

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

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Caragh Thuring: 'It's a sort of standoff – how am I going to deal with this?'

The Brussels-born artist discusses reconstructing old paintings as tapestries to create new work, why she uses figures from adverts, and her love of bricks



by ALEXANDER GLOVER

If you were trying to compare the work and practice of Caragh Thuring (b1972, Brussels) with that of others, you might point to the wave of German painters working in the 1970s and 80s, including, for example, Albert Oehlen. Their preoccupation with recycling popular images and questioning the nature of painting itself is also evident in Thuring's work. But Thuring believes her approach to her work is more akin to that of the great British snooker player Ronnie O'Sullivan. During our meeting, Thuring talked enthusiastically about their similarities: the way O'Sullivan laterally approaches the space in front of him; the sheer rapidity and intensity of how he plays the game; and the fact that he is the only person, apart from her, whom she has seen describe their work as akin to mining – constantly digging through the rocks until you eventually find a nugget. But this comparison demonstrates perfectly

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Thuring's acute awareness of what is going on around her, as well as a refined self-awareness that can, at times, be an artist's most valuable asset.

Her comparison to O'Sullivan is as disarming as it is valid. But you could say the same for her work in the current exhibition in both spaces at Thomas Dane Gallery in London. Pieces such as *Rose Pouchong* (2016), a cartoon-like depiction of a human face, are completely disarming given the more serious undertones elsewhere in the exhibition. And the use of industrial elements juxtaposed with nature, such as the brick walls and plants depicted in *Pavement* (2016), shows the artist's valid concerns about the state of our world and climate. It is these aspects of her painting that have led to her work being acquired for international collections such as the Tate and the Zabludowicz collections in the UK.

Although Thuring's work has become synonymous with painting directly on to unprimed linen, this exhibition marks a turning point, in which the artist has collaborated with weavers from Suffolk and Belgium. The weavers were instructed to recreate in tapestry her old work, creating a series of homages to her previous paintings, over which she then painted with new ideas. Self-repetition is important to Thuring's practice, but this exhibition holds no trace of the artist simply repeating herself.

Alexander Glover: For this exhibition, you have collaborated with weavers to create a predesigned canvas woven with the images of previous work, on top of which you have then painted. Could you talk about the process and why you approached your work this way?

Caragh Thuring: I didn't want to start from the bare linen as I normally do. I was trying to think of how to build something intimate into the structure of the painting without using found materials or turning it into a sculpture. I realised that I hadn't seen anyone paint over their own images. I know people have in the past, but not imagery specifically made to be painted over. I like the procreation of my own image in a way. It was also an experiment. What did it add? What did it take away? That was the starting point.

AG: Is it a process of creating new work, or finding new meanings in older work?

CT: It's both of those things, I think. At first, I was going to make new paintings to be woven into new images, but I decided that wasn't necessary. It was getting very complicated. Instead, I could select certain previous works and just update them, to have as a sort of background. There was already a human presence in the work with the included figures. But they're not really humans, just representations of figures.

AG: Let's talk about these figures that you sometimes include in your work. For your show at Chisenhale Gallery in 2014, you had a work called *Golf* (2014), which featured the outline of four female figures from a 1990s Ralph Lauren advert, with their backs turned towards the viewer. In this show, the figures are shown from the front. Are the figures you have included in some of the works for this current show also from an advert?

CT: Yes, they are. I've actually used that image [an Hervé Léger advert from the early 90s] for my degree show. I've always come back to it. I've also made a physical brick painting based on it [the Hervé Léger advert], called *Soldier Sailor* (2013). It's something that I've used throughout my career as an artist, although there was a period where I stopped painting for about 10 years. So, it was quite strange when I came back to these same figures and repainted them. It was about not really wanting to look for another version of them. I had the version that I needed, and I could keep using it. I was also slightly ambivalent towards them because they're quite a particular depiction of the female, so I was slightly worried about that. I was also aware of the various dialogues around that. But I chose simply to override it. I think there's a strange uncanniness to them. The ones that I've chosen are never engaged with either their own situation, in the plane of the advert, or the viewer. Advertising often attempts to directly engage and make contact with the viewer. In both of these instances [*Golf* and *Soldier Sailor*], the figures are almost aloof from that in a way, and I found the intriguing.

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AG: Despite the fact that these figures are distant and disengaged, they must somehow feel quite personal to you, as you have used them at different points of your career?

CT: Yes, they do. When I look back, I think what I did to these figures was quite daring; they were a lot more muted back then than the way I've used them since. I suppose I realised that I just didn't need to find another version of those figures. There was a David Gandy [a male model] one, *Aggregate Man* (2015), that I've used before and that was to represent the male version of this kind of ridiculous human presence.

AG: In that same Chisenhale show, you had a work sprayed with industrial line-marking paint that listed all the churches within the square mile of the City of London. You've used the same medium for another work in your current show. What are they about?

CT: They are actually both the same work. I looked into making just tapestries; handmade tapestries that allowed you to make new versions of paintings or new versions of old paintings. Then I realised that was what I was going to do after the material was made. It's quite incredible the way they're made by the weavers. Going back to the question, it's exactly the same painting, but I did update it. The blue writing represents all the new tall buildings in that square mile, too. So these are buildings that are all wedged in between these churches. I always saw churches as these kinds of rebellious spaces that were untouchable. They were empty and had sort of lost their function.

I wanted to create a map of the City, but without literally drawing a map, and that was a way of doing it. I also always wanted to make word paintings and that fused those two things together. It's topographical, in a way.

AG: You usually work directly on to unprimed linen. Is that still the case with these woven works?

CT: These are actually made of cotton and fireproof acrylic [laughs]. I'm not sure why, but that's just the material that the weavers use. The pattern along the side of the canvas is the exposed woven parts. You can see four different colours and I chose to use as little colour as possible because I wanted the canvas to be light. This is so I could stretch the canvas out, just like a piece of linen. Therefore, it didn't become like a big voluminous structure. I was amazed at how well the weavers could do it. I could stretch it on a stretcher bar and it was just the background to make a painting. And then I wasn't sure how much I was going to paint on them. When I came face-to-face with these things, I had to negotiate that. With the bars [along the side of the canvas], I thought, should I cover them up? Because there was a certain amount of illusion going on. When I saw them, I was amazed at how deceptive some of them were. I knew they weren't paintings, but there were painterly elements to them with varying textures across the surface. It's really quite incredible how they're made. Anyway, I saw these bars and thought that they sort of gave the game away. But then I thought, no, that's what they are.

AG: Going back to when you first received these woven paintings from the weavers in Brussels and Suffolk, did you know how you were going to approach the painting that was to go on top of them? Had you already planned it out specifically?

CT: I had a vague idea for some, yes.

AG: It must be a fairly anxious experience?

CT: Well, it was, but I guess I had been working on this for such a long time that it didn't feel quite like that: they're large, so it took a while to get them inside my studio; negotiating how to do them; making alterations. I knew I had to treat them as though they were any old surface or piece of linen that I usually stretch, something not too unfamiliar. It was a matter of getting used to that idea. It's the same with the majority of my work, as I don't really do any

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preparatory work. I work instinctively when painting. There's nothing that I test out, so to speak. It has to happen in the moment when it comes to my painting. It's a sort of standoff – how am I going to deal with this?

AG: Your painting Arthur Kennedy (2012), an incredibly beautiful impression of man-made structures juxtaposed against a whirling bed of clouds in the sky, was added to the Tate collection the year it was created. What do you feel it was about this piece in particular that resonated with the Tate curators, and at that moment in time?

CT: I'm not sure. I think that the body of work that I made with that painting was quite interesting, in the sense that I had gone to New York for a few months and got a studio out there. I don't particularly like working within a structure, like on a residency. I wanted to test myself to see if I could make works somewhere else, basically. So I went and got a studio and made work in a very short space of time. I made about eight paintings.

I'm still not sure, though. Maybe it embodied certain aspects of the work that I had made previously, and it was a very clear representation of that because it was a structure. There was a lightness to it at the same time as it having a fairly industrial structure. It wasn't from here, either; it was from somewhere else. But, ultimately, I don't know. I've wondered that myself.

AG: Perhaps a good summation of your work?

CT: Yes, maybe, at that moment. It didn't say everything that I had done, but it had many elements, such as the industrial elements, and also maybe this lightness to it.

AG: These industrial elements are consistently referred to in your work, with depictions of fencing and brick walls. With these particular examples, is it a case of attempting to shift spatial boundaries through presenting materials usually used to create separation while directly commenting on the man-made structures? Or, is it to be read more as a means of using a repetitive pattern akin to the tartan print that you also use?

CT: It's certainly about territory. But with regards to the depictions of bricks, it's something that keeps coming back for various reasons. When I started painting again, I began by painting volcanoes, more especially the cross-sections of volcanoes. But the brick, for me, represents this perfect natural substance that man turns into another form to make other things. I'm just intrigued by the perfection of that, the coming together of two completely opposite things. Also, I just enjoyed painting them. It's about the only thing I did methodically in the work. I would just be filling in bricks!

But, yes, they're to do with territory. I also built [painted] the people out of the bricks, like in Hamburger Helper (2016), and it was a shortcut to something that was already built. You know what a brick is, you know what it does. So I just used it as a shortcut to represent all of those things really, with some appearing more obvious than others.

AG: This show is split between both spaces at Thomas Dane Gallery (London) and in each space you have included a very pleasant cartoon-like, rosy-cheeked face character in your works Enlisted Wives Club (2016) and Rose Pouchong (2016). Could you discuss the ideas behind them? Do they provide a sort of comic relief from the more socio-political narratives elsewhere in the show?

CT: Again, as with the "brick people" [in Hamburger Helper, for example], it's about how do you have this human presence in the work? I'd been toying with the idea of making, well, portraits. I've avoided it for a while. The ones in the Chisenhale show were lateral portraits and these in a way are, too. I don't know, I guess I just made it! I was just having fun in the studio. I was actually going to make a completely different show, if I'm being honest, and suddenly I went off in another direction. That was bothering me at the time, as I'd made loads of these funny little paintings.

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They were from some original drawings I'd done years ago. I just know that I'm going to have to do more with it. I've already started making a portrait with it.

In regards to this exhibition, I wanted something between the spaces. I wanted some sort of humour because these paintings are quite heavy in a way. They're very historical and reflect stuff that is still going on now. It could have just been a person in these places; it could be anyone you know. Next, it will be a wife for the enlisted wives' club [laughs].

AG: You began your career as a painter, then stopped for a few years, during which time you ran a gallery with a friend. Then you stopped being a gallerist and began to paint again. How was the transition from gallerist to artist, and does an awareness of that side of the art world inform your approach?

CT: I gave up painting as soon as I left college. It was a while before I even started helping run the gallery, which I did for about three years. Although I really enjoyed my time doing it, I still felt as though I was on the wrong side. I felt I was kidding myself. Secretly, I knew I wanted to paint, I just didn't know how. When I was at college, it was incredibly unfashionable to make paintings and, for me, it was quite a revelation to start painting, as I was thinking about other things. So that was quite a revelation in the sense that painting wasn't really acceptable. Going back to it all those years later certainly felt right, but it was very difficult.

The gallery experience was useful in the sense that it helped to clarify that I didn't want to be doing it and that I wanted to make work. It taught me that I didn't need to worry so much and that my concerns during college didn't matter. You just do it or you don't, which in itself was very hard because you get a studio and give up a really good job. Everyone thought I was mad because they saw me doing a certain job and fulfilling a role in the industry. It was very difficult to convince people at the beginning. I think I purposefully kept myself to myself. I got a studio and got on with it.

AG: I was going to say, in order to make the transition, did you completely detach yourself from the industry?

CT: Yes, I did. I also didn't get another proper job because I realised that I hadn't made art for 10 years, so I got very anxious that I'd wasted all this time. I really wanted to get on and do the work. And so I quickly got into debt!

AG: My final question was going to be 'What's next?' but I feel you may have answered it [I point towards the cartoonish face depicted in Rose Pouchong] ...

CT: It might be! I'm sort of teasing it out bit by bit. I'm always surprised by what you can end up making because you can mull over things for years and sometimes they appear immediately, sometimes they appear five years later. You can't really control what happens. I think very much in the context of your own work, you're aware of what you have done and what feels naturally right to try out next. I think these things just come when you're ready; you can't force it. So, we'll see, I guess. I thought this show was going to be a completely different one from what it eventually became. I keep thinking I'll attempt film or sculpture, but, then again, there's just so much left to do and attempt with painting that I feel I haven't done yet.

Caragh Thuring is showing at Thomas Dane Gallery, London, until 21 January 2017.

<http://www.studiointernational.com/index.php/caragh-thuring-interview>