

Seven micro essays on the work of Ben Cove (with some historical detours.)

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1) You just need a hair of the dog.

I'm looking at a well dressed woman standing in a museum, staring at a tribal mask. She is holding a piece of paper with what I assume is a list of works in the exhibition and a half empty glass of red wine in the same hand. The exaggerated collar on her shirt dates the image to around the mid Seventies. She is bending slightly to meet the carved eyes of the mask. She is taking a closer inspection at the surface detail and craftsmanship. The elaborate patterning on the mask infer a significance that is impossible to decode - its native utility long displaced by shifting geographies. It is now little more than a curio, an object of aesthetic interest to the woman with the Mary Quant hair-do.

The crowded installation and indoor foliage further date the image - the whole gallery is in need of some curatorial spring cleaning. Ben Cove bought the photograph (along with a number of others) from eBay and is showing me the image in his studio, talking about how it has become a kind of talismanic image for the start of a new body of work. The image is compelling for a number of different reasons. It parallels a moment (Ben later tells me that the image is from 1972) where the Modernist project and certain forms of Western colonialism are being dismantled. From my current perspective, the object and woman both become the 'other' - I stare at the woman staring blankly at a carving looking blankly back. Time, like the shifting geography of an object acts to distance the spectator from original intentions. Who thought that flared trousers were a good idea?

If we relate the image to the title, we could perhaps see the wine, object, and the woman's shirt (as well as their re-circulation on eBay) as one big hangover. Post-Modernism was a form of headache in response to Modernism. Excessive ornament and too much alcohol achieve the same thing; a pulsating headache. Every era creates its own hangover, and it's every generation's job to prepare its particular cure.

2) Perpetual futures...

Ben Cove's paintings invoke a particular strand of Modernist Abstraction. If Modernism was a response to its own era's technological advancements (aviation, industrialism, and the machine) then Cove's paintings are attuned to his own current conditions (new forms of economic and social abstractions). Cove's paintings are at once heraldic and diagrammatic, provisional yet monumental. We could be looking at an unbuilt home, a logo for a multi national corporation or simply two lines intersecting within a nebulous environment. Cove understands that while the Modernist project was about purging narratives and metaphors we can't help but use the surface of an abstract painting as a type of mirror to reflect our own narratives back at ourselves.

3) What does it mean to do Abstraction today?

It is exactly 98 years since Russian Suprematism launched its first exhibition – what are its legacies? Kazimir Malevich et al were attempting to create a future society from the ground up, the Suprematist project was about building; Cove's paintings are more about a type of unbuilding. Like a curious child, Cove takes apart – Malevich just takes stuff out - where Suprematism was about purging Cove is about dismantling.

According to Alfred H Barr's definition, Cove's paintings would be 'near-abstractions', as they retain some vestige of recognisable form. A 'near-abstraction' displaces something to a symbol, back to material and then to semiotic, or; it is what it is until it is not. When we look at Cove's work we see this displacement enacted at every turn – figure turns to abstract, background and foreground merges, and all of those impossible geometries. We never know where we stand these days.

4) Some Etymologies...

The Latin root of abstract comes from abstractus, literally - 'drawn away' - historically it offers a moment of withdrawal from symbolic and representational address. The psychic undercurrent of Modernism was defined by an impulse towards a clearing as it attempted to occupy a position of separation. This assumption of achieved autonomy creates further divisions: you and me, us and them, primitive and cultured, figurative and abstract. Where Modernism was oppositional, Cove collapses these dialectics. His paintings offer a necessary corrective to these pathologies.

5) (Harder) purer, (better) cleaner, (faster) newer

"An entirely new art is thus being evolved, an art that will be to painting, as painting has hitherto been envisaged, what music is to literature. It will be pure painting, just as music is pure literature."

Guillaume Apollinaire (On the Subject of Modern Painting) 1912.

The Russians called it 'Faktura' (material aspect of a surface) and Greenberg referred to it as 'truth to materiality'. Modernism translated its psychosis into a notion of hygienic material purity. All that white! Down with all those straight lines! One can see the variant Post-Modern strategies as a contamination of these ideals – a form of infection. Peter Halley's Artex fluorescent paintings violate the geometry of Mondrian with the language of cheap DIY. Ben Cove's invocation of a Modernist idiom with his tertiary palette belong to a tradition of embedded rather than separated intentions. Cove's 'near-abstractions' recall the heraldic and mystic work of the Swedish artist Hilma af Klint. Klint was completely isolated during her own lifetime from the Avant-Garde circles, but her remarkable canvasses somehow preempt much of the formal experimentation elsewhere.

If Klint was processing her own religious epiphanies through a formal language, Cove's paintings could seemingly conflate the monumental (architectural plans) or the economic (logos) in equal measure.

6) Skeuomorph

On my computer screen I have a number of different pages open, and they are each casting a shadow on the pages below. This is what designers call a skeuomorph (when design visually mimics older technology). This illusion of depth through fake shadowing enables us to understand the information we need to prioritise. Depth of field allow us to navigate information clearly, to define hierarchies (the enemy of Modernism) we can see the deliberate obfuscation of these principles as a literal and metaphorical flattening out - more agricultural than architectural. Skewed geometries are a symptom of a society that doesn't quite know what direction its headed in.

7) What are the psychic presuppositions for the urge towards abstraction?

In 1908 Wilhelm Worringer wrote 'Abstraction and Empathy' – a text which has been hugely influential to generations of artists. Coining the term Expressionism, Worringer was an early champion of abstract idioms, eulogising African carving, Japanese watercolours, and Medieval manuscripts as expressing an urge towards abstraction. For Worringer, fidelity was a form of empathy – to paint the figure was to express a connection to the person. Abstracted imagery on the other hand was the product of uncertainty and fear of the natural world – all those straight lines are a way of distancing yourself from nature, from uncertainty. One can see Modernist Abstraction as a crisis of time (perpetual futures, disavowal of the past) through the production of space (the dissolution of foreground and background). Of course, all of the those lines start to physically and metaphorically break up over time. The smooth surface of a Mondrian becomes covered in a patina of fine cracks. Nature always has the last laugh.