The Following is an extract from a recorded discussion, on Thursday 31st October 2019, between Peter Chalmers and Andrew Cranston. Peter has known Andrew for over fifteen years. Andrew was one of his tutors, then colleagues, at Gray's School of Art and they have remained friends ever since.

Andrew Cranston: So what's the title for the show?

Peter Chalmers: Um… An Empirically Grey Area.

AC: What does that mean? [Laughing]

PC: Exactly! [Laughing] What does that mean?! I think…partly it reflects that the show is mostly grey canvases, but the whole idea of empirically grey is in some ways meant to be playful too. The colour I use on the canvas is Empirical Grey. I also thought there was something playful in the fact that with the subject being something around meaninglessness, waiting, anticipation, hope, things like that, these are all grey areas anyway – in some ways.

AC: Yeah.

PC: If something is empirical, it's kind of tangible, you can record, measure… it's tactile. It's truth, it's fact. So it's about bringing something tangible to something that's not.

AC: I associate it with the age of reason, empiricism as a kind of thing you can test – truth in a way.

PC: Exactly, that's part of the point for me. There are these conceptual questions, or you might even say challenges, and I'm actually attempting to find a solution, to do something as a result – find a way of making that is a solution. I don't know if I have achieved that, I'm not sure I have, but I have made ten new pieces, so in some ways I've found a way of making – for now.

AC: Right. Do they all get made in parallel to each other? Do they all get made at the same time or is there a chronology to how they were made?

PC: There was a bit of a chronology. I have periods – I don't know if you are the same – where I have a big build up to a show. I'll put some work out there and then after that I have this big pause where I sort of collect myself. I'll reflect on what I have done, do a lot of reading, do a lot of thinking, go look at a lot of work and then I let things percolate before trying and go back up to another peak – it's a real peaks and troughs process. Largely I did plan a number of works for the show, so I had a sense that I was getting somewhere, and started making them and then there were other pieces that got added in as I went along. Things started to feed off each other. I'm making a long answer to a simple question, it's a bit of both to be honest. [Laughing]

AC: It strikes me that preparation is really important, that actually the preparation is also the work. So preparing a ground might be for some Painters just that process to get to the next, whereas it seems more an end for you in a kind of way? The attention paid to preparing things, is that planned? Or is that just something you are aware of happening when you were making them?

PC: I think you're right, but although they are quite controlled and planned, I think there can still be a discovery in the making of it or certain decisions.

AC: I suppose that's part of what I mean, that your intentions can change. One of the changes to earlier work, where there's quite a kind of flourish, it's almost Rococo, this feels more austere.

PC: Yeah, perfect word.

AC: You've gone through your own kind of reformation.

PC: Yeah [Laughing] I mean exactly, there's so many things I could talk about in that.

AC: Does every bit have to be right? The thing about minimalism is there is less room for error. When you empty something out, each thing has to be on the money. Does it make you more conscious of each element in the picture?

PC: I think it does for me, but I think there is also an allowable tolerance, which I have to determine. Every piece is flawed and I think that's important.

AC: You want it to be?

PC: I don't know if it's that I want it to be, I could use all sorts of manufacturing processes, but I intentionally choose to make it myself. So much of the work is about how I spend my time, how I use my time in the making, I think it's important that they are handmade. That is a big part of it. There are some pieces that are maybe more polished than others, there is certainly an attempt to make them as polished as they can be, but I think my natural ability is always going to be flawed to a point.

AC: Mm-hmm.

PC: If I don't try to redo it, am I just being lazy or is this the best I can make it? None of them are made quickly, although they may look simple. There's a lot of hidden work that goes into it. There can be times that I get to a point where the whole thing has to be redone again. Someone looking at the work wouldn't know that, they won't see that process. They won't recognise that this very simple bit of varnished surface or simple little brick has had to be redone five times because it just didn't work and that is not an allowable tolerance. It can be done better; I just didn't do it right. [Laughing]

AC: Only your eagle-eye notices.

PC: I've been saying to the folk I share a studio with not to let me make work like this again.

AC: Is there an element of absurdity?

PC: Completely. I actually enjoy that. Thematically it seems so important. Literally thinking about the process of making – what am I making? how am I making it? The whole thing seems so absurd. The idea that I'm putting myself in a position, I'm setting myself up to fail in some ways, but… that is an acceptable part of it, it can be comfortable in a way.

AC: So constraints are important?

PC: Yeah, absolutely. There has to be constraints.

AC: You're working with a particular grey, a particular limitation?

PC: I think that's the nub of it. I'm trying to answer my questions and if anything goes, I can do anything, so how do I know what to do? I feel there has to be some process to eliminate options – to strip it down. It's probably got to a point now where they do look so austere because I'm trying to get some control in a situation that could be so open-ended. It doesn't really matter what I make or don't make in the grand scheme of things, but I'm trying to make something interesting from nothing.

AC: Do you think there is something particularly Scottish or North-East about your work?

PC: I wonder… there could be.

AC: A restraint or something?

PC: I do wonder about nature/nurture, not necessarily in terms of my parents, but like you say, the environment I'm in. How much is the environment influencing me?

AC: Italy had a big effect on you?

PC: Massive.

AC: Earlier in your career you were making ecclesiastical sort of work, are you drifting away from that? There's a flourish, but then again, the early Renaissance work is characterised by a sort of simplicity. Was there something in Italy in particular?

PC: I mean the thing is there are rules. Although there was all of this discovery, this change, what you may or may not call progress in the Renaissance, there were also rules… Maybe that's where this almost queasy side of my work comes in. You get so obsessed with rules, attempting to make something work, a simplicity or rightness, that actually it ends up becoming even more awkward.

AC: And Illogical?!

PC: Yeah and absurd. I think the work that I made here, yeah ok it is austere, but in a very modest way, there is also something quite playful about it.

AC: Oh yeah, yeah.

PC: We can see this big giant horse, big hands coming in, or the wall. I don't think its humorous, I'd never call it humorous, but playful I think.

AC: There is some, some element [Laughing]. There is a Monty Python element to the hand.

PC: One hundred percent. I'm happy with that reading, it's definitely there and I'm conscious of it, but even if you look back at some of these late Medieval/early Renaissance works, you would see these flying hands appearing.

AC: Would we be invited to find connections between the motifs? A horse, a wall, a hand, a calf, or whatever it may be. Is there some sort of significance in their connection?

PC: That's a good question as well. Sometimes they are very overtly connected – sometimes by what is being revealed or what is being hidden. Sometimes what is being revealed is a grey canvas, sometimes, there is a piece with a mirror, the viewer is being revealed or there are other pieces where you have these walls, these fences, where actually there is a sense… how do we know there isn't something painted behind the wall? I read a book recently which really had an impact on the development of the work. It's called 'An Anthropology of Nothing in Particular' by Martin Frederiksen and in it he discusses the work of Samuel Beckett and Andrei Tarkovsky. He talks about how narrative is removed in Beckett's work, for example, to replace it with hope and waiting. Similarly, in Tarkovsky's films, it's all about duration – there is a degree of endurance. I think for a lot of people they are quite difficult films to watch, because they are so slow.

AC: They're commitments.

PC: Correct. You have to commit to them. Visually they are sublime, but they're slow. They seem particularly slow today, but it was the way Frederiksen was talking about the work, and this replacement, I quite quickly thought there is a Painting equivalent of this. If I intentionally remove the image, which is the problematic thing, if I take away that challenge, leave it as a grey area, literally and I suppose figuratively, hopefully playfully too, then that's almost a decision made for me. There is no image, you're left with this anticipation, this kind of suspense, and with that I get freed up. These objects, these appendages – I call them frames – which I've been interested in for a while…

AC: So then, that's the thing which brings any image?

PC: Exactly. It can maybe talk around some of the other questions that I don't know how to solve. I haven't quite figured this out, but I seem to manage to bear it more, I can tolerate it as a frame, as an appendage.

AC: It's offstage as you've said before.

PC: Well exactly.

AC: There's a wonderful Emily Dickinson quote: 'Tell all the Truth but tell it slant.' Where you approach anything, not directly, but from some sort of angle.

PC: Yeah.

AC: Tell it through something. Does awkwardness feature? As a kind of tendency? Something you want?

PC: I think… I think it does, yeah. I'm happy for it to be there. It seems appropriate for it to be there – simply because of the nature of the work. The subject that I'm working with, if it all seemed polished and easy and straightforward, I don't think that would be a true reflection of what the work is about. I am aware that some of the pieces may be more visually comfortable than others – there's a certain symmetry or decorative quality, but there are other ones where having these objects bolted on to the side…

AC: Are they less beautiful? Or is it another type of beauty?

PC: I wonder… it's interesting isn't it. I don't know how other people will view the work, but for me, they are satisfying because they are a solution to a problem.

AC: Do you like your work?

PC: Em… I'm not sure I do. [Laughing] Life would be easier if I didn't make things – I find it stressful, I find it challenging, it is an exhausting process. There is a lot of pressure.

AC: Yeah, yeah.

PC: Not put on me by other people, pressure I put on myself.

AC: See, I think it's a bit like golf that way – and Beckett was a keen golfer. I heard someone saying that why they liked golf was because you play against yourself. You might be in a competition, but you play against your own history, so in a sense it is an ultimate individuals game – measuring yourself.

PC: There is also something else in golf. You can play lots of different courses, but for some people they will be a member of a club and they'll play that same course every week. It's about doing something, doing it again – that repetition. I think Painting can be a bit like that as well. You may well change the image, change the idea, but actually you are maybe attempting to get closer to the perfect version, whatever that is – I'm not actually sure if that exists – but there maybe is something in that endeavour, you know? That's what I'm trying to do here. I'm trying to pare the work down to get closer to whatever this potential solution might be.

AC: Yeah.

PC: I don't think I've got there.

AC: I mean in Beckett it's a reduction isn't [...] sly scrupulous using a word – the exactness of a word. The thing can even appear quite [...] pposite. It's actually really carefully rehearsed, carefully written. It strikes me there is some [...]

PC: Definitely.

AC: Do you still do the th[...] on a paper towel, to make it more matt?

PC: I do… in these grey [...] matt varnish.

AC: Is that the most, in a [...]

PC: Yeah. There is nothing [...] in the other ones they're not reflective, you're not [...] thing else in the reflection, you're just seeing grey. I th[...] nticipation, there is nothing happening – the more you [...]

AC: Yeah, yeah.

PC: With the exception o[...] n the canvas. Again, I could have sprayed the paint or [...] s not perfect and that's all part of it. At any level you [...] There isn't really anything to see there apart from [...] you look at it, it is actually handmade. I think for me [...] ple of boxes. It had to be handmade, but there also [...] wise it wouldn't work.

AC: It's the tension.

PC: That's the tension. Exactly.