

Interview with Pat Fisher, curator of the Talbot Rice Gallery, University of Edinburgh, February 2002

[The artist's role] *is to discover the art
which is unique to him, and then purge that art of all
effects that do not serve its ends.*

Carl Andre

Pat Fisher I find a great sense of stillness and quiet in your work; I also find a certain restraint. Could you comment on how much you use painting as a sanctuary – as an escape almost from the pressures of life?

Alan Shipway Well, the studio is a kind of sanctuary. To me the whole point, the beginning and end of painting, is that in itself it can be a kind of sanctuary – that it can radiate untroubledness, and point to something beyond the realities or mundane aspects of everyday life and can give you something you can't get anywhere else. There is always this feeling of gravity and calm bound up with the paintings and the art that I like from any period: I can't see any other point to painting.

Do you think then that painting is used as a vehicle for the use of the imagination and contemplation not only for yourself but for the viewer?

Of course. I think some people seek contemplation and some people don't. But the paintings are meant to be affirmative, and I think there are people that can see that.

It depends on the viewer, on how much personal richness they have which they can transfer onto a work of art. In her essay for the *Persistence of Painting* catalogue, Judith Findlay asks "Who owns the meaning of art?" Is it someone who can apply it to their own experience or is it someone who knows art history? I would always be interested in the former point there, if that can also be supported by art history, then fine.

Meanings shift, of course, don't they? They can be transient – there isn't necessarily always any definitive one. Some people can find a blank canvas beautiful and others just see it as blank. So obviously I think you are right – you do consult your experience when you look at art, and your depth of experience has a bearing on your judgement. But what I do think is, the more you look at art, the better you get at seeing what's good and what's not so good.

If I could just move on from that observation and ask you to comment on the content of your painting?

By content do you mean subject matter?

Yes, I do.

Because I think there is a difference between the two. I think the content of a work of art is its quality – how good it is, in other words. How good something is – is the only thing that matters about it in the end. Otherwise we wouldn't be interested in it. And that's it. In a way I don't think it's up to me to say what the subject matter or the significance is – someone else will come along eventually and say what it is. Perhaps it would be easier for me to say what my ideal is. I think my ideal in painting is for it to radiate feelings of clarity and so forth, as

we discussed at the outset of this talk. To me there is a value in clarity as such – there is a value in the capacity of paintings to radiate untroubledness and gravity of significance – an ideal that paintings should in a way dignify the space they inhabit.

Could I just take you up again on the subject of the paintings, and your right as the creator of them to avoid comment. As a curator I defend that right and I defend the notion of the unintelligibility of art – that actually the communication *is* the image. There can be too much meddling in the source of the work and in the interpretation of it.

I think you're right in the sense that art is generally over-interpreted, and not enough room is left for intuition. Visual art has a visual meaning, and I don't think that meaning is particularly amenable to discourse. In the sense that paintings are personal – I don't mean it in the sense of secret or secretive- I don't set out to be obscure. It's in the sense that I haven't got much to add in words to what I have done in the painting. When I have done the painting, really I've said all I've got to say. If the paintings are good enough, then people will see that. What I was going to add to that was - Sally Avery, the wife of the American painter Milton Avery, said something about his work that I liked: she said Avery wanted to recreate the euphoria that he felt when looking at something. There are times when I go out walking and I'm in the landscape – and there are places where I occasionally go when I want to not think for a while and to me that's euphoric – just to walk and to not think of anything. I feel the same way as Avery – in painting I am trying to recreate the euphoria and the clarity I feel when I look at landscape. I found I wasn't able to do that by doing representations of landscape, though I would have liked to. It's hard for me to put it any more clearly.

No, I think that's an extremely clear assessment and it's getting towards the clarity that we have already discussed in visual terms.

I'll say something else – my paintings are quite spare, they are quite empty, some of them, made with a few simple elements. I'm drawn to working with very simple means. But it's not because the paintings have got nothing to say – it's because they are not meant to be 'interesting' in the way, say, a Netherlandish painting is. They're to be lived with – you're meant to go on with life in their presence but they don't offer the same visual experience you would get from a van Eyck: paintings are things that you don't just look at for ten minutes – you go on with life in their presence and they fill up your life, if they are good enough.

Can I move on a stage further, to be specific about the repetitions in the work – a use of motifs, of certain colours.

Give me an example.

The lists of colours, for example, a certain repetition of forms and shapes – the semantics of the image; can you discuss the development of ideas? For example the graphic elements in the paintings interest me a great deal, the use of language.

The recurrent use of motifs – well, there isn't any single inspiration or single way of going about things for me in painting. What happens in practice is that you play around with things, - you know, play in a serious sense of the word. You play around with things until they're satisfactory. That's the best way I can describe working. I've always been drawn to using words and numbers in painting. On one level it's simply idiosyncrasy – and on another level, writing is synonymous with drawing. I can't point to any real difference between writing and drawing – at some point writing becomes drawing and drawing become writing. The reason I carry on using letters and numbers so prominently is because they act as drawing within the paintings. They can animate a large field of colour in a painting: they act as detail and as drawing and as counterpoint to bigger areas of colour.

It is composition and communication.

Yes, though it's a device that recurs in painting, it's an age-old thing – if you look at a Byzantine mosaic you might see a saint's name written above his head or if you look at Matisse's painting there's frequently use of numbers and letters – for instance the title of a book in a still life, or 'Marguerite' written at the top of the portrait of his daughter. Letters and numbers have a decorative function: I am quite happy with that word 'decorative'.

I am also – I defend it.

Let's go back to the list of colours – the palette in other words. It's a slightly ironic gesture. A few years back I made this list of the colours I wanted to use in a painting, and it ended up that I just liked the way this list of colours looked – in fact it looked better than any painting that I tried to make with those colours.

Eventually, I incorporated this list into a painting – it was just a piece of paper, I just stuck it on. I liked the way it looked in the painting. It was an oblique ironic comment on the difficulties of painting...

I like the fact that it is almost referencing itself...

An ironic comment that I can't get the colours off the palette – my inabilities as a painter.

Well no- I hadn't seen it that way – to me, it's almost as if you are putting the brakes on beauty. The colours are there and you are saying what they are, but by defining them in a codified way, as a formal list, you are saying, 'here they are, they are beautiful, this is how I want them to look', but you avoid making them too sensual – beauty is shown in a formal manner.

I think you have perhaps put a finger on one of the essential aspects of what I do. Part of me would like to be exuberant, revels in colour actually, and another part of me is drawn to quite severe structure in painting. I think you can see there is a constant tension between exuberance that is kept in check or that is played off against quite austere structures. That's one of the things I like about Anthony Caro's sculpture, especially the painted steel works of the 1960's – they've got this very rigorous structure, and yet at the same time they are extraordinarily exuberant and lyrical: *Sun Feast* or *Early One Morning*, for example. Their colour contributes as well, of course.

Yes, also in a materialistic sense – it's almost like spontaneity slowed down into metal.

They can look fantastically light and playful. But when you see them close up, you're surprised at how incredibly heavy and ponderous they are – there's no way you could lift one.

If we could return to this important aspect of your work, beauty versus severity, I think that is probably what I was referring to in my introductory comments. That I do see the sense of stillness and quiet in the work, I could even add sensuality to that, but I constantly find a sense of restraint in them; it is one of the reasons why they work so well. It is the tension that you refer to that I am always aware of. I see a sense of rightness in most of the works you make, they seem harmonious to me.

I have to say, it's very elusive, that rightness you talk about.

Yes, elusiveness, I think we are very privileged to work in an area where we deal with elusiveness, we deal with something that the intellect should at times back away from.

I think when this rightness comes along in the making of painting – and for me it's not often – I don't often do something that's completely right, but there is a recognition as soon as you see it – that when you have access to that sense of rightness, at the same time it's access to what I can only call the absolute, or absoluteness: it gives you something, as I said earlier, that you can't get from anything else.

Talking about that sense of rightness and the recognition of it, do you spend a great deal of time on these works, I mean the works that will be shown in 2002; have they been worked over a period of time?

Well, it certainly adds up; I'll work on things a long time, on and off, trying to get rid of everything inessential and trying to get clarity. I will put something away for 6 months then take it out again and then change something, then come back to it a year later and change something else, so although there are dates on some of the paintings, in reality they can be worked on for a long period of time – off and on, as I say. Some of these paintings look simple and easily done, but they're not, some of them have taken a great deal of angst and false starts. At the same time I don't particularly want to exhibit signs of this struggle. Having said all that, I'd have to turn round and say there are paintings that I've just done straight off and find they're right – but not often. I don't have any great facility.

Could I return to the specifics of the actual mark making, the use of dates for example – do you date a painting when it has reached that stage of recognition, of finish, if we could use that term. When does the date go on?

I don't have any rules, it's usually when I've done something, I've got to a significant stage, for instance I'll have laid down a background colour that makes me know that I'll finish the painting, then I will put on a date: sometimes there are two dates, there is a date on the front and a date on the back, they might easily be a few years apart.

The exhibitions in 2002 are exploring a period of time in your work so I think it will enable the viewer to make connections.

I think it will show that I circle round a small number of images again and again – images that I return to, that seem relatively inexhaustible.

But to me that reflects a self-knowledge that I'm very interested in and that does come across in the work.

If I could move on to a different topic, there is reference in your work to art history, is in an important factor? Or asking you more simply, could we talk about your influences in an art-historical sense?

Well, of course it's an important factor, because in the best art the past is always implicated, and you're going to have to measure yourself against it. I always find it extraordinary to go to the National Gallery and stand in front of an Italian painting from the 13th century – Duccio, for instance; I find these so-called primitive Italian paintings radiate enormous spiritual power. Now for me this intensity is something that recurs at certain points through the history of art, and I can relate these Italian paintings from the early Renaissance like Duccio or Fra Angelico – to me these relate to modernism: Malevich or Matisse or Rothko say – there's a clarity of colour, a kind of heraldic quality, in this early Renaissance art that I'm talking about, which I'm drawn to very much, and which I find recurs in later forms; to me this heraldic quality re-appears in modernism and 20th century abstraction.

Could you define 'heraldic'?

I think it characterises aspects of my work, it embodies clarity of design, it embodies high-keyed colour, perhaps symmetry, and most of all abstraction.

Tell me more about the influences of 20th century art, artists like Morris Louis and Rothko.

They were influences on me from the beginning. I can remember opening a Sunday supplement when I was 18 and seeing pictures of work by Caro and Louis and Rothko and Pollock: it was like a door or a window opening, all of a sudden. I don't know if other people have these revelations or not. I had never seen that kind of work before, but felt exhilarated by what I was looking at and knew it was what I wanted to do. I knew I wanted to do something like that, except differently, of course. Which obviously is the difficulty of art, doing something that's as good as the art you like, but not the same thing. These have been abiding influences – these particular works that I looked at when I was 17 or 18 have never left me, they're always there for me, they never disappoint me when I go back to them. There are other revelations, things you can't forget, like going into a room in the Pushkin Museum and there's the *Pink Studio* by Matisse, looking as if it was painted yesterday. Things like that push you onward in some way.

Do you engage at all in the contemporary painting debate?

No, I don't, I do painting because I'm not tempted to do anything else... Painting as such seems somewhat marginalised at the moment, but not for the first time; I can remember in the late 1970s you might go to the Hayward Gallery and it would be full of filing cabinets and conceptual art and so on and painting was officially frowned upon, in some ways. Perhaps the current marginalisation of painting is part of its renewal – there are always people working away: I think the current situation, if you look at it positively, is part of the renewal. Let's not ignore the fact that painting's not easy, in the sense that it's discouraging in that everything seems to have been done already, if you're just starting out as a student everything you could possibly do seems to have been done already. I don't know what I would do if I was a student now, if I was 21 I've no idea what would interest me – I would hope it would be what interests me now, but it's dispiriting if you think everything has been done in art, and if you believe that, then you're going to be driven into postmodern irony – you're going to use painting in a completely ironic, cynical manner, whereas if you really believe there are things to be done in painting, which I certainly do, then it's not a problem; you don't have to be postmodern, you don't need to be ironic, it's simply a matter of faith.

And to some extent, a sense of comfort and continuity in that you are associating yourself to art history and developing. Although things have been done before in terms of configuration of colour, composition etc – it has never been done in exactly the same way – your influences, experience and your times make you unique.

Could I come back to some of our earlier points, and particularly come back to my interest in your use of the word 'heraldic'. Could you make an association between that term and your interest in abstraction, the continuity of abstraction?

Well, the heraldic quality that I'm identifying in the art of the early Renaissance, one of the qualities of this is abstraction. If you look at a little panel painting by Duccio, it's fantastically abstract in some ways, if you look at the way the visible world is treated, or abstracted, in the painting. Let's say that I've got a particular liking for the way in which an artist like Duccio or Fra Angelico or Uccello set about making abstractions from the visible world; that quality seems to disappear from painting around 1500, but it reappears in the 20th century with cubism and later on with painters like Mondrian and Malevich, and to me it reaches a kind of flowering or affirmation in the art of Barnett Newman and Morris Louis and Rothko, that particular trio for me – what you could call heraldic abstract painting seems to be ultimately rooted in the art of the early Renaissance or Byzantine art. That's just my personal feeling.

There are two main channels which I keep open in my work: there are images of the natural world, paintings of water with grasses and leaves and so on; and the other of paintings with a strong degree of abstraction and minimalism, and I can't account for the fact that I like to keep these two channels of work open; I need them both for my purposes. They don't seem to contradict each other; perhaps they have to do with the same thing. I like to move from one to the other. I think they look all right together, in a way I would not have expected. Perhaps you've got something to say about that?

I also feel abstraction underpins the visual outcome of the natural paintings as well.

Let's say the representational paintings have a high degree of abstraction in them and the abstract paintings have a certain degree of representation...

The abstract paintings at times point to something – they can refer to things in the world, just in the same way as the sculptures of David Smith a good number of them are totemic – they are tall upright sculptures and they clearly refer to the human figure at the same time as being completely abstract. The fact that Smith's sculpture is uncompromisingly abstract, but at the same time is pointing to something in the world – that particular quality interests me, it's a quality I would like to pursue. That's the sense in which, in one of my paintings with a red wedge or strip down the centre (*Red Archangel*), the red strip is a surrogate figure, or stands for a human figure, right in the middle of the painting, like you might find in an icon painting.

Alan, I know that you didn't come out of a conventional art college course. Could you remind me of your education, your way into being a painter?

Well, it was a kind of idiosyncratic way into being a painter – I don't know whether it's been a blessing or a curse. I did start out studying architecture, I did two and a half years of architecture at the University of Edinburgh, but I knew it wasn't what I wanted to do and finally I packed it in because you can only tolerate doing something you don't want to do for so long. All the time I was doing architecture I was painting on my own, on the side, with absolutely no encouragement, not showing anything to anybody. So it was lucky for me to get accepted into a postgraduate course at St Martin's in London – a course where, at that time, you didn't have to have a degree in art; so I had a year at St Martin's.

It wasn't particularly structured. In fact you could do whatever you wanted – you didn't have to turn up to life drawing classes or any of that kind of thing if you didn't want to, and you could more or less ask whoever you wanted to be your tutor, which was quite extraordinary really.

Coming from a provincial situation to having a studio in the middle of London for a year, really opened my eyes. At that time Caro was still teaching at St Martin's – he would come in occasionally and do sculpture crits, and that was exciting and authentic for me. Caro had an authoritative civilised dignified manner and what he would say would really make me think. I liked what he would say to students. I also invited myself to look at John McLean's work – he used to live down in Clapham and (this is something I would never dare to do now) I just phoned him up and invited myself down because I wanted to see his work, it meant something to me.

It does not surprise me that he was generous with his time and his support.

He was extraordinarily generous with his time, he showed me his work, he took me round other studios so I was able to look at something of what was going on – Jennifer Durrant was another influence, she would come into St Martin's too at that time, so during the course of that particular year I was galvanised – I feel I was pointed in the right direction. I could have stayed on in London – the fact is that I didn't.

Could I just take you up on the term you use – galvanised – or the individuals you have mentioned like Durrant, McLean, Caro and so on – did it galvanise you not only into an appreciation of their work, but into the professionalism of being an artist?

To come into personal contact with painters like John McLean – I thought he was a good painter, I wanted to see how he went about things. And there was something else – John McLean worked in a space in his own house, he didn't work in a communal studio like everybody else. He'd made his own milieu and was independent.

You recognised that. Not only in the quality of the work but in the way he was practising.

The way he was professionally conducting himself made an impact on me. That was what I wanted to do as well.

And it would seem that you recognised the seriousness of it, the fact that it actually was a life option.

And perhaps one of the things that it made me realise as well was that painting is a sacred profession in a secular society. The question of what sort of place art can have in the world – I mean art that isn't simply intended as a commodity – this question isn't talked about much these days, but it's always there for me, in the background.

I'm interested by your use of the word 'sacred' because there is an essence of something religious in your work that I have noted from one of the first times I saw it.

I wouldn't say religious or sacred, necessarily. You could say metaphysical or spiritual, or you could talk about the absolute, as I did earlier. To return to talking of Rothko or Newman: there's that part of the New York School that's involved with the metaphysical, which is something that you get the feeling of from the work – you get a sense of awe.

Yes awe... I'm interested in that – is it also associated with scale? We have recently spoken about artists like Caro and McLean, but a lot of your influences are American. Is that important at all?

Even though I found the scale used by the New York School awe-inspiring – I also found that I couldn't work in these dimensions. There's a European sense of scale that you find in painters like Malevich and Mondrian; clearly a Mondrian would look absurd the size of... you know, 21 feet wide, like a Barnett Newman painting, just as the Newman wouldn't work if it was small – the expanse of it is everything. In a sense, Newman and Louis were confined, if you like, to that huge scale.

I agree with you, I think that the domestic scale of your work is very particular and considered.

I think it's related to the scale of the space that I work in; I work in a room in a house. I don't feel any affinity to the enormous spaces you get in museums, which feel like enormity for the sake of enormity.

But if you were in another place how would it change, can you imagine those motifs changing?

I've never worked in any other kind of space, so I don't know.

From *'Archangel: Paintings 1993-2002'*, published by the Talbot Rice Gallery, University of Edinburgh, 2002. ISBN 1 873108 33 8 Text copyright Alan Shipway and Pat Fisher