

Caragh Thuring



Caragh Thuring is an artist living and working in London. In Thuring's process-driven paintings, architectural vignettes sparsely occupy stretches of raw linen. Her work explores boundaries, spaces and what she has called "lateral portraiture". In 2015, she had a solo show at the Chisenhale Gallery; this year her work has been on show at the Thomas Dane Gallery. She has also produced three books, *Watch*, *Some Men* and *Letter*.

Interview: Thomas Roueché
Portrait: Alison Goldfrapp

Thomas Roueché Have you always been a painter?

Caragh Thuring I started painting again maybe 12 years ago. I returned to it after having given it up when I left college. I find it mysterious; it's what I imagine writing a book is like. You have to engage it in a very slow way; there's not much you can immediately relate to, no people or movement, little physical

material. It's not like a sculpture where you recognise that that's stone or metal or wood and it already has a language. In a way, you're starting from nothing, but I like what is not there, that mystery. There's a sincerity in the way that I approach it which is probably slightly embarrassing in our current climate, but I enjoy that and because people try and avoid embarrassment in a way, there's

this huge space, this gaping hole. There's lots of freedom.

TR I loved your work on Dutch windows – it really talks about ideas of display. I think you've called your approach to them "lateral portraiture".

CT I'm interested in boundaries and I have always thought about different ways of making portraits of people, kind of lateral portraits. The windowsill is a boundary line between the internal world and the external, and there is a sort of representation of the interior that can be completely misleading. I was fascinated by what that space might be, the very thin space between the big outside world and the big inside world, and the way you can look through it. With some of these paintings, even after I painted them I thought, "What is that?" I painted from photos that I had illicitly taken in Dutch suburbs – I was running around and my dad was helping, and people were coming out and saying, "What are you doing?" It wasn't very good, but I really needed to get those images! They are from very dull suburban places where very few people are milling around. Just all this repetition and symmetry in the window displays, and some go really off the scale and have weird objects that don't make sense. But these windowsills are really a portrait of the inhabitants – there has always been a culture of display and of wealth in the Netherlands. Historically, the country has had a bourgeois, colonial merchant past, a comfortable horror that people pretend is not really there. I've also always been fascinated by ports and shipping; for example, Singapore is just one big port really, with Malaysia as its hinterland. Ports are like window ledges, too: they are usually fine strips and have a whole ecosystem of activity going on within this thin line of exchange between the sea and the hinterland.

TR Do these ideas connect to your interest in advertising? There's obviously a similarity in these ideas of self-presentation.

CT As a child, I found advertisements on television so embarrassing! I loved watching them because I thought of them as ridiculous little films. I was probably the perfect person to watch them in a way – they're exciting in a kind of perverse, off-kilter way. It wasn't because I believed what they were trying to represent, but that I found them amusing in a wrong sort of way. So again, it's about what is behind something. In my work drawing on advertising I use images that feel very uncanny, generic humans in a space,

people in a plane that are completely not interested in you, and that are way beyond each other, too. I chose ones that I find particularly peculiar.

TR You recently launched a series of books. One of them was made up of hundreds of images of watches from advertising, all of them showing the same time. I thought that the book had something really candid about it. You were sort of bringing up the curtain and in so doing bringing out this weird embarrassment.

CT Totally. It's the veneer of what they are trying to project and the staggering variety of attempts to do it over the years, how that has evolved – and the sheer idiocy of it all really, the fact that anyone would believe any of it. I used the paper that the *Financial Times* uses to make the book, because that's where you see a lot of this kind of advertising, and it's all part of a big structure. I suppose for me it's about acknowledging all of this, breaking it down, making you even more sick of it, and ramming it down your throat. The book is 360 pages or so. It really started off with noticing that watches in advertisements always show the time 10.10 or 2.10 – I hadn't known that before.

TR And that is basically because it looks better, because it looks like a smiley face?

CT Yes, it's supposed to look positive and not awkward, perhaps even smiley. Occasionally you see an image that doesn't follow the rule and it suddenly looks a bit weird, like an advert that doesn't quite work – suddenly one's off kilter and it looks a bit cheap or jarring. But I'm also interested in the vulgarity of these watches, their embellishment and how they symbolically hold so much weight. Interestingly, sales have gone down somewhat since China introduced new bribery laws that made it illegal for businesses to give them as gifts. But it's just funny that they are such a loaded object – they symbolise such clichés as time, status and legacy.

TR Aren't they supposed to be called "timepieces"?

CT Exactly. The adverts are often about generations of family and all the markers of what's supposed to make you a civil human being. It represents a distinctive insecurity for me, that is what is so amusing about them, they are props to make people feel secure. In a complex era, it is also interesting how material objects like watches become so important as markers of a certain value system that help negotiate your relationship to community. There are so many

competing value systems, so people find stupid ways of negotiating them. I think this has always existed, investing objects with meaning feels like a form of religion or a club.

TR Tell me the story about the book of letters...

CT A friend of mine had told me about how, when he was at school, someone in his year had taken his completed art-scholarship sketchbook and stabbed a pencil right through the middle of it, and destroyed it. No one would own up, so the whole year was given a detention in which they had to write an apology letter to my friend. And he kept a number of them, and showed them to me. As I read, I realised it was really quite amazing what these letters reveal. Although the boys were all in the same year, there is a vast difference in their abilities to write, not just physically, but also in how the words are put down. Some were typed, others handwritten and you could see all these characters emerging very strongly. The revelations in some of them, what was on people's minds, were heartbreaking. For example, one boy's mother had died, and he says, "I know how it feels to lose something, you just have to keep going," and he'd drawn this house on the back, this little cottage with flowers all around it, and a stream and a gate.

TR How old were they?

CT I can't remember, I think they were probably about 11 or 12, maybe 13. And again for me it was like portraiture. A complete lateral portrait of these individuals, without even having to meet them or look at their physical faces. You could conjure up so much from each letter. They worked on so many layers, and it said a lot about all sorts of things, about individuals, about group mentality, about revelations. You could even almost work out who had done it, so it becomes a sort of mystery as well. I loved that something so stupid, and not that interesting really, becomes completely loaded.

TR So do you think you know who did it?

CT Yeah, I do.

TR Ha! Was the letter just too truthful?

CT No, it wasn't that truthful; I could just see that there was remorse in there, and it was only a few lines, and it was written in a really sort of rickety way, with bad writing, and I was like, "I think it might be you." I wanted the book to be very simple; I didn't want it to have a title or any other information. Just read it like you read a book or a painting, and then get what you want out of it, with no explanation, so if you read it all,

it sort of reveals itself. And then the other book, *Some Men...*

TR That's even more of a kind of a lateral portrait... So you found a box of postcards, right?

CT Yes, in Brooklyn, in a flea market, and I suddenly noticed they were all written by the same two people. Some were typed and others were handwritten. I took all the typed ones and left the rest. I felt the typed ones were more neutral. Together they told the story of a mysterious gay love affair over a period of years, and it showed the tragic arc of any failed love affair. Again, it's this universal portrait of a situation, or of two individuals, or just a much bigger story about how a love affair might fall apart, or begin. Again, it's about cliché, the polite beginning, the excitement building, and then this dull end, where it's just, you know, not happening. So in all these books I found ways not to be making a painting, not to be making a sculpture, not to be making a film, just to have these little ideas. And people might never look at the books, but then again, they might. It's a thing I think about; writing being similar to making a painting, or a book being similar to a painting, and maybe it isn't, but I often think about that, in the way I approach these little nuggets of portrait, nuggets of situations, and of people. §