

ANDREW BICK

Mel Gooding, *Andrew Bick and Mel Gooding: a Conversation at Hales Gallery, Abstract Critical, 26 February 2013*

abstract *critical*

for abstract art



Memory Farm, 2008-09, acrylic, marker pen, pencil and Perspex on wood, 189 x 200 x 16cm

MG: Andrew, I came across a phrase that intrigued me in a piece you wrote quite recently. It was for show that was partly retrospective and therefore contained works that came from different periods, but the emphasis was on the development of your work over the last ten years. The phrase was “looking in” and it comes in this sentence:

By suspending these processes [drawing with magic marker paint

and so on] within layers of wax a dense object was built which responded best to slow looking in on the part of the viewer...

The phrase seemed to be prescribing a response to the work that would properly register a shift in your work towards the creation of an object whose translucencies ‘contain’ (and make visible) actual space behind the picture surface. In much of the earlier work the viewer was confronted by an object with opaque

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surfaces, surfaces that offered resistance to the eye in the sense that when the line of sight meets the object it “bounces back”; you were aware that you were looking at an object in space, not at an object with a visible interior spatiality. Thereafter, you made a great number of works in which drawing of various kinds, geometric shapes (created of translucent and opaque materials) and linear devices (some playing with perspectival vistas) were ‘suspended’ (in your word) between layers of wax, visible with varying degrees of clarity.

From using successive layers of wax and embedding within them various kinds of motif, you then turned to translucent perspex on board and to increasingly complex linear, colour and spatial effects (v. Memory Form 2008-09). Your phrase ‘slow looking in’ suggests that in all those paintings you had arrived at a way of working in which there is an open transparency, or a variably dense translucency, creating a species of real space within the object, into which they eye looks and within which it may move. I don’t mean that kind of illusory optical space that is part of our experience of any flat surface. I mean an actual space into which the eye is invited. The difference is between actual space (however obscure the object-motifs may be within it) and the space proposed by linear elements, perspectival and planar, colour and so on, actually disposed on a two-dimensional surface. Could you say something about that difference and its implications for your work?

AB: The crucial thing with building up the layers of wax, and also, slightly later, using translucent-fronted Perspex boxes behind which at various depths other coloured forms and marks were placed, was that all these layers were constructed or fabricated so that everything that one views spatially has been “made”: it is a fiction for the eye. And that may also be a key consideration in certain recent works, where there is no layering of translucent materials to make what you call ‘actual space’.

MG: Yes. Because what we have in the recent work is a return to ‘proposed’ space. What we are calling ‘actual space’ is interesting because that is a space in which each thing that you’re looking at actually exists as something, is an object, even if the object is only a patch of colour or a linear scratch. It’s an object in the actual space of the larger object. That’s fine, and it’s opposed in phenomenal terms to the most recent paintings in which you have returned to a concern with what happens on the two-dimensional surface, in which such recessional space as we can talk about is purely propositional. These newest works deliberately recall a whole history of abstract painting of the kind(s) predicated on propositions about all kinds of possible spaces, while they actually occupy only one space, and that’s the flat space of the surface.

AB: I think I’m actually interested in what I would call contradictory space, in the sense of something that becomes visually unfathomable, or is a conundrum, something that can’t quite be resolved in one stage of looking at it. Going back to how you describe the earlier work, there was in fact a self-conscious desire to block off or direct the viewer’s process of looking at it or looking into it, and this later evolved into a later stage in which there was actually an invitation to ‘look in’, but in which at all times the viewer was encouraged to be aware that the painting was made out of real things, real physical layers, rather than illusions.

MG: Absolutely

AB: At a point, more recently, when I started playing with things

like projective geometry, this came as an extension of the earlier decision to tackle high modernist problems such as the grid, but to tackle those things in a playful way. So if someone were to look at those recent things I am making and say ‘Oh, of course this is composition, in a very old-school way’, they would be misconstruing what was going on or why it was happening. Yes, it is very much an enquiry into those ideas of what happens when one makes a ‘composition’, but it’s done with an element of distance and detachment, and neutrality, and also a systematic process of one step at a time, one thing after another. I mean that the processes of progressive adjustment that got me building up all those successive layers of wax to end up with a final smooth surface obviously leads to something antithetical to the ‘optical space’ of Greenberg’s description. It came out of a concern to open up invitations to all sorts of other valid propositions within the broader history of abstraction.

MG: Well, it was in fact profoundly anti-Greenberg, for what that’s worth: you can’t get out of that! But I don’t think that was an issue for you, then or now. Why should it be?

AB: [laughs] well ok... I wouldn’t say it was a denial; I was trying to prove there were other ways to do it.

MG: I want to go back to what you said about the creation of the image in the recent paintings. Because it is an image we are talking about, on the flat surface of whatever material you happen to use for a support. And you said it is not ‘composition’ in the old way, which you seem to imply was an intuitive process of balancing one thing against another, either having a baseline in symmetry or in asymmetry, having the idea that this would make an exciting or interesting combination of spaces, shapes and colours, and so on, on the surface, and then adjusting accordingly until you ‘got it right’. Now, how far have you departed from that ‘old-fashioned’ procedure? In other words: how intuitive is this play, and how far is it determined?

AB: It sits on the cusp of being totally determined but also contradicts that in that an apparently intuitive decision might be made, so there is a constant reversal: it’s one thing; then it’s the other... To describe the history of how it became more perspectival, I would say there was a sense in which having worked with rectangles on an orthogonal grid and the idea that an opaque rectangle might visually block off a complex area of gesture within the layers of wax, I started to think about finding points or intersections within what was going on in those gestural areas and joining them up. Joining up any three points creates a triangle, in a sense [I might say mischievously] like the New Labour idea of triangulation, a contorted and contemporary way of negotiating impossible situations by linking up the points that seem to be most expedient. What I then realised was that once I started filling paintings with all of these triangles, they then seemed to be pointing in different directions, and that it was something that could be either controlled and managed, and brought into balance and harmony, or it could be allowed to be anarchic. On an intuitive level I like the idea of things almost falling apart. I like things seeming to reach a level where you think: ‘how on earth can that hold together?’ That is just a personal aesthetic, but then what I started to do was to take a photograph of some of those paintings and get someone who works for me to turn that digitally into a linear grid of vectors. So in this way it became a quotation, which I then started to project on to supports and to make all sorts of different decisions about which parts of the grid I was going to re-emphasise.

MG: You talk of the grid as a quotation. Could you just explain

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what you mean by 'quotation'?

AB: What I mean is that I made a grid containing all of the linear decisions within an original painting of mine, which I then turned in to a digital grid consisting of black lines, and that is the source for 'quotation'. The painting that results consists of triangles, rectangles, rhomboids, trapezoids, and a certain amount of gesture, brought together in a process of adjustment. It may have started out with certain decisions, like any other kind of painting, but some elements will get covered up, some will get moved, some will get revisited or reiterated in a process of accumulation...

MG: So you begin with what you called 'a system of triangulation'?

AB: Yes: a very loose system, a quasi-system, a not-very-effective system; in a sense a very deliberately offensive system, because it's not a very good one, it's something that is not self-justifying.

MG: What do you want to get from such a non-systematic system?

AB: A problem.

MG: Do you want that problem to be the dynamic implicit in the painting, or do you want the problem to tease your own mind and lead you to further possible 'solutions'?

AB: I think the latter. Because of an obsession with testing everything, the most viable creative position for me is one of doubt, as a result of which, rather than being satisfied with easy solutions, or resolutions, I try to take things further.

MG: About that doubt: is it true that the recent paintings embody that condition of doubt, and therefore raise questions and doubts in the viewer's mind? Might we therefore say that the subject of those latest paintings is doubt itself?

AB: I think they're doing something that is better than that. I think they're actually sometimes playful, sometimes humorous, sometimes joyful, and that in and of themselves they can actually seem doubt-free. They have an ability to exist that is independent of my own programme and I am aware that, if you like, the programme which makes me work, that makes me want to work, generates things over which I am not entirely in control. And there's something more. Another thing that I'm interested in is the idea of argument, the idea of a lively argument with the artists I'm most engaged with. In the case of some of the artists I'm researching, like the Construction and Systems artists, the argument I am having with them is precisely centred on that very point, that the works I make cannot be controlled within a programme of my devising, and that rather than this being a burden it somehow releases the work.

MG: I don't know why you say 'better'! I mean doubt is a profoundly interesting from a philosophical point of view. And you've circled your way back to it in a way when you bring in your friends the Systems and Construction artists. Because the one thing that seems to mark them as artists (and sometimes as people) is a kind of neurotic desire for certainty. Hence their absolute determination to control the reception of their own work and its histories. That psychological inclination is manifest in their work, which seeks basically to assert some kind of quasi-mathematical certainty. [This is the case however much they may seem to present visual paradox or visual conundrums.]

AB: I suppose the best way I can respond to that is in terms of something that I wrote specifically about Jeffrey Steele's painting [and this is something that from discussion with him I think he does agree with] where I suggested that the system becomes untraceable and unfathomable whatever the mathematical premise. The painting has escaped the original intention of the artist and that is when it gets interesting for me.

MG: Maybe so, but in the end even such an interestingly convoluted and paradoxical way of working nevertheless goes back to a predilection for the closed system. It seems to me, to get to the heart of what you're saying about your own work, is that you're absorbed by the problem of certainty and by the desire to subvert certainty because it seems to you that the subversion of this certainty has a kind of truth to it, truth to reality, truth to our experience.

AB: Exactly. I think what is important about that approach, for me, is that it doesn't offer me refuge, either in my own intuition or in my ability to work things out methodically. On that level it's at the heart of the problems that I am preoccupied with as a painter. And that takes me somewhere completely different from the position I am in when I am working as a curator with British Systems and Construction art. It takes me to another position, for which reason I haven't tried to exhibit my own work in tandem with theirs, because on all sorts of levels it doesn't make sense.

MG: I can see that, but nevertheless it makes sense given your preoccupation with those artists, your admiration for them, and the commendable effort you have made to re-discover them, show them again, and get them re-evaluated critically. This indicates, however, an engagement in which you want to take some kind of issue with their position. That's part of your purpose, maybe, though you are in no way concerned to rediscover and show their work while you stand in a corner, as it were, and criticise their positions. In fact the sharpness or savour of your preoccupation with their work may lie in the fact of it having given you something in your own to fight against or to react to, to take issue with and to develop from.

AB: I don't want to criticise them. There is a sense in which in my own work making an argument, and making a joke seriously also, goes back to the roots that I share with such artists. And that goes back to something you and I discussed a few years ago: that tense historical interface between DADA and Constructivism, as opposed to the commonly understood connections between DADA and Surrealism. Rethinking those histories has been important to me. There is also the fact that a lot of my engaged audience is in Switzerland, and that you can feel there the living presence of artists like Sophie Taueber-Arp, and of the relationship between DADA and Constructivism, and then in the history of post-war Swiss Art, Max Bill and Lohse, etc. and in the connections with Concrete Poetry etc. All of those things, the fertility of those contradictions, and the unresolved movement between them: that is what excites me more than anything. From my own point of view I am not looking for resolution; I am looking for clarity and understanding but I am not looking for a way to say 'yes, this problem can be solved in this way' or 'this painting resolves this issue'. I can't think about things in this way, at this point it would break down for me, it would become tedious.

MG: I have just been writing, as you know, about Schwitters and I think that Schwitters had the clearest picture in his mind of the deep inner connections between his own MERZ, and DADA

and Constructivism. You have introduced a key distinction. But your earlier works, with their translucent layers of wax and motif, seem to have come out of a Malevichian Suprematist origin, as if they were aspiring to a kind of dematerialisation of the depicted motifs and their disappearance into a metaphysical space. Constructivism itself comes partly out of a conflict with that tendency in Malevich. And it seems to me that the tension in your own work has always had a philosophical cast, a hint of the metaphysical, the thing that can't be touched but can be sensed as it were, and can't be spoken of but can be proposed in visual terms.

AB: The metaphysical can make itself present in ways that take people by surprise. But of course the utterly practical fact about these works is their bulk, they are really heavy things, so that however evanescent the images may seem to be, as objects you can't get over the fact that they are heavy lumps of wax and wood, which are actually solid. And, of course, the most appealing thing to me about such solidity is that it can also be transparent or translucent and capable of hovering or floating before the eye. So this is also strategic, it exists on the edge of being both one thing and another thing at the same time. If one thing is central to everything that I do, it is this notion. It doesn't go away, even in the recent work, but it also can never be pinned down to a simple binary.

MG: Maybe it's like a box, containing things that can't be contained in boxes?

AB: Yes.

MG: It has that kind of paradox to it.

AB: Yes, but it's somehow also important that the medium of abstraction [and painting as a whole] gives an essentially formal surface to things. So that, because it rests within that address of "a painting on a wall", those complexities of thinking aren't immediately apparent... you can simply enjoy the work aesthetically.

MG: What do you mean, 'simply enjoy the work aesthetically'?

AB: This to me means that people can like the colour, shape, surface, texture and have a total lack of curiosity about what else might be driving its existence.

MG: That kind of circumstantial 'liking' can't be a very significant aspect of the spectator's encounter with what you're doing, can it? I 'like' your work, certainly, but having said that, I have said nothing about the work; I have said something about myself, and not a great deal at that. When I say I like your work one of the things I am saying is that I take pleasure from looking at it, and that the pleasure for me is as much a mental and intellectual pleasure as a pleasing visual sensation. This pleasure of the mind can only have been brought about by a synthesis: my sense of sight, my sense of space [which is very complicated when it comes to looking at some of your work] and my sense of looking at the object in space, tactility, etc.: all of these sensations combine with aspects of memory, of intellectual analysis (formal, philosophical etc.) and so on. In fact, what's interesting to me about your work is how they demand a subtle and agile response, one that doesn't require certain sorts of completion. Your paintings seem not to be closed systems, but the pleasure I get is not in the fact that they contradict closed systems. When I look at a painting what I see are things that bring back all sorts of recollections of other paintings, other situations, but which at no point allow me

to make direct connections.

AB: No: I'm quite deliberately refusing to let you make a direct connection and it's not to do with evasiveness, certainly not to do with a lack of commitment to what I am doing. It to do with a constant checking, a constant shifting, a constant re-adjustment, a constant hesitation; and these are the things that I am always thinking about when I am making this work.

MG: All the words you've used fit perfectly a description of the procedures of Analytic Cubism.

AB: Well let's look at the word analytic rather than the word Cubism. I suppose now were I to say that I was making cubist paintings or referring to cubism that would put me in to a nostalgic position, which is of course not what I am about.

MG: Why? You cannot but see that your work relates back to, as you've actually described, certain issues that preoccupied painters in the twenties; you've only got to go back fifteen further years and you're at the beginnings of Cubism. What's wrong, or nostalgic, with the idea that you might be engaging with those artists?

AB: To answer your question another way: the question about what might be analytical within the space of my paintings is all to do with what is completely invented, quoted, repeated; there is no real space or real image from which it has been abstracted. That simple distinction allows me to say that I am applying methodologies that we can say relate directly to Braque, but I am applying them to an abstraction of an abstraction. And my quoting of my own work is a further step towards the absurd. I am absorbed and always have been absorbed in looking at great art, but in order to win myself space, to keep my feet as light on the ground as I possibly can, I am going to start with something really stupid, I am going to quote myself!

MG: There's no answer to that... [both laugh]... and I have no desire to press or push in any particular direction except to say that the departure from the given object, that is to say the perceived thing in the world (including everything in nature and culture, from chairs to tables to motor cars and wine bottles, etc.) as a starting point for abstraction was left behind quite a long time ago (initially by Constructivism, Suprematism, De Stijl and Merz in their different ways, and then, later, by Systems etc.) But the questions you raise about your own paintings go back beyond those departures to Cubism itself in so far as what you call 'conundrums' – those enigmatic, playful, sometimes comic contradictory elements – raise the question about what is perceived and what is known, about what is made of what is seen, about the space between perception and cognition. Incidentally, you say that the starting point might be one of your own works, but that of course means your starting point is in the world! (As opposed to a concept in mathematics, say...)

AB: Yes: but it is tangibility without a narrative. In a way that creates a lot of freedom. It was in around 2008 that I decided I was going to take paintings that I had made and make them the source for reiterating work, and that is what I have been doing ever since. Rather than that closing down the parameters and possibilities, it has opened them up, and in a way that is very liberating. It removed the obvious anxiety about how to begin, but has also put me in a position when I can be in the middle of a painting knowing that it's taking me somewhere that I wouldn't want to go if it wasn't following the logic it has laid out before me. So that for example, looking at this painting now: a grid that I use on a

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larger scale has been applied to the wrong size stretcher and has also been pushed back at an angle to the picture plane on the left side so that it creates a false perspective. What it then suggests is, can I have a vanishing point that would be notionally about three metres to the left of the painting? How does that relate to ideas of optical flatness? Are there paintings within the painting [there is a section with built up layers of translucent wax in the manner I have been using for many years]? All of these permutations and possibilities become like a hall of mirrors, a mise en abyme, which creates infinite fractures and splittings-off. Yet at the same time, going back to the visual aesthetic, there is charcoal, pencil, oil paint, watercolour, wax, a whole cocktail of materials that still manage to be quite poised: so perhaps it's a form of juggling? In a way I think of this painting as a very relaxed painting but when I was making it I was constantly worrying about the fact that a whole section, perhaps about 30% of the bottom left corner was blank canvas and could I manage to make sense of leaving that as the projected grid – in a sly inversion of Polke's 'Higher Powers Command' perhaps! determined it should be left?