

Mimicry and Mimesis: Matrix Insect

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***Abstract:** Paintings and insects might seem like odd companions. In this paper I describe how a series of paintings I made depicting insects creates associations between mimesis and mimicry in order to flag a sort of protective self-referentiality – one where painting resists its proverbial ‘end’ and insects are presented as vital new orders. Drawing upon art historical references, such as Surrealism and the modernist grid, I argue that playing on these references and the compositional effects of camouflage enlivens our regard for the sensuous worlds of both insects and painting. I conclude by exploring how paintings of insects are powerful metaphors for imagining new non-hierarchical relationships between humans and non-humans.*

***Keywords:** Image, insect, painting, mimesis, mimicry, camouflage*



Madeleine Kelly West End Grasshoppers (detail) 2008 Oil on polyester 29 x 60 cm

Every now and then an insect appears whose body is so beautifully formed and compelling that it literally stops you in your tracks. It looks both similar to and different from the great forms around it. As a microcosmic mirror to the world, the patterns and structures on the insect's body both reflect and reveal its environment in a dynamic play of hide and seek. Finding difference and novelty in this play, at a time when so many works of art are produced out of so many different mediums and forms, is testament to the incredible pool of patterns and structures in the natural world. That one can still feel surprised and marvel at the extraordinary illusionism abundant in nature, despite the dominant view that almost everything has been visualised and seen in art, signals the crucial bank of relationships yet to inspire and inform art to come.

Even more compelling is the sight of an extraordinary insect whose body, in forming an illusion with its ground, seems relevant to the art world in two ways. First, because it connects with, and both clarifies and challenges, the power of the image to describe the 'original subject', and second, because the heterogeneous nature of contemporary art, and the historical semantic matrix on which art is now premised, seems to echo or mirror the insect camouflaged against its

ground. The way that insects form symbiotic relationships with their environment, where illusions deceive the observing eye, reminds me of the visual compositions in paintings that transcend traditional boundaries in new and vital ways. In the following, I discuss my work inspired by insects with particular reference to the theme of painting itself and the ways in which I have used insects to respond to the aforementioned notions of subjectivity and the semantic matrix of contemporary art. In other words, I address a synergy between painting insects and painting about painting.

Contemporary painting might be said to cipher notions of subjectivity through analogy to the body and I often achieve this in my work by representing non-human bodies. In the nineteenth century, painting was encumbered by its link to subject theory. Modernist aesthetic theory, largely comprising Romanticism, phenomenology, and critical theory, posited painting as the medium that privileged self-assurance (Hochdörfer 15). As Hans Belting describes, the image in painting is tied to the history of the human subject. It often represents a body or portrait, and requires the body of a viewing subject – a living medium that processes, receives and transmits images. In addition to the body that is imaged and the body that sees, is a third parameter of the body – the medium-support of an image. Belting concedes, ‘As images by definition have no body, they need a medium in which they become embodied’ (13). As a gesture that engages with the body through embodied images that are seen, the painted image might be described as an anthropological concept. By contrast, the inherent capacity of insect bodies to emit signs, through camouflage-like patterns, makes insects living mediums – they are important bio-indicators of atmospheric pollution and environmental change as Cornelia Hesse-Honegger has shown.¹ Structural affinities between the near-geometric forms of insects bring to mind modernist movements in art and design, while the singular form of the insect opens up the human subject through a being that is ‘other’.

¹ See Cornelia Hesse-Honegger’s beautiful watercolours of insect mutations caused by exposure to low-level radiation < <http://www.wissenskunst.ch/uk/contemporary/>>.

These paintings also embrace the critique of painting through imagery that references painting's history. As such they invoke a metaphor of painting from the insect world – painting as a network, matrix or web. They might call to mind Crimp's assertion that every painting belongs to the grid, 'the squared and massive surface of painting', the analysis of which has come to denote painting's history (47). By depicting insects within this matrix, threads of ecological crisis interweave with paint, and posit painting as part of a discursive field without compromising the intrinsic worth of image making with paint.

Now that I have established the insect's body as a living locus of images, I want to expand on how it may be interpreted as an allegory for the present condition of painting, one where painting becomes an order that reflexively questions the premise of painted images historically, on the one hand, and formally, on the other, through the mimetic image. Insects already feature in the historical matrix of painting: within still-life painting, they are frequently signs of the ephemeral, their fleeting existences a *memento mori* of the inevitability of death. In the realm of naturalistic illustration, depictions of their complex life cycles are testament to their remarkable metamorphoses, as well as documents of the West's empirical scientific gaze. By contrast, in myth, the anthropomorphic character of insects assumes mythic proportions, whereby insects are used as a mirror to a range of human conditions. In surrealist painting Freudian and archetypal notions of sex and death entwine in the image of the praying mantis.

Yet more inspiring to me is the affinity between mimicry and mimesis that serves as a point of discussion regarding this relation of insects and painting. I use insects in order to suggest symmetry between their bodies and the complex, nuanced matrix of images in painting that they seem to mirror. Mimesis in painting, according to Belting, was originally born of tracing the shadow, 'a theory sketched out by Xenophon, and elaborated in a fully systematic way by Plato...when the evolution from the making present of the invisible to the imitation of appearance' was completed (Belting 108). Accordingly, the analogy of the shadow opposes the body, as well as denotes and obscures the body. As such, mimetic images link presence and absence, as they always substitute for a body that is not there. In folding and doubling, images reanimate the living as well as animate the dead, thus dynamically replicating appearances. This oscillation between life and death is visible in my painting *Animation*, where translucently painted ghostly figures engage in artificial respiration.



Madeleine Kelly Animation 2015 Oil on board 39 x 44 cm

Insect mimicry provides a similarly dynamic mechanism. Both mimesis and mimicry rely on analogy, reflection and resemblance, with animal camouflage a sub-theme of mimesis. Mimicry and mimesis, as philosopher Tom Huhn suggests, might be said to embody an inescapable ‘alterity’ (8). Animal mimicry functions by replicating – it relies on one species appearing similar to another – yet it has a protective function not usually attributed to works of art. A doubling of form occurs when mimics evolve analogous features to their models, that is, when figures (bodies) resemble their ground. As Rosalind Krauss describes, referring to Caillois ‘The

praying mantis fashions itself as so many emerald blades of grass ... If it has passed from figure against ground to ground on ground, it is in order, by outsmarting its tracker, to hold itself intact' (155).

Contemporary painting might also be said to need to hold itself 'intact'. The last few decades have seen it subjected to reappraisal by neo-conceptualists who advocate for the dematerialization of the traditional art object, and in doing so, flag painting's proverbial 'end'. In response, much painting today finds new vitality by presenting visual paradox and ambiguity – camouflage-like appearances and tricks of the eye that cause one to reflect on one's own ability to visualise. In these instances, where ordinary vision is interrupted, where figure and ground are confused, painting might be described as presenting a protective function that refuses its reduction to any singular category and in doing so revitalises the medium. As Huhn describes, painting is 'an activity that theorises – with materials and appearances – about the nature of images' (7). To sum up at this stage, it is the analogy between images, shadows and camouflage that consists in their mimetic relationship to the body that I use to depict painting as part of a network of images and insects as subjects.

The insects that I have found, photographed and painted here, present intriguing surfaces and qualities that have inspired this parlour game of sorts. Once drawn into their intricate patterns and fine eyes, their forms captured my imagination, causing me to reflect on what constitutes an image, and the relationship between dream, contact, analogy and reproduction. In the painting *West End Grasshoppers* 2008, indexical paint marks applied by a fan brush provide a ground of camouflage upon which Geranium leaves and grasshoppers intermingle. Above the scene, concentric rings appear to emanate a pulse or signal, to which the insects incline, as if drawn to a formative pulse or rhythm of life.



Madeleine Kelly West End Grasshoppers 2008 Oil on polyester 29 x 60 cm

W.J.T. Mitchell is frequently quoted in the context of images, where his writing on the ‘life’ of images strikes a chord with artists and theorists. His discussion about the ‘personhood’ of images imbues them with certain subjectivity (72). In his conception he links the trope of the animated object to that of the living work, and by extension, as I have argued, a condition in which images, like animals, might need to ‘outsmart their trackers’. It is important to note that in my paintings, stick insects and grasshoppers are imbued with the symbolism associated with the mantis. Their antithetical appearances and behaviours invite playful analogy because mantises ‘play dead’ in defence against their predators. As Krauss notes, ‘the mantis’s posture in life is to mime the inanimate’ (171). Thus, in an ironic twist, they also negate the living image – the same image that is animated through human perception. Through this uncanny property, the image of the mantis introduces a ruse; a double way of reading an image as both alive and dead, and in doing so loosens poles of representation.

Similarly, in nature insect camouflage a subtheme of mimesis operates by confusing us. Our capacity to differentiate relationships between figure and ground is interrupted. Both concealing and revealing, camouflage succeeds by way of counter-imaging – whether through counter shading that flattens, or pattern that deceives – the ruse performs a kind of alchemy. Such

transformations are also at play in painting when morphing crystallisations of figure and ground resemble these effects of camouflage. Both figurative and abstract, painting is imagistic, and through fusions of their 'opposition' we observe images reconstructed, a synthesis of seeing and thinking where forms tessellate anew.

Tropidoderus childrenii



Madeleine Kelly Mimetic Praxis 2014 oil and Letraset on gesso board 39.05 x 32.1cm

In the painting *Mimetic Praxis 2014*, mimicry and mimesis abide. The figures are integrated so as to confuse distinction between figure and ground. Composed primarily of verticals, it shows the structure of a dish-rack used as an object-stencil painted onto board in various colours. As a camouflage experiment, the lines and edges of the resulting grid are scattered evenly over the

surface and continue flat out of the frame. The resulting image of the dish-rack occupies a space between aesthetics and functionality, its organic spaces conjuring notions of everyday object or fossil record.

A pair of copulating *Tropidoderus childrenii*, commonly known as Children's Stick Insect or Yellow-winged Spectre, who would ordinarily find sanctuary amongst the foliage of Australian gum trees, are painted onto the grid, a reminder of the potential dwelling spaces within all utilitarian items. Their act of love is seen from above where the male mounts the female and in reverse, where the male grips to the grid. The female stick insect is conveyed instead of the mantis without the 'negative female attributions' presented by male Surrealist painting in which mantis were often depicted as castrator or 'vagina dentata' (Markus 37).

The female mantis' camouflage is a fusion of plant and animal life that resembles what the Surrealists considered the primordial world of dream. Insofar as the mantis is tethered to camouflage – both concealing and revealing, playing dead but actually alive – she assumes special status in their work. Because of her metamorphic properties, she presents a primordial 'return' to unconsciousness, to a world in which animal-human relations harmoniously interconnect. Thus Surrealist connections between sex and death, wedded to psychoanalytic content, are captured in the mantis.

In *Mimetic Praxis* the grid also provides habitat to vertical bodies, far removed from human form, which are entombed in spaces. Made to resemble early Rothko figures or insect-men, they stand in opposition to classic iconography. Their androgynous bodies are caught in a coffin-like embrace, narrowly confined to suggest both psychological and psychic confinement, but also the promise of symbiotic growth and generation within anthropomorphic architecture.

The dish-rack lends shape to the grid. Its structure was epitomised in the minimal art of the 60s and gave pride of place to anti-naturalist anti-narrative imagery. According to Krauss the grid is a divisive rejection of the icon, harbouring iconoclastic traits: 'Flattened, geometricized, ordered, it is antinatural, antimimetic, antireal. It is what art looks like when it turns its back on nature' ('Grids' 50). By comparison, turning towards nature, this more 'feminine' dish-rack resembles the naturalistic grids that insects create, like the honeycomb and the wasp's segmented nests.

The grid exists as icon, recasting the male modernist grid that originally rejected iconography, as trivial. Softened and curved, it is reminiscent of Agnes Martin's dissolving, atmospheric grids, which are almost organic from a distance, as a contrast to the masculine hard edge grid. Also relevant is Krauss' invocation of the matrix. Matrix, conceived by Krauss, is a generative structure that points to the matter from which all life is formed. The word 'matrix' comes from the latin root 'mater', and as she elaborates, the term 'means womb, or mold, or die, but in Lyotard's usage, the unconscious' (Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* 192). Analogous forms are derived from this shared structure, reflecting other knowledge where visual analogy finds an equal in metaphorical drift. Language is based on metaphor 'shaped and constrained by our bodily experiences in the world' (Moslund 34). In my work, morphic forms defined by the matrix allude to such contingencies.

Just as the matrix provides a space to recast the modernist grid, it refers to the grid laid over the animal and plant kingdoms. Foucault observes the latter grid's blank spaces as manifesting a superficial order. By contrast, the matrix in my painting envisions other possible forms of human/insect existences wherein qualities and traits are shared, enabling ever new, non-hierarchical relations to appear, and in doing so, it eludes the projection of a classifying grid across the entire universe.

On the one hand, human bodies approximate the insects': on the other the insects' bodies are aligned with the human. Invoking the gestalt-psychologists, Krauss explains that to emphasise a vertical body is to emphasise human vision, the state of being 'fronto-parallel' and able to behold shape (247). An insect's vertical alignment implies subjective coherence - animals that not only see but also behold. By contrast, there is also the alignment with the horizontal, which Surrealist writer Bataille notes, as a descent into '*informe*', a category in which the body assumes horizontal geometry, and in doing so blurs the distinction between animal and human, formally rupturing order (156).

Atractomorpha similis



*Madeleine Kelly Through the heat seeks some bewildered soul 2014
oil on gesso board 27.5 x 34cm*

In *Through the heat seeks some bewildered soul* 2014 a northern grass

Pyrgomorphidae grasshopper, *Atractomorpha similis* points away from a house pictured in the distance. Her spindle-shaped (or arrow-shaped) head and antennae sit closed like a long, pointed beak, poised with certain avian grace. Her planar form is hardly distinguishable from blades of grass, her sentient figure interweaves with ground in such a way that grass is imbued with biological drive. Between wing and grass, appendage and blade, line and point, processes of mirroring and repetition point to exterior worlds.

The grasshopper, in which the symbol of the mantis is also interwoven, here negates the theme of structural matrix via the house which, inspired by Piet Mondrian, is painted in square regions accented with the primary colours of red, yellow, and blue. Mondrian is understood by Krauss as employing the grid as a 'staircase to the Universal' and is not 'interested in what happens below, in the Concrete' (*Grids* 52 – her capitals), which in this image, is the grasshopper's habitat. The house functions meta-pictorially. By referencing Mondrian's painting and the grid, the painting of the painted house weaves within the historical matrix of painting. In the thread between the grid and camouflage, and abstraction and re-presentation, is a grounded spiritual element. The grasshopper vectors as if longing, suggesting her sentience, of being and feeling herself as one point among many others, as perhaps dispossessed of place, bathed in content erasing red, and more or less looking for some ontological world to inhabit. Consciousness is by no means restricted to *Homo sapiens*.

The *Pyrgomorphidae*'s form doubles the act of referentiality, her figure (and by extension, her image) are like a tool, gaining 'foothold' by mimicking, by pointing, towards her environment – an ever transforming, adaptive medium. This act of pointing toward another aspect is mirrored by the painted image. Huhn suggests that the image in a painting glows because 'it is the becoming attractive towards what it is not' (10).

Pseudomantis albofimbria



Madeleine Kelly Exodus 2013 oil on gesso board 39 x 32.5cm

In this work titled *Exodus 2014*, a giant nymph *Pseudomantis albobimbrata*, commonly known as the praying mantis, crouches over the doorway of a house bathed in ethereal pink light. Assuming distinctive posture, she is poised to jump on cue. The flattened fence in the foreground signifies that order has lost its place. Many animals make nests, hives and other shelters. In the case of the mantis, she finds her home in trees, shrubs or grass where she can camouflage herself. In this unsettling scenario, the mantis presents a key rift by occupying the house, without camouflage – she is perhaps a *trompe l'oeil* image sitting on the painting, suggesting a false reality. The work references Foucault's *The Order of Things*, by featuring one of the now-classic figures from Diego Velazquez's painting *Las Meninas* (1656) – a painting which, for Foucault, signified the instability of order, the end of the sovereign subject and the representation of representation. In *Exodus*, the doorway in which the man is poised is embedded within a sort of tombstone floating in the sky, but in Velazquez's painting, the doorway is in the compositional vanishing point. Only touching on *Las Meninas*' complexity, the painting famously depicts the cycle of representation – artist at work, sitting subjects, and most importantly viewing subject – an 'unrepresentable space where the spectator's subjectivity is constituted' (Mitchell, *Picture theory* 62). Unlike the preceding works, where images are painted as if rhetorically engaging with resemblance, and as such with mimesis, this picture, in referencing *Las Meninas*, finds kindred spirit in the history of images that explore the nature of representation and that question reality and illusion. Underneath every picture is another picture, Crimp tells us (87). Importantly, working with strata of representation does not entail a search for origins, but rather an engagement with structures of signification and networks of knowledge. According to Foucault, the search for origins leads to hollow marks, where in the context of images, the surface of a painting and its capacity for mimesis, is 'no more than a smooth stone, bearing figures and words: underneath there is nothing. It is a tombstone' (16). This is not to say that a painting has no internal meaning, but rather that its meaning lies outside itself, in the surrounding systems from which it is created and recorded in the first place. As Weibel states, 'every painting is a cover; painting, like clothing, is to be addressed in relation to what it conceals and omits as well as what is openly stated' (16). To reiterate the kinship of insects and painting, the deception perpetrated by camouflage in order to protect species has been compared to the painting that presents the contingency, ambiguity and mutability of knowledge.

In *Exodus*, this crisis of representation, which images and painting need to account for if they are to remain ‘intact’, also broaches the Western conceptual schism between non-humans and humans. It is somewhat unsettling to accept the idea that origins such as archetypes and essential truths are irrelevant, yet it is crucial if we are to foreground the rights of non-human beings, who exist within different subjective worlds. One way to momentarily and periodically curtail Western knowledge that privileges rational thinking is to engage with surrealist principles and methods of psychic automatism, random chance and the collaged fragments of dream – to remember to forget the rational order we take for granted in order to open up new forms of knowing. Surrealist images aim for the freedom of dream, and as such are a path to imaging these new orders of being and belonging in the world, and of questioning our relation to other forms of sentient life. Therefore the vertical axis in the painting might be considered akin to the vertical axis in dream, which in Foucault’s short text ‘Dream, Imagination and Existence’, was ‘the vector of an existence that has lost its place on earth’ (62).

To summarise, mimetic bodies and animal mimicry duplicate appearances. In these paintings of insects, the insects’ capacity to conceal, misinform, and create visual ambiguity has been indispensable to my engagement with themes of visual perception and visualisation, and the critique of an anthropocentric order that threatens insect livelihood. I have created poetic images where insect camouflage and visual analogies assert a form of painting that has aspirations to explore its philosophical and historical context. Paintings of insects flag a sort of protective self-referentiality – one where painting resists its proverbial ‘end’ and insects are presented as vital new orders. Through the image of the insect we also negotiate corporeality and ironically find subjective coherence in the ‘other’. In detouring through tradition, painting deals with the ephemera that humanity has produced, and in this light, the insect may well come to signify not what is passing but what may reinstate.

Note: All paintings based on real encounters with insects and photographed by the author. The mantis nymph, attracted to the sound of my iPhone’s click, eventually jumped onto it! Repainting these photographs retains a human potency that cannot be equalled by photography.

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