

Wave Machines

The Dutch vessels cluster in the motionless wash, under a buttery sky, in an endless early evening. But if everything is still, the sea that Willem van de Velde painted in *Dutch Vessels Close Inshore at Low Tide, and Men Bathing* (1661) is long gone now – its tides shifted ineluctably, seconds after the painter fixed the scene in his eye or his sketchbook. And what the sea meant in that painting is extinct too. What was underlined by the tranquil marines that the Dutch perfected, as they virtually invented the marine genre, was the silent rightness of their country's naval supremacy. (Although it's been argued that the peace inherent in Dutch 17th century painting, in Vermeer's frozen interiors for instance, was always intended to be seen as an atypical, cherishable calm between the storms of war.) Anyway, that sea and all that it meant is history.

Another gone sea: that in Joseph Mallord William Turner's *Waves Breaking Against the Wind* (c. 1835). Waves explode, spume leaps, and there is not a person in sight; the image, lacking scale markers, steers close to abstraction. The tide, conceptually speaking, has now turned wholly against the placid seascapes of the Dutch, who ruled the subject's aesthetic until Turner. The English artist, who lashed himself to masts in storms and spent thousands of hours studying the actions of massive bodies of water in order to enact proto-Impressionist paintings like this, has shifted the paradigm. Man is not master of the sea: the sea, ascendant, is a live, threatening force of nature.

The seascape would fall into disrepair as a site of advanced art after Turner, returning in fits and starts, particularly in England: the awkward/blissful naivety and flattened perspective of Alfred Wallis' Cornish marines, the surrealistic 1930s beachscapes of

Edward Wadsworth and Paul Nash (who once published an article entitled “Seaside Surrealism” while living in the Dorset coastal town of Swanage). Today the sea has no fixed meaning, but appears in the work of artists as an analogue for their own concerns: time and timelessness in the hieratic photographs of Hiroshi Sugimoto, or loss and instability in the blackboard drawings and films of Tacita Dean, or a post-photographic sublime in the paintings and drawings of Vija Celmins. What the restless sea portends, in the early 21st century, can appear up for grabs.

But that very slipperiness and disregard might hold attraction for a certain obdurate cast of mind: to wit, painting seascapes, considered as a serious activity which speaks to the larger drift of contemporary art, presents a serious challenge. Despite the tidal pull which the roiling deep has on the human imagination, and despite the fact that in the British Isles it’s more ubiquitous than in many other places – for many of us, the shipping forecast is a kind of mysterious demotic poetry – the sea is both omnipresent and vaguely untouchable, particularly for painters, who pursue the most enduringly romanticised of artistic approaches. The sea is chronically overdetermined as a subject, but still the interpretations feel *old*, with all that the sea has previously meant fanning out towards the viewer as a series of dusty options for interpretation. Nineteenth-century notions, despite what came after, cling to it like barnacles. How do you make the sea new? How do you make it speak to the moment? How do you, as a contemporary artist aspiring to more than just a rehash of modes past or involuntary kitsch, get past the negative associations of maritime art?

The sea, in Mario Rossi’s paintings, at first appears transparent and then turns opaque. In other words, what appears

to be a matter of straightforward representation turns out to be far from it; between images, a larger picture complicates itself. Here, for instance, is *Annexe (International Maritime Organisation MSC. 3/circ 11)*, a painting of a roil of waters that sets up a kind of scorched-earth approach to reception. The eye scuds across it, failing effectively to store the information it's just received: the experience of viewing becomes a live one, of being in the moment. And, as such, one is constantly aware of looking not at a representation but at a painting. Here, and more so in *Wonderland*, a view seemingly seen through a windscreen of a figure looking out to sea under a stormy sky, there's an awareness of what it means to paint dribbles of liquid: of how liquid medium and liquid subject are able to interfuse. Albeit self-consciously: the trickles down the glass here remind one of nothing so much as Roy Lichtenstein's wry mockery of Abstract Expressionist gesturalism via cartoonish *trompe l'oeil* images of brushstrokes. We're aware that this dialogue is going on, and so – clearly – is Rossi, whose art gravitates to the difficulty and potentials of representation, and points perpetually to its own constructed nature. The question, then, is not: how do you make the sea new? But: how might the sea make painting new?

Here is another image of the shoreline, one with a furry boom mike dangling semi-surreally over it. It's far from the only allusion to filmic sleights here; and far from the first time that Rossi has engaged with a cinematic aesthetic. (See, for instance, his circa-2000 series of paintings of "The End" as it appears at the close of films, another example of going on while signalling an inability to go on.) The boom mike recording the sound of waves in *Wild Track* is an example of the dream factory's wires showing, but also of the sedulous importation of authenticity into a project that's artificially produced: of getting local, natural sound over

which actors might speak in a studio, producing the illusion of the real. In making such an image, in a roundabout way one traps something of the real itself: the real as an admission of the prevalence of the artificial.

Consider, too, that several of Rossi's paintings of the sea use the screen as a trope: upon which something that looks like a burlesque of painting (the liquid play of water) enacts itself: representation, here, is not a matter of simple transparency, but a process that carries with it the dragging weight of history, of all earlier approaches to the subject. Consider, additionally, that the sea is a kind of projection screen of its own: that, over the centuries, we've projected our sense of what we are onto it. And, as an extension of the idea of projection, that there has been interplay between painting and cinema since the dawn of the latter: that it's only right that painting should take from cinema, since cinema and photography made themselves in the image of painting.

How one injects meaning into the project of painting as it's made in real time – how one engages the project of meaning making into the medium, and confirms that it can offer things that, say, cinema cannot – feels like the focal point of these sea paintings. There is, it transpires, a definite social undertow to them, but a good part of Rossi's labour seems to go into engaging with content without assaulting the viewer with rhetoric. The aforementioned *Annexe...*, for instance, is painted over printouts from the website of the International Maritime Organisation, detailing UNSAFE PRACTICES ASSOCIATED WITH THE TRAFFICKING OR TRANSPORT OF MIGRANTS BY SEA. These are workmanlike grids of reports detailing the stopping and interrogating of migrants around in the Mediterranean: Afghanis and Iranians, Moroccans

and Syrians and Palestinians caught in small craft, lacking travel documents. Now, having discovered such a hook on which to hang paintings which, on occasion, otherwise might superficially offer a blank wall of verisimilitude in a seemingly exhausted mode, the immediate tendency is to excitedly go full-bore and position Rossi as a kind of activist, or at least a maker in thrall to his social conscience. He lives, after all, on the South Coast of England, a short hop across the English Channel from mainland Europe and a prime site for immigration: anyone living here cannot fail to see and sense the friction between less considerate members of local communities and the new arrivals.

But Rossi appears less to have a political axe to grind than an ongoing fascination with the unlikely involvedness of his subject matter. Again: what does it mean to look out from shore, in the first decade of the 21st century? The sea has been a lodestar of naval supremacy, of the romantic sublime, of mystery: what is it now? It is a transit zone. That is the primary *meaning* the sea holds today, that is its role: it is a hazardous, capricious grey field which, in inflated rowboats and fishing boats and small wooden boats, scared and oppressed people are trying to get across. The sublime is folded fearfully into this, as is commandship of the seas: because these boats can be swallowed up, and these boats can be stopped with authority, their human cargo paused in fearful flight. And with this, the circulation of meaning becomes contagious, irrepressible. One begins to see Rossi's painting *Morecambe Bay (Hest Bank: 06.02.04)*, of five orange buckets bobbing in the wash, as metaphorical, somehow – even though the buckets, neatly distributed across the picture plane in an image which itself looks like it might be the closing shot in a melodramatic art movie, also advertise themselves strongly as formal elements in a carefully

determined composition. (The centrally placed boom mike in *Wild Track*, too, speaks of image making as much as it does anything else.) *Operation Poseidon* (*Latitude = 36.0224, Longitude = 13.1067*), a painting of a wake of water produced with almost photographic fidelity, entrains an absent subject: the boat that broke the waves. And now, because the painting next to it is the one with the IMO's printouts on it, cognitive sparks concerning the type of craft start leaping dangerously between the canvases. (It wasn't that kind of boat.)

For all that Rossi's paintings engage with geopolitical urgencies, what's happening when we receive them that way is, in part, merely the process of making them comprehensible to ourselves, as if they were a code to be cracked. There is a jump, frequently, when an artist engages subject matter that has socio-political dimensions, into assuming that the work itself is then a form of politics by other means: here, if one is lazy, there are no fine degrees of investment, only a simple on/off. Rossi's art, taken closely, countermands that view. Certainly it makes one uneasy to understand the chief function of seas today, and these are surely products of an age when politics is fought chiefly in the visual register, but they return consistently to the question of how one can make a painting today. For painting exists in its own time. Duchamp asserted that painting has an active life of 30-40 years, after which art history takes it; and whether one agrees with that or not, one always paints for one's own moment, and, if one is serious, one always paints in the shrinking space of possibility between what has been done and what doesn't need doing.

The deeper anxieties that arise from Rossi's paintings, then, aren't so much inherent in their ostensible content as upshots of his mechanisms of counterpoint and deflection and hide-and-seek

approach to signification. And there is, accordingly, enough careful artificiality – and even absurdism, given his careful, photo-derived fixing of the evanescent – in his art to suggest that a degree of vigilant self-consciousness in our reception wouldn't go amiss. We watch; we watch ourselves watching, rethinking, and ideally rising above binaries. Above all, Rossi suggests, painting ought to remain a restless locus of difficulty, thought, negotiation (as opposed to the majority of cinema), not one of transparency in terms of content, and one that invariably responds to the myriad pressures of its moment. It is in this difficulty, and for all that there's a wake on the wall, that the medium might persist. Because art stands still like the sea does.

Martin Herbert

