

Surface and Structure

An essay by Liam Kelly

Liam Kelly is a lecturer in the History and Theory of Art & Design in the Faculty of Art & Design, University of Ulster. He is a former member of the Visual Arts Committee of the Arts Council of N. Ireland. He is also a Vice-President of the International Association of Art Critics (AICA) where at their annual conferences he has presented since 1980 a number of papers examining issues and dilemmas in contemporary Irish Art. He is currently preparing a book on Art in Ulster.

Although art is fundamentally everywhere and always the same; nevertheless two main human inclinations, diametrically opposed to each other, appear in its many and varied expressions. One aims at the direct creation of universal beauty, the other at the aesthetic expression of oneself, in other words, of that which one thinks and experiences. ... For the artist the search for a unified expression through the balance of two opposites has been, and always will be, a continual struggle. Mondrian¹

After Impressionism the elements of line, shape, colour etc. which formerly although never exclusively went together to conjure up an image which had a visual referent in the natural world now became interesting in their own right and for their own sake. Abstraction or art devoid of representing visual images over and above itself was well on the way towards being developed. It would invariably be called non-figurative art but not non-representational which was used as a more general term to include works that may have had their origin in some form of extension from an external visual reality.

Kandinsky has been mostly cited for the discovery of this so-called separation of art from its ties to the natural world. In his 'Improvisations' and 'Compositions' (1910-14 onwards) he strove to arouse emotions by the purely formal arrangement of colours similar to the way music works.

On the other hand in Russia and Holland artists like Malevich (Suprematism) and Mondrian (Neo-Plasticism) were also striving for a universal language of form but based more on rational lines than the direct out-pourings of spirit by Kandinsky. Mondrian sought to reduce colour to its primary sources together with a 'plastic' and 'dynamic' arrangement of lines and planes in space. Cubism which had developed in France underlined these developments which had led to a more formalist, geometric idiom.

After World War I Abstract art was to wain in France although later a more lyrical abstraction would arise with artists like Bazaine and de Stael. In Germany, however, artists like Moholy-Nagy at the Bauhaus continued to experiment with this constructivist language of form, structure and geometry.

But it was in America after the second world war that both the expressive and by way of reaction, a dispassionate abstraction developed. Abstract Expressionism (although it can be used as a general term which might include Kandinsky) specifically refers to an American group of artists who were interested in creating a style that was direct in its gestural use of paint. Pre-eminent among this group would be Jackson Pollock (Action Painting) but also a more restrained form of soft colour staining typified by Rothko. Common to both groups was the importance of the surface or 'Colour field'.

A cooler, more rational reaction to this set in with so-called Post-painterly Abstraction which included Kinetic art, Op art and perhaps most controversial of all Minimal art.

The Minimalists shared with Mondrian the belief that a work of art should be completely conceived by the mind before its execution. Art was a force by which the mind could impose its rational order on things, but the one thing that art definitely was not, according to minimalism, was self expression. Gablik²

It is not so much the artists themselves, however, but Clement Greenberg (the critic as proselytizer) who is usually associated with the central claim of this abstraction that it is self-sufficient in content without the need of explanation beyond its own boundaries.

The avant-garde poet or artist tries in effect to imitate God by creating something valid. Solely on its own terms, in the way nature itself is valid, in the way a landscape - not its picture - is aesthetically valid; something given, increate, independent of meanings, similars or originals. Content is to be dissolved so completely in form that the work of art or literature cannot be reduced in whole or in part to anything not itself. Greenberg³

Faith in abstract art, as we know, has been dispelled now for nearly two decades with emphasis on the return of figurative art; the opportunities for 'investigating extra-aesthetic feelings and thoughts

Notes

1 Robert L Herbert (ed.) 'Modern Artists on Art', Prentice-Hall, inc. 1964. Essay: 'Plastic Art and Pure Plastic Art' by Piet Mondrian, 1937.

2 Nikos Stangos, 'Concepts of Modern Art', Penguin, 2nd Edition 1981. Essay by Suzi Gablik: 'Minimalism'.

3 Clement Greenberg, 'Art and Culture', Thames and Hudson, 1973.

4 'Mark Rothko 1903-1970' (exhibition catalogue), Tate Gallery, London, 1967. An Essay by Irving Sandler.

5 Donald Judd, 'Complete Writings 1959-1975' Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Halifax (New York University Press, New York, 1975).

6 Hal Foster, Essay: 'Signs taken for Wonders', Art in America, June 1986.

7 Donald Kuspit, 'Art Forum', January 1987.

8 Thomas McEvilley, 'Art Forum', March 1987. Essay: 'The opposite of Emptiness'.

9 ibid

10. ibid

11. ibid

that adhere in the physical properties of works of art...⁴ and the so-called relevance of social and political issues in art.

Now however in America particularly, where Abstract art was mostly developed and nurtured after the war, a re-examination of abstraction is taking place both in the production of works of art themselves and in critical re-appraisal of its relation to society.

Even in 1968 someone like Donald Judd, the Minimal artist, was trying to come to terms with the nature of his work vis-à-vis society.

Any art involves philosophical social and political attitudes... I can't see how I can be outside of the society, which is a wish sometimes, so I'm within it. Judd⁵

More recently Hal Foster has written about the new quasi-abstractionists in relation to our present society.

In one way or another, most of these artists seek to picture abstractive tendencies in late-capitalist life; in science, technology, telecommunications, image and commodity production. Foster⁶

He questions, however, the appropriateness of their means in using paint rather than film, video and computer. He also dismisses claims that the return to geometrical abstraction might just be another swing of the pendulum away from Neo-Expressionism and analyses how this return to abstraction might be a critique of it by means of 'simulation' and 'appropriation'.

On the other hand Donald Kuspit in writing of the work of the German artist Imi Knoebel can reveal how a union of apparently disparate sources such as Malevich (non-objectivity) and Joseph Beuys can come together and produce an art that is more 'spiritual' and presumably for Kuspit more relevant.

...in Knoebel's work non objectivity becomes a way of working an experience - a kind of spiritualization process with no preconceived spiritual destination. Kuspit⁷

Art and life are back together again, but Thomas McEvilley would claim abstraction or non-objectivity was always related to life; that it was never merely a search for pure form.

In a tightly argued and significant article he draws our attention to the fact that recent exhibitions have been investigating the roots of abstraction. In particular he points to an exhibition (late 1986) housed at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art called "The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985" which demonstrates that

...much significant Western painting developed not as a strict consequence of art-historical evolution but with influences from various occult and hermetic traditions. McEvilley⁸

and he further underlines that

...what the emphasis on abstraction as pure form has prevented us from seeing for so long is that much of the 20th century abstract painting is not strictly abstract - like the cosmograms, it involves symbolic representations of ideas about reality, with varying degrees of visual mediation.⁹

He attacks Greenberg for his insistence on 'its (abstraction) desired emptiness of all external content'¹⁰ and praises the exhibition for promoting

...the disturbing fact that many abstract painters were misrepresented by what became a solipsistic genre of critical discourse about the intentions and boundaries of abstract art.¹¹

Now that the critical climate is changing and the artist feels freer to talk about a possible content beyond or out of the surface of the work both Charles Tyrrell and Theo McNab have been prepared to do so although at times hesitatingly.

It is an opportunity to examine how their work has developed in recent years and what factors other than an interest in geometry and the formal demands of picture making may have shaped it.