

MICHAEL CROFT

Orientation/s

The Machine Age

He could guess that terms such as piston, horse-power and stroke had by then entered the mechanical lexicon, but even now knows not what they mean. Insulated from the winter chill by knitted mittens, balaclava, scarf and, most importantly, by the maternal lap that the receptacle was itself just big enough to accommodate, this has become a subject for looking back.

Such a youngster could not have conceptualised that the motor movements of the inert human leg to his right, muddled by the difficulty of that era's technology to achieve transparency in the plastic window between himself and it, was subject to the same intelligence that operated the machine. Equally, he could not have known that further to his right, in the clearing across the wall, lay his still-born brother, five years his senior, in an unmarked grave. The adult was from later knowledge to remember that this was Church Green, just up from the local bus stop, and collage onto this the very difficult idea that his brother's spirit may not have properly been laid to rest.

Inside the receptacle, however, which was not so much deep as just room enough, the seed was sown for a feeling of claustrophobia in the adult. Inside that feeling, therefore, is the powerlessness of the baby against a force that even at the age

of two or three, was starting to be construed as negative. His father not only drove the machine, but *was* the machine. The inert leg was the fulcrum, the centre of balance between the man's body weight and the pinion vehicle occupants' embrace. Mother and child could hear and feel the bike's engine beside them, but more specifically above them, and this represented the strength of the paternal provider.

These years later, the fear of confined space—a cave with narrow walls or a passageway where one had to stoop would do it—has emerged from that troubled memory and attaches itself, similar to the unquiet spirit of his older brother, as a hiccup in the erstwhile child's journey.

Having now entered a physiological age that his father was not to experience, this adult still does not drive and has scant regard for his father's skills. Paradoxically, a resistance towards the mechanical keeps him in the bubble of that early union in the sidecar of a motorbike that constitutes his earliest memory.

The *After* of a Child

End of room; a painting images a black haired male with back to viewer squatting over a birdcage, with surface-inclined older figure prostrate above him. Lower figure shares environment with abstract forms and knifed gestures while upper is held by dark toned space, abstract save suspect horizon.

A young man strides towards the painting—fair to assume he observed it—but turns right towards a stair-rail.

At the exit of the next floor we too squat, to best observe what our memory of the painting preempts. The same young man, now naked, contorts hips to pass beside us. Toned buttocks head us towards a small wood-stained cage, not unlike that pictured. The cage, in which a bird flitters back and forth, rests on a stool at the point

where the balcony that we look towards opens out. Potential has the sun to scorch the man as he stoops low enough to open the cage. The occupant's fright spoils any graciousness proffered by the action. The young man withdraws the creature, turns, but before chancing his face on us, fades from view.

In the span between this and wherever the young man has gone, we turn on the roof and look back from whence we came to see first the gold of a crown, then the emergence of a Thai prince from the Rattanakosin period ascending the fire escape. A small bird, braced in hand, knows not to struggle. Amidst a pause—the hesitation of a single breath—the bird's released. Wait for nothing; but, sensing the air's freedom the bird panics, stalls, and disappears down concrete wall. The prince follows the bird with his gaze then turns away from it, and us, as if both parties had conspired against him to say that freedom delivers a cost.

The balcony below sets different scene. Mimicked on stone bench, the naked young man lies up-faced with strategic thigh. Yet still, prudishness diverts our passage away from him and we direct ourselves back to the story's starting point. There before us, the upper register of the painting images a newly fashioned Rahula in the guise of the *after* of a child.

Freedom is here tempered by ambiguous icons that on occasion collude with meaning.





Paintings from the series "Transitions:" Transitions 3, 7 and 8 (of 12)
 Each painting: 183 x 122 cm; Oil, acrylic and mixed media on canvas; 2005/6.

Orientation (?)

...both formally and as content, when each is ambiguous

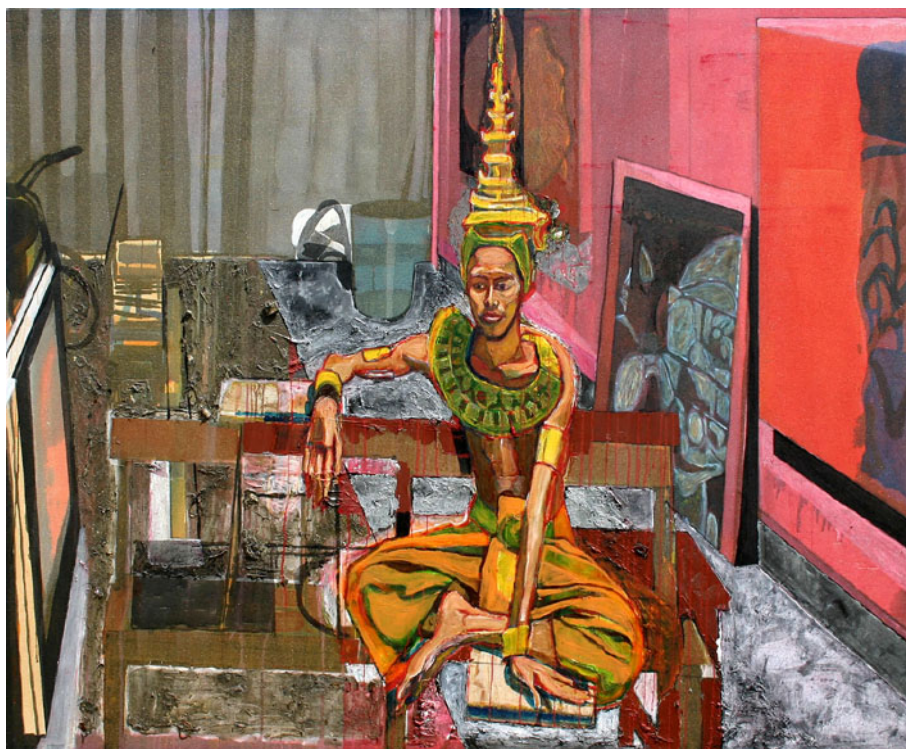
Orientation may concern the problem of crossing the plane. How does one reach from bottom left of the canvas to top right with gestures that link such an axis with all others, ad infinitum, until skeins of differentiation and unity are achieved across the entire field. *Question posed as statement because one has to do it, even while the chances of success are slight indeed.*

There's a relationship, of course, between form and content. In fact, these two are indissoluble. What appears to be a head is defined as much by the character of its abstraction as by the coincidence of its looking like a person. Further—even just a little—beneath the skin and you'll find inflection and gesture that runs counter to the obvious, and it's in there that one should perhaps be interested. Are these the same in visual terms as the drives which cause us to stammer, pause or withdraw breath in moments when we would expect to be lucid. *Question posed as statement because*

one has to put up with them even while they interfere with what one's trying to say or do.

You have to, or can look three times, actually. To look a third time first, so to speak, a space exists on the canvas plane that suggests depth. Not just alluded physical depth, but depth of signification. You can also look and take it as read that a figure dressed as a Thai prince of former time sits in cluttered studio in the present day. Or you can look at the mistakes of the scene, corrections that still don't quite add up, awkwardness that holds correction in the balance, whether by accident or contrivance. The prince would not exist without the space, a space without mistake would not be right in relation to the incongruous spectacle of a human figure dressed in representation of the past, and these two are seen through the disclosing condition of other?

A question formed by a statement because such debate can never be conclusive. Orientation, in the sense in which I would want to convey it, is therefore posed as a question.



“Corrections”

183 x 160cm; Oil, acrylic and mixed media on canvas; 2005.