

Martin Holman

## For Emily, whenever I may find her<sup>1</sup>

I have had an interesting experience looking at your new paintings. We have not had the chance to meet during the preparation of this text so I have worked from images you sent me by e-mail. The list of dimensions and media you put in a Word document did not come through, and instead of asking you to send it again, I made use of two faculties in order to visualise the work – memory and imagination. I am wondering about how well I did.

The memories were of paintings by you I have seen, at your final show in 2006 at the RCA, for instance, and in *Divination*, the remarkable group exhibition of many strong-willed images and after-images that you initiated 18 months later and piloted through its presentation in very atmospheric locations in London, Hamburg and Paris. My imaginings, on the other hand, while informed by those particular memories, were shaped by years of looking at artists' work in reproduction and, as it were, in the flesh.

I think it is that combination that you want me to bring to your new pieces, my awareness of what you have done and my grounding in contemporary art after observing it for over 30 years. So many years, in fact, that a lot of that contemporary work is now historical. It's art history (or art forgotten) and art has gone through many changes, at least on the surface. And as art has become more contemporary that surface has just got bigger and bigger.

One change has been that no-one nowadays looks for the mainstream. If they look, they won't find one. Its close successor has been the 'institutionally established' art favoured by wealthy private collectors across the globe. The choices made within coteries of art journalists, museum professionals and ambitious peripatetic curators have carved out that art; or have they merely confirmed it? Possibly, those institutional choices exist at both ends.

This 'artocrat' art has sprung up as an attempt to give definition to the creative Babel of languages and dialects that spills out of studios, workshops, galleries, magazines and individual artists. It has overtaken the predominance of a single idiom – such as social realism, abstract expressionism or minimalism – that once embodied the idea of cultural 'progress' in the visual arts. The preferences in today's 'art world' for neo-conceptual and multi- or mixed-media work, and for globalism, have helped and hindered art's broader reception.

I feel that the recent Tate Triennial was a manifestation of this tendency. It offered a brand name under which to group a type of art by putting forward the term 'Altermodern' over a thin glaze of philosophy. Such pretensions, either harmless fun or a dangerous example, have provided like-minded souls with a guide through the plethora of practices. They also constitute a route-map for the time poor or asset rich that highlights in advance the principal sights through ever-lengthening rosters of names that have flooded critical attention since 'art' ceased to be 'western' and went 'international', albeit with an American accent, sometime around 1989.<sup>2</sup>

But it could be argued that rather than formulating a mainstream underpinned by ideology or aesthetics, the inner art world's choices have fostered a power structure within art's markets (traded and publicly consumed), a dubious A list of kings and courtiers yearning to be at the centre of the universe, of empires and fiefdoms, masters and mimics. The hindrance factor is that this modern patronage may cast many of their fortunately favoured artists into tomorrow's category of the forgotten rather than into the pool that feeds history.

To dismiss the whirligig of present-day art business as the Emperor's new clothes is foolish, of course, because it has yielded benefits and discoveries. What may be lacking is loyalty to history and to content, quantities that go unacknowledged at the risk of losing an inheritance. Like the high finance economy that landed (us) with a crash last year, gains can become losses when value is written over a mountain of unpaid debts.

Looking at your paintings, I see Babel at work rather than an effort to fall behind a definition. I welcome that. For one thing, of course, you use paint, the ancient medium that survives every premature announcement of its death. Every day in the studios of the most diligent painters witnesses the crucifixion and resurrection of painting – and probably of the painter, too.

That you are engrossed in painting seems to me self-evident in how you work at it, test and defy it, circumvent it. The *Zahnderzeitpasta 3.2.1* and *Zahnderzeitpasta Delta Second* paintings reverberate with the materiality of medium, the pastel delirium of pigment and the expressive cadenza of gesture – the basic form of a line that loops back into itself and then winds away. I have guessed that this painting is big; I am familiar with big in your work, and everything about this painting 'feels' big. I can see that the support is subdivided, and I also sense that what it supports is not quite what at first it seems.

The fairground sweeps of bulbous, tubular tri-coloured ribbons of paint are flatter than I expect, and I can't ignore that deflated ring of the same matter that frowns out of the centre of the image. You've explained to this non-linguist in German that the meaning of *Zahnderzeitpasta* lies deliciously within your language's incorrigible veneration of compound nouns, and that this particular combination aims to spread the tingling aqua-freshness of toothpaste over the rasping bristles of time. The

zithering rise and fall running through the pronunciation of the word itself demarcates a triumph of linguistic engineering. Toothpaste-impasto the image may start out as representing but the 'zeitgeist' element wants to wipe the smile away; it has the heavy-headed dull ache of aftermath about it.

The realisation takes from high-season frivolity to out-of-season homesickness. The swirls turn into marks filtered through frustration that has decided to obliterate words into a carpet of waste matter that the caretaker of art will eventually sweep away or blow into the grass. It seemed like a good idea to punch meaningless fictional syllables into circular confetti out of the text in which they may once have made – or invited – sense.

The obligation to make sense could sit at the root of the various text pieces that make images out of *Rules*. I suppose that could be the first sign of your unease with rules. I know that in every institution notices abound with authoritarian reminders not to run, or to pull or push, or not to chain your bike to these railings; and in many homes, too, from please close the gate to the (perhaps not so often seen) 'now wash your hands'. Your signs are already on to a loser by looking a little, well, blunted, the way words tattooed into skin look blunted because the inert ink impregnating the skin has a living organ to contend with.

These rules have an artist to contend with who is not a natural rule-keeper. The rule of the old mainstream in modernism was that an artist sought his signature style, a metaphor, and the system then almost obliged that artist to repeat the metaphor once it was successfully formulated. Your metaphor, if you have found it, is best conceived as a piece of text. It would not read 'do it in just one way' but as 'mix it up'. Some narrative figuration (*Johannesfeuerhaufen*), with words or with faces (*Zahnderzeitpasta 3.1*); some decoration verging on the abstract (*Zahnderzeitpasta 4.1 fragment*, perhaps even the enigmatic *Mould*); and fantasy and a taste of surrealism (with *Wormhead* and *Birdhead*, which I have assumed to be small works) insinuating themselves into the cultural mêlée.

I like these shifting terminologies. They are a strength in a painter when handled well; they are not to be mistaken for pathological conditions, such as reveal themselves in one person's multiple and concurrent styles of handwriting. In your message to me, you expressed uncertainty about showing *Rearview Rhino*. Show it: that's my advice. It has fantasy and realism, its own internal dichotomy or conversation. Exotic animals pleased the surrealists: Buñuel would have killed for a rhino in his rear-view mirror. I guess this one is small, and it has lapsed out of colour, out of texture and into 'an image'.

Moods also change – travelled in one painting – between playful and serious, between attraction and the ugly. *Houses with Stain* attracts me with the prospect of a double narrative. Or are they parallel speculations? The houses are unremarkable two-storey suburban villas, perhaps even two halves of a pair of semis. I think we are looking at the fronts but I'm made unsure by the unarticulated mound that's appeared on their joint

boundary. A pile of rubbish, I think, a phrase that takes on wider meaning as I turn it around in my mind as I look over this surface.

There are many paintings around now of unremarkable locations, and the genre that elevates banality (or takes painting's status down a notch) is a little tricky. It plays on our susceptibility to imagery, on our expectation of truth, significance, of a point in any depiction. It's the legacy of photography and Richter in particular has put it to especially good use.

Probing the image for significance throws up the question of the surface stains. They have happened, geyser-like eruptions of nebulous matter, conceivably a nimbus of escaped domestic gas captured in the split second before ignition, before tragedy, before the cameras arrive, before the breakfast news. No, it's not that order of speculation (or wishful-thinking), endearing though it is. It is the method of depiction that becomes the subject, the falling apart of one image in the service of composing another. One that blooms on the weave, which separates colour into colours.

I like these paintings. I view them as propositions with an edge dipped in old-time romanticism. There is one identity between them, and there are several.

For Emily, whenever I may find her.

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<sup>1</sup> Title (only) borrowed from the song by Paul Simon and performed by the writer on the Simon and Garfunkel album, *Parsley, Sage, Rosemary and Thyme*, Columbia Records, New York, 1966.

<sup>2</sup> I'm cheekily nominating *Magiciens de la Terre*, the exhibition in 1989 at the Centre Georges Pompidou and the Grande Halle at the Parc de la Villette, as starting point.