

VOLCANO



VOLCANO GLENN BROWN AND CARAGH THURING IN CONVERSATION

GLENN BROWN Can we begin by talking about what you consider the volcano paintings to be? Why do you consider them a group?

CARAGH THURING The starting point was *First Volcano* (2000; fig. 1), made at a time when I was not producing work and was still running a gallery. I decided to get a studio for three months and that was the painting I made. I was thinking what can I make? What can I paint after years of not making anything?

I was always fascinated by the cross-sections of volcanoes that we had to draw in geography lessons at school. I loved how you sliced through a flat facade to open up something very physical, and there would be all these different things going on inside. They seemed beyond rational understanding: the visual incarnation of something that you could never witness, or experience directly. I suppose that fascination became the reason to make a painting. I needed something very simple, that I was excited by. Since then, I have repeatedly gone back to painting volcanoes.

GB So this has nothing to do with any physical encounter with a real volcano?

CT No, absolutely not.

GB Or flowing magma or earthquakes even.

CT No, not at that point. Although – I first came across a volcano when I was about 20 and staying in Puebla, outside Mexico City. I could see Popocatepetl from the roof of our accommodation, this form on the horizon that was very ominous and black, but I didn't think of that actually when I made this painting.

I've visited other volcanoes since, and even been inside the magma chamber of Þrihnúkgígur in Iceland, which was open for a short time. They're usually plugged so it's a very rare and fascinating thing to go into the chamber and look up. You could see all the vents going downwards, full of volcanic scree. Now I can think about and describe the pictures in a different way. But I didn't think of any of that when I made *First Volcano*, which goes back to something much earlier. At that point I wondered what I could make that didn't require justification, or over-imbue its meaning – the volcano excited me for some reason and I just thought I should paint one.

GB Volcanoes are important because they're the

conduit for our relationship with the layers of Earth beneath the crust. These layers keep us all together – we wouldn't exist without that core and the magnetic field it creates around the planet. It's one of the ultimate things to us as a species, but it's not contemporary, and it's not fashionable. It's not identity politics or social phenomena. It's none of those things currently dominating art.

CT When I made the painting I wasn't thinking in any of those terms, and was being consciously superficial about how I approached it. Of course, I was probably attracted to the volcano for all those reasons: it's what you learn about when you're in school looking at those diagrams. But to begin with I just had to make something. At that point I wasn't taking responsibility for those ideas, or thinking about them too much.

It's interesting that with the passage of time I can see the volcano a different way. Now I can understand different things it might relate to – some of those you mentioned – which I probably hadn't been so aware of when making. The paintings change. The volcanoes in them have meant different things at different times. They're included for varying reasons and they come out in a variety of forms: a pyramid, or something literal. And they're rarely actually of a specific volcano.

I still think the volcano is relevant now. I think it still dominates all those metaphors.

GB How do you see volcanoes? Are they inert or threatening? Psychologically, are they a presence of good because they are a facet of nature, or do they represent something much darker and more sinister because of their potential to destroy mankind?

CT I think they represent all of those things and more. That's ultimately what is fascinating about them because, as you say, they're fundamental to our life and force. They hide everything going on underneath. When they erupt they're like a spot being squeezed. There's a build-up of pressure and then eventually it releases through an outlet to the surface.

GB That gives it a slightly different perspective, doesn't it? A change of scale: from the very small to the very large.

CT Yes, to the epic. I think that happens in all of my work. There is a constant fluctuation between the macro and the micro, and it can be going on within the same work. There's no hierarchy within a painting. I can explode the form of something or magnify it in a way that seems irrelevant to the scheme of the whole painting, or include imagery that wouldn't necessarily appear to be the most important aspect of the objects or subjects within the work. Then at other times, I'll emphasise the significance of something much less physical. I put those two things together. They clash against one another in the work.

GB That's interesting because it brings up this idea of confusion. You give the audience something that isn't obvious, something they're never going to fully resolve. If it isn't both large and small, it's both figurative and abstract. The paintings are paradoxes: both carefully and very loosely painted. Some things are printed or woven and some are painted by hand, and you're never quite sure what you're looking at. The work starts to undermine the viewer's sense of stability, you just keep looking and thinking: 'What is all this puzzle? What the hell is going on here?'

CT That's exactly what I aim to do. I don't want to make something obvious. There's a lot to say here – but with the volcanoes, ultimately, you look at one and you see what's left of it. The visible outer shell obscures so many other things going on: processes that effect the atmosphere, deep forces of magnetism. I almost want to see what's behind something.

I'm not interested in the surface I'm presented with because that's obvious to me, in a way. It doesn't matter whether I'm talking to a person or looking at a situation, I always think there's something else going on and I want to know what that other thing is. Rather than what I'm being told, I'm interested in what else it could reveal. I look for what something is.

GB In some of the paintings you refer to the Earth's ionosphere by putting a giant magnet with little cartoon lines in the sky. The way you draw the cross-section of the volcano is like a comic book or an illustration, and very often the way you paint has this sort of purposeful naivety to it, which again, I think you use to comic effect.

CT When I start, I always wonder how I can get from A to B. I don't draw before painting, so in a way they are drawings. They're working drawings that just keep going on and on and on. I know what I want to put in them, know the imagery that I'm working with and what I'm thinking about, and then I just start. It's a very practical thing, and very much about how I'm feeling each time I make a body of work. It might be clear at one point: I will be very much at the centre of a circle, thinking only about tartan or only about volcanoes or only about nuclear submarines. Then these things roll and overlap, come in and out. There's a lot of repetition in my work, it's like two steps forward, one step back. There are things that reappear over time, like the volcanoes.

GB A lot of the volcano paintings feature pyramids. Obviously, there's a similarity in terms of the form and scale, but one is a man-made object the other one is natural. Why did you feel happy to bring the pyramids in?

CT As a kind of visual cliché the pyramid does perhaps resemble a classic volcanic cone, but actually what interests me about them are the bricks. These appear repeatedly throughout the work. Bricks are made of earth, the matter beneath our feet, extracted and reformed by man. And so it becomes man-made, and from this form pyramids are constructed. It's a fake, man-made mountain. It also becomes a building and yet it's also just the ground, the stuff that is beneath us.

That's like the inside of a volcano coming out, which is what a volcanic cone is: the inside comes out and it builds itself. I'm very interested in that relationship with construction.

GB You put Fingal's Cave on the cover of the publication accompanying your 2019 exhibition at Thomas Dane Gallery, and mentioned earlier that you like the crystalline structure of the blocks formed naturally from the basalt rock there. And then you have bricks, which are obviously man-made. This seems like a very nice equivalence of structure.

CT Fingal's Cave on Staffa in the Inner Hebrides comes up from under the sea, the same seam of ancient lava as the Giant's Causeway in Ireland. The

cave's columns of basalt appear to stack up and are fairly evenly cracked, a similar thickness to bricks. They build up like the volcanoes; that rock's been excreted and extruded. It joins these two land masses together: it's obscured by water in different areas, but it's the same piece of material in a sense.

GB Could I say that there was a similarity between the checked patterns and the weave of the fabric itself, the brick pattern, and then the pattern in the dried magma of the volcano as well: this underlying crystalline structure that underlies all of our lives?

CT I haven't thought of the tartan like that, but in a way, it could well be that. In my work they have not been woven from a real tartan, they're just made up. Checks, fake tartans: again, they're built, they're constructed.

GB In the painting *Monument* (2005; fig. 23) rocks appear to be almost falling from the sky. Is the background screen-printed? Do you use that technique in other artworks?

CT Yes it is. I used that technique in several works, including *Hardtack* (2007; fig. 32).

It's funny because I've never thought of them as falling rocks, that's the difference in visual plane. When I made it I was very interested in putting varying visual planes into one space – looking at a map, for example, you have an aerial view. Looking down at one thing, looking across at another, and anything else in between, whatever that might be. It is the ground and also what's in front of you, upright, mashed and smashed together into one space.

GB You're always playing with that idea of perspective, as though the viewer is simultaneously looking up, looking down, and focusing in on small things. Multiple states. The paintings are almost cubist in the way they move you around continuously and don't present any one perspective, they're multi-perspective paintings.

CT Yes, that's absolutely right.

GB They often depict movement, with a sense of an event being caught at a particular moment. Sometimes you feel that you've just missed this event: you've arrived slightly after it, or slightly before. In *That was then, This is now* (2014; fig. 47) it's like

you've just missed the ship – it's either sunk or sailed by. The perspective of the viewer moves on to something more interesting, it moves down to that line of vision. There's almost a sense of there being no central object in the work, with these often purposefully chaotic compositions. With no figure and no ground, you're not quite sure what's what. That sense of frustrating the viewer, enjoying the sense of being adjacent to an event, of things being out of our vision or moving in. Why do you do that so much?

CT I could compare that, in a way, to watching a film, in which the point of view is always moving and things are edited together. In the cinema you don't have to sit through every painful second of how you get from one place to the next, unlike sitting in a theatre, where you have to work through the chronology a bit more. I often find it quite embarrassing to sit and watch a play – unless the actors are so amazing, usually when they've worked in films so they don't project in a completely pretentious manner. Then I can deal with it.

What I love about watching a film is that you're just constantly moving and the director and editor have chosen what you're going to see out of the scene, or whole story. With the paintings, sometimes I think about film and filmmaking.

When I look at other people's work, I'm always more interested in that with a very clear human presence in it, which I find important in order to be able to engage with something fully. I always want there to be an awareness that a human has been involved or is in relation to the work: was either in it or looked at it. How you feel in relation to that space or all those sorts of things, I think I crave that.

GB So those multiple perspectives that the filmmaker has: the ability to edit straight from a close-up to a landscape, from one side of the moon to the other side, from one side of the world to the other. Films constantly switch the viewer's perspective in a way that our brains are already very used to.

CT Yes, exactly. Right now you can focus on a fleck of dust on the table, you can look out of the window and take in the whole street – that's how we experience the world.

GB It is, and that's amplified by film. You see that in the way that art and painting changed after film started to be made.

CT Absolutely.

GB To some extent your paintings are literally like the projection of several films one on top of one another. I like this idea that when I look at your work that I'm not placed in a particular moment in time.

CT It's a very interesting point, because in a way the paintings are an attempt to get all those perspectives – or a few of them – into one space, or the possibility of that way of understanding what you're looking at. You could make an animation of all of those varying visual planes together: it's just one thing, or various uses of one thing.

GB Most of the paint is laid on in translucent layers, so you see the ground underneath. When watching a projection of film, it's just light. The equivalent in painting is often that idea of one image overlaying another. Being able to see through an image, nothing being solid.

CT Or ultimately defined. In *1973* (2006; fig. 25) everything's transparent: the building, the mountain, the background, the faces.

I was very conscious that I didn't want to fill everything in. There's no need to do that. I'm more interested in how I can suggest what I'm trying to get across in the lightest possible way, rather than hammering it out all the way to the finish line. All I need to let you know are several concrete components and how they fit together; the gaps can be filled with the viewer's own experience. You know what a face is, you know that it's not transparent (well, skin can be translucent), you know this is a building, you know that's a mountain – but the painting is not actually any of those things, and it's not pretending to be either.

GB There are a lot of painters who completely cover the surface in layer upon layer of paint, and that thick accretion is very important to their idea of solidity and dominance. Often that's about the artist justifying their presence in the world in a very masculine way. Though your paintings represent a much lighter touch, they are very big: they're huge light touches, which is funny, in a sense. You're representing vol-

canoes – these very big, solid structures – in a very delicate way. If another painter did these they could be very different.

You could stick plates on them. Or make them from lead and put massive amounts of mud, clay and paint on in order to make something that actually felt really earth-like: solid and definite, as though it was going to need several forklift trucks to lift it.

CT That's just so obvious to me. It's such an obvious way to approach the subject, one that I don't find so interesting. That doesn't mean that I'm against loading on the paint or making something very clearly what it is, but when I paint I'm thinking about something else. I guess I'm just trying to find a way to tell you what something is but without rendering it exactly in its perspectives. I don't quite know how to say it, but when someone says, 'That portrait's really well painted. It really looks like you've done all the bits right,' I'm not interested in that. I'm not interested in making that sort of painting or working with that sort of imagery. I'm far more intrigued by how an idea can be subtly suggested, and how the viewer can then go to lots of different places with it. It doesn't just have to be, 'That's a painting of a volcano,' and it ends there: it's like, 'What is that? What does it suggest?' The volcano represents so many things, there are so many clichés around it, like a skull.

GB The volcano is a giant meta-movie and we all come to an end, in the end, we're all destroyed in the end? We all die?

CT I don't mean it that way. Rather I mean that like the skull they have a very strong cultural and emotional significance. People are intrigued by volcanoes; I don't think anybody isn't. They see that form and it represents danger, it represents sex, it represents something hidden, it represents something powerful, it represents geology... it conjures up so many different excitements, feelings and curiosities.

GB Volcanoes are great objects to talk about in terms of the human body. It can either be a penis ejecting sperm or a breast producing milk.

CT Or a spot.

GB Or a spot being squeezed. It's all of those things. It brings us down to the fundamental.

CT It's very visceral and bodily.

GB It is bodily, but on a massive scale. When walking into a room of your paintings, they envelop you. Though they lack those thick layers of paint, they're meant to take you in. Like a film, they draw you in and you become engrossed by them. They're not something that you can ignore.

CT I try to make something that's active. The volcano is industrious, a sort of industry in itself. It's building in action.

GB It's a self-building building. Like the bricks, it's something that forms itself.

CT It comes from beneath your feet and forms itself, and then it does something else beyond that. Through those different layers: underneath, on the surface, and then above it. The volcano is inhabiting all those spaces, and then it's in the air – fumes and smoke. It has a huge range. It takes over a massive cross-section of space, operating on different domains and strata. I want the paintings to do something like that, in part.

GB That idea of stages, of the material in its three different forms, just as water can be frozen solid, liquid, or gaseous steam. Sometimes you apply paint when it's very wet and sometimes in a dry, solid way. It's as if the paint is a stand-in for the material of lava: sometimes appearing like rain, sometimes like dust on the surface in little splats, and sometimes like big drips. Then sometimes almost pallet knife-thick, with a lot of substance to it.

CT That's what you're allowed to do as a painter, you've got this material and you can use it as you want to. I like that you can get this visceral, bodily feeling without having to be so literal about it. You're constructing something by which to intrigue the viewer enough that they bother to look at the painting and get involved with it. That's what I try to do with these volcano paintings: the viewer knows what mountains and volcanoes are, so they've got a lot to go on. There's something very physical and solid about them. They're something that we all recognise and understand, and you can take it where you want from there.

GB Looking at *RL Volcano* with *RL Basalt* and *RL*

Basalt 2 (all 2004; figs. 20, 21 and 22), the figures seem to have nothing to do with the volcanos. As though the mountains needed something that was exactly the opposite of themselves.

CT They could appear so in relation to the actual painting. But the figures are still volcanos because they're erupting, and they almost look like mountains themselves. I've turned them into basalt columns, and now you have this magma chamber. One of the central figures in *RL Basalt* and *RL Volcano* has lava dripping out of her hair. They're quite surreal in a way, but they're also real.

GB Her ponytail becomes an erupting volcano. Again, that change of scale.

CT Yes, again. The way the group of models is presented in that advert, it's as though the figures are some sort of majestic mountain range. It was also one of my constant battles to getting a human into the work – not just implied but actually, physically.

GB You very rarely do it.

CT There's always a suggestion of it. It's quite esoteric in a sense: the figures in the advert are presented as very powerful structures of human beings. In that particular campaign they looked like buildings. They're almost completely non-human because they're all looking away at different points. They're acting on different planes.

GB You like the dynamic structures they've formed between one another, in the way that they were aligned.

CT Yes. There are also three subsequent tapestries of the drawing *Rocks and Blocks* (2016; fig. 49), but in each one something's slightly different. There's just something about repetition, I guess.

GB In the *Pyramid Volcano* drawings (all 2013; figs. 42, 43, 44 and 45) you've used this image of pyramids with smoke and flame rising from the top again and again.

CT It's a drawing that I have done repeatedly over a period of years. I always think of the pyramid volcanoes as two humans, somehow. There are always two of them like this in relation one another.

GB Sometimes they're touching, or overlaying each other and sometimes they're not.

CT Yes, I wonder what that might be.

GB Do you see yourself as being a pyramid or a volcano?

CT No, I don't.

GB This isolated individual.

CT I'm afraid not.

GB You're not an existentialist.

CT No. But after drawing I did look at them and think that's what they're like. The pyramid volcanoes are almost an exercise, because I don't make advance drawings for the paintings, and these came after. The first time that this came into a painting, I don't know where that was exactly, but I started then doing these drawings afterwards, and they became this habit.

GB What keeps you going at the habit? Do you think it's a good one?

CT I think it is useful. They're never the same.

GB It's important that they're slightly awkward and uneasy, uncomfortable to view. I think that's something you get from visiting Naples actually. Naples feels like a transient city that's just been very lucky to be there for a long time.

CT Yes, it reminds me of Glasgow in the UK. The people are reminiscent of Glaswegians. When I went there I thought, 'This is something I know from where I grew up.' It felt very homely because the people are gutsy and have a certain humour. It has the constant shifting, moving energy of a port town.

GB They are both industrial cities to a large degree.

CT Yes. That's what the paintings are. I grew up near Glasgow watching ships and oil rigs being built and nuclear submarines coming out of the water in this amazing landscape. They're very similar to the volcanoes: they're lurking beneath, then rise up to the surface. You do not know what's going on underneath, or in them. They are obscured until they rise up to become a very physical and menacing prospect. The volcanoes are an industrious ecosystem.

GB So like Naples or Glasgow, the pyramid volcanoes are awkward, man-made moments in a beautiful landscape. The volcano is an awkward moment in an otherwise peaceful environment. Like the city it represents danger, as well as excitement.

CT Exactly, that clash. It's a vigorous element within

the landscape

GB You say they're awkward – do you think there's a perfect one that you might eventually make?

CT No. I wouldn't want to ever make anything perfect. That would be a disaster.