



MATTHEW RADFORD
LONDON 2006

STUDIO TALK

Matthew Radford has not shown in London since 2002. During those four years he has been in his studio working on a new series of paintings.

Widely known for his work with crowds, Matthew's new series retains that as a central theme but now the paintings are overlaid with formal grids and images from a world dominated by computers, digital images and CCTV. He has worked to integrate these ideas into the language of painting and incorporate them within his large crowd paintings. It has been a difficult and sometimes frustrating voyage of discovery. He has had to develop new forms of expression and new techniques to create these works. This exhibition is the culmination of all that work.

The quotes below were taken from a conversation held in Matthew's Deptford studio on a cold January morning. Matthew was joined in his studio by Stanley Moss, an American critic and collector - a man who has been involved with the art world since the 1960s.

THE IMAGE OF THE CROWD

MR : The image of the crowd fascinates me and has done since I was a child. It allows me to explore the individual will, subjugated by the pattern of the whole, which seems to me to be the conflict of our time. This battle between the individual will and social order underlies so much.

City life is the starting point, not because of a love for urban things, but because it represents life in its most condensed form, forever changing, moving and because all the contradictions appear so clearly.

When you are in a crowd or observing a crowd that is walking in a mass, you don't have any sense of continuous receding space. You look at someone - you find them interesting or ugly or striking, whatever - but you tend to look at them directly. You are not concerned with distance, with recessional space. I view these crowd scenes like a medieval painting, where everything is pushed up to the surface with no perspective and everything has the same emphasis - everything stands up equally against everything else. That was the effect that I wanted to have.

If you are painting a landscape, you look at a view, receding space and perspective. But the perception of space and the way that humans relate to one another is so different in the city. This idea of flattening the surface and making a three dimensional image 2-dimensional is also how we view so much of our world these days. We watch everything on flat screens and see so much through photography and digital images and pixels - images are constantly being thrust toward us, pushed onto the surface.

THE INDIVIDUAL IN THE CROWD

SM : It is important to really look at these paintings. There is a sense of the contrast between obscurity within the crowd and individuality - the

looking for humanism in a technological world. This search for the individual is an often repeated theme in Matthew's paintings.

The idea of repetition, regularity and sameness is set against individuality and independence - this is just one of the conflicts in these paintings. Within such a busy, crowd dominated world, you can lose your identity and so people are searching for individuality - a special spark. The paint in many ways is the key to rediscovering individuality - look at any one of those rectangles and within one of those seemingly negative spaces and you will find a little universe all of its own - infinitely rich. Matthew goes into these things and revisits every little aspect of it.

Look at Chain, there is a really interesting interaction between the numbers and the people. As you move it changes - look at it now, it is almost as if the numbers have ceased to exist and the people are coming forward - sometimes they are visible, then sometimes the numbers. It is a really fascinating interaction between the idea of the search for the individual - the idea of searching for humanity in a world constantly confronted and devalued by the incidence of technology. Technology tends to isolate us and insulate us, but the challenge is to find the essential heart of the person despite that - that is what the interplay of these paintings is - you are looking for individuality. And you find it, if you go up close to the paintings - go into each little unit and you find out that Matthew has been there with the brush and the brain.

THE NEW PAINTINGS AND THE GRIDS

MR : I worked on these large paintings for about a year and a half or more. They are definitely a series that take an idea, move it on and develop it. It wasn't just a question of abstracting previous works, it was about digesting the idea, changing it and finding news ways of looking at it. These were conceived as a group that pushed different aspects of the idea. For example Chain is probably the most extreme in a mechanical sense, but that is not supposed to be a fixed, complete style. It is merely an extension of the other paintings that I had been working on. I pushed it in that direction, but with other works I have taken different routes.

These large paintings have been a big step for me - I had to throw away a lot of what I had done before to make them. When I first started using the grids, the grids took over the paintings. Then I had to work to reincorporate the humans. Eventually after quite a long time, I managed to get the painterly side and technological side to become interwoven in a way where both hopefully enhance each other. It was such a difficult thing to do to make a hand-made image concerned with something as structural as a grid without using transference methods. It was a big step and sometimes I felt that I might have thrown the baby out with the bath water.

What I wanted to do was remove the indulgence of the gesture. I love expressionist painting, with great mark making when you can really enjoy the fluidity of the paint but I didn't want it to become a rather meaningless mannerism. Using paint in an expressive way can become an end in itself and I wanted my painting to have much more purpose than that. So I thought that by contrasting it with a harsh technological device like the grids, it could suddenly make the painterly areas of it seem much more

meaningful while also adding an extra dimension to a theme that I have been involved with for many years - the human within the system, contemporary technology and its impact on society.

By adding the grids but integrating them into the whole, so that neither the humans nor the technological dominate, makes for a very complex, demanding technique. The humans are painted in a painterly way and this is contrasted with the images of the grid which are treated in a different way.

TECHNOLOGY, PIXELS AND THE GRIDS

MR : Essentially what I was trying to do was steal things from new technology and re-integrate it back into painting. It is not simply about a superficial reference to technology. By working it into my work with crowds, humans, individuals, it refers back to a much deeper response to the subject. What you are trying to do is convey something that goes beyond the superficial.

People are accustomed to looking at images everyday with pixels, computer screens, computer generated images, CCTV images. It is a recognisable language so people immediately understand the visuals I am referring to – however, mine come with the intervention of the human hand. It is not my intention to imitate or appropriate these things. It is rather a chance to expand the language in order to convey different subtleties.

SM : What you are trying to do is use a human brain to simulate a digital process because this was not done with any kind of technological assistance. You look at a map that you made and then inside of yourself you translate it - finally you have a painting. It is about referring to the technology without using it. Suggest it, but not employ it.

REFLECTIVE PAINT

MR : I have also used reflective paint on these large works. By doing this, I have created paintings that change as you move in front of them. The metal paint has that flickering, changeable quality that imitates the changing nature of screen images. The Mica based paint that I use is employed by the automobile industry. It is very stable and has the quality where rather than light bouncing off the painting, it reflects light out of the painting. It isn't a static object anymore - it moves and changes in different lights, from different angles, at different levels.

GETTING CLOSE

SM : I love getting up close to these paintings. When you are at a distance you have one sense of them but when you move in close you see a lot more work in the painting that you can miss at a superficial first glance. Here is a stroke, over a halo, over a colour wash over the under-painting. You don't see that until you walk up close - suddenly the person disappears and you can see the making - sometimes the texture of the canvas is there - sometimes it is obliterated by the incidence of paint. Individuality is also seen in the naturalistic error. Matthew leaves some of the happenstance - those imperfections are the clue to the person who has created the painting.

RECONCILING OPPOSITES

MR : A lot of these paintings are about how to reconcile two opposite things simultaneously without negating both of them - for example the painterly and the mechanical / formal, humans vs technology, the individual vs the whole and also in terms of opposites - black and white, negative and positive.

Reconciliation of opposites creates the tension and what I have found interesting about that is there isn't a solution, there are plateaus, things better than others - but there isn't a solution – it is not a preaching thing, you are trying to portray things as they are rather than as you would like them to be.

SM : This is about the dialogue between the organic and the synthetic. The auto paint is definitely synthetic media whereas this painting is an organic process and that is very interesting interaction in your work.

MAKING PAINTINGS AND CARTOONS

Mention of technique and questions about how he puts such complex paintings together causes a flurry of activity. Out comes a pile of huge pieces of paper – these are Matthew's cartoons for the large paintings. Cartoons are an ancient artistic device to guide painters in their work - it is a tradition that has all but died out in this modern age. Cartoons are generally on paper and are often drawings, quite diagrammatic that act as the road map for the paintings - they are an invaluable source of information, direction and reference for the artist. Essential when painting a very complex work, cartoons are actual size and in Matthew's case, painted in acrylic.

MR : This is my map to the painting and is the first thing that I construct before embarking on a painting. It is more diagrammatic than the painting, obviously. I continually refer to the cartoon, especially if something gets out of kilter in the painting, you can directly refer back. It is the coat hanger that I can then hang the suit on. This is the fundamental design and the painting is the progression but if I am making a gesturely mark about something like a head, I have to have something concrete if it falls apart. Then I wash it out and I need something I can go back to that is more structural.

The cartoon is also vital if I am to retain a balance between the human and the technological – they must sit in harmony with neither dominating the other. The cartoon helps me to hold on to this equilibrium and not let the emphasis tip either way. The cartoons stay on the floor - that way they are always available for me to refer to - that is why they are so tattered and torn.

The cartoons are a very important part of the paintings. I have invested almost as much time in the cartoons as I have in the paintings. It is vital that you prepare such complex works - you can easily get lost within an area unless you have an overall plan.

THE SMALL WORKS

These small works are about random groupings - social units - and in a way, I am looking much more closely at the attitudes of the figures, their gestures and mannerisms and this is becoming much more important to me than previously. Here there is interaction between the people - I've included postures and body language. Everybody here are different sorts of people - individuals, rather than just one within the crowd. Very different to my large paintings.

Making the large paintings was very intense and I can't work at that level the whole time. So when I had really pushed the big paintings as far as they could go, I needed to go away and absorb what I had done. It's at that stage that I made these small paintings. I wanted something less intense, more fun, more painterly. I also wanted to see if the work I had done on the big paintings had altered my vision of what was happening elsewhere - and I think it probably has.

As I make paintings I become totally absorbed in their creation and during that time, often imperceptibly, my thoughts, attitudes even paint handling can change. It is always good to stand back and see what effect an intense period of painting has had on me.

The small paintings look as though they are quick to do - in fact there is a lot more to them than meets the eye. I tend to mess around with the backgrounds for a week or more - but the figures then happen very quickly and they either work and stay on, or fail and get taken off. I tend to make a lot and then destroy quite a lot. I wash them out and paint over them. When you look at them up close, they are not refined but they begin to make sense once you stand away from them. They are quite improvisational and because I work on them quite intensely, I can't really tell whether they are going to work out or not until I have stood back and looked at them - hence the high destruction ratio.

They also tend to be a little bit more humorous - at one moment the paint is a blob, at another it is a person - I like the fact that they are less dramatic and more obviously painterly.

THE DOUBT ELEMENT

MR : The doubt element of this is actually quite important for me. Because at the end of it, however much I like the painting, if there is no doubt there - if there is nowhere else to go, then but I always have doubts, so I suppose I will always have more paintings to make.

Kate Pierrepont
SWI Gallery