Paintings Happen

Paintings happen. The artist may start with a question, a hint of an idea, or possibly an overheard conversation. Once in the studio, he or she decides on a support. It might be a stretched canvas or something more casual, like a found piece of cardboard, an old piece of wood or indeed some other form of ‘kipple’. Colours are mixed and paint applied. The unhurried painter may meander, not knowing exactly where the process will go, but confident that an honest engagement with the materials will lead somewhere fruitful and unexpected.

Paintings are a surrogate model for life – they constitute both a sounding board and a playground, a place where contradictions can elbow one another, sparking contemplation and dialogue. In fuller appreciation of this dual nature of their endeavour, painters have begun to take a meta approach, whereby a painting’s meaning resides not only in the image, but in the artist’s choice of materials and artmaking process. Sometimes cast – incorrectly – as ‘deskilling’, this new aesthetic values an anti-heroic embrace of the small-scale, handmade and occasionally even incomplete, rather than the slickly produced, and sometimes outsourced, museum-sized paintings that have tended to dominate auction houses and international art fairs. Abstraction has embraced big ideas and universal constructs to significant effect. Yet some of the most interesting painting today illuminates the minute details of the everyday life of the artist. Painting as a ritual thus emerges as a potent postmodern metaphor.

As an alternative to the extravagant production and sometimes laboured irony that the art market has rewarded, the conceptual strategy of fusing object and process stresses greater attention to the thoughts, feelings and activities that arise in the moment during the day-to-day painting process. Accordingly, many painters now are at least as focused on artistic investigation as the final product. Artists of earlier generations sought a signature style and produced exhibitions of very similar paintings, and old-school galleries and collectors no doubt still favour this kind of ‘branding’. But a fair number of younger artists have liberated themselves from this traditional yoke, claiming the freedom to make paintings that may appear disparate, and a body of work that may ostensibly lack integration. But if these painters have done their job, under patient scrutiny their work reveals broader cohesiveness and perhaps greater depth.

F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote that the ‘test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposing ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function’. I think that’s what contemporary abstraction’s blend of conceptual and material approaches is about – and what the fine work in ‘Kipple’ exemplifies. These artists apprehend the daily ritual of mucking around with paint and other materials as conceptually significant in itself, and therefore as something that must catch light in the art they make. And it does.

Sharon Butler.

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