

# TOUCH

A Conversation between Dan Howard-Birt, Catalina Maria Ungureanu, Anna Calleja and Elizabeth Langley.

*Devised and edited By Nina Royle*

*Designed by Anna Calleja*

Dan Howard-Birt

Touch in relation to painting is a complex subject. There is touch as transmission, as reach; touch as two entities meeting in a physical, material way and touch as two entities meeting in a spiritual way. In the last couple of months, the subject has taken on new meanings, problems, poignancies. Let's think about complex touches as we think about the show that you've just created on the Painters Network South West [PNSW] Instagram account. What are your feelings towards this page / feed? Is it a useful resource for you?



Anna Calleja

PNSW is a really good bridge between artists in Cornwall and elsewhere. The account regularly hosts 'takeovers', so it introduces artists you might not normally engage with. It also allows artists to show you something more personal about the way they work – their studios for example or things that interest them. Especially as a student in Falmouth (particularly if you don't drive) you can feel quite cut off, so it's a good way to connect with painters and what painting is and can be. In relation to the theme of touch, it allows for a closeness – for work to be accessed from afar.



Dan Howard-Birt

Do Instagram channels like PNSW enable you to develop a different way of engaging with painting? How does this engagement compare to visiting a physical gallery?



Elizabeth Langley



It changes hierarchies implicit in looking at paintings and so new vulnerabilities emerge. Rather than a viewer travelling a physical distance to a gallery space, they might look at your paintings from their own home. Your work is entering someone else's personal space. The viewer is also given a lot of power – they can easily scroll through a feed, click like or not like... make a comment. In a virtual space people can perhaps vocalise their feelings more openly or say things they wouldn't normally say face to face.

Anna Calleja

Another difference is that you – the artist – are the curator of your gallery space and you can affect this via hashtags, who you follow and the algorithms you create. Related to your question, something else I find interesting is how certain paintings seem to become trendy or more visible because of Instagram's structure. So, flatter paintings with brighter colours work better on the format, and I'm sure this is having an influence on how paintings are being made.



Dan Howard-Birt



Do Instagram's mechanisms and systems frighten you? Does Instagram fill you with a sense of possibility?

Anna Calleja

I come from Malta and my art education was fairly conventional. I then moved to Falmouth, a small town by the sea. So, the exposure via something like Instagram and its more global reach opens possibilities.



Elizabeth Langley



The platform can empower self-initiated projects that don't need the validation of a gallery space and it allows movements like Black Lives Matter to gain momentum for positive change.

Dan Howard-Birt

Yes, this is certainly true. Instagram is not a neutral space though. We're speaking about the bastard child of Facebook, of Mark Zuckerberg.



Catalina Maria Ungureanu

Yes, Instagram can limit artworks. I've noticed censorship on it. For some reason I can't link my website to my Instagram feed because it apparently 'violates regulations' or is offensive... something like that. This is frightening because censorship has a direct effect not only on what is being shown, but also on what is being made.



Elizabeth Langley

It can also have a big effect on mental health. Instagram is often the first thing I check in the morning. The number of likes or lack of likes you get for a post can be demoralising. It also encourages constant comparisons with others.



Dan Howard-Birt

I'm intrigued by the realisation that all of these 'effects' come down to the touch of a finger on a screen, which is the same digit that holds the paintbrush. We're in a moment of endless, slippery, disembodied data flows but it all still comes down to this somehow primal, embodied activity.



Catalina Maria Ungureanu

There is a great power in the 'digital touch.' In one click you affirm or validate something that potentially could be online forever. It's funny – you wouldn't affirm an artwork in a gallery by touching it in this way. On Instagram you end up with a quantifiable record of everyone that has 'touched' your work.



Dan Howard-Birt

We have talked about touch in relation to the screen but what about in relation to your physical work? Elizabeth, you paint images onto objects and create installations into which painted images are embedded. This kind of juxtaposition relies heavily on your ability to be present in a space moving elements around. What is your process?



Elizabeth Langley

It begins with the surface and finding an object that stirs a feeling which in-turn conjures an image. The object and image need each other to evolve. I've been painting on small cubes (playing blocks) that allow for interaction and a multiplicity in how they might be placed in space. The physical act of playing with these, and how that process opens-up a range of relationships between the painted image and the object, is one of the things that most fascinates me.





Dan Howard-Birt

So, does your work lose or change its meaning when flattened into a photograph?

Elizabeth Langley



Yes, the objects can't communicate in the way they are intended to. It alters the emphasis. The imagery takes centre stage rather than there being an equality between the object and image, set into physical space.

*Don't step on the cracks, oil on wood block, 2020*



Dan Howard-Birt



Catalina – I'm conscious in your paintings that there is often a small action taking place or about to take place: One figure lights another's cigarette, or a glass of wine gets spilt. You frame these actions within a meeting of different painting languages that refer to print, the cartoon or a social-realist style of painting. What is the relationship between the narratives in your work, the styles and the material?

Catalina Maria Ungureanu

I want the compositions to create questions rather than answers, to create rifts, or inconsistencies. It's important for me to be able to move between different processes – collage, printmaking and painting. I'd say there is a desire for the disruptive and the unpredictable in my work; a rejection perhaps of systematisation and the digitally uniform.



Dan Howard-Birt



In this play between languages and methodologies, in a personal sense – do they feel different to make?

Catalina Maria Ungureanu



Moments of frustration lead to a switch of language in my work. The cartoonish ones are perhaps more fun or loose and experimental to make. In a literal sense they're painted using acrylic, which is an easier material to use. For the grander, realist style, I use oil paint.

*Self portrait with painting, oil on board, 2020*





Dan Howard-Birt

I wanted to ask you about religion, ritual and the spirituality of touch in your work.

Catalina Maria Ungureanu



I come from an Orthodox rather than Catholic background. The presence this religion played in my life felt both intimate and invasive. In Catholicism, during confession you kneel down and confess, but you are separated from the priest. In the Orthodox tradition you kneel down in front of the priest. You are much closer. The priest bends over you and whispers intimately to you. It all revolves around the spiritual and metaphysical possibilities of touch.

Anna Calleja

Yes, the Orthodox Church is highly sensual, you kiss the relics and the cross, which is different to Catholicism where sensual touch is denounced.



Dan Howard-Birt

Anna, we've talked with the others about their approaches to painting. To close, let's talk about your painting of a knitted jumper and its appeal to a haptic sensibility while the painting's relationship with the photograph also suggests the inability to touch.



Anna Calleja



The painting came about because of the question, what does it mean to have something so haptic made into paint - to manipulate another material so that it depicts the texture of knitting.

*Sophie, oil on panel, 2020*

The jumper belongs to my friend Sophie, (hence the title) so it is a portrait of her. It conveys an absence, with the item of clothing acting as a relic for a person. The painted jumper is decorated with stylised figures holding hands. I thought this detail heightened a sense of loneliness. I love narratives in painting; subtle clues that aid the reading of a work. Since lockdown, the experience of socialising online has emphasised this binary for me: being connected to others but being alone. With closeness and distance both brought via the same screen, as well as the sense that 'to touch' is increasingly problematic – an act of transgression – this painting has taken on a new layer of meaning.





Anna Calleja  
[@annacallejapaints](https://www.instagram.com/annacallejapaints)  
[annacalleja.co.uk](http://annacalleja.co.uk)



Catalina Maria Ungureanu  
[@catalinaa\\_u](https://www.instagram.com/catalinaa_u)  
[catalinaungureanu.com](http://catalinaungureanu.com)



Dan Howard-Birt  
[@danhowardbirt](https://www.instagram.com/danhowardbirt)  
[idoprojects.com/dan](http://idoprojects.com/dan)



Elizabeth Langley  
[@elizabethsaskialangley](https://www.instagram.com/elizabethsaskialangley)  
[elizabethsaskialangley.com](http://elizabethsaskialangley.com)



Nina royle  
[@nina.royle](https://www.instagram.com/nina.royle)  
[ninaroyle.co.uk](http://ninaroyle.co.uk)



Painters Network SW  
[@paintersnetwork\\_sw](https://www.instagram.com/paintersnetwork_sw)