THE TRUTH IN PAINTING 1993

MARTIN LANG

The Truth in Painting 1993 is a practice-based research project at the intersection of the digital, painting and photography. Each artwork created for this project has three stages to its production.

The first stage involves making paintings of real-life people and events from 1993 in gouache on paper. The reason for choosing the year 1993 will become clear throughout this essay. The second stage incorporates scanning the paintings and digitally manipulating the images using open-source digital painting software and a graphics tablet. The third stage involves printing the images onto canvas, sealing them with an acrylic size, and then painting on top of them with oils. The result is a combination of three kinds of mark: a printed digital facsimile of gouache paintings; digitally constructed brushstrokes, smears and drips; and analogue marks.

The assumption that the digitally printed reproduction of a painting lacks something of the original because of its flatness (its lack of texture and layering) is called into question by recent technological developments in 3D printing. *The Next Rembrandt* project (2016), for example, demonstrated how digital painting can mimic the three dimensionality of oil paintings.[1] First, all 346 of Rembrandt van Rijn's (1606-1669) paintings were scanned using high resolution 3D scanners. The scans were analysed using an algorithm to detect over sixty points in a painting and determine the distance between these on the subject's face. From there, it was possible to discern typical features and the resulting data were used to 3D-print a new painting with thirteen layers that replicate Rembrandt's brush strokes, depth of glazes and so on. The new painting is not a copy of Rembrandt's work; it is a visualization of data from Rembrandt's body of work that produces a new artwork: the next Rembrandt. This raises questions about the aesthetic implications and possibilities of full-colour three dimensional reproductions. How well can 3D-printed paintings replicate paint types or layering and glazing? I do not have the budget or facilities as *The Next Rembrandt* project, but I complicated notions of flat printing and textured painting by using a clear acrylic gel medium that retains brushstrokes to paint over the first two kinds of mark–giving the impression that flat, printed, brushstrokes are three-dimensional. I am interested in such technical questions, but I am also interested in their political implications regarding authenticity and truth. There is something inherently misleading, if not dishonest, about using clear mediums to make flat marks appear to be three dimensional.

Fig. 7.1. Martin Lang, *Clinton Signs NAFTA (8 December 1993)*, 2021,
oil and digital print on canvas, 37cm x 25cm. Property of the artist.
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A New World Order

With questions about truth and the interplay between digital and analogue painting in mind, I set about researching and painting events from 1993 that, when viewed together, allow viewers to construct their own connections, narratives, or truths, about the people and events depicted. For example, 1993 was the year that NAFTA (the North American Free Trade Agreement) was signed (Fig. 7.1) and the Maastricht Treaty (signed in 1992) came into full effect, effectively establishing the European Union. Viewers might wonder if these two trade deals were connected, co-ordinated even, or

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[1] "The Next Rembrandt," The Next Rembrandt, https://www.nextrembrandt.com. A short documentary film was also made about the project. See, Juliette Stevens, director, *The Next Rembrandt*, Documentary, Short (New Amsterdam Film Company, 2016).

purely coincidental. Benazir Bhutto was re-elected Prime Minister of Pakistan in 1993 (Fig. 7.2), but she would be later assassinated by al-Qaeda on the same day she met with Afghan President Hamid Karzai (27 December 2007).
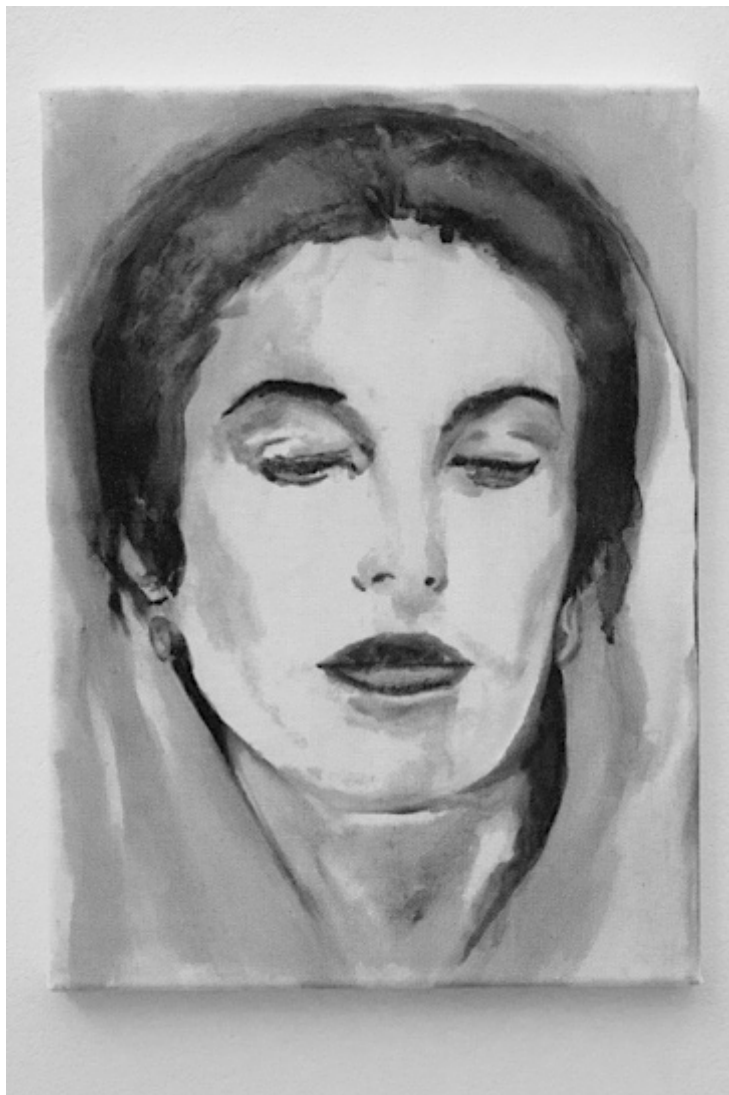

Fig. 7.2. Martin Lang, *Benazir Bhutto Re-Elected Prime Minister of Pakistan (19 October 1993),* 2021. Property of the artist. © Martin Lang.

There is no evidence to suggest that Bhutto's election in 1993 was connected to the NAFTA and Maastricht deals, but there is little doubt that Bhutto was a casualty of the War on Terror. The more conspiratorial viewer might note that the war, which began with an attack on a symbol of global free trade (The World Trade Center is the only international organisation dealing with the global rules of trade), provided cover that allowed NAFTA and EU nations to secure access to natural resources in Afghanistan and Iraq. In 1993, Bhutto set about transforming the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) from socialism to neoliberalism. While studying Philosophy, Politics and Economics at Oxford in the mid to late nineteen-seventies Bhutto was an active Conservative. This experience, coupled with her self-imposed exile to Britain in the mid-nineteen eighties, convinced her that Thatcherite economics were the future for Pakistan. Bhutto's government was swiftly embroiled in several corruption scandals and in 1996 President Farooq Leghari dismissed Bhutto. Several international criminal investigations followed. Pervez Musharraf, the military leader of Pakistan (2001-2008), became a useful ally in the War on Terror, but Britain and America ditched their support for him and dropped their corruption charges against Bhutto, allowing her to return to Pakistan to participate in the 2008 election. Could it be that the installation of Bhutto and Karzai was part of a greater plan for a New World Order dating back to 1993?

The X-Files premiered in 1993. The two main characters represent diametrically opposed views on truth. Fox Mulder believes in aliens and searches for evidence to verify this belief, while Dana Scully rejects apparent evidence of alien existence that contradicts her rational beliefs, as exemplified in this exchange from the pilot episode:

Mulder: When convention and science offers no answers, might we not finally turn to the fantastic as a plausibility?

Scully: What I find fantastic is any notion that there are answers beyond the reason of science. The answers are there, you just have to know where to look.[2]

Mulder leads a crusade against cover-ups and seeks to uncover concrete truths that are waiting to be revealed, while Scully is sceptical even when evidence arises to support the existence of aliens (it cannot be true, so the evidence must have another explanation). They both believe that "the truth is out there" (the show's tagline), waiting to be uncovered, but they also hold firm, contradictory, beliefs in the absence of conclusive evidence. This illustrates Bertrand Russell's (1872-1970) correspondence theory of truth.[3] Russell holds that people have different, sometimes contradictory, beliefs that cannot both be true. According to Russell, a belief is true when it corresponds to a fact. Either Mulder's belief in alien existence corresponds with a fact, or Scully's belief that there are no aliens (or at least, that they have not visited earth) does. It cannot be both and the truth exists independently of our knowledge of it. *The X-Files* caught my imagination because it holds firmly to the idea that "the truth is out there" while also speaking to notions of conspiracy theories, which often call evidence and experts into question and, instead, value intuition and feelings. *The X-Files* taps into a public distrust of governments and large corporations, foreshadowing our contemporary post-truth politics. Mulder is deeply suspicious of experts and Scully is similarly suspicious of evidence of the supernatural. Mulder might represent the conspiracy theorist who frustratingly believes that lack of evidence to support his claims is unproblematic because "it's true for him." However, Scully is not the impartial, rational, scientist that she purports to be.

This fictional distrust of the government shown in *The X-Files* was played out in real life in 1993, in Waco, Texas. The Branch Davidians certainly had their own "truths" about government intrusion on religious rights, which they followed to the end–burning to death inside the Mount Carmel Center (Fig. 7.3). They had prophesised an apocalyptic moral struggle and stockpiled weapons for coming fight. What if they were right? What if religion and morality were the first casualties in a war of capitalist greed represented by the NAFTA and EU trade deals? I listened to podcasts about Waco, watched several documentaries and viewed over five hours of courtroom footage from the subsequent trial. It is far from certain what happened during the Waco Siege and initial accusations that the Branch Davidians chose mass suicide over surrender are certainly contentious, to say the least. We may never know the truth about what happened at Waco. The forensic evidence to support claims about who fired first (the Branch Davidians or the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives) includes a metal door, which of course could not have burned in the fire and yet is missing.

Fig. 7.3. Martin Lang, *Mount Carmel Center on Fire (19 April 1993)*, 2021,
oil and digital print on canvas. 37cm x 25cm.
Property of the artist. © Martin Lang.

The Waco Siege reminds me of John Martin's (1789-1854) painting *The Fall of Nineveh* (1829). The painting tells the biblical story of a siege of the corrupt city. When the invading Babylonian army finally breached the city walls, they found the defending Assyrian soldiers were all drunk and that the King, Sardanapalus, had gathered his most precious possessions (including his harem) into a giant funeral pyre and was about to burn everybody, including himself, alive. The story is a warning about societies that become defined by greed and a love of money. Just like the Mount Carmel Center front door, John Martin's painting also mysteriously disappeared. It was last seen in Egypt in the nineteen-sixties, before President Nasser was assassinated. Seen in this light, Waco might similarly represent a religious stand against moral corruption, greed and worshiping money. After all, the Branch Davidians prophesised a moral struggle in the

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[2] Robert Mandel, "Pilot," Television Broadcast, *The X-Files* (USA: 20th Century Fox Television, 10 September 1993).
[3] Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy* (New York; London: Henry Holt & Company; Williams & Norgate, 1912), http://archive.org/details/problemsofphilo00russuoft.

same year that the NAFTA and Maastricht treaties came into effect. This proposition is implied in my project by juxta-posing paintings depicting the NAFTA and Maastricht treaties alongside a painting of the Mount Carmel Center on fire and a portrait of David Koresh (Fig. 7.4), the leader of the Branch Davidians.

Fig. 7.4. Martin Lang, *David Koresh (1959-1993)*, 2021,
oil and digital print on canvas. Property of the artist. © Martin Lang.

1993 was also the year of the first Islamist terrorist attack on American soil. The World Trade Center was bombed on the twentieth anniversary of its construction. Most of the bombers (Fig. 7.5) were apprehended and now reside in US maximum security prisons (you can check which prison houses who online).

Fig. 7.5. Martin Lang, *Nine Portraits of the World Trade Center Bombers*,
all 2021,
oil and digital print on canvas. 30cm x 42cm each.
Property of the artist. © Martin Lang.

Some have since died of natural causes. Khalid Sheikh Mohammed (bottom row, centre) was apprehended and is currently in Guantanamo Bay for his role in the 9/11 attack. He was not initially charged with the 1993 attack but confessed to masterminding it. During his interrogation by the CIA, Mohammed was subjected to waterboarding more than 180 times.[4] He is generally believed to have bankrolled the 1993 bombing, but his nephew, Ramzi Ahmed Yousef (Fig. 7.5, top right and Plate VII), is believed to have masterminded it. Yousef was also implicated in the 1993 Benazir Bhutto assassination attempt. Abdul Rahman Yasin (Fig. 7.5, bottom right) is the only convicted WTC bomber to escape justice. He was arrested and detained in Iraq. The Iraqi authorities informed the Americans of his capture and that he had crucial information regarding the bombing. Inexplicably, the US did not respond, and he was subsequently released (but he remains on the FBI most wanted list). The Twin Towers, representing global trade, were a symbolic target for religious indignation long before 9/11.

Viewers of my paintings might think that connections between moral degradation, greed and trade deals are tenuous, or limited to religious fanatics (both Christian and Muslim). They might ask what evidence there is, beyond religious extremism, that a New World Order was born in 1993 and with it, moral corruption. If Nineveh pointed to the self-destruction of society because of moral decay, then we might similarly expect moral corruption and degradation in 1993: we do not need to look far to find it. 1993 was a watershed year of moral shock and outrage. When Robert Thompson and John Venables killed James Bulger (Fig. 7.6) there was widespread indignation.

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[4] Erica Pearson, "Khalid Sheikh Mohammed | Militant," in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 8 April 2014, https://www.britannica.com/biography/Khalid-Sheikh-Mohammed.

Fig. 7.6. Martin Lang, (installation shot) *Robert Thompson (18 February 1993)*,
and *John Venables (20 February 1993)*, both 2021,
oil and digital print on canvas,
20cm x 20cm. Property of the artist. © Martin Lang

After their conviction, *The Sun* newspaper gathered a petition of nearly 280,000 signatures demanding that the boys' custodial sentences be increased. The Home Secretary folded under the pressure and overruled the judge (although this decision was later overruled by the Lords who deemed the intervention to be illegal). The murder of Stephen Lawrence (also in 1993) shocked British society to its core. The Lawrence murder highlighted racism on an institutional level for the first time (the subsequent report coined the term "institutional racism"). Such moral panics and huge new global trade deals were either coincidental or they could be linked. The viewer can ponder both possibilities while viewing the paintings and the truth of the paintings' materiality–their obfuscation between the photographic, the digital and the painterly–prompts questions about the truth of the subject matter.

Our habituated viewing of documentaries about Waco,[5] abduction cases, or serial killers in many ways could be said to normalise these atrocities, but might such a fascination also suggest a cultural landscape that has been ideologically inhabited by anxieties about conspiracy and dark powers? How much is our contemporary captivation with popular ways of processing tragedy, images and stories of victims and trauma a part of the so-called New World Order? To what degree might such a mindset enable a New World Order to emerge in the first place? It could be argued that fear of the so-called "deep state" led to Trump's election, for example.[6] Trump's election campaign focused on his outsider status and ability to "drain the swamp" by standing up to "crooked Hillary" and other allegedly corrupt politicians. It is reasonable to claim that an element of this kind of thinking played at least a part in his election. The same might be said of Brexit. Fake news about EU regulations, power transfers and immigration were evident in the print media ever since the Maastricht Treaty came into effect in 1993.

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[5] There was a slew of programmes released in 2018, to mark the twenty-fifth anniversary, see: Muriel Pearson, "Truth and Lies: Waco," TV Movie (New York: ABC News, 4 January 2018); David Thibodeau and Leon Whiteson, *Waco: A Survivor's Story* (Hachette Books, 2018); John Erick Dowdle and Dennie Gordon, "Waco," TV Miniseries (Los Angeles: Paramount Network, 24 January 2018); Chris Warburton, "End of Days," Podcast, https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/brand/p06qc33m. See also William Gazecki, *Waco: The Rules of Engagement*, Documentary, History (Fifth Estate Productions, SomFord Entertainment, 1997); Doug Lowe, *Understanding Waco*, Prime Video (streaming online video), Documentary (Prime Video, 2002).

[6] Indeed, this has been argued in several podcasts. See for example: Gabriel Gatehouse, "The Coming Storm," Podcast, 4 January 2022,
https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/series/m001324r; Marianna Spring, "Death by Conspiracy?" Podcast, 21 February 2022,
https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/series/m0014ywx.

Fig. 7.7. Martin Lang, *Twelve Portraits of Missing People from Soul Asylum's Runaway Train Video (1993)*, all 2021,
oil and digital print on canvas. 35cm x 30cm.
Property of the artist. © Martin Lang.

Runaway Train And Investigative Art

In 1993, Soul Asylum released *Runaway Train*, which became a global hit. The music video featured real-life missing children taken from the "milk carton kids" campaign.[7] It quoted the statistic that there were over one million youth lost on the streets of America. I always wondered what happened to the missing children in the music video. When a child goes missing, something has happened to them, and it is at least hypothetically possible to find out what (the truth is out there). Originally, I set out to create a piece of investigative art that would shed some light on the whereabouts of these children, but I ended up painting their portraits. Painting is a way of lifting normalised stories of tragedy into the heightened position of portraiture–ordinarily reserved for people in positions of power. These forgotten kids were unceremoniously eulogised on milk cartons because abductions in 1993 were so ordinary that Americans consumed them while eating their cereal. I discovered that Soul Asylum made different music videos for the different countries in which they released their single, so I concentrated on the missing people from the British version (Fig. 7.7). Tragically, many have been found dead. In one case, a child was located because of the video and returned to his parents: he later blamed the video for returning him to the abusive domestic situation from which he had being trying to escape. Some have been found alive; more are missing presumed dead. Because 1993 was pre-internet (indeed, pre-digital), the amount of information about each missing person available on the web varies greatly. Perhaps the most heart-breaking discovery from this research was that one child's parents continue to be extremely active–resulting in continuous police activity, local newspaper coverage and even offering a reward for information leading to the whereabouts of their daughter's body–while another missing person has no information about him at all on the web or in local newspaper archives.

Ben Needham (Fig. 7.8) is a British toddler who went missing in Greece and was never found–although a construction worker confessed, on his death bed, to accidentally running him over and burying the body in concrete on a building site. Needham was the last missing person to be featured in the British version of the *Runaway Train* video.[8] Needham's disappearance is often compared to Madeleine McCann's. In *The X-Files*, Mulder's quest for the truth hinges on the abduction of his sister–from her bed–ostensibly by aliens. It is all the more baffling that children can still vanish in our

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[7] Tony Kaye, director, *Soul Asylum: Runaway Train*, Music Video (Columbia Records, 1993), https://www.imdb.com/title/tt4649090/.

[8] Tony Kaye, director, *Soul Asylum: Runaway Train (UK Version)*, Music Video (Columbia Records, 1993), http://archive.org/details/soul-asylum-runaway-train-uk-version-fdeaed-72e-4. The American version was published on YouTube in February 2010. As of 8 April 2022, it has 174,514,295 views. The UK version is not available on YouTube, much to the annoyance of British fans, one of whom has uploaded a compilation of the photographs of the missing people featured in the UK version. This video has more than seventeen thousand views, see UK Kev, *Why Doesn't YouTube Want the UK to See the Missing UK People from Soul Asylum's Runaway Train ???*, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9B6tpyDCtFs.

digital age of ubiquitous CCTV and social media posts. When Maddie McCann disappeared in 2007, she might as well have been abducted by aliens, just like Mulder's sister.

Fig. 7.8. Martin Lang, *Ben Needham (missing since 1991)*, 2021,
oil and digital print on canvas. 35cm x 30cm. Property of the artist.
© Martin Lang.

The Truth In Painting

In 1905, in a letter to the artist Emile Bernard (1868-1941), Paul Cézanne (1839-1906) wrote: "I owe it to you to tell you the truth in painting, and I will tell it to you."[9] Jacques Derrida (1930-2004), in his trademark style, set about deconstructing the meaning of this sentence in his book *The Truth in Painting* (first published, in French, in 1978).[10] For Derrida, terms such as "truth" and "painting" needed deconstructing to prove the impossibility of their neutrality or fixed meaning. For Derrida, the phrase "the truth in painting" was essentially meaningless–or else it had infinite meanings constructed by the reader. I want to consider Derrida's interpretation of Cézanne in a dialectical relationship with *The X-Files*' tagline "The Truth is Out There," which embodies a mind-independent conception of truth that is "out there" waiting to be discovered, and which exists independently of perspective: the opposite to Derrida's notion of truth as contingent and socially constructed. Derrida can be likened to both Scully, the sceptic for whom evidence that contradicts her worldview is either too fantastic…or dangerous, and Mulder, the conspiracy theorist with his suspicion of truth and hierarchy (hidden agendas).

Cézanne went on to make another enigmatic statement about painting and truth. He said: "There must not be a single loose strand, a single gap through which the tension, the light, the truth can escape."[11] This recalls Luc Tuymans' (b. 1958) assertion that: "Every painting has a weakness and a breaking point, where the essence of a painting lies"[12] and Tuymans acknowledges that his painting *Still-Life* (2002) was inspired by Cézanne's *Still Life with Jug and Fruit* (1890).[13] *Still-Life* was first exhibited at Documenta 11 (2002).[14] It is an oversized canvas (347 cm x 500 cm) depicting a still life–a deliberate rebuke to the expectation that he would made a work in response to 9/11. Although it initially looks benign and banal, its size makes it oppressive. According to the Swiss art critic Hans Rudolf Reust, "the deliberate recourse to Cézanne is refracted by a veil of light, like that which emanates on computer screens."[15] Therefore, while

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[9] Paul Cézanne, "Letters from Paul Cézanne to Emile Bernard (1904-5)," Art History Project, accessed 21 October 2019, https://arthistoryproject.com/artists/paul-cezanne/letters-from-paul-cezanne-to-emile-bernard/.

[10] Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Ian McLeod and Geoff Bennington (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

[11] Cézanne in Ulrike Becks-Malorny, *Cezanne*, Paperback Edition (Cologne: Taschen, 2004), 67.

[12] Tuymans persistently makes this claim. I first heard him say it at a conference at the Hayward Gallery, but he has repeated it in print. See, for example: Luc Tuymans and Wilhelm Sasnal, "When Luc Tuymans Met Wilhelm Sasnal...," interview by Christopher Mooney, *ArtReview* February (2008): 42–49; Luc Tuymans, "Interview with Luc Tuymans," interview by Nicholas Cullinan, in *Unfinished: Thoughts Left Visible* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2016), 255.

[13] Tuymans, "Interview with Luc Tuymans," 253.

[14] "Luc Tuymans | Untitled (Still Life)," The Metropolitan Museum of Art, https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/667796.

[15] Hans Rudolf Reust, "The Pursuit: Luc Tuymans–1996-2003," in *Luc Tuymans*, trans. Shaun Whiteside, Revised and Expanded, Contemporary Artists (London: Phaidon, 2003), 152.

Tuymans looks back to Western aesthetics embodied in Cézanne, he places the viewer at one step removed–mediated through the digital screen and then back into painting. Cristina Ruiz (editor of *The Art Newspaper*) notes that Tuymans distances "us yet further from the idea of objective truth" by basing many of his paintings on images taken from secondary sources: material about Nazis taken from "reality TV shows, Netflix series, viral videos on YouTube, Disney."[16] This is something that Ulrich Loock, who curated Tuymans' exhibition at the Kunsthalle Bern (1992) takes further:

> In explicitly referring to a visual index, the symptom, Tuymans gives the appearance of seeking the encounter with the real, even if it is illness, which his iconic paintings necessarily lack…Through the operations of the index, pictorial conventions are rendered inactive, and truth becomes a matter of clues. It is no longer a function of logic, as it appeared to be in the works of the 1960s which were devoted to the examination of pictorial codes.[17]

Indeed, Tuymans believes that "representation can only be partial and subjective, and [that] meaning must be pieced together, like memories, through isolated fragments."[18] This complicates his approach to historical truth as represented in his paintings.

My painting project juxtaposes social constructivist approaches to truth with investigative or forensic approaches that have recently emerged in contemporary art. Forensic Architecture is perhaps the most well-known example of this trend.[19] They painstakingly piece together fragments of evidence from activists' video and audio recordings, architectural modelling and physical reconstructions to produce court admissible evidence supported by digital metadata, such as GPS locators, or time and date stamps. This means that even poorly shot videos can be combined with other partial evidence to prove, beyond all reasonable doubt, a sequence of events and who was where at the time of the event. In the case of their 2018 Turner Prize nominated work, they were able to prove that a Palestinian man did not deliberately kill an Israeli police officer by running him over, because the Palestinian had already been fatally shot before he slumped onto the accelerator of his car. The 2019 Turner Prize joint-winner Lawrence Abu Hamdan, whose work attempts to reconstruct the truth from sound, is another example. Abu Hamdan, who had previously worked with Forensic Architecture, works to expose human rights abuses. His Turner Prize work focused on constructing evidence of abuse in the Saydnaya prison in Syrian, where prisoners rarely leave their cells and are blindfolded as they enter and leave. Abu Hamdan worked with prisoners to make an audio investigation based on their acoustic memories. Both Forensic Architecture and Abu Hamdan maintain that art can be a mode of truth production. While both examples construct narratives from fragments of evidence, they do not so much *construct* truths, as *uncover* them. Their work is exemplary of the forensic turn in contemporary art, which is more aligned to *The X-Files*' notion that "the truth is out there," waiting to be revealed, than the Derridian notion that truth is unobtainable, or a pure construction. Ingrid Burrington, Mario Pfeiffer, Wolfgang Tillmans and Paolo Cirio are other examples of investigative artists. They variously work in the digital realm, including film and sound.

Nate Lowman is a rare example of an investigative artist who uses painting. His first solo exhibition at David Zwirner's London gallery (2019) featured works based on the mass shooting that took place on 1 October 2017, in Las Vegas, where Lowman was born. It was the deadliest mass shooting in American history. Lowman made paintings taken from photographs of the Mandalay Bay hotel room and surrounding area where the gunman carried out the attack–images that were released to the public by the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department with their preliminary report, which can still be found online. The act of re-creating these images by painting them involved a period of intense looking. I suggest that Lowman looked at these images for longer than the police. Indeed, audiences viewing his paintings may well scrutinise the images for longer than the investigating officers did. This act of slowing down to look over an extended period is valuable, but Lowman's paintings also remind us that there is a truth behind the images: something really did happen and that we might be able to access aspects of this truth by observing his paintings. This stands in contrast to deconstructive approaches to viewing art. It is not the case that these paintings can simply mean anything to anybody. Or rather, some interpretations of them will be more correct than others.

Standards Of Correctness

Enrico Terrone argues for a "standard of correctness": a set of norms established by a painting's history. According to Terrone, the standard of correctness allows viewers to "select the correct *understanding* of a representation out of the

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[16] Luc Tuymans, "Luc Tuymans: 'People Are Becoming More and More Stupid, Insanely Stupid'," interview by Cristina Ruiz, *The Art Newspaper*, 27 March 2019,
http://www.theartnewspaper.com/interview/luc-tuymans.

[17] Ulrich Loock, "On Layers of Sign-Relations, in the Light of Mechanically Reproduced Pictures, from Ten Years of Exhibitions," in *Luc Tuymans*, trans. Shaun Whiteside, Revised and Expanded, Contemporary Artists (London: Phaidon, 2003), 77.

[18] Tate, "Luc Tuymans – Exhibition at Tate Modern," Tate,
https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/luc-tuymans.

[19] Forensic Architecture have exhibited in high-profile exhibitions, including the Turner Prize 2018 (Tate Britain, London) and the Whitney Biennial 2019 (New York City). Eyal Weizman MBE FBA (the group's founder and director) has literally written the book on investigative art: Matthew Fuller and Eyal Weizman, *Investigative Aesthetics: Conflicts and Commons in the Politics of Truth* (London: Verso, 2021).

possible *understandings* of it."[20] He discerns three different types of standard of correctness, which he terms kind-standard, individual-standard, and standpoint-standard. Referring to Richard Wollheim (1923-2003), he explains that when art historians mistake a depiction of a lamb for a dog they mistake the kind, whereas if a person mistakes Hans Holbein's (b. 1497/8- d.1543) portrait of Henry VIII (1491-1547) for a portrait of the actor Charles Laughton (who played the king in the film *The Private Life of Henry VIII*, 1933) this would be an error of the individual-standard. In the former case, the standard of correctness establishes that the animal depicted belongs to the kind "lamb" (and not the kind "dog"). In the latter case, the standard establishes that the individual depicted is Henry VIII, not Charles Laughton. Since a real lamb could be mistaken for a real dog, or a real person for another real person, kind-standards and individual-standards are applicable to both art and visual experience in the real world. However, Terrone reasons that standpoint-standard is different. In everyday visual experience there is no confusion about the time and place that the thing in question is seen: it is always here and now, where our body is and when our experience occurs. Consequently, the standpoint is occupied in our body. Terrone argues that pictorial perception is different, as it does not "tell us anything about the place in which and the time at which the scene depicted occurs."[21] We might say that there is a truth regarding the time and place depicted and although we may not correctly identify these factors from the formal information given by the work, this truth still exists. To select the correct spatiotemporal location, we need a standard of correctness. We could not use surveillance cameras and CCTV footage to convict a criminal without determining when and where the footage was recorded. Likewise, Forensic Architecture's work rests on GPS locators and timestamps in the metadata of the recording. Both examples rely on a standard of correctness to determine the time and place–or the standpoint. The only direct equivalence in painting would be the radio-carbon dating of the support and information about when certain pigments were available. In both cases, this "metadata" refers to where and when the image was created, but, in the case of painting, it does not refer to where and when the scene depicted occurred. This information could be supplied in the work's title. Terrone gives the example of John Constable's (1776-1837) *Beaching a Boat, Brighton*, 1824. This gives the viewer a kind-standard of correctness (it is a boat) and a standpoint-standard (it is in Brighton, in 1824). However, this information might not be in the title. It could be missing, deliberately misleading or accidentally inaccurate. Terrone does not address deliberately misleading titles, but he does allow for standpoint-standard to identify whether the event took place in the real world, or a fantasy world and, by extension, this allows us to determine whether we should view a film as a factual documentary, a fictional movie, or a mockumentary. When a mockumentary attempts to deceive the viewer by pretending to be a documentary, this is akin to artists giving false information in titles or catalogue texts. In both cases, the standpoint-standard (or truth) is still potentially discoverable, despite the artist's deceit.

The concept of the standard of correctness is relevant to my project regarding truth in painting because it acknowledges that there are both physical, formal, truths to a painting, as well as truths that are exterior to the art object. In my case, the paintings are of real people and events from 1993. There are kind-standards to my work: people depicted belong to the kind "missing person" or "convicted Islamist terrorist," for example. There are also individual-standards: named individuals, such as Benazir Bhutto and David Koresh (see Fig. 2 and Fig. 4). There are also standpoint-standards: the events took place in 1993 at specific locations (Waco Texas, Maastricht) and generic locations (in Britain). Many of the children from the *Runaway Train* video are missing, so we do not know where they are now, or even where they were in 1993. However, there is a standpoint-correctness to these paintings. The photographs from which they are made were taken at a specific time and place (often before 1993, which is the year the images were broadcast in the music video). The missing people depicted are either alive or dead. We do not know which, but that does not mean that there is no truth about their being alive or dead. It is not the case that one viewer's claim that Ben Needham is alive and another viewer's claim that he is dead are equal: one is correct, and the other is wrong. If a viewer mistakes my portrait of Benazir Bhutto (Fig. 2) for the Madonna, or for Michael Jackson (who was first accused of child molestation in 1993, coincidentally) it is an interpretation of the painting, but it is not the correct interpretation. The standard of correctness informs the viewer that it is Benazir Bhutto–even if they think it looks like somebody else (indeed, even if they are correct to assert that it looks like somebody else). However, these standards of correctness jar with the fact that we know we have incomplete information about the events depicted and that we cannot know if they are connected or coincidental.

Terrone refers to an old disagreement about the standard of correctness in Vincent Van Gogh's (1853-1890) *Shoes* (1886). Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) argued that they were a pair of peasant shoes (a kind-standard) and, as such, should be understood as a metaphor for a peasant's toil and hardship. Lithuanian-American art historian Meyer Schapiro (1904-1996), however, uses historical documents to determine that Van Gogh was living in a town when he made the painting. Schapiro therefore argues that they should be understood as the artist's shoes, thereby introducing an individual-standard, as well as a new kind-standard (that of a city-dweller). In *The Truth in Painting*, Derrida argues that just because Van Gogh was living in a town does not mean that the shoes depicted belong to him, or even a city-dweller. He reasons that Van Gogh might have painted from memory, or imagination. Derrida questions whether they are even a pair of shoes, or two individual left shoes. He concludes that without further information, we should only treat them as the kind "shoe"–not a pair, not peasant's shoes, not Van Gogh's shoes. Terrone argues that they are not just shoes. They are (at the very least), shoes from Western Europe in the eighteen-eighties. This is fine, but it ignores the fact that one of these interpretations is likely to be correct, and at least one is certainly wrong. In other words, there is a truth to this painting, whether we can access it or not. Derrida is correct to assert that we should limit our interpretation to the

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[20] Enrico Terrone, "The Post-Truth in Painting," in *Post-Truth, Philosophy and Law*, ed. Angela Condello and Tiziana Andina (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), 156. Italics in original.
[21] Terrone, "The Post-Truth in Painting," 157.

information at hand. At least, we should recognise that anything beyond this is speculation. If new historical documents were to arise providing new information about Van Gogh's *Shoes*, then the standard of correctness would be updated and adjusted–just as the subjects that I have painted from 1993 would take on new meanings if new information became available. For this reason, Terrone theorises that the preservation of historical documents about artworks is just as important as the preservation of their material properties.[22] This is why Lucy Lippard (b. 1937) was wrong to characterise conceptual art as "dematerialised," as its existence–its full and proper understanding–is dependent on the material arte-facts that describe, explain and contextualise its being. In other words, the standards of correctness constitute an art-work's ontology.

These propositions about standards of correctness will likely annoy many art theorists and art lovers. Since Roland Barthes' (1915-1980) essay "The Death of the Author" (first published in 1967),[23] the consensus in the art world is that biographical information about the artist and the provenance of the artwork, or even the artist's intentions, are superflu-ous. The generally accepted idea is that such things "die" when the text is published, or the artwork is exhibited. From this point on, the text or artwork has no particular meaning. Indeed, artworks can accrue different meanings depending on the context in which they are exhibited. Sam Durant's *Scaffold* (2012) comes to mind. It was toured in Europe without controversy, but when it came to Minnesota it caused great offence to the Dakota nation because of the reference to a mass execution of their people. Meaning can also change over time: think of recent debates about "slaver" statues, or the female nude or how we view the sexualised paintings of pre-teens by Balthus (1908-2001). Meaning is context-based to a degree, but Terrone argues that when we abandon the standard of correctness, the truth in painting "gives way to the post-truth in painting." This happens, he reasons, when viewers use art in the wrong way: treat it as a blank slate, "as mere generators of seeing-in states."[24] Readers who are unfamiliar with the aesthetic concept of "seeing-in" need only think of children seeing figures in cloud formations. Even children know that when they "see" an elephant in the clouds, they are not really seeing an elephant and adults know that, while clouds can be used for this entertaining pur-pose, they have other functions. The same can be said for painting. A figure in a William Hogarth (1697-1764) painting might look like your friend Nigel, but it is not him and to note the likeness is of little to no value regarding how the artwork should be appreciated.

Treating paintings as "seeing-in states," where any interpretation is valid, recalls a story by Umberto Eco (1932-2016) where a future civilisation looks back on fragments of cultural artefacts made before 1980, when an explosion destroyed all life in the Earth's temperate and tropical zones. The only human life left resided in the Earth's polar regions. Millenia later, after the radiation dropped to safe levels, a new, evolved, arctic civilisation travelled south to learn about the now ancient and extinct American and European civilisations. They discover various objects including an *Ajax* box bearing the text "Whiter then white." Having read about racism, they assume the box used to contain "a medicine for the improvement of the [white] race" declaring that *Ajax* was "the first Aryan warrior."[25] When they en-counter a snippet from the film *Singin' in the Rain* (1952),[26] they conclude that it must have been a "propitiatory or fertility hymn to nature."[27] This is what Eco calls "overinterpretation." Lacking the standard of correctness, the arctics mistake *Singin' in the Rain* for a rain dance. These are fanciful and exaggerated examples, but there is large body of opinion that art is subjective and that to assert that one interpretation is superior to another is merely a snobbish, elitist, regression into connoisseurship. However, such opinions have dire consequences for truth and post-truth.

Eco's "misreadings" are akin to what Terrone terms "pictorial post-truth": when "the picture's appearance, split from the corresponding standard of correctness, is no longer understood but rather misunderstood."[28] Digital reproduction exacerbates this problem. As instances of a picture increase, it becomes increasingly difficult to ensure that all copies remain in touch with the standard of correctness. Terrone cites a very Eco-esque example of a picture of Steven Spielberg relaxing on the set of *Jurassic Park* (1993), in front of a dead triceratops. Detached from its standard of correctness, it is possible to view it as a picture of a hunter smiling in front of his trophy. Indeed, it was widely reported how, when the image was circulated online some years after the film was made, Spielberg was mercilessly trolled by numerous Facebook users for having killed a dinosaur.[29] This is funny, until you think of how social media habitually severs articles and pictures from their original context and then uses algorithms to target users who will swallow the misinfor-mation before spreading it to others in their eco chambers. Terrone discerns the following steps to achieve pictorial post-truth. First, the picture must be detached from its standard of correctness. Then, the standard of correctness is replaced by misinformation. When the picture is misinterpreted in accordance with the misinformation, it then becomes a carrier

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[22] Terrone, "The Post-Truth in Painting," 164.

[23] Roland Barthes, "Death of the Author," in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1987), 142–48.

[24] Terrone, "The Post-Truth in Painting," 165.

[25] Umberto Eco, *Misreadings*, trans. William Weaver (1963; repr., San Diego; New York; London: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1993), 20.

[26] Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly, directors, *Singin' in the Rain*, Motion Picture, Comedy, Musical, Romance (MGM, 1952).

[27] Eco, *Misreadings*, 21.

[28] Terrone, "The Post-Truth in Painting," 166.

[29] See, for example, Ella Alexander, "Steven Spielberg mercilessly trolled by Facebook users who think he killed a dinosaur," *The Independent*, 12 July 2014, https://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/steven-spielberg-mercilessly-trolled-by-facebook-users-who-think-he-killed-a-dinosaur-9601244.html; Emily Yahr, "'Jurassic World:' How a Dinosaur Movie Tackled Animal Rights," *The Washington Post*, 15 June 2015, https://search-ebscohost-com.proxy.library.lincoln.ac.uk /login.aspx?di-rect=true&db=edsgao&AN=edsgcl.418023121&site=eds-live.

of post-truth. Accordingly, Terrone concludes that "taking care of the standard of correctness of pictures is not only a matter of aesthetic appreciation; it [also] has a significant impact on the social and political dimensions of our lives."[30]

Conclusion: Aesthetic Truth

Terrone makes a convincing case, but I wonder how this works for paintings where the standard of correctness is deliberately manipulated or ambiguous. For example, Reust points out that Tuymans "never addresses concrete events directly. Instead he refers to forgotten occurrences indirectly, on the basis of a clue, a document, a quotation from a text."[31] My project consists of artworks about uncertain events and even the physical properties of these paintings are obtruse. For some, this destabilises truth, demonstrating how we construct narratives and how individual events are always connected to other events. For others, the fact that truth is uncertain does not imply that there is no truth, or that multiple truths exist from different perspectives or different standpoints (to use Terrone's language). The first camp think dialectically. In contrast to analytical thinking, where components can be isolated and analysed at a specific time and place, in dialectics everything is part of an evolving process that is connected to everything else. The second camp is not so much analytical, as a metaphysical. Adherents to this kind of thinking display a mind-independent approach to truth. They hold that, although we might never know the full truth about what happened at Waco, or whether it is connected to Bill Clinton (b. 1946) signing the North American Free Trade Agreement, an absence of information is not the same as an absence of truth. This is linked to rational thinking, since even if the truth is not observable it can potentially be discovered by deduction.

In *The Truth in Painting 1993*, I layer events and their interpretations onto the original news and media photographs on which the paintings are based, challenging the notion that they might represent some kind of objective truth. In Derridean fashion, the project uses an iterative paint process to explore the potential subversion of any residual objectivity still attached to photography. At the same time, this highlights how paintings can deceive and, consequently, that paintings should not be trusted any more than other media imagery. Here, parallels can be drawn between my project and Tuymans' approach to painting and truth. For Tuymans, the truth is that "painting is an act of description, and there are no neutral descriptions."[32] Owen Drolet declares that Tuymans' paintings are just part of a densely populated media landscape and that they lie as regularly as television.[33] Tuymans himself often says that his paintings are as much about what is left out as what is depicted. Cristina Ruiz concurs when she states that: "At the heart of Tuymans' project is a central conceit: that images are unreliable, that they can offer us no more than a fragment of reality and that our own memories, personal or collective, mislead us."[34] This is undoubtedly the case, but it does not mean that there is no truth– in fact it is a truth claim of its own. I am interested to know if it is possible to arrive at an aesthetic truth, one that has nothing to do with the subject matter, a truth that is internal to painting itself and is only accessible through the act of painting.

It is prudent to be suspicious about depictions (painted, photographed or otherwise), but Tuymans is clear that he believes in expertise and knowledge and therefore, implicitly, objective truth:

> When an artwork is oversimplified to fit a particular framework (the mass media) the artwork suffers the very kind of populist "dumbing down" that I have spent my entire career fighting. Through my artwork, curating and writing and in my dealings with the main cultural institutions of this country, I have consistently endeavoured to promote knowledge and expertise over ignorance.[35]

Tuymans' relationship with truth is cautious and distanced. Adrian Searle notes how Tuymans "treats photographs like pictorial evidence, then approaches them, and painting, with a kind of detached irony."[36] Nate Lowman's work treats photographs as pictorial (indeed forensic) evidence. I do not see Tuymans' sense of detached irony in Lowman's work, but I do see it in my own. The irony is that my images (derived from photographs like Tuymans' and Lowman's) are supposed to point to objective truths about uncertain events for which we have incomplete information. They tell us that the truth is out there but acknowledge that it might be unobtainable.

Earlier in this essay I compared statements by Cézanne and Tuymans. Do paintings' "weak points" allow truth to escape (Cézanne)? Or is it in such points that the painting's essence (we might say, "truth") lies (Tuymans)? In my work, such weak points lie in areas where the digital and the analogue jar. This is Cézanne's "loose strand" that reveals the truth of the construction of the painting, which in turn points to the truth behind the painting's subject matter, but also its deception. For Cézanne, this is to be avoided (the truth must not escape), but for me it is an aesthetic strength and an aesthetic truth. As this aesthetic truth is central to the project, it can also be seen in terms of Tuymans' "breaking point,"

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[30] Terrone, "The Post-Truth in Painting," 167.

[31] Reust, "The Pursuit: Luc Tuymans - 1996-2003," 152.

[32] Adrian Searle in Peter Ruyffelaere, ed., *ON&BY: Luc Tuymans*, (London; Cambridge, MA: Whitechapel Gallery; MIT Press, 2013), 15.

[33] Owen Drolet, "Luc Tuymans: The Truth of the Matter," *Flash Art* 37, no. March/April (2 March 2004): 77.

[34] Ruiz interview with Tuymans, 'Luc Tuymans'.

[35] Tuymans in Adrian Searle, "Why Belgium's Plagiarism Verdict on Luc Tuymans Is beyond Parody," *The Guardian*, 21 January 2015, sec. Art and design, https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/jan/21/luc-tuysmans-katrijn-van-giel-dedecker-legal-case.

[36] Searle, "Why Belgium's Plagiarism Verdict on Luc Tuymans Is beyond Parody,"

where the essence of the painting lies. In this sense, both Cézanne and Tuymans are right: the truth both lies in, and escapes from, these weak points. This is how each painting functions on an individual level, but the paintings are also interconnected. The possibility to construct speculative narratives suggested by the presentation of disparate events, only connected by the year in which they occurred, can be seen as a weakness that allows any notion of objective, mind independent, truth to escape into post-truth relativism. On the other hand, this is the essence of the project, a truth in itself about our relationship with truth and how we consume images.

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