

Memory Holloway and Andrew Nixon Interview
April 30, 2015

Missing Parts

For some time Andrew Nixon has looked at the small drawings by Seurat and Muybridge's photography of animals. His paintings suspend cats in motion in mid-air as a way to study movement. This contradiction is one that he likes. It links him to stillness and to flux at the same time, his way of marking his difference from Muybridge. In his drawings he works with conte and oil stick in a flurry of dense velvety lines that recall the small studies that Seurat did in the late 19th century. He is more interested in the strange silhouette of an animal than making it look real. There are missing parts in the animals, cats with no eyes, elk with tiny feet, quirky mules that kick on command, a sturdy bison, shadows that don't quite add up. We drink some tea from a thermos, and he reads from a review on a recent show of contemporary painters at MOMA and he talks about the "old, slow art of the eye and the hand in service to the imagination." For a long time, he says, we've been told that painting is in crisis, but here it is, unlike anything else, where seeing and touch show us the singular troubles and glories of picture making. In a time of quickly spinning data and overwhelming information, painting demands that we take the time to look. Time suspended, details cut from our expectations. This is the force of Andrew Nixon's work.

I met him in April in his studio, where we talked about art and science, missing parts, the French in Woonsocket and the future of painting.

MH You were born in Cumberland, Rhode Island.

AN Well, born in Woonsocket, Rhode Island, to be precise, but I lived in Cumberland all my young life.

AN My mother was from Woonsocket and my father was from Lincoln, RI.

MH Did they encourage you in art making?

AN Yes and no. They could see that I was good at it. My dad especially worried that I would not be able to make a living at it. When I graduated I got an interview at Hasbro at his insistence. This was in the '80s. I did well in the interview and they offered me a lot of money. I just thought, I can't do this. My parents had just paid for a really great education, and I couldn't spend it making G.I. Joes. My dad was disappointed.

MH Where did your interest in the arts come from?

AN My dad said he wanted to go to RISD but ended up going to World War II instead, and by the time he got out, everything had changed. He was bitter about that. My mother's father was an upholsterer, he had his own shop and made furniture and drapes by hand. Before I went to elementary school, I spent a lot of time with my grandfather in the shop. He was one of the happiest people I have ever known, just making the things he wanted to make. He was a singer and calligrapher and was very good with his hands. My maternal grandmother was a pianist and church organist who also taught music. She was born in Canada and my grandfather was born in Rhode Island but they were both completely French-Canadian. You know, until the late 1960s, French was the predominant language in Woonsocket.

MH Did you hear it growing up?

AN Oh yeah, all my aunts spoke French. When you went to Woonsocket you didn't really know what was going on.

MH What about food?

AN I love food!

MH (laughs) Do you eat poutine? Were any of those French-Canadian dishes in your childhood?

AN Well, ...there were many bechamel cream sauces that my grandmother made. Her father was a doctor and although she worked for a living and cooked well, she thought it was beneath her.

MH You have been looking a lot at Muybridge (b.1830-1904).

AN He called himself Helios for a while, and his studio was called Helios studio. I think there is no definitive way to pronounce his name.

MH How would you describe the process of looking at Muybridge, adapting and extracting, how does he feature in the work?

AN He made over 100,000 photographs. I look at the series and I look for images, images that I feel are vague enough, and have the potential to be made my own.

MH What does that mean “making it your own?”

AN To not be derivative, I have to transform the image. I have to begin with his original work and then figure out how to make it new.

MH How do you transform it?

AN By selectively amplifying some things and excluding others. For example (referring to the painting *16 Cats*) these cats have no eyes, and I am making an attempt to translate the movement, and not the specifics of the form. I’m trying to do it in a similar way to what Seurat did. Cognitive psychologists say that the way we process images is to break down the visual information into two groups; one is what it is, the other is where it is, and then the information is combined again to form the image we perceive. Seurat’s drawings are only where it is, not what it is. You can only understand his form by its context. In his images if you look at something specific like an animal’s head, you can only understand it by looking at the whole image.

MH Are you saying Seurat does not provide a context for us?

AN Oh he does, but it is the context of the rectangle, where things are in relation to other things in the whole frame. It’s a really controlled narrative, so much is left out.

MH But he does in the *Sunday afternoon on the Isle of the Grand Jatte*. That is a really contextualized image. Those drawings, after drawings, after drawings, have a landscape context.

AN Yes and that is a painting that doesn’t interest me (laughs)! I understand what a heroic effort it was, but the studies are what really excite me.

MH He saw himself almost as a scientist who approached his work in an objective manner. He also said almost anyone could do it, which of course, wasn’t true.

MH Do you see yourself this way? What is the distinction you make between science and art? Do you see this (referring to the paintings) as in any way, a scientific endeavor?

AN No, because I am not using scientific method, and Muybridge was kind of a fake scientist. He sold himself as one, but he wasn’t rigorous.

I want to read you something. It’s from the book *Geek Sublime* by Vikram Chandra. In the book he describes a problem in computer software coding that was solved by what is called “event sourcing.” This guy is a novelist but he has also had a career as a coder. The problem he describes, if you had something like a database and you had several users, every time someone added to the database it would change the structure of the code, the original structure would get lost and too complicated. So they solved this problem through event sourcing, meaning whenever a keystroke was made, it was recorded as a specific event, much like a photograph. Through event sourcing, the individual using the software has an experience of a whole form but actually it is a cumulative record of specific events. I’m making a long point here but in it he says:

“As I learned the beauty of the event sourcing, I was reminded of other discussions of identity over time that had been on my mind. The Buddhists of the Yogacharya school (4th century CE) were among the proponents of the doctrine of no-self, arguing what appears ‘to be a continuous motion or action of a single body or agent, is nothing but a successive emergence of distinct entities in distinct yet contiguous places’.”

MH Distinct entities.

AN “Distinct entities in distinct yet contiguous places.”

MH So it’s amazing to me that these Buddhists in the fourth century were thinking about life as being not continuous but life being a series of events that are next to each other. And I thought, that’s Muybridge.

MH Is that you also?

AN I think it’s a really open question. There’s a philosopher name Derek Parfit at Oxford who has written about seeing his own identity in this way. He believes that there is no self, there is just a series of experiences. I don’t know. I do think that the relationship between the individual frame and motion presents that same philosophical question.

MH This frame and motion, what is that? Is the frame a fixed event, how do you see that metaphorically?

AN I guess I see it as a question. The cat is both suspended in individual frames in motion and continuous at the same time. I think culturally when we go to investigate an event visually, I’m

thinking of the Zapruder film of the Kennedy assassination, it is cut into frames to figure out exactly what happened. It goes back to Muybridge. How is the motion, how was the event, connected to the individual frames?

MH How does that relate to who you are, the experience of who I am today and who I was yesterday? Do you think about that in relation to who you are?

AN Yes I do. I look at my body and I can see scars from things that I did when I was in my 20s. I can see a years old scar on my thumb from carelessly cutting some bok choy for dinner one night, but I'm not the same person as when I did it. I think that an interesting thing about life is that you have a vantage point, I would like to meet the person I was when I was in my 20s.

MH Where does photography fit into your experience?

AN Photography is wonderful for a lot of things but it also misses a huge amount of experience. I feel the ability to look deeply at paintings is being lost in our culture.

MH Was it ever possible?

AN Well, as a percentage of the population, it's probably never been different. It's such a shame.

MH Not lost in the kind of work you're doing, not for the kind of looking your students are doing, not for the kind of looking you and your colleagues are talking about. It's a really slow looking.

AN It's rare. For me it's such an important part of life and living well.
When I see students looking at videos on their cell phones, you can trace that moving image all the way back to Muybridge. I don't know if it is the narrative of how the moving image moves through time, but moving images cause a kind of anxiety that you don't get looking at a Vermeer. Some of the difference has to do with stillness.

MH There is also something about the stillness in these pictures that is a kind of contradiction, because they're still but they're moving.

AN Yes and one reason that I started this series is that I found that I was making paintings of very large animals that were both very still and yet moving at the same time. When I looked at Muybridge I found this same contradiction between movement and stillness.

MH Can they be both at the same time?

AN I think so. If you think of the Vermeer of the woman pouring from a jug, it is such a universal moment. Rarely you get these moments where there is something about the light, where being alive is just breath-taking for that singular moment. This idea is really captured in that painting. Which is something I aspire to.

MH That is movement and stillness at the same time. Some of the research on Vermeer's understanding of time is directly related to the construction of clocks, time mechanisms. It's very closely related to the Dutch in the 17th century, who were thinking about the movement of time and clock making. So that's what's happening in the 17th century in Amsterdam, clock making, instrument making.

AN And lenses.

MH Lenses, ways of seeing more carefully, ways of seeing the optical.

AN And the maps and the globe...

MH ...which are about travel and seeing things in the distance. And all these things relate back to precision instruments of navigation and time.

AN Lawrence Weschler wrote *Vermeer in Bosnia* covering the Yugoslavia war crimes trials. While there, he met a jurist who would spend each morning listening to the testimony about atrocities and each afternoon he would go look at Vermeer's *Head of a Young Girl*. Weschler makes the point that Vermeer did not live in peaceful times but created a sense of peace in his paintings. He wasn't just recording it, he was inventing it.

MH Do you see a connection and future between art and science?

AN Yes definitely. I think artists and scientists are both trying to figure out the underlying structure of things, and we have an interest in each other. I had my first one-person show at Fermilab in Batavia, Illinois. I got to meet some top physicists. Fermilab had the largest particle accelerator in the world until CERN (in Switzerland) overtook them. The physicists that I met there suggested that they thought art and science were very close. I have a friend who is a biologist who said to me, "You know what I love about art, everything is settled." Art's values are clear to him. He can look at 19th century paintings and everyone will agree Eakins is great, but he said "in science everything is murky. You can spend ten years working on an idea without knowing if you are on the right track or not." And I said, "No, art is exactly like that!!!"

MH (laughs) No nothing is settled!

AN I think there always has been a dialogue between the two.

MH (Referring to the paintings) Is this a new way of visualizing animals?

AN I don't think it's really new. It's maybe a new context.
 MH The context being?
 AN I think I'm trying to restore some aspects of painting that have been lost. So it is not so much about narrative, or being able to read images clearly, or quickly for that matter. Those are the things that I really love about painting.
 MH (Pointing to the books in Nixon's studio) What we have here are some very still artists; Piero della Francesca, Balthus, Donghi ...and also Hammershøi. In a way it seems you are in between this kind of stillness and movement. But stillness is really important, so you are not reading the quick narrative image...
 AN I think it's also about light and color and form. One of the advantages of being a 21st century painter is the easy access to a sea of images and being able to pick and choose. When I look at paintings, it's not *all* about stillness; it's also about understanding something, form, color, or light. I think good art should be seductive and pull the viewer in, so technically learning whatever you can from marvelous artists is helpful to being a better artist.
 MH Well that's true, but you've chosen the very quietest ones, it's hard to think of a group of images that would be quieter.
 AN Before I studied painting, I studied sculpture. Egyptian art was and still is mind blowing to me. The sculptor Aristide Maillol said what held him about Egyptian sculpture was that it looked like it was about to move, rather than moving. It has a kind of potential energy. This becomes especially apparent when you compare it to Rococo sculpture; you know the kind I mean, naked guys wrestling lions. The energy in the Egyptian forms is so much greater.
 MH Are these animals more about being about to move, than about the movement itself?
 AN Maybe. (laughs) That's a lousy answer.
 MH It was a lousy, terrible question (laughs).
 AN No it's not a terrible question. I guess it's more the contradiction that they're moving and they are not.
 MH Do you find humor in this bucking piece, *The Buck and Kick*?
 AN Yeah, and in almost all my paintings, I think there is some element of humor.
 MH (Referring to the painting *16 Cats*) Do they all have to stay together? Can they be separated, or does the picture have to be seen as a grid?
 AN I'm not sure because it's so big, I can only see it as a grid. I could also imagine it being in a linear series. I may show a sequence of 4 rather than 16. They would always have to be in the same order.
 MH They do? Why?
 AN That's true of the original series. That gives it some order.
 MH What would happen if you jumble them all up, starting with a sequence, and then I do this, and then I do this, and then I do that and that...
 AN I don't know. (both laugh) I have seen them on my computer out of order and it was just chaotic.
 MH There's a variety here, of what you might call naturalism and geometry. Do you see it that way? Are they naturalistic in any way, or realistic if we want to call it that?
 AN I would say naturalistic in that some of the surfaces have elements of chaos. Nature is a contradiction of chaos and order.
 I'm teaching a nature drawing class now and finding that describing the form geometrically is usually the first thing that you do. So you begin with a perfect geometric form and then discover the ways in which it is different from that form.
 MH So what is a geometric form here?
 AN The rectangle.
 MH We can look at *Elk 1-3-4*.
 AN There are certain proportions which are pleasing. And there are a number of ways my image differs from the Muybridge photograph. The shadows are not quite in the right place, so it makes it an impossible space, a little bit like de Chirico maybe. You believe it and don't believe it at the same time.
 MH Once again it's not exactly humorous, it's quirky, it's slightly twisted. Teeny tiny feet and the wrong shadows. We believe it but we don't believe it. We believe it initially, and then there's something that's wrong in all of them. There's something that's wrong; the cats don't have eyes, the elk don't have feet, and the donkeys don't have.... are they donkeys?
 AN It's a mule. Muybridge used a circus mule named Ruth who could kick on command.
 MH Where was that?

AN Philadelphia. I did a big painting of Ruth.
 MH But Ruth has no eyes. What else does Ruth not have?
 AN Originally in these paintings I would put eyes in cats and dogs but not in wild animals. By not showing their eyes it implies that they are fundamentally different than we are. Domesticated animals are sort of like us. But then I did a painting with cats with no eyes and I think I did it because I didn't want to worry about the character of each cat, or that viewers would look at the eyes to find the meaning of the expression of each cat. Not being able to look at the eyes forces viewers to look at the whole form, to find the meaning of the form.
 MH There are missing parts in all these. The missing parts are important.
 AN I think leaving things out is important to transform the image from the original photographic source. In Muybridge's images I prefer the ones that are less clear.
 MH Is that the only reason? Because there is something else going on here. One is the reference to Muybridge, but there is Nixon doing something in all of them. All of them are eye-less, except for one that has personality, and that one has so much personality (referring to *Maggie and Ike*). Are there any missing parts in the dogs? No.
 AN I guess it's because the dogs have such a strong relationship to each other.
 MH So they have eyes and personality.
 AN So they are inconsistent...
 MH That doesn't matter, but there's something about the effacement of personality. It's not just Muybridge, there is something more, and where we begin to understand it is in the elk. Because it's not just the eyes, or the feet, it's something else.
 AN I don't know. It's definitely an attempt to make it my own.
 MH To make it yours apart from Muybridge? Or to make it yours in opposition to the animal? Let's talk about the drawings, because you are going to show them the all. Tell me about the paper.
 AN It's MBM Ingres, made by Arches in France.
 MH It was used by Seurat and made for Ingres, and you're using oil stick and conte?
 AN Yes.
 MH They are very different from the paintings. They have much more of your own personality and touch as well as kind of effacing personality, an effacement of the artist's touch, a flatness, ostensibly and on the surface, pushed into the background. So with the drawings, they're also based on Muybridge aren't they? The bison is beautiful, so grounded, solid.
 AN One of the differences between the oil stick and the conte is that the oil stick is really hard to control. It's just a crude medium, because it's either black or white. A lot of luck is involved. It's like an X-factor that you can't control that is part of a lot of artistic mediums. The conte is really very disciplined, and you really have to be a technician.
 MH Where do you start? With the ground, and then you work your figure into it?
 AN I start with the silhouette of the animal, and because it ends up getting so dark, the original form disappears completely. At the last Seurat drawing show at MOMA, I had an epiphany. Look at the early drawing and you can see a strong total structure using a lot of line. For example if you look at the *Stonebreaker*, he's using a strong weave of lines. It's a conte drawing but the drawing has been examined and underneath there are pencil lines and pinholes, an indication of measuring. He was clearly trying to figure out how to place the forms. And then all of a sudden his drawings change. They become like smoke; only edges are where there is contrasting value. The placement is much more specific, and at the same time there is absolutely no line, and I thought, how did he do that? That's incredible! I know from years of teaching students drawing that you locate forms in relation to other forms by drawing lines. Do you know the answer to this? It's in the laid lines of the paper. There is already a grid. If you look closely (referring to the paper) there are vertical lines which are in the mold from which the paper was made, and there are horizontal lines each inch from another wire in the mold that holds the vertical wires together. That's all he needed to figure out the placement. It's a perfectly elegant solution, so brilliant.
 MH It's here. I can see it. How far apart are they?
 AN I think it's almost an inch. So Seurat I think, is all about the grid.
 MH Did you work first with the grid on the paper? Where did the grid first come in (referring to *16 Cats*)?
 AN The grid helps with finding the form, placing the form. I wanted the cats to be roughly life-size. If I used Muybridge's grid I would either have to do a much larger painting to get them all in, or the cats would either be too small or too large, or I would have to use fewer cats, so I ended

up shifting them. I think he did 24, no 20 (referring to the Muybridge image of cats in sequence). I was hoping that the order in the rhythm of the cats would be enough to hold the image together.

This placement made me think of Egyptian relief sculpture.

MH Did you start with the paintings? Did the drawings follow?

AN I start with drawings. Almost always when I start a new project I begin by drawing, to know what I'm doing. To figure something out, I start drawing.

MH Was this after you saw the Seurat show?

AN Yes. I had really been thinking about it for years and then I ordered the MBM Ingres paper.

MH Is that where the grid begins in the work, in the drawings?

AN I think so. I'm trying to think of past work I did before. In Hammershoi you can see the grid. He almost always lays down the paint strokes in a vertical or horizontal orientation.

MH Do any of these things have a symbolic significance? When we have talked about meaning, we've talked about it in relationship to all kinds of things, in terms of sight, science and your links to the past. Is there any other reason why these things mean something to you? There's no narrative, is there?

AN I am hesitant to say that my work symbolically means anything. There is a really interesting art review by Peter Schjeldahl (*Take Your Time, New Paintings at the Museum of Modern Art 1/5/15*) in a recent New Yorker about a show at MOMA of 17 contemporary painters. He said that he thought painting had lost its symbolic force. I don't know quite what he meant.

He quotes Burton Norton and says of painting, "no other medium can as yet so directly combine vision and touch to express what it's like to have a particular mind, with its singular troubles and glories, in a particular body." Then he says, "but painting has lost symbolic force and function in a culture of promiscuous knowledge and glutting information."

MH Well that's true. It certainly has lost narrative, and allegory. We don't have allegorical paintings anymore, where something stands for something else.

AN He goes on to say that this show exemplifies the problem of contemporary painting: "the old, slow art of the eye and the hand, united in service to the imagination, is in crisis." It's not painting is dead again but "painting has lost its force and function in a culture of promiscuous knowledge."

What stayed with me is, "the old, slow art of the eye and the hand, united in service to the imagination, is in crisis." That's what I remembered from that.

With our access to everything all the time, the notion of a direction of history gets lost, the notion of periods or direction all seem delegated to the past.

MH Everything is in the past. There appear to be just futures, this kind of a quick spinning. But this is good, "the old, slow, heart and hand united..." This is good.

AN I wish I had written that.

MH We can use it.