

# In Conversation with Ingvild and Stephan Goetz

Ingvild Goetz has been collecting art for 40 years and organises a rigorous programme of international exhibitions and publications at Sammlung Goetz, Munich, a museum dedicated to sharing her impressive collection of contemporary art with the public. Stephan Goetz has been collecting art for 4 years and specialises in Chinese art. As part of an ongoing dialogue, Ingvild and Stephan met with the artist in his London studio to discuss the works nearing completion for his forthcoming show at Stuart Shave/ Modern Art, London.

**Ingvild:** The main image in 'The Dead' (2005), what looks like a collection of sick or unhappy vegetables on a tabletop, is even more precise than the other ones in this group of works, because in the other ones you always get lost in the many details around the main image. The background image now seems more concrete, more dominant. **Nigel:** It's the first one that's been pared down to something close to a straight image. There's a clarity between background and foreground that the others don't have. This vegetable still life seems to say in the most direct way what the others say in a more complicated way.



The Dead, 2005  
Oil on canvas  
182x274cm

I: mean it's a step, I don't know if it'll continue like this, but it's a step in a more concrete direction.

But the clarity also emphasises this thing about stupidity and sophistication, or a kind of conversation between the two, which has become significant in this group of paintings. People identify sophistication or the intelligence in the work when things are well painted, or so-called well painted. People start to see it as the 'mind' of the picture

in a way - it's the tone of voice, the articulation of the picture, and in my paintings, which have this high production, you get the assumption of gravitas that goes with it. It's always been there, but you know, it's something I've always wanted to counter with something else, always wanted to confuse with something else. Finding a really good image to react with or against it instead of displaying it as a vanity exercise in painting and detail. It becomes like a conversation between really stupid things and clever things then, which sort of collapses the two and you can't tell which is which.

Something banal like vegetables on a table is a good way in, no matter how you deform them. The pumpkins and things are quite relaxing; you feel like you know what you're dealing with.

**Stepha:** Yes, exactly, it has all the connotations that a pumpkin has, from the natural to the meaning of horror, or whatever. But you still know what that is - a pumpkin is a pumpkin.

**Nigel:** Yes exactly, we have a shared understanding of it. We have its straightforwardness in common.

**S:** Right, we share it.

**N:** We share it as a social thing. So we connect with it and in fact when people come in here they tend to react to that painting very warmly, as though, well that's my way in because I know what that is, but then hopefully it becomes something that you don't know once you've seen it with that painting or this painting.

**S:** That gets to an interesting question about all of your imagery, which is the question of reference. All of your paintings are not abstract, they make reference to specific things, some of which you change so that they are not exact objects any more. So the question is what role do these references to the exact world play in what you do, or what's the role of exact things in a painting of yours - things that I know, what's the role of those? Because some of your landscapes I don't know, I cannot know because they are sometimes bizarre or kind of abstract. But what is the role, all of a sudden, of a pair of glasses or a fruit or something, or even the heads?

**N:** I think in a way this group of works position that as the main point. Paintings like 'Thinking' (2004-05), the one with the big brain, have a lot to do with mundane things in the general environment of the studio and of the world at large. Like some of these things in 'Thinking' are almost like paraphernalia from inside this studio, like books here and there, strange stuff like animal skulls and things that I've always had, like collections of natural history objects, skulls, teeth, insects in cases, light bulbs dangling from string like in a Philip Guston studio painting. There's a bottle of wine on its side, there's a huge book with blank pages, there's a bowl of fruit that's just rotting through - in some ways it looks like a typical studio shot. I wear glasses to paint and one of the pairs is broken, so that's gone in because it captures the feeling of this kind of intense intimate working process - and the cracked glass is also tinted with a kind of melodramatic pain. The painting has that feeling of the intimacy of the kind of objects around me when I'm making the work. So I always feel that this painting is a studio, but the studio is around the landscape rather than the other way round. You know what I mean, like it's in reverse, the landscape is the smaller thing, the studio the bigger thing.



Thinking, 2004–2005  
Oil on canvas  
220x370cm

**S:** Right, so the super theme is the studio and it galvanises into an imaginative landscape.

**N:** Yeah, so it talks about how it actually feels to do the work maybe, when the studio actually inflates in your head, becomes this sort of alternate consciousness that filters out actually more normally macroscopic things like land mass and geology and things.

**S:** So you think in a sense that in this painting you change the issue of dimension - landscape is kind of small, studio objects are large.

**N:** Yes and the brain is the largest thing, which is kind of green and diseased looking and somehow polluted.

**I:** But then are your pieces composed by just adding and adding as you go along? I mean in your mind is there already this painting as a complete image that just needs executing, or do you find it by adding one piece after the other because you change your mind as you go, like collecting objects in real life?

**N:** It's a combination. There's something in my mind already, what I call the global picture, like the biggest object in an image. So this painting was always having a huge brain in it, from the second it dropped into my mind as an idea. But other things have been added as recently as yesterday, like some of the smaller brains, or the concrete blocks there, they've been added this week just because it needed it. Some things like the global things, the total personality of the painting if you like, are always there from the start, like the yellow sun in this one ('Morning is Broken' 2004).

**I:** Or the landscape or whatever.

**N:** Yes. For example the snow in all these works evolved as a formal solution to the problem of how to keep the eye working around the picture. You know, there's a way in which the landscape in these big paintings sort of comes to the middle ground and then requires a reemphasis or a reconnection with the foreground action, because

these are much deeper paintings than my older ones and deeper spaces can go slack if you don't keep them intense throughout. So once you get to the middle ground, you need a re-articulation to remain interesting. The thing to avoid is a kind of dwindling vista, like a Claude Lorrain, because in my work that presents the viewer with too much free contemplation space and associations of romance and reverie. So the snow came in as a way of directing the eye around the painting, so you've suddenly got this flash of snow across the front, pointing up to there and then pointing back there and then pointing back to here. So in a way it's very traditional allegorical landscape stuff, a kind of classical European landscape painting approach, like Kaspar David Friedrich, or more Poussin. They both used those kinds of things to get you to look around the picture properly and with intensity, and to sort of move you from one area of interest to another.

S: A narrative technique then.

N: Yes, but I think in my case, I just make it very formal, like abstraction.

I: It's not so much narrative, its adding visual pieces.

N: Yes.

I: Because there is no narrative behind it.

N: Exactly. It's built like an abstract picture.

I: You just add elements yet there's no narrative stuck in your mind?

N: Yes it's a bit like Francis Bacon. He painted so-called portraits, but the distortion is about saying, well, your legs look better over there, so I'll stretch them across. It doesn't matter if it doesn't look like a person any more, or if it turns into an animal, it doesn't really matter as long as formally the thing has a rhythm that is satisfying to the artist. Painting is the system that counts, not sentimentality or fidelity to appearances, and that really appeals to me. In a way, things go that way for me too. Its like, I need something pale in colour here because it rhymes very well with that bit there, so why not just drag the pale thing across and it turns out to be snow, because this is a highly realised image and everything is tending towards the pictorial. Likewise a large square solid turns out to be a cement block. Its like abstract shapes turn out to be pictorial things through a realism that accumulates over time.

But to go back to the role of the recognisable stuff, I think that they use their familiarity as a point of departure. With the sad vegetables, it starts with a sort of innocence which has gradually been made up into this grown up vocabulary. So the start is, say, children's pictures of fruit and things, smiling, which you see all the time in kids' books and advertising. In my case, those sorts of images have suddenly grown up into somehow traumatised, addictive adult personalities in my paintings. You know they've got lives, they've got vices and feelings and they're tired and they're overworked or something. You know they've become plugged into the adult world in some way. They're kind of damaged by it.

I sort of feel that combination of simplicity and worldweariness has a certain 'flavour'; it has a moronic and rather hysterical flavour that I want to increase. It just seems to have a very good dialogue with the seriousness of the other things that look like they're

from very classical paintings - stones, lawns and pathways and things. It's almost like these familiar things have been twisted to say that things aren't all that good, this isn't an Arcadian space.

**S:** So with the smoking and screaming fruits you kind of attach states of mind to trivial things to question the serious parts?

**N:** Exactly, yes exactly that. To start the process of questioning what it is you're looking at, or what intentions are at work, because you can take something very simple like that, like a pumpkin and turn it into, I wouldn't say my own image, but something like my own image, or a new image. Then you don't know where you are anymore.

**S:** You want that?

**N:** I think if you sort of personalise that, and say well actually you've not actually seen a pumpkin looking like this before, then you can begin to question the rest of it and you're sort of drawn into a way of thinking, which is maybe you can't really take any of this seriously, or as seriously as perhaps you think you should.

**S:** Or you prevent someone from feeling comfortable in the image of 'Pumpkin', because you know it's the notion of 'Pumpkin' that's been taken away from the usual Halloween reference.

**N:** Yes.

**S:** So you take away the comfort of 'I know this object', yet I have a new relationship to it because I now know the limitations of that object.

**N:** Yeah, it's a starting point, but also to anthropomorphise nature is a drive that is ancient, isn't it? You know the way in which people make nature something familiar, comfortable and human. Part of the colonising of the natural world is somehow evident in the pumpkin thing, apart from the pagan idea. I mean a pumpkin lantern is really a skull. Anyway, it's about that very insipid desire to make everything human, so someone, not necessarily me, has come along in the painting 'The Dead' (2005), and made a sort of bundle of vegetables into people. It's not very mentally rigorous, it's sort of naive, but what they've done is they've projected these deeper feelings, this pain onto them. So you start to wonder what that agency is. Someone in the world of the painting has wanted the vegetables to be human, but also wanted them to be in pain.

**I:** What someone?

**N:** I say that because the background image is always secondary in the painting. What I mean by secondary is that I've painted somebody else's painting. You know - graffiti by others on the wall.

**I:** This is the question I wanted to come to. So the vegetables in 'The Dead' (2005) are graffiti?

**N:** Yes, the vegetables are like a mural painting behind the landscape.

**I:** Ah, OK.

**N:** Like all of these images, like the sun and smoking banana and things, they are

always a mural or graffiti, on a surface, so it's a secondary representation. I'm painting it because someone else has painted it. There's always that doubling up of the authorship.

I: So you don't want to be close to the painting's origin? I mean you don't want the usual directness between painter and painting? You want to complicate it?

N: Yes, it's my painting put through another level of representation. Of course it's me, but then it's also a sort of alternate me as well, an alternate author voice in the picture who's doing these things. Painting the grass and the snow and the stones is very primary, because I'm actually rendering a physical material place in this very earnest and respectful way. But then this 'agency' in the painting is going around adding this fruit and veg and things like that in a secondary, destructive way. So there are these two ideas of nature, one that is very simplistic, supposedly, and the other that's supposedly very sophisticated - based on the historical achievements of high culture etc. Gradually I hope it turns the other way round and actually the rendering of stones and rocks starts to seem asinine and pointless and the vegetables become more critical and cerebral.

S: The simplistic becomes the biggest complexity.

N: Yeah, the thing that you took to be simplistic actually turns out to be the most pictorially, historically and conceptually sophisticated thing. It just doesn't look like that right away.

S: I Right

N: And that's what I love, that's what I'm addicted to. In a way the idea that you can play with notions of sophistication and familiarity, to actually reverse the polarities of familiar images, because it all comes down to articulation. If you articulate familiar things in unfamiliar ways and vice versa, then the brain works harder and that's probably a good thing.

S: It's about perception, or the questioning of perception.

N: Yes, in a way.

S: Then it becomes an endless flow, circular.

N: Hopefully, and in a way, the more supposedly stupid the images, the more velocity the circle has, because you're pushing the poles further apart and asking the viewer for a bigger leap of faith. I mean, in the older paintings, where I used skulls and lightening, it's already in the realms of the very serious tradition of the history of art, even if it looks like a record cover or something. Like a Salvatore Rosa, or general gothic imagery and vanitas painting and all that. But now I think there's a sort of giddiness to it, because the obscure things are much stranger. Finding out that stupid things like sobbing courgettes are in fact sophisticated is intoxicating, I think. They are like Disney gone wrong or something. They take the core banality of the lightening and skulls to another level downwards, so they have the aesthetic feel of a mural on the side of a school building. They aim straight for the obvious and exhausted the way that community art does. We've all seen those strange paintings on the walls of nurseries and farm buildings and things, where there's a combination of cliches and weird

inexplicable decisions. There's one near my studio - a typical cheerful park scene, except there's a child carrying a bunch of balloons with one oversized murky black one amongst them. It's the fact that it's the only dingy thing there, amongst all this high colour. But it's also much bigger than the others. It looks like it's been added at the last minute, from a mixture of all the other colours, at the end of the painting session. It must mean something, because it breaks the syntax of the rest of it, it's a different kind of decision, almost mischievous, done to annoy the supervisor of the project. But then reading it in terms of my images, if the bright colourful scene is cheerful, and the balloons buoyant and happy, then this balloon must logically be miserable or evil. But it's more likely to be a random decision, all the more strange for its pointlessness. So it's that kind of feeling I'm after with the graffiti, but then forced into a conversation with the history of 20th century painting.

**I:** Why do you want detailed painting infesting these simpler images done, as you say, by someone else? You have it in all of your paintings. Why do you want to detach it from you as an author? It seems to me that it cannot be detached from the original painter.

**N:** It's a complicated thing. I like the fact that you cannot detach from authorship ultimately; it's part of the point of doing it. But I think once you play the sort of game of pictorial representation, i.e. the business of putting things in space and having a convincing logic to the organisation of the space, then it becomes quite easy to then take that further and say well actually it doesn't stop there. To me that's what urban spaces are like. Here in London you don't just paint a wall white and that's the end of it, often someone comes along and paints onto it and changes it, then someone adds and subtracts from that arrangement and so it goes on. Urban surfaces around this studio for instance are always changing with information. And alongside this, nature is making its own contribution - framing it, eroding it, infiltrating it. My idea is in a very banal way to have that process in the work literally almost, but then also to say on a much more personal level, that the business of this happening is about a kind of duality or ambivalence in my feelings towards the work. It sort of reflects the very process of painting; the very process of decision-making is a kind of dubious one, and as a painter you are always constantly questioning it. What it does is it stacks up another problem, really, because not only are you questioning things like 'does that tree look like it's sitting in that space?' but also does it cast the right kind of shadow onto that painting of a pumpkin that someone has come and done on the wall behind it. So you've got all these layers of visual sense, the attraction of which is that you start to question, what is the desire to actually deface your own work, or is the defacing the actual work? Is that the actual expression? What is the expression in it?

And in a way my idea is always about expanding the terms of painting within the work, in that these paintings are theatrical allegories of the problems of the history of 20th century painting. It's not a material thing, but a visual and conceptual thing. They make a performance of the self-questioning and self-deprecating features of 20th century painting, playing it out in this thing that builds itself and defaces itself.

**S:** You talk about the total abstraction that happened in 20th century painting, which was about process, with no attachment anymore to extrinsic meaning or to reference or to the artist. You instead kind of go back into the physical world and you capsize that ten times to question your authorship. That is what Ingvild was questioning. Why do you reflect on your authorship? That is in reference to where painting is today after so

many things have happened, from direct authorship to pure process, and the need to be seen in the context of art history obviously.

**N:** That story is the reason why I do it. The idea of history in painting, in terms of its deconstruction in the 20th century, is a mess of ideologies. But what does it actually make? What sort of thing does it make? How is it of interest? It's always been, as far as I know, quite a singular thing. There are these different strands that try to claim a singular identity for painting at the expense of all the others. It can happen in aggressive ways, like through Greenbergian Modernism, or more conceptually passive but economically smart routes like the kind of free for all return to image painting witnessed in the 1980's, or in culturally constructive ways like surrealism and its relationship to psychoanalysis or the birth of psychoanalysis. These storylines divide and converge but usually say separate things about the painting of the time, separate from the last moment as well as the next one. This patchwork history is of course punctuated here and there with the periodical death of painting as well. Which is about those things at their end point changing into something else.

I like my painting to try in a way to speed through that, almost in a millisecond, on a microscopic level have a whole history, flickering, all the time in the work, where normally it may take many years to grow through one of these phases and change.

I think painting has come to the point, now, where it actually may take that multitemporality as its way of gathering meaning. And it's about going beyond reflecting the ever-present death of painting by having very wretchedly made canvases with misty images on them. Hopefully I can make paintings that have the whole history of painting, not as in pictures of each stage, but the whole history of the logic of painting. In other words, perhaps the logic is a continuous feature you can identify from the total history of painting. Why does painting always do this to itself, all the time, each time? That's what I'm trying to extract from the history of painting - is this birth and death and re birth of ideologies and anti-ideologies a description of what painting is in its nature? If it is, can you make a painting that explicitly acts like that all by itself?

**I:** That seems to come out of the question 'is it still possible to paint because everything has been done.' Yet if you look specifically at today, you see the sort of realistic painting which has been done several times in 150 years. Every 10, 20 years there is a renewal. I have this feeling it is already a copy of a copy, because the traditional roots of making a realistic painting have been completely different from what feeds this new stuff. There is no root to what made it necessary in the first place anymore. I have the feeling that this copying is where I stop to believe that painting still can exist. Then it is better to have a photograph or work with new techniques.

**N:** Yeah, I think that again, to me, it reminds me of the idea of abstraction. That you see an abstract painting and somehow it looks like the portrait of an abstract painting, it looks like a secondary representation anyway and I think that's how I interpret what you're saying, is that painting now can only look like a kind of copy of itself. It can never be 'genuine', because of this idea that you say about the roots. The original roots are gone, but its gone back to that site anyway. Because the original source of that thinking, which was the culture at that point, has been removed, you get this sort of portrait, a retrospective portrait of a time. You know to me it almost seems like, and this idea seems very prevalent around painting, that if you just look backwards to a certain point in time, then you are instantly making this critical point about the end of progress and the collapsing of linear history. It's like you say, oh well, if there's no



progress then anything can become critical. You could have flower arranging, oil painting and needlework or whatever you want, and in way a that is a great freedom. But I think that because of this situation, that you describe, because the roots are gone, you get this sort of secondary situation and you have to take some responsibility for that in the way you visualise your decision to do it. You know if you're just painting as if you're in 1955, what mechanism can you have not only to say, 'I know what I'm doing', but also 'I'm doing it for these reasons and these are the reasons it's an interesting thing today'. I think painting should try to have a panoptic view of its different moments, a 360- degree vista on the whole history of it. So you can take all the bits you want and mix it all together, and in way, my idea is that that's how you build in this secondary voice, which actually has an ongoing conversation with why on earth you are bothering to do it. Like why you've made this decision to pick up this coloured mud, smear it on a flat surface, and expect people to be interested in it. I think you have to say, these are the reasons why, and hopefully the pictures do that.

**S:** In that sense they bring together, as in the moment before death, they bring together all the experience of before. Everything that has been thought and realised comes together in this one moment, where there is concrete form, gesture and reflection and reflection and reflection. **N:** Yes, it's about saying that all of these things are painting's different personality states or something. It's a bit like if you say, oh that person's a miserable person because on that day they're in a bad mood. You know, if the next day you met them they might have cheered up. Things may have changed. Painting for me is the same kind of thing. It has these different elements. It might be that they're transformed into one personality, that to separate out the features of its time, of its history, is just to focus on a mood on one particular day. For me it's all about compressing it all into one person, one thing that just has different features, that come out here and there in various ways under different conditions, which is about the universality of painting. I think it's about a total painting, which on one day can feel more abstract and on another day can feel more pictorial, and it's also about visualising that as a sort of scale thing.

This is a slightly different point, but if you're looking at a square foot of a painting of mine like 'Thinking' (2004-05), you can think, oh yeah, this is a painting of a landscape, if you look at another square foot you say this is an abstract painting, another square foot, you say this is a cartoon. It depends on where your zone of interest is.

**S:** You constantly have the answer of a good Zen master. Which is, this is absolutely correct to describe this as a chair, but it is totally incorrect to say this is a chair. It is this and it is not that. Which means any form is and is not. Basically what you question is the dualism of things. That's what transformation is about, that you question the dualism of things.

**N:** Yes, this idea of duality has been a real fixation in my work for a long time. It started with a painting I did of Francis Bacon's studio, a while ago, in 1998, I think, where I had evacuated him and his actual paintings and just painted the smears on the wall around where he worked. Its like the thing had gone. The trace of the action was where the content was, and ever since that I've always been interested in where the content is in a painting, like how does it occupy its picturing faculties. Its picturing faculties are a kind of location of content, but what happens is they are actually pictures of the evacuation of content itself?

**S:** You then you wanted to bring back the role of concrete forms in relation to content?

**N:** Yeah, it is that, but the minute you've identified it, you've evacuated it. So these things are constantly jumping from being what they are and what they're not, because I'm interested in playing games with what you expect the thing to mean. On some level it has quite a straightforward story, but hopefully once you've identified that, it falls to pieces. You know, because of the things around it, which are questioning why it's there. That's why these aren't photo realistic still lifes of brains and skulls on a table. They're paintings of someone's painting of a brain and a skull on a wall, on a table, etc., etc. Sort of built up layers of contradiction and difficulty and duality.

You know those books in that painting there ('Thinking' 2004-05) seem to be sitting on that concrete block, but if you could walk around the concrete block, they'd be suspended in mid air. There's a kind of correspondence of thing to thing, a magic, a sort of magic of painting. Which is about saying this is a kind of fictional, optimum position, which doesn't really exist, except in the world of painting. So again, it 's the idea of painting being the total thinking space of the work.

Again like Bacon, that your desire as the maker of the painting is everything . You articulate where things are and that is the meaning. The formalism is the meaning.. The actual formal organisation is the meaning. It happens to be a portrait of George Dyer being sick in the toilet, but above and beyond that it's about how this has been articulated in the painting. And that was what I think is so critical about Bacon's contribution to the development of painting . His kind of modernism made painting formal and at the same time pictorial.

**S:** Yes, exactly. If you say that the pictorial is just the image, that is wrong. But at the same time if you say it is just the process of getting to an image, it is also wrong.

**N:** Yes.

**S:** Which instead of saying this is this, but it is not that, it's this plus this. You know it's process and it's form. But to describe it as either of the two is wrong.

**N:** And you don't necessarily have to grasp it, you just get involved in it. I know that sounds vague, but you just sort of get involved in it. I mean in a way, I try and make them as rich as possible or as diverse and complicated and in some ways as difficult as possible, so that the viewer can be included in the artist's point of view. In my case they can sustain themselves infinitely, with what's going on.

**S:** So there is a narrative to it. You lure someone into a narrative, but then you frustrate the narrative?

**N:** Maybe, it's just something that is constantly blocking itself to no resolution, otherwise someone could pick up the phone and say 'I get it, I've finally figured the picture out'. It's nothing to do with that at all and I think that's clear, but its maybe about a part of that process of evolving narrative content. A part of that kind of enterprise is present, but without the desire to get from A to B, A to Z, you know?

No one has ever come in and said, 'what's going on in this painting, what has happened? Has there been an apocalyptic disaster? Or a snowstorm?' Its very odd that. Although they're quite realistic paintings, no one has ever asked me what has happened in them, and I think that is what is fascinating about it - that you're actually in a realistic painting yet you are taken away from everyday considerations of realism,

that those realistic elements come to life in surprising ways.

**S:** But what's interesting about this is when you compare the paintings with one another. If you say 'Nightfall' (2005) is the eclipse of this next show, this painting with all the vegetables ('The Dead' 2005), because it's more concrete, could also be seen as a new beginning. It certainly is the closest to getting you into the danger of someone asking you, 'what is this about?' and expecting an answer. There's no chance of that in the others, no chance. The universe in them is so various. So you could be asked is this where we're going next, or are we just ahead of another snowstorm?



Nightfall, 2005  
Oil on canvas  
220x370cm

**N:** I see ...

**S:** Well here, you're the closest to the image world proper - it's a kind of dense but clear form of association.

**N:** Yeah, I think so, but sometimes I think it's important to try and bring some economy back in and say, lets do this with a couple of elements, like a mural picture and a landscape. How do they correspond in a simpler enterprise? Rather than the sort of wildness of the others, which is almost, as well as being unfathomable, is also unviewable in a way. It's not just about saying, look, these images don't add up to a single narrative, it's also about think that they generally support these seemingly new developments; they can actually be traced back through a series of images.

**S:** Right. So you would say, if there is any progress, then it's probably the progress of your way of thinking about them, but certainly not the forms that you use or imagery of what you do.

**N:** Yes.

**S:** They come and go.

**N:** Yeah, they come and go.

I: And then, is it just what's around you, or is it things that come up in your mind when you walk through the street, that you get focused on? Or do these forms come from other images, from a book, or the postcard or whatever? N: It's an interesting question because I never really know where they come from. I suppose that's not entirely true. I know where some of them come from. I mean the book here in 'Thinking' (2004-05), that came from a Dutch still life painting. But it's very difficult to know sometimes. I kind of get drawn to something and I don't know why. It's often a found image of something, like that little one over there ('Sore Eyes' 2004-05). It's basically a portrait of Van Gogh. It's been reversed and turned into his sort of graffiti pictogram. I don't know why I was interested in that, so I started to work with it and in a way, when I find an image, if I'm attracted to it, it goes straight into the painting, because that's how I think through it. I like the idea that painting is a bit like thinking. I don't think it is thinking. It's like a metaphor for thinking. So instead of this whole business of doing drawings and explaining myself to myself with them, prior to a picture, it goes straight in unmodified. That's where the thinking takes place. It gets painted, it doesn't get thought.



Sore Eyes, 2005  
Oil on canvas  
33.2x43.2cm

S: It's actual.

N: Yes, it sounds romantic but it gets lived through the paint. The paint lives it. That's how I figure it out.

S: The actual gesture of something comes and it's there, and you design it and design it and then somewhere it takes form.

N: Precisely. It gets straight through and that's where I feel the risk is. That's how I feel vulnerable with a painting. That there's not much quarantine. If I fancy it, it's in, and

then the painting thinks about it. It's the paintings job to think about it, not mine, because otherwise I'd be talking about it in the world, and I'd be involved with it in other ways, but if I don't know why I'm interested in it, it's in the painting.

**S:** Now we look at the other side of the coin, which is how do we get to the painting. No drawing process, no process towards certain imagery. Does it ever happen that after six months, you say this part of the painting is wrong, I have to redo it? Have you never redone it?

**N:** No, it never works like that, because by then that's a new painting.

**I:** You can do a new painting, but do you also have bad paintings where you say, I must destroy that. Or you overwork them instead?

**N:** There's enough destruction in the making of them. Again it's about scale. The entire thing never gets destroyed, because it's a by-product of many mini-destructions. Erasing and sanding off, even. Images get sanded off if they're no good, and changed, flipped round or erased. And these destructions on a micro scale enable the macro scale. So by the time it goes to the macro scale, there's an inevitability and a closure, a depth if you like, a finality which is not questionable. It's just that painting and then if there are questions, then they become questions that are taken up in a new picture.

**S:** Exactly, so that process and that gesture of that moment of painting, that painting is complete, so you cannot go back and re-interpret.

**N:** Yeah, because I think art making is about being two people. Obviously you're the spectator of yourself as a maker, but separately it's also about having intuition about when things end and when they begin, because all this is part of one continuum of feeling and thinking. I could say of this painting in progress, 'Oh, I've made a mistake, the sun shouldn't be yellow, it should be black'. Or you say, 'It's more important that I work out this new opinion in a new picture'. So it's about knowing exactly, really fine-tuning when one body of thought ends and another begins. You know where one statement ends or one enterprise or whatever you want to call it. About making these breaks, you know, really finessing the breaks, in a way, from one thing to the next, to allow the correspondence of things to really breathe, rather than a continuous revision to the point of extinction. It's like the idea that these pumpkins have been forming up over a period of two years, through two shows, the one at the Tate and the one at Andrea's (Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York).

**S:** Before, there were not many pumpkins or no pumpkins? **N:** There were none. It just went in. I thought it and it went in. I travelled a little bit in Illinois and saw a lot of pumpkins in the front gardens of people's homes, and was struck by the proliferation of them. It could have been that, but it could also have been that a blob of orange appeared in the left hand corner about 2cm square and it corresponded with these earlier experiences. But I don't know, I just know that I was drawn to it, but I don't know why, I still don't really know why. I mean I've started to figure it out on some level - it's a development of the skull image, or a revision of the skull from my earlier work. But I don't think that's all there is to it. I still don't know what it is.

**S:** Well, that's a highly culturally charged image, the skull, but you take it back as just a form.

**N:** Yeah, but it's also the fact that its nature and a pumpkin is nature and representation together, but in also carving the face out of it there's a violence too. OK it's not a particularly vivid kind of violence, but it's destruction, it's an inscription of a face, and loosely it's a human face. So it's an anthropomorphising of nature. The use of a knife, the insertion of a candle to give out light. So you have all these things projected. You have the cutting out of human features onto a natural form and the insertion of radiation. And then the face that's carved into it has a look, usually a menacing one, so it has a personality. But what happens if you extend that, say, but this time it's humiliated and it's sort of snarling, because it's also been burnt by something. Maybe the sun is making it feel inferior or that the other fruit and veg smoke and drink too much because they hate their job. It's like you're taking it further into the human, the world of human projection. So it's asking what is this business of anthropomorphising natural things? I'm saying go to the point where it's a kind of pollution of nature, that my natural forms are polluted with something like work, and therefore with something that brings my work into being. And that something is perhaps being in the studio a bit too long maybe, maybe you drank a little bit too much the night before, maybe the fumes are overcoming you, the fumes of the paint are overcoming you a bit too much and you're just generally a slightly polluted form. It's about maybe bringing the things closer to the representation of an artist or something. Maybe it's like Guston's hooded figures. Like he always said he didn't really know where they came from and they weren't clansmen particularly. They were just formal shapes that had this personality and I think my vegetables feel like that for me, they feel like they're ciphers for a polluted creative consciousness somehow.

**S:** Because you decompose it as an object, you decompose a pumpkin, at the same time you decompose the notion of what a pumpkin is typically, this menacing face, so you decompose meaning and the objectivity of that particular form.

**N:** Yeah, exactly, and I sort of want something of that flavour, where people identify with things like cartoon characters or animals. Once in a while you meet someone who collects models of basset hounds or bulldogs or something because they feel like it's them. They feel it reflects their character somehow, with its exaggerated visual features, like a bulldog with its sagging face. The sad expression, they feel it's like their soul in some way, and that idea of identification, of projecting your own character onto things, was a flavour that I wanted in the work. You know, what's that about? Maybe that is a kind of painting thinking, maybe that's what painters are always like.

**I:** You're not interested in the soul though, you're just interested in the form?

**N:** Yeah. I'm interested in it as a formal expression.

**I:** As a form? Are you interested also in the feeling of it, or not? In your painting you're just interested in the form. You find the object and the form is what fascinates you or also what is behind the form?

**N:** Yeah, its kind of both. If a form can carry so much meaning when it's in the world, can it take any more? What happens when I put it into the world of my pictures? Can it keep absorbing these things, can it keep absorbing new features, traits? Can a brain smoke a cigarette and start to take on a different kind of personality because it's in the world of my pictures? And it's that flexibility that I kind of look for, I think, unconsciously look for when I make an identification with an image, and in this show with some of the small paintings, there are some images which are derived from art

history. Like that one, that very small one is derived from Francis Bacon's painting of Van Gogh going to work. So it's my painting of Bacon's painting of Van Gogh going to do some painting. Then my painting is called, 'The Painter on His Way to Work' (2004-05). So there's this idea of the constant layering of this person endlessly trekking out to paint. In a way, this show is all about the daily business of painting. Not just all that historical stuff we were talking about before, but the personal thing too, in a new way, for me. The personal thing about being in the studio.

**S:** Also, in the context of what we discussed earlier, this time, with this painting, you are actually a very personalised author.

**N:** Yes, increasingly so.

**S:** So a very personalised author now? Because we talked about this before: do you want to be an author or not? You're still an author, someone who originates, very much so, even if you reflect.

**I:** Yes.

**S:** But you take a very marked position of someone who does and feels this.

**N:** Yeah, exactly, and that's quite a new thing for me, that these images are a lot more personal. This exhibition at Modern Art that's coming up, feels quite exposed for me, because the imagery is more intimate, although it's still very generalised. There's a lot of feeling in there, surprisingly. It's only recently dawned on me that these are reflections on more much more personal states. These aren't essays on semantics, though it can sound like that sometimes when I talk about the work, that it's just merely a kind of sterile undoing of image types, but it's not that, it's about identification too, on a personal level. Saying that these are paintings of painters, these are paintings of fruit that have been traumatised. There are exact decisions there. Maybe there's an identification with new situations in my own life, the pressures around making art and the new pressures of my life situation, having a young family and growing on that level too, and the work sort of growing alongside life concerns. And I think that that has become important too, perhaps since having children, it's perhaps more difficult to read books and go out and see exhibitions and drink and talk, things you always assumed were permanent fixtures and part of your identity. You become much more sort of close with your working practice because it's the only time when you're just on your own. And that can be both a good thing and a bad thing.

**S:** Exactly ...

**N:** And I think that is really reflected in the works. There's more a use of stand-ins for the artist's personality. The bottles of wine, books and light bulbs and foodstuffs, or the coloured-in teeth on the rhino skull ('Thinking, 2004-05), seem like the dabblings of a person who is having a conversation with himself, in way, as well as taking things to pieces for an audience.

**S:** Right and at the same time, they are obviously not just that. You expose yourself and your thought process and everything comes across.

**N:** Yeah, it's all available. Nothing is off limits. So if I've not been to bed the night before because my youngest has kept me awake, that may make me do a painting of

someone with bleeding eyes, or a Van Gogh with bleeding eyes ('Sore Eyes' 2004-05). But it isn't about me being awake all night, it's just I use that to engineer that image. The next minute I may use my experiences of where I live in London. I may see something in the street that may give me another image, or memories of travelling somewhere. It can come from anything and it's about opening up the work to whatever. It's about opening up the work to anything.

**S:** The painting is using this image bank and emotion bank, it just happens to be yours.

**N:** Yeah, yeah, exactly, exactly. It just happens to be me, my life.

**S:** So it's like today my image box gives me this and then you go maybe the next day to the other image, which gives this. Then you continue with the painting again and other images are coming up. So you are surprised by yourself, what kind of images you are adding in the painting, because they take a long, long, long time. I mean I don't know - how long does it take you to finish one painting?

**N:** It can take up to seven months, the longest is seven months.

**I:** So that means in seven months a lot happens in your life, and the tool box is very full, so that means you're composing part by part then.

**N:** Yeah.

**I:** And you're provided with, maybe, after two or three months, images which you never thought before? **S:** And if you come in to the studio in the morning, you see these kinds of various arenas of potential around you and then you step yourself into one of them?

**N:** Yeah, exactly, and although on the night before I say right, I'm going to come in and work on that in the morning, it never is like that. It goes the opposite way usually.

**S:** Yes, there are these platforms of potential and maybe you come in and all of a sudden, that expression that you have that day can only fit into that one. You have to go to that theatre.

**N:** Yeah, exactly.

**I:** But you stay with what you have done nevertheless? I mean it could be that you say 'Oh my god this idea was so stupid'. Do you over paint it sometimes, or do you just leave it because it was part of your toolbox?

**N:** I let it sit for a while; I let it sort of sweat it out in a way.

**I:** OK.

**N:** And then one day I may come in and identify with it again. Which has happened, you know. I can sort of bring something to the surface, if you like, and put it in the painting, and then the identification may stop very quickly, because I'll suddenly feel I don't know how to grow this. Because this business of just dropping things straight into the work, it puts you in this position of not knowing how to proceed, because you've got nothing to use on it. In a way, that's why they take so long. A lot of people think they take so long because they're highly detailed. The detail in a way is the easiest thing, because you're rendering and if you can paint, then you can paint detail.



**S:** Then you try to make progress in that area in the meantime?

**N:** Yeah, there are problems, of course. There are compositional problems and there are technical problems, like it doesn't look like this, that or the other, and it doesn't sit right, it doesn't look spatially correct. But they can be solved with just application, with hard work. But if you just suddenly painted Van Gogh's face with bleeding eyes, you really don't know what that is and you sometimes have to just let that sit there until you can identify with it and make the whole painting relate to it. It can't be forced, and hard work won't clarify it. Otherwise, they are just like putting stickers or transfers on to a painting. You know what I mean, like peeling off a label and putting it on, you know you can do that, but how do you get it to identify with the other parts of the painting? That's the difficult thing, that's the thing that takes a long time. It's how to compose and identify part to part, when you don't know what those things are anyway. You've got a marrow, or a cabbage smoking a cigarette, that you're trying to identify with a severed head or a snow-covered rock. And you're sensing a thrill and excitement about that correspondence, but you also want to tread carefully to make it convincing because you are aware that there's something quite ludicrous about it. The idea is that if you can pull it off and make it convincing, and convincing to me means intellectually provocative, then you've got a good challenge to offer people and art in general. And if you pull it off you've actually stepped yourself into a new place. A new place of conversation, and that's the thrill, that's what it's about. It's about using technical depiction, mastering if you like, to bring ludicrous things together in an intellectually provocative way.

People say, is the painting convincing or not. It usually means; is it well painted? Does it look like light is hitting that from the right or left-hand side, or whatever? Is the shadow density correct, and things like this. Convincing to me is about, have you maintained all the plates you're spinning, all the ludicrous conjunctions of language and imagery together in an intellectually provocative way? And the more dysfunctional and disjunctive and dislikeable those things are, the harder it is to bring them to the table in a convincing way.

**S:** Why exactly? Is it that the more you go into your kind of funny imagery box and the wilder that gets, the more complex the task of bringing it back together?

**N:** Yeah, but to me that's the challenge that I cannot help but approach, firstly for the sake of my own amusement and for the suspension of my own boredom, which is what this is all about. It has to amuse and involve me. You know, the bigger that challenge is, the more I'm addicted to it. The more I solve or cure the work, the more boring it is. That's why I hope that no two shows are the same. Each time I try and sort of lay down a different problem for myself, and a different problem for the audience to try to take seriously. I don't mean take them seriously in that they are serious, but again, just go through a process with them.

**S:** I remember one of the paintings, where you had this tree and all of a sudden you could see this sort of ram, like the face of a sheep.

**N:** Yeah, a goat. **S:** Yes, a goat or something. Was that something you have been seeing while you were painting? Were you driving towards it or was it popping up in the process?

**N:** That one comes from a painting I did of a skull, a human skull, looking out of the

forest which you've seen I think ('Silva Morosa' 2003). The goat one is going to be a variation on that.



Silva Morosa, 2002–2003  
Oil on canvas  
183x244cm

S: So it was targeted in some ways.

N: Yeah, it's like, well, let's try it again with the goat.

S: Right.

N: A bit like in 'Morning is Broken' (2004); that has a sun rising, but it could have been a pumpkin rising - it didn't matter. That led to the idea of trying it with a brain ('Thinking' 2004-05). There is a way in which there are small-scale leaps and there are quantum leaps as well. There are changes that are trodden very carefully and methodically and there are other things that are reckless and random. Like the sudden throwing in of Van Gogh or a pumpkin. Almost like to test it. The skull came as a sort of solution. It was never going to be there, it was a very instinctive thing to do, because the painting with complete foliage suddenly lacked something in the middle and it kind of grew out of that. A formal thing that actually garnered all these kinds of thought around it and became a kind of expressive, motivational picture. Motivational is the wrong word, actually it summarised a lot of my endeavours up to that point. So although I didn't really know what I was doing when I did it, when I reflected on it, it actually seemed to sum up what a lot of work had been leading towards in my ideas about nature and pathology. It described pathology as an expression of a natural function, or as natural pictorial functioning. But at the time it was a formal solution. So it comes back to this idea that the formal things in the organisation of a painting are like painting's DNA, or character.

S: So that's an interesting connection. You've taken probably one of the most charged

images in art history, which is the skull - Memento Mori, and all that, and then pushed at the centre of the skull and reached the brain.

**N:** Like keyhole surgery?

**S:** You use them together - the skull and the brain.

**N:** I've never really thought of it like that. I suppose the head thing is predominant anyway. The severed heads, the skulls and the brains, it's like the head is the sort of focus, the apex of all the action. It's a significant thing I think. And I think that's what the pumpkins are really, they're heads above all. Maybe that's what it is, they're faces, not skulls. Maybe if my paintings are heads then they have a pumpkin face, a human skull and a cartoon brain.

**I:** I want to turn to the landscape area, it's always quite barren. Is that something you are working on because you have seen it somewhere, or because it's how you feel about landscape generally, or is it just because you think it fits perfectly in this kind of image?

**N:** The ultimate reason is because it fits perfectly in a painting.

**I:** But it's always a similar landscape. It's always similar to this, so you're somehow attached to this sort of landscape?

**N:** Yeah, it's the sort of landscape with the most potential or something. You know, I think that's what it might be, it's that the land is always waiting for something to happen. It's like an entropic flat-line and it's ready for new growth or something. It has inertia; to me, it is asking to be filled up with things. It makes no statement of its own, which is important. It waits for statements to be made about it - it has nothing to say about landscape narratives but it will accept any that may be attached to it. Which has a kind of realism, in a way. Even the most majestic and awe-inspiring landscapes seem to have this indifference when experienced for real, rather than all the grandeur they get heaped on them in painting, film and classical music. It just kind of sits there, somehow, and it's the indifference of it all that's threatening. My landscapes are very passive in that way too, which I think works nicely with the active or maybe even aggressive I've felt of some of the details. It's also like a frontier, a kind of frontier between one thing and another. That's another reason why they're desolate, it's like a cultural frontier between the edge of one civilisation and the beginning of another, the horizon is like a border between realities. So one side of the frontier is like a natural world and the other side is the beginning of another version of this. So there's a kind of barren quality at the end of one world and the beginning of another. So there everything can change, everything is ripe for reinvention.

**S:** So that's where you can also operate in this whole space of entropy and negentropy?

**N:** Yeah, exactly, on one level, on a sort of global level of the landscape it's highly entropic, there's very little difference between things. There's a sort of reduction of variations, but on...

**S:** It's highly organised on another level.

**N:** Yes on another level it's highly organised and there's high negentropy. If you move in on the zones of detail and on the graffiti, there's high negentropy, big leaps between

the identity of one thing and the next. The paintings propose an entropic totality, when you see them from a distance. There's not much difference, although that's less true about the latest works that have these big shapes visible from a distance. But compared to close up, it seems much simpler, less structurally complicated and therefore higher in entropy. These paintings don't make many concrete assertions against the world around them; they're big, pale and simplified. But locally they do, locally there's negentropy and information with heads, monkeys, bones and everything. These little things are full of difference and information. The paintings have a mobility between these states. They make you go across the room to change from one state of viewing to the other. So we go in and find something in there, like go very close up, zoom in and out, and find there's a still life on top of this block which you couldn't see from a distance, the bananas and things painted in a very naturalistic way ('Morning is Broken' 2004). These little sections, down to about 10cm square, can be framed by the viewer as paintings in themselves.

I: Yeah , you zoom in and out.

N: And you're not really aware of the rest of it when you're examining that.

S: That's when you get to this entropic and negentropic permanent dialogue.

N: Yeah. It becomes a temporal thing. There's a time lapse between the states of viewing.

S: That's probably why in our discussion, we never need to refer to the question of the end of painting in the context of time-based media, of photography and film and if can you still paint etc, because it's not about that. What you're doing could also probably be expressed in photography and film but it doesn't matter really, because that process that you describe is outside of the question of whether there is legitimacy to painting still. It has nothing to do with that.

N: Exactly and again it goes back to the idea of the nature of the character of painting, because to me it's a function of the world at large anyway. It's not about withdrawing painting to a sovereign site, like the garret and easel, where somebody expresses themselves through great pain and intensity. It's about connecting painting to a wider world of visual action, of information. Like if you're looking at a greenhouse from a long way away, you can't discern the plants that are inside it from there. You can see the shape of the building containing a greenish material, but you can't determine the plants yet. But as you move in on it the information increases, the negative entropy increases as you examine the plants close up and find variation in the greenish material. Then you might see more detail like an insect on a leaf, and you see that there's a box of mushrooms over here, there's something happening inside, all these other things happening, on a microscopic level and a sub atomic level and so on. These paintings are about making that very literal, and also saying that once you use that as a principal of painting, then you can actually use that as a model for the history of painting too, and look at the whole as something dead, one massive death, one massive redundancy, in which there are micro pockets of high information and high interest. Because once you take the model of multiple temporalities and multiple viewpoints on a system, then absolute categories like complete redundancy become mere stages in a process that spirals inward. And these can of course be reversed by a change in the position of observation. Like a dead sparrow in the street may seem to hold a fixed state to a standing observer, but close up we know it to be swarming with

microscopic action, all the tiny creatures busy dealing with the raw material. Why not actually construct an actual painting like that, rather than, say, take one part of it and paint in that style. Lets take all of it at all levels. Like some sort of Russian Doll, which is growing out from a square centimetre to a 13ft x 7ft wall.

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