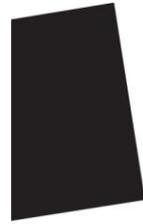


Stuart Cumberland: COMMA 10

Essay by Ben Lewis



Bloomberg
SPACE

Opening times

Mon - Sat, 11:00 - 18:00

Bloomberg SPACE

50 Finsbury Square
London, EC2A 1HD

gallery@bloomberg.net

Stuart Cumberland: COMMA 10

Those of you who do not enjoy the artful splodge, the painterly swoosh or graphic squiggle may wish to avert your gaze from these new paintings by thirty-eight-year-old London-based artist Stuart Cumberland. But connoisseurs of the skilfully deployed, looks-spontaneous-but-is-carefully-calculated school of messy abstraction (yes, I have a more analytical terminology for this, read on) will recognise that in these works Cumberland has established himself as one of the most promising painters to have emerged in this city in the last five years

When Stuart Cumberland showed me these new paintings in his studio last month, he said “I don’t know if any of these are finished yet.” Then he added, “Although my paintings aren’t meant to look finished.”

Somehow many of the most interesting experiments on the frontline of art today seem to involve anachronisms such as this one. The painter sets himself a logically-doomed task, akin to the famous Zen invitation to imagine the sound of one hand clapping. How does one finish a painting that is meant to be unfinished? It is rationally impossible. Yet that does not mean the work is a futile exercise. The best painting of today does not want to resolve this anachronism; its aesthetic interest derives from the process of struggling to reconcile the contradictions within it.

Stuart Cumberland was born in 1970 and lives and works in London. He studied at Bath and then did a MA at the Royal College, later receiving a Saatchi Royal College Fellowship. Since his early days Cumberland has been making large-scale paintings that are at once monumental and casual, inspired primarily by post-war American and German painting, rather than any British antecedents. The paintings in his first solo exhibition at Kate MacGarry gallery in 2003 were all-over primitivist geometries of fragmented figures and furniture in which Philip Guston met Picasso. At a second show in 2006 the influence of American painting was yet more explicit. Cut-out photographs of the heads of dolls were glued onto swiftly painted figures and urban scenes – several of these subjects were nurses, an appropriation of Richard Prince’s well known theme, while the shadow of Jean-Michel Basquiat was evident in the quick and thin paint. At the Approach Gallery in 2007, at the height of the world economic boom, Cumberland cannily took champagne bottles as a theme, in an exhibition he called *Congratulations*. The green and yellow hues of the bottles were painted into super-sized stencils of the bottles, in a painterly update on Warhol’s coca cola bottles. The impact of the final work derived from the juxtaposition of a few different passages of apparently crudely applied paint - a swoosh of green and whirr of yellow to conjure up this glamorous icon of



Bloomberg
SPACE

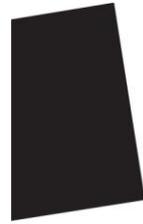
a beverage. Earlier this year, Cumberland exhibited the forerunners of the present series of paintings, *Fort/Da* at the Approach. He left the art market irony of his bubbly abstraction behind, in new coherent style of layers, executed, unlike here, in a day-glo palette of orange, yellow and pink. Amidst all the squeaky clean 'masking tape art' and meticulous nineteenth century style-quoting, and narratives of recent painting, Cumberland's abstract work was a breath of fresh air.

The first thing you will notice about these paintings is that they consist of three surfaces in distinct – art theorists say, discreet – layers. Four if you want to count the primer on the canvas. Maybe five if you think we should include the material canvas itself. Perhaps six, if the gallery wall counts as well, as the most philosophical art critic surely would argue it did. At any rate, on top of the primer is a layer of Benday dots in the CMY colours of the printing industry – cyan, magenta and yellow – painted through a stencil. On top of that there is a second layer of vigorous, sometimes dense black brushstrokes, with which recurring motifs are painted – squiggles, circles and triangles. Cumberland has been painting these elements for years and they started out as body parts – as hands, breasts or heads, collars and what-not. Today they have evolved – or decayed – to look like quasi-automatic gestures, an array of messy doodles that the artist has executed unconsciously. They are painted with brush, spatula and – just for the hell of it, to undermine the conventional instruments of painting – the edge of a window-cleaning tool. On top of that comes another layer – large expansive rectangles of white applied with a roller. Occasionally Cumberland reapplies more Benday dots on top of this again. The areas of white create floating voids in the paintings, completing a circle which returns the picture to the initial layer of white primer. Each layer is allowed to dry before the next is painted so each surface is separate.

Students of contemporary art will notice that each dissonant surface is inspired by a different moment in post-war art history. The dots quote Roy Lichtenstein's and Sigmar Polke's Pop Art. The body parts derive from the forms with which Picasso indicated figures in his late portraits, but also carry echoes of the eighties pictogram-filled pictures of the German painter A.R. Penck. The white voids look like the patches where Robert Rauschenberg screen-printed newspaper photos into his paintings.

Yet these art historical references are brutally degraded in Cumberland's paintings. The dots are the discarded test-strips of the printer, whose colours you might find along the edges of a photograph or colour document prepared for printing. Yet these are now recycled as surface pattern, severed from their purpose of creating a tone or constructing an image. The black paint often looks like it's been sloshed around, as if the artist is trying to clean his brush. The semi-transparent layers of rolled-on paint recall the seductive textures you find in the pictures of Warhol and Rauschenberg, where individual screenprints accidentally overlap. This is an aesthetic of off-cuts, marginalia and mistakes.

The result is a painting that doesn't want you to look at it in the same way that painting has been looked at before. There's no purpose, no harmony, not much form. The centre is often dominated by a hastily convened blank space. None of the layers go together: it's like a mismatched outfit, a



Bloomberg
SPACE

stripey shirt, tartan jacket and flannel trousers on an ugly person. There's an iconoclastic contempt for painting itself, exemplified in those printer's dots. The pictures beg the viewer: "Go on, turn away, cast a dismissive glance over at me, then look elsewhere."

And yet this is painting at the frontline that participates in the very edge of the debate about what painting might do next. In 1969 the famous curator Harald Szeemann staged an influential conceptual art show *When Attitudes Become Form*; in Cumberland's work the painting has become attitude. Here is the second anachronism – bigger and tougher than the unfinished-finished conundrum – with which Cumberland's painting engages. It is in this rejection of the gaze that the value of the painting lies.

There is one painter I haven't mentioned yet, whose influence on Cumberland is larger than any other: Albert Oehlen. In the nineties, many painters wondered how to renew their art form in the wake of Conceptual Art and the 'death' of painting. The ambition of painting – the bravura skill of the artist, the position of the medium at the top of the hierarchy of visual art forms, the myth of the artist-guru – had all been discredited. There were various solutions. Many painted photographs. Some quoted a past style from neoclassicism, or graphic design and illustration. Others turned to narratives and symbolism. Most eschewed large formats. Oehlen (born 1954), however, painted epic canvases in a polyglot mixture of styles, painterly mistakes, erasure and over-painting, hovering between abstraction and representation, which he dubbed "Post-non-representational" or simply "Bad Painting".

But that is only half the point. Contemporary art cannot survive on gestures of rejection and negativity alone. These paintings, which are so difficult to look at, also contain hope. Ever since Jackson Pollock combined chance elements and artistic decision – that is, fate and self-determination – in an artistic style, process has become a performed symbol of something in itself. And so it is with Cumberland.

In Cumberland's work, the canvas is scarred with erasures and over-painting. The artist says he has been inspired by Freud's *Fort/Da* discourse about the way a child enacts and enjoys presence and absence. The psychoanalyst observed his eighteen-month old grandson playing with a cotton reel, attached to a piece of string, throwing it away from him ("Fort", he would exclaim, German for 'away') and then pulling it back ("Da", the child said, German for 'there'). Thus these pictures are a representation of the most primary human sensations of loss and return. But I also think there's another meaning in them. There's a visible tension in the work between the traces of the struggle to create the final image and the apparent carelessness with which the painting appears to have been finally executed. There is a sense that this is work about the effort that is hidden in creation, the experience of how little it takes to get something right, but how much effort, how much destruction and reconstruction is required, to reach that simplicity. That's powerful.

Ben Lewis

Ben Lewis is a critic who regularly writes for The Evening Standard and Prospect.



Bloomberg
SPACE