



Pictures, Truths and Methods: From Function to Form in Abstract

Painting

Dr Tom Palin

Introduction

This paper takes Patrick Heron's assertion as to the abstract nature of painting as a starting point for a phenomenological investigation into the ways in which *abstract* works comport themselves. How is it that abstract paintings become meaningful, and along which communicative channels might meaning flow? Perhaps in opposition to Picasso's denial of the possibility of abstract art, and affirmation of the vitality of figurative painting (his restatement of, "the power of the object"), Heron presented an alternative idea; declaring all paintings to be, in effect, *of the abstract*. In positing an abstract primacy to one's experience of the world *in* painting - Heron's proposition, I will argue, opens more doors than it closes. In support of his hypothesis, Heron drew together the terms *space*, *colour* and *form* - the bedrock of countless claims as to abstraction's *truth* - and invoked an, "abstract reality" that painting (including that which is usually taken to be figurative painting) is seen, subsequently, to embody.

The relationship of abstract paintings to the world has proven to be a problematic one. To revisit it is to wrestle with forms of representation, and thus to speculate as to how it is that one thing is able to point to another. In this presentation, I will foreground abstract painting as *idea* and *sign*, and ponder both its conceptual and linguistic workings. I hope, also, to offer thoughts on the extent to which the picture-aspect of a painting might operate as *language* and *something else*. I am thinking in particular about the limits of that which is deemed to be communicable in art works; about the varying methods of comprehending abstract painting's *truth(s)*; about what it is that the spectator is able to bring to the table; and about how this *bringing to* can be woven into a fuller conception of abstract painting's

operability...from which Heron's terms (colour, form and space) can, consequently, be made sense of.

My intention is not to address abstract paintings in direct fashion. When deciding how to tackle this, I found myself drawn to consider the challenges, relevance and critical status of non-figurative painting in contemporary art practice. To me, however, this meant thinking not about a type of painted object per se (in the sense of hoping to circumscribe the past, or else determine the future prospects of abstract painting). It seemed more productive to consider how it is that one approaches such objects, what it is that one asks of them, and how this asking stacks up against other forms of asking. What interests me, in particular, about abstract painting, is the manner with which it presents itself to the spectator; that it claims distinction from other things; that, over more than one hundred years, a space has been fashioned in which it has been able to function—a space complete with terminology, expectations, and familial dwellings. As the title suggests, I have been helped along in the framing of this presentation by the ideas of Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Martin Heidegger too.

To consider the staging of abstract painting is rather liberating, especially to a painter. In my case, it stops me from making, and having to support, claims as to the merits or lack thereof of paintings themselves: something I feel unable to fully believe in the words for. Also, it forces on me the position of a spectator...of one who uses painting in some or other manner. I don't seek to downplay the fact that I am involved with the making of paintings, and only offer this distinction so as to point out that the possibilities of painting appear to me - when making - as oriented in respect of what I am doing, of when I am doing it, and of how this doing is affected by other acts of doing...in short: by the temporal activities of production. To deal with this in writing would be to describe events, which might then be able to be reused, or put back to work as document, commentary, or some other form of theoretical endeavour. Thus, outside of painting paintings, I

am permitted licence to weigh up other things: things that appear to be other than making, yet somehow informing of it nevertheless.

At this point, I'd like to say a few words about the structure of this presentation as it will play itself out from now on in, with particular reference to the title. In reversing the terms *form* and *function* (and prioritising function), I will offer a critique of an oft-naturalised understanding how it is that paintings - particularly those taking the label abstract - operate, and look to a conceivable alternative approach. And so, first, I'd like to say a few words about signs, and, in particular, about *pictures* and *resemblance*. Then, I will address the terms *truth* and *method* (and their plural forms), offering a short account of the likely limitations of methods, and, subsequently, a sense of what is meant by truths. There will be both theoretical and practical particulars to consider, and I hope that you will permit me a degree of licence to weave seemingly dissimilar threads together in the course of the exposition.

Pictures and Picturing

A common dualism sees abstract painting presented as *that which is not a picture*. Yet how it might function remains unclear. To view paintings as constructed of *abstract elements*, in the manner proposed by Heron, would appear to suggest that colour, form and space possess values outside of the colours, forms and spaces that we come to comprehend colour, form and space through (i.e., within paintings), and that these values reconfigure variously in/as paintings. This, however, is paradoxical, in that it offers up abstract colour, form and space *a priori*, as *things which picturing* (the process that W. J. T. Mitchell called, "seeing as") can conceal, whilst conceding that one's knowledge of this concealment is to be arrived at *through picturing*. This amounts to the picture-aspect of a painting showing - in picturing - that which picturing alone serves to obscure. A lot depends here on whether, for instance, *red is taken to be red*, or *serves as an example of red*, or else *denotes an idea of redness*.

Most considerations of how painting pictures the world - and by world I mean all that can be pictured - look to iconology or semiotics, and discussion tends to take the form of whether the sign is of a resembling-type or otherwise. And so, some signs can be said to approximate to the colour, shape and tonal range of the object attested to (the *this* looks like *that* sort of sign), whereas others conjure meaning as a result of convention, and therefore draw on cultural specificities to attain their particular significance. In addition, as Isabelle Graw has pointed out, painting's proximity to its maker - its *liveliness* (or perhaps even its *madeness*), foregrounds indexical links: a painted mark thus becomes a gesture...or something that acts to link a *this* with a *that*.

In his concept of *schemata*, E. H. Gombrich famously proposed an involved process of individual and, by extension, societal - epochal even - trial and error, whereby the artist seeks, through a manipulation of materials, to correct (and thus improve) his work in accordance with what amounts to a three-pronged positioning of approximations. To Gombrich, these approximations draw from what it is that the artist expects to see (the consequence of prior experience); what it is that he actually sees (the effect of light falling on the retina); and what he could possibly see (the result of societal conventions, known artistic advances and entrenched cultural norms). Yet Gombrich's framework is oriented towards likeness, and abstraction, it seems, is not. Notwithstanding, resemblance remains important to abstract painting, and the effects of pareidolia alone serve to ensure that *looking like* is retained within the possibility of any distribution of pigment on a surface. Thus, pictures are kept. And abstraction's embeddedness within discourse enables it to maintain a theoretical currency, permitting it a continued meaningfulness as idea.

How one is to understand an assertion of likeness in the first place remains a contested area. In *Languages of Art* (1968), and in opposition to Gombrich, Nelson Goodman posits that likeness (Gombrich's *resemblance*) is determined in its entirety by complex systems of non-resembling symbols,

established in spite of an external world not in conjunction with it. All such systems are, to Goodman, simply systems of convention, including, for example, the system of perspective drawing, where truth is to be validated not by how accurate the discrete drawing renders reality, but by how successful the particular framework is in terms of sanctioning meaning. And so, for example, a one-point perspective drawing can't be said to be *like the world*, because the conditions cannot be replicated whereby one might experience it *as the world*.

Whoever the victor in the Gombrich-Goodman debate, it seems that, with the semiotic triad fixed firmly in place, abstract painting (indeed painting *per se*), has all its bases covered—it cannot be other than meaningful. But to ascribe meaningfulness and to determine meaning are different processes. The critic might quibble over the extent to which the iconic, symbolic or indexical attain primacy, or take issue with one or other theory of pictorial representation, yet this would appear - even now - to be a matter of taste, and discussion must quickly turn from the method to the manner of meaningfulness, as semiotic functionality is unpacked. In the case of abstract painting, and to return to Heron's invocation of *space*, *colour* and *form* as prior to, and existing through, abstract paintings, it would be expected that the formal properties of a given painting become redeployed for aesthetic or other ends.

Methods and Truths

It is the linearity of method, however - from identifying types of sign to determining their role - that causes problems when thinking about what abstract painting does. With the naturalisation of this process comes the start of a separation of form from content (the idea that the meaning of a thing's properties stands aside from its use). In this view, one identifies a something, excavates it for meaning, compartmentalises and labels it, before situating what it is that becomes known within a bigger picture, and so on. Methods might include: the rigid adoption of a prior system of understanding, a diagrammatic demonstration of a work's function, and

other such attempts to schematise cause and effect: indeed, any approach intent on seeking out factual data, or problematising loose-jointedness.

But what is it that amounts to one's experiences of paintings? From the inside - by which I mean, to someone playing what Gadamer might well have called *the painting game* - it is hard to say. Processes are notoriously difficult to identify and order. Causes and effects can even appear to reverse. Trying to wear, and to maintain, discrete heads - the maker, the spectator, the commentator, the theoriser - though initially making life easier, brings about all sorts of difficulties later, if and when academic efforts are made to piece the varying voices together, so as to attempt say something more complete about an abstract painting. Being inside forces an outside.

Truth, according to Gadamer, in *Truth and method* (1960), is not the outcome of the natural sciences, which, conversely, rely on method. Therefore, it must be arrived at via an alternate route. In art, objective analysis, quantifiability, and forms of fact-finding, serve only to systematise the processes of thought. *Interpreting*, then, to Gadamer, is thus an activity, not intent on divulging the truth of a thing as such, but designed to reveal some or other aspect of the conditions that make truths possible. To explore how abstract paintings present themselves to the world would, in short, be to move beyond the idea of a method of understanding, or of determining a sequence of cause and effect, towards the generation of a clearing within which works work.

By beyond, I don't mean to imply anything mystical, merely a route to something else. So when the conditions of meaning are grasped - in a particular moment of reveal - then a timely opportunity to situate theoretical terminology is afforded...*a setting to work* in the service of saying something *about* the encounter to hand. Furthermore, that truths relate to one's experiences enables them to be grounded in representation—pictures do work. Yet representation and truth do not necessarily

correspond; and Gadamer is with Plato in suggesting that it would be a mistake to attempt to seek out the truth of a thing through recourse to *pictures*. Nevertheless, both the picture-aspect and what Heidegger considered the thingly-aspect of a painting can align, serving together to provide a fulcrum's around which painting's truth gathers—the very condition from which we might come to grasp painting's truths.

If language permits the correspondence of one thing with another - offering up the sense of representation as a possibility - then such a gathering will situate itself in accordance with the truth to which it is seen to correspond. Gadamer deals with what he calls *aesthetic differentiation*, which, loosely speaking, approximates to what, art historically, would amount to formalist considerations: considerations removed from a social context. Yet this amounts, also, to a form of knowing, in that it involves a to-ing and fro-ing between object and subject, with implications for the being of both. To take meaning from a painting is, thus, not to understand it (to know it) - the *it* being the object conditions of the work - but to reveal the truth of that which one is able to know of the painting, which itself shifts with repeated contact—what Heidegger calls disclosures and concealments. Gadamer is not interested in the reclamation of a past - as it was in the past - for this is not available. Such an understanding is key, if one is to avoid *method* and embrace change. Change, in this context, would amount to a preserving of the possibility of abstract painting.

To accusations of relativism, the following: it is not that abstract painting offers what other forms of painting offer, or indeed any other form of object (or material manifestation of a given sign system). On the contrary, differences between things are integral to a hermeneutic approach. Indeed, the particularities of abstract paintings - how it is that they are taken to operate - only matters in respect of what they are seen to be. In short: an abstract painting cannot be an elephant, for instance, because the conditions in which it could be taken to be so are not, as far as we know, attainable. It can, however, be *like*, or *as*, or *in place of*, an elephant, for

reasons of the operability of pictures, or else the result of some or other form of symbolic attachment or literary trope (such as simile, metaphor and allegory). Moreover, if and when an abstract painting happens to be like an elephant, it will be like it in its own fashion, which can subsequently be built into the possibility of what it is that an abstract painting can now be. Thus, the perceived limits of abstract paintings are limits on the meaningfulness of claims: not, then, what it is possible for a painting to say, but what it is possible for saying to be.

To Gadamer, the purpose of hermeneutics is to sanction transformation, and the goal of communication is to bring about change. As Jessica Frazier puts it, when considering Gadamer's appeal to play: "truth depends on the rules that bring all of the elements into a shared language or world". One expects, from the off, that a painting functions within a given context - in this instance, the world of abstract paintings. And if this is not the case, then increased familiarity will make it so—will make it fit. One must accept the rules of engagement in order for paintings to become operable *as paintings*—for paintings to offer themselves up for scrutiny. Yet rules are not fixed, and the players - in conjunction with the objects whose aspects are considered within the particular discourse to hand - act to create the play; each play being the result of whatever elements bring it about. Frazier contends that, to Gadamer, the dynamism of phenomena permits a sense of a perpetual shifting of structure: a latent mutability. As for pictures, be they intentional or otherwise, their very possibility within what an abstract painting - as object-sign - acts to maintain an alignment of the painting with something external to itself, much as the indexical serves to retain an outside force: the maker.

To Conclude

If abstract painting has often been sustained against the grain of art world fashions, it has, nevertheless, persisted as a diverse grouping of ideas to which a much larger array of disparate objects continue to become attached. Fashionability (or a lack thereof) aside, the degree to which

abstract painting has embedded itself within what painting was, is, and might become, attests to how it looks in respect of what can be said about it. And by said, I mean said meaningfully. In saying this, I hope to make clear a resistance to a methodological approach to painting that foregrounds form as something akin to a material set of building blocks from which a painting - once liberated from picturing - can be constructed. The problem here is that it is inconceivable that abstract painting (indeed painting per se) can forever free itself from picturing of one sort or another. And yet pictures are perhaps not everything.

If and when paintings are other than pictures requires only that the notion of formal autonomy is relinquished. This might seem like an odd thing to say...that to let go of form is to let go of pictures too. However, think of it this way: the retention of form (often held in opposition to subject matter) brings with it the necessity of the very idea of pictures...of something that form might conceivably not be. The way around this state of affairs, then, is to conceptualise after the fact: to attend to the painting, and, in attending, to have the painting happen. This happening is a form of functionality: a process that permits one to speculate on how it is that such happening happened. From here, one might choose to adopt a particular method, or a system of thought. Heron's *space*, *colour* and *form*, but also *content*, *picture*, *history*, *aesthetics*, *idea* - the words that amount to how it is that painting sustains itself within discourse - offer themselves up to scrutiny, and, in so doing, answer the needs of a community.

To Gadamer, certainty is not truth. To understand an abstract painting would be to not know something concrete about its presumed inner workings: it would simply be to be drawn into it, to sustain and preserve its openness to questioning—to take it to be an event from which meaningfulness (which includes the possibility of false knowledge and misreading) is possible. Pictures constitute certainty, to the extent that whatever the picture points to, pointing alone is enough to determine its status as picture, and to deem pictures likely. To be captivated by a work is

to find oneself in a position of being able to inquire about it: to question what it is *to be with* the work...through a *talking through* of the work...in the hope of securing a *realisation about* the work. This requires that the viewer not only let pictures in, but also resist them. And so, the abstract reality invoked by Heron is perhaps to be seen not as a beginning or end, but as a point of arrival: somewhere that painting can be. In light of this, abstract painting appears *as an involvement*: as a form of engagement from which the spectator might come to better understand an engagement with form.

Thank you.

Dr Tom Palin, February 2019