



KEELSEY
BROOKES
FOSYCHER
DELIC
SPACE

Kelsey Brookes' current body of work is inspired by the formal qualities of Indian mandalas, Islamic arabesques, and Christian devotional images and architecture. It is also easily connected to the rich West coast tradition of psychedelic art that enlivened rock posters and album covers characteristic of 1960s and 1970s popular culture. At his heart, Brookes thinks of himself as a scientist, a materialist - a profession he left behind to become a painter ten years ago- however his interests in metaphysics and reductionist philosophy still inform his artistic practice today. Brookes is part of a growing number of artists and thinkers who emphasize a slowing down and suggest a meditative response to the fast paced culture of our times. Titles such as *Attentive Awareness* and *Cognitive Awareness* invite the viewer to contemplate each work. Brookes' recent meditative, molecular paintings likewise encourage an increased awareness of the world around us and ask us to slow down, look and reflect on the power of the present moment.

French theorist Jean Baudrillard in his seminal text *Simulations* stated: "Hidden in the images is a kind of genetic code responsible for their generation" (55). In the case of Brookes' paintings this is literally true as the artist starts his paintings by transcribing the skeletal formula of psychoactive molecules. For this series, he focuses on mind-altering substances such as LSD, Mescaline, and Psilocybin (the compound produced by psychedelic mushrooms). According to Brookes, each molecule has a distinct personality and he is fascinated by how their behavior changes once they interact with other molecules. He is interested in how these particular molecules disrupt our neurotransmissions and the altered states of mind that result.

To begin a painting, Brookes carefully maps out the molecular structure in pencil onto a meticulously prepared canvas where each atom and point of convergence between the

chemical bonds will serve as a locus from which the painted image radiates outward. In *LSD*, 2012, (page 13) the central marks of the molecular substructure (the loci) begin with a soft pink, electric green, or sky blue irregular, organic star-like shape. Once the shape has surrounded the molecular starting point, Brookes leaves a small strip of white canvas and then follows along the previously outlined shape to make the next. The voids are as much part of the composition as the painted areas. Each brightly contrasting hue is layered adjacent to its predecessor to form concentric shapes that expand until they collide with neighboring forms. Once joined, they form visual clusters that continue to radiate out to ever larger, broader bands of vivid color. The overall effect is reminiscent of a handful of pebbles thrown into a psychedelically colored pond. Brookes described it aptly as, "imagine looking at an LSD molecule while on LSD."

In *Mescaline*, 2012, (page 46) the overall appearance of the painting seems quite different from *LSD*. The work begins in a similar fashion with the mapping out of the molecular formula; however, its basic underlying structure that defines the pattern of the painting is different. The center point of departure here is not the star-like shape found in *LSD*, but rather a series of scalloped, parallel lines that radiate as organic ribbing. Instead of applying contrasting colors between each ring, Brookes first uses coral red for six or seven consecutive bands, followed by four or five pink ripples, which soon switch to a bright, fiery orange. The overall effect of the thirty-two brilliant image cores is that of multiple flowers slowly emerging from their buds or of waving coral polyps. A sudden shift in color takes place as the imaging switches to a deep purple, which again is alternated by strips of white negative space in a manner similar to the white banding in *LSD*. The purple bands expand outwards until they collide with another form and appear to delve into imagined depths of the painting's picture plane or meet the edge of the

canvas. The bands seem to be simultaneously expanding outward beyond the edge of the canvas and also inward into a deep perspectival space within the picture plane. As a result of these diametrically opposing forces, the painted image appears to pulsate with an energy that can be read as an organic life force or *élan vital*.¹

Similar in process and basic appearance to *Mescaline, Serotonin*, 2012 (page 58) starts with the scalloped ribbing rather than squiggly shapes of *LSD*. Serotonin, although not itself a psychoactive molecule, looks structurally similar to endogenous psychoactive molecules.² Its function in the body is to regulate our sense of happiness and spirituality, two areas that can also be tapped into with the consumption of mind-altering substances. The painting's overall effect produces a feeling different than the other two paintings described so far. Here, the center cores are either blue, yellow and, only once, green. The intensity and size of the cores are alternated rather than identical. For some, the core is small consisting of only a few ribs of color before shifting into layers of pink and then coral red. The red then slowly darkens into a deep purple with each outwardly expanding ring, only to lighten up into a greenish ocean blue. The ribbed forms' coloration lightens most in the upward right corner of the piece where they meet the edge of the canvas in an electric blue. The overall visual effect is one of a shimmering whole, in and out of focus as your eye wanders across the carefully painted surface. The visual flow patterns concentrate at each core, while also ebbing away into an imagined field of infinite repetition and continuation.

The repetitive process of creation produces a meditative state in the artist and ideally the finished works have a similar effect on the dedicated viewer who chooses to slow down enough to connect to a visually induced state of reflection. The intentional looking at an aesthetic rendition of a microscopic view of a molecule (a zooming in) allows for

1. A term coined by French Philosopher Henri Bergson in his 1907 book *Creative Evolution*.

2. Please Note: Serotonin is an endogenous neurotransmitter and not an exogenous hallucinogenic compound like LSD, Psilocybin, DMT and Mescaline. It was included in the

show because it is structurally so similar to those hallucinogenics. The reason the hallucinogenic compounds are hallucinogenic at all is because of their structural similarities to neurotransmitters—like serotonin—that are performing the more common work of sober cognition.

a perspective shift from the particular to connect to a macro form (a zooming out) such as the universe, life, or states of both individual and collective consciousness. Brookes' molecular series promotes a sense of connectivity that goes beyond the individual to a "whole"—with which I do not mean a god or goddess-like figure(s)—but rather a universal essence that binds us all, both at the molecular level and a spiritual level as part of a collective continuum. They beautifully allow for an understanding of the world outside of language and science.

Canadian cultural theorist Brian Massumi sees everything as existing in a continuum, as an event in a relational dimension to another, always becoming, always in process. Rather than focusing on entities or experiences existing in opposition (the classic subject-object divide), he reflects: "It is all of these things, folded into and around each other to form an experiential envelope, a field, full of oneness and manyness..." (35). This concept of the field of oneness and manyness relates to the experience of viewing Brookes' molecular works as they too connect us to an experiential field of awareness and presence. Brookes' paintings visually capture the philosophical idea of movement and effect, as well as, generate a similar "phasing in and out" as each work of art, although physically 'finished,' still exists in a state of flux.

Massumi is inspired by French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's "theory of flows," which considers objects as the result of, and as part of, process. Activist philosophy equally dismisses the subject as an autonomous entity and presents it as an event, an occurrence, and rejects the dichotomy of the subject as knower and object as known. Their emphasis on process and connectivity between subject and object applies to Brookes' paintings and their relationship with the viewer. The artist's meditative practice translates directly into a reflective experience on the part of the observant

viewer. Artist, object and viewer become part of a lineage of connection; a flow, a continuum, where the ideas and action of one inform the other while simultaneously allowing for connections to the world at large even if in a microscopic way.

In 1998, French curator and critic Nicolas Bourriaud argued along similar lines for the art object as a state of encounter, as an activity consisting in producing relationships with the world with the help of signs, forms, actions and objects in his seminal text *Relational Aesthetics*. He no longer views the work of art as an autonomous object, but rather as an active participation between an artwork and its viewer. The work serves as an activator and generates meaning as the result of this interactive engagement between object and subject. Bourriaud's concept of "state of encounter" provides an apt metaphor for Brookes' current paintings as they are about activating the space between the viewer and the work while inviting the viewer to go to a place that is reflective, meditative.

For Bourriaud, like Massumi, art is active. Gestures are caused by the production process of the work of art and can consist of actions, events, or anecdotes. The image is an act! Art is part of "the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space" (Bourriaud, 113). The work of art can still be created by an individual maker, it is dynamic, no longer simply an object to be regarded by a separated subject. The viewer is in active dialog with the work. Bourriaud states: "Unlike an object that is closed in on itself by the intervention of a style and a signature, present-day art shows that form only exists in the encounter and in the dynamic relationship enjoyed by an artistic proposition with other formations, artistic or otherwise" (8). Although Brookes' paintings exist as physical objects rather than relational works of art in the social practice sense of the term, they do create dynamic encounters between viewer and artwork. Their surfaces are active and passive, real and

illusionary. They are in fact authentic activators of a revelatory visual event and in that sense echo a hallucinogenic experience.

It is useful to continue along with Bourriaud's thought process a bit further as his analogy of the work of art fits in terms of a description of Brookes' practice. According to Bourriaud, "The form of an artwork issues from a negotiation with the intelligible, which is bequeathed to us. Through it, the artist embarks upon a dialogue. The artistic practice thus resides in the invention of relations between consciousnesses" (9). The latter concept of "relations between consciousnesses" is a key idea in understanding the power of Brookes' art, as it instigates a dialogue not simply between a subject and an object, but rather between the consciousness of the artist, the viewer and a larger web of world consciousness. For example, one can think of Brookes' works as a contemporary visual iteration of the ancient Buddhist metaphor of the interconnectedness of the universe known as Indra's net. British Philosopher Alan Watts first introduced Indra's net to the general public in the 1950s. He described it as follows: "Imagine a multidimensional spider's web in the early morning covered with dew drops. And every dewdrop contains the reflection of all the other dewdrops. And, in each reflected dewdrop, the reflections of all the other dew drops in that reflection. And so ad infinitum. That is the Buddhist conception of the universe in an image" (Watts).

As part of a relational theory of art, inter-subjectivity does not only represent the social setting for the reception of art, which is its 'environment' or 'field,' but also becomes the quintessence of artistic practice. The notion of the field is also present in Massumi's writing where the subject dissolves into a plane of dispersal, a relational field, echoing Deleuze and Guattari's theory of the rhizome.³ For Massumi, art, like anything else, is

3. For more on the rhizome see their influential text *A Thousand Plateaus*, 1987.

in process, a "something happening" rather than a static object waiting to be seen. Our interaction with the object implies movement not just of our eyes (visually), but also kinesthetically, through our bodies. Seeing is not a passive activity, but an embodied one. Vision itself is an event. The object is as alive in the world as we are and our relationship to it is an active one, one of what Massumi would call "thinking-feeling."

For Bourriaud and Massumi, the context of the artwork is widening. Bourriaud describes this as follows:

After the isolated object, it now can embrace the whole scene: the work can not be reduced to the 'things' that the artist 'produces'; it is not the simple secondary effects of a composition, as the formalistic aesthetic would like to advance, but the principle acting as a trajectory evolving through signs, objects, forms, gestures... The contemporary artwork's form is spreading out from its material form: it is a linking element, a principle of dynamic agglutination (8).

Massumi considers the work of art a phenomenological reality and part of the same continuum of existence that encompasses object, subject, and nature as equal temporal participants always in process, active. For both authors art is active and part of a larger, ever-shifting continuum: a world. Bourriaud's notion of the work of art coupled with a dynamic trajectory and Massumi's concept of the work of art as part of a continuum are closely related. It is their idea of the artwork as an active agent and its function as a connector to a larger understanding (a thinking-feeling) of the world that I argue applies to Brookes' molecular paintings.

In closing, a short quote from Bourriaud: "Each particular artwork is a proposal to live in a shared world, and the work of every artist is a bundle of relations with the world, giving rise to other relations, and so on and so forth, ad infinitum" (9). I believe that Kelsey Brookes' meditative paintings are indeed a proposal to live in a shared world. They provide a rare and beautiful opportunity for mindfulness and focus within a culture of distraction. Brookes' invitation to take pause reminds us that we are part of a continuum of interconnectedness between the artist and his inner world, an artwork and its viewer, and the universe.

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