

ABSTRACT PAINTING

an exhibition of paintings by

FABIENNE AUDÉOUD AND JOHN RUSSELL

Private view 9th November 2001, 6–8pm

For the opening the artists will be well dressed

The International 3, 8 Fairfield Street, Manchester M1 3GF

Telephone: 0161 237 3336

10th November – 15th December 2001 / Thursday–Sunday 12–5pm

Texts by: Robert Garnett, Sue Golding [johnny de philo],
Dave Beech, Fabienne Audéoud and John Russell

– Text 1 –

'Abstract Painting': You Can't Be Serious? Robert Garnett

My first response when I saw these paintings was that they were some kind of joke. Not so much in the sense that they were taking the piss, because there was something else about them that, although it wasn't exactly a 'seriousness', didn't suggest that they were simply having a laugh at 'abstract' painting either. They were and still are difficult things to work out. They weren't straight-up and yet they didn't seem 'ironic' in any 'knowing' kind of way; they lack the kind of 'coolness' and cleverness of 'postmodern' pastiche or Neo-Geo-esque abstraction – something they're certainly not interested in reviving. They don't seem to be

playing any of the games we've become familiar with in recent kinds of 'abstract' painting, and there's nothing in the paintings that we might reconstruct into some identifiable 'strategy' or 'statement' about the status or continuing viability of 'abstract' painting. Trying to think about them in such terms doesn't seem to be a very useful or interesting way of getting into them, not least because Russell and Audéoud seemingly don't take 'seriously' these agendas.

Another route into them might be to think about them as being 'abstract' in another sense. Somebody once recalled of Andy Warhol that when in the studio his test as to whether a work succeeded was that if it was 'abstract' in the simple sense that it didn't add up or didn't make sense then it 'worked'; it had the 'right' kind of 'wrongness'. This way of proceeding is not that of an ironic 'knowingness', a saying or doing of one thing and meaning another, it is to proceed 'without criteria', without knowing anything in advance. This is *humorous* as opposed to ironic, and to see them as such might be an interesting way of accounting for the '*lack of seriousness*' of this art, and much other art of the 90s also. An obstacle to this in the recent past has been that one was seen as either 'authentic' or 'inauthentic', either a calculating detached ironist or a dumb 'retinalist'. There seemed to be no way for accounting for a kind of work that was vivid by virtue of its '*posture*' as opposed to its positionality, no way of accounting for a work's '*attitude*'. Theory seems to have lacked a '*sense*' of humour.

An attitude is made manifest not on the level of the concept, or in a work's structural 'depth' but floats on the surface of the work, it is the paradoxical '*depth*' of its surface, its '*faciality*'. These paintings' '*lack of seriousness*' seems to be a way of '*de-facing*' 'abstract' painting, or rendering it 'abstract' in a humorous sense. An art of attitude is also an art of '*gesture*'; it is an operative modality that possesses a distinct 'intelligence', a sharp sense of where one *isn't*, as opposed to where one *is*. A gesture is a motion away from what can no longer be taken seriously towards a hypothetical '*somewhere else*'. The painterly 'gestures' in these paintings aren't 'quotational'; they do not refer or represent; they're not about 'picturing' 'abstract' painting. They are indexical of a humorous *no-longer* and *not-yet-ness*. This is what makes these 'abstract' paintings such *pre-post-erous* things.

Improv: I saw these paintings before they were hardened; the blue still wet, the black not yet background; one curved around a minimal studio wall, unframed and limp; two still glistened and smelled; a third, neatly stretched, and thereby, I suppose, considered something resembling 'finished' (it was the most dry of the three and at any rate, stiff). One of the paintings I didn't see at all. Did this omission in my visual consumption of four untitled and elemental oils, matter?

Rehearsal: I was left alone (with myself), accompanied only by a few hot spotlights. The secret, of course, in viewing alone, is the degree to which something attracts and/or repels, and whether or not, in the attraction of the repulsion, you reach out and, for example, touch it. In this case, (it) was wet. Perhaps I shall not go further (confessionals so often being the platform for wannabe starlets and defecating priests), except to say that the smell remained for some time on my fore and index fingers as a portent of things to come.

Opening: I have always had a peculiar penchant for the double o (oo) of time and of life, at least geographically speaking or perhaps more accurately put: sexually speaking (not to be overly literal or rude). Mental note: *can* one be *overly* literal, not to mention rude, or does the literality of the thing and its rudeness extend just as far as you can make the joke and no further? A joke can be made with the thickness of the paint and the thinness of the surface upon which the paint is spread; the colours, the intensities: but none of it will ever produce a crack, a guffaw, a petite and demure laugh. Multiple singularity, in its philosophical vernacular; simultaneity and duration in its memory and matter variation; it has no beginning and promises no end (I feel a song coming on) – this double o opening is of an entirely different magnitude, paradigm, order, rule, shift. No inside vs. outside; no male vs. female; no right vs. wrong. One might say it provides, creates, reinvents a surface: detailed, impure and raw, the very stuffings of abstraction knocked out – smells notwithstanding. But perhaps you are lost in this geography and don't know *at all* of what or to whom I speak.

Repeat: Standing still, I run to declare: there's nothing to hide! nothing to reveal! A re-covering so thorough one might almost think of ... silence. But these are not quiet creatures, settled and arranged. In my aloneness, left there by myself, I cannot but help to over/hear the (not so) delicate voices of an improper event, whispering. Hoarse.

Text 3 – The Stupidity of Abstract Art Dave Beech

I seem to remember something. A few years ago I was doing a lot of reading around early 20th modernism and it emerged – at least in my recollection – that artists were talking about abstraction for some time before abstract art (as we recognise it) appeared. In advance of the innovation of abstract art, word among the artworld was that abstraction was on its way, even though nobody knew what abstract art was or what it would look like. I am slightly nervous about this account because I like it so much. It amuses me to think of Apollinaire's circle talking each other into abstract art, utterly clueless.

Abstraction in artworld discussions began as a borrowed term from philosophy and for a while had no obvious or predictable equivalent in art. It was up for grabs. When the first abstract works were recognised as such, however, the philosophical root of abstraction was eclipsed, or forgotten. Art had its own version of abstraction that had little or nothing to do with philosophical abstraction. Abstraction before abstraction needed philosophy. From now on, though, artists didn't have to read about philosophical abstraction to learn about abstract art; they could look at it and study the ideas of abstract artists.

Something else I half-remember. Several years ago David Batchelor was invited to deliver a paper at a conference on abstraction. His argument was not embarrassing by any means but he felt, nevertheless, somewhat duped. The event was organised by a philosopher and all the other contributors were philosophers. Dave was the sole representative of art's version of abstraction. It was as if he was speaking to himself. Or worse: as if what he had to say – about abstract art – was conducted at a low level of philosophical debate because he referred to abstraction in a somewhat colloquial – unphilosophical – manner. Philosophers don't learn about (their concept of) abstraction by listening to artists talk about abstraction (in art). In the company of philosophers, it seems, Dave was an abstract artist with little or no comprehension of the philosophical roots of the concept of abstraction. Dave Batchelor is not a stupid man, but he would have been forgiven for feeling momentarily stupid in that awkward arena.

Abstraction before abstraction was, for a period, the most ambitious art of its time while remaining, for the most part, quite clueless. What is lost with the advent

of the recognition of abstract art, with the advent of abstraction, is not innocence, then; it is the strange cocktail of ambition and stupidity. Ambition with stupidity. Abstraction's stupidity has not always, in the history of abstraction, been coupled with ambition. Sometimes it is just plain stupid.

When abstract art was settled, when it was recognised, ambition jettisoned stupidity. And abstraction would not be the terrain of stupidity again until ambition jettisoned abstraction. In the meantime, abstraction foisted all the blame for cluelessness on figurative, representational and pictorial art. To the modernist abstract painter there was something rudimentary about the shortcomings of non-abstract art. In Rodchenko's words from 1921, "it [non-abstract art] tried to make the observer forget the presence of the flat surface". Therefore, so long as gallery goers stood back slightly to look at the painting – instead of walking straight into it, thinking there was a whole world in there – then the naturalist tradition of picture making plainly failed to fool anyone. This is the sort of overstatement that tipped the balance in favour of abstraction by casting its rivals as preposterous or stupid. And it worked. Which is why someone like Rodchenko said things like this: "we will not limit ourselves to the repetition of existing forms".

One of the themes of Dave Batchelor's paper to the philosophical conference on abstraction was the relationship between abstraction and modernism. You have to remember, at this time there was a great deal of speculation and assertion about postmodernism and therefore, to associate abstraction with modernism was to risk giving abstraction over to the reign of fools. Dave went further by describing the 'special place' accorded to abstraction in the history of modernism as, in some extreme cases, its 'ultimate goal' and in more moderate or robust corners, perhaps its 'highest achievement'. "Can we talk of non-modernist abstraction?" Dave asked, "Or of post-modernist abstraction?" It was in fact worth asking whether a postmodern abstraction was possible, even though we were inundated with the stuff at the hands of Taaffe, Halley, Bickerton, Schuyff, Lasker and others.

One of the things that postmodern abstractionists had in common was their reframing of abstraction as a preestablished genre, or a repertoire of forms; abstraction as a Readymade, if you like. Schuyff's paintings, for instance, resembled already existing patterns (tablecloths, for instance) on – the surface of – which it looked like he had shone lights (employing in the process, of course, the

tricks of chiaroscuro in order to render the effect, but without any perspectival depth). Halley, Taaffe and Bickerton built their postmodernist abstraction out of figurative bits and pieces they could find to do the job, while Lasker's abstract mark-making looked (at least back then) second-hand, and all the smarter for it. Unlike Rodchenko, then, the postmodern abstract painters seemed to declare "we will limit ourselves to the repetition of existing forms" – and what they repeated were those paintings from the past that declared the presence of the flat surface. Perhaps, then, postmodern abstraction was not possible after all: these were *pictures* of abstraction, cunning illusions that fool us into thinking we are face to face with something that just isn't there. (It is possible they learnt this from Jasper Johns, rather than made it all up themselves.)

There is a rough equivalence, then, between postmodern abstraction (abstraction after abstraction) and early modern abstraction (abstraction before abstraction): they converge in abstraction's deep stupidity. Having abandoned the philosophical concept of abstraction in the search for abstract art (unsurprisingly, of course, because abstraction had been *found*), no serious contender for an artistic concept of abstraction filled the void left by the abandonment of philosophy. Here is a piece of stupidity that has lodged itself within the heart of abstraction: the fact of abstraction seems to have quelled the need for a theory of abstraction. The strain would not be felt until the impossibility of abstraction haunted the ubiquity of karaoke abstract painting. Taaffe and company got away with it because they can be credited, if we suspend our pessimism, with 'asking the question' of whether abstract painting is possible after abstraction. In the wake of the postmodernist replication of abstract art, however, there are no more excuses for the maintenance of abstraction's bottomless stupidity. Holding back from the conceptual and theoretical examination of abstraction only plays into the hands of those with vested interests in the mystification of art. And at this point it is worth noting that it is not abstraction that is stupid; we are.

Text 4 – Stage Fright Fabienne Audéoud

About the first three large paintings (2.10 × 4.30m), (2.37 × 5.55m), (2.18 × 4.15m). We paint together, at the same time on the same black canvas.

Stage fright, then I felt touched, I laughed. I wanted to cry – wet surface, shiny. Oranges and pinks and reds and blacks. Too close to music for a psychoanalytical reading. (The technique). Not that I am sad, even if I am. Everything had been said. A big intensity. Vectors towards the inside of the surface. Everything as everything but not exhaustive. They don't sit (in a category). Implosion and explosion at the same time. They are delayed. The glance is slow. They slow me down. It's a lyricism close to hysteria, in the vulgar sense. The experience of. It starts behind the neck. They don't deal with it.

Diamond dealers. The exchange of responsibility (art history, the viewer). Getting rid of the responsibility, the guilt and ideas, putting them onto the viewer or performing the comedy. The oil paint is soft like a wet sex.

The paintings are not cynical. It is not a joke being told, not the object of the joke. It's being in the joke. A fall. The drama is not romantic.

They are composed only because of the time they take. They are staged but I can't tell how they happen, constant rehearsal, they never reach the curtain call. They don't stand for anything, in their intentions but for everything. And everything not as a philosophical concept (or a political prerogative) but as a pretentious word. Drama and comedy. I, one of the painters can't speak about myself because we are two. Not quite the authorship issue but somehow I find it difficult to say 'I' in front of these paintings. Emptied of my substance like in a science fiction film ... probably because of the impossible meeting. Extreme solitude. Something of the grammar problem (more in music than in linguistic). The trick of negation. The difference between philosophy and theatre. And also painting in that case. The wealth rather than the inner meaning or the projection of the context. Screen test of their own performance. The black micro-fibre fabric is smooth.

Stage fright like always. I like it. Slight taste of blood in the mouth.

Text 5 – Tourette Syndrome: Instantaneously Present John Russell

Stretched across the surface like a squirrel pegged out on the grass, my head is clamped and I am instantaneously presented (both theatrically and un-theatrically) to the aesthetics of my own stinking bourgeois mor(t)ality.

You dirty bastards, don't you realise there are real women and children dying out there? You bloodless, Socratised, cock-sucking, Plato-junky wankers! Come behind this red rock and I will show you real terror in a handful of cultural studies, sociology and stylised politics!

*I will show you real terror but more of that later. I guess ... I guess I come from the wrong side of town but I'm going back there as soon as possible. But as you say 'I see very well what this cover of Paris Match means to me'. **You lying bastard!** – no, you don't – you don't see – you can't see – that's the point – you can't see – you're blinded! You fucking cunt! This is a screen of screaming heads!*

*I'm blind! I'm blind! I'm cracked – like a used cyanide capsule! I'm trapped – like a *screaming monkey!* I'm pinned from behind, with my eye blown out in front, splattered across the surface – slipping across the surface in a further play of signification and visibility, the process overlapping and underlapping in the microscopy of figure, skin, pore, atom – searching for intelligibility and unintelligibility alike in the shine and sweat of the paint.*

*This is a glutinous coming-to-be – oscillating and repeating across the liquid slick of gore and slime, with the movement of maggots swarming and bulging beneath the swilling surface; with the germs fucking and procreating above and the torso swollen and bursting to expose the jellied organs within – pinks and gay reds ... *and then there are the mauves!**

*Oh yes, *always* there are the mauves but I am pinned – pinned in the instantaneously present, so I can't see them – nailed like a fucking grape – reality is reflected in my eye *and now who is going to tell me London is owned by the big corporations?**

Ah yes ... the big corporations ... with the big paintings in their foyers ... I remember them, but now as I watch, I feel bluebottle flies (Calliphora) laying their eggs in my eyes and mouth – and I see the green and orange stains of putrefaction creeping up my abdomen like a sunset; distension is visible; observable swelling of the body and blebbing, with purple transudate widespread; eyes bulging, organs and cavities bursting, veins marbling and the spread of putrefaction stains to neck and limbs. And you say: 'Put your hand into that pot of boiling water and tell me nothing can exist outside language'. Fuck off!