Critical Narratives in Colour and Form

रंगीन और प्रपत्र में क्रिटिकल कथा

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Critical Narratives in Colour and Form

Foreword by Angus Pryor

Critical Narratives in Colour and Form mediates a shared engagement with the idioms of modernism, abstraction and figuration, with particular reference to examples of contemporary painting and print making. Whilst many of its contributors, either as artistic practitioners, writers or academics, have affiliations with educational institutions in Kent and the locality of the South East in the UK, this exhibition examples part of a broader exploration of how received and inherited ideas, forms and narratives have been hybridised and developed in the UK and elsewhere. This process has been principally undertaken by a new generation of what might be termed 'post-conceptual' practitioners – those typically born in the 1960s and 1970s.

Critical Narratives in Colour and Form places a deliberate emphasis on painting and print making – essentially wall-based, two dimensional practice. Although storytelling as a distinct, narrative tradition is well established within and across the visual and religious cultures of India, it has often been pictorially lost or elided within more recent British practice. One of the aspirations behind this selection of work is to suggest a modest contribution towards re-establishing the viability of this tradition, either as personal biography or as the mediation of a broader range of cultural and social histories, within a strand of contemporary art making. A shared sense of re-appropriation, re-fashioning and re-invention, which frequently combines genres, associations, iconographies and motifs, is one of the common links which informs the selection of work shown here.

The focus on painting and printmaking is also intended to help address, at least in small part, a critical tendency to favour other genres – installation, conceptual art, photography, land and film-based practice. The implication of particular kinds of painting with either a discredited Modernism associated with the late critic Clement Greenberg or, as with some forms of print making, earlier narrative traditions which are perceived to be equally problematic, albeit in different ways, are among the reasons for such relative in-attention.

Each of the practitioners whose work is exhibited here have variously engaged with some of these historical issues and more contemporary legacies. Mavernie Cunningham's woodcut and lino prints offer a distinctive interpretation of the genre, referencing both Flemish and North American influences. These antecedents are also fused with a more personal iconography and neo-Expressionist symbolism. Exhibited work by Jez Giddings explore aspects of memory, loss and the spectres of absence through densely conceived canvases in which different forms, colours and marks jostle for prominence.

The new work shown here by William Henry indicates a recent departure, playing with themes explored by another YBA artist, but also parodying a famous museum schema associated with a major modernist figure of the 1930s and 1940s. In doing so, Henry maps out new relationships between the avant-garde practice of the present and the past with evolving concepts of mass culture and social value.

Mark Howland explores a noticeably mid-century romantic modernism that found its origins in a frequently visceral identification with landscape and place. Although historically associated with a generation of early to mid-century British painters, the place of landscape and an intense and sometimes emotional investment with it, continues to inform aspects of more recent UK practice. Turning to portraiture, Chris Hunt deploys figuration, gesture and composition as a basis for exploring both the interiority and exteriority of his chosen subjects whilst the subjects and motifs depicted by Aya Mouri delineate a very personal iconography of struggle and hope drawing on Japanese culture.

My own practice instances a deliberate referencing of the 'readymade' and the aesthetic of Duchamp. The principal concern is to re-validate the idea of the readymade back into the language of contemporary, post-conceptual painting. In doing so, the intention is to contribute to an ongoing critical debate about what and how painting might signify as a contemporary and expansive medium.

Angus Pryor, Senior Lecturer & Director, School of Arts, Medway, University of Kent, UK

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Acknowledgements by Angus Pryor

I would personally like to thank Prashant Baluja (Eduverse and Balujas), whose kindness, generosity and patience has made this exhibition possible. I would also like to offer sincere appreciation to Dr Alka Pande for her support for this exhibition and gratitude to Sarah Megson, University of Kent, Medway, for her assistance with sponsorship. Many thanks to School of Arts colleagues for all their support and time, especially Mattias Frey, Victoria Hart, Ann Howe, Tim Howle, Jacky Olsen, Dennis Smith and Denise Twomey. Thanks are due to our colleagues in the International Office at the University of Kent, and in particular, Kim Tritton. Appreciation and thanks are also due to Flow Associates and the British Council for their supportive involvement.

Several academic colleagues have helped to bring this exhibition to realisation. My thanks to Jez Giddings, K College, UK, for all his design work and to Dr Grant Pooke, School of Arts, University of Kent, UK, for his editorial support and vision for this enterprise. Sincere thanks and appreciation to all the reviewers and writers who have contributed to this catalogue: Jordan Amirkhani, Chris Hunt, David Minton, Diana Newall, Grant Pooke, Clare Roach and Mike Walker.

Angus Pryor, *Love and Death*

Mavernie Cunningham

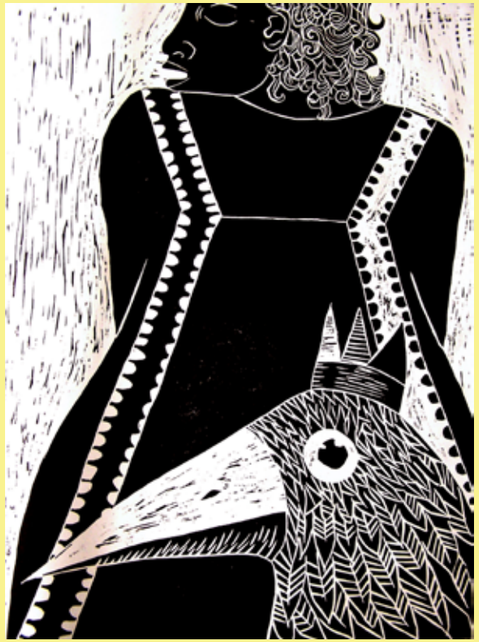
The figures in Mavernie Cunningham's woodcut and lino prints seem to exist between two states of being. Planted firmly inside the picture plane yet often taken beyond the pictorial space by their own inner energies, they are like adults becoming innocent or innocents becoming adult; self-contained but driven.

Cunningham's work is replete with the black of skin and the black of space. Her figures are sensuously alive, filling the space with their physicality. In the stripped-down means of the woodcut medium, they possess a flat physicality, unmodulated by broken tones. In their flatness, the women, children and birds in her prints not only fully inhabit their spaces, space also seems to inhabit them.

Cunningham's work contains something of the narrative drive seen in the prints of Franz Masereel (1889-1972) and Lynd Ward (1905-1985), but they are differentiated by their self-containment and energy. The works are full of pattern, possessing a life force and narrative of their own which permeates and resonates throughout the series. The patterning of hair is echoed in the patterns of the waves, the pattern of a bouquet of flowers which echoes the spiralling buttons in a different work. Pattern contains energies that carry narratives, make connections and which enrich stories.

Like the spiral motif in Hitchcock's film *Vertigo*, the patterns in Cunningham's prints carry desire and foreboding. Narrative and expression go hand in hand. Whatever the specifics of the narratives, they are images that speak to states of being within us all.

Chris Hunt, Course Leader and Senior Lecturer in Visual Theory, University for the Creative Arts (UCA), UK



Mavernie Cunningham, *The Girl And The Bird*

Jez Giddings

Bees burn, rabbits bleed and fish hang in the dark yet frenetically colourful landscapes. Figures and faces float, pervade and stain the canvases. They are spectres of the past; lost relatives staring out at us in a time they do not have.

The *Ancestor Series* contains a multitude of temporal layering which builds narratives through the addition of animals, beings, architecture, fauna and landscapes. These narratives are made from the artist's thoughts on his ancestry as he paints. The act of painting captures these thoughts, building a momentum through the medium itself. Each thought is fixed in paint and forced to exist in, and among, the menagerie of others. Sartre said 'hell is other people' and in A*ncestors, Number Three*, the elephant, squid, rabbit and sheep appear to embody the disease and embarrassment of being forced into the painting together.

In one work a woman with three legs is enveloped by a visceral primordial landscape. In another, a mother holding her baby, is submerged under a Venetian canal. The haunting, bearded face of the artist's father stares out at us from a dark place with black lightening striking a midnight sea in the background. All of these beings emerge from and disappear into the paint which Giddings uses to combine and unify the contents of his mind.

The surface of the paintings become a battleground between the image and the medium. As viewers we enter these battles at some sort of midpoint. Giddings states that the paintings are like open wounds which will never heal, that they will never be finished or resolved.

Clare Roach, Deputy Head of Faculty for Arts, Media and Music at K College, Kent, UK

Jez Giddings, *Ancestors, Number Three*

William Henry

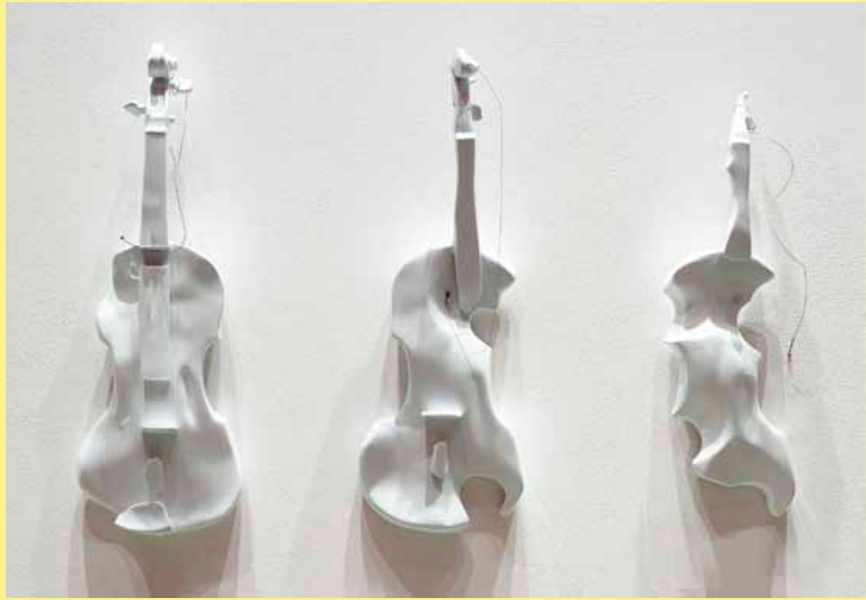
William Henry completed his BA Hons degree (First Class) at the University of Kent in 2007, having previously completed a HND in Fine Art at the Ashford School of Art & Design. Although his sculptural practice explores the legacy and contemporary resonance of the Duchampian readymade, appreciable with *(Urinals) Too Late* (2010, ceramic), Henry's work also has a Surreal inflexion which subverts the familiar and the known. He has frequently deployed the techniques of blowtorching and casting, creating what he has described as 'functionless' and 'dysfunctional objects'.

(Football) Art Movements (2012 Print on Foamex 1.5m by 0.9m) is one of Henry's most conceptually ambitious and distinctive works to date. An arguable point of departure is the playful reference to Simon Patterson's *The Great Bear* (1992), in which locations on London's sub-way map were replaced by the names of well known people. But *(Football) Art Movements* is more expansive than its YBA precursor, providing instead an art historical panoply of artists and movements in the form of football score cards and newspaper fixture results familiar to any UK audience. Beyond the witty comparisons of names, teams and rankings, Henry's work also looks back to the modernist pretensions of Alfred H.Barr's famous 1936 museum survey chart which mapped out the avant-gardes of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

But beyond these cultural precedents, *(Football) Art Movements* offers an intelligent and incisive subversion of avant-garde pretension. Its form provides a timely reminder of the origins of all aesthetic practice in the aspirations of both singular and mass experience. Like the weekly fixtures of football matches and league tables, Henry reminds us that 'culture' is really (and ultimately) an activity through which we recognise friendship, kinship, belonging – and difference.

Henry has exhibited work at London's Canary Wharf (April and May of 2010). He is currently showing in *Post-Conceptual Art Practice: New Directions – Part Two* at The Grange Tower Bridge Hotel, London, UK. Henry has also exhibited work at the Hua Shan Creative in Taipei, Taiwan.

Grant Pooke, Senior Lecturer, History & Philosophy of Art Department, School of Arts, University of Kent, UK



William Henry, *Strung Out*

Mark Howland

Whether it is the marshes near where he once lived, a rock face in Yosemite or his daughter wading through snow in their garden, Mark Howland paints landscapes that are personally meaningful for him. The problem he has consistently tackled is how to communicate that knowledge and his answer has been to make the paintings as densely structured as his own experience. He builds the paintings through many layers, using various media and collage elements, giving himself something to work against: the final image is retrieved from this process, wrenched back to the familiar.

Howland belongs to a tradition of British landscape painters who have sought to evoke some deeper experience of being in the landscape. Perhaps he has most in common with Peter Lanyon, who turned the landscape upside down and inside out in his efforts to evoke what he knew of his home county, but he has also drawn from Auerbach, Bomberg, Hitchens and Nash in equal measure. Howland has also begun to paint interiors, such as the two versions of the barn studio he shares with fellow painters Angus Pryor and Chris Hunt. Both images evoke the dark cavernous space, and all the studio paraphernalia that fills it, with delicate, overlapping skeins of paint.

Whilst employing techniques and strategies that might be associated with abstract painting, Howland continues in his quest to make representational paintings that contain an emotional response to personal spaces.

Mike Walker, PhD Candidate & Associate Lecturer, History & Philosophy of Art Department, School of Arts, University of Kent, UK

Mark Howland, *Dutch Landscape, One*

Chris Hunt

Chris Hunt's portraits are not just copied resemblances—they point to something much more fluid and immediate than static or imitative. Often, it can be helpful to consider portraiture as the Romantic mediation of indexical exteriority and spiritual interiority. The co-existence of these two demands within the portrait provide the genre with its functioning dialectic, and subsequently, a pathway to self-reflexivity for the viewer, the artist, and the sitter.

Hunt reminds us of the effects these readings have on the experience of viewing, and complicates them: "I'm not trying to understand them [the sitter] or represent myself or insist that I am able to penetrate the subject. The portrait is dictated by the time the model has to sit and my ability to get it all down…it's a response to their mood and the struggle not to let urgency degenerate or impair the process." To mistake the completed painting for the key to understanding is to overlook the supple, dynamic qualities inherent to the process of making, and to ignore the fluctuating matrix of duration and work that surrounds this active practice.

For Hunt, the process of painting negotiates its own elusive tempo, and delicately manages the collaborative effects and ephemeral responses between the model and sitter, thereby animating the process of painting as a concerted effort between the two players in the studio. While the encounter of portraits and faces in the wake of 'identity politics' has forced a more nuanced questioning of the links between individual subjectivities, it has also agitated the boundaries of painting 'from nature' and the creative process itself. These issues speak to Hunt's determination to capture the struggle to (re)present the body and face on canvas and his acknowledgement of the ongoing process enacted in capturing the subject's embodiment.

Jordan Amirkhani, PhD Candidate & Associate Lecturer, History & Philosophy of Art Department, School of Arts, University of Kent, UK

Chris Hunt, *Untitled*

Aya Mouri

The paintings of Aya Mouri contain powerful symbolism drawn from the experiences of her own life, but also refer to themes which resonate for many. The imagery of the bird connects to Mouri's childhood and provides an evocative locus for the expression of emotions, pain and sorrow. The grieving or isolated green finch contrasts with a song thrush and walnut, which symbolise the state of being unborn in the womb. The themes of struggle and strife are frequently represented with the butterfly expressing hope in conflict with wasps and bees. Death is also present. The cycle and struggles of life represented by these works offer the uplifting belief in hope set against the trials of human existence.

Mouri's imagery is drawn from Japanese forms and styles but the visual language is developed into a religious expression comparable to devotional medieval triptychs, ritual panels or stained glass windows. Her strong use of vibrant greens and electric blues reinforces the emotional mood of the paintings and captures the sense of the transcendent – god or gods who protect and control life. Many of the images are set in painted frames which strengthen the impression of a devotional work. Some frames have texts written in a mysterious language which is not meant to reveal meaning but aims to strengthen the mystical symbolism and hence the power of the images to connect with the viewer and to offer hope.

The evocative symbols, striking colours, expressive imagery and mystical language capture the viewer's attention and draw them into exploring the paintings and their own experiences of life.

Diana Newall, Research Associate, The Open University and Associate Lecturer, University of Kent, UK

Aya Mouri, *Night*

Angus Pryor

There is a sense of looking for something in and by the work, a kind of cultural burglary. He breaks into painting like a burglar in a posh house, rummaging through it, piling up stuff as he goes. The best burglary is an exercise in educated taste and antisocial behaviour. What about this? Or this, and this? His working methods, his materials, have the feel simultaneously of not quite over indulgence, and pleasure that has made the nerve ends raw.

Pryor takes his influences by the hand and wanders off with them. Using colour not as a colourist, drawing not as a draughtsman, making marks in pursuit of experiences, he submits to and encourages paint's desire to engulf, to reach its own limits, shapes, lines, movements, directions. Seeking their places, mark, form, colour, narrative, dance together and pull apart in a repeating dialectic of form and content, the physical work arising from insecurity and assertiveness in the presence of materials.

In making his marks, all kinds of objects are (im)printed on the surface of the canvas – birds, toys, leaves, vegetables, roadkill. Impression is physical and visual, marks both impressions and giving the impression of... Not quite mechanical reproductions, through the process of infilling of detail central to Pryor's printing from found objects we are made to feel uncertain – there is just enough and not quite sufficient. The works are almost not painted, but still are made with paint, spread out, sorted onto the canvas, the painting technique one of pushing the stuff around, caressing and spilling, spraying and squeezing it onto and into line and shape. Wash, impasto, a blob here, a turd-like mound there, and then a line of them. Like overweight starlings before the roost, they manage to remain airborne but heavily.

This is painting against the grain. Much work is done on the horizontal canvas, Pollock slowly, as it were, and then raised to the vertical. *The Deluge* is a painting on a painting. Foliage and ripples are evident, and maybe sky. Pryor gathers his image toward the centre of the canvas, hemming it in with angular brackets. The detritus of the deluge floats, here a ladder, there a tin can, some leaves, a writhing ochre shape. What might be decomposing food drifts around. Perspectival depth is suggested by the projecting red and green corner of some long defunct magic carpet. The degraded deluge of commodity floats prettily; there is comfort in decadence. Pursuit of pleasure released from moral constraint may be the ultimate freedom. Our desires stare back at us from the paintings; colours seduce, paint often like skin, unreflective, soft. In *Love and Death*, the browns, blacks, golds, encourage a frisson of unease.

David Minton, Writer and Artist. Review, Post-Conceptual Art Practice: *New Directions – Part Two*, in *Interface*, March 12th 2012

Angus Pryor, *The Deluge*

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