

In Praise of Painting



Ian McKeever

Ian McKeever has exhibited his work to considerable acclaim in Britain and America, Europe and Scandinavia. Here, he has written three distinctly conceived essays, based on lectures given at the University of Brighton (where McKeever is Visiting Professor in Painting) and Kettle's Yard, Cambridge. Covering such topics as the presence and absence of light in Western painting, the history and contemporary status of abstraction, and the continued potency of painting in today's mass-media world, these essays move from the artist's own studio concerns to a consideration of such diverse painters as Stanley Spencer and Gerhard Richter, William Blake and Caspar David Friedrich, The Master of Saint Veronica and Simone Martini, Edvard Munch and Vilhelm Hammershøi, Wassily Kandinsky and Barnett Newman.

Extract 1: Light and Heat, Black and White

The last time I visited the Louvre, I spent the afternoon in the very long gallery which houses the Italian paintings. It begins with the Duocento and Trecento painters such as Duccio, Giotto and Martini and continues chronologically up to the 17th century. What struck me, as I walked up and down this history of painting, was how much it was about fading light, and that the history of painting is also a history of the loss of light. For slowly but surely, from the omnipresent intensity of divine light in early Byzantine painting, which preceded the emergence of Italian painting, to the obscuring chiaroscuro of such painters as Titian and Caravaggio, the light is squeezed out of painting to become finally a mere candle-flicker. A world once full of light becomes a world of shadows.

When light does eventually re-emerge, as intense light, it is in another country, France in the 19th century. However, by then the light of God has been replaced by the prosaic light of day.

Of course, by definition all painters deal with light, but some have wanted to hold onto it and have valued it more specifically than others.

In the tradition of the Byzantine icon, the icon lives in a world of light, an absolute light. This is paradoxical, in that the icon knows or acknowledges no source of light, either internal or external, yet there is light. Icon painting considers light as something not external to objects, nor as belonging to some primordial substance such as the sun. Rather, iconic light establishes and builds things itself. In that sense the icon is executed upon light. It is as if we and the world we inhabit were actually to be made of light. Van Gogh alluded to this quality when he said:

“I want to paint men and women with that something of the eternal, which the halo used to symbolize, and which we seek to convey by the actual radiance and vibration of our colour.”

Robert Grosseteste, the 13th century Bishop of Lincoln, in his book *Du Luna*, said more about this when he wrote about light as being the first corporeal form: that light is the maker of matter. Just as Louis Kahn, the American architect, did when he said:

“We are actually born out of light ... I believe light is the maker of all material. Material is spent light.”

For Kahn material is potentially lightless.

Thus material becomes the shadow of light. We could say that, as the material world of today has become more and more 'what matters', the need to form it, give it shape and make it visible has necessitated that we withhold more and more light. As if, paradoxically, the more we know and have, the less light there remains to illuminate anything.

The writer William Burroughs envisaged a world where the ceaseless taking of photographs – that quick click of the camera – is stealing each time a piece of light: in the end, all natural light will have gone. We will have consumed it all and will be living in perpetual darkness. Our only means of illumination, what artificial light we can conjure, will be thrown back on the millions and millions of photographs which congest our lives and become the only means by which we view the world. Photographs which have indeed become our world view.

Painters either paint towards the light or they paint towards the night. There will be either more light, or there will be less. Vermeer was a painter who seemed to insist that light infuse the human spirit. We can palpable sense its increasing emergence; it glows. In his work, the light source is never revealed: it is always hidden, yet it permeates everything. In that sense, his paintings connect to the tradition of the early Italian painters and the Byzantine icon; to the light of being rather than the light of day. The art historian Walter Liedtke high-lighted this when he wrote:

“His (Vermeer’s) profound interest in optical effects compounds the sense of wonder, since his figures, no matter how conventionally arranged (...) are treated in terms of light, colour and definition (or focus) as if they were still-life objects.”

Objects which never seem to be in shadow, but are fully illuminated by whatever light there is. Where every nook and cranny is somehow lit, where greys never find a place but everything remains in full colour. Imagine a world of omnipresent light, of no gradations: how would we see and measure ourselves, how would we make images of ourselves? We are blinded by too much light just as surely as by too little.

If Vermeer painted towards the light, then an artist who painted towards the night was the Dane Vilhelm Hammershøi. Like Vermeer, Hammershøi was a painter of the human figure as stilled-life. However, rather than finding that moment of potentially omnipresent light, he squeezed out of the painting all the light he possibly could. Pushing all colours into greys and reminding us of Wittgenstein’s observation: *“Grey is not poorly illuminated white.”*

In Hammershøi’s work light recedes and we face the possibility there will not be more. In looking at his work one gets that same sensation as when sitting in the

studio at dusk looking at a painting with the light fading; that point at which colour slowly goes out of the work, detail becomes lost and one form is silhouetted against another. Then one experiences paintings in another way: they become soft, lose colour, but at the same time take on another definition. It is as if they become shadows of themselves, laying one shadow on top of another until eventually all disappear.

The Swedish poet Gunnar Ekelöf sensed this moment of building dark upon dark when he wrote:

*“It is the dark that contains all the colours – not the light
What else are colours but shadows
Or shades of light.
Lay colours on top of each other and you get black,
The purest vision
Is pure shadow
The opposite of light.”*

Perhaps for some Scandinavian painters the full light of the sun is more than they can take. This quality of turning inwards away from the light, instead of towards it, is probably one of the qualities which most distinguishes the Northern Romantic tradition from its Southern Classical counterpart. From the safe interior of a lived-in space, looking out through the window to a clear light-filled vista, the classical world can be idealized. It can be both proportioned and apportioned and finally made into a system. While for the romantic painter, always shying away from the full light of day and looking into the gloom of his interior personal space, such distance and distinction from the world around him is unrealistic: he can never see beyond himself.

III

In speaking about black Matisse referred to it as a force, pointing out the emphatic quality which black alone can possess. Often we tend to see the large dark generalized areas in a painting as being a dull black, but they seldom are. Black does not lend itself to such neutrality, nor does it allow itself to be used as a kind of discreet pictorial punctuation. It is just that we, so to speak, ‘black-out’ such areas in a work. So when we actually do see true black being used as colour in a painting, it comes as a shock. It takes us by surprise because it is actively black, and carrying with it the force to which Matisse referred.

In his *Letters on Cézanne*, Rilke threads the colour black through the text like a leit-motif. As such, it never gets heavy or black in that other sense, but remains a living part of painting. Think of the reddish black of Cézanne’s wine bottles, the mirror-black of Guardi and the effect of a light being switched off in Manet: black can take on positive qualities we rarely ascribe to it. In that sense paintings are one of the few areas in which black can actively live.

Black as a colour gets fat fast, it takes on a body quickly and absorbing that body into itself it soon becomes opaque. Leave black transparent and it is no longer black. Stand close to a large black painting, as opposed to a white one, and it is like the difference in standing close to a brick wall instead of a high hedge. One will yield, the other not. White is never so white that we cannot see into it, but black can be so black that we cannot see out of it. When treated as a colour instead of its opposite, black is somehow always more than the sum of the other colours. However, it is difficult to see pure black, just as it is difficult to see pure white: both are always tinged. When lit, both will deflect away from certitude. Their absoluteness lies more in the mind than in any manifestation of black and white we might see. The black stocking legs of Count Faustino Avogaduo in Moroni's painting in the National Gallery, or the black Motherwell painting from the 'Elegy to the Spanish Republic' series: as a colour black moves easily and at times imperceptibly between material and metaphor. In his writings Motherwell referred to the unexpected contradictory natures of black and white as pigments, which any painter knows well. Pick up a full can of black and it is far lighter in weight than all the other colours: on the other hand, pick up a can of titanium white and it is significantly heavier. For the painter black begins light, taking on another sense of weight as it becomes extended by use.

Extract 2: Painting and Countenance

Pinned to the back of the bathroom door is a poster of a small painting by Botticelli, titled 'Portrait of a Young Woman'. It depicts, in profile, the head and shoulders of a young woman wearing a black dress. My wife put it up several years ago and it has remained there ever since. This is how I first got to know the painting. It was many years after I first saw the poster that I encountered the actual painting, I knew immediately why the poster was still pinned up. On another door, the one leading from the studio to the storage area, a solitary postcard of a small painting by Vilhelm Hammershøi is stapled, again depicting a young woman in profile, and again (by coincidence) wearing a black dress. I came across this painting while strolling around the Art Museum in Odense, finding myself repeatedly being drawn back to it.

What is it about certain paintings, that they are able to get right under the skin? Often they are the paintings which one would least expect to do so. How and why do we find such intimacy with certain works? At times it feels as if they had been painted specifically for oneself. They leave the mass and weight of art history behind them and become an inexplicable part of one's life.

Two small paintings, two young women wearing black dresses, heads turned in profile to the right. In both one is drawn to follow the line from the curve of the dress up to the throat, tracing it again around the contours of the face, over the head, and then down again, following the curves of the pinned up-hair down to

the nape of the neck and then back to the dress. In both, an exquisite line. A tender, fragile line made with what can only be described as love. Why do we find it so hard in Britain to speak about our emotions in relationship to art? Why do we always leave our nerve-ends at home, even on the occasions when we are being asked to reveal them?

In Botticelli's 'Portrait of a Young Woman', especially, there is a line which seems extraordinarily pure. Such a pure and fragile line, in which we can sense both vulnerability and strength. Then, one immediately knows what it is to be human. Free of bombast and brute force, it is a line which takes us to an edge where beauty becomes painful and we know why only certain things can contain grace. We also know that it is only possible to paint such a painting if it has had love secreted within it.

In Hammershøi's 'A Young Consumptive Woman' the line is softer, its edge lost in the blurring which so often accompanies oil paint. Its fragility lies more in its illusiveness. When I first saw this modern painting, which is only 31cm x 27cm, I was struck by its delicacy. It is a painting which can be almost cupped in the hands, and indeed, one desires to do just that. It is the same size as a small devotional icon. However, icons are seldom, if ever, depictions in profile.

Full face or profile; in writing about the difference in reference to the icon, Paul Evdokimov speaks about the profile interrupting communion, inaugurating a fading away, a flight leading to absence. In more general terms, I wonder if there are painters who paint 'head on' and painters who paint 'in profile', so to speak; is it the difference between the gaze and the glance? Equally, in coming to look at work, do we also either gaze or glance, and can we only gaze back at what is already gazing at us?

Face to face: there is something emphatic about the self-portrait of Edvard Munch staring out at us from the canvas 'Between the Clock and the Bed'. Just as there is in the self-portraits of Lovis Corinth, of which in later life he painted one a year (in itself a wonderfully simple idea). I have always been curious as to where the necessary distance lies for the painter in order to paint such an image. That edge, which separates him from what he paints, and the nature of the discipline, of seeing oneself as subject matter. We approach self-portraits differently from how we come to other portraits. I use the words 'come to' because looking can be so passive an activity and good paintings do not give us that prerogative. Instead, we have to find a state of attendance, we have to be present.

*"But now the young girl
Is all enveloped by blue.
She sits on the throne,
She becomes august
With a simple majesty.*

*Suddenly
A winged figure
Appears before her,
But, from a higher place.
It is the angel, the announcement.
The air, the visible catch fire.
In the heat Giovanna dozes off.
Oh, he will paint: later, when the time is right.”*

In this short section from the epic poem 'Earthly and Heavenly Journey of Simone Martini' the Italian poet Mario Luzi refers to what is perhaps Martini's greatest painting, the alter piece 'The Annunciation'. Painted by Martini and his brother-in-law Lippo Memmi in 1333, the work depicts the visitation of the angel Gabriel to the Virgin Mary, with St. Ansanus and possibly St. Margaret in the two lateral panels. It is thought that Martini painted the central panel and Memmi the two sides. The painting, commissioned originally for the altar of St. Ansanus in Sienna Cathedral, is now in the Uffizi.

Whenever I see this painting I never know how to walk away from it. I never know how to begin to leave.

Between the Angel Gabriel and the Virgin Mary stands a vase of lilies with the words '*Hail Mary full of Grace, the Lord is with Thee*', Gabriel's message, arcing above. Gabriel is leaning in from the left and Mary away to the right. The centre of the painting (except for the vase and text) is empty, yet the space feels pregnant. It is as if all else in the painting were in attendance to this gap, to this moment which allows for the Annunciation.

To paint a painting in which what is said is not overtly there, in this case cannot be there, but only intimated, is hard, very hard. When we trust the gap created by that absence to carry more weight than what is already there, we know that we are in the presence of great painting. It is possible to make saints out of wine bottles, as Rilke kindly never ceased to remind us; to make something miraculous from little more than intimation.

II

The painting 'Be I (second version)', 1970.

*“One is the number of solitude; two is the number
that separates, and three is the number that goes
beyond separation.” Paul Evdokimov*

Barnett Newman painted 'Be I (second version)' in the year that he died. It is in many ways one of his simpler paintings; a thin vertical line bisecting the canvas to create a tri-partite composition. It echoes the structure of 'Onement I', the 'first'

of Newman's paintings, the work he recognized as being the breakthrough to his mature style. Although Newman painted many works with more complex structures of four, five or six vertical divisions, the basic one of three, which 'goes beyond separation', somehow seems to say something fundamental about his work. It informs in a way that more overtly complex configurations only echo. And perhaps in holding onto something as elemental (yet complex) as three, we can forestall the tendency to think that analysing the formal constructs will get us closer to the work. For it will not.

In speaking so far of portraits – the profile, the full face, the self-portrait – and their antithesis absence, I have been attempting to find a way to Newman. To find for myself, how I might come to the paintings. Engage with work which is so remorselessly emphatic in being just what it is; bands or columns of colour on canvas. Against such odds, it is tempting to invent fictions, treat the paintings as a *tabula rasa* for one's own projections. In effect, construct their meaning. Much harder, however, to admit them as simply paintings.

Yet it is difficult to efface a direct reference to the figure from Newman's work. The paintings' vertical emphasis, even when they are a pronounced horizontal in format, suggests it. And perhaps we should remember the obvious: the paintings were painted by a man, who stood full-square in front of them. The look is that of a direct gaze, not a glance. If it is perhaps this which the paintings appear to disavow at this very moment, then wait. A presence is coming, and in that becoming all will be transfigured.

All at once, we see seemingly nothing. Yet, all at once, everything is there before us.

Newman attempted something few artists do, especially painters: to begin all over again, to start from the beginning. 'Adam' – 'Eve' – 'Day before One' – and 'Now': the titles alone evoke a genesis through the act of painting. Newman stated in one context, "*content has to be determined, at the very moment (the painting) is being made*"; and in another, "*One cannot really say it – one can only paint it.*"

Time and time again. The gap between the moment, and the time needed to paint a painting, to 'be' through painting. Holding and enfolding that moment from one instance to the next, and so on, again and again. The process of becoming a painting is underway, a process with no implicit literal or metaphorical end. Circumspect about what will follow, paintings take possession of their own kind of sight, by which we also are able to see again – "*Oh, he will paint: later, when the time is right.*"

When the time is right: is that what the artist is waiting for – '*all time (...) eternally present*' – a time which takes us back to the beginning, to the point where there is no more to be seen? To look at a Matisse drawing and sense a line as old and

as wise as the first line ever made. To see the look on Rembrandt's face which is that first look; or sense the moment in front of a Newman painting which is this and every moment.

Is this what the artist has to do: to begin all over again; stake claim to a time which was then and yet still is now? Find the moment which threads us back to all which was and to all which still can be, and know it again for the first time.

It is only a case of trying to hold onto the moment: Pinkham Ryder's ecstatic instant, the door half-open which will lead to Los's fall, Friedrich's elation – above and beyond. We cannot come to paintings other than as we are. This is our limitation. Paintings are not tools for learning, but redemptive moments in our lives.

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