

Daniel Sturgis – Fill Of Beauty

Edgar Schmitz, 2002

1. counting Square shapes with dots against rounder shapes, against bigger round shapes, against a pattern of small triangular shapes, against colour. Or laterally: red following blue, following black, following silver, following red, following blue, following black, following silver, or: pink following green, following brown (with spikes), following pink, following green. Wherever the lines of similar patterns in their various successions are studied or counted, the colourful fields and their cones seem ordered with the plausibility of a closed system. The boundaries of the canvas do not matter to these lines and sequences. With the indifference of a system taking place, the groupings are oblivious to limits that coincidentally intersect them, and if there is a neighbouring canvas to the picture, the arrangement continues seamlessly. Opposing the order there are clusters of blue or brown and other minor slippages and gaps in the system or its outlines. But even so: if the pattern is a pattern and thus continuous, maybe just counting long enough could turn even the blips into something regular and recurring.

2. system But all this is thought too much in terms of systems in the age of the digital they allude to. Sturgis' works are not about corrupted or even challenged systems because that would imply a distinction and an order that have no place in these paintings: a distinction between intact systems and corrupted ones, and the assumption that corruption happens thereafter. These patterns were never more intact than they are now. Oscillating between diagram and detail, the whole in these paintings is never really more than the sum of its parts, just something else and, even though bigger, not necessarily more ordered. Their patterns are not generated as they would be by computer (something they imply as a possibility, if not a probability), starting mathematically from a formula and developing complexities to the breaking point, with slips and errors eventually going mad and crashing in a total breakdown of the inherent order. Sturgis' paintings rather refer to systems by approaching them from the outside, and are made from other stuff: from found things that can be manipulated to serve as stencils for the figures' outlines, from the thin pencil lines traced around them and from blob-like shapes themselves and their different languages of attraction (or maybe rather attractiveness - as they stay with the painting and never really move towards the viewer). Whether or not their languages shine through (like the roundness derived from the pizza wedge designed to appeal and sell) is revealing but vaguely beside the point. The fact that their repertoire is always made up from multiple sources is essential though, and so is the disparateness of very similar shapes that keeps the works from becoming a pattern in the absolute sense where pattern means arrangement rather than the forms themselves. Continuous arrangements, but not the Mandelbrot-pattern of self-replicating organisation. Rather than corrupted, these systems are approximations that keep their utopian potential of order and/or freedom, where continuous then means that they can be continued but also implies that it is not necessarily clear how, or where to, or by whom.

3. disegno The paintings are handmade and their designs hand drawn, in the sense of the old Italian concept of disegno that incorporates both painterly invention and its realisation as drawing. The imperfections of the manual process show in the forms themselves and in their arrangements, but most importantly and fundamentally, this approach alters central assumptions about the way a system organises a painting: here invention and execution fall together instead of following each other, and following it through means making it up on the spot, over and over again. Sturgis follows his patterns with the commitment of somebody who tries very hard (and very slowly) to stick to his rules, but where every step, every colour and every form filled in are the potential beginning of a completely new series. He could just as easily re-invent the whole sequence half way through its execution, only he chooses not to, and consequently the clusters are not faults in something otherwise perfect but just a different mode. A mode where the paintings suddenly stumble and open up towards all their other possibilities. Corners reveal this most clearly: where the border twists into an angle, it forces the system into itself and could just as well be a crossing as a joining or splitting of elements - the system becomes pure structure again. Both architecture and nature function similarly against the digital background and its genetic counterpart, increasingly man-made and self-running in equal measure. Where shapes look floral or frieze-like, this effacement of their differences, too, is a subtext to Sturgis' paintings.

4. attraction If the semblance of a system works as one form of bait, seduction is another. With spots of silver paint the paintings allude to the appeal of decoration but then are decidedly not pretty. Seduction plays with withdrawal and hiding, and these paintings are about avoidances where colours shift their position sideways by emptying out the place of beauty. They are sensual, awkward and decidedly painterly in this very ambiguity, yet they also always look like something else and this removes the pictures from any more purified realm of painting. This is where the little scandals of silver paint become obscene in their proximity to decoration.

5. place There are various historical arenas for this work, the points of reference lying somewhere between hard edge abstraction, cartoons and design. Sturgis' interest in these inherited forms is respectful, but it lies with their minor elements and he would always prefer a shaped canvas over any of the supposedly radical gestures of the monochrome. Sturgis reconsiders the discarded bits of abstraction and its (ab)uses that never quite got canonised this side of the big claims of modernism's gigantic ethos. And so the most disparate encounter happens

where Sturgis' shapes run up against the painted void of the picture's monochrome expanses. The void has its place in the contemporary as one of the central (negative) tropes of picturing, but this does not make the status of its borders in these paintings any clearer. Against Sturgis' groupings of shapes, his voids are always too much like a sky and/or too decorative to really empty the surface. As unapologetically painted surfaces, they invert the frieze into a borderline to the spectacle of its own staging, playing with abstraction's celebration of the void by decorating it.

6. usesThe result is a playing out of competing systems which remains within the respect that informs Sturgis' take on abstraction - not ironic, just tempered within a highly specific kind of harmony. Very quietly, Sturgis toys with structures until even the elements of painting look like figures in a board game, conflating chapters from the history of image production. And where they spill over into separate canvases, their unfolding modules promise uses as smooth and awkward as the paintings themselves - decorative and maybe, just maybe, very different altogether.

© Edgar Schmitz. 2002

from *Fill of Beauty* Edgar Schmitz, Berwick upon Tweed: Berwick Gymnasium Gallery, 2002