

## AN INTERVIEW WITH RITA MCBRIDE

RMCB: Yesterday you described your process as cyclical. You called it a circular practice. Where do all of your thoughts and your decisions begin and end?

MG: In my work there are often representations of images with references to specific events, histories, and people. All of the subject matter that I work with revolves around specific histories, and I look at ways in which these have been represented or used. I then use these indicators to align what source material I can find with genres or historical styles in painting, sometimes fitting or sometimes deliberately not, so returning to the original source material, but creating a shift in what has been dealt with.

RMCB: So, like a novelist, you present a picture of life, using the facts of life; sex, money, religion, ideology, technology and then use a painting process to shed 'new light' on the topic. Would you say that your work is primarily concerned with content decisions; concerned mainly with those interests which come from fiction, pop culture and newspaper articles ... from life?

MG: Yes, my work is very much about content decisions and about the interaction between the real references, acted upon in the process of painting. The use of a broader spectrum of life, as you point out, is to take the effect of these images and events, and how they function culturally, and to somehow determine what new critiques, or angles can be created.

RMCB: Could it be that you set up a visual architecture to move within: to understand through a varietous and progressive discovery of angles? How does painting function for you?

MG: I hope there is a level of discovery that happens by incorporating a number of different associative processes in the various 'groupings' that happen (both in the paintings and as groups of paintings). Painting has the potential to project itself out of its own medium: it can function as informative or aesthetic, even at the same time; and there are a variety of imbued signifiers (historic to stylistic) in painting that can be used and overlapped. And even though there is a long history in art of using research, I think that the legacy of the more traditional role of painting, or medium-based practices, as typified in the ideal of a sublime encounter, or a self-referential practice, is not applicable anymore. I find that I am more personally attracted to, for example, early feminist artists who used art to pass on information.

RMCB: Would you say that painting has been largely a male domain? Perhaps it is that a more religious experience can

be offered in painting. Could it be that storytelling or a more informational quality often found in female pursuits is not so applicable in a painting construct?

MG: I think paintings entail a certain power of hidden manipulation, and even 'Creation', that positions itself in the role of the dictator to the viewer. I find it difficult to be generous when making 'a painting'. So in answer, perhaps the concerns of an informational practice do not find painting as applicable in creating a 'style' or vision (as say the tradition of the heroic vanguard), but that can be subverted too ...

RMCB: One of the things I find really wonderful in your work is the use of multiple paintings that have been specifically painted together, to be shown together to create a narrative structure. It always seemed completely logical to have multiple canvases giving what I call clues, which you have called clues, to the narrative that interested you. In *Genealogies Part I*, you seem to be less interested in storytelling and more involved in sociology. Could you describe the decisions made in this project?

MG: The *Genealogies* project functions as a platform and will become a publication eventually. I imagine it as a take on 'consciousness-raising'<sup>1</sup>, because it is encouraging a self-reflection. The invitation I posed to four female artists was: "Write me a letter about a female character who has had an impact on your artistic working practice." and all of these women have described a character who has stuck in their head and shaped them. I made a loosely illustrative painting for each letter, based on what the letter was perhaps trying to get across.

RMCB: It's in *Genealogies Part I* that you have painted 'Progression is Perfection'. Why have you included this phrase?

MG: I made that painting in response to a letter in which one of the artists, Shay, wrote about Ayn Rand as an influential force because her writing illustrated a strong-willed approach to life, which was a turning point in the way Shay thought about the challenges she gave herself. Ayn Rand's historical role is very interesting because she was a proponent of an industrial America and an intellectual ruling class which was vehemently capitalist. So the painting is of a contemporary landscape of defunct industrial machinery with a sign that reads backwards 'Progression is Perfection'. This is a very American ideal that always seems to backfire, so I liked the psychological play of making a defunct notion of 'striving' to better oneself in the context of the whole project.

RMCB: Is there something that you would like to say

about the letters? Why did you ask these women artists to write to you?

MG: The project came from a basic question; what would female artists define as their art history? I wanted to first of all open up that discussion, and leave it unrestricted to medium, so I asked four female artists all working in different mediums. The letters have not been about artists, but about characters of desire, fame, tragedy ... The letters themselves bring the project out of a mining of history, and complicate the idea of a 'character'.

RMCB: It's interesting because I think you have so many options for information, your source material is from a huge pool of possibilities. But your investigation, the questions you ask of your surroundings and of art, is very specific. I mean, you target four women to answer a very specific question and the answers are entirely unpredictable. I suppose this kind of 'gathering' is useful as a gauge for measuring impacts of information ... how and why people are influenced. You've also talked about wanting to paint these source materials. Why painting? Why do you paint all these ideas, all these questions, all this information you gather from more sociological dimensions of cultural indicators? You have mentioned in the past the possibility of a "renewal" of image making. Is it the process of putting all the gathered material through painting filters and re-dispersing it with multiple clues that the possibility for renewal occurs? Is this what you mean when you have talked about a 'confusion of signifiers'?

MG: The theme, or theory of 'the confusion of signifiers' is a way of understanding confusion, or overload. I am attracted to the idea of how a person makes sense of the visual world and, as in *Genealogies*, how it shapes a person as well. In every series of work that I make there is an imposed logic system that tries to address the hopelessness of 'making sense'. And perhaps this is where the painting functions best: as a means of focus created by a remaking (as opposed to presenting source material). In this way, the works also point to the power of what is represented, and what is lost or forgotten. There is a huge cultural consensus of images, which is tied intrinsically to power structures.

RMCB: The new body of work entitled *The Only Man In There* is a series of paintings based on women in power of a certain generation. Is it a generational choice you have made in dealing with iconic women of power like Maggie Thatcher, Indira Ghandi, and Golda Meir?

MG: These female leaders of the past were chosen primarily because there is a legacy there to work with, which is why I

don't want to work with contemporary female political figures.

RMCB: So, Angelica Merkel will not be in this series?

MG: No, because she has no legacy yet, and I'm more interested in how imagery over time changes, and the meaning changes. And I have this feeling that over time all images become equal.

RMCB: This leveling interests you.

MG: I really like that word. Yes, it's as if images over time take on a character of their own that is wrapped up in the different ways they were used and represented, the hopes of the time they're frozen in; as if there is a recognition of a cultural placement but an inability to make the whole web of connections right away.

RMCB: I find these images recognizable but not specific, even when the clues are so direct. In your paintings, you have found a way to not over determine or close down the image but remain informational. The images are kind of obscure at times; there is an ambiguity and that may, in fact, be the painting part. Maybe it is the transfer of an image, a media image or mediated image, becoming a painting in a painting ...

MG: And I question myself about that process of altering photography, or objects, to painting, but I always come back to the same answer: I don't want to just reproduce things as they are and put them together, I would rather imbue them with something.

RMCB: What do you imbue your imagery with?

MG: Well, you have an effect on the things that you make in an informal, and even an emotional manner. I look for visual impact when choosing images: not shock, but resonance. And I love the pictures that I'm working with; I usually work with a massive resource of images, so I just pick the things that I really fall in love with.

RMCB: I was initially focused on your series of paintings about Sylvia Seegrist, especially the potent combination of serial killer and feminism that you approach. It reminded me of something Stephen King wrote in the introduction to a book of tales from H.P. Lovecraft with comments by M. Houllebecq. In the introduction, which generally speaks about the horror genre, King brings up a question that apparently is prevalent among the horror fiction writers. The question is: "Do you ever scare yourself?" For some reason, when you're talking about how emotional

you get about the subjects that you're working with, I was thinking about your female serial killer.

MG: Well, I do feel like a fetishist sometimes. In doing research I encounter a lot of horrific histories, and sometimes I do wonder why I am compelled to look into these things.

**RMCB:** More than a couple of times in the last few years you have mentioned Sonic Youth and Tracy and the Plastics. What kind of influence have these groups had on your cyclical process?

MG: It's funny, because both of those groups engage with very dark material too. I think they are examples of artists that use not only layers of sound, poetry, (sexual)politics, and character deconstruction, but also are 'expanding' their medium, going beyond 'the Medium is the Message', being self-aware of themselves as performers and characters, and especially trying to expand the vocabulary of female roles, which is still very narrow.

**RMCB:** Going back to Sylvia Seegrist. I have questions about the individuality of her constructed world, and other things like good and evil and morality and these Victorian sentiments that, for me, propelled the story. I think that there is a kind of Victorian attitude that you have in some of the paintings. Do you think the roles of women have changed today?

MG: Yes and no ...

**RMCB:** They're still trapped in Victorian and Classist constructs?

MG: Yes, I found it really baffling that when I was researching Sylvia Seegrist and schizophrenia, a lot of the analysis and representations of madness were repeating the neurotic stereotype. The last line of Laura Mulvey's *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, published in 1975, says that women will break out of the roles they have traditionally been assigned to in film. It's 30 years later and, to a large extent, the consumption of the female body and character in the media is ongoing, and it's interesting that we still accept that and desire that despite all that has changed. I think it does have a lot to do with a 'fetishization' of these roles of women that are enjoyable and titillating to watch and to play. In the Sylvia paintings I wanted to have all of the grotesque and sometimes humorous clichés in them, but without leaving the story just at that.

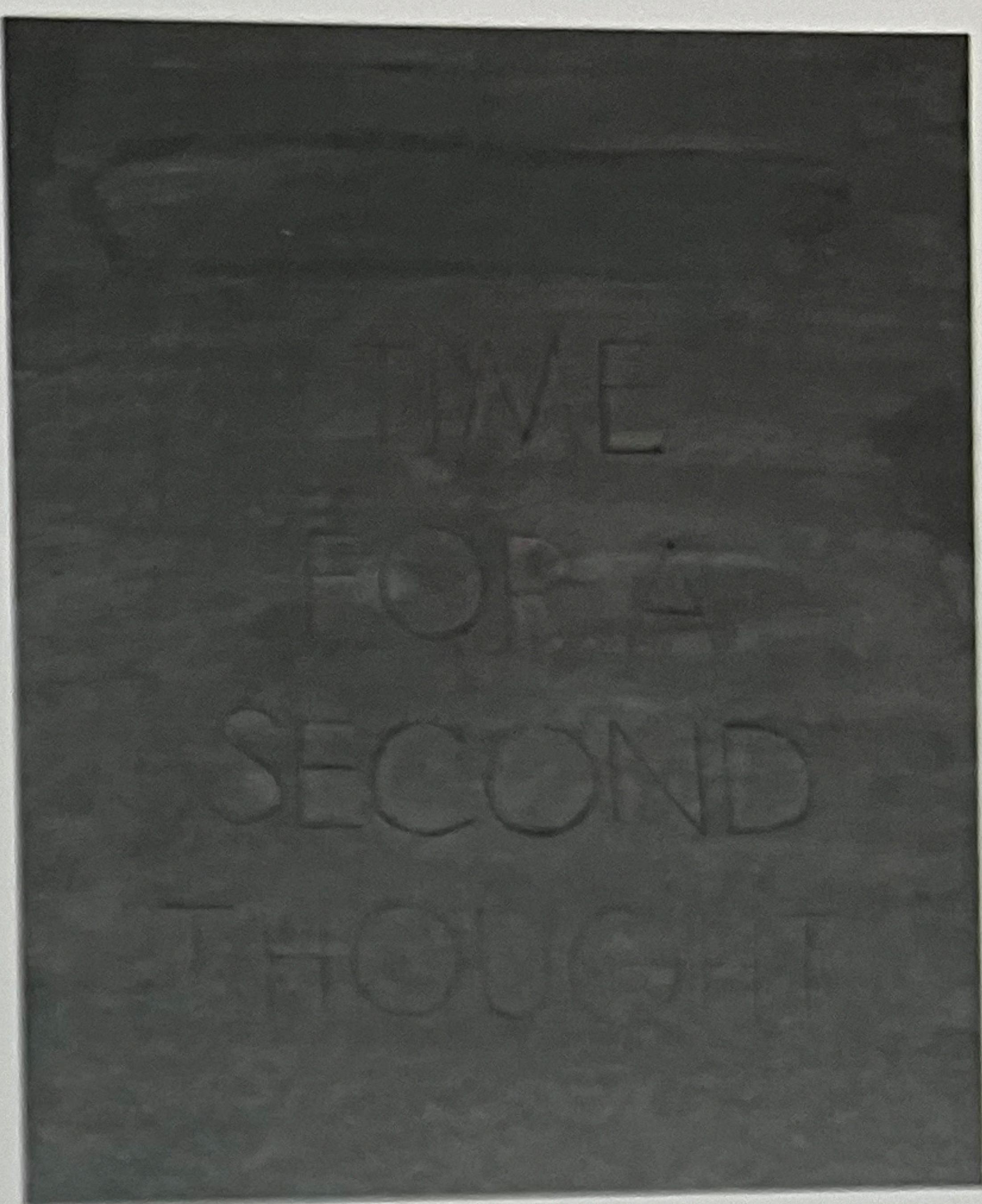
**RMCB:** So what is it about these concerns that feels necessary to talk about in the contemporary dialogue of female roles?

MG: That's something I am trying to address in *The Only Man in There*: female power has existed, but it has always been in the upper echelons, and that was something I was aware of when doing the Sylvia paintings. I just feel that the privilege of empowerment is still classist.

**RMCB:** What role has feminism had in your process?

MG: I think it's important to keep using feminism as a tool, as opposed to treating it like a tenant. Feminism was initially used to ask the question: "What would this be if it was about women in some way?" and now it is necessary to ask, even within the concerns of feminism, other questions about what is out there, what roles things play. I think an exciting potential in making art is that it can set up a platform where the discussion has no urgent need for right or wrong, just a deepening of understanding, a chance to switch a position. In this way, I feel it is also a necessary tool in continuing a discussion that I feel is still very vital.

<sup>1</sup> Consciousness raising is a form of political action, pioneered by United States radical feminists working in the United States in the late 1960s.



*Title, Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 70 cm, 2006*