

Falls the Shadow

Jason Martin

By Sue Hubbard

Art is not what you see, but what you make others see.

Edgar Degas (1)

In the 1950s the critic Harold Rosenberg famously wrote that “the painter no longer approached his easel with an image in his mind; he went up to it with material in his hand to do something to that other piece of material in front of him. The image would be the result of that encounter.” (2) More than half a century later this definition of abstract painting, which may now seem obvious to an insouciant 21st century audience, still holds true. “What matters always”, Rosenberg continued, “is the revelation contained in that act.” This implies that painting has something unique to reveal, that hidden in its depths is some innate truth that can, through the relationship between the artist’s ‘doing’ and the viewer’s perceptive looking, heighten our awareness of what it means to be in the world. But the question that remains for a painter, in a society where image and notoriety have become ubiquitous and the word ‘revelation’ has an almost archaic ring that suggests some sort of pseudo-religious experience, is how to make the inert plasticity of paint and material ‘speak’ and what, in a period more concerned with sound bites than the unmasking of subtle verities, these might say.

Jean-François Lyotard offers a clue when he writes, “To make visible that there is something which can be conceived and which can neither be seen nor made visible: this is what is at stake in modern painting.” (3) But this is a conundrum, for how can one make visible that which cannot be seen? Implicit here is the notion that painting can suggest something inchoate, that is not only beyond language but also beyond our normal visual experience. Lyotard creates a distinction between traditional realistic forms, which

cater to a nostalgia for an unobtainable 'wholeness', and those postmodern forms that actively deny that such wholeness can ever be attained. Kant, he suggests, gives a direction by naming "formlessness, the absence of form, as a possible barometer of the unrepresentable". (4) Kant's sublime has had a huge influence on abstract painting. An artist may have an *idea* or a *feeling* of the world and its totality without necessarily having the possibility – either visually or linguistically – to express it. They might attempt to conceive of infinity, yet struggle to make such an inchoate and abstract notion visible. Lyotard argues that the postmodern explores "that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable". (5) The contemporary artist, therefore, particularly a painter, may find himself grappling every bit as much with such philosophical conundrums as with the obdurate qualities of his chosen materials.

For Jason Martin, a graduate of Goldsmiths and part of the YBA generation for whom image and impact have been paramount, these questions pose a plethora of problems. Why, after all, be a painter when most painterly boundaries have been breached and all grand gestures have already been explored? What space is there left for the painter to inhabit? For Martin, being part of the tradition is paramount. He is, he insists, a painter first and an artist second. Being a painter, he argues, is akin to being a medium. The mysterious, responsive, yet unpredictable nature of the materials and the chance elements that they throw up are integral to his working process. This approach allows for an exploration of the physical, the spontaneous and the visceral in very immediate ways that cannot be achieved in other visual forms such as sculpture.

Whilst his language is entirely abstract, his work is made in the world and therefore refers obliquely to it: to the body, to the movement of light, to organic forms and to the processes of making which can still be seen retained at the edge of a painting, where the history of the layers that make up the surface remain visible like ancient striations in rock. For a long time landscape has been the most obvious reference, along with the figure placed within that landscape. Yet Jason Martin's paintings go beyond mere geographical topographies to create internal terrains. The best painting can, he argues, be compared to nature but it is impossible to mirror nature simply by copying it. As Chagall reputedly said, "Great art picks up where nature ends". It is important to let the materials determine what happens, not to impose

too much and to allow chance and intuition to dictate over intention. To be a painter is to be a part of the cultural lineage of humanity, for painting predates the written word and connects us to our ancient past. In this the gesture is paramount and the body integral. The paint becomes expressive, sentient and vulnerable, built up like so many accretions of skin. As with the rings of growing trees the layers of paint are the physical expression of the passing of time, linking the work's beginning to its end. What Martin leaves is a trace of his artistic and human presence, just as those early painters did deep in the Lascaux caves.

His work commands the gallery space and has a self-confident sense of its own presence, opening up the volume of the surface to the viewer. He believes, as did Jackson Pollock half a century earlier, that the artist is essentially a tool, who discovers rather than decides his direction. Issues are resolved through the process of working. Yet he has deliberately limited the possibility of the 'gesture' - without erasing it completely - to create a level of detachment and objectivity. For, as a contemporary painter in a culture where we are witnessing the exhaustion and ossification of established vocabularies and styles, it is no longer possible to make grand statements without a degree of irony and self-reflection. The utopian language of the American Abstract Expressionists has run its course. Perhaps Rothko, with his sublime saturated canvases, and Pollock, with his visceral viscous lines, were among the last painters for whom a heroic vision was possible with any degree of certainty or innocence. Now for a postmodern artist (and it might be argued because of the accidents of history we are all postmoderns now) work is less likely to be governed by pre-established goals or familiar categories, for it is these very goals and categories for which the artist is searching.

Painting as sculpture, sculpture as painting. This dialogue forms one of the central debates within this exhibition. As Donald Judd argued in his famous essay on Specific Objects, "all paintings are spatial in one way or another ... anything spaced in a rectangle and on a plane suggests something in and on something else, something in its surround, which suggests an object or figure in its space...that's the main purpose of painting." (6) On entering the Lisson Gallery we are confronted by the sculpture, *Behemoth*, 2012, (pp. **). Measuring 3m x 3m at its base and over 2.6m high, it is made of 1.5 tons of virgin cork (cork from the tree's first shedding) that has been coloured a deep dense black. Jason Martin has a studio

in Portugal and spends a good deal of his time working there. Cork, therefore, is a familiar and vernacular material. Over 1000 pieces of cork were suspended in a water-based medium containing 140 kilos of ivory black pigment, with not much binder in it. As a result the pigment seems to vibrate on the surface of the cork, yet has also soaked into it to become an integral element. Constructed in layers, like an interlocking pantile roof, this imperfect cube sits in the middle of the gallery floor like something burnt or charred. There is a suggestion of the alchemical and the transformative, of something elemental rising from the ashes. What is lightweight is given the illusion of heaviness. What appears to have been destroyed or damaged suggests the possibility of renewal. The form resonates with an interior life as the fugitive light trapped within is filtered through the crevices to create a tension between the outer surface and the hidden interior. Here the language of painting and the language of sculpture coalesce.

Jason Martin dislikes the fact that so many writers describe him as making black paintings. In fact, he deliberately uses transparent pigments through which light and the colour of the ground will show. Colour is never decorative but an intrinsic part of both the structure and emotion of a work. Standing with Martin in his London studio discussing this exhibition, it is clear that these so-called black paintings are full not only of colour but of subtle light and shade. There is a black full of red tones and another that looks like the iridescence of a crow's wing – all sheen and shimmer – reflecting violets and greens. This, he explains, is a property of dioxazine mauve. He is very knowledgeable about the properties and possibilities of paint. The paintings begin with an entirely zinc white surface over which he puts down layers of pigment to create a floating, transparent veil of colour. This is then raked with either a section of draft excluder or a comb-like piece of metal or board. Household paint is used as a ground, then layered and sanded until it becomes smooth, after which it is sealed, or not, depending on a desire for reflection, for sealing prevents the oil penetrating back into the ground. These almost balletic paintings contain both stillness and storm, quietness and nervous energy. The shards of feathery light are fractured and dynamic, while their sinewy movements are as expressive as those of the dancer's body. The flame-like marks of *Tempest*, 2011, (pp. **) resonate with *Sturm und Drang*, linking the painting (as does the title) to notions of 19th century German Romanticism that exalted nature, feeling and human individualism in counterpoint to Enlightenment Rationalism; whilst the central rectangle of *Qaaba*, 2011, (pp. **) is ambiguously both a vortex and a void, implying the possibilities of entrance to another realm or

psychological dimension beyond the normal confines of the physical world. The swirling movement is reminiscent of the dance of the Sufi whirling Dervishes performed to achieve a state of religious ecstasy. The title refers to the cuboid-shaped building in Mecca that is the most sacred site in Islam and which, according to the Qur'an, was constructed by Abraham and his son Ishmael. It is towards the Qaaba that all Muslims face during prayers, no matter where they are in the world. The marks within these paintings are not the cathartic, expressive, calligraphic marks of the modernist; rather they ask what can painting do now, what is still possible within its narrow confines? Each work is an act of faith, a journey across the panorama of the surface in which the traces left by the artist's chosen implement are integral to the work's 'meaning' and 'interpretation'. They are a leap into the void. That is the joy; that is what painting offers: a relationship between the metaphoric and the poetic in physical form. "Creativity," as Matisse said, "takes courage". The surfaces of these paintings contrast with the density of the pigment in works such as *Alsace*, 2012, (pp. **) with its vibrant cobalt turquoise pigment or *Yaba*, 2011, (pp. **) constructed from dense spinel black that allows for much less play of light on the surface and more closely embraces the language of sculpture.

A sculptural vocabulary is further explored in the series of cast panels that includes *Verso*, 2010, *Ceyx*, 2012, and *Egypt*, 2012 (pp. **). Patinated matt bronze, copper and reflective nickel all suggest the primal and the mythic. As with the pigments employed elsewhere, these metals remind us of their fundamental, ancient and elemental properties.

The history of avant-garde painting is that of a progressive surrender to the resistance of its medium. This resistance has chiefly consisted in the flat picture plane's denial of perspectival space in order to be rid of imitation and description. Now, too, that exploration has run its course. We are in transitional times, at a point in history where art finds itself without any coherent priorities or means of evaluating either itself or its role. Postmodernity has a tendency to absorb everything and to give out nothing. So much postmodern art is about deconstructing and stripping away the ideological myths that dominated the modernist terrain, the hegemonic and masculine authority that dominated Western European culture and its institutions. The romantic image of Soutine or Modigliani working alone in poverty or the embattled outsider like Pollock is behind us. Artists now are professionals engaged with the world of

money, glamour and power. Utopian thinking and avant-garde rebellion seem to belong to the 20th century. Yet, ironically, this very lack of a solid centre or coherent vision leads the perceptive artist towards a quest for a new visual language in order to revisit the possibilities of the ‘sublime’ and the ‘spiritual’ within contemporary culture, whilst avoiding the self-aggrandising narratives and pitfalls of Modernism. Although it might be argued that the possibilities for stylistic innovation have reached a limit, this is exactly the moment that we need to search for new directions. Insouciance and irony have dominated for the best part of a quarter of a century but there is an increasing urge to re-calibrate art so that it is not simply a distraction from current economic and social issues but gives voice to the pertinent questions of our time. For as the critic Thomas McEvelley suggests, “it seems that the great question that our culture faces now is whether it’s going to have the resilience to redefine itself and take off again.” (7)

It is in this transitional terrain, in this interplay between gesture and material, between image and conception, that Jason Martin chooses to explore subtle new possibilities:

Between the idea
 And the reality
 Between the motion
 And the act
 Falls the Shadow

For thine is the Kingdom

Between the conception
 And the creation
 Between the emotion
 And the response
 Falls the Shadow

From T.S. Eliot, *The Hollow Men* (8)

1. Edgar Degas from, *The shop-talk of Edgar Degas*, R.H. Ives Gammell, ed. Boston University Press, 1961
2. Harold Rosenberg from, ‘The American Action Painters’. Originally published in *Art News*, LI, NY, Dec. 1952. Reprinted in Harold Rosenberg, *The Tradition of the New*, NY, 1959
3. Jean-Francois Lyotard from ‘Answering the Question: “What is Postmodernism?”’, in I.S. Hassan (eds.) *Innovation/Renovation*, Madison, Wisconsin, 1983; reprinted as an appendix to the English edition of Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*
4. Immanuel Kant quoted by Lyotard ‘Answering the Question: “What is Postmodernism?”’
5. Jean-Francois Lyotard as above

6. Donald Judd 'Specific Objects'. First published in *Arts Yearbook*, 8, NY, 1965; reprinted in Judd *Complete Writings 1959-1975*, Halifax Nova Scotia, 1975
7. Thomas McEvilley quoted by Suzi Gablik in, 'The Post-Avant-Garde. Endgame Art, Hover Culture, Rearguard Action', from *The Re-Enchantment of Art*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1991
8. T.S. Eliot, *The Hollow Men*, first published in 1925