

Henry Hudson.  
Reinventing the wheel.

By David Risley

The contemporary painters position is one of constantly reinventing the wheel. Starting from scratch. The whole history of painting still weighs heavily on their shoulders but rather than a continuation of proven techniques it is a perpetual standing start. No one is really painting at art school. Historically techniques and methods of working were passed on from generation to generation. Technique was studied and mastered before any attempt at making an original, meaningful painting was embarked upon. Today, the method of applying paint is as central to an artists practice as what they choose to paint with that method. Process and subject are interchangeable, often indistinguishable. The technique is the work. The process is the meaning.

The way the painter makes the work becomes the signature and distinguishing feature. A significant portion of contemporary 'painters' don't paint at all. 'Paintings' are not necessarily made of paint. Rudolph Stingel, Jasper Johns' flag paintings are made with encaustic, a kind of wax mixed with pigment which has to be heated to become pliable and worked quickly before it cools and sets. Anselm Kiefer's signature works are stripes of foil applied to canvas. Blinky Palermo's fantastic abstract canvases are just that, coloured cloth. Brent Wadden weaves his monotone stripes. Herman Nitsch - blood. Dan Colen - Bubble Gum. Mc - also Bubble Gum. Kirsten Brätsch - glass. Warhol - piss. Jacob Kassay - silver. Theatre Gates - roofing materials. One definition of painting is that it is just pushing coloured mud around on a piece of cloth or board. In this sense Henry Hudson is making paintings, though he hesitates to define them so clearly. He works with plasticine, a coloured form of clay, more associated with the nursery than the artists studio. He says he started using it out of necessity, it's cheaper than oil paint. I understand this but don't quite believe him. It comes out of a distrust of painting. He associates more comfortably with traditions of making than painting. A part of him leans towards the humbler truth of the craftsman. (paintings position in the hierarchy of crafts has gone through a full inversion since the 15c. Van Eyck, one of the technically and conceptually most gifted painters in history elevated painting to the level of the craftsmen at a time when painting was the poor cousin of more valued trades such as goldsmith. Painting was a cheap alternative to the real thing). At art school Hudson was making films and performances, before realising that the sets and backgrounds were probably more interesting than the finished works. This is a circuitous and evasive route to where he is now, making accomplished paintings. The problem with painting is that it will ensnare whatever you make if you come close enough to it, however much you want to avoid it. Language won't help you. Knowledge of alternative crafts and techniques won't protect you from it's grasp. Neither will avoiding the use of paint. Painting doesn't care. Apply a coloured surface with fixed boundaries to a wall in a gallery and painting will claim it as it's own. Especially if you're careless enough to start applying coloured mud to that surface and pushing it around. Which is exactly what Hudson does. His previous series took William Hogarth's Rakes Progress as it's jumping off point. The works were narrative and linear, reliant on one another to complete the story, like chapters in a book or scenes in a film. Hogarth's Rake was updated to become a contemporary Chinese artist... travails, .... The subject matter and imagery bore no relation to the technique. They were not necessarily at odds with one another, more they didn't even notice each other. The technique was a means to an end. A ridiculously labour intensive and laborious means to an end. The images could have been made with oil paint without any significant alteration in their meaning. The plasticine added a certain 'wow factor', a, really? But this happened alongside or in spite of the pictures themselves, a bit like John's flags.

Hudson's new series, to be presented at Sotheby's NYC, brings the technique and the subject into the same place, happening at the same moment. The process and the image are aligned now. They need each other. These seem to be the paintings that plasticine wants to make (God making snakes). Hudson's new paintings are sweaty, claustrophobic, disease ridden images of nature. Hallucinogenic renderings of dense jungle. The plasticine melts into his vision. Sculpted and moulded with tools and fingers. The paintings look outsiderish, like a crazed child genius locked in his room too long, making pictures to terrify his analyst. Gauguin reliefs. Richard Dadd. The scale is hard to pin down. Are we tiny in this world? Moist and sexual. Phallic and yonic. Atkinson Grimshaw's Old Mill, The little Botanist, A Mossy Glen ( <https://biblioklept.org/2016/03/01/a-mossy-glen-john-atkinson-grimshaw/> ). No horizon, no depth. Oppressive. Byzantine. Nature's revenge. The nature of the city dweller, made in a studio in the East London. Places of the imagination. These paintings give us much less to go on than Hudson's previous Hogarthian works. They show a firmer faith, in both the image making and the viewer. Through offering us less these works are far more generous. They trust us to be able to navigate them, giving us space for our imaginations to explore, a place to fond and deposit fantasies. I used to believe (as I'm sure most of us do) that subject matter = meaning. The more I look and read the further from the truth this becomes. An artist cannot choose to add meaning to a work. Loading a painting with references and signifiers does not lead to it becoming more than a sum of its parts. A Frankenstein's monster. Meaning sneaks into works. The artist provides a situation, however spare and somehow it is transfigured into something inexplicably more. By stripping away the direct pointers to things that mean things, Hudson leaves doors open for meaning in unaided. These works look like they grew in the studio in the dead of night. Plasticine, heat and moisture provided the conditions for a musty, lurid, fecund jungle to take root and grow.

There is a great work by Jayson Musson ( <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cu-I5kSeat8> ), in character as Hennessy Youngman, addressing his Youtube audience of imagined art school students in which he explains why it's impossible to make any original art after Bruce Nauman. "You like water right?, 70- 75% of the earth is covered in water, wanna use it in your art? Bruce Nauman already used water, fuck it, he owns water, you're too fucking late. Hands? Too late, Nauman already did hands, he owns hands..." etc etc. Hudson was using plasticine, now in Hennessy Youngman's parlance, he owns it.