

Believing in something that couldn't be built

James Ryan talks to Martin Holman

Martin Holman: *How have your paintings come to look like this, reductive and geometrical?*

James Ryan: My early work, when I was still studying, consisted of photo-realist paintings of used urban environments. Around the same time, I took part in a placement in an architect's office where I worked on utopian models of unbuildable structures. I've never been completely happy with the older work; I always felt I was being too literal. I now see it as a necessary part of getting to where I am now. My current work comes out of a long period of reassessment. I was looking for a way of working that referenced architecture and the urban environment, but which was ultimately about painting.

The paintings look familiar from the history of modernism, perhaps from some point in Europe in the 1930s. Yet the references are neither ironic nor imitative. It looks as if you recognise a contemporary relevance in them.

Absolutely, I feel some of the most important work produced happened in the early stages of modernism. I feel my work is about picking up on positive advancements and using them in a contemporary way. I hope that there are moments in the work, for example, the patterned fabrics and my handling of paint, where new ground is reached. I think my work is about referencing a particular way of painting, but allowing chance and intuition to lead the painting, albeit within tightly controlled parameters.

Are styles from the recent past there for reviving by artists of your generation, as ideas and propositions free of historical commentary?

I think as long as people are aware of the art history they are making reference to, then it's there to be used like anything else. In my view painting is the most self-referencing art form there is. Painters have always looked to the past for inspiration; that's partly why it's such an interesting art form. I see my work as a continuation of painting's language.

Line, colour and the illusion of floating shapes in indeterminate spaces. These images seem to probe the nature of visual reception. Who determines how they are 'seen', the artist or the viewer?

After the work leaves the studio, it has to exist on its own, so the relationship has to be between the painting and the viewer. I don't want to tell the viewer what to feel about the work but, for me, my paintings are about time and the slow unravelling that takes place when you stand in front of the work – as the painting slowly lets out more information about itself.

I am interested in your use of patterned cloth as a kind of ready-made ground. How did that come about?

My use of checked fabric came from a very practical problem. I produce the paintings to a set of self-imposed rules – one being a strong resistance to measure and over-plan the composition. The patterned material seems to offer a solution, a ready-made grid that I can work over the top of. But more than that, the fabrics add a number of other interesting qualities to the work. Having a pattern underneath helps to highlight the paint's translucency and expand the depth and sense of layering taking place. The transparency of the paint means that each subsequent layer affects what it is laid over it, both in terms of visual order and colour. Although the fabrics are carefully selected, I'm conscious of a kind of throwaway or found aesthetic in them, as well as the obvious domestic and craft references. It's ultimately about taking abstract painting somewhere else. Some of the

fabrics have been chosen knowing that they will visually interrupt the reading of the painting. I'm thinking here of the irregular patterned fabrics in this recent show. In these works the painting is almost an embellishment of the pattern, so it becomes difficult to decipher paint from pattern. All the fabrics were selected for their ability to stage or support the painting, like foundations. I am really happy with this relatively new development in the work and can see a lot of potential for the future.

When you layer your repertoire of forms on to this material, are you conscious of being decorative, of making pleasing images?

I know for some people I'm on shaky ground, and I really like that. To me the introduction of the patterned fabric makes perfect sense. The issue of decoration especially in relation to modernist ideals just seems irrelevant now; there are no rules anymore. I think the fabric along with the looser areas of painting in the work really help to distance the work from any idea that the practice is about carrying on a modernist legacy. The work might be reductive but that doesn't mean that references to the everyday can't exist.

Would you consider translating these forms into planar constructions?

I wouldn't rule it out, but for me I would be worried about how that would affect the reading of the paintings. I'm very interested in my paintings as objects in and of themselves. I'm interested in the way paintings are read and their ability to convey visual concepts, particularly when they are illogical. For me, painting is able to do this far better than sculpture, installation or video. There is something about a static image, and particularly with painting, that allows the mind to accept what it is being offered. I think it is because we know that paintings are complete invention, that they do not exist in the same physical space as the viewer. To make them work we have to believe in them, to actively animate what we are seeing, and to turn paint into the thing it is representing - into a face, a landscape or a vase of flowers. In my case, it's about believing in something that couldn't be built, or in something that works far better in two dimensions than in actual space. If I were to build an environment for the paintings or to make installations I don't think I could create the same degree of believability.

James Ryan – Glitch took place at Rod Barton Gallery, London, 18 September - 16 October 2010. James Ryan lives and works in London.

Martin Holman is a writer on art and exhibitions organiser whose recent publications include *Terry Setch* (Lund Humphries, 2009) and *Gilberto Zorio* (Milton Keynes Gallery, 2010). The exhibition he has selected of the final works of Pino Pascali opens at Camden Arts Centre, London, in March 2011.

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