



Astoria

Catherine Story graduated from the RA Schools in 2009, and has since gone on to show at Basel/Liste and Tate Britain. She spoke to Jonathan Stubbs about her new show at Carl Freedman Gallery in June 2014.

JS: I last saw your work in *Painting Now* at Tate Britain at the end of 2013 – since then you have gone away and produced a new body of work for this show, *Astoria*. This feels like a new development or direction.

CS: Most of the work selected for the Tate exhibition came from my RA Schools final show in 2009, and that was mainly paintings of symbols from the desert or old films, such as pylons, huts and profiles. Since then there have been three solo shows at Carl Freedman Gallery – *PYLON* (2009), *Cinema* (2010), and *Angeles* (2011) – where the shapes evolved into paintings and sculptures about how cinema and Cubism developed at the same time. In *Cinema* early film cameras were posed in different scenes from Chaplin films, but they were also obviously symbols for looking and thinking in different dimensions. The next show, *Angeles*, referenced the time when Picasso and Chaplin finally met, in 1952.

In this show we are no longer seeing through the lens, we are looking at what is around the camera, perhaps the actors, or people on the set. It's immediately different from recent shows because it's a group of figures rather than anthropomorphic forms. Also the stylised characters on the wall are in colour, so it's as if they are imagined live, through the eye, rather than a black and white screen.

The first piece that I made for this show was *The Vanderbilt Cup*, (2013). It's a clay profile with a square object held behind the face. It comes from a moment in a very funny Chaplin film called *Kid Auto Races at Venice Beach* (1914) which was the first time the 'Little Tramp' character appeared on screen. Chaplin tested him out in public at a children's soap box race and at the end he sits down in front of the proud parents. Everyone looks at him or the camera – except for a woman right in the middle of the shot who covers her face. I found this image fascinating, how this woman, perhaps unwittingly, prevented herself being recorded at this momentous moment, as in a few years Chaplin was the most famous man in the world. Maybe she was aware of privacy in the same way that we are now, who knows? This sculpture is the reverse of that scene, so we see an idea of her imagined face from the view of the crowd behind her. All the elements of the show are in this piece: hiding, posing, watching, being looked at, or not looked at.

Cover image:
Napoleon, 2014
Stone, wood, acrylic
36 x 22 x 9 cm

Left:
The Vanderbilt Cup, 2013
Unfired clay
31 x 25 x 13 cm

Fairbanks, 2014
Oil and sand on wood
76 x 86 cm



JS: You seem to have pushed the work into a place that is questioning its own reality.

CS: I'm always wondering about what is real. In this painting, *Fairbanks*, we can read him as a character or an object or a building, but either way he can't actually exist as the space doesn't work. Yet it seems to make sense. I chose to hang him as a centre point in the show, as a fulcrum, because this painting is the only one with a curve. All the other characters are made with cubes and straight lines. They're flat because that's what happens when you come out of the other side of Cubism.

But they're also building blocks, references to art deco cinemas and their decorative friezes. Many of these buildings are being pulled down now so maybe, unconsciously, I imagined these figures as the spirits of cinema. It reminds me of how theatre façades are beautiful and ornate, yet around the back it's dark and there's no decoration; it's a purely functional space.

JS: You can't control the viewpoint of the three dimensional work as much as you can in the painting, which goes back to referencing film, the viewpoint, the crop. Selecting what part to show and what part to conceal. How did you come to start making objects or how did they become more important?

CS: When I was at the RA Schools I increasingly had the idea of going back to the beginning, and by the end I had. I think it's

quite common to do this on a post-graduate course if you study again later, and I was in my mid-thirties when I started. I always used to make objects at home but at the Schools I started doing this in the studio. When I was in my final year, Brian Griffiths started as the new third year tutor and he also encouraged the sculptures. In some ways all the doors opened again, and then this strange area between sculpture and painting became my work. I find the relationship between them constantly perplexing.

When I brought the work into the gallery, I realised that all the colour was in the paintings on the wall, and all the sculptures were grey, black and white like those early films – the flatness of the cinema screen had become the 3D object. It was a wonderful moment, because I think about the weirdness of dimensions all the time.

JS: In the paintings, I'm interested in how you deal with the ground around the characters or façades. With the sculptures they just have the air around them, the washed light of the gallery, but in the paintings, you have to deal with the space.

CS: Yes, the flat backgrounds make the shapes appear quite clear and solid, but actually the painting style is quite imperfect and broken, and that's deliberate – because these shapes can't exist.



Odet's Grant, 2014
Oil and sand on wood
91 x 82 cm



JS: Again it's that idea of it being a real object, or not being a real object, it being an illusion, or reality – it pushes it into that place again of reminding you that it's a painting, reminding you that it's got a physicality about it that is flat, imagined.

CS: Cinema is a really good way for me to look at what is real, because the subject is already there, the idea of fantasy and reality is imbued in cinema. The storylines I enjoy already have that in-built problem which I want to deal with in my work.

Odets' Grant was the last painting I made. I imagined Cary Grant sitting by the Thames between takes of *None but the Lonely Heart* (1944). One of the themes of the film is that he's trying to choose between two women – one of them is stringing him along, and the other is waiting for him. Tragic. It's painted over a painting of two women, and you can just about see their profiles underneath. I don't usually paint over other paintings, but on this occasion it related to the story. Sometimes, being an artist is a very isolated life so you have to amuse yourself now and then.

JS: Many of the characters are pensive, self-absorbed. In a way, their thoughtfulness reflects the thoughtfulness of the shapes and building blocks – they are so simple, but yet so well considered. You can't just choose a shape like that, every line is important. Painting and making painting is a very self-absorbing process.

Can we talk about this piece *Napoléon*; it's slightly hidden around the corner, and at first glance is quite different to a lot of the other work – is it made from a naturally found object?

CS: Yes it is – I saw it on a beach on an island. There were grey rocks as far as the eye could see, but somehow my brain processed the whole beach in a moment, and I instantly saw that profile of Napoléon. I have lots of strange objects in my studio, many artists do, but this one is amazing, it's like it's drawn by the sea. As a teenager I was very influenced by Abel Gance's epic silent film *Napoléon* (1927). It's a film about Napoléon's childhood and early life, which I find very moving because it stops at the point where you're being drawn into his campaign, yet you know what's ahead. And then you see the faces of the actors and know what was ahead for them at the time of making the film. The experience of watching it is so layered that it stays with you for life. I had to include this object in the show, to point to that film, so I made the stone look more like the lead actor by adding the black wooden hair at the back. But it also goes back to an idea that runs through all of the work: the idea of looking – but this is looking in a different way, not long and studied looking, but the kind where instinct processes all the information and works out what's important to you before you have the conscious thought. **RA**