

ALAN MICHAEL

interview with Brad Phillips

BP - Hi Alan. Thanks for agreeing to this interview. I guess I'd like to start off by asking you, what do you think is your relationship to Photorealism? Do you identify at all with that categorization? Not all of your work could be seen within that rubric, but certainly there are elements of Photorealism at play in what you are doing. I wonder what your thoughts are about that...

AM - I'm very into the access that Photorealism gives to a lot of areas ... its relationship to pop art, its reactionary status, its relationship to ideas-based artwork. It can represent brainlessness and it can be very intelligent. It gets alluded to a lot in contemporary art and is clearly part of the conversation, which is a tool in itself. It's European and it's American. I like it best for its alienating qualities – as a format, it turns off a lot of people immediately which is just something I think is great. Now, I'm using it to make work about the value of reference material.

BP - I like that you are pleased that it can turn people off. Looking at some of your paintings, cars and houses, the shoe paintings, bottles etc., is there an element of masochism in your work at all? Because these look pretty fucking hard to make. Are you the sort of artist that follows through on an idea no matter how difficult it might be, problem solving as you go along, learning how to make the painting while you make it?

AM - I wouldn't describe it as masochism, although I know what you mean. I prefer to think of those pictures just appearing in the exhibition, wherever, without making a big deal out of the time taken to make them. Playing that side down is quite important because you can end up talking about the effort element all the time, which is really boring. In fact, making those paintings is really boring in itself, it's just a process to achieve an effect – but showing them is really fun and exciting. I wanted to invoke the buzz of



Photorealism. I was in the Guggenheim in Berlin last year at a Photorealism show – crowds of teenage Italian tourists were having their pictures taken in front of a Ben Schonzeit painting of cauliflowers. It was really powerful. But anyway, my paintings are quotations of these types of paintings.

As for making them, yeah, they are just a case of working out the idea and completing it – there's almost never a situation where it looks better or worse than I planned ... I think they are convincing enough as representations of the genre, although I'm not really a 'painting' person, technically speaking.

Those earlier paintings of shoes were made in a slightly different way. Paintings like 'Cars and Houses' are based on photographs that I shot. But for these I used pictures from magazines, Italian men's Vogue etc., ads for English style Oxfords and brogues I had a thing about staple items – a perennial, a golden standard. Things that originally date back many decades but are still in use today. I suppose it was a hunch that became more formulated.

BP - So to then ask a painting question, since you aren't a painting person, do you use a projector with these paintings or do you grid it all out old fashionedly? Also I wanted to ask about your interest in Stanley Spencer who you have made references to in earlier work. Why Spencer?

AM - In the case of paintings like 'Cars and Houses' or street scene paintings, I had to grid them up and change the alignment of upright lines of buildings etc. because the photographs I shot would always have a slight wide-angle effect, or close-up parts that would be out of focus or something. But other ones are projected. It depends on the source image actually, even some of those text paintings are done with a grid.

With the Stanley Spencer thing, it was part of a lot of work I was making that used repeated imagery or texts. I wanted to quote an English painter and through a process of elimination I decided on Stanley Spencer. I'd done drawings of Lucien Freud and David Hockney paintings years before but they seemed like the wrong territory later on. I'm really interested in the whole process of presenting research material, in making the idea of a Personality, a Persona, exchanging special source material – the subject matter. The actual images or texts are usually 'types' ... it's about values. I did a show around the same time that used a record company logo as the basic image for paintings – it followed the same repeat-motif model as the painting of the Stanley Spencer.

BP - Aside from quotation, how do the text paintings interact with the figurative paintings? You've also combined the two, as in the bottle/grassroots work - do you think of your shows as a collection of narrative points? Are the images meant to interact with one another, and if so, how do they function on their own, once they leave the gallery and enter a collector's home etc.?

AM - With the combination of text and figurative works the basic premise was that I was really interested in the parallel trajectories of Pop and Photorealism. I think it's interesting that they both have broadly similar subject matter and timelines but generally have different politics and values projected onto them. I was also trying to focus on fixations people seem to have with the past - politics, products, culture etc. I didn't make exactly faux-pop works but I wanted to use that reference point of the text painting. I was thinking about branding boards as well, format wise. When I made my show 'Decamp' at David Kordansky's gallery in LA, I was right in the middle of these ideas. In the paintings, I obscured and distorted texts behind bottles and other glassware, which as a collection is a motif I associate with the middle classes of the UK. For example, one of the texts was from a blog by this band Belle and Sebastian paying tribute to a café in Glasgow that was closing down. In another painting the text was a list of the singer's 50 favorite films. I was interested in people in the here and now fixating on materials and texts from the past, the 60's 70's 80's. It was negative, but for me that's very positive.

The shows I did at Tate Britain ('Mood: Casual) and at Galerie Micky Schubert in Berlin ('In A Rotterdam Cell') looked similar but had different ideas about the conception – I became more and more interested in looking at the process of presenting Reference Material itself. It's a difficult thing to talk about but I got very interested in the attitudes designers (in fashion, in architecture etc.) have towards reference material. I identified a more informal, less conscious relationship to quotation within this field and experimented with adopting more casual attitudes toward appropriation and in approaching source material – it's about getting together formulas for generating artwork.

The works are definitely supposed to combine to form a whole exhibition, and are planned with that situation in mind. I think that by accumulation of exhibitions, a track record, the general knowledge that my work has a conceptual dimension has gradually become part of what

I do, so shifts in format are accepted or expected and when individual works are isolated they get thought of as being part of all that. I've occasionally seen my work shown in situations I've had little or no input in and it's always been fine, context wise.

BP - You said "it was negative, but for me that's very positive", you also talk about taking pleasure in putting people off. These are attitudes I can relate to. And I'm interested in your ideas about quotation and reference material, and perhaps adopting a faux-anything approach really. I suppose in many ways you are more of a conceptual artist than a 'painter'. Another Scottish artist making work with text and figuration is Lucy McKenzie, although you two are worlds apart. Do you think that there is an aspect of "Scottishness" to your work? How much is your practice informed by your geography, if at all?

AM - Its more of an attitude thing - I'm just suspicious of consensus and I tend to like artwork that is abrasive in some clever way. As a model, I can't think of anything more exciting than Kippenberger but I think that the formats and style of his period are all used up and are no longer confusing. Also, my actual personality, persona, background material aren't useful for all this type of thing and don't really appear in the work very often. It's usually material that stands in the place where that type of thing would be, and that's where my focus is. Generating a formula. I'd describe my work as uncommunicative rather than confrontational. I really love that quality in certain works of art; I think it's extremely important.

I don't really think there is anything overtly Scottish in my work - there's not supposed to be anyway - apart from a few occasions where I've done paintings of the city streets around here maybe. And that should be balanced by paintings of London streets - it's supposed to be generic scenes of a here and now city, the present day. When I think of Glasgow, it seems like a very similar place to a dozen other cities in the UK. Edinburgh is an outstanding place but Glasgow is no different to Leeds or Liverpool etc.

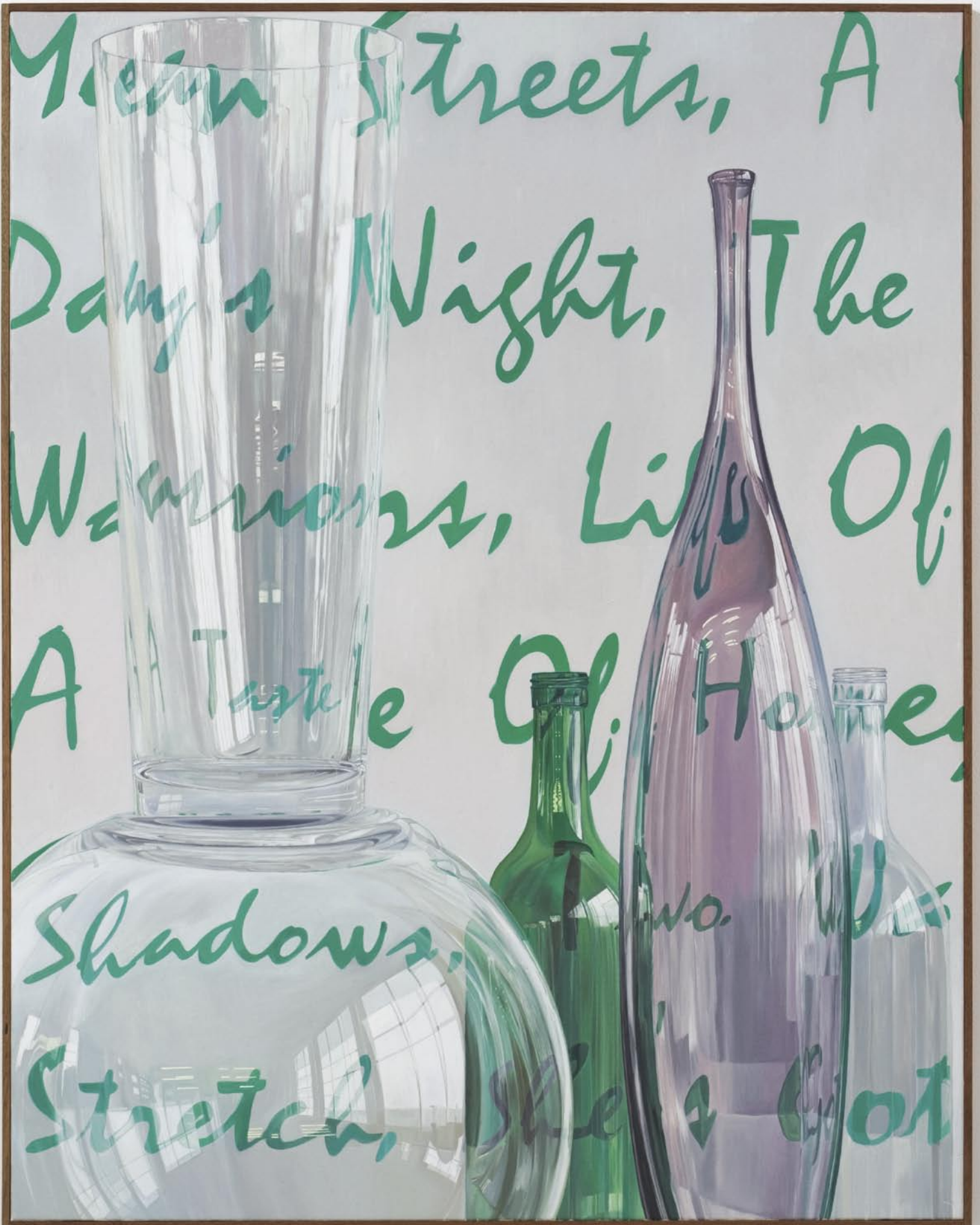
BP - You've made more than one reference to being uncommunicative or putting people off...what is it about problematizing the viewer's relationship to the pictures, that appeals to you? I remember an interview with John Currin years ago where he spoke about wanting to have an adversarial relationship with the audience, and you seem to also have these sort of sentiments. I'm interested because it can complicate the selling of your work, making

a living etc., if you are trying to put people off essentially. It's a tricky line to walk, being uncommunicative but still needing to sell work to get by.

AM - Its true that I like artworks that laugh in your face, films like 'Viridiana' and all that - maybe I'm masochist that way. That's a taste thing. But I don't think my work exactly sets out to do that. I'm trying to focus on the construction of my ideas in a very conscious, very self-conscious way, which - as a side-effect - makes the images themselves very unsymbolic. Which is the uncommunicative part, because it could make discussion of the imagery irrelevant and that could be a problem for people- a negative. When I talk about putting people off, I mean that ideally I wouldn't have to discuss my work in terms of the relative significance of the quotations and people who are into that kind of thing wouldn't find anything of interest in this work, it would be invisible. I do want to communicate things, but I'd like to avoid having a relationship with viewers just based on a set of assumptions about likes and dislikes. I also think that's a very positive thing. I think the main thing that complicates selling work is if it appears incohesive and disconnected without a recognizable look to the overall body of work ... rather than the ideas or attitudes of the artist. Confidence is often more important than whether the work is ironic, earnest or aggressive. Actually, it's hard for me to say a lot about that kind of thing - I'm guessing.

BP - It's interesting that you say confidence can be more important than the attitudes engendered in the work. I put a lot of stock in confidence, or determination as opposed to natural ability etc. So finishing up, what is your work schedule like, your studio life, and what are you working on now/have coming up?

AM - Yeah, confidence is gold. I'm working on a publication on my work right now which should be out in the autumn - its taken ages to do because I've left a couple of galleries in the UK since starting it, which slowed it up. But it should be good to have something like this, so I'm definitely looking forward to finishing it. Apart from that, I'm making work for a show at Hotel in London around November - it's a really good situation for me, my longest association in the art world, really great people who gave me my first show in a gallery. The show's about a further focus on the subject of Source Material ... can't say too much about it yet apart from that its paintings and possibly some silkscreen paintings. I'm working full time on all this in my studio in Glasgow - regular hours ... as you can imagine, I really like a good routine.





Alan Michael, *Pink and White*, 2008, oil on canvas, courtesy: Collection Gaby & Wilhelm Schurmann, Herzogenrath