

# Caravan Paintings I Exploring a Metaphor



Mike Newton



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[mwnewton@hotmail.com](mailto:mwnewton@hotmail.com)

**MARK MAKING AND MELANCHOLIA IN PAINTING:  
A LANGUAGE FOR VISUAL REPRESENTATION OF THE MELANCHOLIC**

**MICHAEL WILLIAM NEWTON**

**PRACTICAL STUDY: CARAVAN PAINTINGS I**

**APPENDIX 2.2**

**to the thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the  
requirements of Bath Spa University  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

**School of Art and Design, Bath Spa University**

**September 2013**



## **Appendix 2.2**

### **PRACTICAL STUDY: CARAVAN PAINTINGS I**

## Caravan Paintings

### A2.2.1 Introduction - Use of Metaphors

After the 1980s critical discourse seemed to restrict the notion of content in painting to being self-referential. As an undergraduate I was continually asked the question “Why paint, why not just take photographs?” I had no ready answer at the time other than that I found painting more ‘satisfactory’ as an artistic response. Embarking on this research project has prompted me to pose the question again albeit in a different way; as a painter, how can I weave the visible marks and my intentions together to create paintings that probe the problem of meaning? For as Mark Taylor observes ‘If a painting is nothing more than a flat surface, meaning collapses in the tautology of self-referential objects; on the other hand if the materiality of the work vanishes into concept, paintings as such cannot be meaningful’. The way I have always tried to do this was through the use of metaphors, and the practical side of this project is primarily a search to find the language to support these representations or surrogates for my feelings.

The dictionary defines metaphor as a figure of speech in which a term is transferred from the object which it normally designates to an object it may designate only by implicit comparison or analogy. “Metaphor” derives from the Greek *metaphreien*, which means to transfer (*meta*: involving change & *phreien*: to bear). Figures, as the etymology of “metaphor” suggests, are sites of transference and accordingly metaphorical language is figurative. However, since metaphors do not refer to specific objects, the determinability of their meaning can vanish into an abyss and Taylor cites Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man as equating the use of metaphor with a ‘provisional loss of meaning’. Taylor takes the etymology of “metaphor” further, noting that the two stems of metaphor are *medhi* (middle, between) and *bher* (cut, pierce; break), so far from merely uniting, it suggests an interstitial break or a cutting medium. Taylor supports his argument, noting that the painter Mark Tansey sees both the activity of painting and painting as “metaphors”, used as a bridge to transfer meaning from the artist to the viewer.

So one of the first steps in the practical study is to explore the various metaphors that I have used in the past to try and convey a sense of melancholy to the viewer, and experiment with mark making to reinforce that sense yet accept that the experiences that spring from it may vary from viewer to viewer. I have confined the written work to the subject I have done most work on as many of the findings are transferable to other subjects.

### **A2.2.2 Initial works on Paper**

**Objective:** To explore the use of the caravan as a metaphor to convey a sense of melancholy and provide ideas for future works.

**Method:** I cut up some coated paper into A5 pieces and then over a series of days I experimented with idioms, colours, context and to some extent language (marks, methods, transparency and thickness) of paint. They were painted very quickly (approx 30mins) with little preparation to try and short circuit my instinct from hampering the creativity. Ideas came from photographs of caravans and trailer parks I had taken or found and themes were 'riffed' off paintings I had recently seen.

**Observations:** I did 50 of these little studies in total and then examined the results to see what themes had emerged and then grouped examples of those that were dominant.

**(1) Twilight:** The first and largest theme that emerged was one of time of day and that this was at twilight. Subsequent research has confirmed twilight as a threshold time leading from a period of lightness – the sanguine – to the darker times beyond. A liminal time that evokes a sense of loss of the day, of passing from one time to another, “times of evanescence and senescence, of fading and ageing” . But rather than a conscious ploy this theme was initially rooted in finding a way to paint, images 001 & 002 and this developed into a way of mixing colour wet in wet to make interesting skies. This juxtaposition of the dark sky with the lighter tones of the van (washed out with turps) seemed to evoke the remains of daylight. This ranged from the full on sunsets of 011, 012 & 042 to deep twilight blues of 037 & 041 and subtle mixtures of mauve, green and violet 013, 15 & 017. In some I added a lamp in the window 002, 004, 037 & 041 with perhaps a nod to some 'Lynchian' narrative that provided scope for lighting the foreground.

**(2) Caravan-Park:** The studies could be separated into those where the van was on a caravan site and those where it was isolated. I expected those with the isolated van to be the most melancholic, but some of the groups worked also well either due to choice of colour 034 & 039 (also these are lone vans grouped with building in some derelict industrial space) or the introduction of additional contextual elements, the empty chairs 007 and the feral animal 042 that evoke trailer parks. Also interesting that the aerial view of the traditional UK holiday caravan-park isn't melancholic - too much space perhaps. The monochrome of the airstream 043 didn't work either - perhaps because it became less painterly and too photographic or maybe the airstream is too iconic to be melancholic. The study painted in bleached opaque colour 015 does work, as does the version in strong primary colours 035, but I think it is more to do with the lack of people in the non-space between the trailers rather than the approach.

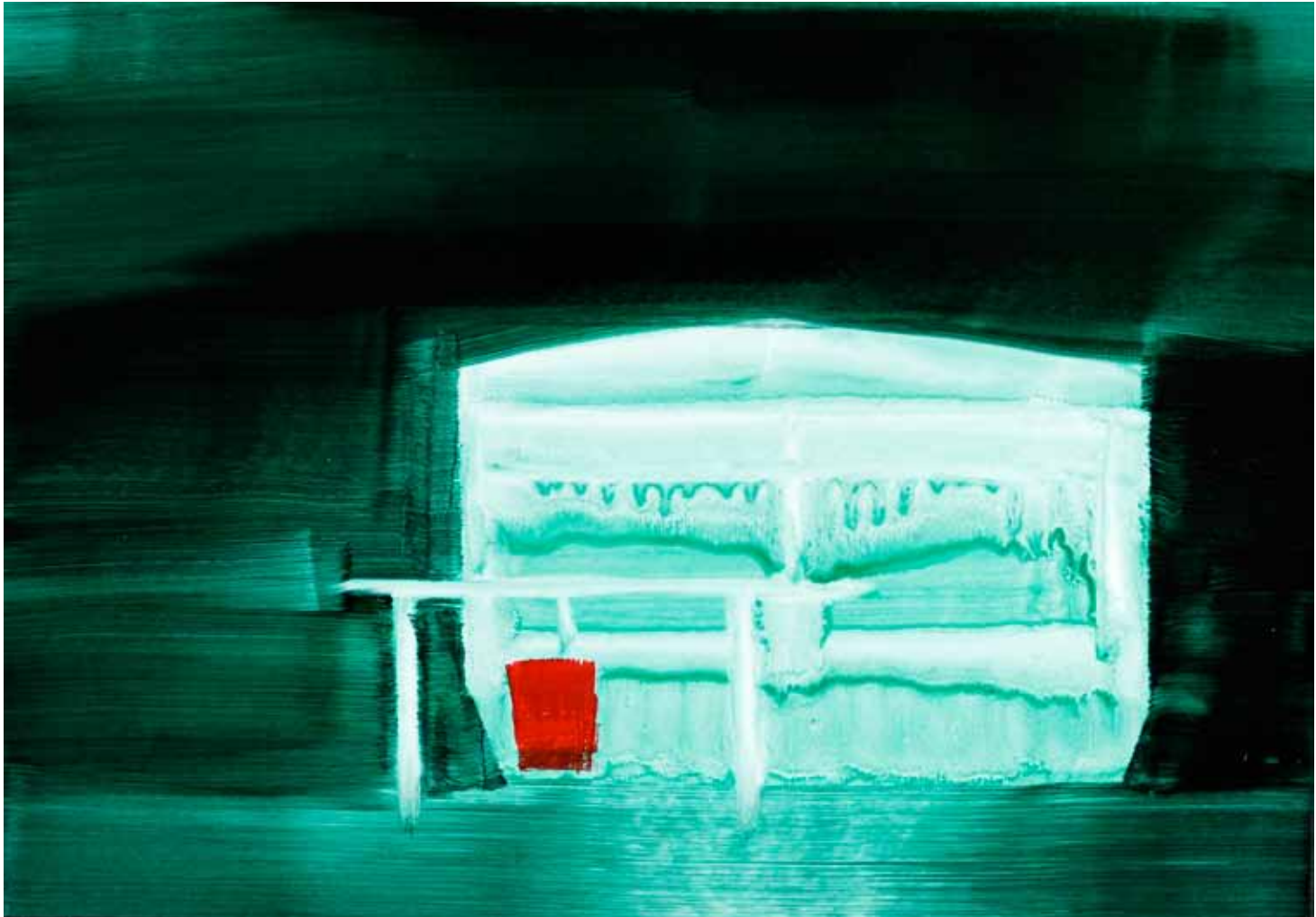
**(3) Isolation:** This group is of paintings where the subject is isolated and alone. Surprisingly I didn't feel that these paintings were particularly successful evocations of the melancholy and that with one exception the best were already in the "twilight" group. The most interesting is 033 that shows the van in a copse of birch trees isolated by a barren landscape from a group of tower blocks. Perhaps 031 works in a similar way but I think my choice of colour works against the melancholic mood. 0021 and 022 are interesting for the handling of the paint and the relative scale of the van to the surroundings and are perhaps worth returning to. On this scale they look too decorative for my taste. 018 borrows the style of Dirk Skreber, but wasn't particularly successful on this small scale

**(4) Landscape:** I found this group interesting from a conceptual viewpoint, if we think about the death of painting, then there is nothing more embarrassing and old fashioned than landscape painting. The caravan itself can also represent nostalgia for holidays or weekends away from the urban environment. It is no surprise that the most successful have appeared in other groupings but I should also mention two that haven't 023 and 044. 023 is quite successful but it relies on the implied narrative of the figurative element for its melancholic feel and in 044 the tree acts as a barrier between the viewer and the subject, suggesting voyeurism rather than melancholic. 038 is probably closest to a classical landscape and whilst this painting doesn't work particularly well I think the idea of the caravan as a blot on the landscape is a sound one.



**Conclusions:** Reviewing this body of work suggested that the most effective evocations of the melancholic came from isolated caravans in the twilight at the end of the day. This in turn prompted the thought that melancholy itself can be seen as a metaphor, evoking a time and place for the siting of a scene of loss. Whilst 'hot' colours and monochromes (045) could be made to work, the most successful were a pairings of a 'cool' and a 'warm' colour or two cool hues. Those with a larger palette were less successful and consequently any additional colour note introduced should be kept to a minimum. The caravan, as a motif, has a marked effect on the reading of the image, transforming a region of wilderness into landscape whether it is urban or pastoral. It provides a mark of civilisation and passes a comment on our relationship with the environment. An extremely useful exercise and I was lucky enough to get to exhibit two of the paintings in the 100% exhibition at Mauger Modern Art in Bath that provided additional useful feedback that reinforced my findings.

**Cross Reference:** See Section 4.1.4 of the thesis for my conclusions on the use of colour to convey melancholy and Taylor, Mark C [The Picture in Question](#) 1999 University of Chicago Press, London **41, 45-46** for Mark Taylor's observations on meaning and metaphors in painting.



Caravan 001, 2008  
Oil on Paper 15x20cm



Caravan 002, 2008  
Oil on Paper 15x20cm



Caravan 003, 2008  
Oil on Paper 15x20cm



Caravan 004, 2008  
Oil on Paper 15x20cm



Caravan 005, 2008  
Oil on Paper 15x20cm



Caravan 006, 2008  
Oil on Paper 15x20cm



Caravan 007, 2008  
Oil on Paper 15x20cm





Caravan 008, 2008  
Oil on Paper 15x20cm



Caravan 009, 2008  
Oil on Paper 15x20cm



Caravan 010, 2008  
Oil on Paper 15x20cm



Caravan 011, 2008  
Oil on Paper 15x20cm



Caravan 012, 2008  
Oil on Paper 15x20cm



Caravan 013, 2008  
Oil on Paper 15x20cm



Caravan 014, 2008  
Oil on Paper 15x20cm



Caravan 015, 2008  
Oil on Paper 15x20cm





Caravan 016, 2008  
Oil on Paper 15x20cm



Caravan 017, 2008  
Oil on Paper 15x20cm



Caravan 018, 2008  
Oil on Paper 15x20cm



Caravan 019, 2008  
Oil on Paper 15x20cm



Caravan 020, 2008  
Oil on Paper 15x20cm



Caravan 021, 2008  
Oil on Paper 15x20cm



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Caravan 023, 2008  
Oil on Paper 15x20cm





Caravan 024, 2008  
Oil on Paper 15x20cm



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Oil on Paper 15x20cm



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Oil on Paper 15x20cm



Caravan 031, 2008  
Oil on Paper 15x20cm





Caravan 032, 2008  
Oil on Paper 15x20cm



Caravan 033, 2008  
Oil on Paper 15x20cm



Caravan 034, 2008  
Oil on Paper 15x20cm



Caravan 035, 2008  
Oil on Paper 15x20cm



Caravan 036, 2008  
Oil on Paper 15x20cm



Caravan 037, 2008  
Oil on Paper 15x20cm

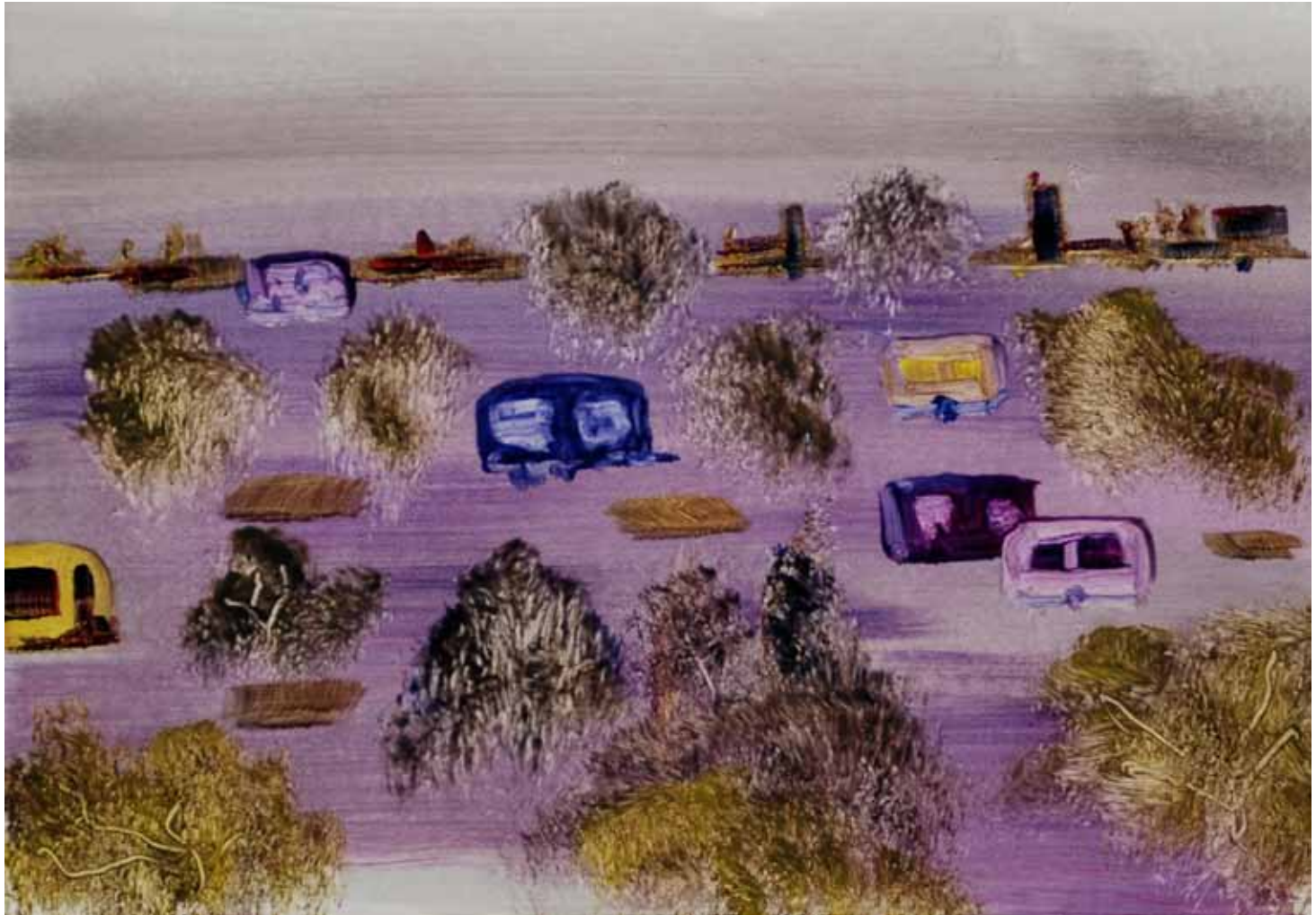


Caravan 038, 2008  
Oil on Paper 15x20cm



Caravan 039, 2008  
Oil on Paper 15x20cm





Caravan 040, 2008  
Oil on Paper 15x20cm



Caravan 041, 2008  
Oil on Paper 15x20cm



Caravan 042, 2008  
Oil on Paper 15x20cm



Caravan 043, 2008  
Oil on Paper 15x20cm



Caravan 044, 2008  
Oil on Paper 15x20cm



Caravan 045, 2008  
Oil on Paper 15x20cm



Caravan 046, 2008  
Oil on Paper 15x20cm



Caravan 047, 2008  
Oil on Paper 15x20cm





Caravan 048, 2008  
Oil on Paper 15x20cm



Caravan 049, 2008  
Oil on Paper 15x20cm



Caravan 050, 2008  
Oil on Paper 15x20cm



### **A2.2.3 Initial works on Canvas and Panel**

**Objective:** Develop the use of the caravan as a metaphor to convey a sense of melancholy through exploration of mark making.

**Method:** A variety of different supports, mediums, brushes, layers types of marks and images.

**Conclusions:** Initially I made good progress, essentially doing versions of the best of the works on paper on small canvases but then lost direction and the work lacked coherence. I experimented with too many variables at the same time: types, size and shapes of support; different types of brushes and ways of adding and erasing paint; speed of mark making; compositions of caravans in different colours and styles within the frame and numerous additional narrative elements (swing/washing line/figures/dogs/palettes).

Two works stood out at the end of this programme, 'Birch' 2009 and 'Starálfur' 2010. In the small painting 'Birch' a melancholic atmosphere emphasised by the sparse birch trees and the bleak landscape. It showed that simple can work well and that the caravan doesn't need to fill the frame. The large painting 'Starálfur' (The title of a song by Icelandic band Sigur Rós) has a real look of twilight, a brooding sensibility of a frozen landscape in winter light that evokes the bleakness of the North.

Despite some paintings working it became clear that I wasn't going to get anywhere unless a more structured approach was adopted, focussing on fewer variables at a time and eliminate those ideas that were less successful.



Caravan 104, 2008  
Oil on Canvas 15x20cm



Caravan 105, 2008  
Oil on Canvas 15x20cm



Caravan 106, 2008  
Oil on Canvas 17x24cm





Caravan 107, 2008  
Oil on Canvas 20x30cm



Caravan 108, 2008  
Oil on Canvas 16x22cm



Caravan 109, 2008  
Oil on Canvas 19x28cm



Caravan 110, 2008  
Oil on Canvas 15x20cm



Caravan 111, 2009  
Oil on Canvas 22x30cm



Caravan 112, 2009  
Oil on Canvas 55x40cm



Caravan 114, 2009  
Oil on Birch Panel 25x30cm



Caravan 115, 2009  
Oil on Canvas 30x40cm





Caravan 116, 2009  
Oil on Canvas 40x50cm



Caravan 117, 2009  
Oil on Canvas 40x50cm



Caravan 118, 2009  
Oil on Canvas 40x50cm



Caravan 119, 2009  
Oil on Canvas 20x30cm



Caravan 121, 2009  
Oil on Canvas 40x50cm



Caravan 123, 2010  
Oil on Canvas 40x50cm



Caravan 124, 2010  
Oil on Canvas 25x45cm



Birch, 2009  
Oil on Canvas 20x30cm





'Starálfur', 2010  
Oil on Canvas 150x95cm

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[mwnewton@hotmail.com](mailto:mwnewton@hotmail.com)