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Anouchka Freybe on Patrick Howlett

Suspended in sentence

Patrick Howlett is a unique interpreter of systems of thought. As a painter, he plays within the formal cross-currents of Abstraction and Conceptualism and has a divining-rod sensitivity for translating human impulses into new schematics. The impulses are embedded in social psychology and forms of communication, and consider how perception and emotion filter and reshape data. Howlett's practice can seem astrologically preordained, as if he has mapped out a new system of thought to be released in increments, where a series of paintings function as a glossary of ideas, to be animated by ascending planets or signs on the horizon. The tacit knowledge required to work fluidly with these processes is as much a reflection on meditative work as it is on the durational impact of labour.

I want to access this series of paintings in "The Slow Rhythms of Reason" by osmosis, like a watery absorption process and feels like what paint would do if it could explain itself. I reach for a two-page 'didactic' accompaniment to the series, that includes five propositions, beginning with the category of *The Cultural Deadline*. I take to heart this proposal.

I might be looking for something to work the way Kandinsky said it could, in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, where "the materials in painting can be manipulated to affect the soul... anyone can respond to what is meditative."ⁱⁱ Maybe I was looking for access to elevated consciousness. Abstraction, at the point of Wassily Kandinsky's writing of his treatise, was an expansion on how the materials of painting were discovered to affect the soul through colour, shape and line. American artist Brice Marden has talked (more recently) about the qualities of abstraction: "If one chooses to look at paintings as vehicles to take you to some other place... abstract painting was much more open... (and) could take you to more complicated places. Abstract paintings have references to real world, but they're not telling you what to do."ⁱⁱⁱ Complicated places. In the 1960s, Joseph Kosuth suggested that the use of language should become the primary material for art, with an emphasis on idea. The sourced phrases Howlett notes in his exhibition text, including *The Less Than 12-Month Year*, *The Egg Yolk*, *The Motivational Dip*, and *The Growing Pane* are words drawn into the work subtly, like fading book ends – they are placed on rows or in columns and augment the idea that these rows and columns play into the function of organizational theory and assessment of value. These semantics are part of the chemistry between the lines. The semantic chemistry is achieved through the text and diagrammatic proposals he has mapped onto the images as graph lines, flow charts, cycles of the moon, months of the year. There is an ironic undertone, as the idea of creating visual diagrams is a play on the representational tradition of art.

Not everyone wants or likes a story. But for some, narrative seeps in. Stories can drop in like dropped coins, flutter through as if they were winged, grow up through the lines, marks, shapes, between the squares. I came across the poem *Peripheral* by coincidence, and it presented itself the day I was looking at *The Growing Pane* (51 x 40.5 cm).

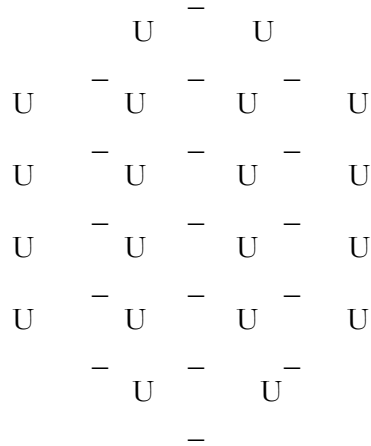
Peripheral, by Toi Derricotte:

Maybe it's a bat's wings
at the corner of your eye, right
where the eyeball swivels
into its pocket. But when
the brown of your eye turns
where you thought the white saw,
there's only air & gold light,
reality—as your mother defined it—
(milk/no milk). Not for years
did you learn the word longing,
and only then did you see the bat—
just the fringe of its wings
beating, its back in a heavy
black cloak.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Growing Pane is the title for two works, one small, one large; each one could be a study for the other. In the smaller one, the ten by seven rows and columns are laid atop cross-hatched loose blue brush strokes, planets of colour float in their centre, stenciled letters hover down close the lower right corner. The temptation is to read into the squares cross-word style, to find an embedded explanation. There are wrap-arounds words and some beginnings or endings, and one can spend time stringing together a series in the hopes of finding clues the way a mandala might reveal a secret about the universe. The quering words “conf/irm” and “af/firm”, “imme/diat/e” and “l/esson” occupy the four corners of the frame. My imagination fills in blanks. It's as if Derricotte's language (or anyone's) can occupy another layer in between; “there's only air & gold light” and “fringe of its wings beating” – dream-like, a state where my imagination wants to go.

I once read a story about a swimmer in Chile, a competitive athlete who was new to triathlons. She was on a practice distance swim in choppy water when – through self-doubt and physical exhaustion – she starts to lose consciousness. The world around her takes on a surreal quality. A yellow glove bobs along and waves, and the fish start to speak. A sense of preordination is the undercurrent. I wanted to better understand the subtext of the story. It was as if her disorientation was also mine.

I thought about this story looking at the larger image, *The Growing Pane* (203 x 178). It started with the egg yolk shape, the way it looked to be a heart, drifting along a milky current. And the lines, in black, hyphenated, could have marked lane ways while other lines reference a body, with limbs that were causing the water to ripple. The squares, seemed structural, like tiles, or light fracturing a sea bed. The quadrants of rows and columns, along with line iconography, is akin to shaped poetry, where the typographic layout is visually tied to the subject of the poem. “Fisches Nachtgesang” by Christian Morgenstern bears musical notations, and the resemblance of what ripple effects breath might cause under water.



Breathing, as with blood flow, the pulse of the body connected to a universal pulse is a notion evoked by Bifo Berardi to suggest how poetry taps into respiratory rhythm. “Foundationally, rhythm refers not only to vocal emissions or to the sound of acoustic matter but also to the vibration of the world. Rhythm is the inmost vibration of the cosmos”.^{iv}

Innermost vibrations. *The Growing Pane* could be said to resemble the work of Paterson Ewen, with his technique of routered wood creating a quality of energetic line that connects to the schematic lines in Howlett’s work. I kept wondering about of imagined correspondence between artists. In *The Clothes Line*, Howlett has spent time looking for the intrinsic voice of the material, a kind of ingrained suggestion. The creases in the surface are noted, marked with tape and form the rhythmic starting point from which other lines take shape. The correspondence between lines is a kind of orchestration, a balance of relationship from one line to the rest of the proportion of the surface. By marking the crease with tape, and painting over the negative space with oil, these vertical lines suggest corresponding formations. One could think of synchronization, a “Fisches Nachtgesang”.

The linen canvas is sized (treated) and primed with an adhesive coating such rabbit skin glue. Howlett makes his own painting materials. Gesso, made of water, rabbit skin glue, and powdered chalk, is layered on top. Distemper paint is an early form of whitewash, and is hand made from water, animal glue and ground pigments. The velvety, cloud like impression resembles the skein of fat on the surface of boiled milk, pulled thin. The 23 columns of alternating chalky blues shimmering under the ‘clothes line’ could go on beyond the frame, infinitely.

It appears that there is a mathematical equation underpinning the logic, or at least the contingency of the lines in relationship to the columns. *The Box Process* is also a manifestation of an infinite possibility; each square having a connection to an adjacent three squares through the mixing of egg tempera pigment. New variations of tone and hue. Look closely. It’s also in the strokes. Howlett has, likely just through chance, a stroke that resembles Cézanne’s, a short stroke that reveals the bristles of the brush and a kind of rhythmic pattern. Egg tempera dries quickly and requires a patient, meditative approach to weave the textures in cross-hatched strokes. Some artists have referred to the effect of painting repeated small strokes as “weaving the earth in my hands.”^v Howlett’s boxes shimmer more like sfumato stained glass, and as with *The Growing Pane*, has a formal connection to traditional colour charts, and demonstrate how essential his tacit knowledge is of the pigment chemistry and application. The tacit understanding is one acquired through experience and practice,

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and an embodied knowledge base that lends freedom to the kind of experimental creativity in traditional painting processes.

The Energy Line reminded me of the work of Jeffrey Yang. He wrote this poem in response to living and working near a power grid in Texas, a giant metal industrial unit set into the desert landscape. A monolith to the consumption of energy, deconstructed rhythmically into text.

Thirteen Stations: V

Music in the lines

Pattern the heavens

...

set frames, variations
on a scene perceived

Less indefinite
draft closer to being

incomplete, red threads
square mat to dome, lead
dust trails leaving

king's blue light
gamboge lake

titanium white wisps
brushed raw sienna earth^{vi}

It feels like an archeological dig to go into where I want to know more. I know I should let that go now. Suspend yourself, take some time.

ⁱ Kandinsky, W. "Concerning the Spiritual in Art", 1912: p. 26.

<http://www.semantikon.com/art/kandinskyspiritualinart.pdf>

ⁱⁱ Brice Marden, from SFMOMA, "Brice Marden: Abstract painting can take you to paradise", sfmoma.org

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9ebExAsHZMg>

ⁱⁱⁱ Toi Derricotte, "Peripheral", *Paris Review*: 124 (Fall, 1992). Also published in *Tender* (Pitt Poetry Series, 1997).

^{iv} Franco "Bifo" Berardi, *Breathing: Chaos and Poetry*. Semiotext(e), 2018

^v Fergus Ryan, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fTYhS91rIUE>

^{vi} Jeffrey Yang, "Thirteen Stations, Part V", *Hey Marfa*. Graywolf Press, 2018: 65.