

AUTUMN RHYTHM

The Abstract Paintings of Laurie Shepherd

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I

The first historical period of abstractionism has ended with the style adrift in the mainstream of culture: another limping target for the postmodernist scavengers.

The concept of irony as the sole subject of a painting is stretched too thin and snaps! In the ensuing crisis abstractionism is recognised as a watershed in the evolution of aesthetic values: a step into the future from which there is no return.

Let the great painters be inspired by a single heroic challenge: to convey meaning that is both ineffable and affecting without recourse to superficial tricks of the eye or mind.

And who could foresee Pollock's drips and splashes in Rembrandt's day?

II

Meantime, until the tragic death of Laurie Shepherd an outpost of the New York School survived in the rural backwater of Halesworth, Suffolk. The town has always been more cosmopolitan than you might think. I remember lugging Frinks up the narrow stairs of the gallery and there were Topoloskis lying around in the attic.

Laurie was a great bloke and we all continue to miss him. His wife and sons have lost a much-loved husband and father. It's been difficult to come to terms with his passing: memories of the man loom large as his personality. But Laurie himself would have loved to be remembered as a painter. And so to the paintings: brash, vibrant, alive with the controlled excitement that animated each powerful gesture of brush or knife. I find them a fitting enough memorial.

III

From the things he said it must have been only five or six years before his death that Laurie concluded he was a purely abstract painter. There had always been a big element of abstraction in his paintings but this was often rendered more or less successfully within a framework of conventional representation or cubist pastiches. At times Laurie concentrated solely on representational veracity. He produced an American style comic, a genre of which he was very fond. But, competent as they are, these works ultimately lack the overall integrity of the abstract paintings.

Laurie's decision to paint in a wholly abstract manner was heavily influenced by his mother's passing away. This profound confrontation with mortality spurred him on to achieve the level of output that would consolidate his mature style. Prior to that, it was obvious to all of us that he had bags of talent but he was not sufficiently prolific to work a number of residual stylistic elements out of his system once and for all. His morbid prescience proved all too accurate but it was as if he found in it the extra motivation he needed to progress from being a gifted pretender to a finished painter. It's therefore appropriate to concentrate on Laurie's later abstract paintings when assessing the enduring qualities of his work.

IV

Laurie believed that the ideas and methods of the great abstract painters had opened up numerous unexplored possibilities. In pursuit of this conviction he proved that abstract painting is as capable as ever of being exciting and fresh in appearance. Of course there have been examples of mannerism and problems with a lack of meaningful content but in the right hands and with a good understanding of 20th Century art there is an enormous amount in the works of Picasso, Braque, Pollock, Rothko, De Kooning and the like to inspire willing painters along the path to successful abstract painting.

Accordingly, there are several influences discernable in Laurie's later style.

V

Let's start with Picasso: every modern painter has had to confront his legacy - he strides like a colossus through the history of 20th Century painting.

Picking up where Cézanne left off, Picasso dramatically increased the extent to which representationalism was subordinated to the actual substance of the work: the colours, shapes and textures arranged on the flat surface; the tools and materials and the different techniques for their use. The painting process and thereby the painter were at least as much the subjects of the picture as the landscape, historical scene, still life or portrait it depicted.

Picasso dispensed with the tradition of spatial illusion commensurate with the actual distance of objects from the eye and created a space that was more appropriate to the limitations of the flat surface. A painter impelled by the evolutionary dynamics of his craft to move away from the magic lantern show

of traditional representation and find a formal approach more closely integrated with the physical dimensions in which he is working will inevitably create a shallow space through a composition of flat, overlapping planes aligned with the two dimensional surface.

For Laurie, many of what Duchamp called swimming lessons consisted of painting cubist-style still lifes with the vestiges of realism that were always part of the cubist works reduced to a greater or lesser extent. This gave him a key insight into the importance of composition over any concessions to realism in abstract paintings. And Laurie was a terrific draftsman, as one look at any of the stage sets he regularly produced would confirm.

Above all it is Picasso's creative energy that is most inspirational for other artists, that relentless outpouring of ideas expressed within the constraints of painting, each one absolutely and uniquely encapsulating his personality. He was the prototype of the existential painter, gesturing extravagantly to prove he was alive in the face of cosmic indifference. There is an element of this swaggering braggadocio – this shouting into the void – in Laurie's paintings.

VI

The shift in emphasis away from an illusion of the natural world towards the painter and the painting process as the main subject of a painting paved the way for Jackson Pollock. With Pollock the marks of the implement itself became the images in the painting rather than the collective means whereby a representational veracity or indeed a cubist composition were attempted – albeit that implement was only joined to the picture surface by a drizzle of paint and an invisible current of energy.

Pollock was another great influence on Laurie. He revelled in paint effects and Laurie showed a similar delight in making paint do all sorts of weird and wonderful things. Both displayed an aggressive, confident, surefooted approach to applying and manipulating paint.

Pollock salvaged materials wherever he could and so did Laurie. Their use imparted a synthetic realism to the paintings, a link with work and production that in no way depended on any attempt to create a representational illusion of the world. It was the outcome of a 500-year dialectic between form and image in painting. A materialist reality had been achieved.

Laurie spoke of the role of serendipity, how a chance event could trigger off a rapid burst of painting in a particular direction and serendipity was key for Pollock. He inherited the practice of using automatic writing to make pictures from the Surrealists and applied the technique both to draft the composition of an abstract painting and to reveal hidden psychological meanings by association with suggestive forms that occurred by accident.

Laurie also emulated Pollock by listening to modern jazz while he worked. This undoubtedly contributed to the rhythm of the paintings. It may have helped the painters to relax and concentrate on something that was intrinsically abstract and spontaneous.

And then Laurie too was, in his own words, no longer a straight line painter.

VII

He cited the Japanese painter Jiro Yoshihara as a major influence. He had a big book on Yoshihara lying open in his studio and reproduced key stylistic elements of that artist directly in some of his paintings to provide extra force and vigour. In many ways Yoshihara provided a link between early

abstraction and abstract expressionism – Pollock was an enthusiastic admirer of his work and ideas.

Yoshihara focused on the actual process of making a painting: an improvisational, uninhibited application of paint reminding the viewer at all times and for all time exactly what had happened to create the picture.

Such paintings are an archaeological site for the anthropologist. They illustrate the mechanics of human movement with greater clarity than any film or computer simulation. And more exciting yet: they show a mind at work in a radically new way.

VIII

There is a strong hint of Howard Hodgkin in Laurie's last paintings. Hodgkin has a distinctive way of applying semi transparent layers of paint over opaque blocks of a contrasting colour, drawing them out with a scraper or a thick semi-dry brush to leave a trail that integrates colour, texture and form. In some instances the underlying colour is still wet. The shapes are quite simple and complemented by splodges or stencils, again relying on colour contrasts for definition. But the finished pictures never look simplistic because of the complex overlay of colours and textures within a particular shape and where shapes meet.

IX

And finally... De Kooning: the pre-eminent influence on Laurie's mature abstract style – visible less as a similarity of appearance than the echo of a common struggle. Two marvellous draughtsmen strive to convey meaning through the essential gestural marks of painting, embracing its material

constraints, impelled by everything they know to create a recognisable image having recourse to a highly refined technique, impelled none-the-less to forget it all.

X

Ultimately none of these influences predominated in Laurie's paintings. His strength of personality ensured that he created his own distinct style. That he absorbed them directly is beyond question. Laurie had video copies of Henri-Georges Clouzot's film *Le Mystere Picasso*, which captures the evolution of a painting, *La Plage a la Garoupe*, and Hans Namuth's films of Pollock at work at the height of his powers. In the last years of his life he visited the big Hodgkin retrospective at the Hayward and that of Pollock at the Tate. And he would inevitably refer to De Kooning in any conversation about painting.

XI

In keeping with the abstract tradition, Laurie's pure abstractions contain accidental combinations of form and colour that the brain involuntarily resolves into a realistic image by association. Though subordinate to the overall harmony of colour, texture and form within the three dimensions of the canvas they provide additional visual and mental stimulation. Many of the poetic titles given to Pollock's ground breaking abstract expressionist works - *Cathedral*, *Full Fathom Five*, *Reflection of the Big Dipper* - were assigned by Ralph Manheim, the author who was Pollock's Long Island neighbour. Although they are oblique responses to the ineffable meaning of Pollock's work and shouldn't be seen as clues to a literal interpretation of the pictures they are partly inspired by some vestige of representation.

I have called one of the paintings Laurie gave me *Pok-a-Tok*, after the Mayan ritual ball game; another *Looking East* from a jazz track by Hank Mobley, a further later piece, one of the last Laurie painted, is called *Necromandion* because of the black swirl running through the picture like a track to the underworld. And still I can't help but appreciate the paintings first and foremost for their synthesis of composition, colour and texture, where the combined effect is greater than the sum of the parts because of the 4th dimension wherein they are reconstructed: the human brain.

XII

Avoiding self-conscious stylistic changes that change nothing; eschewing the pursuit of style as a brand; disdain for celebrity; immune to puerile vulgarity; intuitively radical; no pseudo-philosophy inspiring pet critics to ever greater heights of hagiographic psychobabble; no empty metaspace to suck in ideas like a vacuum: thus the enduring visual lexicon is formed.

I will not seek to throw societies' conceptions of art into bold relief; I have no desire to expose the irony of the gallery space, the art market and the word art: so states the painter of the abstract future.

Laurie Sheppard was just such a painter.

And his later works demand your close attention if only to pay out their abundant reward. Like the man himself they are the genuine article. The best of them should be hanging in galleries around the world for everyone to admire. They would not be out of place.