

BRITISH ABSTRACT ART

PART 1

PAINTING

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Part I: Painting

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Flowers East



INTRODUCTION

Is there such a thing as British abstract painting? Have we really invented a specific kind of abstract art? And if it does exist, nameable and describable, can it be considered as an original invention in its own right or should abstract painting in England be more properly assessed as local variations on a set of themes established elsewhere? The answer to all these questions is a resounding yes, including both the final alternatives: that is, yes it does exist in England in its own right and yes, it can often be seen as variations on an original theme.

In passing, I have to admit to a lifelong hang up, undoubtedly illogical, over the term 'British', synonymous in my mind with the exhortatory rhetoric of politicians when about to set in motion yet another piece of shifty legislation. The word relates far more to political greed and dominance than true cultural achievement. We do not study British poetry or British literature in our universities, now so miraculously increased in number, nor do we ask for a leg of British lamb at the butchers, though we might well specify Scotch beef or Welsh mutton. If we must have labels, what's wrong with the ancient and accurate definitions of English, Scottish, Welsh or Irish? English painting, from the Winchester Bible and Hilliard to Nicholson and Hockney, means something to me, with many delights from Celtic neighbours. British art is deployed abroad by the British Council, eager for prizewinners.

All good art, of course, dissolves the boundaries of national identity and is enjoyable on its own terms from Tokyo to New York, London to Paris. But although nationalism is detestable as an aggressive form of regional insecurity, leading to wars and madness, it is impossible to deny the potency of national characteristics in art. They are there to cherish. Francis Bacon's imagery, his whole approach to painting, could not have emerged from French culture, even given his slight debt to *Ecole de Paris* surrealism. Jackson Pollock couldn't have sprung from an English context. Mondrian's Dutch origins reappear in many aspects of his life's work even though his early alignments with Munch, the Fauves and the cubism of Braque and Picasso are well known. His naturalistic drawings of trees relate directly to his forebears Rembrandt and Van Gogh. Given the widespread dissemination in this century of the various stages of international style, through so many countries, it is still refreshing to see its individual, local inflexions. They were strongly in evidence in Douglas

Cooper's great survey of international cubism staged in New York at the Metropolitan Museum in 1973 and they are still in evidence, up to a point, in any big international show of abstract painting.

Up to a point. The situation is changing – the use of acrylic paint has brought with it an international monotony of colour – and today there are many exceptions to the prevailing force of national characteristics. It would be hard to tell that a sculpture by Caro was by an Englishman or that a painting by Riley was by an English artist – whereas it is always possible to see instantly that works by Nicholson or Pasmore spring from an English sensibility. Artists detest these national identity parades, feeling themselves imaginatively to be *citoyens du monde* and eager to rise above the restrictions of time and place, particularly in their pursuit of abstract ideals – but they do not always bury their origins.

Perhaps the more pure and extreme forms of geometrically devised abstract painting are not so easy to differentiate or locate between one country and another. The common formal currency of this totally abstract branch of art tends to subsume national identity, so that the delicate restraint of Edwina Leapman and the puritan reserve of Agnes Martin arrive at an altitude of formal detachment and objectivity far above the distinguishing traits of English or American art. There are always, in any case, a few gifted individuals who are impelled to work along lines that are quite independent of prevailing style, grandly or modestly free.

So what are the English – or British – national qualities in abstract painting? We have always gained a lot from foreign stimulus, beginning with Whistler's semi-abstract nocturnes and playing host again, fifty years later, to another great American painter, Mark Tobey, at Dartington Hall in Devon in the late thirties, where he perfected his famous *White Writing*, calligraphically based, abstract paintings – the first 'all over' abstract paintings. Together with the floating and spiralling whiplash line of the English artist S.W. Hayter in his abstract paintings and engravings in the same period, Tobey's exquisite invention played a considerable role in the evolution of abstract expressionism in the United States, where Hayter was a wartime resident, teaching in San Francisco at the School of Fine Art with Mark Rothko.

But between the eras of Whistler and Tobey most of the principal formulations of abstract painting were established worldwide. In England, Wyndham Lewis exploring cubism and Italian futurism invented a tough, bristling semi-abstract imagery which sometimes touched on a totally abstract concept. Around 1929–32, Nicholson borrowed from Braque, Arp and Héliou; made the entirely abstract white reliefs of 1936–37 – with some purely abstract paintings influenced by Mondrian and the *Abstraction/Création* crowd in Paris; but soon settled essentially for a semi-abstract topography of Cornwall or Italy and semi-abstract still life structures. During and just after the 1939–45 war, Merlyn Evans made some of the most richly powerful and original extensions to Lewis's semi-abstract world in a group of tragic paintings reflecting on war and violence, developing more abstractly in the two following decades. Ceri Richards built up his abstract poetic and musical references after the war, but had established them in the late thirties in some paintings and notably in some powerfully abstract reliefs, derived from Arp and Picasso.

Abstract painting in England really began to move decisively in the nineteen fifties, with Pasmore's conversion to abstract form via Leonardo and Seurat through to three-dimensional constructions in synthetic materials. Anthony Hill has continued in his own pioneer role in researching the potential of the purist form of construction. On a different path, in painting, Adrian Heath was one of the most committed of the abstract artists of that post-war period, pushing abstract form into different declensions in paintings whose initial stimulus had come partially from the examples of de Staël, Lansky and notably Poliakoff, all working in Paris.

William Gear even earlier, in Paris immediately after the war, had learned from Manessier, Riopelle, the COBRA artists and others. As Merlyn Evans wrote at the time, circa 1954, the crucial post-war synthesis to be made was between Monet and Mondrian.

A spare, challenging, somewhat abrasive kind of painting came from Roger Hilton at this time, lean, pawky but tersely humanist in form and inflexion. Hilton had studied pre-war in Paris with Bissière. In Cornwall, his friend Terry Frost brought a different, more scratchy and abrupt handling of paint and form to abstract paintings derived loosely from boats and harbour lights in St Ives, extending to fields, gates and landscape. But these paintings became fully abstract through the sixties on more spare terms. Patrick Heron abandoned semi-abstract figuration in his long quest for an abstract use of colour.

In Cornwall, Lanyon developed an entirely abstract view of landscape through the fifties and sixties, loving Turner, respecting his neighbours Nicholson and Hepworth – and their wartime visitor, Gabo – and achieving an original vision of his Cornish countryside, often viewed from his gliding trips, well before the advent of de Kooning's semi-abstract excursion into landscape. In landscape art, artists began to enter the landscape itself in unprecedentedly close focus, as we find in the paintings of Hitchens. Separately and nearly a decade later, the freshly radical impetus of land art was felt in the US through the pursuits of Robert Smithson.

When in the early nineteen fifties at Whitechapel I installed the first big exhibition in England of Mondrian, and then Malevich, the shows seemed to contain a mysterious truth from another planet: still radical but exotic and somewhat remote, distanced by something beyond mere time and history. These shows were the first ever held in England for either great figure so the historic impact was very real, but already several fresh strands of feeling and perception – of a totally new awareness – had begun to penetrate abstract painting. Its character had become more complex, fresh possibilities had arrived. Mondrian and Malevich seemed to belong to a more idealistic, simpler world that believed in a better planned, more selfless society, decently housed in good modern architecture, free of war, fully employed, which might come about in partnership, almost, with an abstract art of balance and harmony to embody and reflect the idealism of such a society.

We know that these hopes were shattered in 1939, but at least the abstract art of the early years in our century had an acute influence on our best architecture. And it could be said, further still, that Brancusi's ravishing series of variations on a gleaming, highly polished, attenuated, vertically soaring bronze shape, the *Bird in Space*, of 1922, was the prototype of all modern style at its best, beginning with streamlining, through pens to cars and boats, furniture and trains and much industrial design. A spirit of optimism informed much pre-war abstract art, for which the *Skylon* at the 1951 Festival of Britain was a symbol of post-war hope.

What crept into abstract painting in the fifties as a mirror of our more complex, rather differently troubled post-war awareness was a far more unsettling, sensuous but ambiguous, edgily nervous approach to form that came from expressionism. Whether we call it *tachisme* or abstract expressionism – and they are different – the fundamental impulse in the new painting sprang direct from the nervous

system, rather primitive, concerned with vulnerability rather than transcendence, the experience of the subconscious, and the freshly received supremacy and autonomy of the human mark. The great photographer Brassai disclosed an aspect of this new awareness in 1937 when he photographed, in a spirit of poetic enquiry, graffiti on the walls of urinals in Paris. Dubuffet, Fautrier, Michaux, Lansky, de Staël, Wols, Pollock, Soulages and Hartung continued the exploration: Tàpies and Saura in Spain, Burri in Italy and in the US Pollock, Kline, Tobey, Motherwell and other painters broadened and extended the new premises first touched on or set out by late Monet, early Kandinsky, Beckmann, early Kokosha and Miró in very differing ways. Through the fifties and sixties, many abstract painters in England in varying degrees of independence also worked along lines broadly shared with their contemporaries in Paris and New York.

A fair guide to the less than enthusiastic approach of the English to our very own abstract painting is the fact that we are only now, in 1994, approaching the end of the century which saw its birth and lengthy development from around 1900, laying plans for a possible Gallery of Modern Art which might contain it – and even now depending upon the chancy largesse of a new National Lottery, already eagerly staked out as a source of funding for music, dance, theatre, art, opera, and by the look of things, education, health and housing.

Abstract art is tolerated in England, but not really loved, by a broad public and best appreciated when safely confined within the preserves of a sculpture park or a temporary exhibition as a branch of entertainment or leisure activities. There is a lot of activity but little commitment, like purchasing. It is readily accepted in advertising, on fabrics or as stage decor but not really in painting. Only a comparatively small number of individuals here make large, serious and expanding collections of abstract art although the situation has improved slowly in the past thirty years. There is a sizeable handful of idealistic and often munificent patrons who take abstract art in their stride, although not nearly so many proportionately – in terms of relative population – as in the US. Our education system is greatly to blame for this ignorance and deficiency.

We do not use our artists properly. Richard Smith could re-style entire department stores or supermarkets. There is still no big mural in a public building by Jack Smith, now turned 60. How many Caro or Deacon sculptures have you seen recently in London's parks or squares? If an artist had

been included by statute in each one of those planning committees of the sixties and seventies, most of the urban butchery which now afflicts us all over England would have been avoided.

The past twenty years have not been propitious for abstract art in England, after the real advances in taste and understanding so strongly in evidence throughout the fifties and sixties. This negative phase of reaction against abstract art had its richly comic aspects. By 1970, the sort of straight abstract or quasi-abstract art with which we are concerned here had given place to the furthest reaches of minimalism, social and political protest art, conceptual art and performance art. This in turn led to a reaction by 1978–80 in favour of painting – in a new wave of figurative art, not always quite so new as some of its supporters imagined. Even so, our art schools were packed with students painting convulsive, dense imagery often derived from their world of bedsits, takeaways, tv and computer games. A lot of painting looked like Soutine in Disneyland. Figurative art certainly had a shot in the arm but it was amusing when conservative critics gave loud thanks in the eighties for this supposed return to figurative sanity – did they ever look at it? – since figurative art in various forms has never left the stage for a single second in England right through my lifetime.

Figuratively romantic art in wartime gave place to Bomberg's innumerable followers and then the Kitchen Sink painters. In the fifties, just as abstract expressionism appeared, pop art zapped into view. Pop art was nothing if not figurative here as well as in the US. Hockney went into action around this time and critics yet again wrote about 'The Return of the Figure'. It had never, ever, been away. Thinking of all those boys in showers, Patrick Procktor said at the time that maybe it should be called 'Son of Figure'. Right through all these arrivals and shifts in taste, Burra and Nicholson kept right on painting, just as Clough and Ayres kept on working with growing strength through the seventies and up to the mid-eighties when abstract art was discounted.

I cannot recall a time when figurative art has not been the most popular form of art in England or vociferously in evidence, from Burra to Hockney, or from Spencer to Bacon, Freud and Auerbach. Present day practitioners of installation art – some of it with odd roots in performance art – are all essentially figurative whatever the symbolic discrepancies between written, aesthetic, philosophical, political or sociological theses and the disparate objects or diagrams which face

you *in situ*. There's nothing abstract about a woman painting the floor of a gallery with her hair or unravelling or ravelling her nightgown over several days, or an embalmed sheep floating in a tank, or lumps of urine-stained ice.

Our abstract painters and sculptors are somewhat handicapped by the way in which foreigners rate our art. These well meaning officials and sometimes collectors are almost invariably circumscribed by the way in which they traditionally perceive our national identity, so that they tend to bestow praise on those artists who seem to be doing what an English artist *should* be doing. A well-tailored circumspection, or a cultivated and coolly ordered informality like English gardens, is still the prevailing expectation. Bacon has rather disrupted that notion. But even so, whatever the premises, a good many of our abstract painters and sculptors are greatly honoured abroad, either within the international fraternity of totally abstract art, like Kidner, Hughes, Reynolds and some others, or seen as unique figures, like Riley, Hoyland and Scully – or Moore and Caro.

There are many serious collectors abroad who buy works by English abstract artists, but official knowledge and judgement abroad is often insufficiently informed. In 1975, at the opening celebration for the first big show of sculpture by Caro to be seen in New York, a retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, the catalogue preface informed me that this was the first exhibition at the Modern Museum to be devoted to a British artist since the Henry Moore show of 1946. *Thirty years?* Not a single artist worth considering for even a medium-sized show? Hepworth, Nicholson, Riley, Burra, Spencer, Auerbach... Such a record could only be achieved by ignorance and chauvinism.

Things are a little better now, but American officialdom would still rather welcome Freud, Auerbach and Bacon, because this work fits into their view of what 'British' art should be like, than pay attention to our abstract painters because they believe that abstract art belongs to the US. We are permitted one abstract painter, Sean Scully, and one abstract sculptor, Caro, and that's about it. In Europe, things are far more open, because a new wave of younger foreign dealers and gallery officials, closer to us geographically, are better informed, less prejudiced and far more open in their approach to art everywhere.

Many old divisions between abstract and figurative painting, with their sometimes absurd rivalries and intolerance, are

dissolving, though naturally not the essential and extreme differences. Is Jasper Johns abstract or figurative? What matters is good art, and there is room for that on either side of what is nowadays a sometimes ill-defined or even, on occasion, non-existent fence. I respect the purists' viewpoint, but there is no doubt that the broad sense of abstract and figurative art has changed.

But all in all, it is still quite tough making your name as an English abstract artist, unless of course, for the time being you want to join the ranks of installation art which has now, oddly enough, become the new academy with generous public or private subvention, arenas for action and a broad licence to make public entertainment from solemn themes. Every town hall, school playground, library and exhibition centre, welcomes it. You could say that at the end of this century both abstract and figurative artists have walked out of the studio hand in hand and joined the circus.

And you could say that some installation art is extending the possibilities of art. Whatever, abstract painting goes on because it is still the greatest and most radical twentieth century extension of pictorial language, not as a substitute for figurative imagery but as a new and direct visual line to the most fundamentally indescribable stirrings of the artist's imagination in contemplation of life, nature, and personal experience, from the sublime Klee and Mondrian right up to the youngest painter in this exhibition.

Bryan Robertson 1994

PLATES



23 Derek
HIRST



24 Clyde
HOPKINS

- 20 Alan GOUK (b.1939)
Prodigal Paysanne 1989–93
Oil on canvas
63 x 127ins/160 x 322.5cms
Courtesy of East i West Gallery, London
- 21 Alan GREEN (b.1932)
Two Angles Three Angles To Top 1993
Oil on canvas
61 x 63ins/155 x 160cms
Courtesy of Annely Juda Fine Art, London
- 22 Patrick HERON (b.1920)
27 August: 1991
Oil on canvas
48 x 60ins/121.9 x 152.4cms
Courtesy of Waddington Galleries, London
- 23 Derek HIRST (b.1930)
Winter was Hard No.III 1992
Cryla on panel
60 x 72ins/152.5 x 183cms
Courtesy of Angela Flowers Gallery, London
- 24 Clyde HOPKINS (b.1946)
Over Peenemunde 1993
Oil on canvas
36 x 30ins/91.4 x 76.2cms
Courtesy of Francis Graham-Dixon Gallery, London
- 25 John HOYLAND (b.1934)
Kings Seal 22.9.93
Acrylic on cotton duck
100 x 93ins/254 x 236.2cms
- 26 Malcolm HUGHES (b.1920)
4 Element Relief Painting 1993
Oil on canvas
61 x 45ins/155 x 114cms
Courtesy of Annely Juda Fine Art, London
- 27 Paul HUXLEY (b.1938)
Untitled 1994
Acrylic on linen
68 x 68ins/172.7 x 172.7cms
- 28 Albert IRVIN (b.1922)
Skipper 1991
Acrylic on canvas
84 x 120ins/214 x 305cms
Courtesy of Gimpel Fils, London
- 29 Tess JARAY (b.1937)
Six Red Steps 1987
Acrylic on cotton duck
77 x 47ins/195.5 x 119.3cms
- 30 Trevor JONES (b.1945)
Tomb 1993
Oil on canvas
20 x 23½ins/51 x 60cms
Courtesy of Angela Flowers Gallery, London
- 31 Michael KIDNER (b.1917)
The Emperor's New Mind (Hello Roger Penrose) 1994
Collage on hardboard
48 x 48ins/121.9 x 121.9cms
Courtesy of Heidi Hoffmann Gallery, Friedberg, Germany
- 32 Edwina LEAPMAN (b.1934)
Equinox Series: Deep Dark Blue (B) 1993
Acrylic on canvas
82 x 62ins/208.5 x 157.7cms
Courtesy of Annely Juda Fine Art, London
- 33 Rosa LEE (b.1957)
Tryphe (Indolence) 1992
Oil on canvas
70 x 66½ins/178 x 169cms
Courtesy of Todd Gallery, London
- 34 John LOKER (b.1938)
Blue Cathedral 1988
Oil on canvas
118 x 137½ins/300 x 350cms
Courtesy of Angela Flowers Gallery, London
- 35 John MCLEAN (b.1939)
Reach 1994
Acrylic on canvas
59½ x 66ins/151.5 x 167.5cms
Courtesy of Francis Graham-Dixon Gallery, London
- 36 Nicholas MAY (b.1962)
Blue Gold 163 1994
Acrylic and metallic powder on canvas
79¾ x 97½ins/203 x 248.5cms
Courtesy of Victoria Miro Gallery, London
- 37 Mali MORRIS (b.1945)
Red Through Two 1993
Acrylic on canvas
103¾ x 34ins/263.5 x 86.3cms
Courtesy of Francis Graham-Dixon Gallery, London
- 38 Thérèse OULTON (b.1953)
Transparence No.4 1991
Oil on canvas
77 x 70ins/195.6 x 177.8cms
Courtesy of Marlborough Fine Art, London

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