

OVERWRITING REALITY

- AN INTERVIEW WITH EMIL HOLMER BY SAM WILLIAMS

Let's begin with an example. In DEATH LEAVING LIFE (2011) you paint a heart-like organ with teeth in it, set off against these brightly coloured wriggling things that might be sperm or worms, or parasites. Your paintings often move between two poles like this...

There is a kind of bipolarity, yes.

But it's as if you're trying to channel something between them... In 2000 LONELY LIGHT YEARS (2011), there's a white wash over geometric shapes and the painting appears split in two halves...

That painting had the working-title "transmitter" because of the bipolar structure. The two white organic forms are painted on top of two technological structures, which show through the finished painting.

I've made a lot of works expressing tension between two worlds. Often, one is technological, neon, abstract - the other organic, mindless, swamp-like. It's as if there were two paintings in each one.

In recent works I've departed from that. TROPICAL MACHINES (2011), for example, was a departure for me.

Where did it take you?

It hasn't arrived at an end-destination. But it seems to be about working with clear forms and basic colours, image planes, fields, and something that has been going on much longer, a breaking up of a sort of horizontal/vertical grid.

I'm developing a more open approach to composition and moving from a way of painting by intertwining colours to an awareness of composition as fully separate parts. In recent paintings, I'm trying to keep the elements clear, letting the elements on the surface become the composition. There are parallels with music. Some kinds of music are about building a mass - something so intertwined it becomes formless, chaos - but it's more interesting to make paintings that don't just depict chaos.

Where did that insight come from?

I learn a lot from my daughter. She's three now. She makes drawings. Kids at this age are all talented and they're super-direct. They know exactly when their painting is finished - a certain number of lines and it's done. And they know exactly how to interpret it, you know... 'Here's the princess, here's the wolf and here's the train crash'...

When she was two, there was something even more basic, a fascination about this connection between her hand and the paper. What happens on the paper is only interesting because this is what the hand did. Gesture imitates image and image imitates gesture.

Like feedback...

Right. And in some works I have fought hard to keep a kind of conceptual element. But those are not the works I find most interesting. A lot of what I do is about composition. There's no subject or theme, it's **how** it's done, how it appears on the surface.

Are you interested in the primitive?

I am interested in primitivism and have been for quite some time... 'The primitive' is difficult though: it's philosophical. If I try to understand it in a way a philosopher would... well, I can't.

And as a painter?

I think it's the very definition of painting.

That sounds romantic...

I don't romanticize primitive painting, but there is something there - potential, ambition, for purity, directness. It's essentially religious. But painting is also a ridiculous thing. And I suppose that is romantic. Because it is so accessible, so simple, putting a substance onto a surface.

The challenge is to achieve a simplicity which is hard: to paint simple, direct. You can't describe it. It's about what painting can **do** - as opposed to what is theoretical, intellectual. It's not conceptual. It's simple, but it's a huge challenge. That, for me, is high painting.

But what is 'high painting'?

I think it's where there's nothing else...

I think of Lascaux [*site of Paleolithic cave paintings of animals, figures and abstract signs in south-western France*], and a certain type of Ancient Greek painting you see sometimes, and also contemporary painters like Basquiat - this very raw output. It's hard to talk about in terms of my own work... it's about not going back and modifying what's been done to present a certain kind of surface. The paint isn't trying to be anything else.

In recent works recent works it looks as if you're trying to see what paint will do if you leave it alone...

Yes, and it's a hard-earned insight. A colour - say yellow - has a specific vibration, and when you paint, it's about realizing that - not about trying to modify those energies. You can't. Yellow will always be yellow. And so, when I put a cranium heart-shape on top of a yellow surface (*DEATH LEAVING LIFE, 2010*), there's no negotiation. No element adapts to any other.

So it looks simple, but it requires a lot of work.

What kind of work do you do?

Preparation. I make drawings on A3. I put elements together and paste them into a collage. And at this stage you cannot think, you must be unconscious. You do all this preparatory work, drawings, collage, but on the canvas, you have to have it in your spine somehow. So that's what the work is for. To put it there.

When I paint I set up a space for myself to improvise within. The space is defined by different elements, character. The root or plant-like BLOB, which I've been using for some time is such a character - this sort of irreducible growth, something senseless, unthinking... This last year I've been working a lot with parasites and worms, craniums and teeth, and abstract geometrical forms.

The drawing phase is about working with these characters, getting to know them, trying to define them so that I can use them in paint without thinking.

The problem is that none of these elements or ideas are enough by themselves: it's how they exist, how they are put together: it's the composition of the painting that makes it a work.

So drawing is essential. There's a little less fear involved in drawing.

Why is that?

Drawing doesn't look as serious, somehow. You can scribble on anything, it doesn't have to become a 'work'. There's no pretentiousness. It just is what it is. On paper it feels easier to just do things - absurd things - hunches that might develop.

Is fear a part of the work, though?

It's fear that tells you you're entering something new - where you don't know the parameters. Maybe that's the most important thing about painting - all of it, the whole process, my work - the feeling of throwing yourself off a roof, not knowing, being blind, giving yourself a chance to arrive at something.

I think it's necessary to lose yourself, but I often fear getting lost... You have somehow to regain balance to create something new.

How do you work?

Most of the time, I paint with a brush. I don't make sketches on the canvas first, I don't have a model.

In each painting, there's a departure point, something formulated. It could be a field of colour, something that starts to define a space, a blob-like cluster-drawing, a black block with holes. As the composition grows, I react to the first element with another element, another gesture.

I work on the floor and manipulate the canvas, turning it upside down, using and trying to be aware of how the paint is behaving - running, dry, smearing, appearing, even just flat. I try to work all levels at one time, letting the painting grow different directions.

But it occurs to me, it's not how it's done that's important; it's how it is, how it's seen, how it appears. All those things are more important than the doing: the work must have its own logic.

So all I have is my own limited knowledge. In the back of my head is some vision of a painting I want to see. It grabs me, but I have to discover it.

I set up certain parameters. I start with a notebook and a number of ideas, often instructions, but they're not fixed. For example, in 2005-6, I started doing a lot of figurative painting, which created the instruction not to paint figuratively, but in the process, figurative elements start to creep back in. It happens. Parameters have to be broken.

Is that a problem?

Perhaps. You pass yourself at points. You think you're taking a step forward and you pass yourself and find out you're moving in a circle or a spiral. In earlier paintings, the figures inhabited an interior space within the painting. They were painted into that universe, the universe of the painting. More recently, I decided not to do that. I use these figurative elements like a found object. They're not a part of the painting, really...

What are they doing there?

I'm not sure. It's as if someone walked up and put them there. But the painting itself is a living thing. It's not an image or an icons. It's more like a mechanism, which you set up to allow people to approach your meaning. It's about communication.

Is your goal then, to communicate?

Yes, but a lot of people think that means compromise: I say something and you don't understand, so I say, 'OK, I'll change it.' But it's not that. It's rather like a language. That's what I'm trying to strengthen when I draw, my language.

What do you mean by language?

Sometimes I feel like a linguist working with paint. And the experience of the language is inside the paint. That's just how I want the paintings to work. I guess everything is language... It's hard to use the word 'language' as something completely instrumental, a dumb tool to get something across. There aren't categories of language and not-language, there's nothing outside of language or inside of it. I'm using painting to convey or connect to something, but at the same time what I am trying to reach escapes me. The painting only occurs in contact with a viewer. And I'm also a viewer first. And as a viewer, you are repulsed, attracted, pulled in and thrown out... it's in that movement the works communicate.

You also use words in the paintings. Or rather, on top of them. It looks like a kind of graffiti. Why is that?

Writing over the painting is a way of sabotage. I want the words I use to be simple and clear.

I've often used the same words repeatedly: "Is this this is this..." "Erase" "Fill"...

I realize now this is not a code, but a repetition. It says again what the painting does. It states the painting against itself in a way, but there is also a reaction with the painted surface.

Sometimes I use text like speech bubbles in comics. You have the thing, the figure, the subject, and then there is an overwriting, a characteristic superimposed on the figure.

It's referring to a possible reality outside the painting.

Is this opposing a reality you want the painting to disrupt?

Perhaps. It's like this. There is this thing, the painting, and it's been appropriated, by objects, by words. It's under attack, but underneath it all, there are just these colour fields, and perhaps they appear like figurative elements, or perhaps they don't. And beneath all of this is just paint. It's important to realize that... that's what the scribble elements in my paintings are about: they're creep-holes for passing through.

An art piece works for me when it triggers something, opens something up...

A nuclear explosion could also destabilize, trigger or open something up. It's dangerous...

Sometimes that happens. And it's most difficult when it does, when I paint and just see this monster - this completely disturbed thing - stare back. I ask myself, what can I do with that? And that can be really terrible. But it's something you have to accept.

The way you talk about viewing the painting, it's about accessing a state that for many people would be quite alien, even alienating...

But you don't need to have read certain books or looked at certain pictures to understand my paintings. That's important. What is required is visual engagement.
