“Are we there yet?”

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Duncan Pickstock Paintings 2014-2015

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“... the first glance through the rain-blurred window of a new apartment...”
— Walter Benjamin, Surrealism

IS THE WORLD UNDER CONTROL? Architects, politicians and philosophers might like us to believe so, and might believe that they are the ones who keep it so. But inevitably one order only gives onto another by and through some form of conflict. The question — history shows — is just how violent and disruptive that conflict and that transition will be. Artists, like insects with sensitive antennae, pick up such social concerns, so that historical and political issues creep into what otherwise seem to be their primarily constructive and formal enquiries. Each artist has to then take responsibility for the particular mix of freedoms and responsibilities with which they find themselves engaged, seeking to fuse them into a satisfactory whole that might be called a painting, a work of art, a series, or a practice.

As the inaugural recipient of the Rita Harris Studio Award Pickstock has been able to spend an intensive year working in his studio and it is the results of that period of focused activity that he is here asking the viewer to consider, sharing the outcomes of his experiences in painting while leaving it to us to find our own way, both through his works and through the challenges we currently encounter in our built and social environment.

Pickstock is a good organiser. On visiting his studio you find he has prepared meticulously to unfold the story of his progress over — approximately — the past ten years. Canvases are ordered and stacked, facing the walls, and in the process of conversation he reveals them, one by one, each making or underlining a particular point, marking, what the artist himself calls: ‘hopefully, a small step forward...’

Throughout this adventure the idea of the ‘palimpsest’ seems to have been a consistent companion as in one way or another Pickstock uses layers of painting that variously reveal and obscure, drawing our eye into an exploration of the seemingly inexhaustible possibilities of depth, distance and dimension available to an industrious, bold and conscientious painter. The earliest works feature layers of pale washes swathed onto canvases before being rubbed and scraped back to expose traces of their not-so-distant past. This procedure has become increasingly more conscious and controlled, the process partially mechanised by the use of tape, the form increasingly pre-empted by a preparatory structure of underlying perspectival grids. Nevertheless, the final outcome continues to depend upon inspired shifts of gear led by unanticipated events arising in process.

It also seems important to focus on another persistent motif evident throughout the long journey Pickstock describes, i.e. the multiple, brightly-coloured, clashing or optically complementary runs of paint which often inaugurate his paintings. Like rain on a window this motif seems to re-assert the initial and ultimate flatness of each painting, as if a 21st century painter like Pickstock is not content with being confronted by the already profound, and
Large Landscape Painting 1, 2013  185cms x 185cms
typically modernist problem of a blank canvas, but needs to set himself a further challenge, a meta-surface to wrestle with and overcome. After seeing this motif appear in various guises, sometimes peering through the palimpsests or jumping to the fore and dominating entire canvases, it comes to haunt his practice as if it is beyond the powers and responsibilities of the painter to banish or refuse.

We might assume that any colour could serve the apparently formal, preparatory function performed by these wayward parallel lines, but the rich combinations that Pickstock selects initially boggle the eye with a certain festivity before tending to curdle as they cancel each other out, bringing a tragicomic atmosphere to the work that invokes slightly soured scenes of sodden clowns in muddied fields. We might also be reminded here of the early to mid-career paintings of Peter Doig in which a social and psychological agenda once seemed irrevocably bound up with the vivid, almost psychedelic behaviour of paint and colour. But while Pickstock’s raucous rainbows might represent a primary painterly impulse to throw aside willed formation and take pleasure in paint’s colour and fluidity, it subsequently becomes subject to increasingly mature control, curtailed and confined by an editing process and further layering that never completely prohibits or cancels it and occasionally thrusts it centre stage — though always on the artist’s own terms.

In Pickstock’s most recent paintings perspective is increasingly and assertively deployed, albeit one whose vanishing point brings us up short, as if the horizon had fallen to earth at a distance that proved too close for comfort. Such unnatural proximity seems to claim the space of the painting for the simulacral realm while forcing any make-believe ‘sky’ to confess to its status as no more than a broad swipe of deep colour.

While distance contends with flatness we also find demonstrative allusions to depth opening up beneath the illusory ‘floor’ of any implied mise-en-scène that emerges from Pickstock’s geometrical constructions. Perilously gaping rectangular holes regularly allude to some unknowable chthonic chasm, as if the artist needs to remind us that his paintings’ supposed foundations are far from reliable and are, in truth yet one more playful contrivance.

Today’s painters might continue to dwell and deal in the legacy of post-cubist contradictions, pursuing a self-undermining, self-imposed rigour that seeks to leave no stone unturned in the search for a comprehensive and contemporary practice of self-aware, analytic painting. As a result it is still the most questioning of painters that we are most likely to trust, follow and believe in. The magician whose illusions we are most likely to ‘buy’ today is the one who most candidly exposes their strategies and secrets, even while beguiling us with the same.

Like the 1930’s abstractions of Jean Helion, Pickstock’s paintings can deliver us into a celebratory, vivid, yet nevertheless analytic portrayal of the problems involved in rendering multiple dimensions on a constricted surface. Occasionally 3-D forms, in the simplest and most literal possible guise (looking like little more than paper rectangles folded crisply enough to stand up in space) are called to attention by crisp triangles of dark paint that presume to form their ‘shadow.’ But by now we are learning Pickstock’s vocabulary, a language ever poised between fact and fiction, truth and lie.

Looking at more of Pickstock’s paintings reveals persistent references to architecture, leading us to consider whether any art that constructively organises space may become in some way ‘architectural.’ Wherever we find illusions of depth or allusions to structure set within any representation of distance, some innate human desire for narrative hijacks the eye and
Landscape Painting 1, 2014  120cms x 145cms
starts driving our interpretation, diverting us from purely formal considerations, drawing us to see, or to hope to see, some redemptive shelter or teleological formation emerge. Occasionally in Pickstock’s paintings, as in Cezanne’s *Lac d’Annecy*, (1896), an artful arrangement of hues and tones can make us feel as if we are looking across an expanse of space or water towards a romantically-elusive, barely-attainable, but hopefully hospitable habitat. At other times we seem to be negotiating a labyrinth, more like an avatar gliding through a virtual environment, flying over, looking down perhaps upon a row of makeshift huts dissipating before our eyes under the force of a digital glitch, their structures breaking back into the ground from which they emerged.

By way of architecture we have drifted into an analysis of figural and narrative elements that correspond with our humanity on an affective rather than semiotic level, invoking un-representable sensations as much as confirming any particular gestalt. Something in Pickstock’s work repeatedly touches a nerve corresponding to our need for place and shelter, awakening a sense that all our journeys, however aspirational and adventurous may be ultimately informed by a fundamental need to survive, and therefore given meaning by a longing to arrive or to return. Nevertheless, approaches to narrative, journeys, space, and dimensionality have transformed in our lifetime. Once primarily analysed and informed by painting, sculpture, and drawing, then the novel, movies and TV, they now have to reflect and accommodate the experience of CGI, video games, Google Street View and other means of virtually progressing through virtual spaces, and in heterochronic time. As Pickstock flips, reveals and explicates canvas after canvas the sequence begins to feel like a series of screenshots freezing the artist’s activity at particular historical points. Each decisively draws a temporal line across a period of weeks or months spent searching for a new point of orientation, which is always a new springboard to a new investigation.

Like the digital realm of ‘2nd Life’ Pickstock’s paintings often suggest and sometimes reassure us of the possibility of another place, even if this ‘place’ appears to be forever under construction, always emerging from or falling back into its base material (here still made of paint not pixels). Pickstock’s journey thus seems to synthesise the contemporary digitised environment with an inevitable influence of a more or less consciously absorbed art history, leading him to produce anonymous scenarios, like 21st century De Chiricos, that often feel as virtual and deserted as the myriad empty, ruined and abandoned websites now cluttering hyperspace and to which we feel no clear affinity, even if they stir in us some sense of a contemporary sublime.

Such interpretative readings may of course be too convenient, providing only reductive simplifications of a more complex practice and procedure. Pickstock’s progress is after all not merely or nearly so linear. As he tells the excited story of the recent development of his work you gain a sense that a kind of dance is taking place, and that his ‘progress’ can be as multi-layered and multi-directional as the images we find in his paintings. Pickstock is always and also moving sideways, backwards, digging down and reaching up, making an occasional turn to see what might have been left behind or overlooked, as he insists, methodically, upon covering every potential avenue that his experiments have exposed, addressing all that remains to be dealt with, revising and reworking whichever aspects of his practice may have been sidelined by the focus of his most recent works. Pickstock thus organises, not just the surface of his canvases, and not just the completed canvases carefully stacked in his studio
in narrative order, but his entire oeuvre and identity as a painter, conscientiously ensuring that his contribution will be significant and enduring, even as it makes a dynamic intervention as a vital, current and contemporary practice.

Having said this, all of the activity thus far described may turn out to be mere preparation for a new phase in Pickstock’s work, which, at the time of writing is on its way to forming and resolving itself. Looking at the painter’s latest canvases in early stages of preparation, you gain a sense of someone who has long laboured and experimented to master a personal approach to painting that is capable of satisfying both his own and his audience’s desire to see the medium thoroughly explored, taken to new levels and new places. Many possible depths and distances are already implied even in Pickstock’s underpainting, while those flatness-reinforcing runs of colourful paint are still careering down and over the entire surface. The formal play, the resulting evocations of architecture and the consequent human narrative all seem established as he sets out from a new plateau with a clearer plan of just what he is going to do and why.

The more clearly narrative and architecture emerge in Pickstock’s imagery the more likely he is to subtly subvert any such clarity and point these psychological and social issues back in the direction of a problematic formal investigation that also provokes questions of perception. Nevertheless, it is hard to look at his new, emerging and preparatory paintings without being minded of real, social implications, such as the housing crisis and building boom currently affecting many artists in London (where Pickstock lives and works) and which means significant ‘growth’ for some, and unaffordable rents, exodus or homelessness for others.

In Walter Benjamin’s essay on Surrealism he gave the following example of the kind of intimate event that André Breton might use as an image of experience within which we might discern the emerging dialogue between humanity and modernity — “... the first glance through the rain-blurred window of a new apartment ...” — and it is this quote that I find difficult to clear from my mind as I look at Pickstock’s latest works in their planning stages. Veiled and curtailed tragicomedy has morphed into a muted view over an epic, hypermodern manscape, implying a world in which the only heroes are the buildings, the spectacular city itself, with which no mere mortal can hope to compete. Invisible clones and drones ride the elevators and escalators, servicing the canyons and shafts of an alienating economy, thereby fulfilling an architect’s expressive dreams. Fritz Lang’s Metropolis comes true, albeit less dark and more colourful, as aluminium, glass and baby balconies mitigate destruction of the past, colonisation of the collective horizon, and ambitious investment in hastily-assembled, short-sighted and exclusive futures.

As can be seen in a painting like Un Balcon, Boulevard Haussmann (1876) the Impressionists and their contemporaries responded directly to the Housemann-isation of mid-19th century Paris, with Degas and Caillebotte in particular enjoying and exploiting the sharp-angled perspectives on their rebuilt city enabled by its new buildings. Pickstock would probably reject such historical and politicised comparisons with his own, largely studio-bound, relatively secluded practice, and yet, as we said above, despite a strong focus that might make him detached, and despite his leaning towards a quasi-abstract formalism, narrative, humanity and emotion nevertheless creep — albeit perhaps semi-consciously — into his work, as if slipping through the studio door before it closes behind him as he enters each day, to add a different, more lyrical form of ‘depth’ to his works.
Painting 3, 2014 145cms x 145cms
One of the preparatory paintings referred to above, having been recently completed, now seems to privilege the viewer with the kind of exalted view available only to a fortunate few, i.e. as if gained from an exorbitantly high tower of new apartments from where a multi-layered underworld (the city’s precise ‘surface’ now having become an unreliable parameter) can be glimpsed. Nevertheless, the painting is still clearly and effusively a construction, informed here by digital phenomena, there by further developments in Pickstock’s relatively ‘Lo-Tech’ process. The palette seems relatively homogenised, the massed trickles of watery paint are once again comprehensively washed over, and thereby muted, but still accommodated as a pervasive energetic rhythm, like the lifeblood of the painting, the painter, or the city it seems to represent, reminding us of Mondrian’s encounter with jazzy New York, or Sarah Morris’ vivid responses to Miami and Las Vegas.

Unlike Mondrian and Morris however, a certain sense of drama, and a lingering melancholy, survives Pickstock’s analytic experiments, as if the trouble that inevitably lies ahead, for any society that becomes too ostentatious, imbalanced and disdainful of those it disenfranchises, could just as easily pull from art history as a suitable referent the nightmarishly distorted cityscapes of George Grosz, in which society crashes into a newly chaotic level of modernity unable to accommodate the multiple perspectives of the seething modern crowd.

Despite grand social theories of the plight of narrative and history, each painter, today as ever, continues to make his or her own progress. Yet working away, relatively blinkered, only obliquely informed by the rough and tumble of economic, political and technological change, inevitably allows artists, and perhaps painters in particular, to illuminate the progress of society as a whole. Today our society seems to hover once again between the potential for survival or disaster, between deliverance into a hypermodern future of increased understanding, and collapse into a neo-medieval, unprecedentedly barbaric conflict. Despite their strategically crafted rhetoric, no politician appears ‘robust’ enough to deal with the difficulties they would be elected to manage. Faith in political leadership is reduced to the erection of scarecrow-like caricatures. Meanwhile caricaturists themselves now work in fear of their lives. The ‘no alternative’ model of a market economy has so insulted the majority of supposedly democratically empowered voters that it has become non-representative, clearly out of touch, as bankers’ bonuses remain as exorbitant as Hi-Tech architects’ dizzying displays of prowess — ultimately of little value or meaning with regard to our urgent need to construct a workable, sustainable and inclusive society. Philosophers meanwhile flounder, bobbing between iron ineffectuality and arcane meditations, rendered ineffective by unprecedented ethical propositions reasserted by the irrational force of religion, as it trumps Enlightenment’s hopeful deployment of Reason as our possible saviour.

Humble artists nevertheless paint on, ambitious in their own way, and yet modestly providing an alternative vision, a different service and perspective to all the presumptuous representatives named above, never communicating didactically or directly, nor consciously striving towards a given aim, but nevertheless, and often inadvertently, shedding new light, revealing new depths and sharing new visions of where we are, who we are, and where on earth we might be going.
Small Painting 7, 2014  30cms x 30cms
Painting 7/14, 2014 150cms x 160cms
Painting 1/15, 2015  160cms x 180cms
Painting 2/15, 2015  145cms x 145cms
Painting 6/15, 2014  120cms x 115cms
Painting St/15, 2015  180cms x 160cms
Painting S4/15, 2014  40cms x 40cms
Duncan Pickstock is the first recipient of the **Rita Harris Studio Award**. The award commemorates the life and work of Rita Harris who died in 2013. Rita was an artist and a master of T'ai Chi, which she taught for over 20 years. She was married to Jonathan Harvey, Acme's Chief Executive and co-founder. She worked with Jonathan at The Acme Gallery (1976-1981) in Covent Garden.

The biennial award, which alternates with the **Jessica Wilkes Award**, is supported by Jonathan, Acme, friends and family. It provides an artist with a free studio to enable them to devote more of their time to their studio practice. Worth £10,000, the award is made to an artist selected from applications from current Acme studio holders.


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