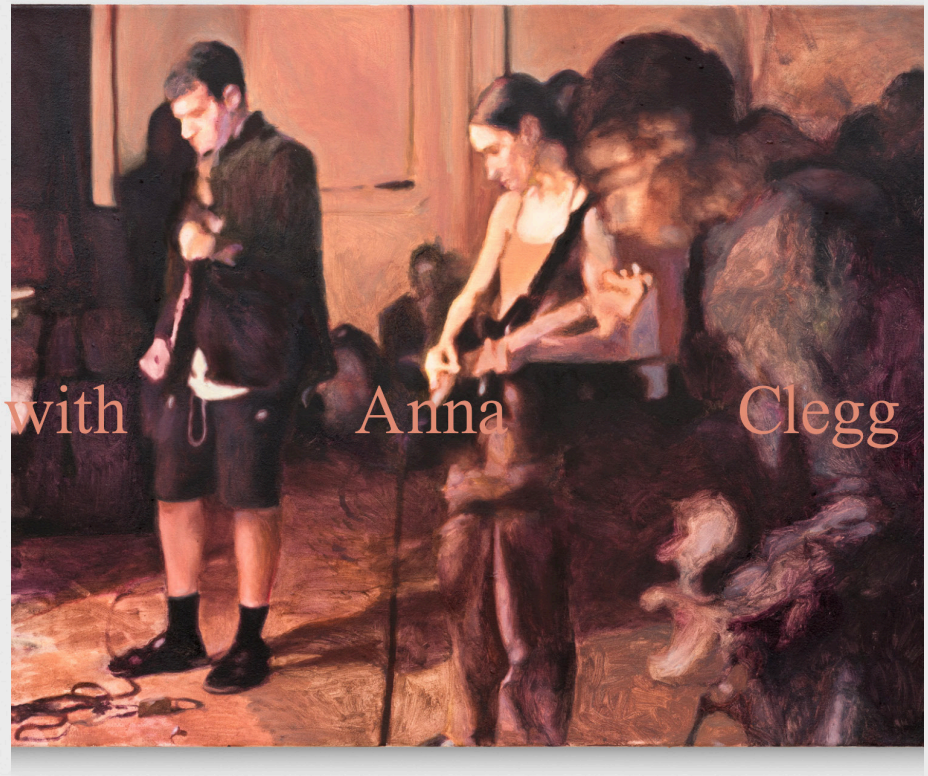
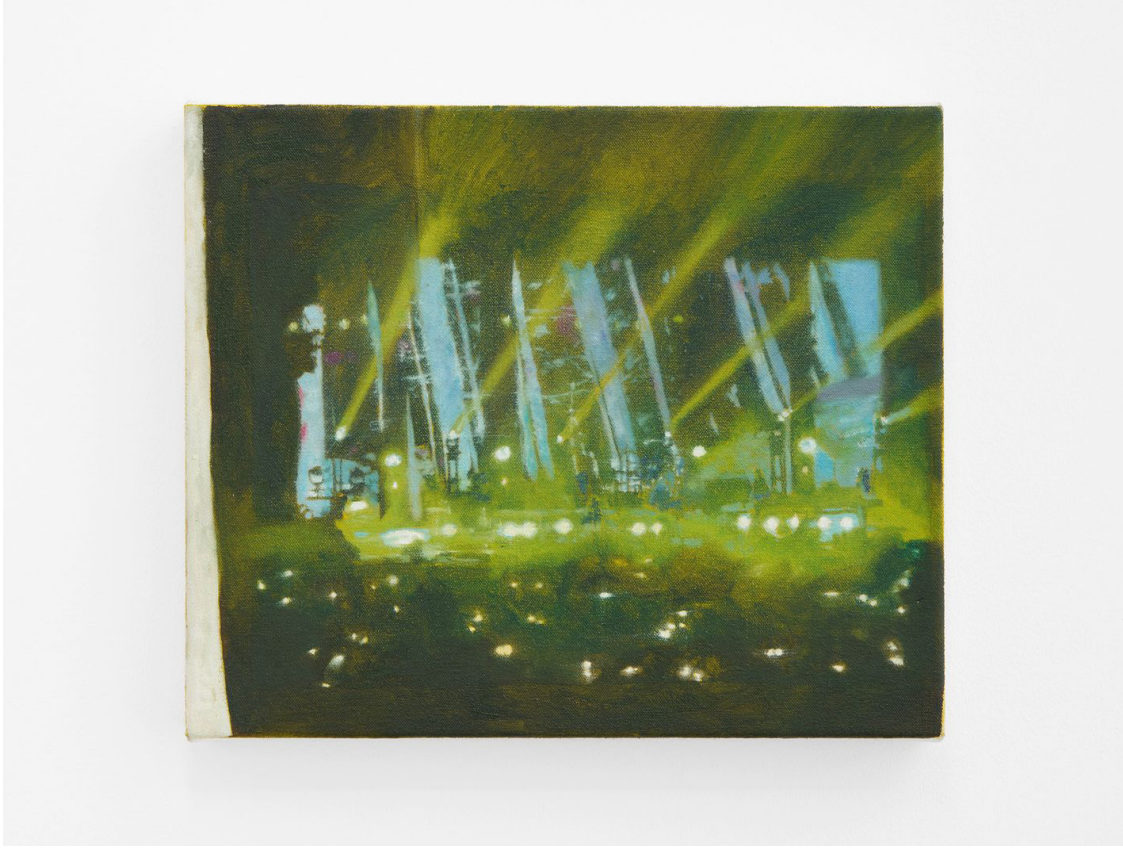
émergent magazine

In Conversation with Anna Clegg



Words by Reece Cox



Anna Clegg, ‘Exterior 2’, 2024. Oil on canvas, 30×25×4cm. Courtesy of the artist and Schiefe Zähne.

Anna, I remember chance meeting you years ago in London at an opening of Kristin Oppenheim’s at greengrassi. You were there with friends that made up a small scene of artists who all were dealing with music in one way or another. Is that scene still around?

Yeah, definitely, and I’ve only met more artists with an interest in this crossover since. There’s been a noticeable increase in the amount of shows about music or with some kind of musical sensibility. There are also a number of musicians in the city who approach music in a somewhat postmodern, almost sculptural artistic way like Klein and Lolina, and contemporary artists who make music as a distinct parallel practice: Georgie Nettell as great area, Josiane M. H. Pozi, Brad Kronz as UK Brad and in the band Stubborn, Jacques Rogers and Catherine Osterberg of Le Bourgeois as The Place, Coumba Samba and Getchen Lawrence as New York, Ewa Poniatowska in performance duo Rat Section, Obie Parry Laidler and James Sibley in band Bad Sip, Ben R Wallers as The Rebel – that’s by no means an exhaustive list.

It’s not a new thing, obviously. Throbbing Gristle were playing shows at the ICA in the mid 70s, Keith Farquhar had The Male Nurse with fellow artists Alastair MacKinven, Andrew Hobson and Wallers in the 90s. However, there does seem to be a particular vitality in the space between the two right now.

There are loads of artists who were in bands before their art careers took over so it’s an interesting question for you and the London scene now, do you worry that one will eventually overshadow the other?

It’s possible that the balance might shift towards one or the other, though that’s not something I worry about. These things are always so in flux there are constant, almost microbial developments that occur out of the proximity between different groups and individuals, and that’s one of the most exciting parts of it to me.

Which came first for you, making art or music?

As a young teenager, I came to art and music from opposite directions; a keen interest in consuming music and an

equally keen enjoyment in making art. I think it's common for kids, as music is more accessible, more emotionally immediate than the coded, cerebral logics of contemporary art or historical painting, both of which I had a very rudimentary knowledge of anyway. I loved drawing, particularly copying existing images. I could play musical instruments to a basic degree but similarly could only cover existing music. I couldn't comprehend the possibility of creating new material from nothing and over complicated the idea in my head as something almost nuclear. I was more comfortable with picking apart and retracing existing material, and I think this psychological predisposition remains a subject of critique in my practice now.

But with music, I was totally obsessed and really into it as a lifestyle thing. When I was 12 my dad brought me to see The Kills and they instantly became my first favourite band. I was immediately, vampirically obsessed. The CD of their second album No Wow came with a tour documentary DVD in the back of the CD case and I would watch it over and over again. It physically terrified me, I would shake watching it. They filmed themselves constantly, getting in trouble with the cops, pressing little pills into each other's hands in gas stations, waking up and scrambling for a cigarette in hotel beds. It's laughable really, living such an unashamed pastiche of a 70's rock and roll lifestyle in the early 2000s, but I had never seen anyone living a life where they're just making all the time and being on the road and having a totally self-directed life. I got completely obsessed and became kind of detached from my embodied reality as a school kid, scheming ways to meet them and writing them letters all the time.

Good Lord, so you were really a superfan.

Yeah, it was a bit intense, and most likely verging on parasocial, but I think it was the tail end of a childhood imagination. I think I held onto it a little longer than my peers at school who I noticed grew into more immediate interests as we grew older. I grew up in a rural area with a lot of farmers for classmates who had a very pragmatic attitude. It didn't make much sense to me. I wasn't a loner but I was quite shy and felt most comfortable in the abstract realm of

(1) Anna Clegg, 'Bird That Doesn't Land (Calendar)', 2024. Digital 2-channel video, audio, 39 minutes 41 seconds. Courtesy of the artist and Triangolo. Photograph: Michaela Pedranti.
(2) Anna Clegg, 'Burning Spear', 2024. Oil on canvas, 60 × 45 × 4 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Schiefe Zähne

Anna Clegg, ‘Interior 15’, 2025. Oil on canvas, 75 x 60 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Schiefe Zähne. Photograph: Julian Blum

lessons themselves, and I spent a lot of time online, which was in its transition phase between earlier web-page/forum structures and the current, social media-oriented web 2.0. It was like a city I built for myself where there was none I could go to.

You’re speaking of your superfandom in past tense but I can see traces of it in the paintings you’re making now, they have a distinct longing about them. Looking at your work reads like a diary of your media consumption habits mixed in with scenes from your daily life, all treated with equal reverence where the fantasy has to coexist amongst an otherwise mundane reality.
For instance, I’m thinking about xterior 2 (2024), an oil painting of a brightly lit stage from the perspective of someone far out in the audience. Even if the stage looks like we’re right in the middle of a massive, bombastic concert, the painting itself feels sort of withdrawn or distant from the action, and it’s unclear if it reads more like a film still or live experience. It really speaks to the feeling of fandom, of being drawn to something but never being able to reach the center, eternally on the outside.

Yeah, exactly, that’s totally it. It’s often this feeling that I try to locate in images, illusion and disappointment. And you kind of busted me… I think I haven’t totally grown up.

It seems to be working for you, hopefully you don’t.

Yeah, maybe. Though there’s a particular shame in being the kind of person that gives everything to a material, something that’s at a distance from them not just through time but through form, and ultimately won’t give anything back apart from what it is in itself. It’s not like putting all your love into another person or something that at least in the beginning might reciprocate, even if they ultimately fail you.

And so the paintings come from a character, a fictional body manifested from this. But it’s not escapist, and I think there is a critique of this cowardly mode of living in there too. The found images of concerts, bands and celebrities are deliberately, awkwardly poster-like, and paired with paintings of run down hospital rooms and rented interiors. These images of the city’s insides go against a certain capitalist ideal of constant growth, whereas the images of musicians could be – and sometimes are, used as assets to capitalise on cultural growth.

It’s one thing to obsess over the peripheral material of who the artists are and what they might be. The other part of being a fan is obsessively consuming produced material, almost like a substance, abusing it, getting to another place mentally and emotionally and almost chemically. Again as a kid, you can get consumed by things so easily and scared by things that aren’t necessarily meant to be scary, just that you’ve never experienced them before.

I was recently talking to my bandmates (of Guillem G. Peeters’ project, Eterna) and trying to explain getting a song stuck in my head and it just making me feel physically

sick, like an infection. My friend said that sometimes when he hears music it solves something that he didn't know was missing in his life. But I think for me it can open up a void instead.

It sounds almost painful.

My friends told me I should see a doctor, but it's not so painful, I was being a little dramatic. As you say, there's this detachment or absence in all the work. It's all these photo-like paintings of interiors with no reason, no narrative pulling you through them. But then there's no narrative to life. It's just an episodic existence where things happen and then things don't happen in between. These in between images, they're the only ones that I can make.

So are the paintings creating a (non)narrative of a fictional character?

I suppose not a fiction, but coming from the existence of a particular personality, like a concentrated version of me, focusing only on one non existent day.

It sounds like you're not concerned with representing some kind of total truth or a complete story, like a character walking around with a camera that fires at random. That if there is a coherent reality between each image, the paintings obfuscate as much as they represent. There's always a sense they're telling a story but you seem not to care to thread the needle for us.

The lack is a really big part of it, I'm not trying to make a painting alternative to a narrative film and that's what I like so much about the exhibition format, the freedom from the temporal. Whether it's painting, drawing or text – I sometimes write little fictions to accompany image-based presentations – every facet of the work skirts around an unseen central pivot that's not accessible because it's not a tangible thing. It's more like some kind of feeling that everything bounces and refracts around. They all kind of fill in each other's gaps.

I also make music, and what's too direct for my visual practice, something that requires figures or dialogue, for example, is probably going into that instead. But music is so dramatic and it's over so quickly, it's difficult to fit the image of kitchen bins into it.

Anna Clegg, 'Interior 14', 2024. Oil on canvas, 30 x 40 x 3.5 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Soft Opening.
Photograph: Eva Herzog

And when dealing with the impulse to make something, is it clear when something needs to be expressed with music versus painting?

I don't know, I think they both stem from the same moments. It depends whether there's an image that attaches to that or whether it suits words better, that's it really. Both forms require their own technical alleyways to completion that

feel quite separate from the starting point, but there are similar interplays of genre, a grammar that is built within each. Sometimes it's nice to start from an image or phrase and then kind of take that away from the equation and try to express it in another format. Do you know the band HTRK?

Yeah.

I really like Jonnine Standish's writing style. She uses lyrics like an instrument, repeating phrases over and over again, but in a way that's slippery enough to avoid being contrived. It's like a diary never granted the release of being written, the beginning and end of a sentence. My friend and I were obsessing over one song called New Year's Day from their 2019 record Venus In Leo. It's got just the perfect lyrical moment towards the end where Standish is listing the colours of a sunset over and over again, "pink, orange, red, white, peach, pink…" And over it is a refrain about a really bodily manifestation of apprehension within a relationship – it's just perfect. That's kind of what I'm looking for in every image.

Painting and listening to music, or being a fan, all seem so tightly woven together and I'm wondering if there is a kind of extrasensory experience that links these things for you?

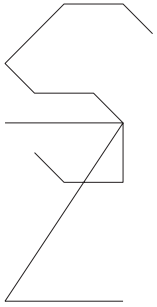
Yeah, there are certain images that have a resonant frequency or something, and that to me can sound like a sine frequency. Others can have melodies to them. And the light that's in them, or the composition, or something that is outside of what they depict is part of that melody. What is essential in an image of a mundane scene comes into question, and I think it is ultimately unsolvable, in the same way that finding the essential notes in a great piece of music is unsolvable and almost arbitrary as its their combination along with instrument, tone, tempo, listener's disposition that make it a successful moment.

Totally, it's something ineffable that confuses the senses in a way that's beyond seeing or hearing alone. For me, looking at and making artworks has always been an aural experience as much as a visual one. I always know something works when I can hear it, and oddly the most successful paintings often make the most subtle sounds, it's important that they're not too loud.
When I look at your work it's as if whatever you've represented in each painting is either attenuated or amplified in order to bring everything to an even volume. A quiet studio still life is handled with equal reverence as a painting of a cluttered hospital room and they meet around the same volume. The handling of each image has an equalizing effect.

Yeah, I think it is kind of a tonal thing. And I think the equalizer is this unseen presence that prevents the scene feeling complete in itself. There's always a Z axis to them, something behind or in front of the image that suggests a previous, first hand experience – which is not necessarily me as the artist. In that way, they're always muffled for me. And maybe there's a ringing in the ears that builds from there as opposed to approaching painting as a window into a scene that is complete in itself.

Like speaking to how it feels to be in a place, a nucleus of all these greater forces around you.

I think it's how it is just to live in a body.

—

Anna Clegg (b. 1998, London, UK) engages with the circulation and consumption of images mediated through lived experience and popular culture, and explores their role in the construction of memory and subjectivity. Her paintings combine photorealistic figuration, reminiscent of the ubiquitous aesthetics of smartphone photography, with painterly gestures, making them feel at once familiar yet uncannily distanced. Her subject matter spans mundane scenes and interiors to references from fine art and popular culture. The references she selects tend to inhabit a specific cultural niche—"alternative" yet canonical, recognizable enough to have attained commercial success. Hence, Clegg's work reflects an interest in cultural capital, where recognition and accessibility often outweigh ownership, offering a nuanced view of how culture is consumed and internalized in the digital age.