

Reflections on painting – Ben Johnson, Recent Work

Are you producing a 'portrait' of a building, or architectural space, or is the building more a source of inspiration for a different kind of painterly project?

Yes, I think it's very definitely not a portrait of a building; it's a springboard, inspiration for exploration. My exploration is to do with space and the nature of space, but essentially the way space is described two dimensionally, so it's a preoccupation I have with the craft of painting and I'm almost using architecture as an excuse to exploit and explore that.

How would you define the relationship between your pictures and photography, and what role does photography play in the preparation of your pictures?

In relation to my paintings, initially I'm a casual observer, a tourist of architecture. I walk around buildings and cities, but I'm attracted to architecture and I find within buildings something very powerful which I want to investigate. After I may have walked around a building and experienced one that moves me in some way – the relationship of space to the building for example – I will go back with a camera as a way of further exploring that experience.

So I am looking for an image, the isolated moment and that moment can be when you click the cable release on the camera or when the sun just fleetingly passes the space, or a figure moves through the space. I will then work with a large format camera, generally, so they are very considered photographs; I use a tripod with a grid on the back of the screen, so I'm already starting to manipulate and control the perspective and the geometry of the image. I will then bring the photographs back to the studio and, from several hundred, I may isolate one or two which become the main centre of concentration and meditation. I will then perhaps even manipulate those photographs further by having several prints made or manipulating them on the computer until I come up with an arrangement which I will then take to the drawing stage.

How do you set about deciding on a subject to paint? What is the quality in a building that confirms to you that it's worth exploring further in paint.

I wish I could define it. If only I knew what I needed from a building, I wouldn't need to visit so many buildings. But I don't know what it is until I experience it. It's the rightness of place and space that's so hard to define. It can be a Norman Foster building, a Richard Rogers, a Mies van der Rohe, a John Pawson, or a Claudio Silvestrin building. Or, it can be some anonymous building, or just a set of spaces between buildings, if I'm thinking of cityscapes. There's a rightness of space and you know it when you're there.

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How do you see your painting in relation to what's happening in the context of contemporary art more broadly, particularly given the ongoing polemic about the decline in easel painting?

I'm not sure about the decline in easel painting. There has been a decline in the press coverage of easel painting because it's been around for many centuries and therefore it doesn't make exciting news. I think that the world is big enough, and the human heart is big enough, to accept it all and if only we could approach it without prejudice, we'd be fine. Just at the moment there is a lot of prejudice and rhetoric about conceptual art and that perhaps we should draw the curtains on conceptual art. Well that's as ridiculous as drawing the curtains on easel art. All art has always been conceptual. It will continue, but with many other activities. The camera is a wonderful invention and the computer is offering extraordinary possibilities.

But studio space is becoming more and more expensive and to create a painting is very time-consuming and therefore creative minds are going to have to find alternative ways to satisfy this urge and to put out into the public realm their concepts and their energies and visions. I think there may even be a greater enthusiasm for painting in the near future because there is a greater respect and consideration for the craft and the process of painting. I think that a lot of conceptual art is being knocked at the moment because of a lack of professionalism, which is a ridiculous thing to say. When lack of professionalism is mentioned I think what is often meant is a lack of craft. But there will be a return to painting because a certain number of the public will need the reassurance that they're not spending money on something that happened too easily.

It's difficult to conceive of an expressionistic approach to painting postmodern buildings that would do justice to them, so to what extent does the subject dictate the technique, or did you take a pre-formed formal discipline to the subject?

My foundations are in modernism and I still believe it was a very important movement that helped form me. The Bauhaus was a very important part of my art training. In Britain, even in the sixties, when I was at school, it still had an enormous influence.

Now, I use a technique in portraying the buildings which is semi-industrial – I use a spray gun – but the reason I use a spray gun is because I was an expressionist at art school. I was very much in the tradition of Max Beckmann, George Grosz. I was very committed to having my hands, feet, face covered in paint. I loved the smell of oil, I loved linseed oil, charcoal. But I realised that I was indulging in making mud pies, playing with paint. So I chose to use a spray gun so that I

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would eliminate my handwriting and the signature and, to an extent, the ego, and that is what really guides me. I'm also very interested in a formal approach to painting, the nitty-gritty, the nuts and bolts. I enjoy being in my studio, but I like to be aware of what I'm doing and by making it slightly more technical, rather than simply picking up the paint brush, it means that I have to question every step I take. And I think that is what guides me – my enjoyment of the craft of making a painting.

And so if I asked if you were aiming for an objectivity in your painting, or whether it is important to communicate a personal response to the world, presumably it would be the former?

Well, my objectivity is my expression of my subjective approach to the world.

How important is colour?

Oh, it's very, very important. Nowadays it would be very difficult to go and talk to any group of art students about aesthetics. You would be frowned on. In fact you'd probably be stoned. However, I'm deeply moved by colour and the experience of colour and half the pleasure of my daily life is the manipulation and creation of colour. Bring out the stones!

There's a powerful abstract quality to some of your pictures, so that one feels that some of them would even work upside down. Are you consciously exploring the territory between realism and abstraction, or between figuration and abstraction, or is that an accidental outcome?

It's an accidental outcome, but it's an outcome of somebody who has their foundations in modernism, but is also moved deeply by Kandinsky, Rothko and many abstract painters. I can't see any object and any visual image as anything other than abstract. When I look at a photograph, however descriptive it may be of a very human situation, I still see it as tones of black and white or colours and I do wonder if it's the relationships of certain forms, colours and tones which help to bring over the emotional quality that is being described and so I can't separate abstraction and realism. I'm hesitating to use that word realism because I don't know what is real. Abstract is real.

Is there any sense in which your painting is also intended to be about painting, as well as being more directly about the things it depicts? Or to put it another way, are you ever

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conscious of your paintings fulfilling a subsidiary function – as comments on the nature and rhetoric of painting?

No, I'm not at all conscious of that. But it's quite obvious that they are about painting if you choose to investigate them in that manner, but they are not made to help continue the debate about painting, and the relevance of painting. Ultimately they are paintings, but that is the means to an end and the end is the emotional response of the viewer.

When we last spoke you said that memory was becoming more and more important to you as an issue. Could you expand on that idea?

Yes, it's something that I'm only just starting to think about more consciously. As I'm making a painting, all of a sudden I will be preoccupied with a certain set of abstract, formal relationships within the painting and my mind will jump back to a particular event in childhood, or a particular place, and I realise that the painting has brought back to me a small environment I was in, or a set of relationships where there was something large over me, or something dark in the distance; or I was walking towards a door; and all of a sudden several memories will flood back, just as they do in a dream. It can be a split second; you've experienced them and they're lasting and they moved your view, your position for a while. And I've realised that paintings are quite detached, in a sense, and this is to do with the technique, in a way. But what I'm interested in are the very powerful emotions behind them. Perhaps the work is just leading towards discovering that darker side of my life and perhaps talking about that. But those may be future paintings.

You appear to be putting more and more reflections into your paintings. What is it about reflective surfaces that interests you?

Yes, the reflections have just forced themselves on me. In fact there are three paintings in this show where the study had no reflections, then in the second version a new level of reflections came in. And then I realised that the reflections were what I was looking for, so I made the third version, which has maybe four levels of reflections. I felt that the painting had then reached a conclusion and that that was where all the work was leading and I started to wonder what that was. I then realised that the buildings are just the starting point for a journey into the illusionary space portrayed on the canvas. Ultimately the journey begins and ends on the canvas because the reality is paint on canvas.

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I like the idea of an entertainer who has something to say beyond the joke, that the joke has hidden depths and maybe that is what this illusion of reflection is. It's a fascinating trick almost, of portraying a visual phenomenon. But it's talking about much more than that. It's talking about the fact that on any surface there are hidden depths and that those depths are what one really needs to investigate and pursue.

So it's not unrelated to the idea of the threshold, which seems be another important theme in your recent work.

Yes, threshold is very important. We are all offered opportunities in life to cross thresholds. How many of us have stood at thresholds, and decided not to enter, not to cross the threshold, and we live with the memory of: 'Should we have crossed it?', or 'What would have happened if we had?'

Thresholds, invitations, we're always presented with two roads to take. If we take the right-hand road, we'll never know what was up the left, but we do have to take one, and we have to keep going forward and never look back. Threshold is important, yes.

We talked a little about your love of Vermeer and Chardin last time we met. Could you tell me a little more about that and how they relate to your more modern or contemporary art historical reference points?

Let's concentrate on Vermeer. He's somebody who technically seems to transcend the time in which he lived. They are phenomenal paintings. I can't believe he didn't have a camera with film. We know that the camera obscura was part of his process but I still cannot believe he made the paintings just using a camera obscura, because he would have had to spend so many hours just within the box or tracing from a projection, and he would have needed a model that sat still.

What's fascinating is the fingers playing on a lute, or the light on a pearl, or the light falling across someone's face, They're extraordinary paintings of intense concentration, of resolution. I find the paintings deeply moving, very spiritual, and I'm fascinated by the fact that he made so few paintings. It just shows that you don't have to produce a lot of work, but you have to put in a lot of work. Each one of those paintings represented an enormous amount of time.

Other painters I haven't mentioned are Fra Angelico who, again, is timeless, and Giotto. The thing that would tie all these painters together is this description of the three-dimensional

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world, the formalising of space, the profound spirituality and utter commitment to the craft of painting as a way of discovering themselves. What I see behind all these paintings is an intense human being, an individual.

And among the high modernists?

Kandinsky fascinates me because of the break from naturalism, from figurative painting into abstraction. A book that has always been on my shelves is *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, which has always been a guide. But also the *Pedagogical Sketchbook* by Paul Klee. And Rothko is somebody I go back to over and over again for satisfaction. Then there is Charles Sheeler, the so-called Precisionist of the 1920s, and Balthus is somebody I can bring into the same tradition as Vermeer, although not quite on the same level.

You seem to me to be very professional in your approach to painting; there's a good deal of discipline in what you do. This seems to be in marked contrast to the prevalent decline in professionalism among many young contemporary artists – and I'm expressing a personal opinion now. Is that something you've noticed too?

No, I haven't. In fact I've noticed almost the opposite. I gave up teaching approximately fifteen years ago and one of things I was interested in was helping those students who actually wanted to make paintings. Nobody in art schools at that time would talk about the craft of making paintings because it was all about self expression. But I was trying to help people understand that there were formal languages of perspective, ways of mixing paint that meant they wouldn't fall off the canvas in two or three weeks. And I thought that was important, because through the craft one could start to learn about oneself. However, that was not really welcomed by the majority of people teaching, however much it was welcomed by certain students.

When you're a student you shouldn't be thinking about your income, you should be thinking about what it is you want to produce and if you produce something that has financial value, it is up to the dealer to realise that financial value.

However, nowadays you now have accountants and dealers and art consultants on the staff in art schools giving lectures on professional practice. And there are people leaving art schools who are much more conscious of professionalism than I am. I've been painting professionally for thirty years, but what is interesting is that these people – and many of them are the so-called

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conceptual artists that have been heavily criticised – they know that one of the first things they should do is go and get a PR company. Now I have real problems with that, but it isn't an insignificant part of making the public aware of what they're doing.

By professionalism, I think I was alluding more to a painstaking approach to the proper application of paint to canvas, which is a concern with which you are associated and which satisfies a need that an object should display the work or craft that has gone into its production.

All right. If you choose to spend twelve hours a day in a studio, which is what I've chosen to do, rather than teach or any other activity, you'd better enjoy the day and I actually enjoy the process of making paintings. I'd never be very comfortable feeling that my paint is going to fall off the canvas in a few weeks time. I don't professionally make my paintings or make them in a craftsmanlike manner just because someone has spent a lot of money on them, but I take a pride in the way the paintings are constructed.. I enjoy, and am very conscious of, every single moment of that process. I'm also by nature an inquirer, and I inquire into the way my paints are made, where they come from, how they're supported on the canvas. So they're well-constructed objects and they take a very long time to make. I would like to believe that they're good paintings. But none of us should ever fool ourselves that because something takes a long time, it's necessarily good.

Your pictures seem to be trying to foreclose a natural impulse on the part of the viewer to see the image as a representation of the world, prompting the viewer instead into a more abstract frame of mind. Is it important to you how people engage with your pictures?

Yes, it is. I would like somebody to be generous enough to give the painting some time. It doesn't have to be a lot of time. But in that horrible, unattractive modern jargon, it should be 'quality time'. I would like them to concentrate for however long it takes to see the message that might be there. I'm not even sure that I know what the message is. I think it's almost above and beyond my own ambitions.

My intentions are both honourable and ambitious...and high. I'd like to bring an experience of peace and tranquillity and wholeness, of oneness. To receive that message, if it is contained within the paintings, just needs attention, and quietness.

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You seem to be a happy person. Does painting bring you happiness?

Well, I can't imagine doing anything else and if any of us have an ambition, it should be towards contentment and at the end of some days I can feel a certain contentment at a job well done and a sense of concentration having been rewarded.

So there's still pleasure in the daily practice of painting?

Absolutely. Long live painting.

Ben Johnson in conversation with Tom Flynn

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