

James Cousins

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Now, more than ever before, our perception of the world is filtered through technology, especially television and the internet. Much of our experience comes via a flat screen. To quote the character Brian O'Blivion from the 1983 sci-fi movie *Videodrome*: "The battle for the mind will be fought in the video arena: the *Videodrome*. The television screen is the retina of the mind's eye. Therefore, the television screen is part of the physical structure of the brain. Therefore, whatever appears on the television screen emerges as raw experience for those who watch it. Therefore, television is reality, and reality is less than television". Ditto the internet.

James Cousins seeks to make his paintings "part of the physical structure of the brain". He starts from the deeply familiar genre of landscape painting, deliberately selecting the most banal examples that look like they come from mass media sources. These are overlaid with various visual filters which also seem familiar because they relate to current technology, such as Photoshop effects, digital pixellation, or distorted video resolution.

This joining of oil painting, a traditional pre-industrial medium, with up-to-the-minute technology is a deliberate strategy on the part of Cousins, who believes that painting needs to engage with contemporary culture to remain relevant. As someone who loves to paint, his strategy can also be seen (in his own words) as a "justification to get paint onto canvas". In his strategic approach to painting, Cousins is very much influenced by German painter, Gerhard Richter.

Richter is one of the most important artists of the post-World War II period. His work sets up a tension between representational painting's illusion of reality and the actual process of painting. Richter's paintings often refer to themes developed by French philosophers Jacques Lacan and Jean Baudrillard, whose writings have challenged many artists (including Cousins) since the 1980s. Their work puts forward the notion that reality exists only as a construction of language, culture and the imagination.

Lacan, who was also a psychoanalyst, went so far as to say that reality is impossible to grasp definitively because it is continually being distorted by language, and by the unconscious workings of our minds.

For him, every construction of reality is a distortion. Images, ideas and ultimately meanings can never be reliable or fixed. Similarly, Baudrillard (whose ideas influenced *The Matrix*

movies) believes that reality is obscured by a "forest of signs" and symbols we call culture. He coined the term 'hyper reality' to describe the matrix of media images and simulacra that we inhabit. Simulacra are meticulous simulations of the real that have been emptied of their original meaning. Baudrillard gave Disneyland and Las Vegas as examples of simulacra.

And so, in *The Matrix*, Morpheus says: "Unfortunately, no one can be told what the matrix is. You have to see it for yourself". As a painter, Richter represented this paradox by disrupting his otherwise immaculate Photo-Realist images with a soft blur (the artist literally wipes the wet paint) that reminds the viewer that they are looking at a painting (a construction) as well as at an image. Cousins achieves similar effects with his blurs and digital screens. In both cases the subject of the painting is distanced. A space opens up between viewer and image and a question is interposed. Is this a literal image of a screen, or an image of the screen as a membrane between us and the world? What is reality?

Andrew Paul Wood

Galleries and museums:

www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz

www.govettbrewster.com

www.gowlangsfordgallery.co.nz

www.64zero3.com

Web search:

Jean Baudrillard

Jacques Lacan

Gerhard Richter

The Matrix

