

The Autopsy of Michael Jackson — Nigel Cooke

What's more eerie – the King of Pop, the great Michael Jackson, depicted as a frog-like and somewhat unglamorous little corpse on the slab, his stage costume affectionately folded nearby, complete with twinkly glove and trademark white socks? Or the fact that the painting- 'The Autopsy of Michael Jackson' (2005), by New York painter Dana Schutz - was made four years before the star's untimely death in 2009? At the time it was painted, much of the work's power rested on what then seemed like a far-fetched prospect: the event happening for real - Jackson ultimately dethroned, vulnerable and abjectly factual as merely another body to be cut up and scrutinized. In Schutz's quasi-futuristic nightmare world, where even the increasingly dehumanized Michael Jackson – of all people – was dead, the scene became almost fantastical, a premonition of some future media-fuelled barbarism and contempt, a universal symbol of voyeuristic inhumanities yet to come. Now, in light of what we all know happened, the painting has brought this reading forward, its criticisms leveled squarely at the here and now. And with that, this painting has had its relationship with the world radically altered.

I met the artist this year in her resident New York just as the painting was being considered for Schutz's exhibition 'Dana Schutz: If the Face had Wheels' at the Neuberger Museum, Purchase, New York. Curious at the prospect of the work re-emerging in a post-Jackson world, Schutz began to fill me in on her feelings about a painting that, like an unwanted prophecy, had strangely 'come true' since it was painted. In the email exchanges that followed, I tried to work out how her conception of the nature of painting negotiated these changing realities.

"In the end I did decide to show the Michael Jackson work", Schutz explained. "It's a painting that I have always really liked and felt that it should be included in the exhibition, but my fear was that it had all of a sudden become a 'realist' painting, too flatly what it is as an event, or all about a time past, the date in which it was painted. Or just straight up too depressing...although it was intense painting it, even in 2005". It struck me how rare it was to think of painting today as being so contingent on affairs in the world at large, to have its identity connected explicitly to actual events. The implied anachronism of what the artist described as the work's realism felt more like a throwback to painting's dependence on court or church patronage, to history painting or the pre-modern portrait commissions of the great and the good. That is, when paintings were intended as a point of reference, cementing an official version of events for posterity. Yet given the disappearance of this model from our visual culture, it is, nevertheless, almost impossible not to think that the work's primary subjects – Jackson's illusion of timeless iconicity, even immortality, key to the work's meaning in 2005 - have been wiped out now that Jackson is deceased.

As most European painting at the end of the last Century has demonstrated, the medium usually copes better when its relationship to historical events is the other way around, revisiting moments of the past that have been represented over and over again, bringing its own brand of turgid vagueness to canonical historical narratives. As a result, 'The Luc Tuymans Effect' – via Gerhard Richter – has previously been successful in bringing up nuanced, marginal questions about what is known, what is imagined, and

what is desired of historical accounts as signatures of our cultural conditions.

It's abundantly clear that Schutz's idea of painting has no real relationship to this approach to painting, investing more in the possibilities of imaginative creation over abject nihilism, regurgitation as expressionism, or whatever you call it - which is what makes its relationship to real-time events so fascinating and irregular. I asked the artist what happens to the 'life' of recognizable images like Jackson's (even if he was seen like never before), once the artist claims them, when they become embodied in, even transplanted by, one's ideas about the business of painting above all? If painting's fidelity to real events is low on the agenda, can the realism mentioned earlier be effectively dodged, once the 'facts' are successfully consumed, even overcome, by visual concerns, which in this case are outside such matters?

"Images can be unstable especially when they are so loaded" says Schutz. "I'm not interested in art purely mirroring life or culture and I wondered if this painting now simply acted as a mirror. But in the end I don't think it does. A painting can reorder the world in a physical way. A painting can act as a person. I love the fact that paintings can operate, be contagious, like images, that they have a kind of DNA (did W.J.T Mitchell say that?). But they do have a physical body too, the experience of this physical body can be bound up in images or even create images".

Here, the painting itself sets the agenda, the real-life event subordinate to what the painting demands. The reordering of the conditions of reception of the work by the work itself (and not CNN news updates) suggests that there was always a sense of the painting having to confront a new reality at some point in time, but the core importance of the painting was not vulnerable to such changes. On the contrary - in this line of thinking, the topical dimension of the work is a conduit, even a metaphor for something else. We are to consider Jackson as a doorway to other concerns; Schutz operates a painting practice that increasingly appears bound up with the very inevitability of change, and its role in the completion of a work's cycle of meanings.

"When I was making the painting, I was aware MJ would pass away at some point (unless he opted for freezing) - I mean, everyone dies. So I knew at the outset that this painting was unstable and hypothetical. I thought it might be more interesting to get the scene wrong (because it was all imagined) than to get it right. I could have painted MJ in any form imaginable (he was always changing anyway), or I could have painted him as an 80 year old. But it felt right to paint him more or less how he was in 2005".

Given this mutability of options when rendering the subject himself, I asked the artist if the Jackson painting had lost some of its specificity - not as an image but as a painting - after he died, and if her own hold on the image had been radically changed? And when considering showing the work again now, was there a fear that a different kind of content (scandal, ethics etc) had arrived on the scene, and maybe the artist had wanted to distance herself from that?

"I did worry about it losing its specificity as a painting and that it did bring up a different kind of content. However this can happen with any painting one it goes out into the world. The MJ painting for me felt strangely intimate while painting it, like it was a view for one, not for a voyeur, but more a scene that is set up for an audience of one, or a witness."

Perhaps that is what transcends the negative impact of chronology here. It is the

artist's relationship to the surface of the image as the work takes shape that crosses over the two timeframes, connecting them in significance in a picture of both a changing man, and a painting (as a consequence of this point) inevitably susceptible to change. The scene then has something of the devotional about it, freighted with a private, interior kind of sadness that contrasts with the public nature of Jackson's life and death. But in that devotion Schutz halts the salacious or ethical dimensions of the story and brings in her own presence, one that recruits the star to her cast of painted characters.

Like much of Schutz's work, "The Autopsy of Michael Jackson" initially disarms with a kind of sunny, childlike wonder at the grotesque or painful, delivering an intense melancholia with it that puts me in mind of the sweet bluntness of a child's questions about the nature of mortality – the kind of questions that leave adults fumbling for words. With imagery of such crystalline pictorial clarity, the same happens here; the image is bright and clear, but the meaning is mutable, the attitude difficult to describe, the mood darkly lingering. The initial openness and candour gives way to doubt, a movement of thought that starts to feel central to Schutz's concerns the more she describes her work. In holding reservations about the work being "too flatly what it is as an event, or all about a time past", Schutz has created a work whose mobility in relation to the unforeseen has ingeniously converted Jackson – in life always seeking the permanence of the iconic statue - into an icon of its opposite: unpredictability, the irreversibility of time, and the tragedies wrought by random events. Far from being mawkishly prescient, the picture in fact gains weight in the relationship, not the discrepancy, between the two points in time either side of his real autopsy – the media-baited exotic Jackson on one, the martyred victim of cruelty and voyeurism on the other. And here stands Schutz's supremely nuanced painterly vision, her ability to translate the private time spent making a painting into a universally accessible feeling akin to sympathy for her characters, holding multiple possibilities together in a personal, intimate engagement with the image: "I wondered if the painting of MJ could still work in a way that feels intimate now that his death was a real event in the world. I guess I'll see when I see the painting in the show- but I think it's still intimate (I hope)".

Even in briefly discussing this painting, Schutz reveals an unusual tenderness towards her pictured worlds, a place where the paradoxes of creativity and mortality are transformed into painted lives (and deaths). There is a powerful sense that the private, intense act of imaginative visualisation involved allows Schutz's paintings, almost in spite of what they represent, to indeed 'act as people' – to create meaning, and have meaning put upon them in turn.

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