

CONTEMPORARY ART SPACE

Fate and Freewill an exhibition of UK and USA artists

Who's in charge here?

A new essay by Martin Holman

"The lot of critics is to be remembered by what they failed to understand."

—G.E. Moore (1873-1958), British philosopher and author of *A Defence of Common Sense* (1925)

Fate and free will. These concepts are not taken lightly. How could they be? Drill the enamel shielding these words and pretty quickly the porous dentin of philosophical debate gives way to the sensitive root of why we do what we do, and how far we own up to that. The exposed connective tissue between them emits the jabbing ache of pure paradox.

If not treated lightly, then how seriously? "We're doomed," pronounced Private Frazer at the first scent of trouble from air, land or sea, his glaring eyes gazing into the unknown far-off. He was the dour Scots mortician-cum-home guardsman in *Dad's Army*, the classic 1960s BBC television sitcom about Britain's redoubtable WW2 militia of old men and youths.

History proves we were not doomed then. But the fictional character spawned a catchphrase that still raises chuckles of recognition on a British street corner. Trust the mass media to make humorous the theological view that God foreknows and predetermines the outcome of all things. And trust the English to find in Calvin a source of mirth.

There's a work by the British artist Sarah Sparkes that raises the spectre of pre-destination, and (involuntarily) of Private Frazer's portentous thousand-yard stare. A lace-rimmed, delicately-worked place mat is embroidered in



"We're doomed", Private Frazer played by actor John Laurie, *Dad's Army*, BBC television, 1968-77

gothic script with the omen "We are all doomed." And, for good measure and compositional balance, the phrase is repeated.

Only that Sparkes mixes the dark with the light. The mat is actually a plastic imitation, dye-stamped in a factory, and the words are painted. It imitates the sort of domestic embellishment thought "proper" since Victorian times to protect furniture valued or cherished on account of its cost or provenance from spills and marks. What its painted incantation proclaims its decoration tries to inhibit. Hand-craft to ward off, to "daintify" the inevitable into a familiar old saw, like one traded half in jest—"if the wind changes you'll stay like that". We know the wind will not change us irrevocably: by mouthing the warning, we give destiny the slip.

Yet there it is, projected with modest means, an artwork that illuminates the "big question": the paradox of fate and free will. The force within this deceptively simple work is its arresting tension. Sparkes's *For what we are about to receive* invokes the table graces that offer thanks to God. It interrogates the evolution

of prayer into an insurance policy that acknowledges that His grace rules. But are we okay with that? Is the future causally determined, or can our desires, feelings, motives and threats determine our actions? How free are our choices? Perhaps nowhere is this

subversive, my child. The American painter Jessica Snow embraces free will as the “elephant in the studio” (to adapt a popular saying of the moment to a painterly application). It stands behind the choice of brush, of color, of placing and, most crucially, self-will’s abandon-



Sarah Sparkes, *We are all doomed*, 2009 1

question more pointed in its asking than in art, an activity defined by my *Chambers Dictionary* as a “practical skill guided by principles ... human skill and agency, opposed to nature”. Ah, nature. If I were of an incompatibilist frame of mind (and I will stress the “if” in that phrase), I would insist that nature is governed by strict laws, such as we see all around us, and leaves no room for genuine freedom. That’s Newtonian mechanics for you, and so much for art.

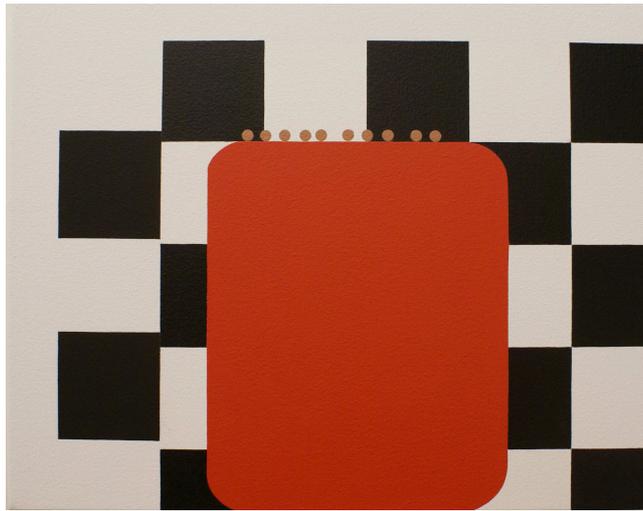
Not surprisingly, therefore, art in the secular twentieth century and since has argued by the force of development for the falsity of the thesis of predetermination. By and large, progressive artists have not been strict Calvinists; they have been individuals who have responded enthusiastically to the role of subversive. Maybe because they were made that way.

Inevitably? There is the hot water of paradox again. St Augustine doubted that humans were able to produce works of worth in the sight of God because of the malign influence of sin on all they did. Stepping up to challenge a view of such longevity and magnificence will make you

ment to an alternative force which Snow calls the work’s “own volition”.

To that she may attribute the freewheeling, space-infused colorfulness of her off-center abstracts and exhilarating room-filling installations. No strict law there, surely (although she named one work a while back *String Theory*), and the condition Snow finds herself in is known to the best artists. I think the transatlantic David Leapman knows it as the zone his drawings inhabit, a territory of linear structures like shelters and shrines. Shafted and buttressed, his ink-inscribed tunnels mine the plane of the paper day after day. Decisions executed in the making of an image, or a sequence of forms, or of an object, appear to reside beyond will in a self-guided rightness that assumes the guise of spontaneity.

It is an area by which moral philosophers can become troubled. The discourse in visual culture is so rich and wide-ranging that philosophy of one sort or another has a place within it. A philosopher will seek to analyze which actions the artist is responsible for and



Daniel Sturgis, *Reasonably Relaxed*, 2009

which are compelled or coerced. And, if the latter influence exists, who or what is doing the compelling. One who may not have been foxed is the Victorian liberal philosopher John Stuart Mill. He proposed that no knowledge is independent of experience. The rule-bound nature of Aquinas was for him so much mistaken memory. Human nature, by contrast, is the seat of individuality and culture, and actions arise from associations in the mind.

The downside of individuality, the tragedy-comedy of difference, may animate James Rielly's dogs in *Learning to fit in* but so does the uncertainty of our interpretation. The image probably did not originate with this French-resident British artist. It is likely that it came his way, fully formed and, like an interpreter restless with the inadequacy of one-to-one meanings in translation, the painter renders the outlook for clarity uncertain. A simple scene sharpens its mental focus into ambiguity as the lightly-touched, well-judged watercolor seems perceptually to slip towards dissolution.

Like Snow, Rielly keeps the surface flat. So does Daniel Sturgis, the British painter whose inscrutable colored forms and subtly defined finish are carried out with relaxed precision. The strong-edged shapes in *Fictive Call* (2008) are not so much spontaneous as built, possible replicas of past designs, or new viable

constructions from yesterday's vocabularies reinvigorated. The past plays a role in how these paintings look, and the sensation is strong that harking back to art's history constitutes a continuing locus for this painter's responsibility towards his medium.

Yet equally strong is choice: it interrupts well enough to prevent history determining the present. Memories of modernism, comic books and consumer design queue up for admission to these images, awaiting Sturgis's decision on their inclusion alongside the means of their (re)making with paint, gesture, scale, line. I imagine Sturgis assessing his material for its formfulness and potential ambiguity, its absurdness, and its humor. It seems to me, too, that his abstraction is judged for its gentle susceptibility to a human reading, its handmade-ness and mind-made-ness.

In this duel of fate versus free will, voluntariness is a key factor. If it is in the exercise of life then, by extension, it must be the case in art. The status it confers is opposed to coercion and, thereby, connotes freedom. "I am free in performing an action," to paraphrase the very level-headed British philosopher, G.E. Moore, "if I could have done otherwise." This outlook appears to embrace two very different American artists, Lee Tusman and Hannah Schwadron.

Schwadron's choreography shifts between moves that are prepared and others that may take the performer unawares. If that person has stepped (metaphorically) away from "personal preferences", possibilities emerge that themselves shape questions about what will follow. The familiar or the unknown? And what determines the choice? In this case, behavior coaxes new orders, new causal chains controlled less by awareness of the past than by imagining a new future (which starts now) informed by will, self, soul, and mind.



Hannah Schwadron, *Improvisation with chair*
(from *Love on Mars*, 2009)

Tusman notifies visitors to his website that "I sit in my studio and listen to jazz, dub, electronica, hip hop and more as I remix clothes to make quilts or clothes, mix together jingles and mash together music, and chop and swap photos or mangle paintbrushes to develop photographs, drawings or comics." Choice abounds in a way of working defined by what (infractions of the rules?) can be excused when consciousness and behaviour interact.

Tusman is undoubtedly aware of what he should do as an artist. But he acts as if that awareness is a mistaken inheritance and he assumes the liberty to start a new chain of events. Attitude defies fate and is, arguably, the trump card of the artist. Expressed more soberly, and in a more discursive context,

Maimonides pointed out in the twelfth century that "a man is judged according to all his actions", so let free will reign. God, if He is in the equation, must have given that permission, Maimonides reasoned; because God exists outside time, his knowledge of the future is exactly the same as his grasp of the present and the past. So play on.

Jewish thought is more lenient to the individual than Christian theology. Indeed, some eminent theologians are rather hard on God, curbing even His own freedom. So much for miracles (that is, reversing fate). Art is not about religion, but the deeply oxygenated veins of millennia-old tradition have not yet been stemmed, cauterized and sutured in the modern secular body. Hollywood might film its survival into one of its own long-running series: *Die Hard VI: Old Habits*. For, if the once-regular laminar flow of religious belief was now the faintest echo of a terminal arterial throb, we would not be grappling with this ancient paradox today. We would be guiltless libertines. The past, however, provides the small print on the reverse side of the pro-forma of all our lives.

Mention of responsibility may appear heavy for a reflection on these artists' work. But I believe it applies to the decisions taken by an artist as much as those of a doctor, accountant or legislator. An awareness of interconnectedness inhabits British painter Stuart Elliot's canvases. The star pattern which provides the geometric root of his paintings is an acquired shape, one the artist has seen in thirteenth-century Islamic decoration and on Victorian manhole covers in London streets. Its origin is geometry, the rule-based principles that govern the transformation of figures and the properties of figures that remain constant. Geometry governs the universe: it is the origin of Newtonian mechanics.

Elliot's appropriation is primarily motivated by the demands of making another image.

Undoubtedly aware of the origin of his source he chooses freely to subvert, adapt and transform what he has given himself. Personal feelings, knowledge, and a need to test the rightness of his actions within the arena of the stretched support affect his choices. In other paintings, not shown here, he masks the entire motif, exposing parts non-sequentially and at random for treatment with garish, brightly-colored acrylic, willing the image to paint itself.

The Canadian-born philosopher Ted Honderich has argued a second conception of freedom versus determination to challenge the perennial monopoly of the one that has had us all seemingly doomed since Augustine. There is room for celebration, after all, as attitudes affect life as well as unavoidable responsibilities. Not everything must change, but some things will. So not all is dark. Phew, but a conclusion I sense that artists had already reached. Snow catches that spirit of celebration in her work; Tusman, too. At its particle level, life is not predictable.

The Londoner Danny Rolph evokes a world in full color that may be interpreted as celebratory. In a way, it is, as everything in this show is a demonstration of art's utter unquenchability as a source of new perspectives on old stories. But Rolph's abstraction is the product of his view of the "big picture", the macroscopic level that Newton asserted was determined by restraining laws.

This artist uses the mechanics of image-making, extended by collage, to imply a setting against which decisions are made that is full of information that then multiplies some more,



Danny Rolph, *Lyn' Eyes*, 2008

superimposing itself on the last eruption before that outburst could be fully organized. Rolph's work takes the quantum stride forward to incompleteness, the openness ahead of the latest link in the causal chain.

Titling an exhibition with the words fate and free will instantly locates the interaction between work, maker and observer in the studio rather than in the gallery. The circumstances of this show and its impromptu setting outside the institution of art inject that exchange with the apart-ness that the studio represents to artists. Many liken that environment to the mind or brain. That is the seat of responsibility, itself a non-physical thing and, to borrow irresponsibly the philosopher Gilbert Ryle's memorable (but derisive) phrase, the "ghost in the machine" of the artistic body.

© Martin Holman 2009
London, October 2009