

Daniel Sturgis – In Equal Minds

Tony Godfrey, 2007

When I look at a painting like *Passionate Insecurities* several apparently contradictory responses and associations come to mind: these are archetypal shapes of modernist art, circles, floating across the canvas, but they are also design shapes – old vinyl – whilst the semicircles on the right are like the keys of some art deco piano. It is all very flat, the surface impeccably smooth, yet a sense of space keeps slipping in: the circles are in front of the ten-sided grey shape which is in front of the blue background. And how do we reconcile the two sides of the painting? Conceptually that is, for formally they seem to balance. Even perhaps we spy a human presence: these two little figures at bottom right are like those in Asher B. Durand's *Kindred Spirits*: men confronting and in harmony with the wilderness. All these readings are happening co-contiguously, disparate things and perceptions are held in a balance. It is the great virtue of Daniel Sturgis's paintings that they use the perceived impasse in modernist abstract painting as a springboard to enter an area where hybridity is not negative or disruptive but a source of wit, beauty and even harmony. As he said of these paintings 'things become in agreement, reconciled and politely positioned together. There is a balance despite the divergent references from art, contemporary culture, abstraction and design, etc. They are brought together and share a common ground. Hence the title of this exhibition: *Equal Minds*.¹

Sometimes it is difficult to stop oneself anthropomorphizing these paintings, but then again, it seems ridiculous to do so. When I look at *Age of Hope* what do I see? Do I see just three little shapes on top of or beside six much larger shapes - a witty redeployment of those sorts of shapes we see in modernist art - or do I see two people standing atop high buildings or hills and down below another, disturbingly headless figure. My eye and mind oscillate between the two readings: neither able permanently to supplant the other. This has a lot to do with the way we have been brought up to read cartoons where everything can be - and often is - anthropomorphized, where a big circle and two little circles means Mickey Mouse and a big circle on a bigger circle means Cartman from *South Park*; it also has a lot to do with how these paintings echo (surreptitiously) configurations and formats, especially landscape formats, from paintings of past history; and, thirdly, it has a lot to do with how these paintings orchestrate the eye so it shifts from wide scan to sharp focus, from pan to zoom, as if we were searching the landscape. We look at these paintings very much as we do the 'real world', but we are likely to become very conscious of that act of looking whereas we always view that 'real world' unconsciously.

Surprising memories can come to the surface. When I look at *Ground Period* I cannot but recall images of cowboys: I see two men who have climbed to the top of a mesa and have paused to survey the vast stillness of the desert around whilst down below them and to the right there is a man stopped staring at a house which is slightly off perpendicular;² I see again in my memory a filmed dance by Tricia Brown's company *Roof Piece* of 1973 where the dancers on top of various New York buildings moved in response to one another, as if they were telegraphs signaling across the urban canyons; and I find myself, to my great surprise, recalling paintings by Canaletto where tiny figures made up with minuscule blobs and swirls of paint are scattered across St Mark's Square or the embankment of the Thames like actors on a giant theatre set. Not portraits, their faces are nothing but a blob and a gash for a mouth or dot for an eye, barely even homunculi, scarcely more than costumed points in space they nonetheless catch and focus our eyes, animating the scene – or rather choreographing our eye to dance around the scene.

Of course Canaletto's space was that of the perspective master whereas Sturgis's is that of some one brought up in the age of the screen, (of cinema, TV and the computer). Nevertheless the principle, the way it makes the eye work is the same: the dots call to each other and call to us. One could argue that Sturgis uses the screen as a paradigm within which to re-view the world beyond the window: to re-make those connections.

Sometimes these tiny columns or dots are alone and isolated in space and at other times they are more rounded or squared off and marshaled en masse. It is easier not to see these anthropomorphically but once that process has started it is difficult to stop: once that happens we should see the massed figures (or shapes) in their serried ranks as not just like the serried ranks of goons in *Toy Story* waiting for the claw to descend, but also like the crowd in Jacques Louis David's *Oath of the Tennis Court* where each shape or figure is placed slightly differently so as to avoid monotony and to give a sense of a crowd in which all jostle subtly for a better view or to reiterate their individual presence.

These are paintings that seem initially to be about colour, flatness and pattern, but which turn out to be about

¹ Email to author. 11.7.07.

² Is there a subliminal echo here of that famous 1949 Henry Moore drawing – Crowd looking at a tied up object - where a crowd gather and stare at a vast mysterious wrapped monument or monolith?

space and time. They may seem humorous but they transpire to be meditative. It is no mere coincidence that Sturgis was at the time he made these paintings working in two landscapes noted for their immensity: the Lake District and Texas. Where his earlier paintings could be claustrophobic and hectic these new works open up and slow down. Because they still seem to echo the motifs and flat colours of animation and graphics we may expect movement or signs of movement in these paintings, but all such an expectation does is render their residing stillness yet more surprising. They are paradoxical: they look noisy but are quiet. Time seems paused or poised. The colours have become far more muted in these new paintings to emphasise this stillness.

And these are not just images: these are very much paintings. Sturgis talks of how he wants to be 'relaxed but precise'. He talks of how much he likes the precision of the paintings by John Wesley that he saw in Marfa, Texas. Wesley is like him a painter whose neoclassicism masquerades as burlesque. He talks of how very much he liked the architecture of the Judd Foundation so that even the chicken coop that Donald Judd designed for his garden is a refined and considered object. He liked the way formality and informality blur – the way every gallery is carefully hung but has a bed in it.

These paintings look easy, but aren't. Sturgis begins by making sequences of small acrylic-on-paper drawings, to work out the glossary or dramatis personae of his works. Often he will make several similar ones to establish all possible variants of a chosen format and to get the exact balance he needs between symmetry and asymmetry, design and narrative. To get the surface of the actual painting to the absolute evenness he requires he needs to apply six to seven coats of paint. Graphite lines are added at edges quite late in the process – to help emphasize that these are hand-made objects. This persistent wobble or tremor, these dislocations in symmetry or sequences are like the flutter of an eyelid or the twitch of a mouth on the otherwise perfectly still person: they are signs of life, of something beyond our control.

The titles are wry, teasing rather than prescriptive. But they are never *Untitled* because they are not modernist paintings. He belongs rather to all those artists who try to swim between high art and the popular, between art history and the present: Carl Ostendarp, Jonathan Lasker, David Reed, Mary Heilmann. Within Britain he feels closest to those eclectic figures who flatten things out: Peter Kinley, Patrick Caulfield. But the position he is in today, between art and design, between visual overload and reflection seems a crucial one. This is not so much comic abstraction³ or postmodernism as humanized abstraction or humanized modernism where, firstly, a sense of humour, the absurd and the scale of the human in the world has been re-established, but, once we enter their world, a reflection on a moment of conscious existence, where everything is still:

At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless; Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is, But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity, Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor towards, Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point, There would be no dance, and there is only the dance.⁴

It is the potential for movement - the way they invite the eye to the dance – as well as the sense of music held within the stasis, that makes these paintings unique. Within their apparent simplicity there is complexity and within their apparent quirkiness a vision that is both rich and harmonious.

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from *Daniel Sturgis Equal Minds* Tony Godfrey, London: Westbrook Gallery, 2007

³ The title of a disappointing exhibition at M.O.M.A. New York earlier this year.

⁴ From: T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*: 'Burnt Norton', 1935.