

‘Shocked into Presence’ – Joanna Jones

arrival

Even a seasoned viewer of contemporary art, someone who reckons they’ve seen it all, will never have entered an exhibition in quite this way. The venue is unique. The Citadel is a former M.O.D. property on a hill near Dover. It has been a garrison, then a prison, then another sort of prison (a borstal), then an immigrant’s processing centre. It was unused and deserted for some years before being purchased by David de Min, a young tech entrepreneur, who has very many and diverse plans for this complicated site.

Coming to see this exhibition of paintings by Joanna Jones you cross a bridge that spans a considerable dry moat, 50 yards wide and deep, and pass through an immense arched gateway, with its remote-controlled iron gates. On the day of the opening visitors are welcomed and given directions by some friendly artists (that is, instead of the NCOs or screws or Border Force personnel you would have encountered in The Citadel’s previous lives).

The space is at the end of a concrete road, enclosed by 18 foot steel-mesh security fences, with double rows of razor wire at the top. This funnels you in to a narrower, totally enclosed, passage, like a giant version of those traps for feral mink, and above its entrance there is a sign that says ‘Joanna Jones’, the artist’s signature in big letters.

spaces

The ‘space’ (that art world expression now has widespread currency), that is the room being used as a gallery, is a 19th century gymnasium, later altered slightly for use as a refectory or canteen. You could fit, I guess, three tennis courts in here. The paintings are displayed in two ways. A lot have been hung in the

usual way, on the walls, but paintings have also been suspended from the ceiling's metal roof trusses, so that this considerable space is partitioned. The impression is of an exploded view of a building; an actual size 3D version of the plan of a series of rooms (bizarrely, it made me think of the floor plan on a Cluedo board). The paintings hang some way off the ground, suspended on thin wires that you hardly notice, so you could have the momentary impression that the whole thing had been somehow exempted from the effects of gravity. The contrast with the oppression signified by all the heavy security structures you have just passed is quite marked.

The suspended paintings are back-to-back, pairing works of the same size, so that you don't see the reverse sides of anything. This solution seems so neat and so fitting, you'd think the work had always been intended for this setting, and this manner of exhibition. It was not, of course – some of this work was made in the 1980s. The artist/curator behind this ingenious arrangement of floating partitions, Nicolas Deshayes, would have been a child.

rhymes

This is an exhibition of paintings, of discrete works of art, and their individual power is supported and amplified by this clever installation; but, the appreciation of this power is also briefly delayed, *suspended*, actually, by the encounter with the manner of its display, this segmentation of space. And then you will come to notice other things, other features, before you address, one-to-one, these large abstract paintings. There are visual rhymes and counterpoints. You note that the converging perspective of the steel roof trusses, from which the paintings hang, is visually counterbalanced by the imagery of the paintings, viewed *en masse* – the billowing gasses, the spreading pools and folds and tresses. But then that disjunction, the contrast between the

geometry of the setting and the biomorphic forms in the paintings, is mediated, as you come to register some of the effects consequent upon the building's age and state of disrepair. Paint is peeling from the walls; there are ghosts of old signage, faint rectangles of glue on the walls that echo the supports of the paintings. Looking through some of the windows you can see that the security mesh has in places become a trellis for Old Man's Beard, a self-seeded climbing plant.

paintings

The paintings. This is a retrospective, of sorts. Paintings selected from a very considerable body of work made over several decades. The distinctive method, the technique, was discovered by Jones decades ago, and has been followed ever since largely because it's an extremely direct method, that yet will constantly yield visually fresh results. It's unusual, but not without precedent. The artist uses her own body to manipulate the paint, sliding and body surfing across the canvas on the floor. Examples of other artists using the body as a brush or squeegee or printing block are in Viennese Actionism, Yves Klein's 'Anthropometries', and a Chris Burden performance (Burden lay on his front and crawled forward with an open paint tin in front, smearing a trail of the spilled paint with his face). Those are precedents, but, then again, the process in Jones' work is the artist's own, with quite distinctive outcomes. For instance, in the Klein works the body is easily identifiable, it really is a sort of print, whilst here it is not easy to see that that was how the works are made – in fact, having seen the work and having had a chance to become familiar with it, I still needed to be told. I admit to being surprised.

So, there is a performance aspect to all this, but, again, the relationship to that genre is wholly distinct. That, too, is the artist's own. (A note – The word 'performative' is over-used, actually *mis-used*, in art world discourses these days. It comes

from linguistic philosophy, and had nothing to do with performance art. It meant the aspect of an utterance that constitutes the performance of an act, rather than being just a description of something. So, telling you to 'shut the door' is to perform an act i.e. issuing an imperative. Saying 'I do' in the marriage ceremony is performing an act i.e. making a commitment. And so on. Lately artists have started saying their work is 'performative' because they think it sounds more important than saying they 'do performance' – which is, actually, what they're trying to say. Anyhow...) These art historical examples were performances in the usual sense i.e. done in front of an audience, or, if not before an audience, recorded photographically for later consumption by an audience. Jones' painting method has its roots in performance, and retains a performance art dimension, but now it's the sort of performance many of us enjoy alone – singing in the bath, dancing about in the kitchen as we make toast, dancing in front of the mirror when you've got your favourite record on, and nobody else is there. In this case the record of the 'performance' is the object – the painting. We may say the paintings are the lasting trace of a sequence of otherwise unrecorded movements. Something like footprints, but, then again, not. The body is the painter's tool here, but we will not encounter the candid corporeality of a footprint, or a snow angel, or the clear outlines of hands you'll see in cave art. Nothing so distinctive or identifiable as a foot is ever seen in these paintings. The body is essential, and yet it disappears in the finished work.

The physicality of this process gives a tremendous range of effects, some striking, spectacular even, some very subtle – soft veils and filigree effects, traces and smudges. You get the full painterly gamut of weights from impasto to Titianesque glazing. Some passages are opaque and others are transparent.

The colour, as well as the technique, actually, is reminiscent of Titian, and Giorgione, and Tintoretto. The palette is Venetian. This underlines a resemblance in some passages to costly fabrics, bruised velvet and organza.

abstraction

Asked to describe these paintings, to identify their genre, generally the response will be, as I have said, that they are 'abstract'. They are. But there has been a tendency among those wishing to seem intellectual and mildly contrarian to say something like, 'I don't think there's a difference between *abstract* and *figurative*.' Let's dig in to that a bit, because I think it's weird. Anyone saying this is claiming that, upon being shown a Barnett Newman and a Dominique Ingres painting together, and then being asked to say which was abstract and which figurative, they would be justified in saying 'Well, I don't know what you mean – They seem just the same to me'. This is rubbish. (To be clear, the Newman is abstract, obviously, and the Ingres is figurative, equally obviously.)

That said, the notion of abstraction is a complex one. It is sometimes used interchangeably with the term 'non-representational'. The difficulties here are that 1) Even a painting we may easily identify as abstract will *picture* some components of the natural world. As soon as you have a figure/ground relationship, a space with something on it, then you have the illusion of a third dimension; picturing, that is. And 2) Pictorial representation is not the only kind of representation. As soon as you have a colour in an abstract painting, that could also be the colour of something in the world, so you have another sort of representation, in this case by association. Pillar box red, sky blue etc. More broadly, abstract paintings represent a set of values and cultural practices. A late 20th century school of art

criticism argued that they represent Western cultural hegemony (but there's no space to go in to that thought here).

These paintings are abstract, then, but, so far from being 'non-representational', are rich in meaning. There is an iconography here. They generate connotations and associations. The billowing forms connote multiple ranges of scale in nature – a form we find in the paintings may represent a galaxy, or the curl of smoke from a cigarette, or an amoeba. It could be something smaller still. Subatomic particles. There are many other associations – for example, a recurring, scalloped, tube-like form that reminds this viewer of the large intestine. There are these natural associations; and then there are associations with the *supernatural* – we can seem to be seeing ectoplasm, the substance supposedly emitted by clairvoyants and mediums while in a trance.

And here we may note that these resonances place the work within a tradition – The two key sources in the gestation period of abstract painting, with Kandinsky and Hilma af Klint, Jean Arp, and so on. There was the new access to imagery gathered through microscopy; the world of tiny life-forms, amoeba and radiolarians and so on, that had been invisible because it was too small to see with the naked eye (our visual perceptual system is attuned, roughly, to the scale between an ant and a mountain). At the same time there was interest in another unseen world, the supernatural world of auras and spirits that was supposed, by adherents of the then fashionable Theosophical movement, to surround us and dwell within us. These components together form abstraction's foundation.

presence

About this title: 'shocked into presence'. Some titles are descriptions, and some are much looser – they are points of departure for a train of thought. Mine goes like this...

There is a standard dualism in art critical discourses associated with improvised abstraction. That is, the sort of abstract painting that's made with the minimum of technical means or planning. No masking tape or preparatory drawings. Just the paint, some means of applying it, and the support upon which it is applied (and here the process is even less mediated than usual, because there are no actual tools for applying paint). Its antecedents are in Abstract Expressionism (Pollock and De Kooning and Frankenthaler) and, before that, in some varieties of Surrealist painting (especially Miro and Masson). A recent, and great, exponent worth mentioning here was Louise Fishman, who died in 2021.

The feeling is that paintings of this sort have two components, coming from two wholly distinct orders of existence. There will be that which is straightforwardly, materially, to hand, such that it can be lifted and held and smelled and so on; but we speak, also, of the spirit. The spirit is something that is around, but not something you could lean on, or pick up, or smell or hear. The sense of 'presence' in which we say 'so and so has presence' also contains those two characteristics. If a thing or person has 'presence' they are emphatically physically present, so that we can see them and hear them, and they are impossible to ignore; but this quality, 'presence' also has a key component that is nothing to do with any physical characteristics. You can't see it, but it's there, for sure. This is related to what we're getting at with the words 'charisma' and 'aura'. It's related, also, to classical Cartesian dualism, the extended and the unextended.

Jacques Derrida believed that Western culture had been beguiled by a myth that he called 'the metaphysics of presence'. This thought is grounded in the observation, made by Saussure, that the meanings in language are not inherent within words, but are generated by the differences between them. Words are like

chess pieces, he thought, so it doesn't matter that the castle is castle shaped and the knight is horse shaped, it just matters that one moves one way and the other another. You might say that what makes any given chess piece itself, what confers identity and meaning on it, is the fact of it not being any of the other pieces on the board. It's defined by everything around it. So (according to Derrida), 'presence', that is meaning, which we suppose to be inherent within words and signs and so on, is no such thing – it's a sort of illusion generated by a system of differences. Presence is not, as we believe, **in** things, but **between** them.

Who knows if he was right about that? (I don't.) He was right in thinking that the notion of 'presence' is potent for us. In the current context, talking about paintings, the painting gives us the feeling that it carries or contains or emanates something that's real but which we can't see; something unseen that would not exist without this thing, the purpose of which is to be seen – a painting, that is. And that is my train of thought, or one of my possible trains of thought. Someone else, obviously, will have a completely different one.

paint

So, this is painting of a certain genre, of a certain Modernist type, but which is also strikingly distinct. Distinct in two principal ways 1) The way in which paint is applied (with the body) 2) The kind of paint. Egg tempera is an unusual medium in painting. I knew about tempera, a bit, but had mainly heard of it being used in the Elizabethan miniatures of Isaac Oliver and Nicholas Hilliard. It's traditionally a medium for small works on smooth supports, often wooden panels or, as in the case of the Tudor miniaturists like Hilliard, on playing cards.

I knew of one contemporary painter called David Hepher, who became allergic to oil paint and so switched to tempera,

because he didn't like the plasticky qualities of acrylic. In abstract painting it's unheard of. Speaking as a painter myself, I didn't know you could use tempera like this. I would have thought only plastic paints, acrylic copolymers, could be poured and pushed and pulled with such physicality on this scale. Not long ago, if I'd been asked if you could use tempera in this way, I would have offered the expert opinion that you cannot. It will crack and fall off, I'd have said. (Wrongly.) Joanna's been painting like this for years, decades, and it's absolutely sound. Given that the obvious choice would have been one of the plastic paints, why use this stuff? It has a finish, a kind of matt, that you can achieve in no other way. And, another thing – It sounds obvious, but it's because it's organic. It comes from something that has had life.

scale

These closing remarks will be about something in this work that does not receive the attention it should in recent discourses on painting (I suppose because people get worried about seeming to be 'Formalists'). That is *scale*. How the proportions of the work relate to those of the painter, and to the objects surrounding it, and to the sizes of all paintings that have ever been made, by anyone. The hallmark of all good painting, but most especially of an improvised abstract painting, is that it could be no size other than its actual size. All aspects, all dimensions, of the whole and of its parts, and of their relationship to the body of the viewer, and so on, are necessary and incorrigible. This is what distinguishes a painting from a picture. Of course, a painting can also be a picture (most are, one way or another), but a real painting is also, most emphatically a **thing**. It's an object whose parts and relations are like stable forms in nature – the cell, the molecule, the atom. Everything in it is as it must be. And what the painter is doing is discovering this apparently preordained

order in the push and pull, the unlikely balancing acts of painting. Because, surprisingly, a real painter never really knows how to do it. Experience helps, of course, but there can never be any exact replication of previously successful solutions. The problem of how you're going to make this thing is solved anew every time. Paintings don't really need to exist, until one has been completed successfully, at which point its being becomes a preordained necessity.

Simon Bill 2023