

OBJECT MEDITATION

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Essay by Tom Wilmott

The foundations of Object Meditation have been developing over the past three years, but in truth it is only relatively recently that its significance to me has become clear. The exhibition represents the crystallisation of particular thoughts and ideas that have arisen as a direct result of my practice during this period, and I intend it to embody what I consider to be the most important of these. Although I will go on to address universally relevant issues in this text, I realised early on that it must be written from a position of personal experience. I do not mean to generalise, to preach or propose some sort of pseudo-universal truth. These are simply my thoughts and opinions and all I can hope is that in reading them you may encounter something that strikes a chord.

A love that is longer than a day.

Object Meditation was originally conceived as a simple and direct expression of what painting is to me. As action, object, or field of pursuit, painting both ignites and satisfies a super-lingual, all-encompassing, fundamental desire. It has the power to calm me, excite me, entice me and fulfil me. It nurtures innumerable indefinable positive sensations by way of humble materials and simple objects such that the irrationally positive effect defies accurate or intelligible explanation. Each work exhibited in the show has been selected because in one way or another it feeds my ravenous yearning to feel this way and although the analogy doesn't quite pinpoint the sensation, likening my need for painting to hunger is as explicit as my own understanding of it allows me to be. Left unchecked it can become physically troubling, and may only ever be temporarily satiated but, when fulfilled, it has the potential to provide entirely unique and incomparable pleasures. Individually and as a group the paintings in this exhibition offer me the intense satisfaction that I crave like a cornucopia of heavenly delicacies. They exemplify a universal appreciation amongst this group of artists for the intrinsic materiality of the medium and showcase painting's vast and varied potential in the hands of people possessed of a profound understanding and sensitivity to it.

I made first contact with the majority of these artists online and it is no exaggeration to say that meeting people who share my passion has been the single most important external opportunity I have encountered. When first deciding to study art on a serious level twenty or so years ago I could scarcely have imagined that discussing and sharing work and ideas with like minded people the world over might literally become an everyday occurrence. Receiving and offering support from a position of intimate understanding is a benefit beyond compare, and whilst the selection of the paintings in this show is based very firmly on quality and integrity, it would not have happened without each individual artist's drive to communicate and connect with others over a common love.

It is true that this is a deeply personal project, particularly so at its inception, but as time has gone on I have come to understand it has the potential to reach further. A painting is an object made to be observed, functioning first and foremost in the field of the visual. Engagement demands that the viewer examine it, and its crafted physicality and elevated cultural position dictate that the nature of such an examination be appropriate to its revered status as a work of art. The viewer ought to be 'present', not just literally, physically, but in the psychological sense - so that they might take time to perceive and appreciate the painting in the here and now. One could argue this to be true of any material artwork, but it is my opinion that by its nature abstraction is the most well suited to encourage a "mindful" experience. This is because the abstract has no overt narrative. Its 'otherness' and separation from

storytelling mean it presents only in the tangible, physical form we perceive. It hovers out of time. In the immediate. In the now that is neither memory nor anticipation - the only moment that actually exists. It brings us into singular presence because if we are to truly engage with it, all we can do is look upon what is before us.

Mindfulness has become something of a buzzword in recent years, and although superficially its value may have been diminished by having been 'on trend', so to speak, its popularity has deservedly grown. In a relentlessly intense global society, characterised by unprecedented and ever increasing pace, excess and demand, opportunities to stop and be 'present' have never been scarcer. I would suggest that through its essential material existence and the ways in which we may encounter it, abstract painting has the potential to find renewed relevance as a psychological salve, and help counteract the widely acknowledged mental overload that increasingly results from living as we do today.

All the world is mad.

I am a millennial. Just. An early adopter, if you will. I turned twenty in 2001, and as such have spent my adult life under the heavy and fearful veil that smothers a post 9-11 outlook. When the financial crisis of 2008 hit I was an employee in the early stages of what I assumed would be my long term career. Eleven years on I understand that the markets are overdue another damaging downturn, and yet the element acutely conspicuous by its absence has been the boom between busts. It may well have happened - I couldn't tell you - because during this time the overwhelming broadcast of our financial situation has been unrelenting austerity and uncertainty. The current political climate inspires precious little confidence but, being uncertain of my readership, and wishing to engage with as wide and varied an audience as I am able, I feel it unwise to comment further on this subject. However in my opinion these aren't even close to the most serious issues weighing upon us today. Climate change, overpopulation and the damage the planet has suffered at our hands transcend them in the extreme. These things do not threaten nations, economics or politics, they threaten a species.

According to some, I am a "snowflake millennial" - a term that characterises my generation as weak-willed, mentally fragile, unable to cope with simple "adult" problems and quick to lament their privileged plight. I don't much like it, but I can see their point. I can see that I do quite readily and openly talk about my struggles. I agree that I occasionally have a hard time getting to grips with seemingly straightforward aspects of life that my stoic parents might have quietly dealt with. I accept this, but not in the form of meek concession to accusations of incapability. I accept it because for me, and the generation to which I belong, an everyday decision as simple as what to have for breakfast must be made in the context of the volume of plastic polluting the oceans, the heinously destructive impact of livestock farming, "Global Foodcorps" whose policies on employment flirt with definitions of slavery and the carbon footprint of the avocado on my toast. With gnawing concerns such as these on an infinite mental loop, is it any wonder we might stumble over the small things? The domestic, national and international problems society has faced throughout history are now overshadowed by crisis on a planetary scale. It's here today. We have to deal with it now, and by "we" I mean the people mature enough to do so with understanding, and engaged enough to still care what happens to the world in the coming decades. Leaving it to our children is not a luxury we, or they, can afford.

Days I lived a world of night.

“I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend. Make me happy, and I shall again be virtuous.”

- Mary Shelley, Frankenstein

In 2016, having endured a long and, in its latter stages, acutely serious period of depression, I suffered what is technically termed a mental health crisis but which most would refer to as a breakdown. In the years immediately preceding it I became entrenched, inch by inch, in a deeply damaging situation. In my mind I was locked to a routine and structure which forcibly extracted ever more from me, whilst returning precious little. It appeared inescapable and ultimately I hated it but, despite its toxicity, I believed I needed it. I could find no way out, so I remained, and allowed myself to be crushed. Looking back now, having achieved a critical distance that was far beyond me at that time, I can see it for what it really was. The closest thing I can liken it to is a gradual poisoning - so slow that day by day it is imperceptible. Only when the flow is halted, and the venom allowed to drain away, does healing begin and truth become clear.

My earliest, most profound steps of recovery were taken with the unwavering support of my family, who have also endured terrible things as a result of my suffering. After an initial convalescence of around three months the first clear sign that I was on a good path was when the urge to paint returned. In the years since I have acted to ensure I remain on a positive journey, but probably the most significant thing I have done is to bring painting to the forefront of my daily pursuits. Since childhood I have painted as often as circumstance has allowed, but in terms of importance, application and intensity, nothing comes close to what I have achieved between the autumn of 2016, when my wife and I made the conscious decision to follow our truest passions, and today. Happily consigning the old ways to history we now pursue our practices the way we want and as a result enjoy platforms for expression such as this exhibition and the valuable support of entities like After Nyne Gallery. I understand full well that we are extremely fortunate to have been able to follow our careers as artists, but I would also assert that our decision was a brave one and that we continue to work hard for what we have. There was, and remains, significant risk in choosing this path over one of greater certainty and security, particularly given our responsibilities as parents, however, the enduring belief that it is our route to happiness cuts through all associated impracticalities and makes it a risk worth taking every day.

Being happy and knowing that my painterly needs will be met has lifted a great weight from my mind. It improves me in the most profound manner and consequentially I feel I can be better in all ways. I am able to give more in my personal

relationships - be more attentive, understanding, kind and tolerant but, passing beyond my immediate life and into the wider world, I now feel capable of considering and addressing the daunting issues mentioned earlier. I am happy to say that I have begun making small but potentially significant personal changes as a direct response to the problems I perceive. They are not grand gestures, as I do not believe such things to be sustainable, and they certainly stand to increase in number, but they are positive incremental adjustments I feel entirely confident of maintaining in the long term. I am one person, but it seems clear to me that the life choices of the individual are now the best, most effective way forward. We have the power to change, we just have to exercise it in the most efficient way we can. It need not be dramatic or overt, because if enough of us do it, it is unstoppable.

What makes today's homo sapiens so different? So appealing?

“We are the local embodiment of a Cosmos grown to self-awareness. We have begun to contemplate our origins: starstuff pondering the stars... Our obligation to survive is owed not just to ourselves but also to that Cosmos, ancient and vast, from which we spring.”

- Carl Sagan, Cosmos

Having reached a point at which I feel inclined and able to consider my position in the world and how I want to contribute to its betterment, I must admit to privately raising the somewhat nihilistic question of why we ought to pursue the continuation of humanity at all. Over the many millions of years that the earth has existed, extinction events have happened. Species come and go. The world keeps turning. What makes us so special? Why does it matter whether or not we're here to watch it turn? Why on earth should I care? The survival instinct is common to all living creatures - we're a planet of beasts hell-bent on not expiring - but a don't-die-default setting is not a conscious decision to exist, it's simply a reflex action.

Carl Sagan suggests that we are the universe become self aware and so we are obliged to live on. I do subscribe to this idea, but for a quite specific reason. We identify as individuals, seven and a half billion or so at the time of writing, but in fact we are all just instances of one entity - the universe - each reaching out into the unknown realm of a fledgling consciousness, finding ways to understand and experience it, and then sharing those ways with other instances so that they too might know what we have come to know. There are many, many different ways to experience the world, but there are also experiences that are broadly the same - vast consensus' of opinion on what we want to feel, and what we don't. Such consensus' span boundaries of age, culture, language, gender and so on, thus they have come to shape our definition of the most profound of polarised feelings - in short, good and bad.

Positive emotions are also many in number - pleasure, excitement, wonder, awe, joy, contentment, love, the list goes on of course, but for the purposes of clarity let us generalise and call it happiness. I do believe happiness is the thing to live for. It can be derived from multifarious sources, but again there is a broad consensus of emotional response to, for example, the sight of a blooming flower, churning waterfall,

majestic mountain, or the infinite night sky. To the birth of a child, or embrace of a loved one we can all find a common personal response - there can be little doubt that these are wonderful things, but in my opinion they do not make humanity universally essential.

The thing that interests me - that convinces me that our species has a value that is, to the best of our knowledge, cosmically unique, is not a compulsive emotional response to external stimuli, but the inclination to actually create a positive emotion from nothing. If we really are stardust, - the inanimate become conscious and spontaneously aware, then we are the universe making choices, and embarking on a course of action for the sake of improving itself beyond the basic functionality of deterministic cause and effect. We can deliberately generate positive feeling through the things we make and do, entirely separately from what is presented to us by nature. In doing this we are developing and elevating what it is to "be" above mere existence and creating something of this universe which would otherwise never have been at all. The activity is entirely superfluous to basic continuity, but is the manifestation of a wholly unique driver of life; it defines the notion that to be is a far greater thing than to simply exist.

Among the many ways we have found to do this, one in particular interests me, and that is an act of creation whose sole and immaculate purpose is the spontaneous generation of happiness in momentary perception. It is easy to be in awe of the natural world, but when we can find equal fascination in the mundanity of canvas, wood and pigment married together by human hand, this is something else. Something beyond. Something magical that can only exist as a result of an essential desire to make life better for ourselves and for others. It is my firm belief that actions like the construction and perception of even the most modest little abstract painting are the purest reason for us all to continue existing.

You too are one.

At this point I feel the need to reiterate that everything you have read is personal opinion. This is what painting is to me, what I believe it can do for others, and the ideas that have come to me as a result of being able to pursue it with conviction. I do hope that reading what I have written and visiting the exhibition that set me on this train of thought in the first place, might be of interest to you. It's not necessary for you to feel the same way I do about painting. Perhaps it is an opportunity to take a quiet minute and achieve a momentary presence, away from the business of the world. And maybe then you may be a little better placed to consider what it is that could make you happier. It might be looking at art, windsurfing, collecting rocks or reading trashy novels - it doesn't matter, as long as it improves your experience of living.

We are all equal parts of the universe, but we are a very few, rare parts who are aware of our place, and as such we do have a responsibility. Not just to ourselves, our friends and family, our species, or our planet, but to every single atom that exists. In my opinion that responsibility is to simply strive to be happier. Only if we give ourselves the opportunity to truly appreciate what good life has to offer, will we be capable of addressing the significant existential challenges that we must. There was a time when I could have done nothing more than shrug my shoulders and leave all this to someone else, if indeed any of it had actually registered with me at all, but thankfully that time has passed. I feel fortunate to be able to see my own path clearly now and to know what I want to achieve, but I also understand that not everyone is as lucky as I in having identified an unimpeachable and unwavering source of happiness. I am aware that for many finding such a thing is not so straightforward, however, with this in mind I feel I can offer one statement of encouragement with absolute conviction: Your search for happiness, wherever it may lead, and whatever it may yield, is the most important that you or anyone else will ever undertake. It will be of incalculable value to you, to me, to all of us and beyond because if you can find a way to be happier today than you were yesterday, then you will have made an undeniable contribution to the infinite betterment of the universe.