

SURFACE MORPHOLOGIES

ALISTAIR PAYNE & STUART MACKENZIE



HOUSE FOR AN ART LOVER

MORPHOLOGIES OF SURFACE AS GESTURE

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*"Often when looking for a thing I find something else."*¹

- Neil Gunn

Alistair Payne and Stuart MacKenzie are artists who have been in conversation for a number of years. It has been a sustained discussion about their shared commitment to the specificity of their respective disciplines, a conversation about painting and print, a discussion that has focused on their enthusiasm for the journey ahead, one very much filled with what has yet to come, for the past is always littered with misfortune. This may well be the burden of the artist, the artist who prefers to take risks but it is also the mark of a curious mind: for the possibility of failure is an essential part of an artist's success.

For these artists, as for many, the studio is a necessary place for thought, for those intense periods of concentration so studiously worked towards, and which upon their arrival begin to falter as the time of making moves on. But the studio is a treacherous space for it is the location of difficult moments, of conversations with matter and stuff where the many things thought simply do not work out: things thought must be thought again. It is also the space of the threshold, somewhere physical and somewhere imagined, a space that is always in some way uncertain, a space in which we must always take heed, for such thresholds are also more fully the very demarcation of the edge, the ante before the actual: something we collectively recognise as that which transpires at the very limits of the workspace. But for many including myself thresholds are the active spaces within, for those things that inhabit the space of the studio are invariably in transition.

For Payne this is a significant point for the transitional is the imagined space of the surface as layer upon layer it becomes through its own dissolution, whilst for MacKenzie it resides in the in-between, in those surfaces that come together, or

Alistair Payne,
**An Indeterminate
Prognosis,**
oil on canvas, 2014





Stuart MacKenzie,
Species:
Capercaillie II,
oil on paper, 2017

in the transference of a medium from one surface onto another, the moment of pressure before the peel. Thresholds, one might say, are seductive for they are promisory sites of anticipation. But for these two artists if one thing is certain it is that thresholds announce space as much as they announce surface: the space-surface and the surface-space are in radically different ways their focus of attention.

I often imagine Payne and MacKenzie's daily routines as they approach their respective spaces of doing with the intense demand of thought and the thinking through of what needs to be done for these are the spaces in which action and thought reside, in which thought *becomes*, amidst the *already made* and the paraphernalia of the studio space. But it is hardly a revelation to say that the space in which thought might play is not always the space of affirmation for this is a time that takes time, a time of tension and suspension, for the studio is "a 'living' room... [often the space of limited time] that 'holds' the process [of making] non-sequentially and makes it 'present'"², a time in which the span of years collapse, for the studio is the space of the incomplete and the apparently abandoned, those *things* dismissed as irredeemable: those skeletons behind the studio door. But, the studio is also the space of the yet to be thought, the yet to be nurtured, the yet to find its way. And it is here for both Payne and MacKenzie that there is a sense of resolve, a sense of responsibility to those too often wilfully forgotten half-remembered ideas still 'lingering' amidst the multitude of surfaces and between the studio walls.

Such moments in the studio before the time of making are always compelling for there is a need to somehow renegotiate the work already there, the work that already inhabits the space the work that is going to have to give way to yet more ideas in need of habitation. Sometimes this work cries out asserting its need for attention, like some demanding child, as if agency is somehow all too present in the material stuff itself. And of course there are those who would fervently argue that this is actually so, perhaps in the form of those speculative and momentarily fashionable triple 'O's', with their rhythmic mantra of the 'O' 'O' 'O', of the 'object turn'. But, some would say that our investment in the objects we make is far richer than that embodied in material form, for one might extrapolate from the work of the anthropologist, Edwin Hutchins, from his *Cognition in the Wild*, that the objects we find ourselves in relationship to impress upon our psyches in far more complex ways⁴. As a result, we can never fully cleanse our hands of the very things we make, for the paint and the ink is as much in the sedimentary formation of ourselves as human subjects, as it is on the surface of our hands, as it is beneath our fingernails.

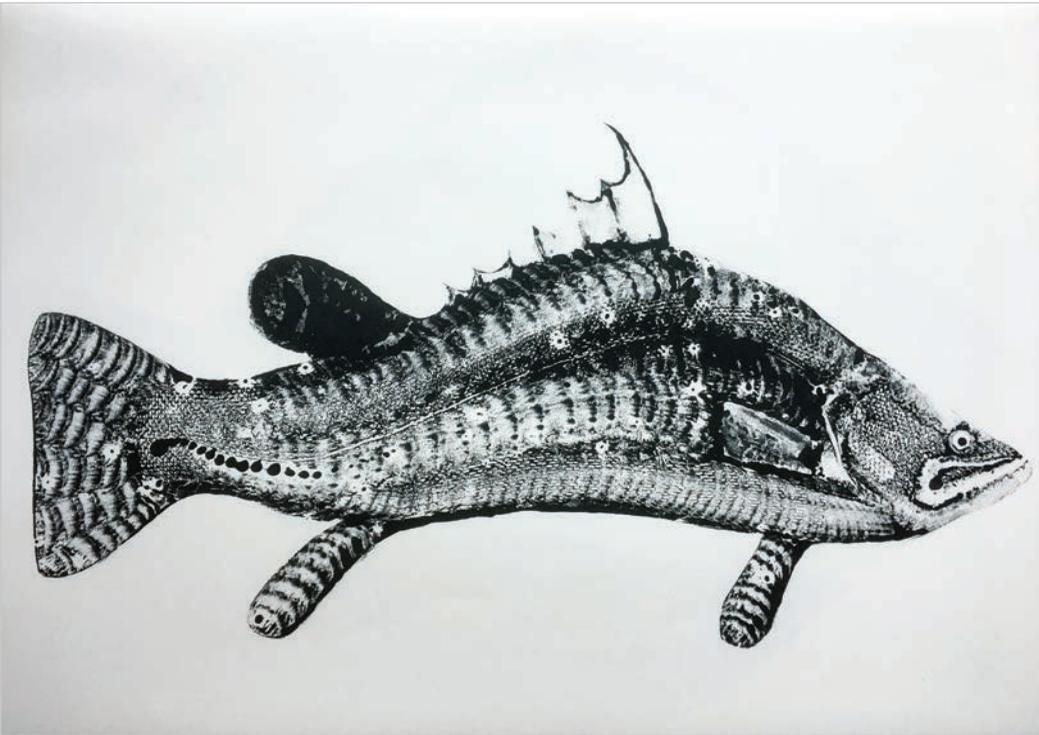
Nevertheless, some may call upon us to pay closer attention to the task at hand, to give greater care to the very nuanced materiality of the artwork - as it is in the process of becoming - before wet becomes dry, as if scanning the body of the dead, the already dead, for lingering signs of life in those moments of grievous acceptance: of grievous acceptance of what has *become*, the realisation of its own *un-belonging*. But, perhaps it is here in such moments, and through the philosophical scrutiny of Maurice Blanchot, that we come to a more complex understanding of the artwork as something akin in its status to the dead, for as Blanchot, reminds us again and again the artwork is always cadaverous. For Blanchot what the cadaver presents does not belong, it is *the image of the image*: something simultaneously overwhelming and marvellous⁵.

On some level, even in putrefaction the forces of life persists, processes continue beneath the surface not only of the work but also of the world that always presents as *the image of the image*, or the abstract world of the zombie, what we might call the complex *formal* condition of the dead. Sometimes it feels as if such material bodies are holding back and we the viewers are positioned, as waiting, waiting for that moment in which there is the inevitable deep release, when they can withhold no more an inaudible gasp 'to be' as if in transit from water into air.

One might claim this to be elemental a matter of *matter* itself, of a substance and its properties (as if delving into the molecular with Karen Barad⁶) but it is also about the awe that we experience in the natural world, the flora and the fauna within which we are entangled. For some reason this makes me think of angling, fly fishing to be precise (and the wisdom of the salmon sought out by Neil Gunn as a boy somewhere upon the Strath⁷), for this is where the transit of the surface takes place between two distinctive worlds of habitation, worlds that on the surface can never fully mix: water and air, regardless of their often turbulent happenstance. Yet still such environs become replete, when water becomes vapour and air is trapped in the ancient streams and rivers and oceans of the Anthropocene, those places in which the most ancient of species, the Coelacanth live. This is also where we find the invisible unification of the world of things, where atoms become and molecules bind. MacKenzie knows this all too well, for the angler casting off it is the silent movement of his hand, body and rod, the delicate touch that informs this scene. As the line draws high in the air in preparation for a moment of swift release in which, the line that falls in gentle perfection across the surface of the water, does so with the subtlest of reverberations: a balanced enticement from above to below. The pressing adhesion of ink into paper, the painted surface with its lacquered sheen, the place where matter comes to *matter*, the place of materiality and scene.

Alistair Payne,
**Un-subtle
Inflections**,
oil on linen, 2017

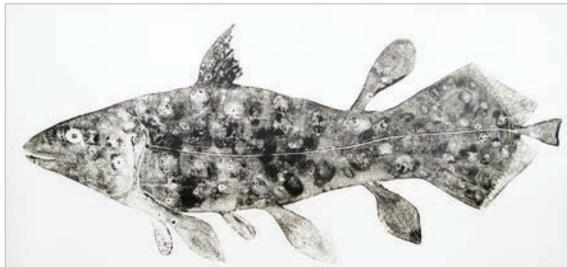




Top:
Stuart MacKenzie,
Species:
Barramundi II,
oil on paper, 2017



Bottom left:
Stuart MacKenzie,
Species:
Perch,
oil on paper, 2017



Bottom right:
Stuart MacKenzie,
Species:
Coelacanth,
oil on paper, 2017

One evening whilst waiting for another, Payne shows me the work he has been making by flipping through some images he has taken on his iphone. He excitedly shows me numerous permutations of the work, the possibilities for its design and composition. Clearly, the intention is to give some understanding of the nature of the work itself prior to any actual encounter but it strikes me that such digital images lack resonance, for they have no actual experiential edge.⁸ This has become commonplace for so much of what we encounter where contemporary work is mediated, abstracted from our actual experience to such an extent that we regularly mistaken the image for the thing itself, *the image of the image* perhaps without any primary experience of affect. This is the place of safety, for an encounter with what we might call the 'secondary affect' has little impact other than to nullify our experience of the world. To render it somehow ineffectual, as Parveen Adams⁹ might say through *the emptiness of the image* or in the way that David Abram conjectures that we are now so distanced from the world by the abstraction of language,¹⁰ that there can never again be any truly phenomenal attunement.

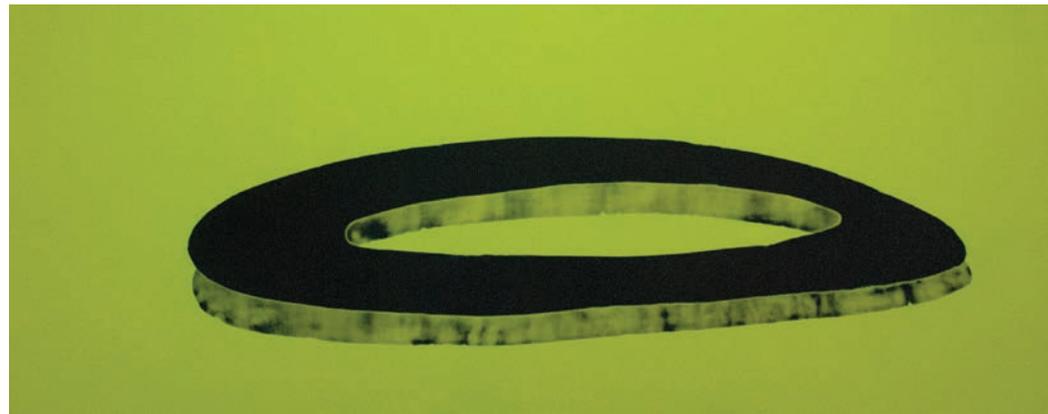
This becomes interesting in this context for the work being made by these artists constitutes a concern with painting and print that simultaneously affirms and negates what these practices are, in favour of a deferral of knowing that is also an act of ambivalence. They both appear as they are and yet infers that somehow they are not. They assert a certain position through their material surface, ones we are jolted into that potentially claim the work as photographic, or at least allusive so, as somehow close to the photographic surface (Payne) and also the photographic image (MacKenzie), a relationship which Rosalind Krauss in another context describes as a "*visual likeness, which bears an indexical relationship to its object.*"¹¹ The indexical and the cadaverous are never far apart.

Both paint and print processes may well be viewed as indexical, the palimpsestuous indexing of layers, the scripto-inferior revelation, the imprinting from one surface onto another. But perhaps this imagining of the image as something indexical, also denies the surface that fails to expose its means of production, something that in following Daniel Rubenstein, we may refer to as 'the amnesia of the invisible'.¹² The status of the latent image as latent, as that which can never be materialised prefigures the cadaver as *the image of the image*, as that which *has been* and lingers in rigour mortis. Furthermore contra Abram, one might contest that some forms of abstract painting and image making forge a more direct relationship with the world for it is pre-linguistic and therefore indicative of those moments prior to marks being read rather than seen, the spaces of bio-structural and linguistic morphology.



Strikingly, the work of both Payne and MacKenzie can be understood as being concerned with morphology. MacKenzie with his study of the natural world as part of an on-going archive titled Species Morphology, of species and their gestures, ostensibly of fish and of fowl, from Barramundi to Salmon, Capercaillie to Pheasant¹³ in which there appears to be no space to breathe in water or in air for they are held tightly between the edges of the paper, the sharp reality of the physical edge that renders the image as frozen, as held in place with no means of escape, as if caught: somehow latent, in the shutter of the camera. But the dead eye of the Barramundi looks back at us blindly as if laid on the fishmongers slab for the very first time. There is a much greater sense of *the image as the image* here, the image as something cadaverous, for there are instances in which these fish appear blotched and mottled, monochromatic and in delineation, some densely black like the salmon, some as pale and light as the Halibut, as if emerging from the paper, as if the fish themselves had been the source of the imprint. The closed eye of the Capercaillie hints too at the deathliness of the image but it also hints at its strength of presence and its being in the world for this is an image with accents of vivid red that brims with evocative gestures and impressions, of touch and an economy of marks, as if caught fleeting in the forests amongst the pines, marking territory: in action, calling out, an image of audibility.

Alistair Payne,
Descension,
oil on canvas, 2017



By comparison Payne's concern with morphology is one in which he attends to the forms, shapes and structures held within the surface-plane, works in which one encounters a sense of other worldliness, works in which in their heightened use of colour there is a dislocation from the everyday into the immeasurable depth of the surface of the work. The viewer's position is always unsettled. This is a highly evocative practice one in which the image, the sense of the image, is emergent as if surfacing from somewhere deeply psychological for these are works that speak of interiority. There is also something cyclic in this body of work and Payne continually questions the emergence of certain structures and motifs such as the repetition of elliptical forms, forms that have reappeared at intervals over time: forms that themselves mark intervals.

But as I scan these paintings for clues about their presence I think of that which is before me and that which has yet to come for there is a deep sense of the emergent as the space of anticipation for there is always something looming out of the sheerness of the surface. But the surfaces of these paintings are complex in their construction for what appears to loom also sit upon the surface-space rather than within it. One haunting image in particular *(D)welling*¹⁴ is so impactful that it evokes a train of thought in which I find myself at the bottom of the ocean, bearing

Alistair Payne,
(D)welling,
oil on canvas, 2017



witness to the yet unseen, to that which lives in the darkest places on earth. But these paintings are rarely dark for their surfaces are often rendered in vivid yellow and vivid green, intense in their spatiality, simultaneously ocean and plane, the imagined viscous space of the deep and the dead so many writers have written of. This is the deepest darkness, a space that once light penetrates reveals the most unimaginable forms of life. As if caught in the tracking lights of divers the surface depth of these paintings gives way to the unimaginable.

Yet Payne and MacKenzie are also aware of the treachery of representation, the problem of the mimetic where image becomes mirage, where the image is misread as something all too real. But as Blanchot recounts, '*Mimesis appears as such.*'¹⁵ For Blanchot the cadaver does not belong, it has no place in the world. It is neither a natural nor cultural object. It '*withdraws not only from life but also from the order of meaning*'¹⁶ hence it appears as such. The cadaver, the image is always simultaneously as it is and other than it appears to be. It is in suspension, it is the irreducible surface-space. It is a mortified stability and in many ways the work of Payne and MacKenzie is equally irreducible.

HENRY ROGERS

July 2016

Top:
Stuart MacKenzie,
Species:
Pheasant,
oil on paper, 2017

Bottom:
Alistair Payne,
The Fall,
oil on linen, 2017

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Henry Rogers for bringing such care and attention to the catalogue essay for this exhibition.

Gemma Mannion for supporting us both through this process, I am sure she will be greatly missed by all those at HAL and also to Jimmy Cosgrove for suggesting we submit a proposal to show in this unique space.

Tonje Ytterstad for the photographs of Alistair Payne's work and Michael Fullerton for his work on Stuart MacKenzie's images for the catalogue.

Lynn McKnight and Tonje Ytterstad for their unstinting support of the artists work.

- ¹ Neil Gunn, *The Atom of Delight*, (Polygon, 1986), 1.
- ² Rebecca Fortnum, from her paper presented at the *Not Knowing, How Artists Think* Symposium, Kettles Year, Cambridge, 2009.
- ³ Object Oriented Ontologists as derived from Object Oriented Ontology that is often entwined with Speculative Realism in which living and non-living entities are regarded as having equivalence as “objects” towards a reconsideration of ways of thinking about and being in the world. One of its main founders was Professor Graham Harman.
- ⁴ Edwin Hutchins, *Cognition in the Wild*. (MIT Press, 1995). Hutchins explores an unusual interdisciplinary approach to cognition in culturally constituted activities outside the laboratory -- “in the wild.” He explores how people interact particularly with objects such as ships in which the actions of many make the object perform. His analysis of cognition he then explores in relationship to learning arguing, “that cultural activity systems have cognitive properties of their own that are different from the cognitive properties of the individuals who participate in them”.
- ⁵ Maurice Blanchot, *Two Versions of the Imaginary in The Gaze of Orpheus*. (Barrytown/Station Hill Press, 2000).
- ⁶ Karan Barad, *Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter*, in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 2003, vol. 28, no. 3. (The University of Chicago).
- ⁷ Neil Gunn, *The Atom of Delight*. (Polygon, 1986).
- ⁸ This incident reminded me of another, for in December 2016 I watched a young woman take a photograph of Botticelli's *Primavera* in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, again on her iPhone. Arm outstretched to such a degree that she could hardly keep it still, but eventually after a prolonged intake of breath the image was taken. She seemed pleased and relieved in equal measure. But her anxiety was misplaced for the iPhone (the technology) did what it always does and standardised the image into a ‘good shot’, the good mediation: arguably a ‘good’ cadaver.
- ⁹ Parveen Adams, *The Emptiness of the Image* (Routledge, London, 1995).
- ¹⁰ David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (Vintage Books, 1997).
- ¹¹ Rosalind E Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-garde and Other Modernist Myths*. (Cambridge, Mass.; London: MIT Press, 1985), 203. “Every photograph is the result of a physical imprint transferred by light reflections onto a sensitive surface. The photograph is thus a type of icon, or visual likeness, which bears an indexical relationship to its object.”
- ¹² Daniel Rubinstein, *Digital Image*. (Mafté’akh; Lexical Review of Political Thought, 2014), 6 (1). Here in speaking of analogue photography Rubenstein regards his concern with latency as dealing with ‘the amnesia of the invisible’, the amnesia in photographic theory, to attend to the ‘latent image’ as a necessary ‘prerequisite for the formation of an ordinary photograph’. ¹² For Rubenstein the latent image must always be latent, suspended it must never emerge. It must never surface for in surfacing it ceases to be.
- ¹³ The images of the *Barramundi*, *Salmon*, *Capercaillie* and *Pheasant* are all oil monoprint on paper.
- ¹⁴ All works are oil on canvas or linen and completed in 2017.
- ¹⁵ Maurice Blanchot, *Two Versions of the Imaginary in The Gaze of Orpheus*. (Barrytown/Station Hill Press, 2000).
- ¹⁶ Joseph Sugila, *Holderin and Blanchot on Self Sacrifice*. (Peter Lang Publishing, New York, 2004) 96.

BIOGRAPHIES

STUART MACKENZIE

Stuart MacKenzie RSA lives and works in Glasgow. He is Senior Lecturer in Painting and Pathway Leader of Masters Drawing and Painting at Glasgow School of Art. He is a council member and chair of exhibitions for the Royal Scottish Academy and was convener of the Scottish New Contemporaries 2016. He has shown extensively nationally and internationally. His work is held in numerous collections including the National Collection of Scotland. Recent exhibitions include, *Subtle Subversions*, Donghua University, Shanghai, China, *The RSA Annual Exhibition*, Royal Scottish Academy, Edinburgh (with catalogues), and *Heresies* at the Lamb Gallery, University of Dundee. MacKenzie will be exhibiting in September 2017 in New York, at the Norwood Club in a survey of recent Scottish Art. In 2017 he published *A Reconsideration of Painting as a Material Based Practice in Teaching Painting: How can Painting be taught in Art Schools?*

ALISTAIR PAYNE

Alistair Payne lives and works in Glasgow. He is currently Professor of Fine Art and the Head of the School of Fine Art at Glasgow School of Art. He completed his BA in Fine Art at the University of Hertfordshire, MFA at the University of Newcastle and PhD at Chelsea College of Art and Design (2005). He has shown extensively in the UK, Europe and the USA. He had a recent solo exhibition titled, *Indisciplinary Behaviour*, Rom8 Gallery, Bergen, Norway and exhibited in *The Ends of Art* at Beton7 Gallery, Athens, Greece. He has also published his writing on Painting and Philosophy including the book *Painting as an Interdisciplinary Form* and the book chapters *The Virtual and Interdisciplinarity*, 2013 and *The Virtual, Alternate Spaces and the Effects upon Artwork*, 2015. In 2017 he published *On Painting: The Discipline, Interdisciplinarity and Indisciplinarity in Teaching Painting: How can Painting be taught in Art Schools?*

HENRY ROGERS

Henry Rogers is the MFA Programme Leader at Glasgow School of Art and Visiting Professor at the Royal Academy of Arts, London. From 1997-2017 he worked at Birmingham School of Art where he was latterly Head of Postgraduate Taught Studies. In 1990 he was awarded the Mark Rothko Memorial Trust Award to live and work in the USA and in 2001 he became an Abbey Fellow at the British School at Rome. Since 1990 he has worked in art schools in the UK and between 1986 and 2002 he lived and worked in Florence, Paris, New York and Rome. Publications include: *I See What You're Saying: The Materialisation of Words in Contemporary Art*, Edited publication with Ikon Gallery, Birmingham (2013); *Queertexturealities: queer methodologies in art based practice*, Edited publication, Article Press (2013); Article ‘*Civil Partnership: All About My Mother's Shame*’, Zetesis journal [refereed journal] (2012).



HOUSE FOR AN ART LOVER

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The Studio Pavilion, situated in Bellahouston Park, opened to the public in 2014 acting as an artist's retreat in the heart of the city. The Studio Pavilion is a highly significant addition to House for an Art Lover's ARTPARK Glasgow, Centre for Arts & Heritage. The innovative design enables transformation between exhibition space and artist's studio, giving local and international artists opportunity to produce and exhibit work in a creative environment.

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For more information on ARTPARK Glasgow's programme, please contact our Arts and Heritage Development Officer at: arts@houseforanartlover.co.uk or call: 0141 427 9557

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