

## **Assessing Practice-based Research in the Visual Arts: A Proposed New Criterion**

### **Abstract**

#### *Purpose*

The article offers an original criterion of assessment for examiners of practice-based doctorates in contemporary arts practices, based upon the degree of intrigue, perceptual and conceptual, afforded by the research outputs. It is argued that intrigue is the necessary stimulus for the states of attention required for the recognition of fresh understanding and the acquisition of new knowledge from such outputs. The article is intended to support doctoral students structuring theses for such research, those responsible for assessing proposals in university cross-disciplinary research committees with limited experience of practice-based research, and the examiners of such research.

#### *Methodology*

Acknowledging the several decades of work already published on practice-based research, the article adopts an aesthetic cognitivist position from which the visual arts are construed as powerful means of deepening our understanding, a source of non-propositional knowledge on a par with, although qualitatively different from, the way that the sciences are accepted as the means to propositional knowledge.

#### *Findings*

A case study demonstrates the efficacy of applying the proposed criterion in the assessment of practice-based doctoral research.

#### *Originality*

The terms *perceptual intrigue* and *conceptual intrigue* are coined as values implicit in aesthetic cognitivism; they are construed as the initial stimuli for the state of attentiveness required for fresh understanding, and the degree of balance between them is proposed as an original criterion for the assessment of practice-based research.

#### *Implications*

Consolidation of the validity of practice-based doctoral research in the visual arts within cross-disciplinary universities.

### **Keywords**

Perceptual intrigue; Conceptual intrigue; Practice-based research; Visual arts; Types of knowledge and understanding; Research assessment criteria.

### **Introduction**

With regard to research policy (regulations and requirements), it would be important to acknowledge the existence and importance of non-propositional/tacit knowledge, how it can be included under current requirements, and how research results can be communicated inclusive of its tacit component to facilitate application in practice.  
(Niedderer 2007:12)

Since Kristina Niedderer's article, many universities' research policies have been augmented to specify regulations and requirements relevant to practice-based doctoral research in the visual arts (Vaughan 2021). However, the topic is still contentious when it comes to assessment criteria, despite the many articles since Christopher Frayling's

(1993) seminal contribution, including Candlin (2000); Morgan (2001); Barrett & Bolt (2007); Nelson (2013); Taylor & Vaughan (2016); Leavy (2018); Brabazon, Lyndall-Knight & Hills (2020); and Vear (2022), and Semir Zeki's (1999:12) reminder that "The function of art is... an extension of the function of the brain – the seeking of knowledge in an ever-changing world. This seems so obvious that it is surprising that the connection has not been made before."

This article is intended to support research students, their supervisors, and particularly examiners of such research, with which to assess the viability for "...*contribution to knowledge and understanding in the field(s) of study concerned*. This principle, of an original, independent piece of work, is enshrined in all PhD regulations." (Frayling 1997:9 my italics).

Following a brief review of how visual arts practice has come to be more widely accepted as research in the UK HE sector, and a discussion of the taxonomy of knowledge, the article demonstrates an original criterion for assessing the outcomes of doctoral research through visual arts practice. The criterion is the degree of balance between 'conceptual intrigue' and 'perceptual intrigue', explained as the twin sources necessary for the stimulation of the various states of attentiveness required of viewers for reaching fresh insights – understandings, non-propositional knowledge – afforded by the research outputs (material objects, installations or participatory events) under scrutiny.

I should make it clear at the outset that I am not arguing a separatist case for research through the visual arts, rather I advocate *inclusivity*: the visual arts on a par with other academic disciplines, albeit with their own research methods and criteria of assessment, just as in other specialisms.

### **A Brief Review of the Case for Visual Art Practices as Research**

Before addressing visual art practice-based research in its contemporary context, it is useful to take a historical view, in order to rehabilitate a long-standing social function of art: to expand our knowledge and understanding through the sharing of imaginative constructions of experiences. Art's role in society that has evolved over the last 200 years

– how it has become aligned with the economic and political values of neoliberalism such as privatisation and competition, instead of maintaining an independence of inquiry and the sharing of new knowledge and understanding – is in need of rethinking.

Neo-liberalism as a political stance has been reviewed in a specific fine art context by Katrine Hjelde (2015); this article foregrounds the contemporary effects of what the *Group for Learning in Art and Design* (GLAD 2019) coyly termed ‘instrumentalist governmental metrics’, alluding to the neoliberal regime following the Browne Report (2010) on the UK arts education system: David Willetts, Minister for Universities and Science 2010-14 and champion of neoliberal policies, decreed, not so coyly, in 2013: “...unleashing the forces of consumerism is the best single way we’ve got of restoring high academic standards” (in McGettigan 2015: 2). Even though a proportion of art college research might contribute directly to the mass-production/distribution/consumption economy *via* the design disciplines associated with commodity aesthetics (Haug 1986), there is a need for research whose academic standards are best assessed using criteria not directly related to market values.

Prior to 1961, when the Diploma in Art & Design (DipAD) was introduced to replace the National Diploma in Design (NDD) in operation since 1946, UK art schools were, in the main, preparing students for professional practices. ‘Research’ was not specified on the agenda, ‘outputs’ were generally artefacts made for exhibition, or the results of craft and design activities related to local traditions and market requirements. The shift towards Polytechnic structures in the late 1960s (typically, amalgamations of regional technical colleges, teacher-training colleges and art colleges) and the re-classifying of the DipAD as the Bachelor of Arts (BA) degree in 1974, meant that those art schools desiring national recognition found themselves on a par with the other academic disciplines. Since 1992, when Further and Higher Education Acts re-branded the Polytechnics as new Universities, this parity – particularly with regard to research functions - has been brought under closer scrutiny, not least by university research committees.

The specific debate about the status of visual arts practice as research within a UK higher education context can be traced back to this period, and by the end of the

century, a Working Group under the auspices of the UK Council of Graduate Education and convened by Christopher Frayling, then Rector of the Royal College of Art, was articulating the position of doctoral research within the art schools:

“...the *practice-based doctorate* advances knowledge partly by means of *practice*. An original piece of work is included in the submission for examination. It is distinct in that significant aspects of the claim for doctoral characteristics of originality, mastery and contribution to the field are held to be demonstrated through the original creative work. Practice-based doctoral submissions must include a substantial *contextualisation of the creative work*. This critical appraisal or analysis not only clarifies the basis of the claim for the originality and location of the original work, it also provides the basis of a judgement as to whether *general scholarly requirements* are met. This could be defined as judgement of the submission as a contribution to knowledge in the field, showing doctoral level powers of analysis and mastery of existing contextual knowledge, in a form which is accessible to and auditable by knowledgeable peers.” (Frayling 1997:14)

Several other articulations of the concept of practice-as-research have been proposed; Linda Candy and Ernest Edmonds (2018: 64) reference this distinction: “If a creative artefact is the *basis* of the contribution to knowledge, the research is *practice-based*. If the research *leads* primarily to new understandings about practice, it is *practice-led*”. Earlier versions include Frayling’s (1993: 5) trio: research *into* art and design; research *through* art and design; and research *for* art and design. Research *through* art and design practices involves “studio work plus a more extensive and substantial research report”. This definition sounds very much like *practice-based* research; the other two configurations fit *practice-led* research. (See Vear 2022 for the most recent review of the various arguments; for visual research methods in the social sciences, see Freedman and Siegesmund 2024,)

It is clear that the Working Group of 1997 was defining a cautious, “situated” position, in Michael Biggs’ and Daniela Buchler’s (2008: 5) description of practice-based arts research

as integrated within the general academic research community; a position which still required specific guidance for candidates with an art school background structuring doctoral proposals. Could an elaboration of the terms 'knowledge' and 'understanding' resolve the misunderstandings that still occur between academic research disciplines in their common quest for...knowledge and understanding?

### **Types of knowledge**

The disciplines tussle for authority, assuming the supremacy of their methodology, the precision of their language or the truth of their knowledge. We favour whichever knowledge set, methodology or language we learned as undergraduates.  
(Jelinek 2013:126)

Changes in the structuring of UK higher education adumbrated above, culminating in the art schools being incorporated within the university sector by 1992, (and thereafter eligible for inclusion in the national research assessment exercises, RAE 1996, 2001, 2008, and the research excellence framework, REF 2014, 2021), have revealed the confusion over the status of research in the visual arts as a means of contributing to knowledge and understanding.

This confusion has been exacerbated because university research regulations still remain vague about what knowledge and understanding mean in the context of the visual arts, whilst tacitly prioritising *propositional* knowledge, traditionally assumed to involve "...justified true belief..." (Gettier 1963), over other types of knowledge. Niedderer (2007: 5-6) has shown (in Niedderer 2007a) that this understanding of propositional knowledge is "...implicit in the definition of research because of additional requirements such as the textual/written presentation of an intellectual position (proposition, thesis – 'true belief'), because of the logic of verification and defence of this intellectual position through argument and evidence (justification), and the requirement for generalisability/transferability and explicit and unambiguous communication."

However, whilst virtually all theorists agree that true belief is a necessary condition for propositional knowledge, there is a longstanding refutation of the condition of justification, as demonstrated by Edmund Gettier (1963), famous in Anglo-American epistemology for his article attacking the tripartite definition of knowledge. This defines 'S knows

that  $p$  as:

$p$  is true  
S believes that  $p$   
S's belief that  $p$  is justified

Gettier showed that this definition is insufficient, he argued that one's true belief might be justified in a way that depends too much on chance: for example, consider an analogue clock which is normally accurate but happens to have stopped, and an observer who reads it at one of the two precise moments in 24 hours when it shows the correct time. In such a case, the reader has true belief which is justified, but is not knowledge. (Dancy, 1995: 312).

So it would be safer to regard the theoretical basis of propositional knowledge as a means towards generalised abstractions – rich though they may be – rather than as the exclusive means to a deeper understanding of the world and our relationships within it.

The historical prioritisation of propositional knowledge has ignored the kinds of knowledge associated with practice, which have variously been called 'practical', 'personal', 'procedural' or 'tacit' knowledge - most popular in recent writings is the term 'experiential' knowledge – all of which I shall include under the collective term *non-propositional*.

Berys Gaut (2006:115), as an exemplar of the aesthetic cognitivist position, reviews the different kinds of knowledge: "...most cognitivists correctly hold that there is a wide variety of different kinds of knowledge that art can impart to its appreciators: propositional knowledge, know-how (skills), phenomenal knowledge (knowledge of what it is like to experience something), conceptual knowledge, knowledge of values and of significance, for example."

Notice that the term *cognitivist* embraces not only propositional knowledge resulting in truths (justified or not) derived from the 'scientific method' of inquiry – the application of systematic observation and experimentation, inductive and deductive reasoning, and the formation and testing of hypotheses and theories, what Gilbert Ryle (1949) called 'knowing that' - but also what has come to be adopted as an antonym to cognition; *experiential* knowledge, (Ryle's 'knowing how').

Much well-intentioned effort has been expended in the attempt to legitimise those types of knowledge mentioned by Gaut as alternatives to the propositional knowledge assumed to be derived from the scientific method of research. But the resultant perceived split only served to divide the research community, leaving practice-based or practice-led visual arts research in the position identified by Biggs and Buchler (2008: 3) as isolationist.

Here is the nub of the confusion, the “slipperiness of cognitivism”, to borrow Peter Lamarque’s (2006:129) phrase: experiential knowledge (and its variations) is not inimical to cognitive knowledge. Rather, it is a sub-set of cognitivism, non-propositional, and which delivers *understanding*, as valuable and socially-useful as propositional true beliefs.

Indeed, Christoph Baumberger (2013: 62) argues that: “...an epistemology of understanding is better suited than a theory of knowledge to do justice to the cognitive achievements of science, philosophy and the everyday; and that such an epistemology can and should accommodate a wide range of cognitive functions of artworks and provides a suitable epistemological framework for aesthetic cognitivism.”

Whilst recognising that propositional knowledge delivers *true beliefs*, Lamarque also points out that non-propositional knowledge can be derived from “exploring aspects of experience” or “imagining possibilities”. It should be noted here that both kinds of knowledge are derived from cognitive procedures, and are complementary: no clear opposition is implied between the two.

Paul Crowther (2013: 2) has proposed a “methodological bridge” between the two strands of the philosophical tradition of relevance to the acquisition of knowledge, analytic philosophy and existential phenomenology, arguing for a ‘post-analytic phenomenology’ which might alleviate the false dichotomy perceived between propositional and non-propositional knowledge at the core of misunderstandings sometimes experienced in research degrees committees. He cites Richard Wollheim’s (1987) *Painting as an Art* as an example of the analytic philosophy position with a phenomenological emphasis, and as such, a useful bridge between the two.

### **The Visual Arts as a Means to Knowledge through Understanding**

We can know more than we can tell.  
(Polanyi 1983: 8)

Much of our everyday experience is structured as language: notoriously arbitrary in terms of its relation to its referents and in the myriad of meanings deferred but exposed in its deconstructions, language is at once the source of our deepest illusions and our highest perspicacity. But we can also make sense of the world by applying a method of visual interpretation – *imaginative* interpretation, as Gordon Graham (1997:57) puts it. In much the same way as we are not all blessed with an acute sense of scientific logic, so we are not all blessed with powers necessary to negotiate the *nuances* of language, which is where the visual arts play a significant role in the augmenting of ways of knowing:

“Works of art can supply the imaginative appreciation of experience...and their value derives from the fact that we may ourselves be deficient in this regard. This is the sense in which art is a source of understanding.” (Graham 1997:58)

We do not need to be limited by the scientific quest for confirmation of a measurable equivalence between our experience of the world and the material world itself; we do not need to be subject to the arbitrariness of language: visual art is another means to understanding, through which we may construe realities afresh. But just as the sciences require a degree of numeracy through which we can glean the understandings they offer, and the humanities require a degree of literacy in order to access their insights, so the visual arts require of us a degree of...*visualcy*, in order to construe the fresh perceptions, the new understandings they offer. I first tentatively proposed *visualcy* some time ago (Riley 2002:150) as being appropriate to identify the human faculty older than both numeracy and literacy – after all, archaeological evidence (eg Davidson and Noble 1989) proves that we were drawing long before we were writing or counting.

James Elkins (2008:1-2) notes the term “...*visual literacy* has been in uncommon but intermittent use for over a hundred and fifty years”, and reports a definition as “...understanding how people perceive objects, interpret what they see, and what they learn from them.” My neologism, *visualcy*, embraces not only this sense of understanding, but also the facility for *producing the means to understanding through the articulation of visual elements in the construction of material works*. This more pro-active definition is in line with Cheryl Lemke’s (2003: 15) acknowledgement of the demands of the expanded



field of the digital age: she describes visual literacy as “The ability to interpret, use, appreciate, and create images and video using both conventional and 21<sup>st</sup> century media in ways that advance thinking, decision making, communication, and learning”. Ways of nurturing this ability, which I have described as an *intelligence of seeing*, are offered in Riley (2008) and Rankin, Riley (*et al.* 2017).

### **Aesthetic cognitivism**

Since 1997 it has been accepted that specific guidance for doctoral candidates should emphasise Frayling’s *general scholarly requirements*, particularly the inclusion of a review of the recognised paradigms of research, the criteria of assessment applicable to each paradigm (Denzin, Lincoln, *et al.* 2024), together with a reasoned argument for the adoption of the chosen paradigm and the criteria by which the chosen one is justified. After all, the doctorate is a licence to research; it is confirmation of an understanding of the anatomy of the whole research body culminating in an original contribution to knowledge, not simply a demonstration of professional practice.

The 1997 Working Group’s contribution built upon a crucial insight of Nelson Goodman (1978: 21-2. My italics) “...knowing cannot be exclusively or even primarily a matter of determining what is true...Much of knowing aims at something other than true, or any, belief. An increase in acuity of insight or in a range of comprehension, rather than a change in belief, occurs when...we see...features and structures we could not discern before. Such growth in knowledge is not by formation or fixation of belief but by *the advancement of understanding*.”

The subtle *nuances* through which insight, understanding and knowledge are related, as identified by Goodman and elaborated by his erstwhile colleague Catherine Z. Elgin (2002; 2006), serve to support the case for an *aesthetic cognitivist* position on how arts practices can enhance our understanding – and knowledge - of the world, which advocates an emphasis upon the second of the two main concerns in the general study of Western art; firstly, the philosophical traditions of analytic philosophy and existential phenomenology which seek to define visual art; and secondly, an approach which explores visual art in terms of its *value* within social contexts. This latter, sociological

approach regards the concept of art to be a social construction, and therefore construed according to the specific social context. This position becomes the more appropriate for the analysis and discussion of the potential of research in the visual arts disciplines to yield original contributions to knowledge and understanding within today's cultural context.

Within the sociological tradition, theories aiming to explain value are classed as *normative* since they attempt to establish a standard, a norm. Graham (1997: 46) reviews three such normative positions: firstly, the idea that the value of art lies in its capacity to give pleasure, *aestheticism*; secondly, that art's value lies in its abilities to facilitate the expression of emotion, *expressivism*; and thirdly, that art is valuable as a source of understanding and knowledge, *cognitivism*.

This article takes the view that the most socially-useful value of visual arts research lies in its scope for contributing to our understanding of our experiences of the world, without denying the social functions of art practices as a source of pleasure or a means of self-expression.

The *aesthetic cognitivist* position articulated here echoes the opinion of Goodman (1978:102): "...the arts must be taken no less seriously than the sciences as modes of discovery, creation, and enlargement of knowledge in the broad sense of advancement of the understanding, and thus that the philosophy of art should be conceived as an integral part of metaphysics and epistemology."

The sense of imbalance between the perceived value of the sciences and the arts as sources of knowledge and the advancement of understanding evident in Goodman's wording of forty-five years ago still resonates today, and is a telling indication of the difficulties still faced by those in the art schools involved in nurturing research through visual art practices, when advocating research proposals within the context of a university research culture steeped in the definition of knowledge as exclusively propositional, gained through justified true beliefs.

### **A proposed criterion of assessment for practice-based research**

Immanuel Kant suggested that aesthetic judgements may be construed between

objective, cognitive judgements and subjective, sensory ones. (Schellekens 2021:95).

Georg W.F. Hegel 's (1835) sociological approach, an elaboration of a *normative* philosophy of art in which aesthetic judgements lie between objective cognitive judgements and subjective perceptual judgements, provides a strategy for avoiding the renowned difficulties in defining art *per se* by construing art as what he referred to as a 'determination'. The difference between a definition and a determination is explained by Stephen Bungay (1987: 25): "A determination is not a definition because a definition excludes possible examples delimiting the object at the outset. A determination is a theory, a framework of universal explanation, which then must demonstrate its own explanatory power through its differences and its instantiation."

Within such a framework of universal explanation, Hegel identifies a place for art: halfway between intellectual understanding and sensual experience. For Hegel (in Preziosi 1998: 97) "...the content of art is the Idea, while its form is the configuration of sensuous material."

Whether in the form of traditional media or manifested as contemporary 'relational art' practices, the artwork considered in its aesthetic contexts (philosophical, sociological, psychological), should be scrutinized for its potential for embodying transformative rhetorical tropes, poetic devices facilitating aspects of human experience, amenable enough to sustain a range of alternative interpretations resonant at both individual and social levels of negotiation, and at the same time affording a balance between the two components of the criterion for assessing value offered in this article, derived from three sources: Kant's stance that aesthetic judgement is somewhere between the cognitive and the sensory; Hegel's 'halfway between intellectual understanding and sensual experience', and Richard Wollheim's '*twofoldness*' (1991:105) in his specific sense of simultaneously perceiving the surface qualities and the illusory depths of space of a 2-D artwork. The components are *perceptual intrigue* and *conceptual intrigue*, introduced earlier, and defined in detail below; a suggested criterion of assessment being the degree of balance between the two.

Consider the values implicit in the term *aesthetic cognitivism*. *Aesthetic* value refers to the

potential of an artwork to intrigue the eye, to stimulate imagination through the viewer's engagement with the haptic, the proximal and the distal values which, in visual terms, are realised through the combination of visual elements to produce perceptions of scale, proportion, pattern, rhythm, contrasts of tone and texture, and illusions of depth; *Cognitive* value refers to the potential of an artwork to intrigue the brain, to facilitate understanding, to stimulate imagination through the engagement of poetic devices such as metaphor and metonymy, synecdoche, oxymoron and pun (Brandl 2023). I argue that the degree of balance between these two can be of practical relevance in support of aesthetic cognitivism as a means towards the *understanding* and *evaluation* of practice-based research in the visual arts.

### **Levels of Intrigue: the Stimulus for Perceptual Attention**

Attention is a prime requirement for engagement in any perceptual and cognitive activity. With our limited capacity for processing the wide range of perceptual information from our environment all at once, we have developed "attentional mechanisms" (Chun, Golomb & Turk-Browne 2011:73) which direct us to concentrate on the information most relevant to our environmental situation at any given moment. The primary stimulus which triggers such mechanisms is identified in this article as 'intrigue', both perceptual and conceptual.

Charles Eriksen and James Hoffman (1972) were the first to distinguish between 'focused' and 'distributed' attention, their parameters being specific objects within the visual scene, or the wider scope of the visual field. Bence Nanay (2016:22) suggests expanding their model to include 'properties' of singular objects: as well as attending to the general field and the objects within it, we can attend to the attributes of specific objects such as their size, colour, texture, shape and edges, and can shift our attention from one property to another, while still focused on one object. Nanay (2016:24) proposes four states of attention:

- 1 Distributed attention to objects, and focused on their properties.
- 2 Distributed attention to objects, and distributed across properties.
- 3 Focused attention to objects, and focused on properties.

#### 4 Focused attention to objects, and distributed across properties.

However, his definition of 'object' may embrace more than a single entity represented in traditional material artwork such as painting or sculpture. A landscape for example, made up of a variety of objects including trees, rocks, and buildings, might intrigue perceptually, and therefore engage the focused attention of a viewer; contemporary practices involving social participatory activities recognised by Nicolas Bourriaud (2002) as 'relational aesthetics', along with socio-political interventions involving negotiation with relevant legislative authorities, endorsements of financial sponsors and permissions of gatekeepers to stage multi-media performance events in public or gallery spaces - activities I have termed 'negotiational aesthetics' (Riley 2024:51) - all such activities have potential to intrigue perceptually and/or conceptually, thus stimulating attention focused upon, and distributed across the event.

'Perceptual intrigue', as exemplified in a 2-D representation, is the product of the tension between the material, textural qualities, the proximal values of the surface of a work, and the illusions of depth perceivable *via* that surface. The term embraces how the artist's manipulation of the material qualities of the work can stimulate perceptual experiences which cause the viewer's gaze to linger, and perceptual complacencies to be challenged, leading to new understandings. It should be noted, however, that perceptual intrigue is not limited to two-dimensional works, and can relate to the tensions set up between spatial scale and proportion in work installed site-specifically; between haptic, distal and proximal values in three-dimensional work; between rhythm and pace in time-based audio-visual media.

'Conceptual intrigue' refers to how a work can afford viewers fresh insights which stimulate new understandings of its subject-matter; the capacity of work to employ rhetorical tropes in order to transcend whatever prosaic subject-matter might be represented in the work, so as to make available meanings at a more profound level about our experiences of life, and the human condition in general.

#### **Case Studies**

Outlets for practice-based research now include OAR, the Oxford Artistic & Practice Based Research Platform (<https://www.oarplatform.com>), and Corkscrew, a network managed by Sophie Hope (<https://corkscrew.sophiehope.org.uk>). The inaugural edition of the journal *HUB*, a journal of research in art, design and society appeared in the Autumn of 2023 (<https://i2ads.up.pt/hub>).

As a specific example of how exploring aspects of experience and imagining possibilities through visual art practice can advance our understanding of our relationships with the world, and an example of a high degree of equivalence between perceptual and conceptual intrigue, consider the work produced by Robert A. Newell for his practice-based PhD (University of Wales), *Landscape Painting: Redundant Genre or Viable Practice?* affording viewers a fresh understanding of the dichotomy between *landscape* and *environment*:

We are made aware in Newell's thesis about fundamental physical forces which form our shared world of land, sea and sky. We are invited to explore the psychological tensions which underlie the oxymoronic constancy of change, the constant process of transformation of which we are too often unaware. The paintings and drawings integral to the thesis show the fascinating effects of that process, and afford us some understanding – *knowledge* – of our relationship with our physical surroundings because they challenge us to resolve the tension between the concepts of an objective landscape and a subjective environment. In Newell's (2012: 3) words: "Painting and drawing are integral to an extended perceptual process that mediates the relationship between subject and object."



**Figure 1** Robert Newell 2023 *Great Asby Scar 1* Graphite pencil and watercolour on paper 48.9x78.8cms. (Source permission Robert A. Newell)

Newell's practice invites the question: are we gazing over a landscape outside ourselves, or are we positioned within an environment, symbiotically-linked to our surroundings?

Newell argues that perspective – the geometric projection system – actually serves to draw the viewer in to the picture, and studying the drawing *Great Asby Scar 1* (Figure 1) in particular, reveals what he means: we are afforded a much deeper insight even than that offered by Wollheim's *twofoldedness*; we are offered a *visual understanding* of our twofold relationship with the space we inhabit: how we are *a part* of it, and simultaneously *apart* from it, derived from the projective geometry of the drawing and how that compositional structure positions the viewer. Paul Klee, paraphrased by Arthur C. Danto (1991: 211), noted that "...art need not simply render the visible, but *renders visible*, which means that we see by means of art something not to be seen in other ways, something in effect that must be made visible." Here's the heart of Newell's drawings' intrigue, worth exploring as twin stimuli of the levels of attention necessary for acquiring understanding: perceptual intrigue, and conceptual intrigue:

How do Newell's drawings intrigue the eye? Every one of the individual marks, and every combination of those marks at whatever level we choose to engage with these works,

offers drawn visual equivalents for the natural phenomena in which our being is immersed yet rarely consciously experienced – land, sea, sky and their interactions with light. The visual psychologist James Jerome Gibson (1966:238) had no doubt what artists are for: “The legitimate endeavour of working artists is to practise the art of structuring light”. Practising the art of structuring light is exactly what Newell does. Notice how at every level of illusory depth in the picture plane, from foreground to background, the scene depicted is in focus, edges are sharp (Figure 2). Now, this is *not* the way our natural perception system works. We are only able to focus on one plane at a time (if you doubt this, try the two fore-fingers test: hold them in line, one close to your eyes, the other at arm’s length: focus upon the nearer finger, and note the double image of the further finger.)

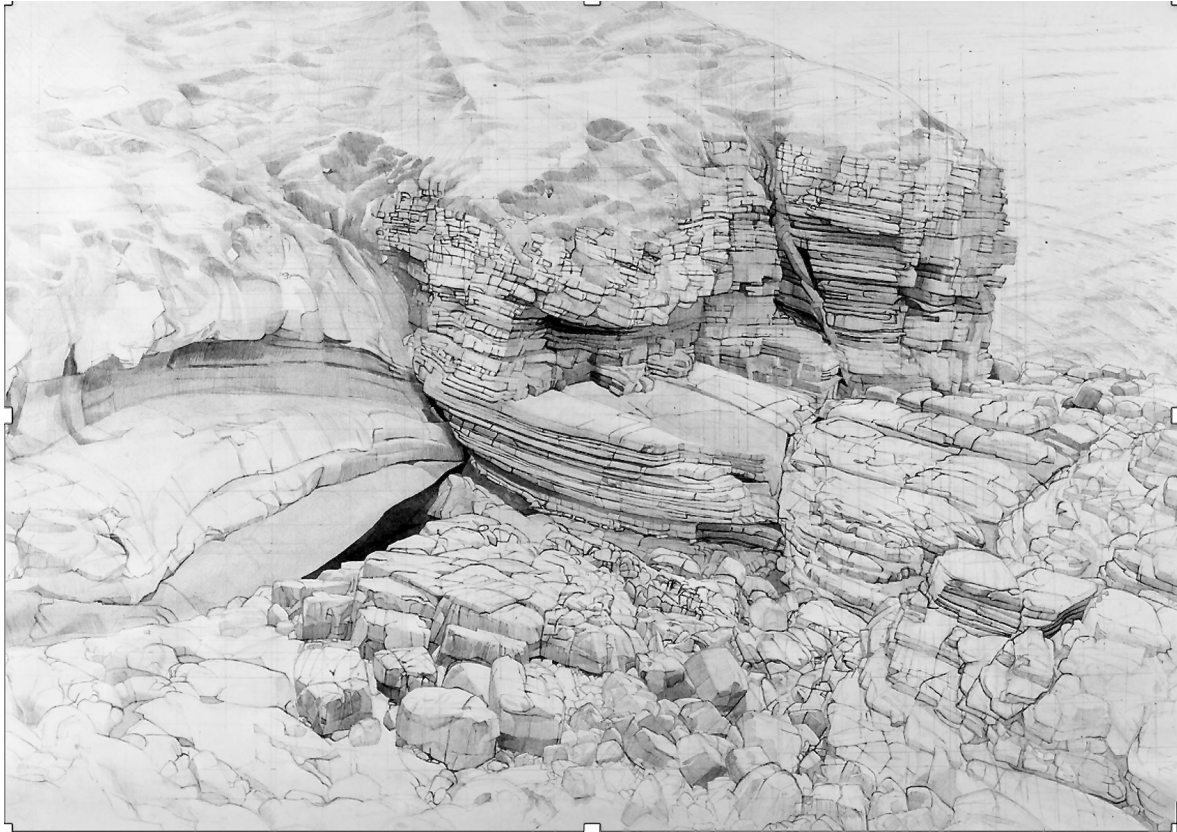


**Figure 2** Robert Newell 2023 *Gilfach yr Halen* Graphite pencil and watercolour on paper. 48x91.5cms. (Source permission Robert A. Newell)

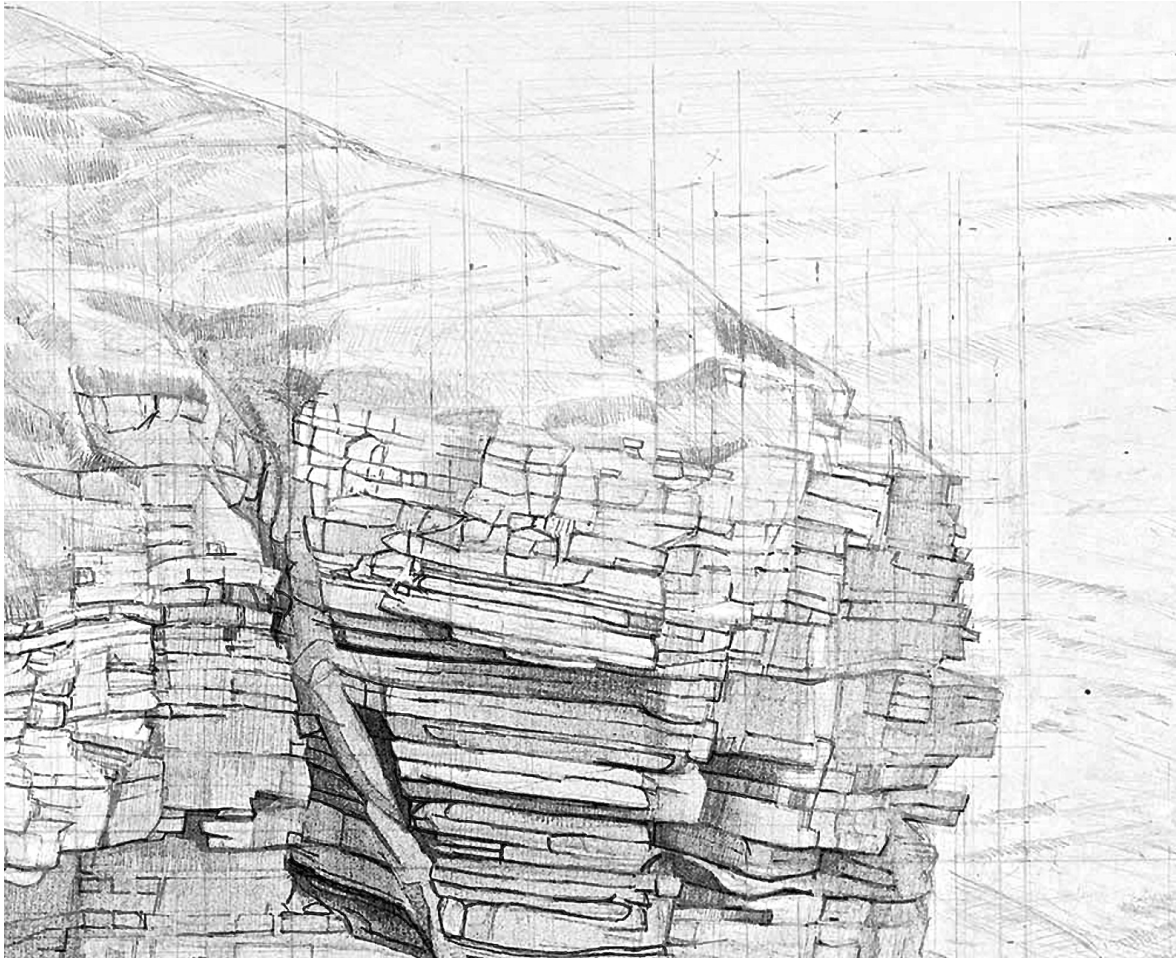
So, if these drawings and painting are *not* records of natural perception, as Ernst Gombrich (1960) mistakenly defined drawing, then what are they? These drawings are, in Newell’s (2013) words, “...a synthesis of temporal looking...” They represent *time*, as well as space: lengthy periods of time spent focussing on each individual surface and edge, time spent gradually building an *understanding of structure* beyond our reality of perception, a *shareable understanding*, a specific kind of knowledge. Speaking of



structure, notice the double structure apparent in *Limestone Cliffs, Caim* (Figures 3 and 3a), the Coldstream-esque pencil grid (meticulously made, sometimes with the aid of a spirit-level) mapping an underlying structure and thus affording the viewer an understanding of order underpinning the apparent chaos of disintegrating matter.



**Figure 3** Robert Newell 2023 *Limestone Cliffs, Caim*. Graphite pencil and watercolour on paper. 53.3x73.6cms. (Source permission Robert A. Newell)



**Figure 3a** Robert Newell 2023 *Limestone Cliffs, Cain* (detail) (Source permission Robert A. Newell)

Such drawings that reveal their construction process are a source of understanding unattainable by other reprographic means. (At the risk of offending the photographers, this is one aspect that makes drawing more interesting than photography!)

Newell's practice-based research allows us insights to a range of perceptions of the world by over-riding our biological constraints: *the familiar is made strange*, to paraphrase Russian Formalist theorist Viktor Shklovsky (1917).

What about the second kind of intrigue I mentioned? How do these drawings and paintings intrigue, conceptually? By stimulating our attention, engagement – what Jakobson (1958) called the *conative* function of communication – we cannot fail to connect with an awesome concept: the ever-changing but hardly perceptible erosion of what Newell has called 'the bones of the land', under ever-changing lighting conditions, conceptually resonates - an appropriate Gibsonian notion - in the equivalent erosion of

paper texture by the pencil's graphite grit or the abrasion of brush bristles against canvas weave. To paraphrase Kant (1790): "The fluid is to all appearances, older than the solid..."

These works are about material on the move! So we have a balance between perceptual intrigue and conceptual intrigue, such achievement moves beyond the subject-matter to reveal something more universal – "to reveal... the universal in the particular" in Lamarque's (2006: 131) words, and that is surely the hallmark of quality, the doorway to understanding and knowledge. As Peter Goldie (2007:166-7) argues: "There is a kind of cognitive value that many good conceptual artworks possess. These works can help us to think about certain difficult philosophical ideas. This is their cognitive value. So an artwork's being of cognitive value isn't restricted to its yielding knowledge in the form of propositional knowledge, of justified true beliefs. It can also be cognitively valuable in that it *facilitates* knowledge, and enhances our intellectual dispositions. This broader conception of cognitive value...helps us to explain an important fact: we can return to those artworks time after time and *continue* to find cognitive value in them, and this could not be explained if all they yielded were propositional knowledge."

As universities' research policies continue to evolve regulations and requirements governing practice-based doctoral research in the visual arts, this article is offered to provide a criterion of assessment for consideration by research supervisors charged with advocating research proposals, for those responsible for assessing such proposals in research committees, and for those examining such research, with which to assess proposals' viability for contributing original knowledge and understanding in the fields of visual arts practices.

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