

Fourteen False Starts
Conversations with Ian Grose

Lucienne Bestall



Ian Grose, *Self-Portrait, Longmarket Street*, 2016

– 1 –

If you walk down St George’s Mall, past shops and cafés and stalls selling curios, past office workers from nearby buildings collecting in eddies outside exits to smoke cigarettes, you’ll find St George’s House on the right-hand side of the avenue. There, on the corner of Shortmarket Street, next to the young woman wearing a sandwich board – *cash for gold, good rates, no questions* – and opposite the blind man who plays his guitar for loose change, is an off-white building marked ‘77’. The entrance to St George’s House is hidden just beyond the blue neon *JEWELLRY* sign in the window of the Cape Diamond Exchange, to the right of a vacant shop. And it’s through

this entrance, and up to the fifth floor, that you'll find the painter Ian Grose's studio under the eaves. Small paintings, photographs and reproductions are taped to the walls, piled on the table and stacked against the skirting. On the desk, two handwritten notes on pages torn from a spiral notebook read *More Idea Less Work* and *It's all very well to valorize attention, but the question remains: attention to what?* There are books here too, in sliding stacks beside the couch, among them books on Egon Schiele, Vuillard and Velázquez, a back issue of *ArtForum* and a copy of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. The close, musty smell of oil paint hangs in the air, cut by the sharp smell of turpentine. Standing in Grose's studio, looking out of the windows to the high-rises opposite, you might be anywhere in the world, in another city and another time. Paris in the 1920s, perhaps, or Buenos Aires three decades later. From this height the avenue below is obscured by treetops, appearing as a green river that runs from the cathedral down towards the foreshore.

– 2 –

Some time ago, I interviewed the painter Ian Grose at his studio in St George's Mall. It was a Tuesday evening and the sun was setting. It had rained earlier that morning, and the city's streets and buildings appeared newly washed and clean. He poured us both a whiskey, and we climbed out of a window to sit on the small balcony. We spoke for an hour, sitting outside, watching the sky turn from pastel orange to pink and then to black. Twice, church bells rang out across the city, the first tolling the hour, seven strikes for seven o'clock, and the second marking the end of a midweek service.

I asked Grose what the perfect article about his work would say. How would it describe his artistic pursuits? What impression would it paint of his preoccupations?

“The perfect article?” he asked, “or the article that would most satisfy my vanity?”

“Either,” I said. “Both”.

He paused, and looked away towards Lion’s Head. “The thing that would really make me happy is if someone were to represent that balance that I feel exists between my intellectual endeavour and my practical or technical endeavour. If they could communicate the fact that those two things are so curiously intertwined. Not in an explicit way, but the way they are weaved into the process of the work.”

– 3 –

The painter Ian Grose speaks slowly, with long, considered pauses. When I first met him in 2011, the pressing silences that punctuated his sentences were the cause of great distress to me. I have since learnt not to interrupt him, as I used to. Not to preempt the end of his sentences. Not to jump ahead. Instead, I now take pleasure in the precision of his language, which is never pretentious, but always carefully chosen and exactly right.

To my mind, the measured tempo at which Grose talks is his most defining characteristic. Yet others are more often struck by his appearance. The art critic Sean O’Toole, on meeting Grose for the first time, wrote: “He looks different to how I had imagined. Thinner.” Another writer, Oliver Roberts, was moved to write a stirring tribute to Grose’s eyes: “Ian Grose has these insanely intense eyes comprised of a blue outer ring and what is quite obviously a supernova bursting forth all greenly from the black holes of his pupils.” The same writer also noted Grose’s “jutting cheekbones”, but stopped short of mentioning his similarly jutting hips. I mention all this only to paint a rough sketch of Grose as tall and somewhat spare, with eyes of cosmic brilliance, and the air of quiet genius in every pause between each sentence.

– 4 –

“You never want to introduce yourself at a bar as an artist,” the painter Ian Grose, then twenty-six and a recent fine art graduate, told Sean O’Toole in an interview in 2011. “Definitely not artist, never artist.” But as to calling himself a painter, Grose said: “I think something about its specificity makes it excusable.” Always meticulous with the language he uses to describe himself and his work, Grose never *paints* a *painting*, instead he *makes* a *picture*. The maker Ian Grose.

– 5 –

During one of my recent visits to Ian Grose’s studio, I was drawn to a new series of seemingly abstract paintings he had hung about the room. These painting are the most recent works along a particular line of inquiry that Grose has been following for the past five years. He refers to these new works as *transparency paintings*, having reproduced on canvas images he composes with thin sheets of plastic marked with paint. While the final paintings may appear wholly abstract, they are in fact the carefully observed reproductions of these plastic sheets, layered one upon the other.

These transparency pictures are a continuation of Grose’s fabric paintings, an extended engagement with surface and texture. To the painter, “these works are all an excuse for, or a concealment of, an investigation of technique. An honest dishonesty.”

Grose’s titles nod to this dishonesty, his earlier fabric paintings sharing titles like *Refrain*, *Dissimulation* and *Intercessor*, and his transparency paintings gathered together under *Pretext*.

Pursuing a purely technical curiosity, these fabric pictures and transparency pictures are completely absent in terms of the type

of content one would traditionally expect from a representational picture. To this effect, and to quote a passage from the press release for Grose's solo show in 2015, "He employs the subject matter in his paintings as pretexts, to research how the paintings function as objects of experience, and how they might act as metaphors for the experience of seeing and representing the world."

– 6 –

I remember arriving at the painter Ian Grose's studio one morning in 2014 to find him staring at a painting he'd finished the day before. He was dissatisfied with a single, wayward brushstroke. It was a boring brushstroke, he told me, pointing to the offending mark. Yet to my eyes it was hardly noticeable, hardly *boring*. To my eyes it looked much like all the other brushstrokes.

I was again reminded of that singular mark when I read Alexander Matthews' article 'Painting and the Miracle of Representation', published in the *Mail & Guardian* that same year. Reflecting on the potential for the painted mark to both communicate and obscure, Grose said, as quoted by Matthews, "You can have a set of marks that's descriptive and concealing at the same time. You can look at [a single mark] and oscillate between seeing it in one way and seeing it in a different way." Grose's mark-making yields layers of notation and meaning, which slip in and out of focus as the viewer moves towards the painting, the resolved image slowly dissolving into distinct brushstrokes.

In an *ArtThrob* review published in 2015, art critic Lwandile Fikeni considered this changeable quality of Grose's image- and mark-making. "I suppose one is tempted to speak about Ian Grose's work in pure abstractions," Fikeni wrote. "For the work is so nebulous and elusive, being one thing at one distance and transmuting into something wholly different up close."

– 7 –

When asked to describe his work in only four words, in an article written by Michaela Stehr that appeared in the June 2015 issue of *Visi Magazine*, the painter Ian Grose replied: “Pictures thinking about themselves.” Grose seldom speaks of his paintings as conceptual, but rather describes them as self-referential, echoing subjects and technical mannerisms from the Western history of their medium. His work pursues an idea of intellectual art – art that doesn’t illustrate a single thought, but that considers a history of thinking and understanding the represented world. Grose’s paintings are at once preoccupied with these cerebral pursuits, and with the more practical considerations of pigment, surface and mark-making.

– 8 –

I asked Ian Grose why he is so often drawn to paint his immediate surroundings – his friends, his studio, the view from his apartment. Over the past four years, the people and places most familiar to him have been the recurring subjects of many of his smaller works, often painted from life and often in only a single sitting.

“Philosophically,” Grose said, “I feel there’s an economy and a humility about working with the stuff of my daily life, which I find appealing on a strangely moral level.”

Grose had expressed a similar sentiment in a 2014 press release for his exhibition *Some Assumptions*. “I wish to retain,” he wrote, “a sense in which the surfaces of daily life can be seen to contain the deepest things I know.”

But recently, the painter has grown dissatisfied. Where at first

faithfully reproducing pictures without much invention proved a satisfying and exciting undertaking, Grose now feels it is no longer enough to take only the natural world as his reference. “I feel like I’ve got to the end of that thread,” he told me. “I want to liberate myself from the visual information I’m receiving from the scenes in front of me.”

– 9 –

In 2012, the painter Ian Grose asked me to sit for a portrait. I was in my second year at art school, and had, for a short while, worked as his assistant. As his assistant, my only duties had been to have coffee with him each morning and to clean his paintbrushes. Back then his studio was on Kloof Street. I sat for him one evening, for two hours or so, squinting against the bright studio light. It was a curious feeling, to be so closely observed. To be so perfectly unmoving. And to be seen not as myself, but as a composition of light and shadow, a series of shifting tones. When Grose at last set his paintbrush aside, he sat back to appraise the picture he had made, tilting his head this way and that, and narrowing his eyes. He looked displeased. I saw the painting only briefly that evening, before it was consigned to the stack of failed pictures in the corner of his studio.

Grose has moved studios twice since then, first to Longmarket Street and then to St George’s Mall, each studio with a different quality of light, but with the same muted carpet. He has since had five solo shows, and been included in group exhibitions. And I have since cleaned many more of his paintbrushes, and sat for him several more times, too. Only a few of these paintings have joined that unhappy stack.

– 10 –

Late last week, I spent Sunday evening at the painter Ian Grose's apartment. The conversation turned to poetry. "When I was in third year," Grose said, reflecting on the naivety of undergraduates, "I used to take copies of my classmates' poems to parties and read them aloud on the dance floor." He was lighting candles as he spoke, and placing them about the room, pausing to sip his whiskey, and to turn down the lights. I didn't know Grose then, when he was younger and just as gaunt. But still, I could imagine him, standing in a shadowed room, his face illuminated by a sheet of lucent paper. I could imagine, too, the people who listened, with a mocking smile and distant eyes, hearing those verses read above whatever song was playing.

After a pause, Grose said, "I think the poems I wrote that year are among the finest things I have ever made." But he didn't offer to show his poems to me, and I didn't ask to see them.

I was reminded of a night some months ago spent sitting at a bar, Grose and I discussing the merits of Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*. We have longed shared an enthusiasm for the work, though neither of us has ever finished reading it (being, as it is, famously long). I can't quite remember what we were talking about, but I do remember Grose apologising for inadequately paraphrasing Proust's words, and reaching into his backpack to pull out a lightly scuffed copy of the third volume. Finding the page he was looking for, he read aloud to me, over the noise of the bar. How like Grose it was; the setting, the scene.

I only now remember that I dreamt of the painter the following night. In the dream, Grose lent towards me and said, disappointed, "I feel you mis-see me."

– 11 –

Last year, for my birthday, the painter Ian Grose gave me a copy of Janet Malcolm's *Forty-One False Starts: Essays on Artists and Writers*.

– 12 –

On Tuesday evening, I interviewed the painter Ian Grose, sitting on the balcony outside his studio, five floors above the city streets. An hour after we began, we went inside in search of warmth and another drink, having grown cold in the spring night air. I recently reviewed the audio recording I had made that evening. You can hear us climb back through the balcony window and into his studio, moving about, still speaking, and then a song starts playing. The last thirty minutes of the recording are obscured behind Vince Staples' latest album, and then Mount Kimbie's. You can still hear the cadence of Grose's voice beneath the music, yet his words are largely indistinct.

Grose's taste in music is curiously eclectic, ranging from minimal techno to opera, Childish Gambino to Beethoven, and everything in between.

At some point in 2015, when I worked as Grose's assistant, he had been labouring through his entire music library alphabetically. I asked him if he remembered a particularly hard-going week of folk rock. He did. "I think it was D," he said "D for Dave Matthews. The rule was if I couldn't listen to it I'd delete it. But then there were some exceptions, of course. The songs that I didn't want to listen to but also didn't want to delete."

Grose's literary inclinations are more predictable. He returns to the same books again and again. When I asked him what he was reading he laughed and pulled a copy of Kenneth Clark's *Civilization* out from his backpack. "Of course," he said, by way of explanation.

And as to what he's looking at?

"I've been looking at a lot of Renaissance paintings," Grose said, "It's like classical music. It all sort of sounds the same until you get good at listening to it, and then you can hear why certain things are good and why certain things aren't. Renaissance painting is just so strange and artificial."

– 13 –

"Painting is the cliché of clichés," Ian Grose wrote to me, following a recent conversation, "And lots of the work I'm making, in its 'conventionality', can invite cynicism." In his email, he wrote of the relationship between real artistic impulse and mere performance, suggesting that it was his work as the artist to recognise and resist insincerity.

Having spent a good part of the past four years painting small pictures from life, Grose has since tired of the endeavour.

"There's been a recent spate of people painting friends and delicious monsters," he had said in an interview at his inner-city studio, "That strikes me as a little bit cloying and bourgeois in a way I can imagine other people view my own work. I guess that might be what's propelling me to do something more ambitious, more imaginative. Something that takes account of psychology and symbolism. The signals that indicate that the world depicted is not this world."

Already, Grose's paintings have begun to shift away from faithful representations of everyday scenes, and towards artifice and imagination. For some time now, he has delayed the transference of image from life to canvas, choosing instead to make pencil sketches of a scene with detailed colour notes, and then to paint the scene sometime later. *Royal blue* in a shadow, *burnt umber* on

the windowsill, *lead white* reflected in an eye. This pause between seeing and painting allows him to misremember, to invent, to invite accidents of observation and translation.

– 14 –

When I interviewed the painter Ian Grose at his studio earlier this October, he was working towards a solo exhibition for Stevenson’s Cape Town gallery. It would only be a small show, he told me, hung in only a single room. It wouldn’t be an ideas show although it would be self-referential, but more by accident than design.

“When something catches your attention you can never be sure if it’s catching your eye or your head, or some combination of the two,” Grose said, “I suppose I feel I’m following instincts, or unverballed ideas, and once the work has been made I’m forced – by the gallery, by viewers – to verbalise it, to make sense of it.”

Which is to say, the sense is secondary, the paintings unified more by a sensibility and painterly language than by a singular concept.

As to his future endeavours, I asked him, what would he be painting next?

“Whatever I say about where I want my work to go in the future,” he replied, “ultimately, I’ll be following enjoyment, and that might lead somewhere unexpected.”

His paintings, he told me, notate a series of decisions made on the basis of small intuitions. And so Ian Grose will continue to pursue one curiosity until another develops, and with it a new pretext for the next painting.

November 2017