



'Alla Prima'

Introduction to the 2009 catalogue

The term 'Alla Prima' translates from the Italian into English as 'at the first attempt'. In some ways it has come to be misused, many painters proudly giving the title to simple sketches. But true Alla Prima painting is a high demonstration of skill given to artworks or parts of them completed to a high finish in a single intense stint of effort.

The artist must first know his materials thoroughly, be clear on his colour theory and be a very sound draftsman. In preparing to paint he considers his subject closely, weighs up its difficulties and proceeds generally with a great sense of trepidation. Many of his attempts at Alla Prima will fail. Complications or tiredness often make him pull back on his reins and decide to finish the picture more slowly. The successful Alla Prima should be a small tour de force.

Gabriele Finaldi a director at the Prado in Madrid unknowingly laid down a challenge to James Gillick in the introduction to the 2007 catalogue when writing that his paintings contained 'flashes of genuinely painterly virtuosity'. James Gillick seeks here to demonstrate his skill in asking if it is possible to tell the slow paintings from the Alla Prima.