

Julian Brown: A Sense of Wonder

The world is full of magic things, patiently waiting for our senses to grow sharper.

W.B. Yeats

On display in the National Gallery of London is an intimate painting which measures only 44.5 x 45.8 cm. It was produced between the years 1307-11 by the 14th century Italian artist Duccio and is titled *The Annunciation*. This beautiful masterpiece depicts the moment when the Archangel Gabriel descended from heaven to reveal to the Virgin Mary that she would give birth to the son of God.

As with all great art, every aspect of Duccio's painting is the result of a deliberate consideration by the artist. It synthesises a series of ideas into a single coherent object which represents a universal vision as he saw it. In order to achieve this Duccio has employed a number of signifiers which include placing a copy of the Old Testament in to Mary's left hand. This she holds open at the pages the prophet Isaiah wrote which predict the event we witness. Standing between Mary and Gabriel we also notice a vase of white lilies which allude to her purity, whilst hovering overhead a white dove represents the Holy Spirit. In the background we see gold leaf instead of paint which symbolises the glory of heaven whilst we also observe how the Virgin Mary is dressed in blue robes. This blue is Lapis lazuli, a pigment so expensive, it cost more than gold and provides testament to Mary's importance in the painting.

As well as these symbols, renaissance artists like Duccio made use of geometric principles to help compose their paintings so that the mathematical order observed in the movement of the stars would be reflected upon the earth. In this way, the adoption of the golden section rule and Euclidian geometry were engaged to mirror the divine order of heaven on earth, which in turn placed human actions at the center of a celestial symmetry. Just as the infant Christ was born into a culture which pre-existed him, we are also born into a pre-existing world of objects, places, languages and social structures which we slowly learn to make sense of. The ability to see beauty in this allows us to perceive patterns and make connections more readily, so that our environment becomes a personal place rather than an alien world of chaos and estrangement.

Duccio's *Annunciation* is one of Julian Brown's favourite paintings, yet at first glance it appears to have little in common with the work of this 21st century British painter. Instead, Brown's work seems to be more in keeping with abstract artists of the 20th century such as Willem de Kooning, Bernard Frize, Mary Heilmann and Raoul de Keyser. What this connection allows us to consider, is that whilst cultural expressions find differing articulations

depending upon the time from which they emerge, all artists are fundamentally concerned with exploring certain underlying themes which are universal to human experience.

Where Duccio is informed by Christian texts and sacred geometry, Bernard Frize's paintings emerge as an expression of pure images of paint, colour and reflected light produced in a process driven way. But unlike the openly gestural marks of an artist like de Kooning, Frize seeks to obscure the trace of process in his completed work. In this way his paintings are not a manifestation of religious faith, but have developed within the specific language of 20th century abstract painting. Yet in working in this way, Frize presents us with paintings which appear as though they were formed beyond the realm of the man-made. Mary Heilmann on the other hand works more in a constructivist mould and says of her own work that she likes to reference other artists, describing in a 2011 interview how "I imagine the images of other artists. These days I tap into Google to find something on the internet. My current obsession is Malevich, which is why many of my shaped canvases are slanting up and down the wall. I look at the everyday objects around me and mentally take them apart, cut them up and put them together in new ways. All of this is done in my imagination, until I finally get busy and actually make something."¹ This makes Heilmann's work the very expression of the human desire to create order and sense out of the chaos we see around us.

In Brown's paintings we can observe a sophisticated synthesis of abstract styles which has been informed by the process-led work of Frize, the constructivist led paintings of artists like Heilmann and the gestural abstraction of artists like de Kooning and Guston. In addition to this Brown draws heavily upon of the folk art of his mother's native Poland. His mother Joanna was the daughter of the Polish intellectual and political writer Wojciech Wasuitynski. Wasuitynski fled Poland in 1939 and Joanna followed seven years later, first to Meppen in Germany then to the UK. The heritage of the country she left behind must have been important to her, as examples of the craft of Wycinanki were displayed in the home Brown grew up in. Wycinanki is a paper cut-out craft which originated amongst Polish peasant farmers who couldn't afford to buy glass for the windows of their houses. In its absence they hung sheep skins to keep the warmth in and the cold out, which some of them then took to cutting patterns in. This grew to become appreciated for its decorative qualities and evolved into an activity of brightly coloured paper based appliqué.

Artists often draw from the work of pre-existing traditions. Between 1846 and 1853 the pianist Franz Liszt composed a series of piano pieces known as *The Hungarian Rhapsodies* which were based on Hungarian folk themes, whilst Béla Bartók composed a suite of six piano pieces in 1915 titled *Romanian Folk Dances* which were centered on seven Romanian tunes from Transylvania. Synthesising the work of other artists in this way is a form of artistic sophistication which seeks to elevate the sense of beauty inherent in the work on which they were formed. When we look at Julian Brown's work we see that, as with Liszt and Bartók's

compositions, he has been informed by a local folk tradition, which for Brown is an appreciation of Wycinanki.

If we break down the components of Brown's paintings more carefully we begin to see they are composed using a predominant mix of vibrant acrylic colours with staple pigments being lemon yellow light, cadmium orange, manganese blue, quinacridone nickel azo gold and light magenta which are either underpinned or overpainted with black and earth based pigments. In addition to this he employs an aubergine and putty coloured mix for layering. This vivid mix of paint is applied, somewhat reminiscent of Polish Wycinanki paper cut-outs, very flatly to the surface of the canvas.

In producing his work, Brown prefers to generate ideas intuitively, saying of his approach to painting that "I have worked on series of paintings formed on preparatory study, but generally I like to allow the painting to evolve with the painting process." He goes on to say that "Sometimes I deliberately avoid using any kind of study so the paintings evolve into something new or push my work in an unknown direction. (...) Painting is live, it's fluid, tactile and hand rendered and timeless. I don't react to any other form of art work in the same way so I will always make paintings and I'm obviously not alone in this."ⁱⁱ

We can see clearly how Brown has created a fusion of abstract painting in *Buccaneers II* (2005). Here, Brown has begun with an aubergine and putty colour mix applied as a base, over this he has laid a geometric framework across the surface of the canvas, which acts as a kind of matrix from which the painting can hang. In the centre Brown has painted a large void using a magenta base; this is a kind of zero space which seems to suck everything in. Overlaying this, if we look very carefully, we can observe a subtle rendering of dark green paint which has been allowed to drip down the surface of the canvas. On top of this a series of separate yet interconnecting broad upward brush-strokes have been applied in black paint which have themselves a series of brown marks superimposed over them. These seem to resemble tinder. Their shape is echoed with black brush marks of a similar shape and size which surround the void. In addition, Brown has scrubbed passages of manganese blue, overlaid with marks of quinacridone nickel azo gold which act as a kind of frame to the vacuum.

The title for this painting originally started out as *Kindling*, but was eventually changed to *Buccaneers II* after the struggle to resolve it was complete. Of this Brown says, "I often set up actions to change the direction of the painting, I'm interested in the idea of bad painting or certainly pushing order as far as I can. Titles can change because the general message in a series can evolve."ⁱⁱⁱ Here, Brown's statement highlights something interesting to us, in that not only does the language of his painting emerge from a tradition of 20th century abstraction, but the way he interacts with his work does so too. When we think of a painter such as Duccio we realise that he will begin each work with a very clear plan laid out of what he wishes to

achieve before the work of production is even begun, whereas artists like Brown have none. What they have instead is a tool box of working techniques, preferences and visual language. It is with this they set out to make each painting, not knowing how it will conclude, instead the journey of production becomes one of a conversation with the nature of paint and painting itself, and the result a meditation on the metaphorical nature which materials and traditions can provide.

The void presented at the centre of *Buccaneers II* has yielded for Brown the subject of the void as a universal metaphor as it occurs in many great works of art. In Caspar David Friedrich's *The Chasseur in the Forest* (1814) for example, a lonely figure stands before an opening in some trees, the Chasseur himself is a stand-in for ourselves and allows us to meditate on being at the threshold of the unknowingness of the future. In Mark Rothko's *The Seagram Murals* (1958) we are again presented with a void, a blank which for Rothko appears to represent the unknowingness of death. But where Friedrich has placed someone in front of the image to act as our proxy, Rothko places us as viewer at the heart of the action. Rothko's vision is bleak, sad, it is an uncompromising confrontation. In *Buccaneers II*, Brown has taken the same concept and found hope in it; he has found something which can dance.

Where Brown's canvas paintings offer up complex harmonies of colour, technique and style, his watercolours are much more direct. Paintings such as *Frost Flowers* (2012), *Autobahn* (2012), *Gamma* (2012) and *Orion* (2012) present simple and direct marks which seek to find patterns in elements as diverse as the effects of temperature, motorways, radiation and stars. In these works Brown unites a sense of wonder at the configurations he sees in the universe of things which surrounds him and he communicates that sense directly to us. By the dictionary definition of the beautiful being a "combination of qualities, such as shape, colour, or form that pleases the aesthetic senses, especially the sight."^{iv} Brown's paintings are unequivocal displays of the beautiful.

What though does beauty really mean to us?

When we consider beauty we become aware that it finds varying forms of expression in different cultural traditions and periods, yet certain core tenets underpin all of them. The things we see around us as beautiful are the things we form a connection of sensitivity to. This is an aesthetic appreciation which allows us to look closer at people and objects by slowing down our engagement with them. In this way beauty helps us gain a sense that we are at the centre of life, somehow inter-connected to the world of things. By taking a position which is aligned to the beautiful, Brown is making a powerful statement that our desire to appreciate colour, form and harmony is hard wired into our psyche. In heightening and presenting this aesthetic, Brown is creating an opportunity for all of us to look again at our surroundings and re-connect to the spectacle of things, so that we, like the Virgin Mary in Duccio's *Annunciation*, can stand at the centre of a universe of beauty and wonder.

Robert Priseman, 2015

ⁱ <http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/articles/conversations-paintings>

ⁱⁱ From an email sent by Julian Brown to Robert Priseman on the 15th January 2015

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^{iv} <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/beauty>