

The Almshouse Tempera Project: Introduction

Derek Hampson and Peter Suchin



Hind Memorial Homes, Nottingham, 2015

This publication documents the artworks and the thinking that has emerged from The Almshouse Tempera Project, a year-long (2014-15) Nottingham-based artistic endeavour initiated by Derek Hampson, focused on enabling contemporary artists to work with the early painting medium of egg tempera, using it to make artworks which explore the theme of the almshouse, an equally early form of social housing. Hampson's collaborators within the project were Deborah Harty, Atsuhide Ito and Peter Suchin.

The impetus to bring together the technique of egg tempera painting and the almshouse has come from an interest in their shared status, both being too-often disregarded in their respective fields. Almshouses, most of which predate the twentieth century, were largely established by wealthy individuals to house the local poor. They now appear as social and architectural curiosities, markers of a bygone age in terms of design and charitable intention. The technical limitations of egg tempera contributed to its historical decline. Egg tempera paint cannot be manufactured in a factory and stored in tubes so that it can be purchased ready-made. Instead, it has to be freshly produced from raw egg yolk and pure pigment just prior to the act of painting. This and other limitations contributed towards it being thought of today, if thought of at all, as a technical curiosity or the province of interested amateurs.

Egg tempera's admittedly more versatile successor, oil paint, seemed immune from tempera's eventual decline as a plausible artistic mode. That was until the appearance of what was latterly theorised by Rosalind Krauss as the "post-medium condition" began to make itself felt in the 1960s, eventually becoming enshrined within the catch-all term "Conceptual Art". Across several publications Krauss argued that ambitious contemporary artists no longer focused their attention upon a single medium, instead combining several mediums, techniques or technologies in new ways so as to generate new forms of expression and critique. Three of Krauss' texts, detailing the development of her thinking on this matter, became one of the central strands of discussion during the project (see bibliography).

Following the pioneering and now extremely well charted lead of Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968), which shifted the analysis of artworks away from their merely sensuous, aesthetic attributes – their clearly demarcated mediums – to the issue of the contextual or philosophical conditions determining what exactly a work of art might be, the post-medium condition appeared to extend an increasingly tight grip upon claims as to what was or was not "art". Such a position acted to destabilise the technical aspects of artistic production, foregrounding instead art's conceptual particularities, its uniqueness as art. In order to be seriously regarded as a piece of contemporary art, a work, it was

suggested by, amongst others, Joseph Kosuth (1969), must expand the concept “art” beyond its historically dominant forms of (in the main) painting and sculpture. The so-called post-medium condition renders null and void the very possibility of painting’s claim to be the leading force in art, this role being reserved for practices which radically question and expand the established parameters of “art”.

It is within this complex and expanded context that The Almshouse Tempera Project approached its almshouse theme. The resultant artworks take as their point of departure a number of attributes produced by the trope of this particular type of charitable dwelling, including physical and geometrical mirroring, modes of dwelling, the condition of precarity, and notions and forms of threshold. These concerns can readily be seen within the works, fulfilling, perhaps rather surprisingly, Duchamp's persistent demand for an "anti-retinal" art. Other Duchampian concerns are also evident. Derek Hampson's *Miss M. E. Hardcastle in Water, Grass, Marble and Zinc* (see p. 24) references Duchamp's use of both traditional and non-traditional artistic materials, but through the medium of egg tempera, emphasising painting's representational imperative as both a conceptual and a perceptual enterprise. Other works mirror the organisational order suggested in the symmetry of the almshouse's facades. Peter Suchin continues the focus on materiality, in a number of his pieces in which the privileging of a solitary medium is practically refuted, combining tempera with acrylic, bitumen, coffee, collage, ink and other materials to produce semi-abstract works which act as analogies of the almshouse as dwellings and historical forms. Atsuhide Ito references Duchamp directly in his work *Elizabeth Mutt* (see p. 44) in which the unexpected mediums of egg tempera and mould combine on a kitchen sink. This work is part of his aim to depict scenes in the life of an imaginary but 'typical' resident of a pre-21st century almshouse, “Elizabeth Cotton”. His work considers notions of the precarious and the impoverished, as well as the contemporary use of an apparently out-of-date medium. Deborah Harty has produced a large-scale multi-part drawing, *on ... in ... through?* (see p. 35), inspired by a partially open door at the William Woodsend Memorial Homes, Nottingham. The piece considers, through the medium of egg tempera, the concept of thresholds: between inside and out, the public and the private, the drawn and the painted.

The project was organised into five distinct areas; inter-artistic interactions, individual research, public discourse, exhibition and publication. The project exhibition, *Inscription: The Almshouse Tempera Project*, September 19 to October 23, 2015, at Nottingham Trent University's Bonington Gallery, Atrium Space, displayed the artworks made by the four artists involved in the project and illustrated in this publication. The exhibition took its name from the carved inscriptions placed as a matter of course on almshouse exteriors to record the names of the donors whose generosity made the very existence of these dwellings possible. The show echoed the physicality of the carved sign, inscribing within the gallery not only painted representations of almshouses, but also the presence of the almshouse. A number of material components, reclaimed from Nottingham's Lambley Almshouse during its renovation by Nottingham Community Housing Association were interspersed with the artworks. These included a window, a door, primitive elements of plumbing, and considerable portions of the building's floor (sometimes incorporated into artworks or employed as a surface upon which to paint).

In addition to the artworks illustrated here each artist has contributed a text detailing the thinking that this project has encouraged. Alongside these essays are included texts by Jonathan Hale and Aimie Purser, members of Sense of Space, a University of Nottingham inter-disciplinary research group organised around the writings of the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty. In addition to these texts Sense of Space also contributed to many of the public debates instigated by the project over the twelve months of its life.

Bibliography

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