

John Long: For and Against Art History

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It is rare to look at a painting and hear music. Yet when I first encountered John Long's recent work, I was overcome by the sense that the silent figures who occupy his interiors are listening intently to music. Not just any music, but the deep, sonorous sounds of Bach's Cello Concertos. Resonant, intimate and tinged with melancholy, Bach's six suites are considered some of the most beautiful music ever written. Beautiful, intimate and contemplative Long's compositions are the visual equivalent of Bach's concertos.

In a concerto, the soloist and the orchestra play in alternate episodes of opposition, co-operation and independence. Long is the soloist working alternatively for and against art history. At first glance paintings such as *Nocturne with Fabius Magdalene*, appear dutiful homages to past masters, in this case Georges de La Tour's 1630 painting of the penitent Mary Magdalene. Further study suggests that Long has absorbed the lessons of art history, and filtered them through his personal vision and virtuoso skill to create compositions that are both in tune with tradition and unmistakably contemporary.

The myriad of art historical references in Long's paintings are worthy of a thesis. Direct references to past masters including Vermeer, Poussin and Picasso are evident. In *Still life with Lute and Love Letter*, Vermeer's painting *Love Letter* (1670) is transplanted from the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, to the artist's studio. Long's title playfully refers to both Vermeer's painting and the still-life he has constructed. In *The Reader*, an image of Poussin's *Nurture of Bacchus* (c.1628) hangs on the wall. This painting in the Collection of the National Gallery, London, is based on part of Ovid's *Metamorphosis*. Long's reader looks at neither book nor painting. Lost in her own world, she appears to be listening passively rather than engaging in the activity assigned to her. A Picasso Cubist still-life is reproduced in *Girl with a Basket of Fruit*. The contrast between Long's style and the semi-abstracted composition is stark. His inclusion of this Picasso is both an acknowledgement and a rejection of Cubism. Long could paint Cubist compositions but he chooses not to.

The influence of Velázquez presides over much of Long's work. The Spaniard's masterpiece, *Las Meninas*, has inspired artists for generations. Long's inclusion of a figure reflected in a convex mirror in *The Musician* references both *Las Meninas*, where the artist's subjects can be seen in a mirror behind the easel, and Jan van Eyck's *Arnolfini Wedding* (1434) where a convex mirror reflects the image of two figures who have been interpreted as wedding officials or witnesses. Another more local reference may be John Lavery's monumental painting, *The Artist's Studio* (1909–1913) where the Belfast artist depicts himself reflected in a mirror behind his wife and

daughters. In *The Musician* the artist's easel is visible, but it is unclear whether it is the painter who is present.

The Artist's Studio is in the collection of the National Gallery of Ireland, an institution that Long frequented during the period that he lived in Dublin. He recalls regular visits on Thursday evenings and on other occasions when he needed inspiration before returning to the easel. Numerous references to paintings in the NGI can be found in Long's work; both obvious homages and subtle comparisons, conscious and unconscious. While Long studied highlights of the collection including Vermeer's *Woman Writing a Letter, with her Maid* (c.1670) less celebrated paintings also made an impact including Willem Claesz Heda's *A Banquet-Piece* (c. 1635). A still life in the Dutch *banketje* tradition, this painting depicts everyday objects including pewter plates, glasses, knives and food in meticulous detail. The crumpled white cloth Heda used to highlight elements of this still-life is updated in Long's use of a napkin in *Girl with a Basket of Fruit*. This in turn echoes the tablecloth in the Picasso still-life illustrated on the wall thus linking Long with an unexpected artistic lineage.

Perhaps the most significant painting in the NGI in relation to Long's work is Velázquez's *Kitchen Maid with Supper at Emmaus* (c.1617-1618). An early genre painting known as a *bodegone*, (kitchen still life), this work is a close ancestor of *Girl in a Turban II*. Devices including the depiction of a painting within a painting, the landscape format requiring the figure to be bent over, the table occupying the foreground and the central role of ceramics are common to both paintings.

By definition genre paintings are images of everyday life portraying ordinary people engaged in common activities. The figures depicted are usually anonymous and unnamed. Long's paintings often fit this description but ultimately he is more interested in the formal concerns of composition, colour and balance than the social implications of painting everyday subjects. Velázquez's genre paintings often have religious sub-plots but Long's compositions resist narrative. While it is tempting to try to create relationships between the figures in his paintings and the art historical references he includes, ultimately, Long's interests are more formal than philosophical.

Yet, sometimes objects depicted within the paintings have particular significance for the artist. The ceramic vessels that Long includes in his compositions were made by his father and recur from painting to painting. Although he does not paint portraits and is not interested in likeness, these ceramics are particular and personal props that Long has been painting since he was a school boy. In other paintings, the subject is clearly detritus that he has found formally interesting. *Remnants*, a painting of an empty cotton reel and a used kitchen sponge, is a resolutely domestic image. It recalls the work of Charles Brady, the American painter who made his home in Ireland and mastered the art of understatement in his paintings of match boxes and envelopes. The unapologetically prosaic nature of *Remnants* is striking – shocking even – when seen within the context of Long's other paintings where beauty is the dominant note.

The influence of Euan Uglow, Long's teacher at The Slade, has often been noted in relation to his work. While Uglow played a crucial role in making him the painter he is today, the continuity in style and subject between Long's early work and his recent paintings, suggests that, rather than creating a direct disciple, Uglow encouraged the approach to painting that Long had already found instinctively. His teaching gave authority to his pupil's work but did not define it.

In a photograph of Long in his studio, an impressive display of giant rulers and set squares hangs on the wall. This is a telling image. Like the master tailor, measuring, marking, cutting and sewing to create a bespoke suit, Long works meticulously to create perfectly balanced compositions with the precise tonal harmony and exact atmosphere he desires. He grapples with art history, converses with Velázquez and with a nod to Euan Uglow, creates compositions that move beyond formal concerns to evoke the beauty, resonance and grace of Bach's Concertos.