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Cover Image: Deep Frieze (detail)
Backcover image: History Painting (detail)

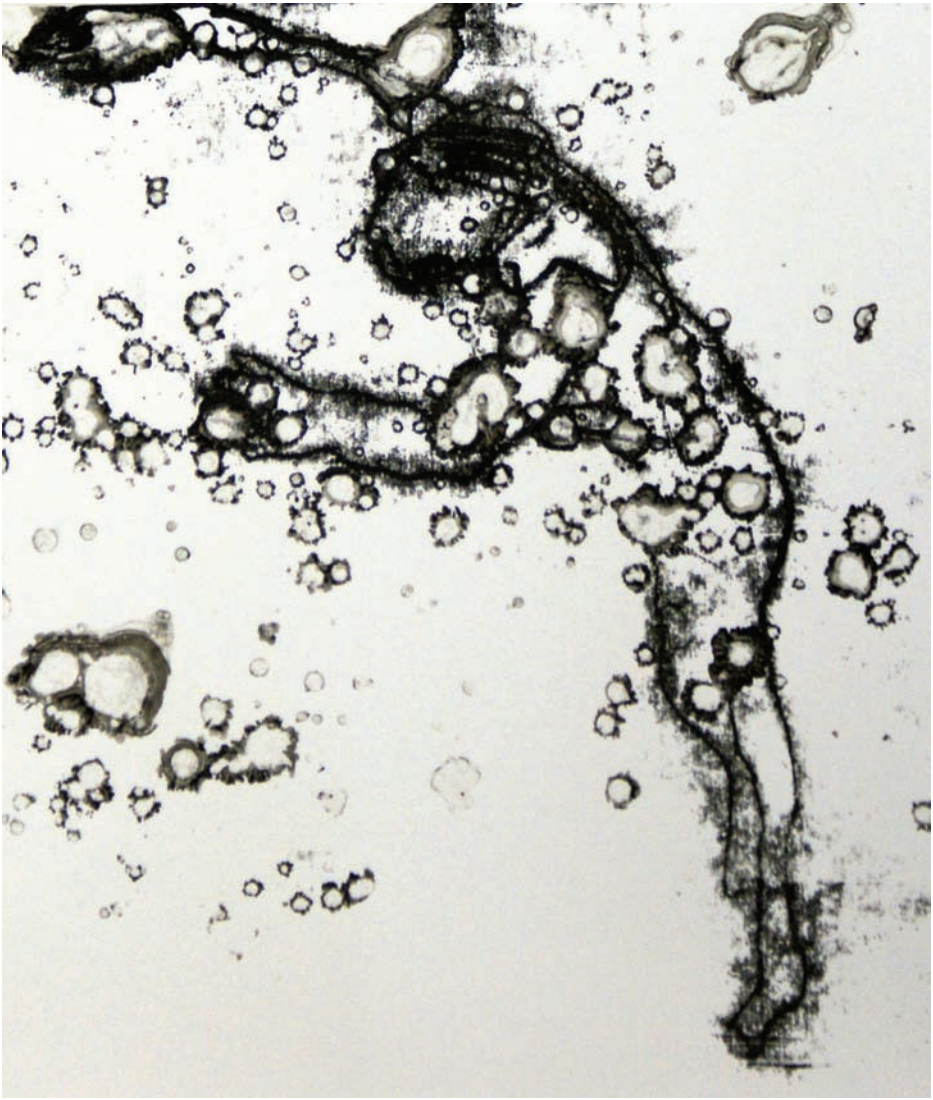
REFLECTIONS

works by **Tom de Freston**
at Christ's College

September 2009

Dedicated to
Tilly and Janis

Contents



Study of Falling, 2008, Monoprint on paper, 20x24cm

Preface

Christ's College has a rich tradition in the fine arts, and has a thriving Visual Arts Centre as well as a newly-refurbished performance and exhibition space in the Yusuf Hamied Theatre. The Visual Arts Centre, located at the King Street end of College, consists of a Gallery and studios, used by sculptors and artists working on an exciting range of artistic projects for the College and beyond. Tom de Freston has held the Levy-Plumb Visual Art Studentship for the last year, and has produced a corpus of work that has made an impression on many of the fellows and students.

Reflections, organised by students on their own initiative, is a significant event, and a further innovation by the Visual Arts Centre. The role of the arts within College continues to develop, thanks to the commitment of time and thought from students and fellows in organising this exhibition.

The variety of essays, from scholars in different disciplines, is a tribute to the depth and breadth of de Freston's work and the reactions it can produce. I have been impressed by Pablo's enthusiasm in curating an exhibition from scratch, and Tom and Pablo's determination to make this venture a success.

I am delighted to present Tom de Freston's latest works in an exhibition and with a catalogue which, I hope you will agree, sets a high benchmark for the arts at Christ's.

Professor Frank Kelly FRS
Master, Christ's College

Swimmer of Lethe, 2008, Acrylic on canvas, 76x117cm

Swimmer, 2008, Oil on paper, 55x76cm

Reflections

Soul and spirit according to de Freston

Pablo de Gandía

Spirituality is a fascinating aspect of de Freston's work that challenges the viewer in its different and often puzzling recurrence. There is in his work an intense dichotomy between the glorious and noble ethereal heroes floating or falling and their almost immediate de-dramatisation through subtle statements on the futility of their positions. De Freston's pathetic characters fall into the oblivion of perdition, with a sense of drama that fascinates for its inherent irony. *Icarus* falls, quite literally, from undeserved light to the unknown and fearsome realm of darkness. A similarly stately but staged –and thus questionable- pathos, is proposed by his swimming figures, that aimlessly move in a state and element which is not their own.

I would define spirituality in de Freston's work as incarnated in those characters and contexts that express otherwordly experience. *Icarus* is a splendid example of this structural and figurative displacement. Characters exist in a time frame and spatial framework completely devoid of reference, which ensures that they appear decontextualised both in terms of their own persona and their surroundings.

In much of de Freston's work spirituality has a most definite form that, although questioning the very spirituality that engenders it, could be considered as both an independent form either in its own, as is the case in the series of swimmers and floaters, or as an element intervening in pieces that have a different thematic focus. This presence functions at several levels; it forms the 'noble heroic' perception that fuels heroes such as *David no Goliath* or in other

instances challenges the very existential purpose of delicately characterised actors. For indeed de Freston offers unresolved dramas where the very premise of the characters-apparent is challenged at many levels, starting with the complete de-dramatisation provided by red socks and boxers.

As a form within de Freston's opus, spirituality has a generously defined context, aura and gestural expression. The characters in *Swimmer* and *Swimmer II* are caught – almost suspended – in an instant, both chronologically and spatially. The moment caught on canvas turns to a parallel reality where the act of falling is the essence of the characterisation, imposing a position, gesture and motion that returns to the very act and essence of falling, swimming or floating. This causes a thematic -and both physical and metaphysical- circle that by returning to the fall/floating/swimming offers reflection on the significance and futility of the entire exercise. Indeed the swimmers and fallers prompt reflection, thought and most of all a re-examination of the actors on the canvas and, of course, of our own inner self.

This discourse between the fictional faller inviting reflection on his plight and the observer's reflection on his own, constant, fall through reality is one of the most challenging and powerful aspects of de Freston's work. Between the almost evanescent *The Faller* and the spectator, a relationship is established that is almost voyeuristic in nature. Although the breach-of-intimacy effect is powerful, it becomes voyeuristic when we are allowed into the intimacy of the room in *A Lover's Discourse*, and when we look at the ravishing, almost life-size Diana in *History Painting*, where the infernal swarm of characters does not seem to be aware of our intimate relationship with her. She herself, though, seems highly aware of it.

This aspect of spirituality in de Freston's work is solemn, powerful, noble and possesses a clearly depicted sense of heroism, The fallers are magnifications of human nature in their epic poses and contexts. In *David No Goliath* there is a magnificent theatricality – another constant in de Freston's work – that because of the solemn pose, the perspective and the staged setting works because David is imbued with a spiritually satisfying righteousness.

De Freston, however, also destroys the solemnity of his heroic characters with brutal expediency based on detail that leaves spirituality in a position that challenges their sense of purpose. In *David No Goliath* and other pieces, this is done through the red socks and boxers, but often the relief from drama is provided by a perversion of the leading thematic conceptuality. For instance the solemnity of the fall seen in *Icarus* or *Deposition II* is completely undermined in *Him Who Wanted To Fall* by his awkward position that reflects the

clearly pathetic nature of the character as well as his now undermined sense of purpose.

The only pieces where spirituality is unchallenged and finds its most sophisticated expression are the large sketches for the *Deposition* project for Christ's College Chapel. These paintings (especially *Deposition II*), through a meticulous application of glosses and bold but refined depiction, both in terms of composition and execution, of the resuscitated flesh rising out of the darkness achieve a dramatic movement and chiaroscuro-based power that de Freston has, mercifully, left intact.

Spirituality thus not only lives as a form in de Freston's work, but also finds a persisting presence throughout most of his works. This presence is not restricted to a unique topical presence, but rather, works at several levels. In *Fast Judgement*, a cloud of falling figures stands in absolute opposition to the figure on the left welcoming the spectator and the one dramatically kneeling at the end of the yellow causeway. A dual challenge is posed to the spectator: falling figures in a carefully staged comical drama that, curiously, leaves us more sensitive. On the other hand, in an unfinished piece in his studio, small semi-transparent falling figures at the right side of the horizon provide a perplexing spiritual recovery and relief from the allegorical and referential debauchery that fills the rest of the painting.

The unquestionability of some of the absolutes of human nature; nobility, power, tragedy, misfortune, death and joy are merged in a whole that, whilst not offering any answers, challenges their intrinsic individual values.

De Freston's bold strokes in *The Last of the Seducer* reveal a brutal dichotomy of vividly human drama and comedy. If art is the exploration of humanity at its best, worst and most intimate, then Tom de Freston is exploring human despair for regeneration. To forget: the cleansing experience of renewal through the decomposition of the stage and, of course, the free-fall of experience and fear. The spirit is broken through tragedy and the miserable fallacious leftovers are abandoned in a carefully staged pathetic comedy. Reflection on the self is the only path to salvation as the spirit is reflected in tragicomic fallacy within a cycle that eventually reveals itself to be dystopian.

Deposition, 2009, Acrylic on wood, 18x29cm

Altar Pieces

Ruth Padel

Sombre colours, the unchanging pale and dark of naked human bodies facing the shadows they must face, for a chapel whose wooden panels have hidden hollows and shadows of its own.

A ladder and a cross - and a human figure on the ground, looking at them. A young figure falling in a brown rush of air or perhaps water. Is it drowning? Or struggling up to the surface, to some light we cannot see?

Together and separately, the two panels for Christ's College Chapel will pose important questions for us all to answer differently, at different times, during prayer, music and service. Like Rembrandt's portraits, or Goya's figures trapped in night, they ask us to think about the way we are all, in different ways, set against the dark.

In our environment; in how we look at things (like that ladder, and the leaning rungs we shall all have to climb in our time); and in how we live - headlong, falling and struggling, up and down.

Christ on the Cross is present in each panel differently, as a reminding metaphor, a future to contemplate, but also in the struggle we have now, living our lives in our bodies and also in our psyches: a relation with the dark which W. H. Auden evoked in his *Elegy for Sigmund Freud*, when he imagineed the figures of the unconscious as creatures of night:

> About him till the very end were still
> those he had studied, the fauna of the night,

and shades that still waited to enter
the bright circle of his recognition…

but he would have us remember most of all
to be enthusiastic over the night,
not only for the sense of wonder
it alone has to offer, but also

because it needs our love…

Tom de Freston's colours here match the serene browns of the chapel. But the chestnutty tinge and bubbled texture give them a human warmth, and an energy which speaks to the Chapel's history, this building which has changed so much in five hundred years to become the tranquil chapel and anti-chapel of today, but which began as a much larger single space surrounded by bare pink brick. And whose unique inward-looking window and secret stair, built for a woman to observe and receive mass, reminds us of crucial chapters in the Ninth Book of St Augustine's Confessions.

St Augustine describes how he stood with his mother a few days before she died, looking through a window. His words are wonderful images for what it is like, to come and sit in a chapel, to listen and think, what one comes to a chapel for - all the things which these altar pieces help us ponder. "Removed from the crowd," says Augustine, he and his mother were "resting after the fatigues of a long journey." His mother had been agonized at his apostasy and felt her life fulfilled when he converted. They discussed wisdom, "just touching her with the whole effort of our hearts." Side by side, looking out of that window, they "came at last to our own minds and went beyond them." They imagined what it would be like, if "the tumult of the flesh were silenced; and the phantoms of earth and waters and air were silenced; and the poles were silent as well; indeed, if the very soul grew silent to herself, and went beyond herself by not thinking of herself."

Tom de Freston's sketches for the chapel project fulfil brilliantly what we need from any backdrop to an altar. Their images are about the flesh but also how to go beyond it. How, as Augustine says, to "come to your own mind and go beyond". How one might picture "the tumult of the flesh silenced, the soul going beyond itself, not thinking of itself." The more you look, the more there is to think about what lies ahead, how we live in our bodies and our minds, and how we deal with the dark.

Deposition II, 2009, Oil on canvas, 76x117cm

The Last Romantic, 2009, Acrylic on paper, 150x200cm

Looking, Imagining, Growing

Engaging with Tom de Freston's boxer shorts

Damien Freeman

That red boxer shorts and socks do just as well as fig leaves for concealing modesty in Tom de Freston's recent work demonstrates that modesty can also be a source of comedy. Monumental figures and poses, which might otherwise inspire awe, instead elicit a grimace. Perhaps this humour is not strictly an aesthetic virtue of his work. Even so, there are many genuinely aesthetically relevant features that we might attend to: representational properties, expressive properties, formal properties, and art-historical properties. In this essay, however, I wish to draw attention not to the aesthetic value of his work, but to its moral value. Whilst these works might be experienced as part of a tradition that seeks to appreciate art independently of our practical lives, I believe that there is a particular way of reading some of the paintings which could offer the basis for moral growth. This involves understanding the relationship between looking and imagining in our experience of de Freston's work – and not just in the experience of an individual work, but in the experience of one work in light of the earlier experience of other of his works.

De Freston's interest in the history of art is never far below the painted surface, and so it is appropriate that we begin by thinking about how artists

working in de Freston's tradition have invited us to look at their paintings. It does not take much imagination to work out how we are usually meant to look at a picture. We are often meant to experience the depicted scene as if we were looking through a window; as it would unfold around one standing in our position, but within the depicted scene; as someone standing in my shoes in the picture would perceive the scene around him.

In de Freston's painting, *The Last Romantic*, we are confronted by a scene which is dominated by the back of the male figure in the centre of the page. The figure stands on some sort of platform or alter with arms outstretched and head upraised as he gazes into – or beyond – the dark heavens at the top of the page. There are some seven figures beneath him who face him and us. They are all of different sizes, although their heads are all roughly aligned near the horizon at the middle of the page. These heads are the key to the picture. All are depicted with one side black, the other side white. Some are looking up towards the head of the large figure on the platform, who does not meet their gaze, but looks yet further up into heaven. Others look away from him, either preoccupied with their own activities, or, in one case, pointing to the large figure's head without actually looking at him.

Wherever the figures are looking, we cannot help but to feel that they are either looking at the central figure or that they are deliberately avoiding him. The fractured black and white faces seem to be painfully and purposefully craning their neck towards, or away from, him. But this does not necessarily induce the spectator to crane his neck towards or away from the central figure. Rather, the spectator feels inclined to try to raise himself on tiptoe; to elevate himself up to the level of the central figure towards or away from whom the other figures seem to orientate themselves. Indeed, I suggest that the picture invites the spectator to identify with the central figure; to imagine that he is that figure; and then to experience the drawing from that figure's perspective. Now we have the simultaneous experiences of trying to gaze beyond into the elusive heavens whilst also being aware that the ground beneath us is occupied by figures who are striving to engage or avoid us. This reading of the picture demonstrates that the internal spectator is a device which we might suppose that de Freston employs in some of his pictures to good effect. He explicitly invites us to identify with a figure in the picture and then experience it from that figure's perspective.

In *The Last of the Seducer*, de Freston presents us with an image that is a pared down version of Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa*. The raft at sea con-

tains a single figure in the bottom left hand portion of the page. He has the half-white, half-back face of the figures in *The Last Romantic*. The figure maintains a mournful – albeit strangely stoical – look as he nurses a corpse clad in red socks. The raft is also shared by another corpse whose head is cut off by the right hand edge of the page. The raft is adrift and seemingly drifts towards the horizon and away from the spectator. The figure's gaze is fixed towards us and away from the horizon towards which he is heading. With whom or what is he fixated? Perhaps it is someone stranded in the receding distance whom he drifts away from; someone who has no reason to feel stoical as well as mournful, as he does, not have the possibility of survival to entertain.

I have suggested that sometimes we are meant to experience a picture by identifying with an internal spectator. Are we meant to do so in this case? As there is only one figure in the painting, it would have to be that figure. But I cannot see how we could identify with him. He confronts us too directly for us to imagine being him looking at ourselves. However, as with Wollheim's reading of Manet, our imaginative capacity is not exhausted by the depicted figures. Perhaps in this case, we are meant to imagine the figure whom the raft is drifting away from. This figure is not represented, but we might still locate him somewhere out of sight but within the scene, perhaps somewhere behind where we stand when we look at the drawing. We might then identify with this unrepresented internal spectator and engage with the depicted figure's mournful stoicism in the way in which the internal spectator would engage with it as he watches the raft – and his own hope for salvation in this life – drift away from him. Again we can make use of the device of an internal spectator when engaging with de Freston's work, but in this case it requires the imagination to work harder: it has to imagine the internal spectator who is not represented before it can imaginatively identify with him.

Again we should ask why it is necessary to imagine a figure with whom we identify when experiencing this picture, when it is perfectly possible to experience the picture just in terms of what is in the picture. I am not going to say that de Freston demands that we engage with his painting in this way, and that a failure to do so is a failure to engage with the painting in the way that he wants us to engage with it. But I am going to say that it is a possible way of engaging with the picture; that this possibility is a legitimate possibility; and that its legitimacy stems from the fact that de Freston

makes the possibility legitimate. The source of the legitimacy lies not so much in what de Freston achieves in this picture, but in how our experience of this picture relates to our experience of other pictures by him. And it is at this point that I return to *The Last Romantic*. In that picture, I suggested that we are presented with an internal spectator with whom we imaginatively identify. What I now want to suggest is that when we experience *The Last of the Seducer*, we might bring the experience of *The Last Romantic* to the experience of *The Last of the Seducer*. Once we have found it rewarding to identify imaginatively with the internal spectator in the first picture, we are now ready to see the potential for imagining an internal spectator with whom we can identify in the second picture. Just as we felt compelled to identify imaginatively with the figure that the black and white faces were looking at or away from in *The Last Romantic*, so we now feel compelled to imagine the figure that the black and white face is drifting away from in *The Last of the Seducer*, and imaginatively identify with this imagined internal spectator.

The Last Romantic provide us with a basis for experiencing *The Last of the Seducer* with the aid of an imagined internal spectator. With de Freston, as with Manet, new visual experiences are possible when we attend not merely to an individual work, but to the works as an oeuvre. New possibilities for how we can experience an artist's work arise when we appreciate it not on its own, but in the broader context of our experience of more of the artist's work to which it relates.

I have suggested that, at least when I engage with some of de Freston's pictures, I can either experience them from my own point of view, or I can imaginatively identify with a spectator in the picture – be that a represented or unrepresented internal spectator. I have also suggested that at least in the case of the unrepresented spectator, this possibility is only disclosed to me when I engage with the picture in light of other pictures by de Freston which I have previously experienced, and which open up a new possibility for my experience of this picture.

This possibility might more readily be noticed as a possibility of another art form: the novel. Just as we can experience *Home*, by Marilynne Robinson, as a stand alone piece or a companion to Gilead, so we can experience de Freston's paintings individually or in light of his oeuvre. The experience of de Freston's picture with a depicted internal spectator can prepare us to experience the later picture by imagining an unrepresented internal

spectator. That we have these alternatives in both cases is morally, as well as aesthetically, important because we have similar alternatives in the personal relationships of our practical life. This is the key to a further value of art. Engaging with some works of art might offer a special sort of moral education. It offers us the possibility for personal growth; for learning that imagination and context can enable us to see things in new ways. If we can then translate this awareness into our personal relationships, we find that the looking and imagining in our experience of pictures can enable us to grow in our experience of other people. In this way, art can provide a preparation for life. It can make us aware that we can use imagination to engage with people in new ways, and to appreciate that sometimes the broader context commends our doing this. So one important value of de Freston's art is the possibility that he offers us for exercising our visual and imaginative capacities in a way that can be redeployed to promote our moral growth in practical life.

N.B. This text is an abridged version of the original.

A Lover's Discourse, 2009, Oil on canvas, 76x117cm

Play, Monkey

Jaya Savige

Let me do that thing for you,
You know, that thing
You said you liked in bed.
Yes, with the door open.

Let me do that trick I do,
Be your little acrobat again.
Together we can spark
This room up like a circuit –

We know how to work it.
Say you don't remember
The cold nights in November
We scalded the walls

With our bleach-hot lust.
Oh, but you must.
Upside down, I became
Your pliant Polyphemous,

Your pet Cyclops,
A vulnerable strumpet –
Grotesque herald mid-arabesque
With a Dantean trumpet.

Hush, be still, forget
Your complicated dramas –
Here I am, your silly lamb,
Your monkey, sans pyjamas.

Come back to bed! Know
Again the body's declaration.
I rest my weight, exiled, waiting
For you to teach me how to fall
When this game begins to pall.

A Brief History Of Heroism, 2009, Acrylic on paper, 150x200cm

A Brief History of Heroism

Caroline Vout

"One day he started to peel off his clothes. I was horrified to see that he was wearing the full Chelsea gear. It took all of my self-control to stop myself laughing."

Antonia da Sancha on Heritage Secretary, David Mellor, 1992

Performing masculinity

It's a dog-eat-dog world out there. Each man for himself, all of them facing what our modern media has hailed as a 'crisis in masculinity'. To moisturise or not. To take to the gym or to the kitchen. 'Metrosexual' males are the order of the day; Russell Crowe is unacceptably Neanderthal. Yet society is more brutal than ever, with gang warfare and hooliganism on every corner. And not all of it always sordid. Far from it. Television, cinema and computer games glamorise, and feed our thirst for, gore. If the latest Bond films are anything to go by, violence is the new eroticism.

A Brief History of Heroism taps this turmoil. It is a vast canvas, divided into three poster-like sections, and background and foreground, by four vertical and two horizontal white bands which function as a grid. At one moment, they are frames for billboards or shop-windows, the next, markings on a sports-field. They could be anywhere, are co-ordinates that seek the location not of a particular place or time, but of the viewer. The groups in the three 'windows' look first

like gladiators battling it out in the blood-soaked arena. These were heroes in the Roman world, captives or criminals who fought to the death but were often eroticised in the process. Not for nothing was the emperor Marcus Aurelius' wife. Faustina, reputed to have bathed in the blood of the gladiator to whom she was attracted.

On second glance, they are yet more mannered: the group to the far right, a grotesque version of Rembrandt's *Abraham and Isaac* of 1664 and the other two, stills from a modern wrestling match. Only in the left one can we see the umpire. The central scene showcases Abraham's knife for a second time to bridge the gap between ancient and modern. With whom do we identify? How do we feel about the violence? Do the wrestling ring and arena equate? As Roland Barthes wrote in his *Mythologies* (1957), 'the function of the wrestler is not to win but to go through the motions'. As is the case with Abraham, wrestlers perform their masculinity.

Below them, mini-men gather in rows. Michelangelo's *David* and the *Dying Gaul* are relegated to the side-lines. What use are they now? If the triptych above is about individual glory, this is about team-spirit, as swathes of figures in red shorts and socks block an attempt at goal. What kind of hero are we? The use of masks and blindfolds brings Kendo Nagasaki and other heroes from the world of wrestling together with the villains of horror films like The Texas Chain Saw Massacre, and protagonists of Italian improvisational theatre or Commedia dell' Arte to underline the performative aspect. Masks are also familiar from Gay iconography. Men are being asked to measure themselves against these poles, to stand up and be counted.

Men are from Mars and Women are from Venus

The women in the painting are colourless. Only one of them, shown here in two different versions, stands upright, and she is Eve – after the Fall. The others recline, not so much on the canvas, as etched into its skin, like tattoos on the forearm of a sailor. They are all Venus or adaptations of her, an evolution of artistic imaginings from Giorgione's *Sleeping Venus* (c. 1510) through Titian's *Venus of Urbino* (1538), and *Danae* (1550-3), each complete with their dog, and Velàzquez's *Rokeby Venus* (1647-51) to Manet's *Olympia* (1863). Deprived of the sumptuous couches or crumpled bed on which they are accus-

tomed to lie, they float – figments of male desire that have been stripped of their substance. The red sock on the foot of the male figure directly above Venus and Cupid looks like a love-heart, rendering the reference cutesy rather than iconic. Meanwhile, the scandal stirred up by Olympia is stilled, her all too knowing gaze 'dumb-ed down' by her Betty Boop complexion. The necklace and flower of Manet's painting are a thing of the past, as is her right slipper which she once discarded. More uneasy than provocative, she now wears a shiny, new red shoe that marks her as the female to the males around her. Even the staring cat is a cartoon, too separate and saccharine to be suggestive. It is the terrier in the foreground that now commands attention. He could eat these dolls for breakfast.

One man and his dog. But what kind of a relationship is this? In the eighteenth century, few portraits of the British gentleman were complete without their canine companion, its presence as crucial in capturing their aristocratic claims as were their stately home, and velvet breeches. Here, however, its master is – despite his crown – still sitting it out between bouts in the corner of the ring, hoping to snatch that victory. He tries it on for size, but too self-consciously, as though in the spotlight, playing King Lear. Is the crown gold or is it paper? As he touches his head in anxiety, the other male figure with which he shares the stage hails his fans and touches his crotch. Very Robbie Williams: thrusting or should that be camp? No socks or boxer-shorts here. The gloves are off. And the prize for 'Man of the Year' goes to? Contemporary women are absent from Tom's painting, the traditional models for understanding male-female relations belittled for being the clichés that they are, too sketchy and overused. Today, women do more than stare back provocatively; they air-brush their own bodies, 'kiss and tell', even jelly-wrestle at Cambridge garden parties. They have taken the male view of women by the scruff of the neck and toppled its creators in the process.

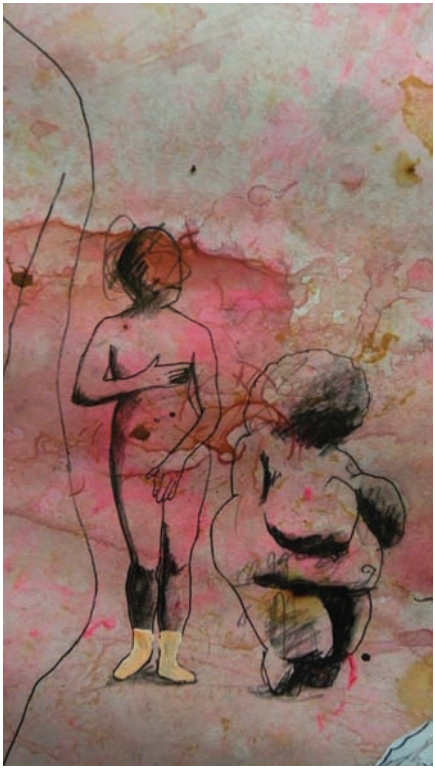
Life imitating art and art imitating life

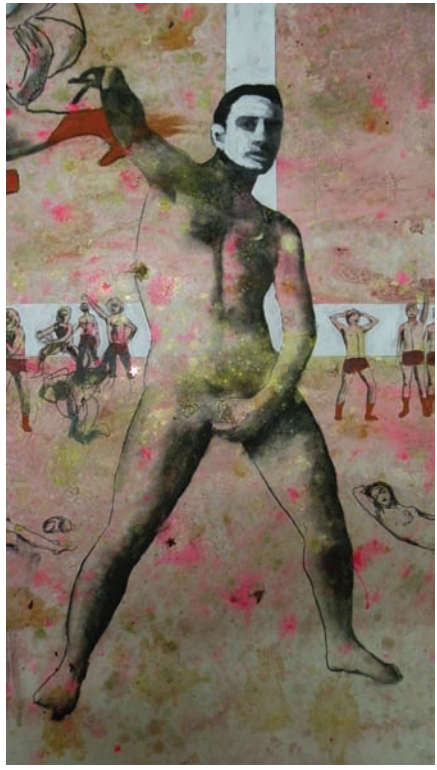
Is this empowerment? Far from it, in my view. 'Doing it for the girls' is not the same as commanding respect as a woman. Rather all of us, male and female, are manipulated by the media, bombarded by images which tell us how to look, love, live. Never has the 'anxiety of influence' been so overwhelming. And this is in a sense the message of Tom's painting. Do we conform or rebel? Can we win without violence, and with our dignity preserved? Heroism and hero-worship are wider-reaching concepts than ever, but so are the challenges that

they issue to identity.

This realisation lies at the heart of another art project in which Tom has been involved: Anthony Gormley's *Fourth Plinth Project* in London's Trafalgar Square, in which members of the public were given the opportunity to stand where Mark Wallinger's *Ecce Homo* sculpture had stood, each for one hour. This time Tom was not artist but subject, up there at 2.00 am – in (you guessed it) red boxer-shorts. In this way, he wonderfully brings his painting to life, art and gender as performance. The price of a man's fame is exposed as such: masculinity 'with its pants down'.

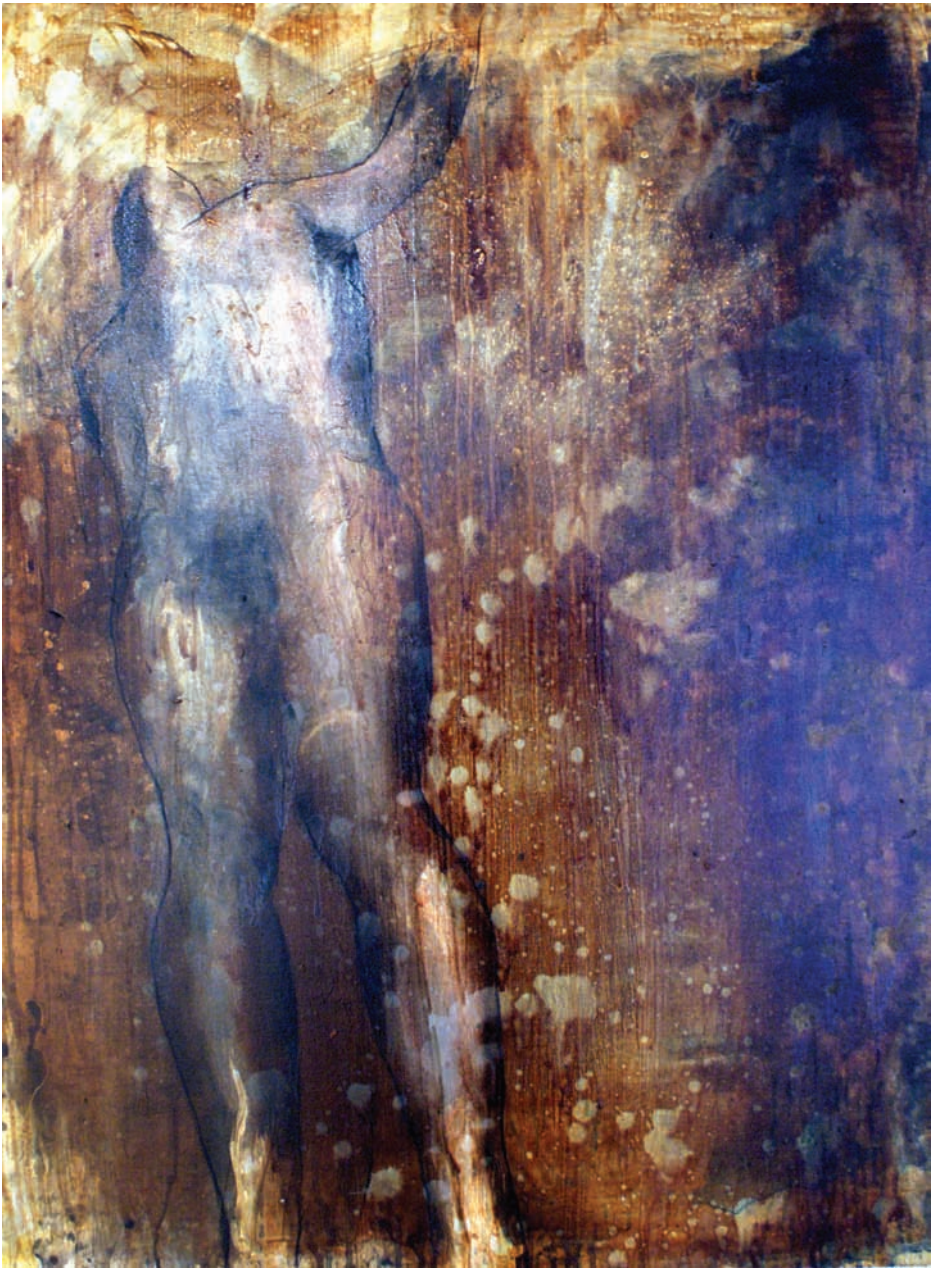
A Brief History of Heroism is not the only one of Tom's paintings to be crowded with references to earlier artistic masterpieces. Some of these echoes are more obvious than others: like those of Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* in the ludicrous *Jove's Lost Rape* or of the contours of the Knidian Aphrodite in *A Lover's Discourse* – a statue which has spawned a host of sisters over the centuries from the Venus de Medici to the page-three pin-up. But all of them reward discovery. Not in a smug way (this is not Classicism as connoisseurship), but in bringing us face to face with where we and our ways of seeing the world (have) come from. In the process, we better understand who we are, and are trying or pressured to be, have our own pretensions punctured.



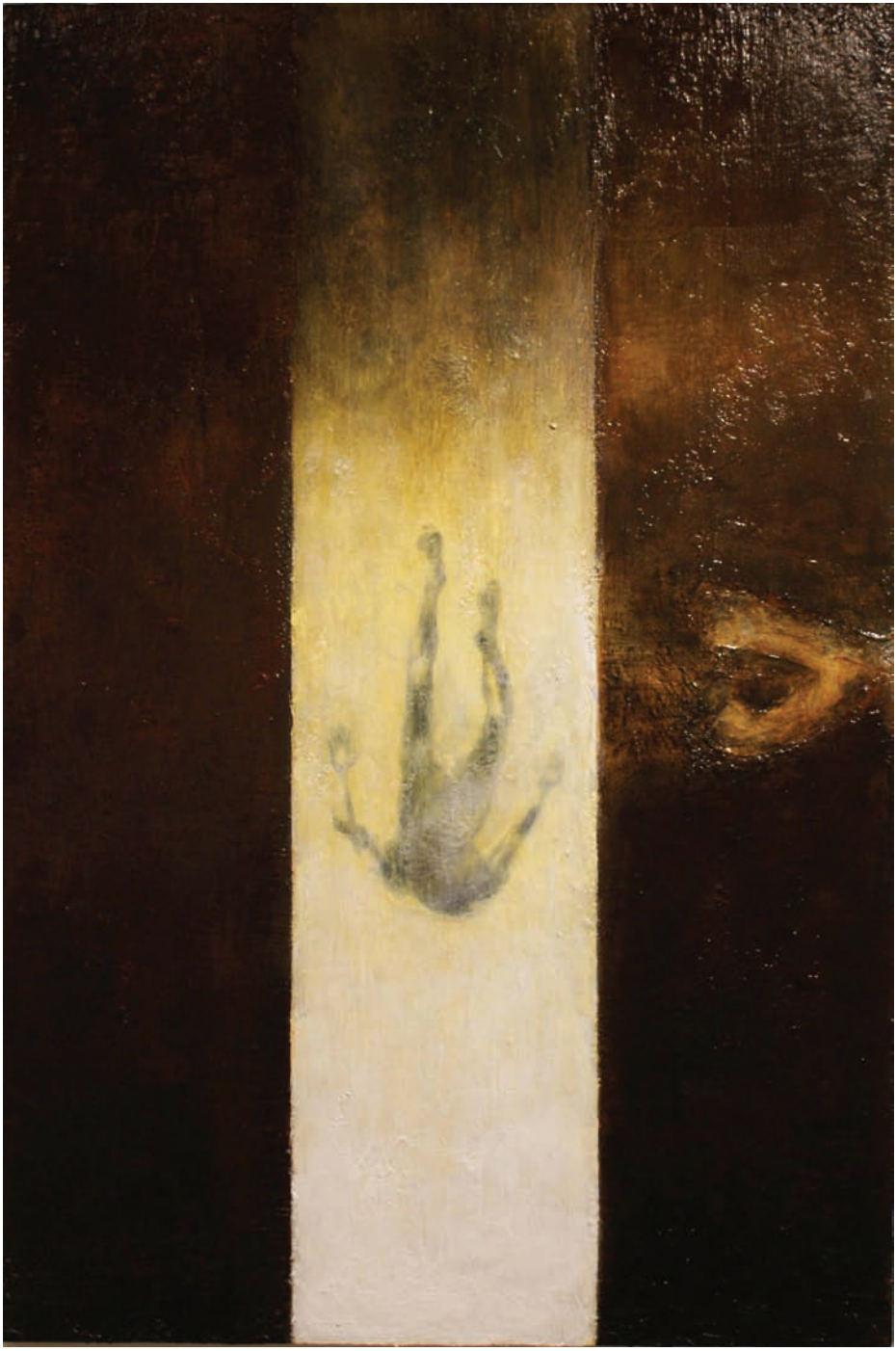


Details from **A Brief History Of Heroism,** 2009, Acrylic on paper

Catalogue

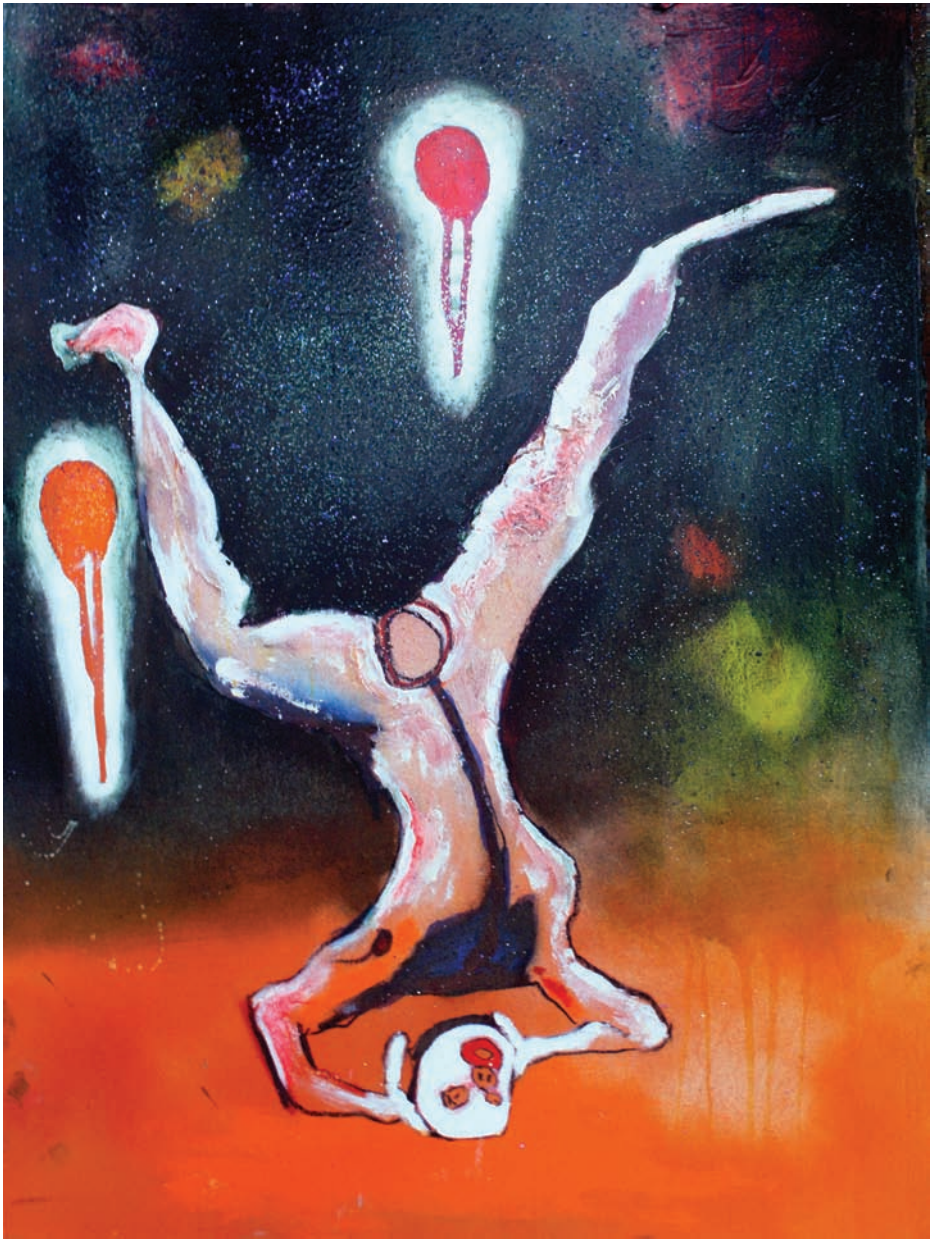


Deposition III, 2009, Oil on canvas, 76x117cm



Icarus, 2008, Acrylic on canvas, 61x92cm

Him Who Wanted To Fall, 2008, Acrylic on canvas, 76x117cm



The Boy Whose Head Came Off, 2009, Oil on paper, 60x90cm

Desire For The Fall, 2008, Oil on canvas, 76x117cm

A Lover's Discourse II, 2008, Oil on canvas, 76x117cm

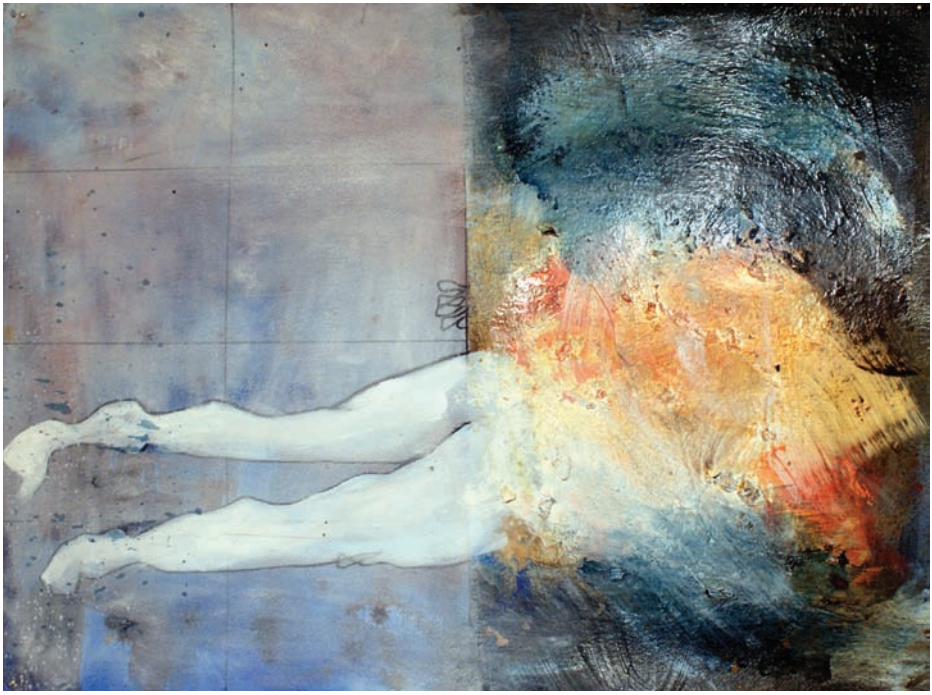
The Pink Lady And Him, 2008, Acrylic on canvas, 76x117cm

Desire For The Fall But Nothing At All,
2008, Acrylic on canvas, 76x117cm

The Blue Lady And Him, 2008, Acrylic on canvas, 76x117cm

Spectacle Of The Collapse, 2009, Oil on canvas, 76x117cm

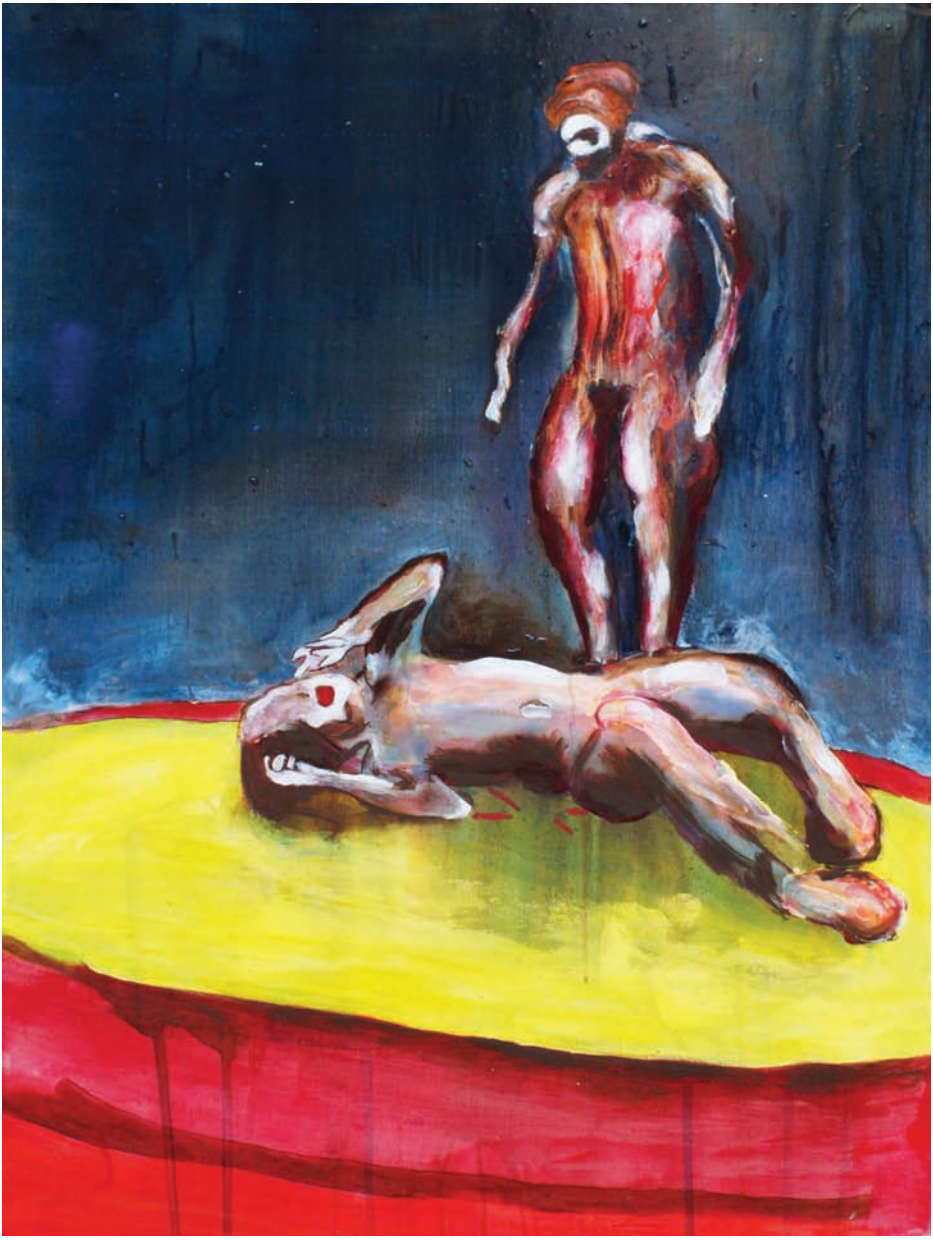
Floater, 2009, Oil on canvas, 76x117cm



Swimmer II, 2009, Oil on paper, 55x76cm

Floater of Lethe, 2009, Oil on canvas, 76x117cm

Horse Between Somewhere And Nowhere,
2009, Oil on canvas, 76x117cm



Tragedy – Dancing To The Bee Gees On The Disco Floor,
2008, Acrylic on canvas, 76x117cm

Wrestlers, 2009, Collage on wood, 15x30cm

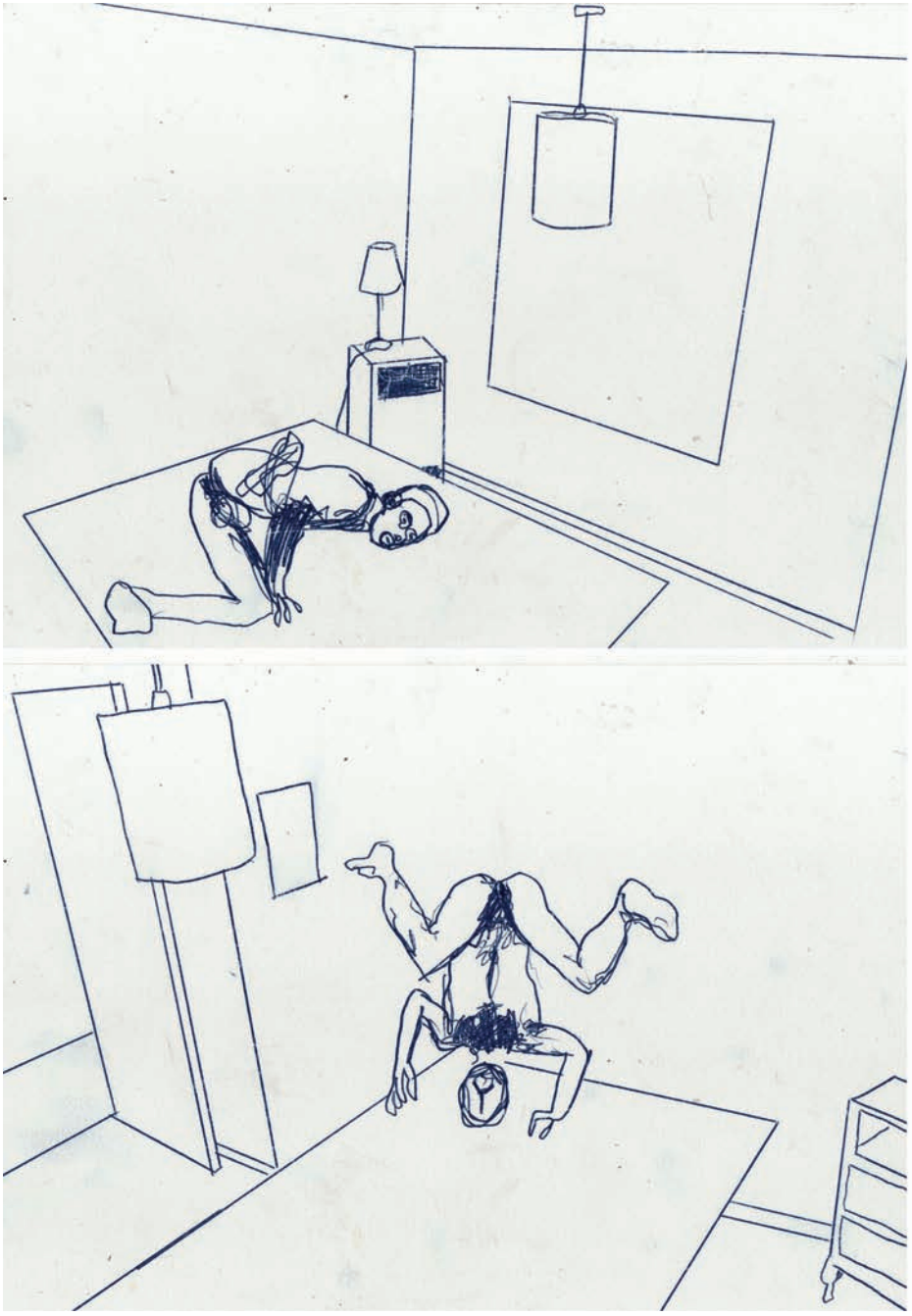
Sodom, 2009, Mixed media on paper, 150x200cm

The Dying Animal, 2009, Charcoal on paper, 150x200cm

The Last Of The Seducer, 2009, Charcoal on paper, 150x200cm

Jove's Lost Rape, 2009, Oil on canvas, 76x117cm

Fast Judgement, 2009, Acrylic on paper, 150x200cm



Studies For A Lover's Discourse, 2009, Pen on paper, 29x40cm

History Painting, 2009, Acrylic on paper, 500x150cm

David No Goliath, 2009, Print and ink on paper, 18x29cm

Interview with Tom de Freston

with Professor Admiral Face, recorded on 12 July 2009

Professor Admiral Face : What would you label your work as?
Tom de Freston: Tragic comic.

P.A.F. : Could you elaborate on why?
T.d.F.: Well, the works' inability to achieve any of the genuine pathos or grandeur of tragedy is pretty comical and the lack of genuine wit or humour in the work is pretty tragic.

P.A.F. : What do you consider to be tragic?
T.d.F.: Tragedy manifests itself in very different ways, dependent on the vehicle. Painting, for instance, has a very different tragic structure to literature or photography. It is always dependent on the art's unique properties; a logic which I accept could be seen as a Modernist hangover, but which I think reaches back further.

The tragedy of painting is reliant on its flatness, its stillness, its silence and the singularity of the moment in terms of its spatial and causal coordinates. My chief

deviation from Modernist ideals is that I don't think these are properties to be singled out, but rather challenged.

Painting deals well with moments in flux. Points of action which seem to be transient, on the verge of slipping into the next frame.

Tragedy in painting is about the play between the construction of an implied ideal and the realisation of its falseness.

P.A.F. : And comedy? I had never thought of painting as comic.

T.d.F.: It's certainly not, to use text speak, 'LOL'. It's more a search for a quiet caustic wit. Let's call it Melancomic.

P.A.F. : In works such as *History Painting* the scene is overflowing with art historical quotation. Reference, reference, reference, how about your own creativity? Are you not just cannibalising older works?

T.d.F.: That's exactly what I am doing. I like the image of me literally devouring these past images and excreting and regurgitating them back out onto the canvas.

I think the mass of the quotations and the context in which they sit makes it clear that this is something different to mere plagiarism. I like the idea of stealing the past's weapons and attacking them.

Through the sheer mass of references, almost all of which are canonical and weighty, I am looking to pick away at the very fabric of the structure and system in which these images have been housed.

The independence of my voice comes in the manner in which I deal with the source and the way in which I rip specific elements from their historical context and then piece them back together in new orders and systems. Suddenly Adam and Eve are no longer next to a snake in the Sistine Chapel, but are sandwiched between a boy on a donkey and a strange bastardisation of a Daumier Saltimbanque. Some images are bastardised, some celebrated. Some are pastiche or parody and others an open homage. Hopefully history is flattened and a democracy of vision, which is peculiarly contemporary, is found.

P.A.F. : What do these zombie paintings tell us that is different to the originals?

T.d.F.: In my most pretentious moments I'll ironically believe that the references to the past are an attempt to eke out the Zeitgeist. These zombie characters,

killed off and then brought back to life, are no longer making the same comments. In their original source they are consistently moral, dealing with grand and important themes, archetypes of History Painting. In their new guise none of the messages are conveyed anymore, Eve's eyes are no longer tempted by an apple, but seem more interested in Adam's crotch. The crass nature of the reduction seems to comment on what we might label, again pretentiously, the post-modern condition.

The almost complete destruction of value systems and absolutes has left us in a position where as a mass we have nothing consistent or concrete to belief in. The apathy and vacuousness of this condition is, hopefully, present in the nature of my relationship with the past.

I suppose there is something slightly mournful about this. Everything seems to be accelerating, of having reached some kind of whimpering closure. The past provides some kind of haven to seek solace in.

P.A.F. : *A Brief History of Heroism* and other paintings have this lewd pink surface. It seems quite a conscious choice. Why the obsessive pink?

T.d.F.: I want it to read as a radioactive skin; a skin of paint and of flesh.

I think the expressive energy of the surface gives a nod to mid-twentieth-century Abstract Expressionism, and particularly Jackson Pollock. I think the tradition is something I want to play with. To me it's an overtly masculine tradition, the big American hero, all strength, power and free will; allowed to make large physical expressive marks without justification. Pollock's works feel like one giant series of ejaculations over the canvas, his sticks and brushes merely extensions of his penis.

To try and capture this energy, but then to code it in this garish, acidic and vomit inducing pink seems to be an interesting juxtaposition.

P.A.F. : So are these paintings about painting?

T.d.F.: I hate that phrase. But I have made it sound like that, haven't I? Paintings have always been self-reflexive, but there seems to be a boring tendency to want to make elitist works now which are exclusively so. I would hate to think my paintings are singularly self-reflexive.

P.A.F. : Do you think they are?

T.d.F.: No. I think the surface reads as paint and as flesh. As much as its a nod to

Pollock it also draws from a huge history of the painting of flesh. I want their to be this sexy, alluring surface which draws you in, like a moth to light; its acidity smacking against your retina; which then reveals itself to be a stick, hairy cosmos. If it works then it should be sat in limbo between its reading as the spreading of paint over a surface and some kind of flayed human flesh. The paint should be a sign as a multiplicity of references.

P.A.F. : That seems like a very contemporary position to take.
T.d.F.: I think it's labelled as such, but that's bollocks. There is such a desire to believe that we are in this unique position in terms of what we understand to be possible in painting. All that's changed is the depth and breadth of the stylistic dictionary from which we can borrow.

Painters have always been interested in paint as a sign with a multiplicity of references. It's a continuous history as opposed to a unique tendency of contemporary painters. From Titian, through Delacroix, to Rothko and onto Doig; to name only a few, there has been a constant desire and understanding of the linguistic flexibility of the medium. The poetry of paint is its ability to be mimetic, expressive, self-referential and spiritual. I'm boring myself, let's move on.

P.A.F. : The play between the structure and the surface in some of your paintings creates an unstable spatial system. Is this something you seek?
T.d.F.: Yes, and it's a fine balancing act. It's about creating a certain kind of tension which I don't yet think I have achieved. The structure and the figures are often laid over the surface in a manner which stills allows large parts of the original layer to show through. The same skin of paint can be seen in areas of foreground, background or a section of a figure.

The dialogue between the structure and the skin looks to set up a play on the two-foldness of painting. I want it to slip between the illusion of three dimensional space and the reality of its flatness.

P.A.F. : I hate to suggest it again, but this seems like a very contemporary, post-abstraction position. Is it not?
T.d.F.: No. Again I think there is this weird presumption that we are in a unique position as painters in a post-Greenbergian world. Is Greenbergian a word? I'm not sure. It's the presumption that we are the first set of painters to consciously play with the idea of painting as both a window and a wall. This is due to a belief

in a two-way history of space in painting. The belief that during the Renaissance they moved in a clear linear path towards the ideal of implied depth, a reading which is a Vasarian bastardisation of history. Greenberg and the formalists then take this and argue that a return journey to the surface is made, from Manet to the nadir of Pollock.

In reality I think most painters have been interested in the spatial duality that is inherently present in painting. Its ability to be read as a window when we know it is a wall is a constant. In both a Titian and a Pollock we fluctuate between seeing through and across the picture plane.

P.A.F. : A recurring theme in your work is The Fall. Why do you keep coming back to this?

T.d.F.: It's actually something I'm trying to move away from. I became unconvinced to the extent to which my figures justified such a romanticised and grand narrative, or even a narrative at all. Instead I started to focus on the desire for such drama.

P.A.F. : But it is something you keep returning to. I'm interested in your use of space in depicting this subject.

T.d.F.: That what interests me. The verticality of the canvas, and the division of this space so that two halves are formed. The positioning of a figure travelling between these two spaces sets up the potential for a formal and metaphysical binary opposition, the sacred and profane.

I think the importance of this spatial structure runs through history, from depictions of the deposition through to the collapse of the Twin Towers.

P.A.F. : The excessive series of photos, drawings, print and paintings of male figures on stages which read as beds? They seem to be deviations from your ideas of The Fall.

T.d.F.: Yes, they are. They become about desire for The Fall but nothing at all. These excessively melodramatic figures who are actually totally vacuous. The theatre of their performance is clear.

P.A.F. : And what about this uncomfortable display of anuses?

T.d.F.: I want the scream and the anus to mirror each other. In doing so both signs are destabilised. The silent scream becomes not a signal of Baconesque horror, but a whimpering fart.

P.A.F. : You title them *A Lover's Discourse*. Is this a nod to Barthes' text?

T.d.F.: Yes. I think they are mournful pleas for the absent other. But I want the pity to be one step removed. I want you not to pity their plight, but the vacuousness and patheticness of its excess.

P.A.F. : Talking of pathetic, how about the recurring motif of the red socks and boxers?

T.d.F.: I'm glad you think they are pathetic, that's just what I want. I want the clothes, paradoxically, to strip the characters of their desire for heroism. It emasculates them, no longer nude but castrated.

P.A.F. : Beyond this cynicism your work has an underlying concern with spirituality?

T.d.F.: Thank you. I think there is a constant dialogue in my head between the romantic and the cynic. I still have a belief in the ability of painting to be a vehicle for transcendence, to provide a fleeing escape from tangible reality.

P.A.F. : Does an interview like this give you control over viewers reading of your work, ensuring they don't make mistakes?

T.d.F.: No. The painter has no divine hold on meaning. The picture is the only thing which analysis needs to match up to. I am certainly not a believer that any reading goes. I see paintings as being like an empty vessel. The viewer can fill and empty it with an almost limitless numbers of meanings. The only constant is the vessel; the liquid (to stretch this analogy) has to fit inside its boundaries.

My waffled nonsense should probably be totally ignored. This probably makes this interview process fairly redundant.

Select shows and collections

'A Brief History of History Painting' - solo show
Gallery 106, Fulham, London. June – July 2009.

'Napoleon's shadow'
Performance as part of A. Gormley's Fourth Plinth project
Trafalgar Square, London. July 24th 1-2am 2009

'A Brief History of Heroism'
Platform 1 Gallery, Wandsworth Common Station, London. May 2009

'Deposition' - solo show
Christ's College Chapel. April – May 2009

'On Air'- group show
Christ's College Visual Arts Centre. April 2009

'Dying Animal' - group show
'The Shop XIII Jesus Lane', Cambridge. February 2009

'Between Somewhere and Nowhere' - solo show
Museum of Classical Archaeology, Cambridge University. October – December 2008

Theatre of Limbo - solo show
Loft Theatre, Leamington Spa. September 2008

'Swimming in Lethe' - solo show
'The Gallery'- Stratford Upon Avon Leisure Centre, May 24th – June 8th 2008

Public Collections

Museum of Classical Archaeology, Cambridge University
Classics Faculty, Cambridge University
History of Art Faculty, Cambridge University
Trinity College, Cambridge University
Wolfson College, Cambridge University
Lucy Cavendish, Cambridge University
Warwickshire College Library
St. Edmunds College, Cambridge University
Christ's College MCR

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