

PHILLIP CHAN: CHRIS TRUEMAN REVIEW

Distant Rumbling: A review of Chris Trueman's Paintings

On Saturday June 22, I attended Chris Trueman's opening at White Box Contemporary gallery. My first surprise was that the walls of this "White Box" were painted black which I saw as the foreshadowing of some ironic twist. My first take was that the paintings seem like a late Formal Modernist jig, dancing over the grave of Modernism, fit for decorating innocuous corridors of corporate capitalism. On closer examination, however, the juxtaposition of geometric abstraction of the 1960's atop the Abstract Expressionist grounding of the late 1940's and 1950's evoked the tensional coexistence when Modernism was beginning its decline. I began to wonder to what end had Mr. Trueman rearticulated that aesthetic clash within the Neo-Modernist stage of his paintings?

The deployment of that tension informed me that this particular artist had a finger on the pulse of the underlying unresolved dialectic within Modernism, elevating thereby his painting above those anonymous objects of my first take. I began to wonder the degree he actually understood the nexus to which his paintings potentially occupied. A number of telltale signs began to surface. Firstly: There was a painting that seemed out of place, perhaps a slightly early formalist painting that reminded me of Al Held to which he incorporated, rather than juxtaposed his Neo-Geo patterns into a composition. Secondly: a number of the paintings had pushed the geometric patterns past the point of productivity such that its patterns dominated vision. As a consequence, those paintings merely presented the spectacle of Neo-Op. Thirdly: The spectacle of Neo-Op was particularly keen in the small paintings, the existence of which was presumably to make available for collectors who could not afford the larger. If that was the intent, it failed, since the small paintings did not give even a small taste of what the larger paintings were capable of. I, therefore, concluded that either Mr. Trueman did not understand the depth of his own work or was ready to sell himself short in the market place.

To understand the real potential of his work, we must concentrate on those few, which provided a glimpse into something astonishing. When the juxtaposition between the Abstract Expressionist undergirth and the superimposed geometric interference was correctly balanced, the paintings generated a third image, one which was unstable, in a state of becoming, emerging at the decisive moment before it can be objectified. This third occupied a conceptual space, which might be termed "linguistic Impressionism". Not only is the emergent quality of this pre-cognitive third a bewonderment in its own right, but teasing out its presence have resulted in bending the end of Modernism back to its beginning, achieving a sort of feed-back loop that is an octave higher.

To fully appreciate this point, we must possess a minimal understanding of the development of Modernism. To do so, it would be informative to simply ask (Where is regarded as the beginning of Modern Art?) Certainly everyone would regard geometric abstraction as modern, but what animates geometric abstraction was Constructivism, and what animated Constructivism was Cubism (Synthetic Cubism in particular). To many, Cubism is regarded as the beginning of Modern Art. While that assertion is acceptable, because his formal concerns provided a stage for Cubism to turn its back on nature, liberating, thereby, the picture plane as the synthetic world of art, those with a deeper understanding would extend that lineage back to Cezanne. However, while Cezanne's pictorial architectonic provided the framework to formalize the dabs of paint, those dabs of paint came from Impressionism.

Since Impressionism can be easily misunderstood as fuzzy realism, for the general public it is rather surprising that it can be regarded as the foundation of Modern Art. However, for those with a deeper understanding of Impressionism, it was the pivot point to the modern turn. While 19th century academic art had misunderstood Impressionism as fussy, unfinished sketches, the Impressionist by contrast not only considered their paintings to be finished, but to achieve the results they wanted, it must also exist in its (indeterminate or impressionistic) state. To understand this contention, the realist sees the subject of a painting to be, that which is represented (i.e. the apple, the seascape, the figure, etc.). For the Impressionist, that (old subjectmatter) was repositioned as an (objectmatter), displaced by the real subjectmatter, which was the experience



of that objectmatter. The reason those dabs of paint was left sketchy was not they were unfinished, but because if harden it would have objectified the objectness of the objectmatter; For the Impressionist the sketchiness of their paintings better capture the fugitive nature of sensing experience. This displacement of the objectness of the external world by the subjectness of experience affirmed the turn from exteriority to interiority that was the basis of the Modernist revolution.

Indeed the content of 19th century Romanticism was already concern with interiority; however, it manifested itself in the form of objectified myth making. Because music had no objectmatter other than its notation, Romantic music found absolute footing in the compositions of Beethoven, Schumann, Brahms, while painting had to first decompose objectness in order to atomize vision. Cezanne provided the formal framework to re-objectify sensing within the language of art. In so doing, Cezanne's formalized picture plain began to dethatch painting from representation opening the way for Cubism to follow suite by grounding that picture plain with a more flexible pictorial space for capturing the inner space of concept and feelings. Subsequently, Constructivism jettisoned even the objectmatter of representation turning the act of creation itself into the subject of production with its new objectmatter as the object-art itself. By this progression, Formal Modernism is the affirmation of production over reproduction, creation over representation.

Parallel to this was the development of the second Modernism oriented at the content of interiority. While 19th century Romanticism was already concerned with interiority, its content was mediated through moribund myths, semi-mystical insights, and fanciful narrations to gave form to their expression. Expressive Modernist, such as van Gogh, the Fauvism, German Expressionist, and Surrealist sought a more direct link to interiority. For half a century, Formal and Expressive Modernism remained essentially a detached dual modernism. In the late 1940's and 1950's Abstract Expressionism finally unified this dualism, which is why it is given credit as High Modernism. By the 1960's High Modernism essentially split into a formal mannerist Late Modernist camp and an anti-formal neo-dada Postmodernist camp.

With this brief history in mind, Mr. Trueman's paintings seems like a part of the urge to put yet another nail in the coffin of Modernism by juxtaposing High Modernism against Late Modernism, consuming their bodies to excrete itself. However if one understood Postmodernism to be the antithesis to Modernism than the "post in Postmodernism in not what comes after Modernism, but a conceptual "post" as in "post-sensual, post-formal, post-visual", an anti-formal antithesis that is a part of Modernism tightly wrapped within its dialectic, continually deconstructing Modernism from the inside out. If so, Modernism not only rest on the special/temporal juxtaposition of the collage principle, but also on the conceptual juxtaposition of the formal thesis and the deconstructive anti-thesis that had produced the forward spiral of advent-guardism. This modernist double helix was not only central to the production of art, but also the production of isms. With the exhaustion of the Modernist part of the helix, Postmodernism has been feasting on its corpse, but insofar as Modernism and Postmodernism was a double helix, unless the anti-thesis helix can synthesize itself into a new thesis, it is simply a matter of time when it will cannibalize its own corpus.

I believe the best of Mr. Trueman's paintings is a late manifestation of mannerist Modernism. The third to which I speak can simply be an epiphenomena arising out of Postmodernism's consumption of itself. If so, the "White Box" gallery being actually black is an ironic comment on Impressionism's opening the black box of interiority in order to let out the white light of imagination that inevitably decays into the black box of exhaustion. Seen thusly, the show has managed to deconstruct itself, leading to the spectacle of Neo-Op covering over the exhausted body of High Modernism. On the other hand, if this third is capable of producing a linguistic condition from which images continually bubble up a conceptual in-between place from which pre-linguistic images emerges and dissipates before they can be named, then maybe Mr. Trueman has taken a step into the post Postmodern era in which the antithesis is transforming itself into a true, yet unnamed thesis.

This, of course, is not a prediction, but a hope. While Mr. Trueman's ears might indeed be pressed to the ground, listening to the approaching rumblings, there is not enough consistency in his work to even suggest that his works are a sign of the future that is yet to come.

