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JOHN BUNKER IN CONVERSA- TION WITH MICHAEL STUBBS: THE CAKE PAINTINGS

I just wanted to create an impactful, if not deliberately cheeky, critical idea. I was reacting against the idea of the emerging art market, and those works examined the mechanics of the commercialisation of culture.



Michael Stubbs is well known for his poured/graphic stencil paintings. I believe his work offers material proof that whatever does not kill one's art – in this case, a healthy scepticism about the status of painting in the wider culture, but also about the nihilism that haunts so much of the critique of that status – will very likely make it stronger.

But how did he come to forge his dynamic brand of contemporary abstraction? I wanted to take this opportunity, to discuss with Stubbs, his early body of work known as the 'Cake paintings'. To me, they feel like the lodestar of what was to follow. How did they come into being? What, if any, conclusions can we draw from them now? And how have they impacted on his current thinking?

Coming to maturity as a painter in the early 1990s, Stubbs characterised the ensuing struggle with his chosen medium as an:

"obsessive questioning of how painting's contemporaneity relied on, but fought against, its daunting history. In short, we found ourselves burdened with the dominant trend of the day, which stated that we were at the end of history and that painting was dead. We gradually recognised the limitations of the theories of the 'death of painting' (as theories) and sought ways to reconfigure painting."

Stubbs set about 'reconfiguring painting' by looking critically at painting's modernist and postmodernist past. In a climate in which Fredric Jameson asserted that, "If the experience and ideology of the unique self... is over and done with, then it is no longer clear what the artists and writers of the present period are supposed to be doing." Stubbs answered this challenge by developing a new kind of agency for his painting practice – one that acknowledged the extent to which subjectivity and the sense of self are mediated by language, ideology, institutions and, arguably, by the stupefying effects of late capitalism's all-pervasive deployment of 'the image' – whilst ensuring that the work remained sumptuous, energetic, seductive, and engaging to the curious eye.

Thirty-one years on, are these *Cake paintings* 'breakthrough' works? And if so, what did they break through to? Do these paintings still speak to us? Do the issues they address still resonate for those of us painting today? And how does Stubbs perceive them now, given that his style (and arguably his content) has changed?

John Bunker: So, to kick off... Michael, before we get into the thinking at play in these works, can you describe the process of making the *Cake paintings*?

Michael Stubbs: In 1990, during my MA at Goldsmiths, I started making 'stacked' or 'layered' paintings. They resembled a real cake in terms of depth and sculptural size whereby I forced



Untitled (blue)
1990
Oil paint from cake icer
on stacked canvases
32 x 32 x 22 cm

Courtesy of the artist

oil paint through cake decorating equipment. They were a foot square and up to five layers deep (a serial reference to Minimalism). They were made by laying the stretched canvases out in a row and repeating the same patterns of squeezed oil paint across each canvas. While the paint was still wet, the canvases were laid one on top of another in the fashion of a layered cake. The paint would ooze out of the sides of the stack while the final, front piece remained intact.

JB: Just thinking about the layering process and the drying time for a moment, you must have had to work out a lot of the procedures beforehand, or was there much room to experiment in the process?

MS: I would produce them systematically, but once I got used to repeating the patterns on all of the layers, it simply became a matter of stacking the layers up on the studio floor and waiting for them to dry into solid objects. I figured out that, after two to three months, the paint would hold the canvases together so they could then be mounted onto the wall of a gallery.

JB: What is striking, also, is the sculptural quality of the work. Was this on your mind at the time?

MS: These painting/sculptures were a refusal to take sides with media specificity. They were intended as comedic critiques of Clement Greenberg's ideas of the purity of the medium, whereby painting was viewed as the *highest* of all arts. The idea was that the paint referenced itself in the same way as Greenberg would have wished, but at the same time they also became 'pure' sculptures: a doubling up of media that would have been an anathema to Greenberg. The painting/sculptures, when dry enough to move, would then be displayed on the wall (as optical painting) at arm height (sculptural touch).

JB: I first saw one of these works when I came over to your house in London a few years back. Funnily enough, because

they are wall-based, what struck me was the fact that the cake-like qualities came in focus a bit later as I was looking at the piece. The work's material density and symmetry is what hit me first, and the colour! There's that thick creamy painterliness that one might associate with a Robert Ryman, or with Jasper Johns' *Flag* paintings, especially the stacked *Three Flags* or the *White Flag*.

MS: They were not only aimed at critiquing the division between the genres of painting and sculpture, but also at the pretensions of impasto: gestural, high-culture abstract art, which included the Modernist Masters of Abstract Expressionism such as Jackson Pollock or Willem de Kooning (similarly British painters such as Frank Auerbach and Leon Kossoff). Most of my early painting/sculptures were monochromes, so they also lampooned other, multiple modernist art histories (Malevich's *Black Square*) and also, at times, the motifs of the late 1950s target paintings of Jasper Johns. The fact that they resembled actual, material cakes lent a further, ironic reading toward the idea of the art object as a consumable in the then-emerging art market for young British artists.

JB: So what was driving the need to obsessively reference all these icons of twentieth-century art? What kind of theoretical frameworks were you reaching for at that time?

MS: A dialectical tension between the histories of Modernism with all its high cultural associations, was turned, by me, into a decorative process that belonged to an entirely different realm of popular cultural experience. Making a 'cake' was not what was expected of an artist during the so called 'Death of Painting' that was prevalent in the museum and critical art world of the 1980s-90s. I was helped in my decision to make these works because of my academic reading at the time: post-structuralists such as Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard, Jean



Baudrillard, and Michel Foucault, etc.

JB: I noticed that these cake pieces appeared in shows during the ferment of a new emerging art market for young British artists, and that you showed alongside Keith Coventry, Glenn Brown, Ian Davenport, Peter Doig, Gary Hume, Callum Innes, Julian Opie, Fiona Rae, and Rachel Whiteread. These artists were often criticised for being 'one-hit wonders' or 'novelty' artists. Sometimes, it can be a very fine line between creating innovative, challenging art, and producing a 'string of hits' that might grab a few headlines. How conscious were you of walking that line between being innovative and creating 'novelty art'? Or is that idea of the 'fine line' entirely the wrong way to think about the *Cake* paintings?

MS: I wasn't thinking too much about the status or value of 'novelty' or becoming a 'one-hit wonder', whatever that means in the meaningless demand for fashions in art. I just wanted to create

an impactful, if not deliberately cheeky, critical idea. I was reacting against the idea of the emerging art market, and those works examined the mechanics of the commercialisation of culture.

The *stack/cakes*, I argued, were literally consumables: the painting as cake as art market consumable (in the Duchampian tradition). However, although critically successful (*Artforum*, *Vogue*, *Time Out*, *The Independent*, *The Art Newspaper*, etc.), I became frustrated with the repetition of the negative production of an ideas-only based painting, and began to explore the possibilities of reintroducing a positive understanding of painting free of the 'end-games' of postmodernist deconstruction. I expanded on base materiality by using extra colours for decorative composition; different 'designs' on the front piece, or utilising different cake-making nozzles to resemble gestural brush marks. Then, around 1992, I began squeezing paint out of mastic guns in grid formations as a reference to builder's tools – a popular cultural reading as with the *pâtissier's* cake decorating tools – and with the grid also referencing a sort of childish Mondrian. The titles were gleaned from pub gambling machines, such as *Triple Seven Heaven* or *Cloud 999* – aspirational titles that seemingly offered financial promise, deliberately compromised by the awkward application from the mastic gun. So, this aspect of finance and art was further explored within my work at that time.

JB: I'd like to bring in a quote from Andrew Graham-Dixon at the time. He notes that you were moving on from the *Cake* works...

"Stubbs more recent paintings look like *Bakewell tarts*, but they, too, carry their freight of pictorial reference: one looks like an edible *Bridget Riley*, another rather like a *Frank Auerbach*. They are generally less tasteful, less enticing than his earlier work. Stubbs has become more of a painter, maybe, and less of a *pâtissier*. It is hard to be a painter these days because so much of the language feels worn, used up. Perhaps a style,

Cloud 999
1993
Oil paint from mastic gun on
canvas
32 x 32 x 6 cm

Courtesy of the artist



DPM Membrane
2021
Household paint, tinted floor varnish,
digital poster on MDF
153 x 122 cm

© Michael Stubbs
Photo by Damien Griffiths
Courtesy of PALFREY, London

now, is something that can only be approached on tiptoe. It seems to me that that is what Michael Stubbs is doing at the moment, and that is why he is unusual. These paintings are sensual and they are beautifully handled. In the end, they are not super-cool at all, although there is something guarded about their wittiness. They are nervous, self-questioning pictures. They are anxious objects.”

JB: Looking back, is that a reading you can relate to? I'm particularly interested to know if you recognise the role of anxiety in your approach to work at this time.

MS: Oh yes, they were anxious objects alright, part of a heightened anxiety that surrounded myself and my Goldsmiths colleagues about the very status and future of the fine arts.

JB: Graham-Dixon is referencing Harold Rosenberg's essay *The Anxious Object* from 1966, in which he suggests that,

“Works intended to shock or startle, scarcely stir up a query... Attitudes, styles, modes, casts of characters replace one another without a struggle. All the art movements of this century, and some earlier ones, have become equally up to date. It is as if art history had decided to turn over and go to sleep.”

Funnily enough, although Graham-Dixon seems to be drawing parallels between 1991 and 1966, Rosenberg could be talking about 2021! Do you recognise such parallels?

MS: Not necessarily, because the ‘art world’ is much more diverse now in terms of content and commerciality. The art landscape of the early 90s – and I'm talking predominantly about the London scene – was very different to 2021. Many young artists now, it seems, are not concerned with the same critical language we were then, because those values are rooted in that time. Now, my paintings utilise different critiques revolving around painting, although there is still a concern with layering, colour, form and, of course, a critique of the tropes and inherited language(s) of painting. In fact, looking back at the



Michael Stubbs: Three Paintings
Installation view
2021
PALFREY, London

© Michael Stubbs
Courtesy of PALFREY, London
Photo by Damien Griffiths

quotes above, I've found myself in a position where it's more acceptable to be a Neo-Formalist painter, but – and I need to stress this – a painter who juggles, juxtaposes, and argues with painting in relation to popular cultural concerns and motifs. Graphic design, utilitarian paint materials, and the digital screen all have an impact on me now (albeit flatly now rather than thick impasto). But that's another story!

References:

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Postmodernism and the Consumer Society
1998
In: *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998*
Verso, London

Andrew Graham-Dixon
Michael Stubbs: Critics View
Artline International (Art Issues)
Winter 1991/92



John Bunker
Rite
2021
Acrylic, ink, collaged canvas,
collaged denim, coloured
papers on denim on board
37 x 65 cm

Courtesy of the artist