Sidney Hunt and the Journal ‘Ray’

reproduced four of Schwitters’s collages and assemblages (three of them – ‘Revolving’, ‘Und’ picture and Construction for noble ladies – were early Merz pieces of 1919) together with the sound poems Large and Two noise poems. He also published another Dada poem by Bonset (Troop Marching Past) and the anonymous Commercial poem, which had been extracted from an advertisement in the Saturday Evening Post. This significant group of works reinforces the ludic spirit of Hunt’s editorial comments and quotations: on the cover of the second issue, Ray was described as ‘the most beautiful, the most expensive magazine in the world’. The unorthodox combination of short sentences (by Rodin, Léger, Tzara, Oscar Wilde . . . and Pontius Pilate) on the last page of the magazine also shows why the periodical can be considered today the English link to Dadaism.

At the same time, the reproduction of works by Moholy-Nagy, Gabo, Van Doesburg, Peeters and El Lissitzky represents a first attempt to bring Constructivism to Britain. Hunt included Van Doesburg’s ‘Contre-composition XIV en dissonances’ from 1925, one of his first Elementarist paintings, and also one of El Lissitzky’s earlier Proun paintings, Proun P23 (1919), which moved a step further from Suprematism into the exploration of the third dimension. As an example of the incorporation of new techniques and materials in art, Ray reproduced Gabo’s sculpture Construction in glass, which preceded the arrival in England of this Russian artist in 1935. Hunt’s interest in the critical debate surrounding modern art was also reflected in his decision to include three theoretical texts: Schwitters’s ‘Art and the Times’, Van Doesburg’s ‘The Progress of the Modern Movement in Holland’ and Walden’s ‘What is the Theatre’.

But Ray was as short-lived as it was exceptional. For unknown reasons, Hunt did not publish a third issue of the journal. As if he had foreseen his future three years before, the fact of not being subsidised might have ended all aspirations for continuing Ray. In 1929 he resignedly wrote: ‘There are still of course the dozen or two others with quicker beating hearts, not enough to support either as contributors or subscribers a British periodical of purely adventurous and ‘experimental’ work’.31

Today Sidney Hunt and his journal Ray should be reconsidered within the history of modern art in Britain. Unlike other significant English journals such as Blast, Axis and Circle, Ray has never been reprinted and has remained virtually unknown.40 Most certainly, if Ray had been reprinted, a different narrative would exist for modern British art. Its existence refutes the quite extended assumption that interwar Britain remained cut off from the energetic avant-garde activity of Continental Europe until the mid-1920s. Seventy years after Hunt’s death, it seems fair to rescue his name from oblivion and recognise his remarkable achievement as the singular creator of Ray, ‘the only English periodical of the avant-garde’, within the cultural scene of Britain in the 1920s.


Nature and things: recent paintings by Howard Hodgkin

by John-Paul Stonard

Howard Hodgkin has stated that he is seeking more ‘actuality’ in his recent paintings. And, indeed, in a group of paintings completed in the past couple of years, an earlier concern with human subjects, memory and emotion has given way to the presence of simple objects. This new objecthood of Hodgkin’s paintings reveals a more direct engagement both with things and nature, and consolidates a new period in his work – a remarkable achievement for a painter who has been working for some sixty years.

Leaf (2007–09; Fig.45) is doubtless the most striking of this recent group. It shows a single painted mark, a simple fold of translucent green paint that appears as a gesture of concealment, literally of implication, as if the smallest mystery of nature, the greenness of a leaf, was being held and protected within a fold of pigment. Small reservoirs of oil and Liquin leak from the top edge of the mark, and where the green stroke has carried over to the frame the paint shows as a dark varnish, barely perceptible. The paint has clearly been applied in a single action, and the date range of two years is thus at first surprising, suggesting that a long period of preparation elapsed before paint was applied to panel. A longer history still can be read in the wooden frame, stained, scuffed and clearly recycled. Combined with the earthy green of the painted mark, the first impression one might have of Leaf is something historic, perhaps sixteenth-century German, a botanical illustration by Dürer for example. The antiquity of the frame points to a long history of the materials, and a tradition of painting, at the end of which the work itself appears as a tiny yet decisive slither of time. Just as the wood of the frame seems to be returning to nature through a glacial process of ruin, so the painted mark appears through its simplicity and lack of contrivance as natural, inconceivable. Leaf draws together nature and art with consummate economy, and shows how natural things live both within and despite history. Francis Ponge described the ‘perpetual leaf’ as the emblem of plant life, and suggested how the essence of this leaf was the simple fact of being present: ‘The time of plants is conditioned by their space, the space they gradually occupy filling in a canvas doubtless determined forevermore’. Leaf is about the ‘time of plants’ but also about the long durée of
painting, about the vast patience required to frame the momentary act of putting brush to surface.

It is for a future biographer to place Leaf and other works finished between 2007 and 2009 against the events of Hodgkin’s own life (although it may be noted here that the two years were a time of continuing illness for the artist, a fact reflected in the small size of the paintings). The origins of these recent works may be found in four large paintings whose titles refer to the chorus of the American patriotic anthem (and the state song of Kansas), ‘Home on the Range’: Home, home on the range (2001–07); Where the deer and the antelope play (2001–07); And seldom is heard a discouraging word (2007–08); and, finally, And the skies are not cloudy all day (2007–08). It would be tempting to draw out the ways in which the titles of these paintings elaborate recognisable elements of Hodgkin’s work: the early attachment to America; a sense of longing and the tenor of a lament; the interest in popular songs, again, particularly American. Yet striking also is the degree to which the titles, with the music they imply, draw the paintings together into a difficult group – one almost longs for the paintings to free themselves from the liltting but essentially banal rhythms of the traditional melody ascribed to the settler poem. Yet the logic of the poem also gives the paintings an order, and moving from one to the next we may recall the sense of the song – a paean to untroubled nature and homeland – and detect a resolution in Hodgkin’s own approach to painting, as the view-through structure of the first two paintings is exchanged for a far looser, startlingly spare composition in the latter two.

The asceticism of And the skies are not cloudy all day, comprising a bare panel with a flurry of light green marks gathering in the upper register of the painting with most of the surface left


(23rd June to 5th September). The exhibition travels to Tilburg and San Diego.


untouched, presages more recent paintings. Red, red, red (2007–08) and Saturday (2005–08), both made from the application of one colour, apparently at a single painting session, demonstrate a move away from an earlier approach in which numerous layers would be built up over long periods. Like a chess player for whom the mechanical opening gambit and mid-game elaboration can be played mentally, as ways of arriving at the unique endgame situation, so Hodgkin has stated his wish to rid his painting of pentimenti, to apply paint to board only after mental elaboration of the particular problem presented by each work. The simplicity of the painting belies the long process of consideration that occurs before the moment of execution, revealed in the often self-consciously extended date ranges. As such, the role of memory has given way to a new decisiveness.

The shift in Hodgkin’s work may be characterised from a concern with emotional situations and personalities to a meditation on objects and being – from an existential to a more ontological form of painting. Snake (2006–08; Fig.48) shows with disarming simplicity an orange serpentine form moving among Hodgkin’s characterised scattered dabs, framed by bands of orange and green. Closer inspection reveals the grain of the plywood backing which assumes the appearance of the swirls and drifts of desert dunes. The presentation of a single object in Snake, and also in the beguilingly simple knot-like form in Croissant (2008; Fig.46), are not related by the artist to any ‘back-story’ (which he is in any case reluctant to impart), and seem rather to be at the start of their lives as images, waiting to find their place as their own histories gather.

The actuality of an object, the thingness of a thing, is a kind of surface tension that delicately guards against deeper observation: so thought Vladimir Nabokov in his novel about the contingent life of objects, Transparent Things. ‘A thin veneer of immediate reality is spread over natural and artificial matter, and whoever wishes to remain in the now, with the now, on the now, should please not break its tension film.’ The narrator is a neurotic for whom transparent objects reveal their history of making as a bewildering mass of banal details – and it is exactly this that Hodgkin avoids in these works, scoured of pentimenti, refined to a single decisive gesture.

Other works recuperate motifs that have appeared periodically in Hodgkin’s œuvre, motifs that may be traced over the years with their own developmental logic. Both the tiny painting Folk art (2008–09; Fig.47) and Collage (2004–08) present a single brushmark as the subject of the painting, which in its upright animation suggests a figure or a phallus. This motif can be traced back through many works, from Self-absorption and Blushing (both 2007), to the clearly phallic Art (1999–2005; cat. no.432), and the central standing form in Performance art (2003–04; no.424), and further to the oval panel Tree (1982–84; no.192), which shows a single dark form against a feathery green background. The single upright mark often seems a totem substitute for the artist himself. Yet, as with other recent works, Folk art gives renewed significance to this gesture. It is the smallest painting Hodgkin has made, and has a simple facture that can be reconstructed through close examination. First, three green marks rise and curve on a background of light brown around to the right. Next the frame was covered with a bright red, which also stains the top of the inner picture, rendering the green much darker – and then a single brush of yellow mixing with the red but not the green below it. The paint is shiny and sweet, creating a small saccharine world. Although Hodgkin has described
the ‘back story’ to Folk art as the memory of a painted Russian chair that he was given as a child, the feeling is more of the pathos and charm of folk art considered in a broader sense.

A reverse format can be seen with In the train (2002–09) and Embrace (2008–09; Fig. 50), both of which are constructed with thick strokes that define a central letter-box aperture, suggesting covert or protected vision. This is a common sensation in Hodgkin’s work, for example in Gossip (1994–95; no. 278), or in much earlier works such as The Hopes at home (1973–77; no. 135). Yet, where in these earlier works the framing gave intimacy to an inner composition, with In the train what we see is simply the bare board on which the painting is made; and an even more unexpected element of Embrace is the section of a word ‘TICIPAY’ (from ‘Anticipate’) visible at the centre of the painting. The profile suggested in Happy night (2008; Fig. 49), defined by a dark blue frame over a light blue ground, playing off the warm wooden frame left exposed at the edges, is without precedent in Hodgkin’s aware, unless one thinks, at some remove, of the small much more ‘painted’ portraits from the 1970s, such as A bust of Paul Levy (1976–77), for example. But the more one examines individual paintings, the more it becomes clear that each is predicated on something entirely unanticipated (giving an ironic jolt to Embrace) and possessed of a strength of personality, the defining quality of Hodgkin’s work.

Despite the continued presence of people and places in Hodgkin’s painting, notably in Artist and model (2005–07) and In Egypt (2007–08), in other works there is the gathering sense of a return to nature. Richard Morphet has noted the increased importance of landscape in Hodgkin’s work since the early 1990s, ‘inward or psychological topographies that are fused with perennial astonishment at the effects of nature’. The blaze of golden paint in Old sky (1996–97; no. 314), or the evocation of the heavy saturated shuddering of air in Thunder (1999–2002; no. 394) bear witness to this fusion. Such a ‘romantic sense of man in nature’, as Morphet points out, would have been unlikely in the upbeat Pop milieu of the 1960s.

Although weather systems have calmed in recent paintings, the feeling of a closeness to the elements has by no means diminished. Damp autumn (2001–08) employs the full tonal range of a single pigment to evoke the slow entropy of the season, and brings to mind the warmer ‘elegiac’ painting Autumn foliage (1998–99; no. 331). Similarly, Sky (2005–09) and Rain on the pane (2009) both use a restricted palette and present a plane of blue pigment, a recurrent motif in Hodgkin’s painting. One of the most surprising recent works is Ozone (2004–07), showing a somehow rotating mass of dark blue paint topped by fleshy pink and ochre.

John Elderfield has compared Hodgkin’s approach to painting with Vuillard’s notion of ‘the definitive brush stroke’, a statement which finds renewed meaning in Leaf. Citing Hodgkin’s own statement that it is the ‘accidental’ rather than planned mark that is definitive, Elderfield asks what such a mark could represent, and answers that accident allows access to ‘the memory of hidden desires’. But one might go further than memories as being the subject of Hodgkin’s work, and posit rather an idea of nature as something other than human volition, something just given, and therefore truthful. Nature and natural things return as simple objects, and moreover in an endlessly unanticipated way, part of a repertory of images undiluted by repetition. The decisive brushstroke is the virtuoso gesture that allows access to nature – in the case of Leaf by creating a remarkably concise analogue for the simplicity and richness of a single natural thing.

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5 Similarly, House (2005–07) and Garden (2005–08) are pendant works painted with a limited chromatic range on the back of found frames.
7 Embrace is made on a thin wooden invitation card for a department store inserted into a found frame.
10 It also brings to mind Hodgkin’s prints made using a single colour, for example Artist and model (1980); giving an impression both of silhouette and transparency of the pigment.
11 See, for example, Nixtime (2004; no. 422); Día vu, día blue (2004; no. 416); Breakwater (2004–05; no. 415); and Seascape (1996; no. 301).