

# MICHAEL CROFT

## Revelation and Concealment: A story of personal and cultural displacement

### Introduction

“You’d better come clean,” Frank said to me, “You’d better tell them I’m not really the creative colleague

internal relationship with the story's characters but are more likely, perhaps, to gain an affective relationship with me through my own presence within the text.

Frank is part of a quartet comprising the subject of the story, R-K and his textual adjunct, Richard the story's reader; author as reflexive; and the selfsame who stands apart as the progenitor of an interaction between factual recall and imagination played out by the other three parties. The first of the quartet, the subject Asian painter resident in London and his adjunct an HIV sufferer who was to die of AIDS in 1993. The character R-K's feelings of displacement as manifest in his work are explored in the story, and the character Richard's presence implicates a baser surrounding milieu. Frank, therefore, is in a sense a disclaimer: I would wish you the reader to situate this composition somewhere between interpretive observation and fiction.

The hypothesis is that R-K and Richard's details coalesce around the idea of concealment and revelation of identity that is determined by factors of personal and cultural displacement. What I share with the story's subject may concern a certain elliptical experience as a Western expatriot living in Asia. Such insights reflect a sense of self as other projected into the story through the example of artwork and illness [2]. According to Lacan, the otherness of one's ego, or self, would seem to be founded on its original alienation imposed and endorsed by the mother as, Other, sense of identity projected onto others being a repetition of this original specular or mirrored scene.

## Observation

We learn from Frank that R-K lives in a two-storey narrow building. Downstairs is rented out and he has the floor above, which he uses as a studio room for painting, cooking, socializing and sleeping. Frank claims that he would be invited to sit a single bed that doubles as a sofa with a vista firstly of a small dining room table, then a side table with easel usually with an unfinished painting on it that is the window to the left indicating that R-K paints in his own shadow. Behind that is a kitchen unit with cooker, fridge





dying, Frank wondered if he had absorbed his friend's own position on the matter by blocking the realization of his friend's status from his mind. AIDS was of course a spectre cast over the entire gay community in London and people armed themselves against it in various ways, the strategy for some being to move with great caution through their sexuality and hardly breathe the word. Richard may have been in denial of his medical condition with its prospective development, the same denial that the solace he sought in watching the TV and in his likely nocturnal jaunts

While Richard was not shy to admit to friends that he enjoyed the sight of bodily contact in the Saturday wrestling, Frank could only piece together from vague references and the application of a good deal of his own fantasy, what went on at the personal level. Frank recalls that Richard once told him that he was too "slim and clean" for him; that he preferred the opposite in worker types. The compulsion and repulsion of the film that was it—had dank connotations of stables, with row-standing blokes prompting one another's glance amidst the stench of urine and bleach.

Frank often finds strewn on R-K's floor the sketches that the painter made of a black model that he employed. As Frank knows from his own experience, men who are prepared to do this often also enjoy the subservience of such a role. With his likely feelings of difference as an Asian in the UK, may have been reversing roles in this context. Similarly, according to Frank, Richard's lovers were simply understood from his perspective as lower class; by this means different in relation to him, stalked by him, and not vice versa.

R-K studied art in Paris before moving to London. From what Frank had seen of R-K's student paintings in a few catalogues and cuttings, in Paris the Asian painter may have been influenced by artists from the Group Art Informel, which included a style of painting



Having the London paintings referred to as “study” delegates them to immaturity, although they anticipate, in a way, what Frank describes as the artist’s complaining a decade or so later of the UK’s coldness, grey skies, drab people and selfish government. When water’s involved and the brushwork frees itself, its murky appearance is perhaps indicative of the artist’s emergent state of mind. This would be tantamount to looking into the gaps as it were, in the works’ obvious formal structure. Their earnestness, however, bodes hope

The interlaced brushstrokes and accents of heightened colour are more instinctively joyous than whatever the matrix represents. These works may concern Frank’s attempts at assimilation into a culture not automatically his own. In a Japanese context, but in the introduction suggested to include people in general from the Far East, the Japanese novelist Shusaku Endo describes the problems facing his own country’s students who chose to study in France in the 1960s [6]. The short story And You, Too uses illness, specifically tuberculosis, as a metaphor for the difficulties facing such Japanese students. What is described as the weight of European history born in every “stone” of the “houses, streets and churches” thus imposes a “pressure and burden” that translates into “physical and mental anguish.” That author explains in his introduction that he doubts that any

The character Richard flips the metaphor of illness for the sheer weight of European culture in Endo's novel paradoxically it is in a cultural sense too, and as European that Richardsuccumbs and dies.

"A lot of R-K.'s early works, a few later ones too, have an oblique angle that spans between left and right of the composition, kind of indicating an abstract plane

In a sense, a veil has been mostly shown open to reveal a picture the veil's remainder in the bottom left of the composition suggesting that the artist's complete authority over the scene was not possible. The tension between veiled and unveiled is that both represent revelation; disclosure of the extent of assimilation of the cityscape represented in the form of a gradual opening, still aligned with hope, and evidence, in the form of what remains of the veil obscuring the same scene, that the artist still maintains a degree of difference from that with which he attempts to identify through the painting.

"The interest in Art Informed of his student days in have mapped favorably with any likely Chinese calligraphic influence of his youth."

These early influences may also have been displaced. In detail only, perhaps, the works allude to a time when R-K aligned himself with no apparent inner tension to an acknowledged artistic style in the manner of research. For example, the ground that is allowed to come through these moments of disinherited brushwork tenuously signifying water, sand and sky is like sexual release, with any naïve impulsiveness that may have characterized the student work now replaced by a perhaps somewhat troubled spirit. The semiotic revelation of language, which attempts to position the agent as subject in its midst, may provide the most likely validation of such a reading of visual language. One sometimes reads of the lack of intentionality as being a characteristic within language for a certain "excess" which alludes to the presence of the subject. Conversely, such excess might be described as accident, inflection, incoherence that exists in the "spaces"—almost as though escaping surface the work's formal structure [8]. However, these indications are subtle enough not to disturb the paintings' mundane,

albeit loosely gestured realism. The difficulty of assimilating oneself into another's culture and the perpetual ambivalence between self and other (referenced above), has been given over to questions of finance. In a sense, at the threshold of his house, is saying to a British public that the more they buy his work, the more he may feel that he too belongs in the UK.

"R-K makes allegiance to another genre from time to time and becomes a kind of Orientalist, almost, making sketching trips to Asia and the Middle East. The confecting of the scenes is as suggestive as anything of the idea."

The works in this genre are an act of will, perhaps; a strategy for R-K to displace his identity back onto peoples on a par with the Western colonial stereotypes associated with his own culture, through an exchange of roles that place him symbolically in the midst of the impulse that fuelled certain artists of the Victorian era in the UK. Some of these works are incongruously De Stael, and the scenes' walled streets give picture to the paintings' surface as metaphor for the battle with self. It is as though R-K, in the role of a representative of Western civilization and takes off to Third and Fourth World communities only to return to face himself, in the guise of an aesthetic issue through the picture's surface as wall, with the betrayal of his own illusion

These, like all of R-K's paintings, falter on failure. The movement is towards resolution—hence perspective that attempts to push surface as wall back into its pictured space, or the yellow angled block characteristic of crunched stone, whose contrary effort may seem to be to unveil what looks like a benign face made out of it rather than any real determination to achieve wall. These paintings are done from memory rather than from the motif, although Frank maintains that there are observational sketches, and so for all their effort to provide escape they merely confirm R-K's position as other in others' midst.

Richard's likely sexual assignations would have promised well until afterward when he might imagine having been caught by the police or robbed if he had brought someone

home He would have bartered with these and other risks, and in so doing perhaps merely shore up his feelings of anxiety.

“Funny, actually, but I remember sitting with Richard outside a late-night café on a small Paris street when an Oriental strode back and forth in front of us in a soliciting manner. Richard egged me on with the gun and I felt that he was forcing me to choose between a complexity of emotions that he himself may have had surrounding things as sexual anticipation, flirting with danger, the unknown, that would have broken the stasis that holds one safe.”

Frank’s anecdote that includes the phrase stasis that holds one safe suggests the necessity of constraint in relation to sexuality. Richard, he suggests, may have experimented in ways that pushed health at risk. The fact that the incident involves an Oriental, an other in a European city, alludes to a particular East/West sexual polemic, a consequence of which is the exile of people from one’s own culture. This may be an underlying motive of the striving of some people towards cultural exile.

R-K’s life choices may have involved certain costs on a personal level that are displaced onto the battle with his work, with the inevitable attendance of failure. Similarly, Richard displaced himself in his apparent refusal to acknowledge his illness, which would have opened up questions of generation and culture surrounding sexual behaviour in the early years of HIV. To stumble unwittingly into the problem is, in analytical terms, likely to be read as unconsciously enacting that one will not see the problem coming. Feelings of anxiety, however, are perhaps around one to suggest to tell. The anxiety of both R-K and Richard may share the same root cause.

“There’s one work that was begun as a cityscape but was finally turned upside down because I persuaded him that from this view the resulting image looked more like a male back. RK liked the idea enough to settle for the upturned view, although the viewer is steered away from this reading via the title, which I think is pointing, towards the more innocuous idea of the ablutions of a figure of indeterminate gender.”





[10], here expressed through the potential of a medium, and these are features of the side of all language[11]—this allied to the sheer oddness of twentieth-century stylistic precedents—then it is unlikely that artwork will solely concern obvious iconic meaning.

R-K's mature works confirm the by now-



## Closing

It was of some surprise to Frank, who had Richard marked as a loner, that his funeral was attended by a diversity of people. He had evidently had some women friends and there were people of other nationality too. The occasion's pathos would have transcended any division of issues that may have haunted him through life, not least his sexuality, and everybody at the ceremony melded over this.

This may tie in with the question of interpretation underlying the opinions in the story. Both the creative individual and the academic writer venture opinions, and these usually corroborate or dispute existing knowledge in selective fields of interest. The field of psychoanalysis makes more use than any other, however, of individual interpretation. The correctness of the analyst's interpretations is reliant on a deep understanding of his/her own mental health, whereas other professionals may not have this and yet still exert sound academic or scientific judgment. The structure of the psychoanalytical contract is in a sense triangular; analyst, analysand and interpretation. In an interpret

reader in relation to this particular investigation constitute another dynamic, whereby your interpretations also help to bring to the surface the underlying meanings. Via the character RK and what he is doing with his work, circumstances pertaining Richard, the structuring of the story to include the reflexive position of the author and the question of interpretation by you the reader, the attempt is to make manifest the idea of the restless semiotic of language as posited by analytical theory.

#### Notes

1. "[Lacan] emphasizes the fact that patients' lives are determined by their *overheard* letters"—the snatches of their parents' conversation (that is, of the Other's discourse), often not intended for their ears, that were indelibly etched in their memories and sealed their fate. Patients bring those letters to analysis, and analysts attempt to render them legible to their patients, to uncover the hidden determinants of their desire." Bruce Fink, *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, [1997] 1999), 205.
2. "counterpart (semblable)..The image of another person's body can only be identified with insofar as it is perceived as similar to one's own body, and conversely the counterpart is only recognized as a separate, identifiable ego by projecting one's own ego onto it." Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge [1996] 1997), 289.
3. Language, nonsense, desire: *deleuze* accounts for the relations between these three terms. "...In other words, language becomes tainted with desire, by the actions and passions of *deleuze*" (ons0c7p..)14(s1n.(i)7(on





“Reverse Order”  
Acrylic and Oil on Canvas  
6ft x 5ft  
Circa 1990