

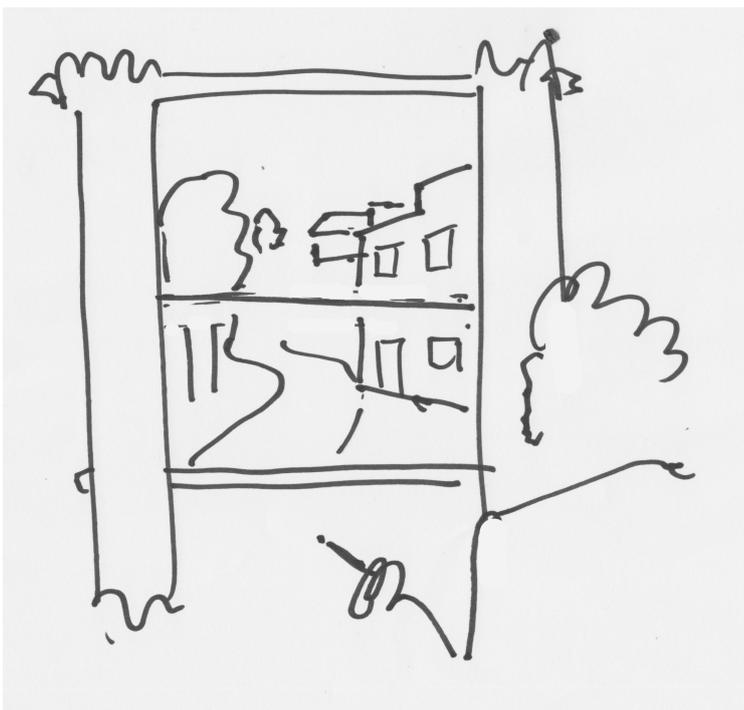
Painting Layers of Depth

A Brief History of Western Perspective and an email to James Hopkins.

In a recent lecture I was introduced to many representations of physical space according to different cultures and time periods. The lecture was entitled The History of Perspective, in it Tom Cardwell talked about the way that Representation shifted from Object-based to Time-based to Spatially-based through different art periods and geographies.

What I was surprised about, however, is that he gave no identifiable reason why these 'common sense' approaches were markedly different from each other. This got my attention. By understanding (the) Western Perspective I can begin to understand those of others. Systematic approaches to evolve a system of perspective are considered to have begun around the fifth century BC in [ancient Greece](#), as part of a developing interest in [illusionism](#) allied to theatrical scenery, we shall come back to this. The mathematical approach was formulised in the Renaissance. Melozzo da Forlì first used the technique of upward foreshortening (in Rome, Loreto, Forlì and others), and was celebrated for that. Not only was perspective a way of showing depth, it was also a new method of composing a painting. Paintings began to show a single, unified scene, rather than a combination of several. This was elaborated on by Piero della Francesca elaborated on *Della Pittura* in his *De Prospectiva Pingendi* in the 1470s.

I can't help thinking about my own visual reality and how the outstretched arm in art class measuring distances is merely a mathematic approach to object relations.



Subjective
perspective onto
a flat surface. If
you imagine
drawing the
scene directly
onto the window,
with one eye
shut.

But the eye is curved.

The spheroidal optical world had to be rediscovered from the Greeks millennia earlier. They portrayed a circular perspective as related to the Stage. They're Columns and backdrops convex to feed illusions of depth and aid viewing from various angles. This philosophy is close to true angle-perspective.

Euclid's Eighth theorem points out that the rays of light entering the eye are projected onto the inside of a ball, as opposed to the flat surface used in Renaissance *perspectiva artificialis*, this gives rise to *true perspective*, *angle perspective*, which was for some reason seen as an unserviceable method during the Renaissance, as Panofsky points out; 'Clearly this (the use of linear perspective's) contradiction could be resolved only by abandoning the angle axiom; to recognise the axiom is to expose the creation of a perspectival image as, strictly speaking, an impossible task, for a sphere cannot be rolled on a (2D) surface'- Panofsky, E 1924:36

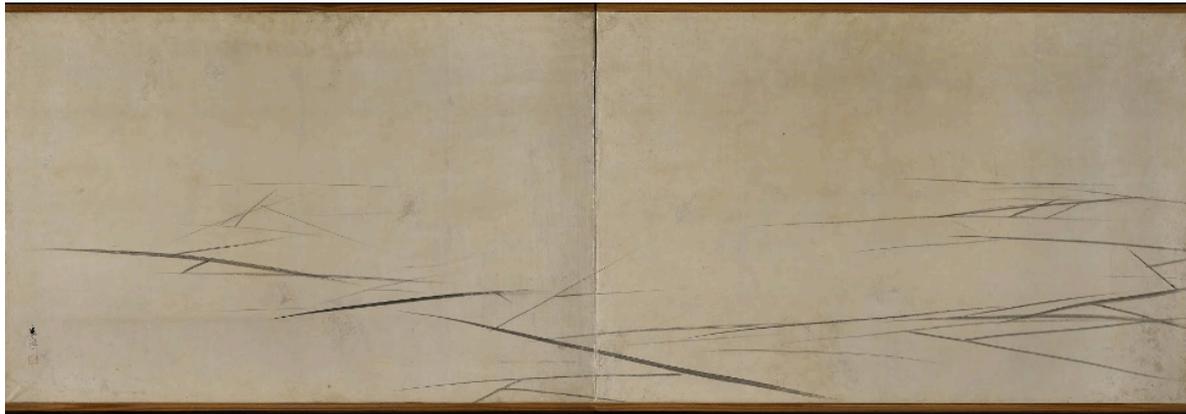
Angle perspective was what I was using when measuring the still life in front of me at school. It can be approached in drawing if you imagine a grid as a sphere circumscribing your single eye and scraped by your outstretched arm as you measure around you, using angles and not distance

You have to be at a fixed point in front of a flat surface to both paint and experience true perspective. In practice, unless the viewer chooses an extreme angle, like looking at it from the bottom corner, the perspective of a picture normally looks more or less correct. This is referred to as "Zeeman's Paradox" "...the paradox is purely conceptual: it assumes we view a perspective representation as a retinal simulation, when in fact we view it as a two dimensional painting. In other words, perspective constructions create visual symbols, not visual illusions. We naturally take into account some sort of movement around the object, the picture as well as reading other visual clues; the other eye, textures, colour, the knowing that we are reading an illusion. Lots of people can experience the same object 'It is only through a denial of the perceptual process on the abstract plane of concepts that several individuals can claim to see the same thing, when they look at the same object. An existential position can yield only a particular point of view in space-time, revealing only certain aspects of things and leaving other concealed' – Saint-Martin, F 1997;111

The key is that paintings lack the depth of field cues created by binocular vision; we are always aware a painting is flat rather than deep. And that is how our mind interprets it, adjusting our understanding of the painting to compensate for our position. Wilhelm Schickhardt pointed out ' I say that all lines, even the straightest, which do not stand directly in front of the eye..necessarily appear somewhat bent. Nevertheless, no painter believes this: this is why they paint the straight sides of a building with straight lines, even though according to the true art of perspective (subjective, angular) this is incorrect.'

So, perspective is subjective, and this is only in one meaning of the word! In the other of course is in what is 'seen as important' although subconsciously. The 'common sense' of a cultures' art appears to be a function of what people are used to seeing. This allows us to read art with ease, as a common language.

Maruyama Okyo *Cracked Ice* Late 18thC.



Around the same time that *Cracked Ice* was portraying Okyo's understanding of marks made by both western and eastern artists, Giovanni Battista Tiepolo was advancing theatrical illusion in a series of frescoes of Residenz, Wurzburg



Apollo and the Continents
1752-53
Fresco, 1900 x 3050 cm Stairwell of
the Residenz

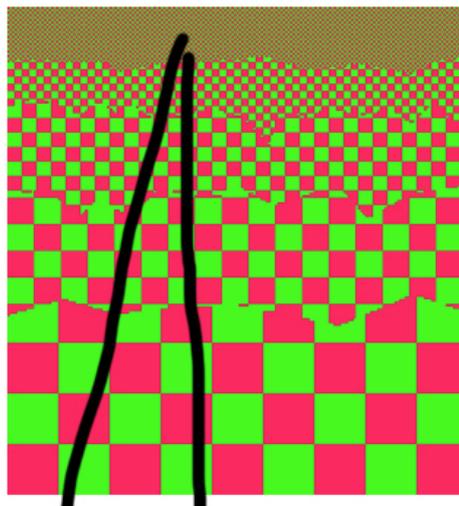
The painting is yet again a stage; the fascination in Western Art with this moving around the object is glorified in the art of the fresco, from the Renaissance onwards.

“If at first you're pulled into the golden light of heaven, the higher you climb (the staircase), the more you are brought down to earth...everything floats, everything is elastic.” –attr. Simon Sharma, *Civilisations*



The Marriage of the Emperor Frederick Barbarossa to Beatrice of Burgundy
1751, Fresco 400x500cm
Imperial hall of the Residenz, Würzburg

In this fresco Tiepolo forces a Trompe l'Oeil, curtains of actual plaster peeled back by cherubim (proving the exaggerated movement of foreground objects) lie over a more distant scene. Designed to be looked at along a long hall, as opposed to the stairway art that you emerge into in the previous work.



Line → Pattern → Texture → Colour

Pollock 2018

In modern times we love to play with the interaction between line, pattern, texture and colour as received in our media, themselves being some of the clues to depth perception. Through print into photography and the development of the screen, images are reproduced in painting. Tropes are set up that allow us to 'read' the space, both spatially and culturally.

I'm going to take painter Richard Patterson as an example of the contemporary outlook.

'Unlike Gerhard Richter, who balances abstraction and photorealism by simultaneously producing two bodies of work, Patterson manages to conflate the categories, allowing both styles equal time on the canvas.' Pollack, B 2000:164 and from Patterson himself:

“I’ve always dealt with subjects bordering on the cliché, really. I’m not alone in this — Pop is sort of the idiom everyone is working in now, whether they realize it or not. Abstraction included. So, there are really two ways to approach making art — one is to feel that you can’t do anything that’s been done before, in which case you’ll never make anything. And the other is that you embrace the cliché and try to surpass it. The risk is that you hover too close and never get free of it. My hope is to make the images grand enough they transcend it.”



Richard Patterson,
Back at the Dealership Culture Station #5
(detail), 2005, 92 1/4 x 137 5/8 inches

‘By opposing flatness with visual depth, painterly abstraction with linear hyperrealism, wholeness against fracture, Patterson connects disparate imagery to find out where they align, and where they are fissured. –Artsy Dec 1 2014. Patterson’s works quotes the postmodern mediascape, images that are fed to us mainly on screen, where, in the postmodern world ‘boundaries between information and entertainment, images and politics, implode’ Best and Kellner 1991:18, this occurring *itself* on screen. Hyper reality replaces it, according to Baudrillard, we are in an era of cybernetic control systems, which has led to the process of social entropy, a saturation of the social field and a neutralised flow of information. The real and the simulated can become indistinguishable from each other ‘a hallucinatory resemblance’ Baudrillard 1983a:23. We can access all histories of perception from anywhere in the world and any artist can reorder the information, inserting a chink into the matrix.

The Stage is set again!

The new ‘hyper realities’ are designed to reconnect our worlds in a way in which is steerable, controlling perhaps and above all, attention grabbing through their manipulation.

‘Most people are happy to see both abstraction and figuration in painting, but not the conjunction of the two ... I am trying to put these two very different visual languages together in a single painting and see if they can work’ (quoted in Anthony d’Offay Gallery 1997, p.42).

So, what perspectives is he setting up? The three paintings from his Minotaur series below illustrate a good few of the techniques he uses.

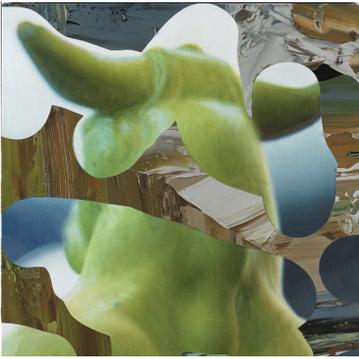


Fig 1.



Fig 2.



Fig 3.

I recognize some working methods from my own practice, the fact that he recycles imagery by feeding it back through the digital domain after manipulating in the physical. An object is painted, photographed, printed, overlaid, photographed, printed, painted, whilst referencing the techniques themselves: deliberate blurring to give the short depths of field as seen by a camera; portrayal of the eraser function in Photoshop; he paints paint as if seen on a screen; there are expressive (abstract as Richard likes to call them) brushstrokes re-rendered as the recycling in the media portrays recycled images. Foregrounds depict a different world but are intrinsic to the picture space as if the artist has invented a new dimension.

Clichés are by nature exposed, the actors on stage, you can follow their story and see what effect unfurls, pictures are read firstly by the commonest trope, a hook which leads us in to the scene. There is always the unexposed, or hidden End of the Play though, Patterson's work makes us feel that there is more to understand, we are peering through a gap in the curtains and getting two thirds of the story.

Saint-Martin, F in his book *Semiotics of Visual language* provides us with 26 names for different perspectives seen in art, covering projections used in delineation from all corners of the globe and is seen as a development of Panofsky's work *The Perspective as Symbolic Form*, with some modern ones thrown in. I have no idea why there are no illustrations to go with these insights but nevertheless these categorizations are interesting. Some of them appear to be culminations of various perspectives in the same image *The Perspective in height* for example is common in Chinese art, the view of mountains from a height so distance is governed by subsequent mountains stepping up on the picture plane is superimposed by eye-level renditions of objects in the landscape.

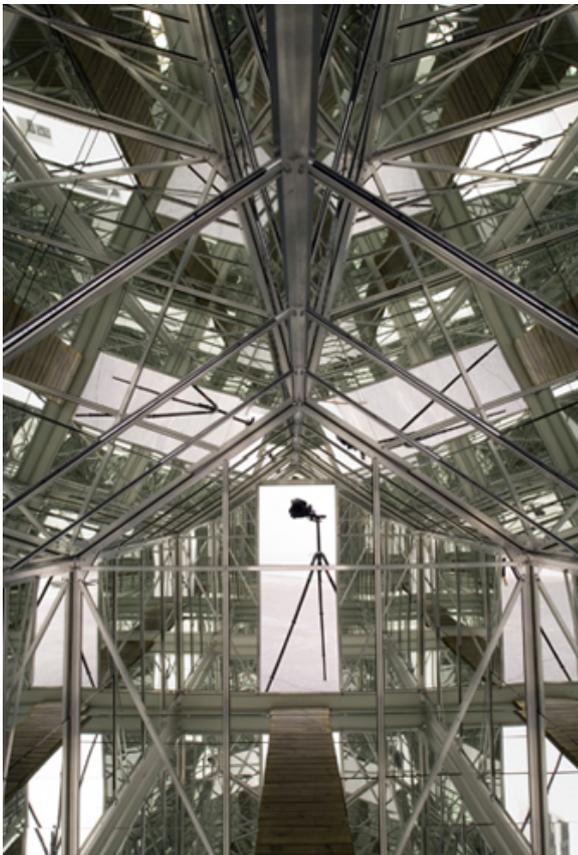
He touches on *Anamorphic Perspective* as developed originally in the scenic arts, 'In medium or distant depths, this perspective modifies in a gradual way the dimensions of one of the coordinates (height or width) of the Euclidean grid, without applying the correlation defined by the law of foreshortening in the linear perspective. Destroying the strict proportionality of the grid, it allows for the reconstruction of an iconic resemblance from a particular point of view on the side of the visual work.' – 1987:144

Very popular where there is a constricted viewpoint, as in a corridor or from a door, there is a fashion for chalk-based street art however where the viewer must find the point where the scene becomes 'convincing'. The position of the viewer is forced using *recognition*, allowing a very personal space-experience within an open area. *Photography* as a process is quoted by the need to preserve this particular point of view. Artists (particularly of this genre) compete in this day and age by getting images to go viral on the Internet. Anamorphic art appears to quote it's own destiny.



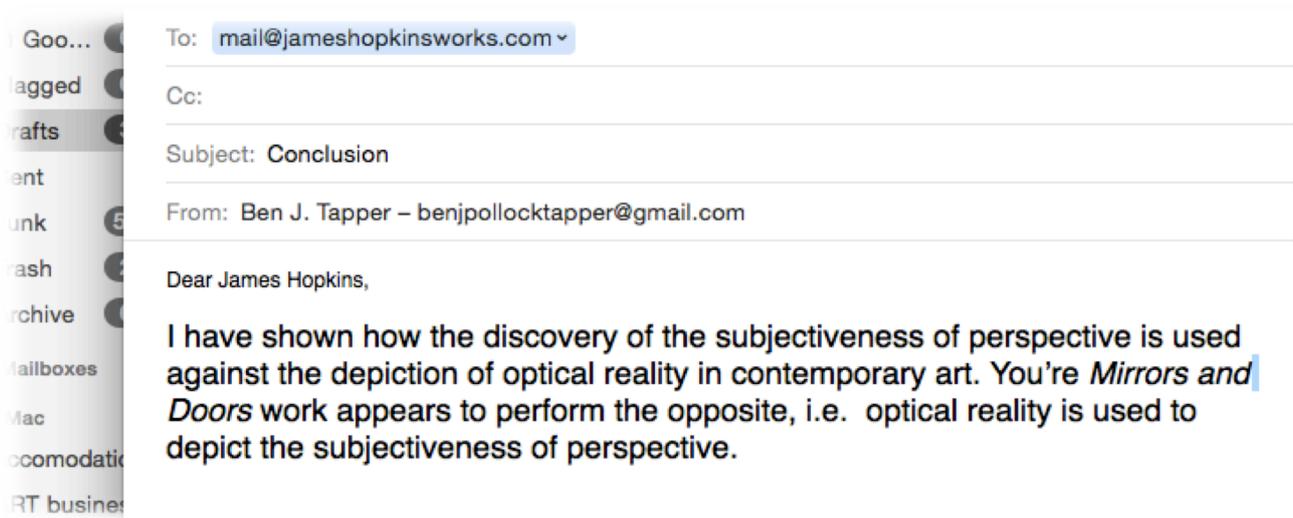
Mr. Hou
Chalk on Tarmac

Finally, I'm going to mention James Hopkins, He generally works in 3D, so the same rules don't really apply, but the concepts of manipulation of reality offer similar insights. In the following work the point of view *itself* is referenced with the camera depicting itself. 'It's precisely the point that one doubts one's (perfectly functioning) eyes when encountering these works' - Brian Sholis, Max Wigram Gallery, London, 2006



Acid Rain, 2006
(detail)
Greenhouse and
mirror, 195 x 195 x
255 cm
Courtesy of the
artist and Cosmic
Gallery, Paris

I shall conclude by sending James an email.



* * *

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Images

Fig 1. *The Spanish Chair* 2013
Fig 2. *Painted Minotaur* 1996
Fig 3. *Minotaur with Brushes* 1998

Richard Patterson images courtesy of
Timothy Taylor Gallery

Ps. I apologise for the incorrect spelling of Your, in the last paragraph but I cant change it now. Hopefully James will understand.