

CALLUM INNES

A QUALITY OF DETACHMENT

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"For in truth, art lies hidden within nature; he who can wrest it from her, has it" *Albrecht Dürer*

Despite their apparent simplicity the paintings of Callum Innes betray an ambitiousness of purpose. Often linked with British artists - such as Nicholas May or Ian Davenport - who interrogate the processes of painting through their work, Innes actually stands apart from their concerns. Although process is foregrounded in his paintings, they do not have process as their subject-matter; similarly, although formally conceived they are not solely concerned with formalist imperatives or aim at an articulation of decorative possibilities. The stress here is not on the way the painting is made, or even how it looks. His goal being "to achieve this detached point where things seem to have just happened of their own accord" and that his "starting point is the desire to create an image that is somehow natural, that exists in its own right, holds a place for itself" (1).

The means by which Innes achieves this wish to make something that appears not made is largely through a process of excavation, subtraction or reduction; that by disclosing something you also at the same time show that it had at one time been



Untitled, 1992, Oil and shellac on canvas, 175 x 165 cm.
Courtesy Frith Street Gallery, London.

covered and that it had been revealed. Innes does not look for something in painting, but instead hopes that something is found there. The distinction might seem small but is crucial. Martin Heidegger, in his influential study on *The Origin of the Work of Art*, discusses the significance of the use of the Greek word *techne* for art. He explains that the word signifies not craft at all but instead "a mode of knowing. To know means to have seen, in the widest sense of seeing, which means to apprehend what is present, as such. For Greek thought the nature of knowing consists in *aletheia*, that

is, in the uncovering of beings" (2). It is this sense of uncovering that, to Heidegger, goes some way towards defining the creative act. The process becomes of minimal significance - whereby Innes for instance more or less evenly paints a canvas with one colour and then proceeds to repeatedly drip turpentine onto its surface from a pipette to create streaks of dissolved paint which reveal the canvas beneath - what actually gives the painting force is what can be known or unlocked as a result of this process.

At the heart of what we see when we behold Innes's paintings is a dual sense of application and exposure. Similarly Heidegger outlined the nature of art as the 'setting-into' the



Installation view, Galerie nächst St. Stephan, Vienna, 1992. Middle: *Five Identified Forms*, 1992; right: *Exposed Olive Painting*, 1992.

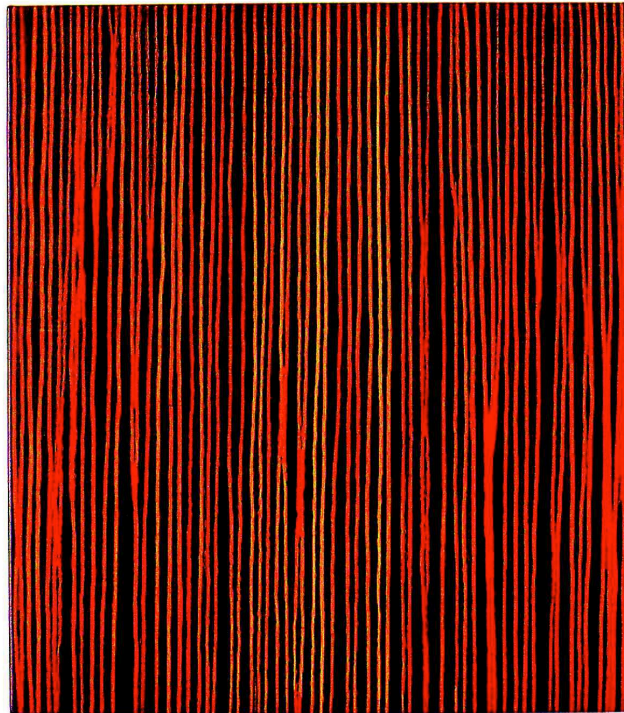
painting of truth (truth being defined as the unconcealment of what is), art being both the becoming and happening of truth. Truth is then found in disclosure and as the quality of presence of that which is unconcealed: a unity of what is disclosed and the process of disclosure. It is in this frame that the ambition of Innes can be recognized as a search for the sublime, not in how the paintings look (a sort of representation of a spiritually elevated intangibility) but in the determination of their creation or this 'setting-into' the paintings of truth by means of showing something that had been hidden.

In respect of this strategy it should be underlined the distance that exists between Innes's aims and those of the American post-War Abstract Expressionists. In embodying truth in their being his paintings are not metaphors for something else, they do not carry any sort of mythical baggage, they are not the sublimation - or even the pictorialisation - of the artist's own personality (he suggested in 1989 that "When a painting is done, I don't feel that my personality is hanging on the wall, for all to see. It is a piece of work that I have organised and presented." (3)), nor are they formed within any referential field. The use made of subtraction - formation through negative process - stresses the manner in which he is concerned with a presentation of the infinite, just as in the *Formed Paintings* there is no sense of containing edge so the lines of bleached-away paint seem to have no point of origin or end. These paintings do

not stand for something else but stand, on their own terms as an embodiment of the self. Functioning through their own material facts and Innes's manipulation of them in negative process they are the result of an attempt to show the unrepresentable, the infinite, the sublime.

The paintings exist, held in a tension between the negative and the affirmative, fact and their process of becoming, the sublime and a refusal of reference. Everything that we behold in the work and that is projected out to us exists in the work's interior logic. Talking about any notion of spiritual intent in the work Innes has said that "I don't bring that intent to the work, I don't carry feeling to the piece, it comes from the work." The 'setting-into' of truth in each painting demands that nothing be applied; any projection of emotion onto the canvas would just inflict reference or representation and the painting would cease to be. Similarly he has admitted that "In my work there is ... something emotional, perhaps slightly spiritual going on in the canvases, especially the white ones. I just didn't want them to be completely self-evident" (4). This is to say that emotion exists but in the paintings' own being.

This could all easily suggest that Innes relies on chance and that the paintings miraculously paint themselves, indeed if there is any illusion in the paintings that is it: "I want to work on something in a way that when the viewer or even I approach it, it looks like it has developed by itself. Any image becomes part



Formed Painting in Red, 1992, Oil on canvas, 85 x 75 cm. Courtesy Frith Street Gallery, London.

of the material I'm working on... In the *Quotations* series, the actual paint is almost part of the canvas, so it looks like the image has just occurred." These paintings are "organised and presented" in such a way that Innes's achievement of a quality of detachment creates an opposition, such that the paintings define themselves, between order and logic, and disorder and chaos. In this situation the paintings can only operate within their own frame of reference; a sense of the sublime denial of the edge. The defined formal appearance of *Exposed Olive Painting No.5* 1992, or *Untitled* 1992 in which a veil of shellac has flowed over the painting's worked surface, is achieved through a process that can be "dirty or chaotic because I'm letting different liquids or materials flow or I'm placing them and then destroying their apparent orderliness." Just as in the same way a strong sense of emotion within the paintings acts as a cloak to their formal definition.

It is this detachment that is crucial to the success of Innes's paintings. Through detachment the trap of any representation or reference to things beyond the painting can be avoided. The ambiguous spatial quality of each painting does not represent another space somewhere else but shows the space of uncovering the painting's own hiddenness. Furthermore, he acknowledges that, for him, "Art is for one artist to express a time, a place, you could say it's also an action, doing things, exposing things." This statement is illuminated by what Jean-François Lyotard called

"singularity" or, following Heidegger, an "event"; the timescape of the 'it happens', as opposed to the 'what happens', is then represented by Innes in such a way that the subject (the painting) becomes its own frame. The sublime is then unconcealed by the 'setting-into' the painting of truth (presentation) by its own presentation (uncovering).

(1) "A Discussion with Iwona Blazwick, March 1992, Edinburgh", in: *Callum Innes*, Institute of Contemporary Art, London 1992, unpaginated. Further unattributed quotations by Innes originate from this discussion.

(2) Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art", in: *Poetry, Language and Thought*, Harper and Row, New York 1971, p.59. This text is a translation of Heidegger's revision (published 1960) of a lecture initially given in 1935.

(3) "Callum Innes" (from a conversation), in: *The British Art Show 1990*, The South Bank Centre, London 1990, p.72.

(4) "Callum Innes" (interview) in: *Frieze*, Dec 1991/Jan 1992, p.16.

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