

Painterly Looking Glass

A review of the exhibition: *The Independent Eye – Contemporary British Art from the Collection of Samuel and Gabrielle Lurie*, At the Yale British Art Gallery, September 2010 – January 2011

By Geoffrey Detrani

The idea of the “avant-garde” is often considered in musings about art. Sure, it’s a concept of fungible elasticity but it can also be a useful pet to have around. I’ll deploy this domesticated, if imperfect, beast here, to put in context a group of artworks on view at the Yale Center for British Art. Wind the art historical clock back a few decades and the tip of the avant-garde points where? Not to abstraction - it being the over-bullied, oft-eulogized, limb of painting. To conceptualism? Or pop-conceptualism, or minimalism?

By the 1980’s the prominence of abstract painting had thoroughly waned, replaced by a resurgence of expressionistic figuration in painting. Although most of the works on view in “*The Independent Eye: Contemporary British Art from the Collection of Samuel and Gabrielle Lurie*,” were made in the late 1970’s and 1980’s the artists “came of age” in the 1960’s – when abstract painting was just being dethroned from its post-war high. Art can possess timeless appeal but historical context is important too.

The exhibition favors the work of John Hoyland – a painter of resourceful mettle. Hoyland’s paintings are characterized by a brash use of paint qua paint. He squeezes ribbons and beads of paint onto smeared and splattered backgrounds. The paint, with its sculpted plasticity, and kinetic exuberance, sits on the surface creating imagery that’s halfway between the art room at a psychedelic kindergarten and the printer at a quantum physics lab.

The artist Pat Caufield (the shows only non-abstract painter) is represented by one painting (also, several prints) – one of the strongest pieces in the show. With “Wine Bar” one gets the feeling that the Caufield hit the nail on the head. It suggests an amalgam of antecedents (Matisse meets pop art with Francis Bacon as prop designer). It’s a nocturnal interior – depopulated and off-puttingly eerie. Pools of light anchor the composition, the foreground filled with a bowl of salad that feels visceral and unnervingly alien.

Ian Stephenson’s work (two large painting, two drawings) is alluringly serene. Wall text informs us Stephenson was motivated by an interest in cosmology. What we see is a kind of microscopic pointillism – a field of dotted paint. The all-over effect feels obsessive and oddly calming. There is a suggestion of the white noise that scientists say is the visual sound of outer space. Stronger, though are the artist’s two smaller drawings that show the crucial relationship of image to negative space.

The exhibition’s remaining works are sourced to the artists R.B Kitaj, John Walker and Howard Hodgkin. Walker’s paintings are less exuberant, more expressionistic – no fauve-like coloration here. Their muted tones and packed, tactile and

painterly surfaces are like a pathos driven, meditative counter weight to Hoyland's bright and brassy riffs.

Howard Hodgkin - one of Britain's foremost abstract painters- known for including the frame as part of his painting surface, is represented by a single print. Though prints are inherently flat, Hodgkin works in an ersatz frame and his signature, jarring exploration of all-over shape and color are satisfyingly displayed.

R.B. Kitaj – the only American born artist in the show – is also represented by a single print of forms, organized loosely around a grid, Kitaj's work makes overt reference to political content by use of associated names and titles.

There is a familiar feeling to many of the works in this show – save perhaps for Hodgkin and Kitaj, who stand out as evidencing a strongly independent style – even though many of these artists will be new to American audiences. It is tempting to think of this show as representing a moment in Britain's recent artistic past yet the evidence of the collector's subjective choice is just too strong for that. Abstraction can seem timeless, yet so utterly of a specific era. With it, in lieu of specificity of content, the senses must be strongly compelled. But that's always a demanding high mark to hit.