TURPS

ANDREW BICK

Bick, Andrew. Katrina Blannin Interviews Andrew Bick for Turps Banana, Issue 13, Summer 2014

KATRINA BLANNIN INTERVIEWS ANDREW BICK FOR TURPS BANANA

KB: We met briefly for the first time at a very interesting talk you organised with Jeffrey Steele at the Hales Gallery during your own show there in 2009.

You have been researching and instigating curatorial projects and symposia involving some of the surviving British Systems and Construction artists and their legacies for some years now. I for one have been grateful for this renewed and well overdue exposure. Why did you organise a talk at that time?

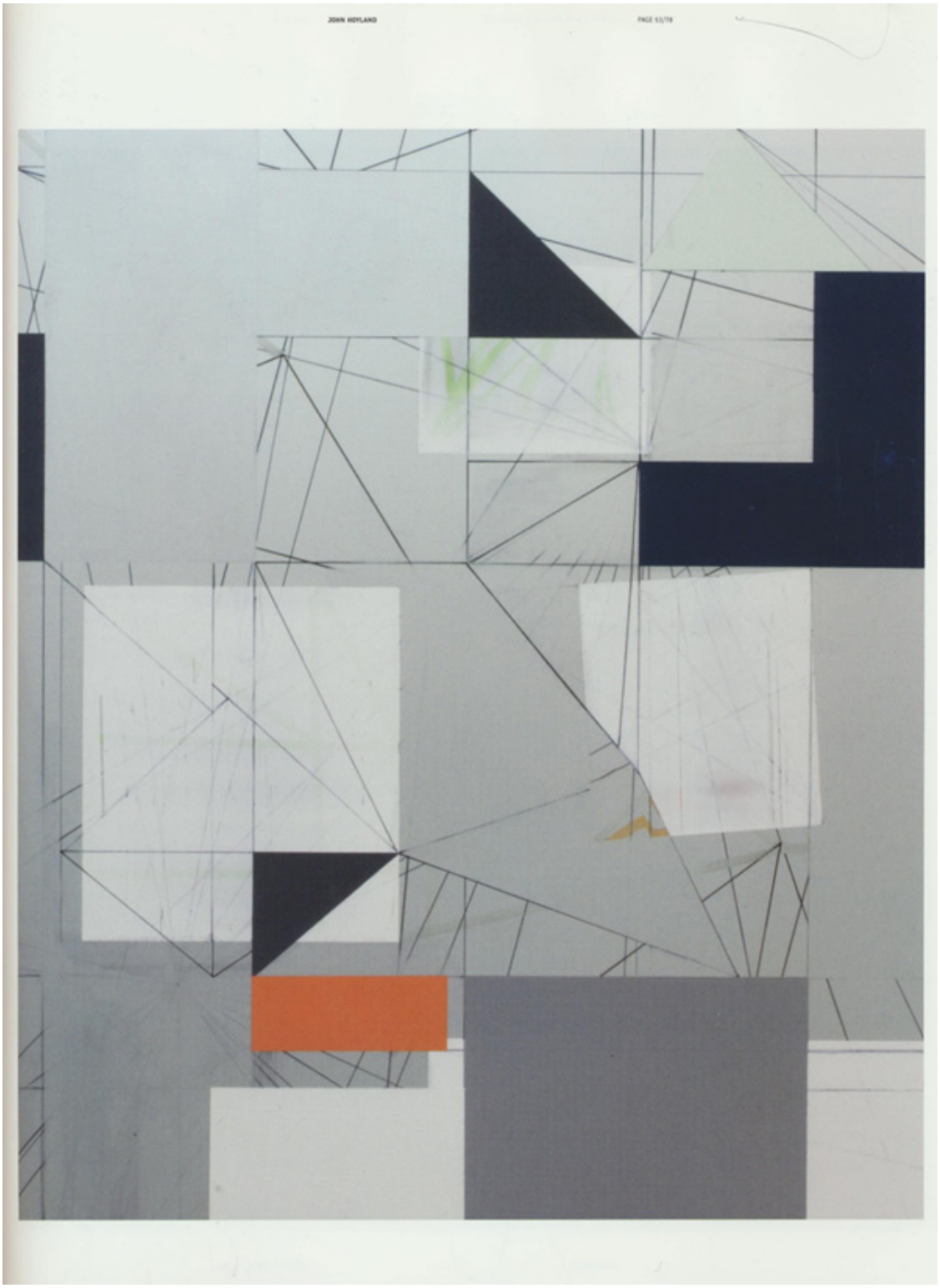
AB: The talk with Jeffrey Steele originated by him telling me on a train back from a conference at the Henry Moore Institute, which we had both taken part in (I gave a paper on the legacy of the Hayward Gallery exhibition Pier + Ocean, 1980) how he thought my work was inferior, despite his appreciation of my engagement with his work and thought. Hales Gallery wanted me to do something generous for a public audience as part of my 2009 exhibition, Systems for Hesitation, as this economic recession was just kicking in around then and people were beginning to wake up once more to the idea of being public and collective. My response was to invite Steele for an 'in conversation', putting him and myself on the spot at the same time. But also, as he was probably aware, I was putting my Dadaist and absurdist tendencies in the foreground of the exercise, when the obvious thing to do would have been to hire a nice critic who would give my work a ringing public endorsement. Steele was very publicly negative about my work, as you will remember, and I responded by cracking a joke and probing around the position he was taking concerning the 'rational aesthetic'. In the end it was much better for the after effect than on the night itself, although it was exciting because it has become a catalyst for all sorts of subsequent re-engagements with Construction and Systems art, as well as an amazing learning curve in my own development. I should add, that we were friends before this event and are even firmer friends now.

KB: We have a shared interest in this particular area of Modernist constructed art and painting, which has systems and mathematical approaches as its central argument. My understanding is that the 'ideology' part or 'dogma' has been overstated and generally misread – although the premises and motives are still being debated. For me, it begins with the visual: an attempt to understand painting as a difficult synthesis of logic, or the rational, and the perceptual or phenomenological. Can you say why and when you were drawn to explore this territory and how it impacts on your work?

AB: It is the inherent (and apparent) contradiction between rationality and intuition, which for me is at the core of this work and what makes it so exciting for art now. I would agree with you that the importance of the rational-irrational dialectic has been overplayed in relation to Construction and Systems. I think we are now in a 'dark age' in terms of cultural development where the absence of convincing authoritative structures, culturally and socially, means we have to look for other ways of understanding the sustainable and renewable aspects of current practice in relation to modernity. What excites me about the work of artists such as Steele, Anthony Hill, Kenneth and Mary Martin, David Saunders etc, is that the moment where an intuitive or subjective decision occurs in the work cannot be pinned down. In Steele's instance the later systems he deploys are sometimes so complex they cannot be traced or worked out by eye. Such situations within works of art imply

Opposite: **OGVDS [Alu] #3**
2012
marker pen, oil paint and wax on aluminium
76 x 64cm

Courtesy of the artist and Hales Gallery, London



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(and demand) a level of attentiveness that is highly significant as a statement of the purposefulness of the art object. Phenomenology too is undergoing something of a re-investigation as a philosophy with something to give to painting. Where this might connect with the concrete/constructive is through the notion of the object itself as an important locator of thought.

KB: Are you comfortable with the word abstract to describe non-representational painting today? And why and when did you decide to work with this visual language?

AB: Right at this moment, I don't particularly care about abstraction as a word. I am interested in the distinctions between the concrete and the minimal and keen to bury an over-respectful attitude to North American abstraction in late Modernism. Similarly, I am cussedly against an 'edge of the real' idea about abstract painting that waters down what is exciting about artists such as Raoul de Keyser. There is enough at stake in art at large for me not to see any value in being a member of a separate club of abstractionists. To answer the second half of your question, I think I knew as soon as I got to art school that I was more interested in the surface and presence of the work I was making than the images it represented. This basic approach has always underpinned what I do and what I am passionate and patient/impatient about. Incidentally I love language but hate the way language gets lazily privileged within art discourse, so for me 'visual language' is about the most annoying term on earth.

KB: I have seen words like 'organised chaos', 'gently disruptive' and 'mischievous meddling' used to describe your recent work. The phrase 'school studies' is part of a show title, which seems to refer to ideas about rules and parameters – and of course learning. Would you say in your case that the 'playground' has entered the 'classroom'? Are there some rules here that are meant to be broken or challenged?

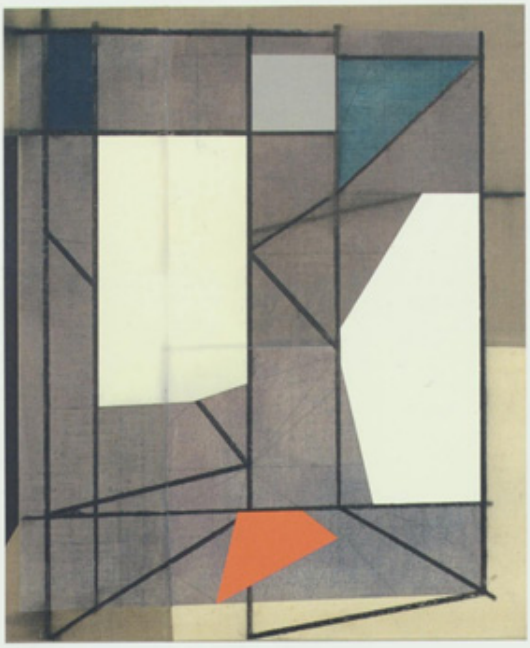
AB: Difficult to say, other than the value of contradiction is extremely important to my thinking. School Studies was the title of an essay from Simone Weil's The Need for Roots, which discusses her ideas about state and nationhood as a French exile in Britain during the latter days of the Second World War. Jon Thompson writes very well about her thinking and used the title of another book, Gravity and Grace for a Hayward Gallery exhibition that was very important to me when I was a student. Mischief has always been essential, as a sort of jolt in to another way of paying attention, and my early love of DADA and Schwitter's Merz poems in particular has never gone away.

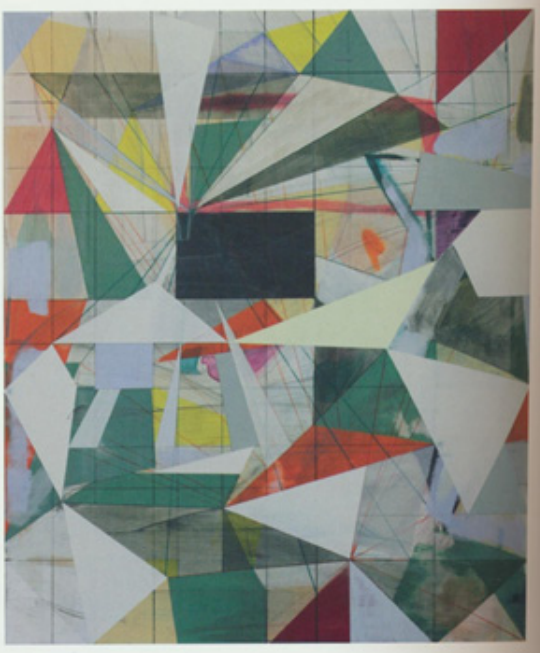
KB: Ghosts, another word from the title, refers to part of the process for starting a new painting. Over the last ten years you have used a drawing of a previous work to provide the 'armature' or structure for a new one. Could you elaborate on this generative approach and then say something about how the paintings develop?

AB: The paintings are endless echoes of the same painting. By generating a digital drawing of the grid of a couple of paintings and then creating a hybrid and cross breeding that grid in a methodical but random way - anxieties around originality, gesture and system are removed. It becomes a 'why not' moment in the studio rather than a 'why?' that I find relaxed and joyful. The ghosts are a further way of copying/repeating works where the colour is replaced by black, white and grey. There is a wonderful Frantisek Kupka series of woodcuts in a book called Of White and Black, which creates a non-narrative out of completely abstract imagery that is enthralling as a page sequence. I have a facsimile but was delighted to find out from Anthony Hill that he once owned an original of this book (very generously donated to the

Opposite: **OGV 05 [detail] G**
2013
Acrylic, pencil, oil paint and watercolour on linen on wood
76 x 64cm

Courtesy of the artist and von Bartha Garage





Above left: **OGVDS [tilted] A**
2012
Acrylic, charcoal, oil paint, watercolour, wax on sewn canvas on wood

Courtesy of the artist and Hales Gallery, London

Above right: **OGV [double spider], dirty A**
2008-2009
Acrylic, marker pen, oil paint, pencil and wax on canvas
75.5 x 63.5cm

Courtesy of the artist and von Bartha Garage

Victoria and Albert museum).

KB: Space and depth are important factors. Could we say 'real' or 'physical' rather than 'illusory'?

AB: Yes, real, physical space in painting as opposed to sculpture or relief is a way of reconnecting to the grounding principles of constructed relief, but in a cranky (i.e. disruptive) way. Illusion does get used in more recent work, but then cancelled out. The ultimate paradigm is contradiction without that idea ever being as simply pleasing, as a 'trick of the eye' structure, such as in MC Escher's work. I like to think of the paintings as spatially folding and unfolding on themselves (a recent text on my work refers in this way to Lygia Clarke's Bichos) and the idea of space somehow appearing mobile and un-resolvable within what is a physically static object is something that I aim for.

KB: Early De Stijl principles were founded on the idea of the elements of both colour (primary only) and space: figure and ground should be entirely integrated on the same plane. Would you say that what you are doing is the reverse? Complicating things?

AB: I would prefer to see it as acknowledging that things are complicated, at this moment, but it is too easy to forget the intensely complex implications of Mondrian's work at the time it was made; Carel Blotkamp's book on him, which identifies the destructive tendency in Mondrian's work, is a great piece of research as far as I am concerned. Seeing Mondrian as engaged in acts of erasure and destruction gives a clearer idea of the urgency in his work.

KB: I am interested in how these approaches could be seen now, as a direct metaphor for exploring and examining the history of Modernist painting, how or why this can't be avoided and then what you actually think about painting as metaphor?

Installation view, von Bartha Garage, March 2012

Concrete art and people like Steele) connects with my long standing love of concrete poetry and a sense of ordering materials in a concrete and constructive way. Paint, in its various forms, from watercolour through to encaustic, as well as line (in the form of charcoal, pencil, marker pen, CNC routed line, digitally printed line), is treated as a material to be placed in strict relationship to other materials. This is then adjusted, or disrupted. I like to think I am spontaneous about finishing works, other people visiting the studio sometimes tell me when they are finished, or by asking if they are, trigger the decision. But I would always subscribe to the notion of indeterminacy, re-visiting work in the way that Raoul de Keyser did.

KB: And let's say, putting it crudely, that paintings are like 'sentences' (part of a wider language) would you say that painting for you is an ongoing conversation or argument full of 'question sentences' with no answers? Should we be worrying about the function of painting?

AB: The relationship with the viewer is very important to this work; it is about creating space in their minds as much as good writing opens space in the imagination. Conceptually the objective is very different from providing solutions or answers, but nevertheless I believe it addresses vital issues around human modes of attention. I worry more about the weaknesses in our infrastructure for looking at art than I do about the problems of making it.

KB: I know you have used the words 'doubt' and 'uncertainty' before when discussing painting – perhaps there is some humour here? Which other contemporary painters do you identify or empathise with at the moment, with regard to these notions?

AB: Without humour I am lost. I have already mentioned the British Construction and Systems artists, de Keyser, and I would add Noel Forster. These are artists who are either in their eighties or dead. Basil Beattie, in terms of gestural abstraction of a particular intelligence would be another one I would add, and some of my contemporaries in Switzerland such as Karim Noureldin and Daniel Robert Hunziker are making great work. When I was working in Holland in the mid 1990s, Marien Schouten was making

extraordinary painting/construction/installation hybrids, and then colleagues I have worked with in the UK, such as Cullinan Richards, Robert Holyhead, Adam Gillam, David Rhodes and Gareth Jones are great because of the ways their work crosses painting with other territories to a greater or lesser extent. Patrick Fitzgerald is one of my oldest friends and a great painter based near Bilbao. Painter and writer Sherman Sam also introduced me to the work of Thomas Noskowski a number of years ago, which was a real discovery. I could go on, there are many others. The crucial thing for me is mobility and generosity in looking at other artists' work.

KB: I have been looking at very early Renaissance Florentine panel painting recently. I am struck by the colour relationships, compositions, and surface painting and patterning techniques such as sgraffito. Are there paintings from history that you study in this way?

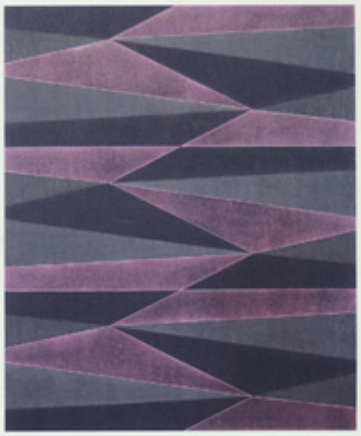
AB: Not systematically, but in the big collections and when I travel. Fifteen minutes in front of a Piero Della Francesca at the National Gallery is never time wasted.

KB: Is there a spiritual factor somewhere? Perhaps this might be a question about philosophy or which philosophers have been important? What sustains your practice?

AB: Going way back in my own reading and thinking, the intellectual wrestling of late Medieval mystics such as Meister Eckhart (around negative theology) has an oblique but critical link to my own approach to making art. There was logic (having grown up in a Church of England vicarage) to finding a way to philosophy via theology. My first ever catalogue text, from a writer called David Miller, discussed my work in relation to negative theology, and in the world of ironic 1990s Brit Art my then gallery viewed this as career suicide – suggesting I drop the essay and get Sarah Kent to write something more catchy! The interest in the kind of thought Eckhart pioneered hasn't been supplanted, but the notion of silence (thinking of concrete poets such as robert lax and dom sylvester hoédard) is carried in my approach to ideas of attentiveness in art, not as something quiet or passive, but as a social and political force.

KB: Despite the crisis in painting, which seems to have gone on forever, there is plenty of renewed interest at the moment, with lots of painters just getting on with it, 'hang ups' gone and looking to the future. How do you account for this? Or perhaps I am wrong. You teach in several art colleges and see what is going on first hand.

AB: I like Thierry de Duve's essay in Kant after Duchamp, The Readymade and The Tube of Paint, in which he describes Marcel Duchamp's crisis with his own inadequacy as a painter as a trigger to his whole artistic career. The truth probably is that everyone is responding to painting (or the idea of painting) all the time, leading to all sorts of individual crisises on a near permanent basis. This is far more interesting than the end of painting (in 1981 - courtesy Douglas Crimp), it has always been ending, the critical questions are more about if any of us are capable of having a useful crisis with painting, or art in general, or art in a social context? I don't see a crisis of painting in art schools. There is a crisis of resources, of cultural confidence in the value of art as art, as opposed to a weak subdivision of the social sciences, but the energy and desire to make painting, among students and artists in general remains undimmed.



Hexad X Six – Katrina Blannin
2013
Acrylic on linen
120cm x 100cm

Courtesy of the artist