

About Vision

New British Painting in the 1990s

Museum of Modern Art Oxford

A STORY OF THE EYE

David Elliott

It was not by chance that during the 1980s *Modern Painters*, John Ruskin's youthful hymn to Turner, became the battle cry for a Back to Basics campaign in painting and sculpture in a magazine of the same name. Its whole premise was that the traditional ideals of truth to nature, the beautiful and the sublime had been neglected by an avant-garde which had taken an increasingly reflexive and reductivist path. In both painting and sculpture the depiction of reality by the visible hand of the artist had been downgraded as irrelevant to contemporary concerns. When, towards the end of the seventies, entropy took its logical course and the avant-garde imploded on itself, traditional and 'authentic' values began to be reasserted.

In Germany a different pattern had led to a refocusing on the medium of painting in the 1980s. After the war the making of an ostensibly German art had been rendered impossible by the racialism of the National Socialists. The historical thread had to be broken. For a time in the 1950s American painting seemed to have won the day. Being 'German' was both too painful and too dangerous. The neo-expressionism of *Die Neuen Wilden* which surfaced at the beginning of the eighties, however, was really not so new. Many of the most substantial figures such as Baselitz, Lüpertz, Penck, Polke and Richter had been active since the 1960s, although the international art

world had barely acknowledged this at the time. During the early 1970s Kiefer and Immendorff turned to painting in both positive and negative reactions to the social idealism of Joseph Beuys, their teacher at the Dusseldorf Art Academy. Neo-pathos typified this form of painting in which a work could be both full of feeling and irony at the same time. Emotion had to be mediated through knowledge and memory. Nothing could be taken at face value.

In Italy by the early 1980s the elegant and minimal experimentations of *arte povera* had been swept away by a generation of younger artists - typified by Chia, Cucci, Clemente and Paladino - whose ironical and mythological baroque was driven by an exuberant, if superficial, eclecticism.

In France the combination of theory, politics and repetitive decorative marks which had typified the work of such *Support-Surface* influenced painters as Hantai, Riegl and Viallat from the fifties to the seventies was replaced in the eighties by the punkily subversive New Images of Blais, Combas and Garouste.

From the 1960s painting in Britain had looked westwards to America for stimulus and energy: to Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art, Hard Edge and Minimalism. But already established tendencies were also of importance:

the vitality of classical French modernist painters - particularly Matisse and Bonnard - and the existential expressionism of Bacon, Bomberg, Auerbach, Kossoff and latterly Freud. The eighties saw the withering away of American influence in particular and of abstraction in general in what was now promoted as the most quintessential British art.

Humanist subject matter, traditional methods of working and a Cézanne-influenced obsession with the difficulty of recording an optical sensation (which at the same time was also an expression of emotion) became the central themes of such seminal exhibitions as *The Hard Won Image* (Tate Gallery London 1984) and *The Proper Study: Contemporary Figurative Paintings from Britain* (The British Council, 1984). Under the benevolent eye of critic and writer Michael Peppiatt, the School of London was born.

The mood of British painting in the 1990s, the subject of this exhibition, has developed in marked contrast to the previous decade. The opposite of 'hard won', it has celebrated a diversity of viewpoint and approach. It is still too early to surmise what will eventually be seen as the dominant tendencies but an expansiveness and delight in different materials for their own sake characterises the work shown. At last the *passéist* obsession about whether

a painting is actually figurative or abstract (and the implications of this) has been dissipated in a carnivalesque blurring of boundaries. Moral earnestness has been superseded by experimental energy and a number of painters are now not so much concerned with the pictorial as with the sculptural - or, more accurately, the object-based - nature of their work.

The cult of painting as the most elevated medium within the Academy has also been challenged as a number of artists work simultaneously in different media without giving pre-eminence to any of them. It has been fashionable of late to regard painting as an art form in eclipse as video, IT and installation art have been promoted as a cutting edge. The work in this exhibition reflects not only the eternal ability of painting to reinvent itself but also a new richness which has drawn energy from many different sources.

The paintings of Gerhard Richter and Sigmar Polke, who both in different ways have counterpointed the conventions of style with critical content have been particularly influential for this generation. But the Americans - such diverse figures as Rauschenberg, Johns, Lichtenstein, Rosenquist and Judd - have also not been forgotten. With premodern figures such as Fragonard, Rembrandt and Manet they reappear not within the context of the

historicist morass of eighties post-modernism but in a contemporary playground in which the languages of tradition, Pop and Minimalism have become scrambled together. History has been telescoped. A bride is taken from a Japanese catalogue of formal kimonos; a nude from a porno mag. The juicy, impasto surfaces of an Auerbach or an Old Master are carefully simulated in flat *trompe l'oeuil*. Conventions of 'High' and 'Low' art have been blasted out the water.

Some recent exhibitions have regarded painting as a discrete discipline by applying a preformulated view of what contemporary painting should be.¹ This show has taken an opposite approach. It includes a cross section of the best painting being made by the generation of artists under the age of forty without imposing any single view of what is important. The issues which have surfaced are the result of a process in which a large number of interviews, studio, gallery and art school visits have been made in order to establish what concerns are currently important to artists. In this way the exhibition has been conceived as literally *about vision* and how this has been mediated by both mind and process along the subtle borders between representation and reality.

Emerging from this, three areas of interest have been highlighted, although these are not mutually

exclusive nor necessarily expressed in the work of each artist. The hanging of the exhibition does not reflect these categories because visual concerns are more important in this context, but these categories are helpful in understanding the context out of which the work has developed.

The first area includes paintings which operate as self-referential or existential fields. Often monochromes, these are not so much concerned with process as with the distillation of experience. Some of them have architectural or textural elements which engage the viewer in their surface and which consciously refer back to the non-specific Minimalist objects of the 1960s. Within such a loose grouping the evanescent surfaces of Simon Callery or Callum Innes co-exist with the more sensuous material exercises of Clem Crosby, Ian Davenport, Jane Harris, Damien Hirst, Richard Wright and Jason Martin. Fiona Rae's surfaces are consciously more dialectical in their conglomeration of marks and gestures as are, in a very different way, Lisa Milroy's 'portraits' of Japanese brides.

The second area focuses on the fragmentation or dislocation of reality. These works may use devices which are alien to painting (such as, most strikingly, elephant dung) or concentrate on transient, peripheral or fuzzy vision where conventional boundaries

are blurred. This painting of shift and alienation hovers between the bitter-sweet celebrations of black consciousness of Chris Ofili, the erotic disjunctions of Marcus Harvey, the unsettlingly bland smiley faces and archimboldesque stick figures of Alain Miller, the brooding metaphysical theatres of David Austen, the floating chromosomes of Mark Francis, the emergent images of Gary Hume, the laconic pastiches of Glenn Brown, the estranged snap shots of Peter Doig and the romanticised scaled-up plastic toys which form central motifs in the paintings of Richard Patterson.

The third area which incorporates work from the first two categories, engages in a critical discourse with the parallel media of photography, film and video. Some works, acknowledging the traditions of either Hollywood or avant-garde film, imply the pathos of a narrative cut short, others concentrate on the texture and inner light of a photograph, cinema or video screen in order to concentrate better on the mechanical disjunctions between eye, painting and camera. Acknowledging that TV and photography have irrevocably changed the nature of vision, these works reflect on what this means for painting.

The eye, a figure of speech in which this part of the body is taken to represent the whole person, has become a metonym for both the

anguished painter (neurotically striving to realise his or her vision) and the power of the connoisseur who is able intuitively to short circuit the judgements of language. To Surrealists such as Georges Bataille or Luis Buñuel, the damaged, disembodied eye was a cipher for the dislocated erotic fantasies of the unconscious. To Roger Fry, an heir of Cézanne, it was the ability to detect what was significantly visual about art.

The generation shown here, uniquely in British art, has consciously distanced itself from history while at the same time remaining part of it. They have done this not through irony or paradox - the commonplaces of the 1980s - but by understanding that the unity of a painting may accommodate many different, flickering and conflicting eyes all at the same time.

¹ For example *Unbound. Possibilities in Painting* (Hayward Gallery London 1994) examined the liberation which painting was experiencing on an international scale as a result of being away from the spotlight. *From Here* (Waddington Galleries and Karsten Schubert Gallery, London 1995) focused on continuities in British painting across the generations from the perspective of the present. *Real Art, A New Modernism British Reflexive Painters in the 1990s* (Southampton City Art Gallery, 1995) looked at the particular area of reflexive or self-referential painting which is represented strongly in the youngest generation of British painters.

ARTISTS

David Austen	Jane Harris	Lisa Milroy
Glenn Brown	Marcus Harvey	Chris Ofili
Simon Callery	Damien Hirst	Richard Patterson
Clem Crosby	Gary Hume	Fiona Rae
Ian Davenport	Callum Innes	Richard Wright
Peter Doig	Jason Martin	
Mark Francis	Alain Miller	



GLENN BROWN

I lost my heart to a starship trooper (detail) 1996
oil on canvas
mounted on board
65 x 50cm
courtesy Galerie Ghislaine Hussenot, Paris

I have memorized my mother's life and, like in a play, I act it out in front of the mirror every morning for an hour. This has gone on day after day for years now. I don my mother's robes, holding her fan, my hair done like hers, plaited into the shape of a woolen cap. I enact her in front of others as well, even on the bed of my beloved. In moments of passion I cease to exist, I am not me, but her. For I enact her so well that my own passion vanishes and only hers remains. In other words, she has already stolen my every touch of love. Yet I do not begrudge her, because I know that she too was once robbed in the same way by her own mother. If someone were now to ask me why I act so much, I would say: I am trying to give birth to myself anew, but a better way...

Milorad Pavić

From *Dictionary of the Khazars*

Biography

1966 Born in Hexham, Northumberland. **1984-85** Norwich School of Art, Norwich. **1985-8** Bath Academy of Art, Bath. **1990-92** Goldsmiths College, London. Lives and works in London.

Solo Exhibitions

1995 Karsten Schubert, London. **1996** Queen's Hall Arts Centre, Hexham.

Selected Group Exhibitions

1996 'Jerwood Painting Prize', Lethaby Galleries, Central St Martins College of Art & Design, London. 'Ace! Arts Council Collection New Purchases', Hatton Gallery, Newcastle (South Bank Centre touring exhibition). **1995** 'Obsession', The Tannery, London. 'Young British Artists V: Glenn Brown, Keith Coventry, Hadrian Pigott and Kerry Stewart', Saatchi Collection, London. 'Brilliant, New Art From London', Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. 'From Here', Waddington Galleries and Karsten Schubert, London. 'That's Not The Way To Do It', Project Space, University of Northumberland at Newcastle, Newcastle. 'Painters Opinion', Bloom Gallery, Amsterdam. **1994** 'Here and Now', Serpentine Gallery, London. **1993** 'Mandy Loves Declan 100%', Mark Boote Gallery, New York. 'Painting Invitational', Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York. 'Barclay's Young Artist Award', Serpentine Gallery, London. 'Launch!', Curtain Road Arts, London. **1992** 'Surface Values', Kettle's Yard, Cambridge. 'How Did These Children Come To Be Like That', Goldsmiths Gallery, London. 'With Attitude', Galerie Guy Ledune, Brussels. **1991** 'BT New Contemporaries', Amolfini Gallery, Bristol (touring exhibition). **1990** 'BT New Contemporaries', ICA, London (touring exhibition). **1989** 'Christie's New Contemporaries', RCA Gallery, London.