

# Material

*Painting in the Post-AI Era*

Prithwee

*An excerpt: Prologue and opening chapters*



# Prologue

## A Studio in Toledo, 2026

*The reality of sunset is hard sometimes,  
when it empties life to nothing.  
Each time something is wiped away to nothing,  
my heart breaks down.*

*And the sun, if it wished,  
some vast cosmic power of its own,  
like last nights,  
could put out life entirely; or could bring on  
darkness,  
could wake despair, resentment, hatred!*

*from Whenever I See You Khovai, translated from the Bengali*

This is my third bedroom in last two years, like I sometimes keep changing visions in life to touch something I never could figure out myself. There is not much to visualize it.

This paintings I am sharing in this book was made under a specific condition in twenty one days. When life behaves like a roller coster that makes you run in the speed of wind but tied, the only thing we are tied off, is the fear and the risk.

In those days, surprisingly a room not so cinematic like this can give you the last hope to breath.

The book that follows my attempt to think about what painting is for, in a world that has, in the past four years, learned how to produce images at a rate and at a fidelity that the institution of painting has never had to negotiate with before. At the very beginning, I want to thank a small number of writers who have helped me think. John Berger most of all. Walter Benjamin. Susan Sontag. David Sylvester. Adrian Stokes. T. J. Clark. Roland Barthes, Kate Crawford and Safiya Noble and Ruha Benjamin and Hito Steyerl.

The argument the book wants to make is small enough to state here as we start. Painting is a material practice. The materiality is not decoration. It is the argument at a moment in which images can

be produced without a body. The painter's existence, and what they leaves on the surface, becomes the argument that the image is from somewhere and someone with a cost. And the practice of painting now, when chosen very freely by a person who could have used the machine and did not, is itself a position. In this book, I will try to state my reading of what the algorithm is for and what it is not for and what is being given up when it is used.

I would like the book to be useful for any painter who is reading it, maybe for any researcher in machine systems who has wondered whether painters know anything that researchers do not and for anyone who has stood in a room with a painting and felt the thrill of sensation that happens in front of paintings.

In traditional sense, a painter is not allowed to write a book like this in their first decade of practice. I am writing it anyway, for two reasons. The first is that the conditions under which the paintings were made is not allowing me to wait. That is my inner fight with myself that may go on longer in future. The second is in which the

paintings are being asked to think about their position in relation to machine image production is not the moment that will wait either.

I hope it teaches me something also.

# I.

## Material

A painter pulls a brush across a surface and the surface pulls back, and what is on the surface afterward is a record of the negotiation between the painter's hand and what it was working against. Material is the thing under the hand that kept resisting among hundreds of years of art history.

Almost everything else in the book follows from it.

I have read hundreds of writings on paintings. Most of them begins with the image. With what is already depicted, or implied, or refused. This is a mistake. Painting begins with the surface and the surface is a real thing. It is paper, or canvas, or wood, or wall or a string. It has weight. It has tooth, which is the word painters have been using for texture that makes pigment adhere. A painting has

reflectance. It has a smell when it is freshly primed. The pigment is also a real thing. Acrylic emulsion is plastic suspended in water. Charcoal is the burned remains of willow. Oil is linseed pressed cold from the seed. All of these are organic or mineral matter that someone, somewhere, prepared into the form in which the painter buys them. The brush is hair, or synthetic, a stick. A painter's hand is a body part with bones and tendons in it and a name attached to the body that owns it.

I am writing in this way because it is the only way I could find to argue what I want to argue in this book. The material conditions of a painting are not what the painting is about. The material conditions are what painting originally is.

This is a hard thing to claim. Painters do not usually claim it. From our childhood, we are trained in school to talk about painting in terms of meaning. The girl in the painting represents loneliness. The red field stands for rage. This makes me remember we had a medium sized reproduction or cheap print of Leonardo's Monalisa in my house. My father bought that, hung on the wall, and the thing that is relevant today that he already knew this

painting has something mysterious about and what exactly mysterious about. The composition suggests crucifixion. We are foundationally trained to read the image, to find the metaphor. This is not wrong, but it is downstream of the thing that actually makes the painting a painting.

Consider what happens when a painter chooses charcoal over graphite. The two materials look similar at a distance. They both make black marks on paper. They both can be scratched, smudged, layered, erased. But charcoal is friable and cannot be sharpened to a precise point. It will rub off if you breathe on it too hard. It demands to be fixed, with a spray, if it is to survive. Graphite, by contrast, is a soft metal compressed into a binder. It is precise and can be sharpened. It does not crumble. The choice between charcoal and graphite is not an aesthetic preference. It is a decision about what kind of permanence the mark wants to have. About what the painter wants the mark to be made of. About the painter's environment and condition of affording choices.

Painters across history have painted with what they could afford. John Michelle Basquiat painted

with oilstick partly because oilstick is faster than oil paint and a stick of it fits in a jacket pocket. Mark Bradford built practice on the endpaper from his mother's hair salon. El Anatsui in Ghana built his on bottle caps and copper wire. The work was made of what was around them, and what was around them became, in time, the signature of the practice. The poverty of the material here became the position.

As a painter myself, when I scratch a charcoal mark into a wet acrylic ground, I am making a continuous decision about what the materials can do in each other's presence. The charcoal will not behave the way it would on dry paper. The acrylic is going to absorb some of it and reject some of it. There will be a margin of dispersion that I cannot control. The result will be a specific mark that exists because of the combination of these particular materials at this particular moment. It is not a marking that could exist in any other way and it is the negotiation, that gets recorded.

Painting is the recording of a negotiation between specific materials, at a specific moment, by a specific body. The image that arrives on the

surface is a byproduct of that negotiation, not its purpose. If the image were the purpose, painting would have been ended by photography in 1840.

Painting was, instead, transformed. Painters of 1840 had been spending much of their time and labor trying to record the appearance of the world with as much fidelity as a painted surface could allow. The photograph could now do this without a painter. What was left for the painter? The answer that the next two generations of painters arrived at, and that we now call Impressionism, was that painting could record the negotiation that a painter's eye and hand and the surface had been performing all along, which the photograph could not perform. Monet was painting the appearance of his negotiation with light in front of haystacks. The negotiation was the thing and this is the lesson the book wants to remember today just like the era of 1840's when artists were confused to fight machine. We are in another moment in which a machine can now produce images without a painter. And this time the machine is not bound to the appearance of a real scene. It can generate any image that can be described in language. It can produce a portrait of a

person who does not exist, in any style of any historical period, in any composition the user can specify. The output is faster and cheaper than any painting has ever been or will ever be.

The question for the painter of 2026 I ask, as it was for the painter of 1840, is: what is left? What is the negotiation that the algorithm cannot perform?

The approach of this book is that the negotiation that the algorithm cannot perform is the negotiation between specific materials and a specific body at a specific moment. The painter who paints now, in the knowledge that the algorithm exists and that it can produce images, is making a specific argument about the value of that negotiation. The painter may say: the surface I am painting something that no system without a body, without time and without my specific materials can paint. The mark I am making could not be made any other way. And the act of looking at this mark requires the viewer to stand in front of it and acknowledge that someone made it.



There is a longer version of this same argument. John Berger published *Ways of Seeing* in 1972 which was made alongside a BBC television series. The argument he made across both versions of the work, is about reproduction. What happens to a painting when it is photographed and reproduced and distributed in books and on television. Berger says, the original painting, once it has been photographed, becomes one image among many. To explain it briefly, a surface that can be reproduced is a surface that has been removed from its body. Once removed, it can be made to mean almost anything. It can be put next to advertisements for cars or it can be shrunk to the size of a postage stamp. And the original painting itself, hanging in the museum, becomes a referent for the reproduction rather than the thing the reproduction refers to. This is what Berger meant when he said that the reproductions of paintings change the actual meaning of paintings, even when the original paintings are unchanged.

Berger was not condescending about painting. He was not protective of it. He was specific, political. He looked at the surface and asked, what is

happening here, and on whose behalf. Berger said paintings do not speak. People do, in the presence of paintings, depending on who they are and what conditions they are looking from. The looking is the negotiation.

I am drawing on Berger now because the negotiation he was describing has a new chapter. The reproductive image technology that Berger was writing about was the photograph and its descendants in print and television. He could not have anticipated the algorithmic image. The algorithmic image is different from the photograph in a specific way, and that specific way is probably what the rest of this book is going to be about.

In a photograph, the scene had to exist. A body had to stand there with a camera. The image is bounded by the world that was photographed.

An algorithmic image is generated by a statistical model that has been trained on a very large number of images and that produces, in response to a prompt, an image that is statistically likely given the prompt. The scene did not have to exist. No body had to stand anywhere and the

image is bounded only by the training data and the prompt.

Berger said about the reproduction of painting that reproduction changes meaning because it removes the painting from the body of its original site. The algorithmic image is reproduction without an original. The body has been removed not from a specific painting but from the entire economy of image production. The image, in this regime, is no longer the trace of a negotiation and has become a sampling from a distribution.

This is the moment at which the painter has to decide what painting is now for. The answer surely cannot be to produce more reproducible images, because the machine can do that without the painter. The answer can only be to produce surfaces that remember that they came from somewhere, from someone, with a cost. And this is what I mean when I say the material is the argument. Because the material remembers and the algorithm does not.

The next chapter is about who has historically been allowed to look, and who has historically been

required to be looked at, and how that arrangement is being inherited by the machine.



## II.

### A River of Gaze: Old and New

*Men act and women appear. Men look at  
women. Women watch themselves being  
looked at. Ways of Seeing*

This sentence does a tremendous amount of work in three clauses. It says that the convention of the female nude, which is the largest single body of subject matter in the European oil-painting tradition around centuries, was built around the imagined presence of a male spectator. The actual woman whose body the painter was rendering, was a function of the male viewer. She was depicted in poses that arranged her for his looking. She was depicted as a thing to be enjoyed in his absence and as a possession in his presence. This convention was so consistent across so many painters in so many centuries that the convention itself, became

the lens through which Western viewers were trained to see women, in painting and outside it.

The same question did show up in our South Asian art tradition in a different way though. The European convention, female body as ornament for the male viewer in the form of the nude, does not appear in the same form in Bengali painting. The body is rarely undressed there due to religious and cultural suppression. What the South Asian tradition absorbed instead was the female figure as ornament for the male viewer in the form of mother, bride, folk worker and nationalist allegories.



*Bharat Mata, Abanindranath Tagore, 1905*

Abanindranath Tagore, one of the most influential painter of Bengal, painted Bharat Mata

where woman is the country herself, this is idealization of a female body that no real woman could occupy. Jamini Roy painted folk women in flat, decorative compositions in which the woman is a pattern more than a person. Other famous artists like Zainul Abedin and Sultan painted female peasants and famine sufferers, sometimes even muscular and dignified, but almost never as individuals whose interior the painter was trying to reach. In such cases the female figure is arranged for the male spectator. And the arrangement just uses the vocabulary of virtue rather than availability. The Bengali painting tradition refuses the European nude only to install, in its place, a more thorough form of supervision. The woman became the symbol of the good, the modest, the maternal and the national.

In recent decades, it will be a regret not to mention contemporary Bangladeshi artist Tayeba Begum Lipi, who has spent twenty years working specifically against this inheritance, using razor blades and bridal accessories to ask what the cost of being good has actually been for the women who absorbed it. I've only seen her works in online

images but her work is one of the closest south asian visual answer to Berger's question, and it appears predictably, only after the convention has been working for a hundred years without interruption.

Some of my earlier collages are called Freedom Under. They are about where I grew up. They are about in particular, the specific way in which women in south Asian countries lived under what Berger would call a regime of appearance. The conventions they lived under were not Western oil painting conventions. They were colonial conventions that had been transmuted through nationalism, religion and the household. But the underlying form was quite the same. All of these women watched themselves being looked at. They organized their body around the imagined presence of the watchers.

I was painting those body of works as a man, with all of the limits that this position carries, and from a diasporic distance, with all of the limits that this position carries. I did with one question, how a person makes a life inside a regime of appearance had been one of the central questions of my early

adulthood, and I did not want it to be institutionalized.

The point of me writing this chapter is not to revisit Freedom Under. It is to bring Berger's sentence forward, into this present time, and to ask what the sentence means when the watching is being done not by men and nor colonial inheritances, but by a statistical model that has been trained on, among many other things, four hundred years of European oil painting.

So, here is the direct proposition. A generative model that produces images on request is not free of the convention of appearance. It cannot be free of it. The model was trained on a corpus of images. The corpus of images includes, prominently, the entire reproducible history of Western oil painting and of mass advertising. Both of these reproducible bodies of work organize bodies around the imagined presence of a male spectator. And for that, when the model is asked to produce an image of a woman, the model produces an image that is the statistical center of mass of all the images of women on which it was trained. The image, accordingly, here inherits the convention.

This is one of the structural findings of one of my works which I am going to share further in next chapters. Such models produce images of women that are, by every available statistical measure, organized around the conventions of appearance that have been imposed on women by the watchers across the centuries. The watching is no longer being done by individual men in cities of Europe instead is being done by a function that has been trained to predict the next pixel, given a description.

It is maybe the latest stage of a long inheritance. The convention of the gaze is this time into a system that produces images at a rate the old conventions could not approach!

I have written about this elsewhere with numbers and figures and confidence intervals. But those numbers and figures is not valuable here. But, I want to explore what it means to be a painter who lives inside this inheritance and who has decided to make work that argues with it.

In such case, the argument has to be made on the surface of the work. I am going to write the next chapter about what photography could not do, and

what the algorithm cannot do, because the structure of the question is the same. The question is: what is the painter for now.



### III.

## The Photograph and the Hand

*To be written.*

[ photograph ]



*Photograph by Krysta Sa, to be added*

[ photograph ]

*Photograph by Krysta Sa, to be added*