

# ACHIEVED SPACES: ADJUSTING SIGHTLINES IN THE PAINTINGS OF GARY HUME

*"Knowing and looking have utterly different modes of being."*

He won't remember this but Gary Hume once taught me an essential lesson about how to hang paintings. It was in the early nineties and I can't recall what or where we were hanging. But I remember his instruction clearly: "Lower." And lower still. The problem, he said, was that hanging them too high made them special. The phrase still strikes me as radical. And I think something else was going on with that hang. Gary wanted to implicate you in the looking. You don't look up at a painting, but into it.

What to make of 'unspecial' paintings? Of course, they are not unspecial at all. But if there is something to be understood from this story, it is that the paintings are themselves an encounter with subjects that are not celebrated or over-determined. Painting has a way of making things major, and I've always thought Gary's paintings celebrated the minor, lending permanence to a moment or an image or an impression that would be otherwise overlooked. Dave Hickey calls this a "suburban sublime",<sup>ii</sup> suggesting Hume belongs to a group of "abstractionists of daily life".<sup>iii</sup>

Is Hume pointing towards a particularly modern crisis with painting; that you can only begin to read the painting when its subject is elevated. But what if that subject was underplayed, or set it aside for the duration of our experience of the work? When looking at the painting, what if you could read its processes, while still not entirely cut adrift from points of recognition. Because recognition was only the start of the story. In Gary Hume's paintings you are implicated in this process.

History tends to reduce the last hundred years or so of painting into two rather clunky camps - abstraction and figuration. Abstraction was the linear conclusion of figuration, moving incrementally away from the representation of the world observed. There was a logic to it. With 20/20 hindsight, there was only one place it could end up – somewhere around the monochrome. Thereafter, the past fifty years have seen a different kind of tension between the two. The figure never went away, it only receded or hid within the processes of making. A push-pull, where one strategy displaces the other in alternating succession.

One might think of this as an anxiety of abstraction. A return of the repressed, when abstraction disassociates too far, and the artist and viewer needs a way back in. The painted canvas takes the systematic exclusion of the real world too far that there is an obligation to reclaim the territory of representation. Only painting can do this. It has something to do with abstraction reaching a type of ahistorical end that is never the end of the job of figuration. Anxious because the tendency towards abstraction makes reading the painting harder. You read for the subject of the painting first and foremost, anthropomorphising where necessary, filling gaps where possible. Those gaps are crucial.

Gary Hume's paintings emerge from a space that is consistently pitting the surface against the subject. He first came to prominence in the early nineties, closely aligned to a generation of artists emerging from Goldsmiths College at the time, including Damien Hirst and Sarah Lucas. The agenda at the time might be understood as a type of materialised conceptualism. From 1998 to 1993, Hume painted nothing but doors. It's a project which sets a conceptual agenda for how all his paintings might work. The 'Door Paintings' were not illusory transitional descriptions in the manner of Hammershøi or de Chirico, but rather mimetic shapes which inhabited the spaces of where paintings should go. Not quite as if they were doors themselves. The scale of a door, almost, with finger-plates and portals. There's an illusion going on, but this recedes into the thingness of it. It's not so much a representation of something but a demarcation of its space.

The repetition of making dozens of the 'Door Paintings' reinforced the conceptual practice and insulated it from the still challenging problematics of figuration. The first exhibition dedicated solely to the doors featured ten painted in 'magnolia' - the most prosaic of colours. David Batchelor calls it, "a quintessentially institutional colour, a quintessentially non-art colour."<sup>iv</sup> It was a beautiful subversion of that inherited legacy of the monochrome. "More than that," Batchelor continues, "Magnolia is an entirely unemphatic colour; its job is to cover a surface without drawing attention to itself."<sup>v</sup> The monochrome's history is an enabler for Hume, but even when he paints in one colour you wouldn't want to call it that. For later paintings Hume even handed over the decision making for colour to friends, giving them paint swatches from which to choose. In a recent conversation with Brice Marden, Hume takes his relationship to colour further, implicating the viewer and their surroundings into the image itself: "To be able to take the light from the world rather than reproduce the light on canvas."<sup>vi</sup>

It was not a painting of something, but the thing of the painting. The precedents in abstraction, at least, are numerous. Although Hume is often compared to the likes of Alex Katz and Patrick Caulfield in their pared down, linear, figuration, it is equally useful to

see him in the processes of abstraction established by Frank Stella and Ellsworth Kelly. Stella's 'Black Paintings', in particular, set an agenda where the canvas is mapped out and territorialised in advance. The process of painting, its work, is about 'filling in'. This is far from an empty gesture, however. You can see these demarcations of space in the canvas as fraught. They are central to the understanding of any painting, only here, they become the narrative of the painting and its making. Similarly, for Kelly, the edge is a highly charged encounter between one colour or shape and another.<sup>vii</sup> You can speak in terms of colour fields and geometries, and even figural references, but the point of contact, the edge, is the tension which holds together the painting.

Hume's paintings are made up of discrete spaces, often materially demarcated by built-up lines within the surface. These are not emotive encounters in the painterly plane, in the manner of, say Newman's 'zips', but assert that the painting is made of many spaces and planes simultaneously. This is not just an effect or stylistic affection, but crucial to an almost ideological way of working. Decisions may not be articulated in formal or aesthetic terms, but there are shifts in colour which occur in the composition and execution process that entirely change the dynamic of what's going on in the painting. Often this is a liberating moment when colour moves away from the obligations of resemblance and comes to stand for itself within the painting. This is not about tonal shifts, but radical responses to the layering of the painting, where foreground can be sent back and vice versa through the substitution of unexpected or disruptive colours. Colour in Hume's paintings establishes its own aesthetic hierarchies. Not what the object represents looked like, but the feeling of what it looked like. Direct correspondence in colour is some way down the list of obligations when making the painting.

Even the materials of making could be understood to get in the way of conventional representation, but for Hume, that's part of the pleasure of them. Hume's early adoption of household paint is essential to understanding his relationship to painting. It's stuff without history, without a legacy of representations.<sup>viii</sup> The paint is unyielding and unexpressive in itself. It doesn't lend itself to the gestural. But what it does achieve is a conscious attention to the surface of the painting. Surfaces matter, but only to the extent, perhaps, that they are the last 'accent' in the process of making. Moreover, for Hume, the viewer's engagement with the painted surface is not the oscillation between illusion and material gesture, in the manner of a heavily impastoed canvas, for example, where the viewer is unseeing the paint in favour of the illusion as well as deriving pleasure from the paint's material transformations in equal measure. In Hume's case, the paint 'gets in the way' of an unencumbered viewing. The surface reflects sufficiently to the full consummation of illusion:

*"I found that gloss paint suited me entirely, and its qualities still intrigue me. It's viscous and fluid and feels like a pool. It's highly reflective, which means there are layers of looking. You look at the picture, and you look at the surface, then you look at the reflection in the surface behind you, then you look at yourself."<sup>x</sup>*

The paintings hover between a representation of the thing and a materialisation of the thing itself. In speaking of the achieved spaces within Hume's paintings, there is a need to read them also materially. When he started to paint on aluminium, there was an immediate conceptual shift which moved the paintings away from given histories. For one thing, he could paint with the work laid flat, which must surely affect the way representation works, as you move around the plane. By extension, when you come to read the painting vertically, that image is changed again. And crucially, there is an immediate pleasure in the material surface itself: 'One of the things that interested me is that when they arrived the aluminium panels were beautiful already.'<sup>x</sup> This is most evident in those paintings where part of the surface is left untouched, such as the *Smoke* series (2005-06). It's hard work to leave it unworked.

The surface is always deceptive. The aluminium support resists the paint. There is, at a distance, a promise of detached application and smoothness of surface. But it's acutely about painted, pooled, spaces, plotting the gaps. There's never impasto or gesture, even when the brush is visible. Perhaps this is something to do with working in the wrong medium; the wrongness is what works. Household paint is infallible, rarely nuanced, reflective away from the surface. It doesn't sit comfortably.

For more than thirty years, Hume's strategies for composition, while exploratory in terms of materials and scale, have been consistent in the processes of negotiating the subject. That is, where an image, in whole or part, comes into the structure of the painting. Negotiation, here, because one cannot assume that figuration is the only job at hand. As Adrian Searle puts it, "The painter's subjects live on the surface."<sup>xi</sup> It is not about likeness or representation, but Hume's paintings take an image, or more often a part of an image as a starting point. Drawing, here, is the most stable and at the same time, problematic, part of the process:

*"[T]he more I paint, the more I know that all it is is drawing. I can work on a painting for months and months and I change everything other than the drawing and it's still rubbish and then finally I it's the goddamn drawing that's useless. I very rarely sit and draw an apple tree and therefore, when I I'm having to learn how to make one mark stand in for light, for shade, for form. So on that level I can't draw. But I do know how to get the speed of a line right."<sup>xii</sup>*

The figurative turn, here, is minimal. Very often it's the least you could do to achieve an image. The painting takes on an appearance of its own, from which you could rarely ex-

trapolate the source. Not that those sources do not matter; they are essential, often deeply personal, however occluded. But the painting doesn't reveal itself by tracking back to this source material. Indeed, a more productive reading might be to look into the interstices of representation, the gaps in the painting where an explanatory line, or gestural narrative is absent.

As Hume insists, drawing comes first. But it's a particular type of edited mark, often reducing information in favour of the line itself. Crucially, one should not underestimate the artist's intimacy with his sources. Hume is a collector of images. Their appeal to him may be emotional or purely formal. Somewhere between narrative and a working vocabulary of found shapes. Francesco Bonami suggests (positively) that he "chooses a useless iconography."<sup>xiii</sup> If there is subject matter, the paintings are not about a leaf or a bird or a plume of smoke. Or even the subject of a portrait. Perhaps what is reassuring about these subjects is that they already belong to the vocabulary of painting. There's nothing left to prove with them. That's a good starting point for revising the already familiar image in an unfamiliar way.

And equally, it's tempting to read for portraiture within the paintings. The figure is so often there, and while they are often named - Kate Moss or Angela Merkel - the viewer's preconceptions of what they look like might only be a diversion. Explicitly invoking classical painting, in *After Vermeer* (1995), for example, plays on your memory of the subject. *Tired Child* (2016) is a quiet portrait which seems to carry that whole history while being grounded in something far more personal at the same time. These paintings belong to Hume's ongoing take on classical material which began with his first *Madonna* (1993). It's a collective memory which you nevertheless read it as if it were your own. In this way it is not too large a leap of faith for the intimate images of Hume's own mother of recent years to function simultaneously as deeply personal and universalised at the same time, through the formal translation processes the painting demands.

Could this form of representation be understood as a type of synecdoche, where partial representation must carry an idea or memory of a fully formed image? This must be understood as an ethical moment, where 'over-representation', paradoxically, limits what that image might be able to do in the painting. There needs to be a space for the viewer to fill in those gaps. Didi-Hubermann articulates this moment well in the encounter with Fra Angelico's fresco in Florence:

*"Sometimes it even suggests to seekers-after-representation that there's "nothing there" — despite its representing a wall, although a wall so close to a real wall, which is painted the same white, that*

*it seems merely to present its whiteness. Then again, it is by no means abstract; on the contrary, it offers itself as an almost tangible blow, as a visual face-off.”<sup>xiv</sup>*

The painter’s job is to demarcate space in which something happens; where the viewer makes it happen. Space isn’t necessarily represented in the plane of the painted, so much as forced open. Space achieved through minimal means.

Information comes and goes, gets lost, only to reappear elsewhere. Look at the varied handling of the bird image in *Blue Bird* (2008), *Big Bird* (2010) and *The Worm with the Bird* (2012-2016). Hume’s line signals both presence and absence, demarcating space within the plane of the painting. These absences are achieved spaces, often marked out in lush or discordant territories of colour. Spaces are similarly demarcated within self-coloured images, such as *Hot House* (2015). (That non-monochrome again.) Colour and territory are consistently interrogated on the surface, but the action is often between the lines. It’s the visual equivalent of musical counterpoint, where an economy of form can propose more than itself. You fill in the gaps. If Hume’s line suggests the simplicity of a sketch, which seeks likeness with economy and speed, the job of the painting is so much more than this. Something much more material, and implicating, than merely an act of resemblance.

- i George Didi-Huberman, "The art of not describing: Vermeer – the detail and the patch", *History of the Human Sciences*, vol. 2, June 1989, p.135.
- ii Dave Hickey, "Romance in the Suburbs", in Caroline Douglas & Dave Hickey, *Gary Hume: Flashback*, London, Hayward Gallery, 2012, p.12.
- iii Ibid., p.10.
- iv David Batchelor, "Of Cans, Corruption and Colour", in [[ED? xxx]] Adrian Searle, David Batchelor, Judith Nesbitt, *Gary Hume*, London, Whitechapel, 1999, p.24.
- v Ibid.
- vi "Painting Now: Brice Marden and Gary Hume in conversation with Tim Marlow", 30 September 2017, Royal Academy of Arts, London. <https://gagosian.com/quarterly/2017/11/06/brice-marden-gary-hume-and-tim-marlow/>. Accessed 30 April 2019.
- vii A serendipitous comparing could be made between a later 'Door Painting', *Red Barn Door*, 2009 with Kelly's photographs of barns. The photographs are a revelation in that they anticipate Kelly's painterly conjunctions within a found bricolaged plane.
- viii It is notable that early contemporaries such as Damien Hirst and Ian Davenport also shared an affinity for this paint, with very different applications.
- ix Gary Hume, quoted in Dominic Murphy, 'Little Promises', *The Guardian*, 7 September 2002.
- x "Gary Hume in conversation with Caroline Douglas", in Douglas et al, op. cit., p.28.
- xi Adrian Searle, "Behind the Face of the Door", in [[ED? xxx]] Searle et al, *Gary Hume*, op. cit., p. 20
- xii Douglas et al, op. cit., p. 24.
- xiii Francesco Bonami, "Gary Hume: 'Reflection in a Golden Eye', in (ed.) Aloys van Burke, *Gary Hume*, Maastricht: Bonnefantenmuseum, 1996, p— — — —?
- xiv Georges Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images: Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art*, trans. John Goodman, University Park, PA: Pennsylvania University Press, 2005, p. 17.