

**Visual Metafictions:
Mark Fairington's *Mantidae* Paintings
and Victorian Representations of the 'Real'**

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Abstract:

This paper examines the contemporary British artist Mark Fairington's *Mantidae* series of paintings (2000) via the representational methods of his working process. Taking each stage of this process in turn, the paper examines key discourses surrounding mid-nineteenth-century approaches to painting, microscopy, photography and montage dialogically in its analysis of Fairington's own approach. The paper subsequently argues that the *Mantidae* paintings operate as visual metafictions rooted in Victorian explorations of representation and reality. In its consideration of visual artworks through this literary model, the paper argues that close similitude exists between key theorisations within neo-Victorian studies and postmodern art theory. Ultimately, the paper seeks to initiate a cross-disciplinary application of literary theory surrounding metafiction in its examination of how the visual arts demonstrate self-conscious exploitations of historically-located forms of mediation.

Keywords: Mark Fairington, metafiction, microscopy, painting, photography, photo-montage, Pre-Raphaelite, representation, specimen, visual art.

British artist Mark Fairington's large-scale paintings of Mantid (or mantis) insect bodies in his *Mantidae* series (2000) convert representational specimens into individual subjects: particularised examples of the two thousand species that compose the Mantidae family of insects that confront our scrutinising gaze through their forward-facing postures. This particularisation can be observed in the minute gradations of yellow and burnt orange, combined with the linear patterning on the lower wings in the above mantid image. It is equally apparent in the careful rendering of the myriad of blacks, greens, blues and yellows that run across *Specimen (7)*'s body surface (see **Fig. 1** below), as well as the expansive cracks that have encroached upon its wings, and the remains of its spindly, angular legs –

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details that surely can only result from the artist's close observation of his subject's idiosyncrasies.



Figure 1. Mark Fairnington, *Specimen (7)*, 2000.

Oil on canvas, 214 x 189 cm, from the *Mantidae* series.

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Yet whilst critics like Giovanni Aloï have associated these paintings with the imitative ambitions of Photorealism by describing them as “photo-realistic” (Aloï 2012: 36),¹ the works’ subjects – sourced from the collections of natural history museums – differentiate them from this movement, whose members depict the familiar sites (or sights) of everyday life, as seen in the work of Richard Estes for example (see <http://americanart.si.edu/exhibitions/online/estes/>). Furthermore, the dedication to detail that they contain does not correspond to the artfulness of Photorealist works so much as a painterly homage to decimated exemplars of nature. The museum context that the subjects were sourced from not only represents the holding place for these insects² but also the moral dilemma of

how, and why, nature's creatures are collected at all. Victorian attitudes towards nature are exemplified by these sites of the collection, display, and study of what an apparently endless and abundant natural world. As Sally O'Reilly highlights in her discussion of the *Mantidae* works, in this period "issues of colonialism and cultural subjectivity were not integral to the considerations of a keeper or curator, and knowledge was deemed absolute and unconditional" (O'Reilly, 2005), implying a reflective encounter between contemporary and Victorian attitudes towards the natural environment to be performed across the canvases.



Figure 2. Mark Fairnington, *Specimen (6)*, 2000.
Oil on canvas, 203 x 214 cm, from the *Mantidae* series;
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This ethically-driven interplay between the past and the present is the most immediate neo-Victorian dimension of Fairnington's representations of insect specimens – now transformed into monumental tributes to the martyrs of scientific knowledge. Indeed, the artist discusses the works as a form of painterly resurrection through which the insects "become [...] half-dead,

half-live beings” (Fairnington qtd. in Coline Milliard, 2010). These are, then, paintings that are closely bound to Victorian cultural activities in both their subjects (natural history specimens) and in their sources (the museum collection). But they are also paintings that knowingly reflect Victorian approaches and attitudes towards the act of representation itself.

Fairnington’s process deploys several modes of representation that originate in the Victorian period, including microscopy, photography and photomontage: a staggered working-process that provides the subject matter for the final oil paintings. By analysing Fairnington’s representations of insects in the *Mantidae* paintings in relation to their visual Victorian counterparts – including the work of John Everett Millais, Victorian attitudes towards the microscope, and the photomontages of Henry Peach Robinson – this essay will explore how they operate in dialogue with the cultural matrix from which their methods (and concerns) first emerged. In this way, this essay argues that Fairnington’s canvases reflect upon but also interrogate the distinct forms of visual representation that they invoke.

Further to this historically-informed treatment of Fairnington’s practice, the essay applies the literary model of metafiction to its consideration of the *Mantidae* paintings. As a postmodern literary approach to storytelling, metafiction simultaneously underlines and undermines the fictional text’s status as constructed by deploying forms of authorial trickery thus drawing readers’ attention to the representational function of narrative. Characterised by their self-referential nature, metafictional novels by authors like A.S. Byatt, Graham Swift and Sarah Waters thus operate through the very palpability of their status as authored constructs. By analysing Fairnington’s visual confluences of fact, fiction, verisimilitude, and authorial subjectivity, this essay will argue the *Mantidae* paintings to similarly operate as assemblages of Victorian methods of representation that seek to explore and exploit mediations between reality’s rendering and reading.

This essay thus aims to contribute some solutions to the challenging question of how we might theorise neo-Victorian visual arts. Most significantly, in its application of the theoretical model of ‘metafiction’ to painting, it will explore how existing frameworks within the field of neo-Victorianism might be re-thought in relation to works that are image- rather than word-based. But further, as a neglected field of inquiry, neo-Victorianism in contemporary art represents an important subject area in

which an interdisciplinary scholarship that refuses to limit itself to traditional methodological confines might be practiced.

1. The Visuals Arts and Neo-Victorianism

As Nadine Boehm-Schnitker and Susanne Gruss observe in their introduction to a special issue of this journal entitled ‘Spectacles and Things: Visual and Material Culture and/in Neo-Victorianism’, there is a clear “twofold task for Neo-Victorianism”: “one is aimed at the exploration of the respective historical uses of the Victorian in a specific context; the other concerns the analysis of aesthetic constructions and reflections of these uses” (Boehm-Schnitker and Gruss 2011: 3). Of course, scholars have examined the visual materials of Victorian culture to great effect, including the collection (Briggs 1988), heritage culture (Joyce 2007), the scrapbook (Solicari 2013b), and the photograph (Green-Lewis 2000). But contemporary visual interactions with this broad ‘collection of collections’ have been significantly neglected by historians of contemporary art and visual culture.

Despite this absence of neo-Victorian scholarship in the field of art history there have been two notable curatorial enterprises that explored how neo-Victorianism might ‘look’ in the visual arts: *Secret Victorians: Contemporary Artists and a Nineteenth-Century Vision* (1998-2000), curated by Melissa E. Feldman and Ingrid Schaffner for the Hayward Gallery’s Touring Exhibition, and *Victoriana*, organised by Sonia Solicari for the Guildhall Art Gallery, London, in 2013. However, as Solicari highlights when describing her process for selecting objects for this exhibition,

there is neither a handy manifesto nor a connected group of artists championing a particular aesthetic; rather Victoriana is the crossroads at which many different paths of inspiration coincide to produce works that speak about our negotiation of old and new, about who we are and where we come from. (Solicari, 2013a: 182)

There is a danger in these circumstances, then, that curatorial decisions might become driven by ‘aesthetic’ rather than ‘conceptual’ considerations and to centre upon the work of artists who simulate Victorian stylistic tropes

rather than reflectively re-present elements from the historical past via an (inherently) historically-informed present. Furthermore, because exhibitions are most usually thematically-drawn, they are often limited in their analytic potential. In many ways, the most significant examination(s) of neo-Victorian artworks has thus far been left to reviewers and critics, who, like Marie-Luise Kohlke in her discussion of *Victoriana*, successfully draw out the conceptual significations of the exhibits, as well as their positioning in relation to broader discourses (see Kohlke 2013).

There are several artists whose works visually interrogate historical forms of representation. However, the direct appropriation of such forms made by artists like Kehinde Wiley and Yasumasa Morimuri's differs significantly from Fairnington's use of Victorian processes of perception. In Fairnington's work, it is not the motifs of the past that become integrated into the images, but rather the methods by which the Victorians explored the act of representation itself. In this way Fairnington does not so much subvert the historical past as visually recall its questions in 'the present'. Over the last fifteen years there here has, of course, been a sustained interest in artists who use objects such as glass domes to display their work, processes like taxidermy, and technologies like the magic lantern as a medium of projection. However, the current *Zeitgeist* for all things stuffed, mounted and/or biophilic can lead to a lack of distinction between fine art practice and the return of a 'Victoriana' aesthetic that furnishes shop windows, pubs, and restaurants across Britain.³ Indeed, as Solicari highlights, "some aspects of the Victorian aesthetic, such as the return, once again, of the mantelpiece as decorative focus in home furnishing and interior design, have become manifest as recent trends, losing their historical context" (Solcari, 2013a: 182).

2. Realism and Representation

Fairnington asserts that the Mantidae depicted in his works "can only exist as paintings; they don't exist in any other form" (Fairnington qtd. in Elstob 2012). This statement firmly situates the works as authored representations and disavows them of any claim to objectivity or even, as we shall see, of hyperrealist intent. It is therefore important to understand how the paintings are achieved if we hope to authentically unpack their significance as visual studies of how representation functions.

Although artists associated with several movements and periods have made use of photography in their working process (including the Impressionists, the Pre-Raphaelites, and the Photorealists), Fairnington's approach differs. For *Mantidae* the act of painting serves as the final stage in a series of distinct visual mediations that function to insert distance between the subject (the object) and the artist: it has been magnified, photographed, deconstructed and then reconstructed through montage. The Mantid's ultimate depiction in paint thus becomes a subjective conflation of each of these deliberated manipulations – each of these versions of representation.

Fairnington began to experiment with this staggered working-process whilst based at the Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art between 1999 and 2002. During his Residency the artist gained access to the Oxford University Natural History Museum collections, which contained the specimens that subsequently formed the subjects for his *Mantidae* series. Brimming with the particularised detail of each insect's parts, the apparent realism of these works is their most notable – and noted – feature. *Specimen (6)* (see **Fig. 2** above), for example, renders the crinkles, tears and texture of the Mantid's wings minutely. Its crooked antennae and bristly legs are starkly contrasted to the solidity of its posterior curves; whilst the artist's use of light and shade results in the static specimen's depiction becoming sculptural and visually convincing. This seemingly hyper-realist approach to painting has provoked a good deal of critical commentary on the accuracy of the depictions achieved. O'Reilly describes the specimens as “artificially preserved” (O'Reilly 2005), whilst Colline Milliard asserts that they are “anatomically accurate” (Milliard 2010). But Mary Madden successfully observes the conceptual implications of this “super-realist effect” when she argues that it “draws attention to the painstaking construction of the canvases while creating an illusion of transparent access to the truth of the subject” (Madden 2012). This is significant because it is the ostensibly high level of realism achieved in these paintings that most significantly throws their status as representations into high relief: a key requirement of the metafictional text. Indeed, as Fairnington himself states, “what's important for me is that the work is a reflection on realism, rather than being realist” (Fairnington qtd. in Elstob 2012). These paintings are therefore carefully constructed simulations of realism's tropes rather than painterly attempts to achieve its most rudimentary aims.

Realism characterises much of British creative output in the mid-nineteenth century, and indeed the origins of the term ‘Realism’ are bound to two of its most famous Victorian proponents: John Ruskin and George Eliot. In 1856 both Ruskin and Eliot introduced the word ‘realism’ into the parlance of British literary culture, thereby declaring “a common commitment to the labor of representation” (Levine 2000:75). In the moment of the genre’s conception its purpose was, therefore, already bound to the task of drawing readers’ attention towards the ‘constructedness’ of the text – to the ‘labour’ of representation. We see this purpose manifest in Eliot’s famous opening passage to *Adam Bede* (1859) in which she writes: “With a single drop of ink for a mirror, the Egyptian sorcerer undertakes to reveal to any chance comer far-reaching visions of the past. This is what I undertake to do for you reader. With this drop of ink at the end of my pen” (Eliot 1980: 1). As Stephen Gill argues, throughout this passage Eliot has no intention of “effacing [her]self, retiring like the God of the creation within or behind or beyond or above [her] handiwork”, but rather “[aesthetic distancing] with George Eliot is created by her presence, by her insistence that we attend to her and to what she is doing” (Gill 1980: xii). Importantly, however, Eliot follows this “insistence” with the abrupt instalment of apparently objective data with which she leads her reader into the first scene of storytelling: “With this drop of ink at the end of my pen I will show you the roomy workshop of Mr Jonathan Burge, carpenter and builder in the village of Hayslope, as it appeared on the eighteenth of June, in the year of our Lord 1799” (Eliot 1980: 1). Thus,

[o]nly through George Eliot’s eyes do we observe the world of *Adam Bede* which she [...] presents as simultaneously a real world, historically placed, specifically realized, accurate in verifiable detail, and a fictional one, artistically ordered by the *knowable* author. (Gill 1980: xii, his emphasis)

This authorial spotlighting of the “real” and “verifiable” as simultaneously existing alongside the “fictional” and “artistic[.]” subsequently becomes the *modus operandi* for late-twentieth-century neo-Victorian novelists who appropriate and pastiche (and to some degree parody) the literary forms of the past. Significantly, however, such comfortingly familiar invocations of

past forms are carefully – and self-consciously – laced with equal measures of celebration and critique.

An ideal literary example to consider here is A.S. Byatt's *Angels and Insects* (1992): a work of two novellas that, like Fairington's *Mantidae* paintings, centre on the subject of nature's preservation, resurrection and death. As Hilary Schor writes in her analysis of the first of these novellas, 'Morpho Eugenia':

The act of preservation at the heart of the novel is simply unnatural, its way of cataloguing, transforming, and resurrecting matter an intervention in the world it pretends merely to "show"; what better form than the Victorian novel for gathering, for interrogating, for estranging the forms of representation themselves? (Schor, 2000: 244)

Like Fairington, then, Byatt uses both the forms and the subjects of the Victorian past in order to 'gather', 'interrogate' and 'estrangle' 'the forms of representation themselves'. We might, however, query Schor's implication that the novel, or text-based work, is the sole vehicle through which such activities might be carried out.

Whilst a novelist like Byatt seeks to subvert the Victorian realist novel by aping its very form(s), a painter like Fairington interrogates the visual mediations that surround his insect specimens' origins through Victorian forms of visualising the natural world. The canvases of the Pre-Raphaelite painters are arguably the closest visual equivalents to the textual works that form the aesthetic fodder for Byatt's—and others'—literary rewritings of past forms. Forming their 'Brotherhood' in 1848, and composed of artists like William Holman Hunt, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and John Everett Millais, the Pre-Raphaelites zealously sought to depict nature as it 'really is'.⁴ There exist countless anecdotal testimonials of the fanatical devotion to realism that the Brotherhood performed: from models made ill from lying in cold water⁵ to artists travelling enormous distances to ensure authentic backgrounds for their Old Testament subjects.⁶ But, like Eliot's self-signalling presence in the opening passage of *Adam Bede*, Pre-Raphaelitism's "fidelity to representation [through] rendering the precise detail of the real thing or scene" (Levine 2000: 75) was combined with a keen awareness of representation's inherent status as fictive. Here we find

an important – and as yet critically un-noted – source material for Fairnington’s re-presentations of nature’s specimens. Indeed, when asked about a potential relationship between his work and the Pre-Raphaelites Fairnington reveals that they “had a huge influence on me” (Fairnington qtd. in Elstob 2012). And if we consider a work like Millais’s *Ophelia* (1851-52) (see <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/millais-ophelia-n01506>) in dialogue with Fairnington’s *Mantidae*, we can perceive the strength of this influence on his metafictional renderings of history’s forgotten specimens.

3. Pre-Raphaelitism and Particularity

Millais’s mid-nineteenth-century painting of Hamlet’s tragic lover positions the drowned woman beneath an arched frame that encloses her body within the reeds, flowers and mosses of an English country stream and its banks.⁷ In doing so the artist situates the fictive Ophelia within the verifiable particulars of a geographically-specific natural environment. Indeed, several critics liken the scene to a natural history museum diorama. Geoffrey Hemstedt, for example, asserts that when viewing the painting “it is curiously like looking into one of those glass recesses in natural history museums which recreate the ‘natural setting’ for the stuffed coyote or dabchick” (Hemstedt 1978: 144),⁸ whilst Lynn Merrill equates the work to a collection of natural specimens, describing how “Millais painstakingly assembles hundreds of individual specimens of plants and flowers”, creating “a collection of thin oily representations” (Merrill 1989: 174). The subject being depicted in Millais’s painting is, of course, both imaginary and literary, which means that the particularity with which nature is rendered ultimately draws attention to the canvas’s status as a constructed space filled with detail and data. In this way, the work asks its viewers not only to be seduced but also enamoured by the level of verisimilitude with which we are being plied: this is not ‘reality’ – this is reality’s beautiful, but manipulative, avatar.

In Fairnington’s *Mantidae* paintings the visual information that the artist’s close observation of the specimens allows similarly endows the subjects (insect bodies) with an apparently objective status, whilst calling attention to the painterly means through which such information (and such a status) is being provided. When seen ‘in the flesh’ one can discern that the paintings are produced from generous brush marks that are long, wide and

heavy in paint rather than built up slowly in precisely-drawn sections (as Photorealist works are for example). These paintings are, in fact, “surprisingly painterly” (Smee 2004). As Fairington himself highlights, the *Mantidae* works are not “just a description or a translation - a huge number of decisions, subjective decisions, went into [producing them]” (Fairington qtd. in Elstob 2012). Closely echoing Millais’s integration of specific botanical species within his fictional representation of Ophelia, such as buttercups, meadowsweets and purple loosestrife, Fairington’s close-sighted depictions of missing legs, broken antennae, and unique colour conglomerations, also function to bestow his subjective representations of nature with their very own collection of apparently objective reference points.

There is, however, an important distinction between the storytelling of Pre-Raphaelitism and the floating specimens that look out from Fairington’s canvases. Whilst Hunt, Millais, and fellow members of the Brotherhood depicted Biblical, literary and poetical subject matters, Fairington’s *Mantidae* are objects that have been doubly removed from their context(s): firstly, through their original collection from nature and subsequent relocation into natural history museum collections; and secondly through their removal from the specimen drawers into Fairington’s own studio through photography – and then into paint. This raises the important question of what constitutes the subject matter; in other words, are we being asked to conceive narrative through authorial deployment of the particular, or encouraged to focus on particularity for its own sake?

Whereas Pre-Raphaelite painting exploits particularity as narrative’s primary tool of persuasion, or what one critic describes as “observant literalism” (Peters 1961: 1), Fairington’s subjects are anchorless bodies with neither story nor background. And although this distinction may appear at odds with a comparative study of Fairington and Pre-Raphaelite renderings of Shakespearean *mise-en-scènes*, many Pre-Raphaelite painters were indeed criticised for constraining familiar subject matter within a perceived “straitjacket of literally minute finish” (Axton 1977: 288). Indeed, in the century of their creation Hunt’s paintings in particular were met with confounded criticism; one reviewer describing the depiction of *The Scapegoat* (1854-56) as “a dying goat which as a mere goat has no more interest for us than the sheep that furnished our yesterday’s dinner” (Anon. 1856: 589). According to this view the central figure of the ‘scapegoat’ is

rendered with far too much realism for its narratological function to be fulfilled. But more generally speaking the Pre-Raphaelite compositional tendency to locate a central subject matter (the apparent content) within highly particularised backgrounds and surroundings (arguably their primary content) undermined the established traditions of visual storytelling. Indeed, some members of the Brotherhood, including Hunt and Millais, would complete their paintings' backgrounds before installing the central figures. As Michael Booth testifies, Hunt "first painted the background and foreground of 'The Hireling Shepherd' (1851) out of doors, and then added the figures from studio models" (Booth 2016: 13).

This compositional focus on botanical specificity, architectural precision, and geological accuracy results in paintings that are two- rather than three-dimensional in their form. As W.F. Axton observes, such an egalitarian attitude towards content – or what Axton describes as "problematical depth" – is particularly apparent in Millais's *Ophelia* "in which the screen of foliage behind the figure actually appears to project out, over, and in front of it, and has the effect of making everything seem to be crowing toward the surface" (Axton 1977: 304). In some ways, then, despite Millais's representation of Ophelia as frozen within a single moment of sequential flux, this 'projection' of her surroundings becomes as important to her narrational depiction as the clambering ivies and thorns are to Sleeping Beauty's eternal stillness: the content (Ophelia) is engulfed and controlled by the forms that surround her (natural specimens). Fairnington's foregrounding of such forms therefore represents a more literal version of Pre-Raphaelite particularity, rather than being contradictory to those painters' use of mythological, biblical and literary narrative to establish something of a creative alibi.⁹ Indeed, as Merrill suggests in her discussion of *Ophelia*, rather than functioning as the subject matter of the work, Ophelia's "whole story and Shakespeare's play hover as narrative context behind her" (Merrill 1989: 173). Through this obsessive regard for particularly the importance of narrative is thus made equivalent to the forms through which it is presented. In the case of Fairnington's *Mantidae* paintings, this weighting shifts further still: the composition (form) is pushed forward to become the primary subject matter (content) of each canvas.

Such a forceful display of formal composition is also key to the operation of literary metafiction. By inserting the factual or verifiable to

bolster and spotlight the fictional, the author deliberately draws attention to their act of creative representation. As Heidi Hansson explains, “a leading function of information [in metafiction] is that it lends verisimilitude” (Hansson 1998: 116). Thus, via the inclusion of “incidents or objects, verifiable and consequently true”, metafiction’s audience “readily also accept those ‘facts’ created by the author as true” (Hansson 1998: 116). Fairington’s painterly amalgamations of closely-observed visual information with subjective choices of depiction also deliberately – and knowingly – signal this ambition. But crucially, because metafiction involves authorial self-signalling, its “lowest common denominator [...] is simultaneously to create a fiction and to make a statement about the creation of that fiction” (Waugh 1984: 6). The author of metafiction thus “*displays and rejoices in the impossibility*” of equal status amongst all types of discourse “and thus clearly reveals the basic identity of the novel as genre” (Waugh 1984: 6, original emphasis). If we apply this approach to the creation of visual rather than literary arts, we find, in Fairington’s generous brush strokes, painterly canvases, and assertively subjective choices, an equivalent authorial desire to undermine the apparent realism of representation. But importantly, this desire is doubly problematised by the artist through closely-observed anatomical detail, light, and shade, which function to perform the task of “lend[ing] verisimilitude” (in Hansson’s just cited terms) to our reading of the works.

4. Microscopy and Magnification

In order to garner greater visual information from his specimens than the naked eye would permit, Fairington began to use microscopes: “I began to photograph specimens [...] under a microscope, as source images for the paintings – this generated the amount of surface detail that enabled me to greatly increase the size of the paintings” (Fairington qtd. in Brodie 2004). This increase in scale of nature’s minutiae creates monumental portraits of creatures that would normally receive little attention from the public in a museum setting. Each canvas measures close to the size of viewers (*Specimen (4)* from 2000, for example, measuring 215 x 183 cm, see **Fig. 3** below), which bestows their broken and discoloured bodies with an importance normally reserved for ‘charismatic’ mammals, such as horses, elephants, and lions.

But Fairnington's adoption of the microscope does something else too: it reveals the specimens' most intricate physical details. For Fairnington, the magnification of the insects was a revelation and allowed him to explore his interest "in the sense of wonder that originally stimulated people to ever look at things and start painting them" (Fairnington qtd. in Milliard 2010). For the Victorians, microscopy appeared to allow an invisible world to at last be seen and visualised. In the popular 1860 publication *Evenings at the Microscope or, Researches Among the Minuter Organs and Forms of Animal Life* by the renowned naturalist Philip Henry Gosse, for example, this new optical instrument was described as "the key that unlocks a world of wonder and beauty before invisible" (Gosse 1860: 5), which was able to open a "myriad [of] wonders of creation" for the first time (Gosse 1860: 3).



Figure 3. Mark Fairnington, *Specimen (4)*, 2000.
Oil on canvas, 215 x 183 cm, from the *Mantidae* series.
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As Michael Bartram observes, “[m]icroscopes stimulated the imagination of the 1850s to journey through uncharted territory” (Bartram 1985: 15), and this “unchartered territory” was explored by several fiction writers of the period. In 1858, for example, science-fiction writer Fitz-James O’Brien published a short story titled ‘The Diamond Lens’ in which the protagonist becomes entranced by the new worlds revealed to him through the microscope. In them, tiny mildew become

enchanted gardens, filled with dells and avenues of the densest foliage and most astonishing verdure, while from the fantastic boughs of these microscopic forests hung strange fruits glittering with green, silver, and gold. (O’Brien 1933: 601)

And indeed, as O’Brien’s obsessive microscopist asserts, “it was no scientific thirst that at this time filled my mind. It was the pure enjoyment of a poet to whom a world of wonders has been disclosed” (O’Brien 1933: 601).

Microscopy’s potential for discovery thus infiltrated Victorian culture well beyond the scientific realm. As Carol T. Christ argues it was the proliferation of microscopes (alongside growing understandings of atomism) in the mid-nineteenth century that distinguishes many of the period’s poems from its Romantic predecessors. In her discussion of Victorian poetry Christ argues that “in much Victorian poetry and painting, detail becomes scientifically precise and minute, conspicuously particular” which metaphysically results in “particulars [that] are not representative of a moment of imaginative experience that becomes in some way universal”, but are “merely descriptive of a single moment of consciousness” (Christ 1979: 14). The resultant optical and psychical solipsism that we encounter in the poems of Hopkins, Browning and Tennyson in particular also become important subjects of exploration for neo-Victorian authors like Byatt, who replicate and respond to these concerns via poetical pastiche.¹⁰ In *Possession* (1990), for example, the Victorian protagonist ventriloquises poetry through the ‘voice’ of Jan Swammerdam (a significant seventeenth-century biologist credited with inventing the microscope), glorifying the minutiae revealed through microscopy. But, importantly, as John Glendening highlights, the poem’s author

recognizes that a consequence of scientific investigation has been – in his poem because of early astronomy and microbiology but also, in his own century, because of geology and evolutionary science – to decenter humanity along with biblical evidence of its preeminence in God’s plan. (Glendening 2013: 153)

In some ways Fairnington’s use of the microscope also decenter[s] humanity” as the preeminent species “in God’s plan”. Whilst the myopic vision microscopy allows Fairnington to include unexpected levels of detail and data, it also enables him to dramatically increase the size of the insects that he depicts. It is interesting to note that when Fairnington’s specimen paintings – including both the *Mantidae* and *Membracidae* series (2000-2010) – were displayed in the Natural History Museum in London in the 2004 exhibition *Fabulous Beasts* the press release might easily have lifted its prose from a nineteenth-century microscopy text: “*Fabulous Beasts* reveals a world where the ordinary becomes extraordinary, the microscopic becomes gigantic and the mundane becomes amazing” (Natural History Museum, London: 2004). But this attitude also closely reflects the artist’s intention that these paintings should and do return us to the sense of wonder at discovery found in the nineteenth century and beyond.

The ‘diamond lens’ further provided Fairnington with raw visual footage for composing paintings that use “the syntax of the fantasist” (O’Reilly 2005). This “fantasist” element is most significantly achieved by a scale that converts the minute into the monstrous. But fantasy and the imagination are also key to the mediations installed between what the artist sees beneath the microscope and what the viewer sees on the final canvas. Whilst Victorian texts such as Reverend J.G. Wood’s *Common Objects of the Microscope* revel in an unselfconscious joy of learning – “a preparation properly made will last for many years, and will amply repay all the pains that have been taken in its production by the pleasure that it will give” (Wood 1938: 182) – Fairnington’s canvases knowingly interrogate the instrument’s ability to relay knowledge over information. For Fairnington “the painting is the research” (Fairnington qtd. in Elstob 2012); and it is a form of research that he describes as distinctly unknowing: “I only really understand what the process of making a painting has done once the finished thing is in front of me; it’s not something that I know before I start

making it” (Fairnington qtd. in Leader 2012: 32). This statement asserts a subjective character to his working process that is not immediately apparent when “the finished thing is in front of” the viewer. This subjectivity and lack of epistemological pretence is important, however, as it suggests that what we are seeing in these works is a representation of the artist’s perception of the insect specimen rather than its painted facsimile.

In this way the microscope does not hold the status of ‘truth-maker’ in Fairnington’s working process, but rather one of creative lens. The paintings that are produced exploit the microscope’s ability to magnify the specimen in order to increase their scale and introduce visual touchstones of the ‘real’. Whilst this visual testimony appears to claim veracity, the artist’s use and style of painting undermines this claim. This conflict between presentation and process is triply problematised by the intermediate stage in the Fairnington’s working method, which involves the photographing, fragmenting, and rebuilding of each magnified subject before it makes its way to the canvas in paint.

5. Photography and Fragmentation

To create each insect painting Fairnington takes photographs of each specimen several times at various angles and magnifications, and under different concentrations of light. From this collection of images Fairnington subsequently constructs a whole-specimen, image as seen in the photographic montage for *Specimen 5* (2000) (see **Fig. 4 and Fig. 5** below). This element of his process has been widely discussed by critics in their studies of Fairnington’s work. O’Reilly describes how he “takes numerous photographs of his subject – sometimes hundreds” (O’Reilly 2005), and Sîan Ede provides the following description of the process:

Fairnington took many photographs of [the] pinned specimens and [...] built up the paintings by conflating the photographic images, accommodating their difference – the subtle shifts of perspective, the magnification or the light reflection in each component – to merge the various parts into a coherent whole. (Ede 2008: 168)

But, like microscopy, the role of photography is subsidiary to the act of painting for Fairnington: “To me”, the artist explains, “it’s very much like a

field trip, where you go, gather what you can, and with the fragments that you've got, you put together the most believable image [possible]" (Fairnington qtd. in Elstob 2012). This attitude towards the 'gathered fragment' strongly echoes the approach of Victorian field naturalists who collected specimens and subsequently constructed a generalised understanding – or 'picture' – of the natural world. But rather than capturing nature through the net and transposing it through the vial, Fairnington preserves it through the camera lens and transports it via the photograph and into his studio. And it is in the space of the studio that the artist ultimately gathers together his material 'evidence' in order to build a picture of the nature that he has viewed *in situ* (in this case, the site of the museum).



Figure 4. Mark Fairnington, photo-montage for *Specimen (5)*, 2000.

© Mark Fairnington; reproduced with kind permission of the artist.

Photography in the Victorian period, too, offered a novel way to "collect directly from nature" (Armstrong 1998: 32). And despite the fact that producing photographs in the nineteenth century was far more labour

(and time) intensive than it is today, its ability to mechanically produce an image of ‘the real’ meant that it was accorded the status of material fragment throughout the period. As Jennifer Tucker argues this meant that for collectors, the ‘real’ and the photograph were in some ways seen as possessing equivalent value, and “[n]aturalist photographers [...] enlarged their photographic collections much as they accumulated their treasures of botanical specimens” (Tucker 2005: 27). Fairnington also accumulates photographs as specimens in their right, and then combines them to create an ultimate visualisation of the insect body:

I photograph [...] individual specimens under a microscope at different degrees of magnification. Each insect [is] moved around under the microscope and with each new photograph the point of focus shift[s]. These differences become an integral part of the painted images. (Fairnington qtd. in Stein 2007: 61)

This collection of “differences” can be perceived in the photomontage produced for *Specimen 5* (see **Fig. 4** above): the mantid’s parts are disjointed individually through the reflection of light, the cast of shadows upon them, and the angles at which they were photographed, creating a kaleidoscopic image of shifting views rather than a flawless jigsaw. The tail-ends of the wings, for example, contain a heavy, black discolouration on the viewer’s left-hand side, whereas on the opposite side, the wing surface is illuminated with light, exposing it as almost translucent. This effect is created within the photomontage through the disparate overlapping of several separate photographs, whereas in the final painting such discrepancies of unity are, quite literally, painted over.

In the photographic stage of Fairnington’s practice, then, we can see three distinct but related processes being demonstrated. Firstly, the fragmentation and distortion of the image of the object (the insect) through its multiplication of parts in photographs; secondly, the re-formation of those parts through montage; and finally, the synthesising of the montage through paint – a process that results in an entirely distinct version of both source object and source image(s). This latter process furthermore signifies two important ideas: the artist’s selection and re-presentation of certain examples of information or ‘data’ in order to bolster the persuasiveness of

his paintings on the one hand, and the final representations' pictographic distance from their subject matter on the other. Ultimately, such a deliberated imposition of mediations between the subject and its depiction results in a mere vestige of the original insect specimen on the final canvas: now merely playing host to the painterly traces of a consciously abandoned 'real'.¹¹

6. Montage and Mediation

By the mid-nineteenth century, sight, perception and reality were perceived as heterogeneous rather than equivalent phenomena.¹² The wide research carried out into the optical sciences, the proliferation of microscopy, and the invention of photography combined with the Victorian passion for the material and the particular resulted in understandings of the nature of reality (and the reality of nature) becoming destabilised from around 1850 onwards. Realism became both a victim and a victor within a cultural context that suddenly found that "it is possible for the world to exist only as the materialization of our subjectivity" (Christ 1975: 25).

The "keen Victorian interest in the practice of mediation" (Levine 2000: 75) that resulted has also offered suggestive means by which to consider Fairington's contemporary paintings. The artist's active employment of methods and devices closely linked to the rupturing of reality's conceptualisation in the nineteenth century provides an important collection of parallels to his processes of mediation and representation. In this way Fairington's practice is heavily reliant upon pre-Modernist modes of representation: looking backwards rather than forwards (or sideways) in its chosen methodologies. As the artist himself has expressed, "my interest in Victorian and pre-Victorian representations of the natural world is specifically the way in which they fuse fact, fiction and fantasy" (Fairington qtd. in Brodie 2004). As we have seen, this fusion of "fact, fiction and fantasy" is precisely how Fairington's paintings operate: self-consciously exploiting the plausibility that is impressed through data and detail within factitious representations of reality. This playful yet interrogative approach to representation is also how many creative Victorian representations function: happily straddling the 'real' and the 'imaginary' in image- or text-based forms of storytelling.

An important example of this is found in the work of the Victorian artist-photographer Henry Peach Robinson (1830-1901) who found no

contradiction in artificially converging numerous photographs in order to create fictionalised narratives. As Margaret Harker highlights this composite methodology was directly influenced by the Pre-Raphaelite paintings that Robinson saw whilst making visits to the house of the sculptor Alexander Munro (1825-1871): “Robinson saw the relevance between the accurate and closely refined rendition of detail in [Pre-Raphaelite] paintings and the supposed realism of the scene transmitted to paper by light and the lens in a camera” (Harker 1989: 135). Robinson especially admired Millais’s *Ophelia* (1851-52), on display in the National Gallery. Seeking to produce a photography-based response to the painting, in 1861 Robinson created *The Lady of Shalott* (see <http://www.hrc.utexas.edu/press/releases/2001/nr091301robinson.html>) – a photomontage also depicting a scene from literary storytelling. In this way, Robinson’s composite methodology could be seen to operate as a photographic adaptation of Pre-Raphaelite approaches: skilfully installing and blending verifiable aspects of the natural world within an imagined and self-referential tableau. Established within the visual arts of the mid-nineteenth century, then, the particularity of the natural world was being assimilated with(in) fictional or imagined depictions in both photography and paint. Although Robinson was criticised by his contemporaries for developing a “scissors and paste” technique (Smith 2008: 93), he was aware of photography’s status as a record of material rather than perceptual reality:

[Robinson] maintained that all his composite photographs were real in content, although idealized in form, as photography inevitably records real objects which exist in time and space. It does not record, in the conventional sense, pictures which exist only in the mind. (Harker 1989: 137)

This statement returns us to the peculiar nature of Victorian attitudes towards the ‘real’ (peculiar in the fact that they appear, superficially, to be contradictory), and the relevance of them to understanding Fairington’s own, neo-Victorian, re-presentations of reality. The very Victorian concern with mediating both perceptual and actual reality ripples across Fairington’s insect portraits because the process that lies behind their creation deploys a series of lenses upon and beyond the material specimens. Rather than fulfilling the role of precisely painted facsimiles, these works

thus assertively draw our attention to their representational status as exemplars of the ways in which natural objects are seen, recorded and depicted both ‘then and now’.

7. A Collection of Views

In both a literal and figurative sense Fairnington’s *Mantidae* paintings function as collections; literal because they are a painted conflation of a collection of photographic fragments; and figurative because each painting is the result of multiple mediations of the specimen into a representation of it. The concept of the collection is defined in two ways by poet and scholar Susan Stewart useful to our understanding of this element of Fairnington’s *Mantidae* paintings:

First, the metonymic displacement of part for whole, item for context; and second, the invention of a classification scheme which will define space and time in such a way that the world is accounted for by the elements of the collection. (Stewart 1984: 162)

In Fairnington’s process, the photograph’s status as a collectible object in its own right achieves the “metonymic displacement of part for whole, item for context” that results in both a physical and a conceptual distancing between the subject and its photographic reproduction. This distancing is subsequently exaggerated by the final paintings’ dependency on simulated ‘wholes’ for their subject matter. And it is Fairnington’s use of the photomontage technique to create these ‘wholes’ that is perhaps the most revealing layer of his process, because it produces “a classification scheme which [...] define[s] space and time” through multiple images that possess their own gradients and variants of light, angle, scale, and so forth – forcefully, and falsely, unified.

This creative integration of divergent sources is also crucial to the construction of metafiction. As Christian Gutleben observes, neo-Victorian novels “mix all the previous aesthetic traditions” together in the creation of “an aesthetic of maximum plurality, exploiting, combining and revising all the aesthetic, generic or modal practices of the past” (Gutleben 2001: 221). As visual forms of metafictional representation Fairnington’s *Mantidae* paintings exploit a similarly assimilative methodology: blending together

distinct forms of mediation via “an aesthetic of maximum plurality”. Whilst all art – whether text- or image-based – performs the amalgamation of representational traditions, Gutleben highlights that metafiction distinguishes itself by coercing the reader (or viewer) into witnessing a systematic regurgitation of all representational forms. Thus,

the different metaphors and notions usually associated with contemporary [arts], the palimpsest, ventriloquy [*sic*], stratification, intertextuality, polyphony, the mosaic, the potpourri, the kaleidoscope, and of course pastiche (not in the sense of a style but of a compilation of motifs), are brought together in the concept of syncretism. (Gutleben 2001: 221)

Gutleben’s figurative use of “polyphony”, “mosaic”, “potpourri” and “kaleidoscope” in this passage closely reflects Fairington’s process of collecting photographic fragments of the ‘real’, laying these images upon and beside and amongst each other and then ‘painting over the cracks’ in the final representations. This representational gamesmanship appropriates, applies, and repositions reality via its various forms of visual mediation, which are converted from methods of seeing into a collection of historically-situated referents of how we see.

8. Re-Presenting Representation

Fairington’s large-scale oil paintings of insect bodies are the amalgamated result(s) of a collection of mediations. By considering these acts in correspondence with their Victorian counterparts, the works are found to perform a conceptual rather than representational function in which their surface subject matter – Mantidae insects – becomes almost incidental to the process that lies behind their depiction: it is that process rather than its results that Fairington’s canvases re-present. In this way, his paintings operate in an equivalent fashion to Byatt’s textual creations. As Schor writes: “Byatt invents a contemporary version of realism that can reanimate the complicated literary genres of the past” (Schor 2000: 237); a claim that strongly recalls Fairington’s assertion that his paintings are “a reflection on realism, rather than being realist” (Fairington qtd. in Elstob 2012). By collecting, regurgitating, and reanimating historically-located forms of seeing and capturing reality the *Mantidae* paintings might be seen as visual

heirs to literary re(-)presentations that seek to invoke the historical past by gathering, invoking, and redeploying its textual forms.

The concept of invocation is important to these ideas, because it describes the nuanced effects and results of replicating the familiar through a number of calculated mediations. Indeed, the mode of the ‘medium’ is less important in these circumstances than its ability to communicate – or invoke – the past. In literature, for example, “the novel (*Angels and Insects*) is not only a ghost story but a catalog organizing the material and immaterial world. It is a ‘literary’ device for giving forms form” (Schor 2000: 237). The most significant method of invocation in the visual arts is through the appropriation of existing images, materials and/or forms and, alongside parody and pastiche, is broadly considered by art historians to characterise the authorial voice of postmodernism.¹³ This fact surely collapses the perceived distance between literary and visual arts; for, what devices summarise postmodern works of fiction more than parody, pastiche and appropriation (the latter more commonly discussed as intertextuality in literary studies)?

In his examination of postmodern art and appropriation Jan Verwoert concludes that

appropriation [...] is about performing the unresolved by staging objects, images or allegories that invoke the ghosts of unclosed histories in a way that allows them to appear as ghosts and reveal the nature of the ambiguous present. (Verwoert 2007: 7)

Such a description pushes open the door between neo-Victorian literature and visual arts further still as both seek to reanimate “the ghosts of unclosed histories” via those histories’ forms. And whilst material forms of the past (insect bodies) are being appropriated by Fairington in order to produce the *Mantidae* paintings, what is more significant is how the artist adopts and adapts mediatory forms in his working process. It is, then the act of representation rather than the reality that it attempts to capture that ultimately forms the subject matter for Fairington’s strange and beautiful paintings of forgotten insect specimens.

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Notes

1. As a movement, Photorealism began in the late 1960s in both New York and California. Subject matters vary but Photorealist works are identified by their incredibly life-like renderings of reality that have been copied directly from photographs.
2. All of the Mantidae that Fairington paints were sourced from the collections of the Oxford University Museum of Natural History. Many of the insects had been collected several decades previously, making their survival in the specimen drawers symbolic of the natural history activities of the time that the Museum was originally founded (1855).
3. Proposed by E.O. Wilson in his 1984 book *Biophilia*, the biophilia hypothesis suggests that there is an inherent feeling of connection between humans and other living organisms. Biophilia has also been argued to explain the cultural tendency to surround ourselves with nature's forms (both their real and their represented forms). In 'Jellyfish on the Ceiling and Deer in the Den: The Biology of Interior Decoration', Maura C. Flannery argues that our biophilic collective need to be close to nature manifests in the form of decor, pictures and objects inspired by organic forms (Flannery 2005: 239-244).
4. Of course the famous call for 'truth-to-nature' in art was made by art critic (and some time artist) John Ruskin, the Pre-Raphaelites' most ardent early supporter. Although this particular phrase is found in his 1849 publication *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, it was his five-volume work *Modern Painters* (1843-60) that is often credited with forging Pre-Raphaelite attitudes towards representation.
5. This is an allusion to the well-known story of Millais's model Elizabeth (Lizzie) Siddal spending so much time in a cold bathtub when posing for *Ophelia* (after the warming candles had gone out without the artist's notice) that she caught a severe cold. Her father even sued the painter for the sum of £50 for her pains (which Millais settled).
6. This alludes to William Holman Hunt's two years spent in the 'Holy Land' (Egypt) in 1854 where he sourced the background for his painting *The Scapegoat* (1854-55) and model sketches for works like *The Abundance of Egypt* (1857).

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7. The scene depicted is from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Act IV, Scene vii, in which Ophelia, driven out of her mind when her father is murdered by her lover Hamlet, drowns herself in a stream.
 8. Hemstedt's simile is especially fitting when we consider that the diorama as a mode of display had only been invented in 1821, thirty years preceding Millais's painting of Ophelia, by the theatrical illusionist L.J.M. Daguerre and his co-worker Charles-Marie Bouton.
 9. This is not, of course, a denial of these painters' interest in their subject matter, such as Hunt's deep devotion to God, or Millais's fascination with literary narrative. But rather an important, and much-made observation of these painters' dedication to setting over subject matter.
 10. In 'The Conjugal Angel' in *Angels and Insects* (1992), for example, Byatt responds to Tennyson's *In Memoriam* (1850) via a pastiche that is perhaps as celebratory as it is critical (see Louisa Hadley 2010: 145-147)
 11. Theory surrounding the idea of the 'trace' has been widely employed by scholars in art history and visual culture. For example the work of Paul Ricoeur on the 'traces' of history and the 'memory image' are commonly invoked by theorists within the field. We also find important work on the 'trace' in literary studies, including Rosario Arias Doblaz's current project on the 'Trace in Contemporary Literature' funded by the Ministerio de Ciencia e Innovación (see <http://www.thetraceinliterature.com/project/activities>).
 12. For an insightful discussion of this issue see, for instance, Caroline Levine's 'Visual Labor: Ruskin's Radical Realism' (2000); George Levine's *Dying to Know: Scientific Epistemology and Narrative in Victorian England* (2010); and Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison's *Objectivity* (2007).
 13. This is a necessarily generalised statement, but one that is worth making here. The significant point is that from the late 1960s onwards we find the appropriation, parodying or pastiching of existing texts, images or objects the most common approaches in practices that we nominate as 'postmodern' in the visual arts. Although I am aware of the problematic significations of this term, it is important to highlight the clear parallels between 'postmodern' tendencies in the visual and the literary arts if we are to draw out commonalities of a neo-Victorian nature.

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