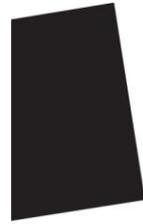


DJ Simpson: COMMA 08

Essay by John Chilver



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Mon - Sat, 11:00 - 18:00

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DJ Simpson: COMMA 08

It's Spring 2009. DJ Simpson's studio is empty in a brisk, businesslike way. You notice the equipment: the handsome industrial vacuum cleaner, the heavy routers and vast power planes that seem too big for one pair of hands. You see that the equipment is specialist, well beyond the realms of D-I-Y. It indicates a level of competence and technical curiosity that is higher than that of an amateur, yet the one or two sample routed panels on view don't quite stand for professionalism either. The studio is a deadpan centre of technical operations, except for a tiny image pinned on a big wall at eye-level of a circuit for the remote control of a car's heated wing-mirror. The lines of the circuit snake back and forth in a pattern of tightly nested curves. Here is a decorative image that catches the eye without its designers intending it to. Over on the other side of the room is a found fragment of wallpaper squirreled away by DJ years ago. An Escher-like pattern formed of stacked bricks composes a visual play of alternating convexities and concavities. And because the depicted bricks are almost life-size the wallpaper has a striking effect of scale that injects a dose of austerity into its decorative register. Combining routed panels with wallpaper, Simpson's project for Bloomberg SPACE certainly marks a move in his work, yet it is one that he has rehearsed in a multitude of ways over many years.

The wallpaper in this installation declares the decorative as an arena in which several questions can intersect. Historically, decoration has been attacked variously on grounds of its lack of 'tactile value', its lack of organic connection with construction processes (according to Adolf Loos' complaints about architectural ornamentation) and, implicitly, its lack of optical space (in some of the later texts of Clement Greenberg, though he never quite spells that out). For the French revolutionary painter and politician Jacques-Louis David, the pictorial version of republican virtue could only be anti-decorative, and a principled rebuke to the ornate and supposedly decadent *rococo* style of the eighteenth century. And so somehow this deep-seated equation of decoration with triviality and decadence remains ever present as a kind of subcutaneous layer in our expectations of the visible.

Simpson's installation implies not only that there are other modes of engaging with the decorative, but that there is a certain necessity to embrace it without moralising. For instance, if the decorative is understood as self-constituting pattern, then we can attend to it as autonomous affect, as was stressed by Alfred Gell in his ethnographic accounts of patterns used in tattooing and other kinds of symbolic decoration; or as cognitive encounter, for example, when a pattern invites us to reflect on the logic that regulates its repetitions.



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Brickwork is one example, and weaving another, where a pattern is produced by the regularities of a consistent procedure. A bricklayer's aim is to maximise the strength of the wall. There's no intention to arrive at a visual configuration as such. But it turns out that maximal strength of bricks and mortar coincides with a particular pattern. Comparable things happen all the time in fabrics, built structures and of course in nature and mathematics. The decorative understood as pattern then is a kind of universal constant in our surroundings to a degree that trespasses over any secure boundary between nature and culture. As the artist Daniel Buren once put it "the decorative is inherent to the universal plastic world."

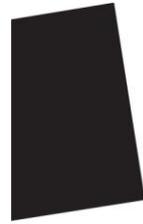
I suspect that this sense of the decorative having to do with making procedures and with functional strength – and along with it the recognition that the decorative can tell a complex story of how constructional behaviours interact with the strengths and forces of materials – has always been at play in DJ Simpson's thinking.

The awareness of the 'structural decorative' that I've outlined is ever-present in DJ's approach to his routed panels, mirror versions of which are here placed on the wallpaper. This wallpaper with its faux Op Art spiralling ellipses and its shifting backdrop of dappled tonal grey discs stands for a design sensibility associated with a certain period – surely the 1960s. It also neatly supplies a diagram of the exhibition itself: the wallpaper's ellipses float on the decorative bed of grey discs in much the same way that the routed mirror panels overlies the wallpaper.

What then of the modes of marking that distinguish Simpson's work? What of the routed removals that create lines and areas within the usually monochrome grounds of his panels? And what happens to those kinds of marking performances when they are placed on wallpaper?

One way to think about this is through an imaginary hybrid of Jackson Pollock's drip paintings and Donald Judd's plywood or box pieces. In a sense Simpson's work offers itself in the role of this unlikely hybrid. It has been commonplace to think about Pollock in terms of traces or 'indices', meaning that the drips are the real traces of the making, of the maker's movements, and so forth. But we don't talk about that in Judd's work because it is evidently at pains to refuse contingent traces. Simpson however does look at Judd in almost indexical terms. For instance, he has often talked about the absence of mitre cuts in Judd's boxes and plywood works. Given the consistent constraints of Judd's vocabulary, the difference between two surfaces meeting at 90° and at 45°, as would be the case with a mitre cut, becomes highly significant. And isn't this also a kind of index? Not like a drip painting, for sure, and without any hint of existential drama. But it is indexical in that the details of how the materials are created and formed and how their combination in the eventual artwork is fabricated remains crucial to the work's effects. Details like junctions, seams and rivets in Judd demonstrate a sensibility that – paradoxically – seems to apply an artisanal connoisseurship in a practice of bespoke industrial fabrication.

The obsession, throughout Simpson's work, with the technical specifics of operating the router is an odd but smart way of holding onto the thing that Pollock confronted: the mark as pure trace



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without any depictive function. That allowed for a mark that didn't refer to anything but itself and the moment of its making. This approach again links directly to Judd in his bid to present objects that refer to themselves and nothing else. Simpson's work extends the influence of Pollock's fluid mark, but in a peculiar way that silences any lingering echoes of humanism or psychodrama. You would almost say the routed works get rid of traces of the body, but that's not quite right. Whereas Pollock's thin sticks permitted him to sway in the air above the painting's surface, DJ's routers are chunky machines that must remain in direct friction with the surface they are cutting into. With continual practice he acquires a more and more attuned routing competence, but the machine still largely dictates to the moving body that pushes it: the routed mark is not organic, but it is trans-organic, meaning that it traverses an organic body.

Simpson's mark feels something like a slow motion re-play of a filmed brushmark, where the footage is magnified to a near microscopic intensity. There is the sense of a test-bed on which the mark is simultaneously excavated, documented and re-conditioned. Inevitably this project – like all current painting that foregrounds the mark as such – has an air of exaggerated staginess about it. At which point the matter of the mirrors and wallpaper needs revisiting.

The mirrors – as we know – make the exterior surroundings of the panel visible in its interior; another way of thinking of this is as a process of simultaneously emptying and filling up the panel. The mirror also makes its image contingent upon our movements in the space around it. But the routed marks within the mirrored panels are distinguished by their relative opacity: they are the bits that do not fully reflect light. Much of the charge of these works has to do with this heightened contrast between mirror ground and non-reflective routed mark. The marks anchor the panels because, unlike the reflective backgrounds, they don't visually alter with the viewers' movements through the exhibition space.

The new commission for Bloomberg SPACE confronts – without presuming to resolve – a central tension in both DJ Simpson's practice and contemporary painting in general. On the one hand it implies a partial affirmation of the decorative, on the other hand there is the realisation that if painting focuses on the mark, as such, then it is or has to dramatise a contrast between marked and unmarked space – something the mirrored panels decisively announce. Their ingenuity is in the way they contain unmarked, relational space within them as reflected light. The decorative – understood here as the repeated wallpaper pattern – cannot contain unmarked space, but can only displace it. It is this extreme tension that the exhibition has the ambition to think through.

John Chilver

John Chilver is an artist and critic living in London.