

Gisbourne, Mark, '...Not Fade Away', Alexis Harding at the Andrew Mummery Gallery (London: Andrew Mummery Gallery, 1998) p. 3-7

## Alexis Harding

'...not fade away'

*Watching and being with the paintings over a series of months through their long drying process, to me, feels like being with and around people from day to day.*

Two duration-based principles or laws operate in order to create the paintings of Alexis Harding, namely those of gravity and entropy. The oxymoron-like status of a suggested gravitational entropy, therefore, is always present as the central paradox and union of means at the heart of this artist's working process. For gravity is that abstract law designed to encompass a sequence of phenomenal experiences in time and space - the ubiquitous apple falling from the tree - while entropy is that turning, or intended 'transformation content', which while existing is lost for the purposes of doing or making.

Harding's work has less to do with the conceptualisation of its content than the melancholy loss that is wedded to the condition of its making. The concept of its content is freely cast into a mixture of semi-controlled expectation and hope, allied to a abandoned degree of trepidation and confidence in his studio. For the work both makes and unmakes itself in front of your eyes, and never more so than in the first month to three months of the drying period of his paintings. These are the intimate moments which form the abstract analogy with human life and relationships, slowly becoming self-evident as it gives added meaning to the expression 'to me it feels like being with and around people from day to day'.

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The analogy is important because it is furthered by the actual materials that are used and which signify both the aesthetic and the domestic nature of his paintings. The aesthetic is the monochroic oil paint used as a surface to the square or rectangular MDF support, and which is then placed on the ground.

While the domestic aspect is the gloss paint that is poured into a trough or guttering and then drawn across the surface 'wet in wet' to form an initial grid. The residual grid is that which generally remains always signified as the drawing by other means that is neither the pen, pencil, nor brush. It is clearly evident in works like *Split* and *Split II* [1997], but also more discreetly apparent in a purple coloured painting called *Boudoir* [1998]. Apart from the fact that this practice codifies the artistic means and the condition and status of the studio as the site of making, it is no more than the preliminary of the 'making', which in fact takes place in the period that follows as the skin begins to rupture and create its own unpredictable *craquelure*.



The ubiquitous role of the grid so redolent to the discourse of modernism is intentionally problematised by Harding.<sup>2</sup> What follows thereafter is the ongoing process of completion - a further paradox. By moving the un-dried surface and support around it is lifted at the behest of the artist onto the wall at which time the gravitational-entropy takes effect, the 'watching and being' with the painting is thereby extended. The unpredictable movement of the paint forms a bubble or lip, generating an uneven edge, and at times even falls to the studio floor in fulfilment of its entropic journey of expenditure. The role of chance first inculcated at the very beginnings of modernist painting is thereby liberated to express itself freely again through the visual language of a series of self-made abstractions.

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*I want this device to be an armature and flexible enough to hang all my emotional crap onto, I want these paintings as impulses to be so saturated that the entire image collapses under the weight of them...*

A subjective interest in art as subsequent coherence seen through a series of residual effects - that which takes place as the performance of making ends - is a radical departure increasingly common to the contemporary practice of painting. In this respect analogies could be drawn to contemporary artists like Angela de la Cruz and her abject works, among several others. It amounts to the ongoing aesthetic completion to which I alluded earlier. This is the liminal becoming or threshold in which the work will continue to be experienced both by the artist and the world.

However, this is not to say that Harding's paintings are without any visual similes as the artist has openly admitted. It is clear that a work like *Liftin' Spirits* [1998] and *Untitled (Split)* [1997], make some vague reference to frayed tennis netting, fencing or shattered railings, perhaps, even those near to the artist's studio at Deptford. A titled work like *Hellfire* [1998], no doubt by its naming also alludes to some figurative potential, but it is no more than that which is the free association of a spontaneous imagination. The naming function is just as readily ironic as it is symbolic. This is also true of his deliberate and recent use of lurid contemporary colours like lime green, lilac, or purple. These colours mark a departure from the artist's general use of black, white, and the primaries - Mondrian's tribe - but alternatively evoke a daring sense of transgression in pursuit of the 'decorative', while at the same time redeeming in part that forbidden twentieth century's no-man's land of decoration.

The intellectual conflicts wrought by Alexis Harding deliberately using what can be called secondary and tertiary colours opens up again the potential for a new *rocaille*, or lyrical form of painting, but one free from the tyranny of a

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pre-determined modernist discourse of decorative-negation.<sup>3</sup> Harding replaces autonomy with a dis-autonomy, plurality, fragmentation and a breaking apart, painting which dares to be 'saturated so that the entire image collapses'. The lyrical returns no longer simply as mere subject matter but as an abject dissolution of itself - the subject of me [it] becoming the journey of me [it] as other. This is why Harding places such an emphasis on 'watching and waiting' and why he has claimed, his paintings are like being around people.

*This desire I feel is... an excitement and flamboyancy as well as melancholy.*

There is a danger of misunderstanding what is at work here, for watching and waiting might be determined as no more than a personal voyeurism, a narcissism at work in the painter's practice. Indeed, observations have been made to that effect.<sup>4</sup> This might be true if one confuses effect with affect, the former being a particular manipulation and the latter a spontaneous reaction to being with the work. In watching and waiting to see a work change over a protracted period, to see if a painting might destroy itself, does not necessarily have to totally anthropomorphise the work - at least not in the so-called 'people' analogy given by the artist.



However, what it does do is reveal the condition of loss and exultation experienced in the process of having made something that cannot always fully realise itself. This might be considered as humane rather than ordinarily human. It is to be understood as regards the artist's own personal experiences within the studio - the being with and living through the work. When a painting works there is flamboyancy and excitement, but when it fails sadness or melancholy for that which might have been.

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But, having said that, there is also a pragmatic realism at work in Harding's painting, a realism that embraces the ephemerality of human life and all the things that are made and realised by it. All things end, all things destroy themselves. We live most obviously under the conditions of gravity, a day to day given in our lives. However, we are less honest in facing the entropic reality that our existence entails. Harding speaks of being 'sadistic, harsh, and violent with them in their making, as I realise this is an integral part of the process of loving and caring for the work,' and in doing so acknowledges that while these are merely paintings, they are similarly a measure of the emotional conditions of personkind. For it is often by passing through formal means, that we have come to understand many of our informal articulations.

Mark Gisbourne  
23 August 1998

## Endnotes

1. This statement and the periodic italicised statements that follow are from a series of typed observations made by the artist about his work, currently in the possession of the author.
2. Rosalind Krauss, 'Grids', in The Originality of the Avant garde and Other Modernist Myths, MIT Press, Cambridge Mass., and London, 1986, pp. 8-22
3. The French word '*rocaille*' [rock-grotto-work] from which the term 'rococo' was derived, is assimilable with nacre, commonly called 'mother-of-pearl' familiarly used in such grottoes...
4. This suggestion was recently evident in, Daniel Crowe, 'Interview With Alexis Harding', Butterfly, Issue no. 1, Summer, 1998, pp. 6-7