sense. Perhaps, rather, the problem lately has been that we have been doing too much...

Slavoj Žižek¹

In his recent book, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*, Slavoj Žižek describes the recently completed decade of the “noughties” as bookended by two events – the terrorist attack on the United States on September 11, 2001 and the global financial crisis of fall 2008. Each of these, he says, was met with a call for immediate and aggressive action.² For Žižek, the US government’s (i.e. then-President George W. Bush’s) reaction was and is symptomatic of our societal tendencies, as immediate action in these cases (as opposed to slow action in the cases of, for example, the AIDS crisis or global warming) is required for the maintenance of the liberal-capitalist status quo. Žižek proceeds to use this diagnosis of the noughties to springboard into a treatise on a revival of the Idea of Communism.

Žižek’s reference to the frantic push for immediate action runs parallel to the curatorial framework of *Take Your Time*, as set forth by the exhibition title itself. Both remind one of the potential danger inherent in acting or re-acting too quickly – of *not* taking our time – and both prescribe a personal and societal slowing down.

Take Your Time presents a close look at the current state of figurative painting in British Columbia. But beyond its geographically specific art historical considerations, the exhibition’s exclusive focus on paintings created at this specific historical moment also invites a renewed exploration of the inherent temporal aspect of the medium of painting. Looking at each individual work, one is faced with the relationship between time and the creation of that work. With each brush stroke that sits on the surface of Rebecca Brewer’s painting or Heather Passmore’s mattress covers, one is met not only with the artist’s hand, but also with the durational aspect of specific mark-making. Henri Bergson’s theory of *la durée* influenced a generation of early twentieth-century artists as evident, for example, in the Cubists’ attempt to represent anti-rational space and in the Futurists’ effort to depict the human experience of the passing of time. Contrastingly, *Take Your Time* draws our attention not to the depiction of *la durée* within the subject of the paintings, but to the painterly trace of the artist’s durational experience of creating the artwork. In other words, the painted canvas acts as a material record of *la durée*.

Standing in front of each painting, one also encounters a moment in time created within the world depicted on the canvas. It is certainly no coincidence that each of the paintings in the exhibition is representational. Each depicts, and thus constructs, a world with a unique space-time that is definitively separate from the one which the viewer primarily inhabits. Some of these spatial moments are more penetrable (Gary Pearson’s wine drinker connects with the viewer, if

¹ Slavoj Žižek, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*, London and New York: Verso, 1999, 11.

² Ibid, 2.

only to tell her to “come back later”) than others (Ben Reeves creates a smoke screen beyond which one can see but cannot reach). What each of the depicted moments share is that they present moments of leisure or rest, moments when time slows or even stops, sometimes briefly, at others permanently.

“*Take Your Time*” is also an instruction to the visitor on how to approach the work in the show – and perhaps painting in general. T.J. Clark opens his 2006 book *The Sight of Death: An Experiment in Art Writing* with a quote from Wittgenstein: “A picture held us captive.”³ In the book, he leads the reader through a sustained meditation on two paintings by Nicolas Poussin. The reader becomes a viewer as Clark offers an intimate, detailed description of what is present before him. Elsewhere Clark has described the quality of stillness that one can experience when one spends time with images, and the significance of presenting the opportunity for prolonged attention in the encounter with the image.⁴ The engagement with a picture can ultimately be driven by a pleasure of looking and an astonishment at what a picture has to offer – a pleasure and an astonishment that the world at large seeks to withhold at every opportunity (or worse, seeks to make marketable, as Clark aptly points out).⁵ *Take Your Time* presents a similar opportunity – request, even – for engagement. It may not be the politically revolutionary engagement that Žižek asks of his readers, but on a theoretical (and practical) level it is not far off.

Thus the exhibition – beginning with the title and extending to the works themselves – presents an opportunity to consider the relationship between painting and time on at least the three levels considered here: the temporal aspect of the creation of the work, the space-time created by representational painting, and the temporal aspect of viewing the work. The latter two are particularly poignant when considered together. Here we find a prescription, one that may well exist outside of the intentions many of the artists in the show. If we see in this combination of images a general call to slow down, perhaps it is reflective of the many global initiatives asking for just that, a backing off from the frenzied, blind form that progress has taken on in recent years.

This call seems necessary as we transition out of an era characterized by a frenetic need for constant action. Former US President George W. Bush responded to both the terrorist attacks of September 11 and the financial meltdown of fall 2008 with speeches of the same general tone: a call to “immediate action” in order to defend “our way of life.”⁶ On an individual level, the demand for continuous action is epitomized by the pervasiveness of personal electronic communication devices such as the Blackberry. Although intended to make communication (and thus work) easier and more efficient, the actual result is not an inversely correlated increase in leisure time; rather, smart phones have allowed work to encroach upon every aspect of the user’s life. Perhaps the parallel between the political call to (aggressive) immediate action and the private call to act and work as quickly and as efficiently as possible is mirrored in the parallel between the re-embracing of the Idea of Communism in response to the former and the private

3 T.J. Clark, *The Sight of Death: An Experiment in Art Writing*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006.

4 Katherine Tuma, “T.J. Clark in Conversation with Katherine Tuma,” *The Brooklyn Rail* (November 2006), unpaginated.

5 Ibid.

6 George W. Bush presidential address, Sept. 11, 2001, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YMIqEUBux3o>, accessed November 15, 2009; George W. Bush presidential address, September 20, 2001, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rm8Nt77C-u4>, accessed November 15, 2009; George W. Bush presidential address, September 19, 2008; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IP7GYSr2dQQ&feature=related>, accessed November 15, 2009; George W. Bush presidential address September 24, 2008 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YsDmPEeurfA&feature=fw>, accessed November 15, 2009.

response of certain localized community movements to the latter. In the noughties we find an increasing, although perhaps somewhat underground, popularity of practices that attempt to slow the pace of life, such as the slow food movement, knitting circles and board game parties. One still hears stories about individuals hospitalized due to extreme exhaustion after playing games online with a community of people who never lay eyes on one another.⁷ However, more and more people are replacing this type of highly abstracted (and extracted) mode of interacting with one that relies on a direct connection with the world at large and other individuals within that world. People are taking a step back from the mediated mode that so many failed utopian consumer products encourage us to assume, and experiencing the world as if for the first time – leaving the car at home and feeling the wind in their faces as they ride their bikes to work; feeling the literal weight of their purchases as they walk the ten blocks home from the local grocery store, bags in hand.

It is not surprising that at this moment one finds a similar trend within art-making – in this case specifically painting⁸ – that thematizes a slower pace of life. Žižek's characterization of the noughties pointedly describes the historical moment from which these paintings emerged. Even if it relates only tangentially to the artists' intentions, the works in this exhibition, the organizing curatorial thesis and the exhibition title all support the suggested societal yearning for slower living. Putting down the "Crackberry" may signify decreased efficiency but it may also mean increased leisure. If one's experience of the world can become less mediated then perhaps one can take pleasure in what is *immediately* present – a proverbial smelling of the roses. One can enjoy the social time to build a sandcastle or have a dance or the personal time to read a good book or examine one's toes.

Paradoxically, it seems that in order for the aggressive action engaged in response to 9-11 and the financial crisis of '08 to be truly immediate, the actors should have taken heed of the prevalent, timely warning: maybe they should have taken their time. Slowing down is not only about pleasure. It is also about survival. The point of slowing down is to allow for the time required to experience one's way through an encounter and furthermore to think through that experience. Which returns us both to Žižek and the title of the exhibition. We take the time to slow down, and the result is that we have time to think before we act (or react).

Take Your Time offers up a moment to consider the relations between painting and time. It also presents an underlying thesis regarding the societal need to slow down, as expressed through a group of paintings that have emerged from a society (consciously and unconsciously) feeling that need.

If the reactions to the major events of the previous decade have taught us anything, perhaps it is that a reconsideration of how things are done, by both individuals and governments, might be high on everyone's agenda. Here is a moment. How will you take it?

7 An extreme case involved the 2007 conviction of a couple whose two infants were found malnourished and suffering other untreated health problems because their parents were too busy playing online games to feed or care for them. (Washington Post, July 15, 2007)

8 All of this, of course, is not to say that painting, or the experience of looking at painting, has a privileged position in its relationship to time or the experience of time, or the manifestation of duration. One can certainly make comparable but substantially different arguments regarding the relationship of photography to time – for example Henri Cartier Bresson's notion of the decisive moment, or, closer to home, Scott McFarland's digital compositions of elapsed time.



Damian Moppett

1815/1962 Self Portrait, 2006

Oil on paper

52 X 36.75 inches