

Daniel Sturgis - No Narrative

Matthew Collings, 2005

I read this morning that Daniel Sturgis' paintings are the progeny of Barnett Newman and Ellsworth Kelly, because of their sheer surfaces. But I feel they're the progeny of much more appalling parents as well. Their multi-parenting is uncomfortable but realistic. It gives you more to think about. Jeremy Moon, surely a certain Dad, now has a definite cult: the buzzword for him is 'awkwardness': it's to defend him like a voodoo spell against any possibility of anyone thinking he might have been part of authoritarianism, which we know to have been a horror of the past. Barnett Newman and Ellsworth Kelly are beyond glamour, of course – they're like Titian and Durer being your Mum and Dad. But John Hoyland being your Dad, or Robyn Denny: this kind of awkwardness really would be difficult.

I thought of days spent in Chelsea and Westminster hospital earlier this year while my mother was waiting for the final curtain in a ward on the fourth floor. The experience made me more and more familiar with the art disposed about the place. I began to know it in what I thought of at first as a state of alienated familiarity, but then I realised that, no, I actually knew it, because of everything else I know about art: I wasn't detached from it I was related to it: would this be the same for Sturgis?

The utter lack of hype in this new context: hospital art, provided by kind donation from various organisations, made me wonder how we ever see anything normally. How do we make sense of something that doesn't have a current dialogue, except for that to be the only sense, the losers and not the winners in the ephemeral meaningless game of Art Careers? I drove in from Holloway each day feeling alienated from the ads across London, as if I'd been abroad for years: death made me detached from all the excitement. It wasn't the same for the hospital formalism, though. Why did I find it profoundly reassuring? I realised it was because it wasn't asking me to think about content. I thought a hospital was a very good place for formalism.

I'd been in and out of the hospital a lot over the years since it was revamped, never really looking at the art, just registering it: a Bert Irvin (how many of his paintings could there really have been at Homerton hospital when my daughter was born, was it the delirium of the event that makes me remember dozens, all enormous?), a Therese Oulton, a Tricia Gillman, a Hoyland, plus a lot of others. There was a very large, palette-knifed and brushy-dabbed effort, near a sandwich concession stand and some out of order lifts, with slab-like wonky rectangles of off-colours like ivory, bone and porridge, countered by pink and yellow, and burned orange, which I found myself more and more looking forward to seeing.

Hoyland's *Wotan*, 1977, I felt particularly strange about. It floated high in the air in this white environment, with the escalators going up and down – a glimpsed patch amongst the names of the wards and the directions to staircases and toilets. All around it was the revamped hospital space: open-plan, huge, deep, shaft-like, dipping and rising, its whiteness dotted with all the other multiple examples of 70s and 80s formalism, which were either seen in fragments from the corner of the eye, or suddenly loomed in their entirety and then disappeared again. Some of them had a label a yard or so away, as if it really was a serious matter who it was by, some of them not. Unscrewed by neurotics from the Mental Health Unit next door maybe, or arbitrarily never screwed in to begin with. One time I investigated *Wotan's* label. It said "Arts Council collection". I remembered the last time I saw it in real life. Then it was at the correct eye-level, in bright lights with milling drinkers, at a Serpentine Gallery retrospective in the late 70s. Having only recently left art school my evening naturally ended with me being sick from the private view wine on the Serpentine lawn, in the dark, like a dog. Not as one like in a metaphor but really like one, on all fours. But I thought that show was full of elegance: I couldn't admire it enough. I was amazed by the sparkling darting materials, and by Hoyland's apparent inability to ever make a mark that didn't look alive, and by the constancy of the witty clever glorious colour.

What does Daniel Sturgis do with these father figures? Like any intelligent artist from Goldsmiths in the 90s he tries to kill the pain. A Sturgis abstract cannot be broad, textured and rough with muddy splashy or melded colour: the 'natural' in that kind of thing is now seen to be too much of a statement, a contrivance. The new way is not to refuse contrivance but to accept the impossibility of there ever not being any, and to go along with artificiality.

Art always expresses the ethic of the time. It might do it in a deliberately oppositional way but even opposition is determined by what the times permit. So 'shock' isn't the pay-off in Sturgis' paintings (as in the YBAs); nor are clever-clever, smug, knowing, slightly hateful and asinine pseudo-concepts that appear to reference a 1960s world of psychological experimentation while actually only referencing a shallow style-take on what was already probably a bit overrated in the first place (as in YBA backlash art, political statement-art, Relational Aesthetics merchants, and so on). But the open door to visual play that the 60s offers, and which the 90s and early 2000s accepts, so long as there's a post-80s-theory agenda of investigation of a Social dimension attached, is part of the

Sturgis story.

His anti-macho look is informed by feminist theory. Not absorbed actually as theory, which, let's face it, would take years and you'd have to be doing it every day instead of being in the studio, but just absorbed somehow, by osmosis, which is the usual way ideas operate in an art context. The tiny, tiny just detectable traces of the artists' hand seem more connected to stereotype feminist-art modes like weaving and knitting than to the classic traces and splashes and smearing brushy-ness of self-asserting freedom-loving maleness. Also there's a print look, an idea of digital technological absence-of-assertion-of-self, in which brush strokes are assumed to assert the self while print asserts selflessness—this fallout from Warhol, of a kind that affects Gary Hume, say, and virtually any abstract painting that has contemporary currency, fits with feminism because in relation to painting's traditions it's about otherness.

What is the basic Sturgis structure? Small units of colour repeating and varying. The colour is flat, not broken or layered (at least not immediately noticeably layered) or stippled or scumbled. It's a 'made' look but made-ness is countered by flatness. The colour range, which probably would be casually described as 'bright', is actually more towards muted than bright. In a design or craft context it would be referred to as 'sub-brights'.

What are you being asked to contemplate? A type of formalism that acknowledges nature, and also style devoid of content—is that right? It can't really be devoid of content, because there's always content in anything, but what is the content then — is it a tease about the impossibility of content, if content is only thought to be expression of the self? He often opposes sky-type emptiness with lots of little parts that make up large areas suggestive of crowds, so the effect is like people in nature. Is it a playful opposition against fascist-type social arrangement—something universal but within it an allowance is made for difference? Within what seems to look like a universal scheme you see quirks, and these quirks are really the point. They show you how oddness can be subject to overall-ness. It's an optimistic vision in that differences can exist effectively within a whole. It takes a while to notice them: little variations on the colour you've been set up to expect, or forms that wobble or lean where you've been set up to expect them to stand up straight—all this within an overall pattern or design.

One thing definitely referred to constantly is the history of formalism. He suggests a contemplation of relationship-to-the-edge formalism—the issues those 70s artists in the hospital believed to be important, he now cartoonises. That's the difference of the times. It expresses our current moment's tolerance of fictional positions, but also our virtual inability not to see everything that's ever happened as fictional—which is probably a bit pathological of us.

Maybe we're given the power to see through society's fictions by Foucault, but don't feel we have the power any more to do anything about what lies behind them. From the perspective of Now, in which it's impossible for anyone to really believe anything, Formalism seems uniquely well suited to be examined, turned-over and made a joke of, because Formalism's world of No Narrative is actually a world of belief, a world of positively resisting narrative.

What is the relationship to Jeremy Moon again? Moon also does over-painting and not caring – he leaves former changes of mind showing. You don't see macho certainty, you see tentative certainty – you have a proposal: how about this? Or this? And Barnett Newman and Ellsworth Kelly? He seems unrelated initially, but then, yes, he obviously shares a fascination with a squiffy or pleasingly asymmetrical, pattern or design. You'd call this 'composition' in some contexts, but it's hardly a permitted word now, because of certain changes in thought: composition seems too much like something that can be easily done, so we don't mention it.

I once saw one of Sturgis' paintings where the proposal seemed to connect to the question: "What is the edge? What happens if I move the edge in?" So the painting was a kind of question about form, about what you expect from it. But because the result didn't fit with the tradition of what you do expect from form, it was actually rather curiously disordered: those little units standing high instead of leaning over, or vice versa, seemed more like a breaking of order rather than a staging of a paradox. But that's OK, because to want to rehabilitate in a modern context an art ethos from the past in which success and failure are meaningful terms—so breakage is always possible; maybe in order for life to triumph over death—is something worth cheering for.

© Matthew Collings. 2005

from *Daniel Sturgis Abstract Logic* Matthew Collings, Kathy Kubicki, Grasmere: The Wordsworth Trust, 2005