

Involvement, Inbetweenness and Abstract Painting

To come to an awareness of painting in the period after abstraction - by which I mean after the emergence and development of abstract painting - is to contend, to a greater or lesser degree, with the *idea*, *language* and *look* of a large assortment of painted objects from the past hundred or so years; dissimilar in form and content. The figurative painter Paul Winstanley goes further, stating that: “It is [...] impossible to make paintings of any sort now without an internalized vocabulary of twentieth-century abstraction (2018: 13)”. For him, this is especially apparent in the manner of painting’s particular pictorial arrangements - in the ordering of space - but also in a call to its own condition as object (in respect of its surface/image or object/edge). Together, to Winstanley, these elements serve to: “heighten the metaphysical nature of the painting surface as a reflection of the depicted surfaces and space” (2018: 13).

Notwithstanding, it is permissible to consider levels of involvement in what Matthew Collings, in his TV programme of the same name, calls: “the rules of abstraction” (BBC Four, 2014). It is not within the scope of this short essay to seek to address these rules directly. Nevertheless, it is no doubt correct to assert that some familiarity with the myriad moves of abstraction - the game of painting as a whole (Bois, 1994: 241) - is required in order to allow the painter to work knowingly with abstraction. *To be with abstract painting* is to take on board that which painting has been, in the service of what it might become. It is not simply that painters help to ensure - with works - that paintings reference earlier modes of painting, but more that to engage in any process of painting - as painting - is to find oneself subsumed in painting’s past.

American abstraction - particularly of the New York School - tends, at this juncture, to exemplify what it is that abstract painting in the West means. Big, optically significant, gestural (or not), painterly (or not), flat, minimal, hard-edged et al: to consider abstract painting outside of the aesthetic and

performative models supplied by Clement Greenberg (1960) and Harold Rosenberg (1952) respectively is to look again to its European origins, or else to ponder its situation in the aftermath of the pluralisation of approaches to painting that the 1970s ushered in. To wrestle with the viability of an abstract painting now is to engage in theoretical conversations to do with digitisation, the screen, appropriation, the body, and the historical development and oft-presumed death of painting. To work in the shadow of the idea of an abstract painting is to seek to retain something of painting: a thing that painting can still be.

Moreover, with the impulse to retain comes the impulse to locate, or to find space for (to see how one thing rests in respect of another). To claim to sit between - abstract and figurative painting - would be to claim knowledge of that which either side (and together) serves to position *the between*, leaving that which becomes positioned to do so approximately: for if either of the locating pillars happen to have been built on shaky ground - or if there is recourse to doubt the soundness of the partitions that keep the between *between* - then subsequent deliberations will threaten the identity of the known. In the case of abstract and figurative painting, there are problematic practical, art historical and linguistic particularities to consider if one is to grasp the varying nuances of claims to work off, with, amid, or in opposition to either marker.

Abstract painting has, over the past century, taken many forms. To say this, however, is to imply that abstraction is rooted in the structures of painted objects: to see it as something that modifies itself in accordance with internalised painterly developments. In this light, abstraction becomes historicised as a thing that painting has sometimes been. Only then can it acquire an origin, a method of approach and a sense of logic that permits its distinction, but also relatedness (to other modes of abstract painting, and to non-abstract painting too). As painting has changed, so, the logic goes, has abstraction. *To abstract* is to begin in one place and to move from—to remove. It is, for the most part, to orient the work away from a mode (or

modes) of pictorial verisimilitude—towards a *something else*. This something else, in respect of the works of the pioneers of abstraction - Mondrian, Kupka, Malevich, Kandinsky, Klee and the Delaunays - could, then, be said to *look unlike the World* to varying degrees.

Approximation is built on looking, but also on conditioning and expectation. In short: *to look* is to cast one's eye over; *to be implicated in* is to be a user of language; and *to expect* is to assume a likely effect from a presumed cause. If abstract paintings have looked other than *like the World*, they have not looked like any other World, and not only because painters have had no knowledge of other worlds - and thus cannot legitimise an alternative form of likeness - but also because *looking like*, in painting, was deemed superfluous to requirements. The constituents of paintings - colour, tonality and arrangement - were, by many painters from 1910 onwards, redeployed for other ends. These ends were sometimes political, oftentimes ideological, and always metaphysical. Thus, to paint was to establish material structures that would, in turn, act to invoke, or else retain, an immateriality too easily lost behind lifelikeness.

This would manifest itself as an appeal to a host of signs and symbols rather than to likeness (visual approximation)—to that which, in the configuration of its form, pointed towards the transcendent. Yet there was an appeal to immanence too—to that which is present. Take, for example, the redness of red, which can be seen to be present in any presentation of red, whereas the angriness of red, for instance, is present only in a demonstration of red's use within a framework to disclose anger. The Platonic implications of a universal redness that precedes a discrete moment of redness aside; the unlikeness of colour - the sense of it becoming liberated from things - permitted painters to redirect attention away from the world of seeing as a form of pattern alignment (*this* structure of paint aligns with *that* moment in the World), and towards foregrounding of painting's presentness, and also its truth.

To operate between abstraction and figuration - as a painter - is to make some concession to what the World looks like, whilst, at the same time, doubting that the world of pictures is enough. A search begins...for more: more material, more ideas, more truth! But there is a contradiction: for the painting must maintain the idea of picturing, however attenuated, within its form, or else picturing dissolves in favour of what Michael Fried would later call objecthood (1967). To not have pictures is to be without the ability to have one thing represent another. To have objecthood only would be not to have objecthood, for objecthood functions as an imposition: applied in response to a consideration of pictures. To seek to throw out pictures does little more than reinforce their hold over all who approach paintings knowingly. It is in their seeming absence pictures that are most present. In their presence they hide.

If the *looking like* sort of pictures - the iconic - can be suspended, to be replaced by symbolic representations of one sort or another, then it follows that the operability of pictures is not dependant on the work to which picturing is ascribed. In other words, resembling pictures are merely built into the possibility of looking at paintings. So too, it would appear, are symbolic alignments of *this* with *that*—paintings can be lined up against all manner of other things. This is significant in that it gives the lie to attempts to keep abstract and figurative modes of painting apart, on absolutist, non-experiential grounds. In short: designations as to the abstractness of a painting appear conditioned by what it is that one hopes to get from painting in the first instance, by how one utilises language and history, and by the extent to which one is able to navigate sometimes simple/sometimes complex optic and haptic systems of exchange.

What Ernst Gombrich termed the psychology of pictorial representation (1960) - how we come to see what it is that we come to see - is a complex, contested area of theoretical inquiry, which draws together iconological, cognitive and historical dimensions of looking and using images, in the service of supplying a model of perception that embeds painting within a

host of cultural particulars. Simon Bill, in writing about the neuropsychology of visual perception, seeks to demonstrate how, in essence, seeing and knowing are to be considered part of the same experience. The result being that a purely formal visual experience (prior to polluting it with *content*, as Clive Bell might have suggested) is, in Bill's analysis, simply not feasible (2018: 16). He comes rather close to Gombrich when he reminds the reader of the constructedness of seeing: of its dependence on sensory receptivity and stored knowledge. Abstract painting is an invitation to abstract, and to disregard (2018: 19).

And so, the more famous of the conscious in-betweeners from the mid-to-late twentieth century - De Stael, De Kooning and Diebenkorn - attain degrees of in-betweenness as a result of how their paintings look, which relates to how other paintings have looked, and to what it was possible to set out to achieve in respect of the then current discourses of painting, but also in respect of various sensory determinates. Yes, in their paintings there is irresolution of one sort or another, a regularity of structure, a tendency to emphasise the general rather than the particular, an exaggeration of colour, and a seeming misuse of perspectival space. Still, all of these features are commonplace in the works of even the most zealous of figurative painters. If singular modes of practice or discrete genres have existed at all (by which I mean, attained concrete form in/as paintings), then such occurrences were surely fugitive, and requiring of a circumscription of exposure to countless contaminates.

Abstract painting is a useful label to differentiate some of the varying manners of painting, but it does so with a broad brush. As a term, it points also to a series of preoccupations, as does the sometimes-confusing label, *figurative*. Similarly misinforming is the oft-unqualified term *representation*, which tends to be used to mean *to attain likeness of the resembling sort*. It is generally misleading to ascribe abstractness or figurativeness to painted objects without implying too great a separation between activities and objects. Abstract painting is, firstly, painting—the

orchestration of materials on a surface, with an intent to affect. Nonetheless, the affect of abstract painting is not the subject to hand. My intention here has been to offer a number of suggestions as to how to approach thinking about abstraction and painting, with the hope, perhaps, of shedding a little light on a rather murky area of debate.

To be between abstraction and figuration is to be involved in painting. Involvement can be great or little, and the degree to which abstraction makes sense - to which it determines and is determined by events - determines its manner of meaningfulness. Consequently, abstraction can be worked with, or not (which can also amount to working with), by both maker and spectator alike. This appears to include making oneself receptive to the varying prospects of abstraction—to what it can now be. The intricacies of language and signs (the possibilities of picturing), the complexities of cognition, and the particularities of painted objects in situ conspire to delimit painting's reach. Yet such limitations are themselves opportunities: in this instance, to explore how it is that painting is able to perpetually reconfigure its form against the expansive backdrop of the world of non-painterly reconfigurations, and to persist still.

Dr Tom Palin, December 2018

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