



DEMOCRACY – MICKEY TAKES AN IN-DEPTH LOOK

“The U.N. won’t participate in Mickey Mouse elections.” (Carina Perelli, Director of the United Nations Electoral Assistance Division, quoted in *The Washington Post*, 18 June 2004.)

Facing page: Clive Humphreys, 2004-05, *Democracy – Mickey Takes an In-depth Look*, acrylic on canvas 152 x 213cm (detail, courtesy of the artist).

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Demos – the people Kratos – authority/rule

This is a painting based upon two bubble bath containers that have sat on the end of my bath for the last twenty-five years. They are amongst those items that did not get thrown out with all the other packaging. It is difficult to say why these objects have suddenly become *noticed objects* as opposed to *all but discarded objects*. These plastic figures do remind me of the very first paintings that I owned, given to me by my Godfather and painted by him during a stint in prison. Those same portraits of Goofy and Mickey hung proudly on my bedroom wall, testament to the one thing that almost anybody can draw given just a little practice and patience (he did have time on his hands).

The language of painting and the language of politics have many equivalences. Most political systems consist of *left* and *right* orbiting a much valued *centre*. Political parties strive to occupy the centre ground or risk obscurity on the periphery (this is also the fundamental grammar of pictorial composition).

Viewers of paintings read, on the most basic physical level, the expenditure of the painter’s energy (*labour*) and, in the surface of the paint, a very particular expenditure of resources (*capital*).



Clive Humphreys, 2004-05, *Democracy – Mickey Takes an In-depth Look*, acrylic on canvas
152 x 213cm (courtesy of the artist).

Democracy – Mickey Takes an In-depth Look is, essentially, a Medieval space, common in Byzantine painting; a pre-Renaissance space where depth is suggested mainly by the overlapping and size variation of each figure. Spatial depth is also suggested by degrees of colour saturation. Mickey, who is imitating the viewer (taking the Mickey?), clearly occupies the foreground, as he is the only figure painted in full colour saturation. Other figures apparently advance or recede according to their degree of saturation. But all the rules (*laws*) of spatial depth (implied perspective, colour saturation and scale) have been utilised with total inconsistency so that, on closer examination, the whole disposition of the picture plane is contradictory. Just as the painting uses the grammar of colour to contradict its own spatial integrity, so democracy has tended to undermine its own principles with contradictory mechanisms in what could be described as a conflict between *form* and *content* (bureaucracy and morality). As John Ralston Saul suggests about many modern democracies: “The moral sense of the eighteenth century has not only been turned upside down, this has been done with its own vocabulary.”¹

Significant in the recent history of Western European painting has been the *democratisation* of the painted image. This *democratisation* tends to embrace the ordinary and commonly recognisable moments of popular culture and to step away from the heroic, didactic themes of Christian morality and tragedy. It also implies a shift in the relationship between the viewer and the maker/author (and thus in the “politics” of viewing). This shift is characterised by a change in the manner of looking, from the fixed and directed penetrations of formal perspective, (here we are drawn to the omnipresence of the creator who radiates in deep pictorial space from infinity) to something less obligatory. This other mode of viewing is more akin to scanning. The eye moves laterally across a shallower space, as if reading (or speed reading) text. By projection, the viewer is freer to move through, into and across the objects and spaces within the painting with a greater illusion of choice.

Democracy is also very dependent upon *visibility* (the viewer and the viewed). This *visibility* is often termed *transparency* (it is important for the law to be *seen* to operate and for an unregulated press to act as an independent watchdog). Democracies should be deeply involved with public self examination. In the painting above, negotiating a kind of milky transparency, the qualities of visibility and self examination are both random and coy.

I doubt if any of this occurred to my Godfather as he whiled away his prison sentence with his cheap paint set. I imagine him sitting in his cell like a caged (framed?) mouse in a research laboratory. Perhaps all political systems are founded on prisons; they are frequently amongst the first institutions to be built by any form of government. And my Godfather was not only serving his sentence. Consciously or not, he was also becoming a painter, an occupation that, along with political expediency, often justifies its outcomes *in retrospect*.

- 1 John Ralston Saul, *Voltaire's Bastards: The Dictatorship of Reason in the West* (Englewood Cliffs: Penguin, 1992), 238.

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