

## Between Hypertext and Facebook

“How can an art form that is so indebted to, and informed by, its long and rich history still make a space for itself in today’s world”<sup>1</sup>

Artist/curator Daniel Sturgis poses this question at the beginning of his catalogue essay for the exhibition *The Indiscipline of Painting*, TATE St Ives and Mead Gallery Warwick Arts Centre. It is perhaps no coincidence as there appears to be a resurgence of interest in abstraction amongst the current crop of students and graduates that *Abstract Critical* is also through the process of this newcomer’s competition, hopefully as I think it must, addressing similar issues.

So in the search for a newcomer what are we looking for? Someone new and different perhaps work that grabs the attention? Possibly, although I would suggest also more importantly practice that asks questions and tries to find answers to these questions through the process of making. Dan Roach I feel is such an artist.

Roach is no different from any other contemporary abstract artist confronted as we are every day in the studio with difficult questions about the style and relevance of the discipline we work in, his approach is a reflective and thoughtful one originating in an interest in the philosophies surrounding the home and memory. We can of course all bring our own personal memories and experiences to paintings whether it be as Kandinsky said, “Development consists of a sudden flash similar to lightning, of explosions bursting like fireworks in the sky scattering a whole bouquet of differently shining stars. This flash shows in its blinding light new perspectives, new truths...”<sup>2</sup>, Perhaps just the timeless melancholy of Johnny Cash singing *Sunday Morning Coming Down* or simply a direct response to the look of colour and shape

The spaces and forms in Roach’s paintings invite engagement, images that are at the same time monumental and reassuringly welcoming, what Gaston Bachelard in his book, *The Poetics of Space*, referred to as: “intimate immensity” “Immensity is within ourselves. It is attached to a sort of expansion of being that life curbs and caution arrests, but which starts again when we are alone. As soon as we become motionless, we are elsewhere; we are dreaming in a world that is immense. Indeed, immensity is the movement of motionless man. It is one of the dynamic characteristics of quiet daydreaming.”<sup>3</sup>

If the poetics of memory are the genesis of these paintings, metaphors for childhood spaces, they are also paintings about painting. Taking ownership of an image is an important and difficult step for any artist accepting the awkward and unattractive as well as beauty and the poetic, Roach has chosen to express himself through the six sided forms that populate his work, either allowing them to stand alone and command the space or collect in groups in dark interiors or as in other works cover the surface in more overall gregarious organic structures, on occasion hinting at familial relationships sometimes colour flattening the surface in a more graphic response, perhaps forms eluding again to nests, corners of architectural spaces, the primitive mystery of the unknown, images evolve and reconfigure. The armature is at the same time pattern subverted and destabilized by the painting process suggesting safety and uncertainty in equal measure, in a complex world.

Possibly in these paintings we can find a place to pause somewhere between Hypertext and Facebook

Informed by British abstraction, aware of his antecedents and the inherited language of abstract painting Roach confidently expresses his desire to understand the nature of the painted surface and its communicative potential both formally and philosophically as when for example a seemingly arbitrary dark green smear of paint down the left side of a painting or sweeping across a more defined image all but obliterating what has gone before, we can see where the

paint was placed on the canvas and dragged with perhaps a pallet knife or brush and has been left conveying the physicality of the material, the emotion of the gesture and the importance of painting as an integral part, if not taking centre stage, of the subject. Elsewhere perhaps an image has been removed either through conscious compositional decisions or a seemingly random action to push a painting beyond the comfortable and predictable creating tension between chance and control.

Roach's work has clearly improved incrementally in the short time I have known it but it is increasingly difficult for an artist to take the big steps or indeed the leaps of faith required to move work on and keep it relevant and I don't believe this can be done without a context, the serious endorsement of this competition and the support that it offers is a fantastic opportunity and will of course be of great benefit in going part of the way to providing this context also encouragingly Roach is artist in residence at Worcester Cathedral Oct 2011 to Oct 2012, this immersion in a different environment with its own history and particular architecture will undoubtedly offer new challenges and painting problems within his practice, this level of exposure is just part of the wider infrastructure needed to enable new abstraction to flourish but having said that I am confident that Dan knows very well it's still what you do in the studio that really counts.

Iain Robertson

1. GREEN, Alison; MOONIE, Stephen; MYERS, Terry R; NICKAS, Bob; STURGIS, Daniel. 2011. *The Indiscipline of Painting* [exhibition catalogue]. London: Tate St Ives and Mead Gallery, University of Warwick In association with Tate Publishing.
2. VERGO, Peter and Rosel GOLLEK. 1979. *Kandinsky, The Munich Years, 1900-14* [exhibition catalogue]. Edinburgh: The Edinburgh International Festival in Association with the Scottish Arts Council.
3. BACHELARD, Gaston. 1994. *Poetics of Space* (1958). (Trans. by Maria Jolas). Boston: Beacon Press.