

FrameWork 12/16

Alex Bowron on Patrick Howlett

Writing about painting

‘Any picture can be understood as failed or incomplete writing, and the same is true of any writing’¹

‘...[pictures] routinely escape attempts to have them make the kinds of orderly sense that art history desires’²

‘The painting is teeming with clues and with traces that the artist has left here like signposts’³

Disclaimer: It is the author’s firm belief that art’s value is intrinsic. The work of art must necessarily be allowed to exist *for its own sake*. Artists must never accept criticism for the lack of obvious instrumental value contained in their practice because their practice has an inherent and true potential to advance human thought. Human minds require a free zone in order to practice the three most essential precursors to progress: experimentation, risk-taking, and critical problem-solving. Art’s role is as developer, channeler, and challenger of thought. Painting, like all art, does not need to prove its worth. Painting’s worth is that *it is*.

The paintings are both hard and soft. They are staggered in composition; both internally, and in their hanging. They contain geometries and transparencies that underlie the overall flow of each canvas. The edges of their lines are clear, but are defined by moments of bleeding and blending into the soft, reoccurring transitions between figure and ground. The pictorial ground is formal in structure and function: what pops from a distance is actually closest to the surface. At times the figure and the ground compete: the figure should be the ground, the ground the figure. Negative spaces act to convey three-dimensional depth. They are the volume of empty space where the volume of a picture is contained and organized. Each piece of each painting is part of a movement. The tension both within and surrounding each compositional element causes a pull and push inside each element and throughout the picture plane.

There are numerous borders left undefined, or kept permeable. Perspective remains both atmospheric and linear; space is ordered through an overlapping and converging of shapes, with equal attention to foreground, middle ground, and background. Texture is both actual and implied, with the paint at times protruding in sculptural clusters from the flatness of the ground, and at other times acting as a translucent veil to bolster the linen’s natural tooth.

¹ James Elkins. *On Pictures and the Words That Fail Them*, New York, NY, Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 131

² *ibid* xviii

³ Françoise Barbe-Gall. *How to Look at a Painting*, London, Frances Lincoln Limited, 2010, p. 195

The artist puts his paint to good use. He exploits the behavior of this medium in order to showcase all the ways that paint can be applied to a canvas. His style is both abstract and realist, biographic perhaps, but certainly technical. He employs visual conventions that rely on the expectations of perception: symmetry, line, shape, colour, and texture all appear in every possible iteration. Symbols are both recognizable and abstract, and compositions do not remain confined to the limitations of the picture plane. Scale is neither large nor small, causing our bodies to be active in the space within, and surrounding each piece.

The artist's palette is diverse but not gratuitous. Frosted pastels, cool blues, and ashy greys mingle with richly saturated golds, poppies, and burgundies, all the while maintaining their role as unified sums of a harmonious whole. They add personal depth and an invitation to approach.

Every moment of the artist's thought is contained within the markings of his technique. His lines are soft and deliberate, oscillating between a methodical delicacy and an intentional looseness. They float and flow on the canvas, obeying their borders even in the act of merging and overlap. Despite their clear and deliberate intentions to define space, the brushstrokes are never mechanical. They maintain an organic fluidity and commitment to contour so confident that the frame can hardly contain them.

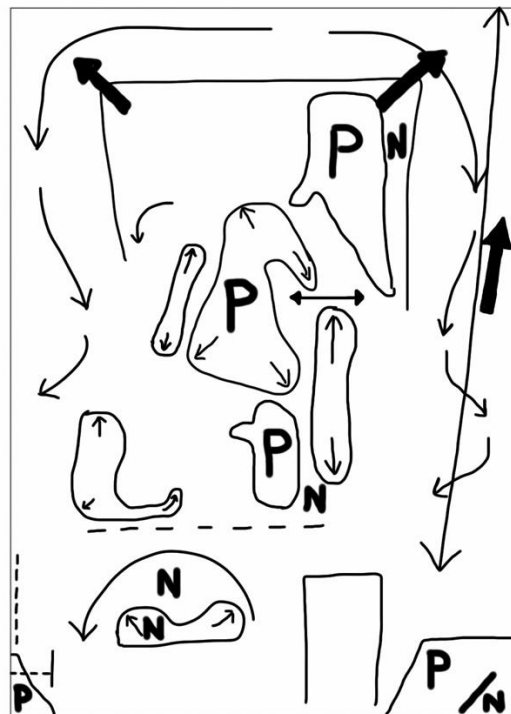


Figure 1: The writer attempts a visual dissection using the methods of the painting's creation.

Aside from its immediate aesthetic pleasures, the exhibition is actually quite esoteric. This is art for artists; painting for painters. The installation is structured, stacked and site-specific, full of intelligent intuition. It is constructed in much the same way as the paintings themselves: using layers, positioning shapes, and building off of what came before. The works are convergent organic accumulations, like limbs in motion, with all their actions flowing towards an innate geometry. Our eyes are alive, active in this zone where all perspectives are afforded equal value.

There is movement everywhere, but action is concentrated within the vibrations. The paintings emit reconfigured infinite and ultimately creative waves that mingle with our own. They give, we receive; we give, they receive. Their aura is fully intact, pregnant with the collected stockpiles of painting's history. They combine the energy of their physical ground, media, intellectual sources, author, environment, and viewer, to create an atmospheric landscape into which a personal atmosphere can extend. Energy is continually transferred between the forms, objects, and symbols that make up each picture and the forms, objects, and symbols surrounding them.

Layers function in service of the aura. Like a cumulative patina of art and personal history, they cause us to consider this exhibition as the organic result of the artist's context. These paintings are exactly as they should be. They sit on a trajectory that began before memory and continues indefinitely. They exhibit the emotional relationships between shape, colour, body, material, and ground. Each painting speaks with an internal logic that reveals the conditions of its making.

Engineered to function architecturally, the nature of each painting's subject matter is re-created plastically, so that 'all the forces of design and three-dimensionality [are related] to the flatness of the picture plane'⁴. The resulting represented space is abstract *and* realist, or, it is an abstraction derived from lived experience. The subject matter of each piece is both simplified and complicated, allowed to carry its original meaning while performing on an entirely new stage. With content identifiable as both formal and a subjective, this is a faithful recording of reality. It represents the preoccupations of the painter because the painter's ultimate subject has always been painting itself.

On this note, we arrive at the question of surface, not as a formal consideration, but as a theoretical, and even spiritual, one. The perceived limits of the picture plane are of no consequence to a painter who understands the power of self-vibration. Having fully immersed himself in the illusion of the three-dimensional, he becomes a true believer. He is a transmitter and a receiver, both orderly and energetic, understanding his role as agent for the 'strange influences' that inanimate objects exert.⁵ And so with certain awareness that the first dimension is permeable, he is free to make it sparkle and hum, in a celebration of so-called flatness, paying no heed to the weight of painting's history, and understanding that there is no painting without surface. The artist paints as though painting were new.

⁴ Erle Loran. *Cézanne's Composition: An Analysis of His Form, With Diagrams and Photographs of His Motifs*, Oakland, CA, University of California Press, 1963, p. 17

⁵ Frank Channing Haddock. *The Personal Atmosphere: Ten Studies in Poise and Power*, J.F. Tapley CC, New York, 1908, p. 37

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