

the children paintings

1.

Everybody assumed, when the paintings first appeared, that they were a gnomic element of a broader and, as yet, unrevealed advertising campaign. This had more to do with the almost complete conquest of every scrap of public space, including the interstices of our subconscious minds, by the advertisers and merchants and aggressive capitalist imagists and peddlers of consumerism in its most rank form, than with the nature of the actual paintings themselves. The marketing boys had managed to take over the magazines and Sunday supplements, the lampposts and bus shelters, the roads were rimmed with bill board after bill board, the walls splattered with fly posting, the night sky polluted by neon signs, football teams, action movies, television, our own clothes, everything became an advert to such an extent our brains were flooded by it and we could never be sure if what we bought was something to buy or just something to advertise something else or a blurry case of both as the Maltese cross became the thin petalled flower and back again. It was a testament to how far gone we were that when we first saw the children paintings we didn't think children, we thought toilet paper, or perhaps life insurance.

The first one I noticed was on the pillar of the railway bridge that arched over the road as I dipped and sped towards home after work. A little moppet boy sprog, about one year old, eyes staring, pop-eyed and immediate, mouth a little open, definitely a painting, but with a photographic realism. I thought nothing of it. I drove past it all week and all week registered it as another form of graphic static which the commuter has to habitually deal with. The eye level reading matter that stays there for a month; the new television screens at the railway station that flash visually arresting ten second video reels; the articles in newspapers that look like articles but are really selling you a book about how to spell. Most of these tricks and stratagems are so ubiquitous now, you don't even register how ridiculous they are and how annoying. The annoyance is as unnoticed as the labour of breathing. No one says 'the Coca-Cola cup? the *Coca-Cola* cup?' Well, Naomi Stein might, but you kind of had to buy that as well. Chomsky says there's no way of avoiding it. If we got fed up and decided to just stop buying stuff, we might as well just kill ourselves; that is, the impact it would have on society would be more or less the same. Not that there's no solution, but just withdrawing isn't an option. Not a viable one.

It was actually Toby who pointed out it wasn't an advert. We were coming back from the supermarket. We always go to do our big weekly shop on Saturday lunch time as, if you time it right, the place is deserted.

'How do you know?' I said.

I was driving. Toby hates driving because he says he is easily distracted, but I suspect he is, as in all things, a complete coward.

'Julia, Julia,' he said. [The unreconstructed supporter of patriarchy likes to luxuriate in his own condescension.] 'Don't you see it's painted directly on to the fabric of the pillar. Nowadays advertisers would never seek such permanence.'

'Well, if it isn't an advert what is it?'

'I'll wager this ... is a work of art.'

2.

The second one could easily have been the first painted. Like the first victim of serial killer who is carefully weighted down, whereas the second is there for all to see. It was on the wall of an electricity substation. A girl moppet now, holding up a hand in an uncertain gesture, perhaps of invitation, perhaps of warning. I say it might have been the first because this was high summer and the electric substation was neck high in nettles and brambles and long grass, the effusive superabundance of July. It was only when the municipal authorities got off their arses and trimmed and strimmed and hacked and chopped in August that the painting became visible. The likelihood is that she had been peering through the long grass all that time and we hadn't noticed, like she was playing *Hide and Seek*, but playing it the way all children play it, giddy and frightened and longing to be caught. *Pretend to Hide but be Found* might be a better sobriquet.

'Have you seen the new friend, Julia?' Brenda asked me. She has short hair and eyes that blink too often, as if she is forever emerging from a darkened hall into bright sunlight, which she is only occasionally in actuality doing. Strange to say I knew exactly to what she was referring.

'On the coast road?' I asked.

'Yes, I think she must be called Gemma. She invites a naming, doesn't she?'

'Maybe she already has a name.'

'Oh no, I don't think.' Brenda will not countenance an idea which doesn't come directly from her or from her book shelf. 'She is a blank, awaiting the fulfilment of the gaze.'

'Cool,' said Toby to irritate her. She blinked at him as if he were a mote in her eye.

We were in the garden eating hotdogs with fried onions. It was a kind of mid-summer ritual, often to the sound of the interminable test match commentary, a dodderly melange of Posh and Yorkshire and West Indian that pattered on until something exciting happen at which point it would suddenly

begin wheezing. Toby and Leon lay back on sun loungers and Brenda perched on the edge of a deck chair. I had commandeered the hammock.

‘What I want to know...’ said Leon who made a virtue out of long unnecessary pauses... ‘is who is doing these children paintings...’ he bit into his hot dog, munched and swallowed, took a breath, ‘and why?’

‘Forever the teleological impulse,’ said Brenda throwing up her arms, not so much exasperated as going through the gestures of exasperation, like a dance. ‘Nothing is good enough in itself it has to lead to something, something has to be behind something to have meaning, but here’s the paradox isn’t it, here is it, for once you’ve seen what is behind the thing then you are automatically driven, nay compelled, to inquire what is behind that.’

‘Yes,’ said Leon, very tall and oddly misshapen, who didn’t give an ounce what Brenda thought because he knew she was terrified he would leave her and go off with someone less intelligent. ‘But still, I would be interested to find out ...you know ... what the story is?’

At which point Brenda burst into tears, which rather made Toby’s day.

3.

‘Why don’t we like our friends?’ was Toby’s question later that night, subsequent to rigorous coitus.

‘I think it’s because we don’t like ourselves,’ was my rather harsh but undoubtedly true riposte. I had not liked myself for some time. I hated what I was doing. I wrote for a local newspaper, just your usual stories of swimming galas, new bacon-slicer for the Co-Op, a hundred years old and can still play the piano and yet what I wanted to be was a real something or other. I’d never been absolutely sure what it was, an actress perhaps but I couldn’t stick the theatrical types at school, arty farty tossers, the lot of them, or a proper writer, but I didn’t have the patience it took to sit still and do it properly. Ultimately, I could not sit on my own in a room for any length of time and that rather rules me out as a writer. Still, I was burning with an ambition, a terrible all consuming ambition, to be something else.

Still, the newspaper money was okay and the job itself passed the time, but I would be thirty six next week and look at me.

Toby was happy in his work. He taught Geography at a secondary school. I say taught, he corrals the children through the years until they go off and do something else. He relishes the meetings though. For some reason he seems to rev up to the parent nights and the staff meetings. It’s his old radical political self being projected onto interminable battles with the heads of other departments

and the headmaster, who he frequently refers to [quite seriously] as his nemesis. Still, having said this, I think the underlying reason he likes his work is because it gets him out of the house, it kills time. That is all that we seem to have left, that and our ridiculous little rituals, the sex, the food and our favourite programmes.

I suppose we should be thankful we have so much.

For Christmas we are going to splash out on a big screen plasma TV.

4.

Of course, Leon was right, there was a story here and so when I saw the third and the fourth paintings, I decided now was the time for the fearless *North-Western Evening Gazette* reporter to get out her trusty spiral ring notepad and start pursuing some hot leads. The first step was to get some nice pictures of the paintings. I took Thomas Purlieu down, him and his little satchel of equipment and his humour so dry and straight faced that often I'm not sure if it even qualifies as humour any more. Still, I like him sitting next to me in the car as I motor along and the occasional physical contact as we talk together at work, him always standing just that nth degree closer than he really ought and me letting him and leaning into him sometimes when I walk or laugh.

'Look at these birds,' he says. 'They're like science fiction space ships with feathers. Pod blasters. And you know whizzing.'

'Groovy,' I say, keying into his mock druggy retro babble. If that's what it is.

We photograph the pillar.

'He's used a photograph,' he says.

'What do you mean?'

'He painted this from a photograph, not from life. It's very good. You see there. He's even painted in the slight blurriness and red eye.'

'How long do you suppose a painting like this would take?'

'I couldn't say,' he takes some more photos.

'You think he could do it in one night?'

'I couldn't "in all honesty" say.' He stands back and considers not only the painting but the camera in his hands. 'Look at me photographing a painting of a photograph. Just call me Jean Paul Baudrillard and lets have done with it.'

'No,' I say.

Standing on the side of the road like that, makes me realise that the loudest noise that cars make here on the open road is not the noise of the engines but the noise of the tyres ripping along the

tarmac, the clunking and thumping of trucks as metal hits metal. And the Doppler effect so that the sounds seem to come out of nowhere and then vanish. There's no story to it. These are just terrifying events succeeding terrifying event.

That evening the photographs are published with my story. I've played it up as a mystery. The fact is I haven't actually gone out and asked anyone as yet. If I'd done that I would have just got one story, the one Leon wants to know and me too I suppose. Rather this way I get two stories, the questions this evening and tomorrow, hopefully the answers. Sally Brampton, the editor, loves getting the readers involved so I make sure I print the 'contact us if you have any information on...' tag at the bottom of the story.

Chances are it'll save me a good bit of leg work. Hell, the artist will probably get in touch himself and that will be that.

More importantly, writing the story would have meant staying late and *The Simpsons* is on, so I rush home for that. And wouldn't you know it's a repeat. There's nothing as sad as watching Bart writing on the blackboard and realising 'oh I've seen this one.'

That is the saddest part of my week.

5.

I didn't have to wait until the next day. All hell broke loose that evening. Toby was at another of his long staff meetings and so I had settled down to watch some of the DVDs that have been lying around for weeks waiting for me to watch them. I tend to order these European cinema masterpieces box sets. It's partly because this is the kind of thing Agatha Toning raves about and she is one of my favourite journalists. You just feel she sits there lapping these things up and, as I didn't get a chance to, not living in London, it's always up to BBC 2 double bills, Channel 4 seasons or DVD box sets to get my intellectual background filled up and strengthened. I've been going through the works of Werner Herzog recently. Wonderful crazy films. Anyway, I'd just started *Even Dwarves Start Small* when the telephone rang. It was Sally who was going absolutely ape shit over the story about the photographs. Apparently she'd received three telephone calls from devastated, horrified and outraged readers.

It transpires that these paintings are of dead children. It takes me a while to get the whole story but I hang up and I'm still so confused I have to ring Sally back up and ask her to tell me it all over again.

The thing is it appears that no one except me, Leon, Brenda and Toby had even noticed the paintings. So for many people the photographs in the newspaper had been the first time anyone had

seen them. Once I'd unravelled this from Sally's frankly spluttering phone call, then I was able to quite calmly say that we finally had a real story.

'They're not actually angry at us,' I told her. 'They're angry at who painted these things. We can champion them. Interview the police. Get some action. Tell their stories.'

Sally realised it would be indecorous to accept my conclusion too readily and anyway it would make her look stupid, so she gave me a kind of "don't think you're getting out of it that easily" speech and then hung up. She phoned back a few minutes later to say she's had a chance to think it over and maybe it would be better if we met early tomorrow morning and discussed the strategy for the paper.

6.

There were paintings of dead children all over the place and no one knew who was painting them or why. The children had been the victims of illness and accident. There was nothing sinister as such in the appearance of the paintings. They were taken from photographs that were in the possession of the families, but which had also appeared in the newspaper itself as part of the death notice. Someone could have copied them from there. The only real mystery was who was doing this and why. I might well have added how and when but no one was really interested in that. It was the meaning and the agent that unsurprisingly our Western mentality latched onto, the more existential interested in method, the doing rather than the reason for the doing, well it was pointless to even talk about that.

The police response was simplistic in the extreme. Officer Carton said that as far as he was concerned this was just graffiti, straight and simple. Damage and destruction to private or municipal property. Other paintings had appeared on the walls of a school gymnasium, a railway station underpass, the back wall of a cinema. All the places were slightly hidden and the children kept appearing.

We ran three interviews with each of the families involved which spoke almost identically of their hurt and distress and indignation. The consensus seemed to be that these paintings should be eliminated and whoever had painted them should be found and punished. And so that's what Sally wrote in her editorial. She also brought out some things which certainly hadn't been stated but which had underpinned all the complaints and the aggression: a subtext, unspoken and yet certainly there, a fleeting feeling, a vaporous suspicion.

A. To what end was this being done. What was the bottom line? What was the profit? This was most certainly exploitation, the parents kept using the word, 'exploiting our grief' and so

forth, but what was the meaning of it all? What was the story? Ultimately, what was being advertised? And

B. Was this the evidence of paedophilia? How far away from paedophilia was this? Was this man dangerous?

As far as I remember, there were very few voices of opposition. Of course wouldn't it be my luck that one of those voices had to be Toby.

Dear Editor,

[He wrote] I have enjoyed reading your local newspaper for its often unintentional amusements, but I must say this week you have really excelled yourself. First you print a story so incomplete you ask your readership to fill in the blanks. Surely asking us to read your newspaper is work enough; we shouldn't be required to write the bloody thing as well. Then when the blanks are filled in by distraught parents of deceased children, instead of counselling caution, keeping your mind open, on you rush once more into realms of idiocy via your editorial in which you seem to suggest the painter of these pictures to be a cross between Saddam Hussein and Sweeny Todd. Couldn't it be possible that he is someone else altogether?

Sally printed the letter as evidence of the paper's magnanimous and open attitude to criticism and also to strum up some controversy of which there was predictably enough plenty. Indeed it was this issue of the newspaper which devoted the centre spread to letters rebutting both Toby's letter and another letter which suggested that the paintings were actually quite nice in the most vociferous and abusive terms.

Toby shrugged. 'There is no anger like local anger,' he pronounced. But I could see that as he was reading it he was discomfited. What had he expected? The one lesson I had learnt in all my years (eight) of local journalism was that the idiots always won.

7.

It was the strangest thing to follow Officer Carton from one site to another with his council workmen following in a van behind and witness the painting out of the children. There was something very oddly like desecration in the air to see their podgy faces disappearing under swipe after swipe of white wash. Thomas Purlieu stood next to me and took his photographs. It was only that afternoon that I began to realise just how many paintings there were. In total, fourteen. And each one had been done with great care and attention and skill. But the bodies had been exhumed and needed to be laid once more to rest. We needed to forget them. Parents couldn't keep driving past these images of their children. The dead had to die and the living had to get on with it. Anyone

who attempted otherwise was being unnecessarily cruel. Sally had taken a more sensible sounding tone for her subsequent editorials. She also wrote the Agony Aunt page and it was this tone that came to the fore now, rather than the hectoring of her earlier editorial. She used words like 'healing', she quoted Tennyson and Larkin. Something surviving. Love does something. Or something does love. I can't quite recall.

A week later I took Thomas Purlieu out to the pub, got him drunk and fucked him on the floor of his bed-sit.

8.

The difference between the new paintings and the old paintings was not immediately apparent. They had reappeared in the same places and featured the same subjects. The substation, the cinema wall, the supermarket, the railway underpass, the bridge strut. The little girl holding up her hand, the boy staring, a little one laughing. God, it was painful to see them there again. And I don't know why.

Officer Carton said the paintings had been painted despite the fact that the police had been patrolling those areas with increased vigilance, suspecting that their might be an attempt on the painter's part to somehow respond to the destruction of his work. We printed a long interview with him and also featured a sort of mini-profile of him as well, which was hard going since there was scant material.

At first, we thought the difference, the slight haziness, the lack of focus, the blurriness might have something perhaps to do with the painter working more hurriedly, for fear of capture; that it was a flaw. Again it was Tommy, perhaps with his eye for such things visual, who saw that this wasn't the case.

'He's painting the pictures as they were printed in the newspaper,' he said.

'What do you mean?'

'Look,' and he held up a copy of the newspaper. The photograph of the painting was reproduced in the newspaper and the newspaper was reproduced in the painting.

'Jeez,' I said, leaning close to him, without needing to or even wanting to but doing it and feeling a twinge of cruel pleasure as he shifted away.

He was an arse.

9.

I was in the supermarket with Toby and we were doing our usual routine. I was doing all the work, pushing and filling the trolley and he was making desultory and redundant comments about the various brands he affected to despise. Leon and Brenda were coming over for Halloween and we were going to watching some of the most gruesome horror films ever filmed: *Cannibal Holocaust* and *Audition*. It was a tradition, dating back from watching the first *Evil Dead* movie when Leon had actually been sick although he claimed it was a white out from the strong grass and the *Tennent's Super*. We always did our best to cook something particularly gory to encourage Leon to produce sequels maybe even a franchise. Gooey lasagne, or blood red steaks.

By some kind of accident, I wheeled my trolley into the baby food section and Toby gave me this look. Or more accurately, he gave this imaginary television crew that he always seems to have filming the documentary of his life this look, this oh here we go again look, as if I'd been harping on about having children for years. And it occurred to me that Toby and I have never once contemplated having children.

Not even once. And I looked at him and he looked at me. Not at the television crew, but actually at me. Our eyes actually met and we looked at them and we held it for who knows five seconds and then we both said, 'Nah!' and burst out laughing and that was that.