

The Information — Darian Leader

“The thing I love about painting”, says Nigel Cooke, “is that it shows me I am in exactly the same place”. But what kind of place could this be? Is Cooke referring to the magical, disturbing spaces conjured up by his paintings? Or, alternatively, to some kind of continuity in his own artistic trajectory? It might seem obvious that there is a difference between the places that Cooke paints and the place that he paints them from. But why should we have to assume that they are distinct? And what would it mean for them to be one and the same?

The places that Cooke paints would be difficult to find on a map. Most of them could never exist empirically. We see ruins and severed heads next to fruit and veg howling with pain, surrounded by graffiti and foliage. Vast suns and human brains smoke cigarettes, and strange recurrent singularities like lightbulbs, cords and wires appear with no apparent use or meaning. This is not even a concatenation of objects with a single mechanism, like some gigantic Mousetrap game, but a fragmented, dispersed collection, an impossible landscape painted with all the realism and detail of the possible.

Impossible juxtapositions are certainly not new to painting. We could think of the Italian Baroque, or Gothic nativities or the universe of artists like Dali or Ernst. In all of these examples, we find objects sharing the same space that couldn't do so in the material world. Yet the rationale for their juxtaposition may be quite different. In one case, it may be to show the proximity of the world of the dead to that of the living; in another, to articulate a logic of symbols that distances itself from the usual conventions maintaining space and time. Cooke compares his own procedure with the schoolroom assemblages of children, who put together the random objects they bring to generate wonder in their classmates. A rock and a lion's tooth can share the same tabletop as a four-leaf clover and an army knife. And it is this “taxonomical bizareness” that Cooke finds so fascinating.

Yet it would be difficult to ascribe such a randomness to the artist's own landscapes. He may tell us that these scenes “look like things arranged on a nature table”, but there is so much more to their composition than an arbitrary dispersal of found objects. The key here is no further away, however, than the ‘nature table’ itself, once we ask the question of why children bring their special objects to school in the first place. Beyond the occasional request from a teacher, aren't we seeing here a form of communication? Each object is the vehicle of a wider story, a testimony to the courage or curiosity of child or parent. Whatever this story happens to be, what matters is that it is condensed and contained within the object. And so each object, as a bearer of narrative, becomes both a source of and a pointer to information beyond itself.

Although the view may seem unfashionable, for Cooke, painting is all about information. Not in the obvious sense that any art form can send a message, but in the way that the seemingly arbitrary encounters of dissimilar and heterogeneous objects and realities stage a drama about the fate of information and the processes that shape it. Cooke is intrigued by how information gets altered and distorted by the very channels that transmit it. The medium might be the message, but how exactly does this medium operate on, and even do violence to, itself?

Cooke's response to these questions take place on many levels, and all the more so when we realise that one of the forms of information he is most interested in is painting itself. The information that appeals to the artist can range from a remark he overhears on a bus, to a piece of theory, to a stylistic feature or genre of visual art. What happens to these informational elements in the process of transmission? How are they shaped and morphed and dislocated? Cooke has indeed compared his work to the result of an intergalactic game of Chinese Whispers (telephone). As information about planet earth is passed on from one receiver to another across galaxies, the end result will be the strange and apparently random world of one of Nigel Cooke's paintings.

This dynamic is echoed in the comment we often hear that Cooke's landscapes are like a dream. Rather than understanding such comments as the sign of abdicating from any attempt to get to grips with the work, why not take them literally? What is it, after all, that characterises the contiguity of impossible objects in a dream? Dream landscape relies on the logic of compression. When an unconscious desire cannot be represented readily in a dream, it will take the form of an absurdity, an impossible juxtaposition of objects. When Ernst unveiled his images of Oedipus, he made no effort to depict the narrative of what happened to either Greek hero or Freudian toddler, but presented incompatible beings and objects within the same space. In other words, he took the Freudian idea seriously that it wasn't the content of the unconscious thought that was so radical, but the filtering process that occurred before it could reach representation.

If Cooke's work has anything in common with the interests of Surrealism, it is in this focus not on revelation but on censorship. Surrealism was never about unconscious thoughts or wishes but about the way that these could only ever emerge in censored form: the impossible juxtapositions, compressions and condensations associated with artists like Dali and, for a certain time, Ernst. Unreality was simply an effect of the transmission of information. To get through, it could only articulate itself in scenes which could never occur empirically, and which had an absurd aspect. If Surrealism had any real engagement with Freud, it was through this exploration of the processes that distort unconscious material. It was an art not of revelation or freedom but of censorship.

And it is exactly this vein of Surrealist art that Cooke takes up in his own way. His project, as he says, concerns the question of "what happens to information". His paintings elaborate not only how an alien might picture earth after the great game of Chinese Whispers, but they present actual stagings of this process. One of his aims, we could say, is to give theatrical form to this movement or dynamic of information being sent, distorted and blocked on its intergalactic path. Don't the paintings, after all, present immense, often monochrome backdrops, with a stage for the action levelled flat right at the front of the scene? Even when Cooke dispenses with the local geography of his landscapes, as in a painting like 'The Dead', his fruit and veg still sit on a flat, stage-like stone shelf, as if a curtain has only just risen.

Given Cooke's concern with information, why should theatre be so important? Is it an embellishment or something more central to the place his art both depicts and stems from? Theatre, after all, highlights how what we are seeing is a representation, and its simplest way of doing so is through the use of a stage. Like a frame, a stage gives whatever takes place within it a semiotic density, and isn't this rendered in Cooke's

work by the elementary framework of horizon and base line? A pure line is all it takes, as children learn, to set out the difference between earth and sky, and so enter the world of drawing. This has little to do with our visual field (we rarely see pure horizons and base lines) and a lot to do with the conventions of representation. When a children become engaged in the activity of drawing or painting, this is how they are supposed to start. The foreground-background distinction and base line ushers us into not just the world of childhood but of depiction as such.

Once the stage is set, Cooke can then bring on his actors. And these are rather atypical beings, less full human forms than bits and bobs, severed heads, light bulbs, birds, cartoon-like books and fruit and veg. Although they invite us to invent stories around them, the paintings never deliver a coherent narrative, and Cooke's actors are ultimately perhaps minimal parcels of information; this could be an image derived from an overheard remark to a motif or genre of painting, like the Baconesque light bulbs or Guston-like body parts. Even in his earliest work, we can find these references to painting made present in the way that space is partitioned with screens. Flat screens float within the painted scenes, dividing the space, and these would then become actual paintings in subsequent work. These surfaces-within-surfaces allow Cooke to sustain what he calls "a conversation within painting", explaining perhaps the ubiquity of painted surfaces, graffiti and inscriptions within the represented space of his works.

Cooke's cosmology involves the very big and the very small, from a vast sun or pumpkin or brain to a tiny fly or speck of graffiti. The detail of the paintwork is brilliant, yet as we draw closer to wonder at the artist's dexterity, we notice some peculiar things. The pumpkin that had seemed three dimensional now appears to be painted onto a wall; the massive sun has a cigarette burn in it, suggesting that it is less voluminous presence than painted surface; the depth of an open book becomes the pure illusion of a stencilled cartoon. Everything we took to be real turns out to be represented, and even to have representations -like graffiti- inscribed upon it.

Mark-making is in fact everywhere. Perhaps prophetically, Cooke's early painting of an aviary does not hesitate to include the birdshit, a primary form of inscription, just as more recent paintings include graffitied signs, scrawls and images. These representations of representations index not only arbitrary acts but also genre, styles and motifs from the history of painting. If the epic scale and structure of the compositions remind us of both German Romanticism and American Sublime, we also find Bacon, Van Gogh and Guston. We are teased with the promise of narrative painting, and then forced to consider not narrative but, as Cooke puts it, the "entropy of information". These paintings could even be seen as a sort of graveyard for painting, the place where painting styles and motifs go to take their rest.

Cooke often speaks about the necessity for him of "keeping the conversation about painting going within painting". And as we consider the antagonism between a graffitied wall and a beautifully painted rock or pond, we are drawn to the question of how meaning is generated in the painted image. Here are so many elements of painting's history strewn together in a grim yet humourous landscape. A Guston-like brain smokes a fag, while a pumpkin placed like a lantern in Caravaggio begins to wail. Here we find the high end of Modernism, with its big flat monochrome surfaces, and the left-overs of much earlier European art. We've got Greenbergian flatness along with the paraphernalia of early Romantic painting. It's as if Cooke is asking how these elements ever worked before and why we didn't see the funny, daft side to them. Or, at

times, why we didn't see how menacing or scary they were.

The graffiti that we find on nearly all of Cooke's surfaces invites us to wonder whether this is in fact the fate of all painting. Or, from the intergalactic perspective of Chinese Whispers, what painting would end up as. Would it consist of marks on surfaces intended to leave a trace, and, in some cases, to deface or make more beautiful? Graffiti, which came into Cooke's work in the late 90s, was what he called a "painting mechanism". The bird outlines graffitied on walls and concrete structures evoke not only the idea of Platonic forms, but the real human activity of marking, and Cooke says here that he realised that with graffiti, "you can deface your own painting by adding to it. You can attack the work from the inside". And it's here that we move beyond the theme of language and information. Attacking, after all, involves a bit more than information.

If Cooke's scenes are like information graveyards, they are by no means dead places. Graffiti casually invests the space, sprouting like a weed, just as vegetation festers and invades. Mark-making may be about representation, but it is also, as Cooke says, a "viral presence". Language and the organic have met, and Cooke is showing us how this encounter is far from benign. The invasive processes of vegetation are similar, in a sense, to the swarms of locusts that inhabit Hitler's bunker or the artist's studio in his earlier works. In this collision, painting becomes an equally organic and cannibalistic force, devouring, vomiting and regurgitating the art forms of the past.

"Secondary representation", Cooke says, "creeps over everything like vegetation". Here the language of painting eats, consumes, creeps, and envelops. If the most basic form of information is DNA, this is junk DNA, the overwhelming, massive part of DNA not necessary to transmit any specific message, just an "invasion of information". And this is exactly what is echoed in the graffiti. This is now not only a mark, but the active idea of making a mark, the trashing, demolishing and vandalising that is a vehicle of both information and the drive. Can the history of art be separated from the history of acts of destruction of art? Cooke is showing us how in the end we cannot separate vandalism and information, or, to put it another way, language and obscene organic growth.

These mark-making acts take place on the very specific stage that the artist has constructed. Graffiti may be vandalism and destruction, but it is also what Cooke calls "the low-frequency side of painting as information, a sub-pictorial static". It stands at the junction between trashing, making art and displaying. And painting subsists here in a curious way. Cooke manages to re-invent the famous theory of mimesis associated with the French cultural theorist Roger Caillois. Caillois was interested in how animals can mimic their habitat even if this doesn't always ensure their survival. In his studies of the praying mantis, he noted how this creature can play dead, blending in with leaves and vegetation, and it can do this even when it is actually dead. The mimetic process, Caillois claimed, continues for some time after the biological death of the animal.

For Caillois, this testified to the existence of a curious law of nature, according to which animals become images: they become part of a scene, like a painting. Cooke's question here is if a mantis can play dead to become an image, can an image, like a painting, itself play dead? The obvious interpretation of this question would involve the production process: do paintings hide the means of their own creation? But Cooke's revamping of the Caillois question seems wider than this. If an organic process like the

growth of foliage - or graffiti - destroys and swamps in order to live itself, will art forms of the past try to blend in so as to save themselves? Can paintings and styles blend in to disappear? Can they disguise themselves? Can they be ignored in order to protect themselves? These questions, which Cooke has elaborated in many contexts, encourage us to scrutinise not only his own paintings but also all other paintings, from the immediate 'representation within a representation' to the presence of details or technical gestures within any given painting. And not forgetting those paintings and prints hidden in shops throughout the country's high streets.

As we think about these questions, they seem to develop logically out of Cooke's endeavour to explore how language and organic process are not separate but profoundly entwined. The idea of playing dead links these two dimensions exquisitely, and suggests, perhaps, that for Cooke, contrary to what we often hear, it wasn't that painting ever died - it just forgot it was alive. As he says, "Painting is always about death, from cave drawing to Mondrian". And this threading of the living and the dead might give us another clue as to why Cooke paints studios as sites of vital, festering decay.

In a sense, paintings like 'Thinking', 'The Dead' and 'Morning is Broken' all approach this theme. Motifs of life and death are present both as explicit icons and as compositional tensions, to make of these works modern variants on the Vanitas theme. Death is not only biological finality here but also a question about representations. If Cooke starts with severed heads, he then moves to the fruit and veg that we usually see grinning and laughing in advertisements. These are cartoons, and hence their representational quality is emphasised, but they are still the bearers of unspeakable sadness and despair, mixed in with a dose of comedy. This is a blend of a Disney and German Romanticism, and with the ghost-like forms of 'The Dead', we could say that Cooke is trying to put the Caspar back into Caspar David Friedrich.

These slapstick figures are linked to one of Cooke's working methods. If you put on your best tie, he observes, you're bound to get muck on it, and the human effort to be perfect always ends up in farce or tragedy. If that is really the case, why bother trying to be perfect? Why not, in fact, accentuate the imperfect? And why not let the imperfect, the comic and the incongruous then have a place in the high art form of painting? When a critic deemed Cooke's work impeccable, apart from the silly pumpkin, Cooke responded by multiplying the pumpkins. Once again, this is about information. Rather than repress an element that seems to be getting in the way of the 'message', Cooke gives pride of place to exactly this obstructive element.

It is the process of articulation that matters here, the distortions that interfere and transform. Although Cooke's privileged space is visual, doesn't this suggest that sound is equally his working material? If a comment he overhears on a bus can appear in a painting, and if he conceives of his work as the result of Chinese Whispers, sound is becoming image. The static that gets in the way of the message is less ignored or deleted than amplified. If painting is information, and his work is a form of listening, couldn't we say that painting becomes a form of overhearing?

This overhearing will mean that the variety of references in a painting by Cooke will be complex and resistant to a uniform narrative. He calls one of his works 'Don't Mess With My Message', but it is the messing that is the real substance of the message. This may at times leave the viewer perplexed, and asking the question of where the painter is coming from. But as Cooke himself once asked, "Can I be more than one painter?".

Certainly, the graffiti and other forms of inscription might allow him to be another painter within the space of a single painting, but since this painter also uses his ears, everything that gets in the way of a message can get in on the picture too. And perhaps that is why Cooke can say that painting shows him he is in exactly the same place.

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