

**ALAN CHARLTON: VERTICAL INTEGRATION**

His self-authored epigram reads: 'Alan Charlton is an artist who makes a grey painting.' It's that simple. In conversation, Charlton is, like his work, honest, direct, modest and often given to being quietly profound. Perhaps those characteristics, more so than the mystical, or metaphysical qualities that constitute the partial legacy of the monochrome, are what make writing about his work notoriously difficult. The monochrome can be described more or less fully in words. It was, after all, its proximity to language and inherent ability to serve as a foundation for critique that allowed it to pass from the avant-garde to Minimalism and into Conceptualism.

Alan Charlton's statement above – borne out by his practice for some 35 years – sets him apart from being a painter and establishes him as an artist instead. He first showed his grey monochromes at Konrad Fischer Galerie in 1972. As with others who have pursued the primal through paint across the last century, Charlton had already begun to paint monochromes two if not three years earlier as a student, and made certain decisions about what he would allow into his practice (and to an extent his life) and what would be kept out. Charlton wanted to make a painting out of the most ordinary and basic materials. He wanted a painting that was abstract, honest, direct, urban, pure, simple, silent and absolute. His first canvases were notched with serial permutations of square apertures that took their measure from the 4.5 cm module of the painting's edge. That already sounds far too finicky and complicated. The 4.5 cm module is given: this is the 'edge' produced by a standard piece of 2x1 inch timber and the stock material of the builder's trade. After working through other industrial colours – red, brown, black – Charlton settled on grey for its promise of stillness and ordinary status as material.

Positioned as a statement rather than an experiment, Charlton's grey monochromes are materialist in intention. They offer an eloquent and powerful adventure nonetheless. Their greyness – hanging still and silent like the imprint left on the city sky by its urban industrial zones – is their dominant feature. Charlton treats each element of a work equally: from concept, to the building of a painting, painting the painting, its packing (he builds their individual boxes with equal attention and care), to transporting and installing the works, and designing the catalogue. Wood, canvas, shape, size: all are equal in conceptual weight and treatment. This is not a feature, or fetish of a painterly craft. It's an expression of Charlton's work ethic and the conceptual base of his practice. All this is, most simply put, his job. And he treats it as such. Charlton has never managed to bring assistants into his studio and divide or rationalize his production. Workers are more likely to share their lunch and holidays than their tools; for Charlton, wood canvas, paint and cardboard are his tools. In speaking to Alan Charlton about his practice, I have the feeling that, for him it would be straightforwardly dishonest to do anything other or less. An ethic, when treated as such, takes on a political value and tone. Charlton's paintings are of the left. They are socialist. While I am reeling out what too many would deem unfashionable anachronisms, I might as well broach the subject of Modernism. Alan Charlton still believes in the promise of its unfinished project. I am still working out the relations of that fact to my belief his painting does not belong wholly to a set of prolonged end-game moves enacted via the monochrome, nor is it fully in line with a practice of painting in some feigned Year Zero. If it were clearly and identifiably either, then there would not be much to look at in 2006. I am convinced that there, in fact, is.

One might start with a plainly stated material object with sculptural overtones. This posits a painting that is not a self-contained vehicle to be looked at, but a work to be seen in relation and aspect to the space it exists in. As self-composed and stoic as they are, Charlton's paintings are a direct act against composition. To the degree that any composition exists – and there is a great deal in operation – it exists as composition as context and within the installation of works in space. Meaning then resides in the total

context, or between the placement of works within a gallery, room or space. For Charlton, making a painting is largely about activating the space that it resides in. A wall is the fundamental support for his painting but his paintings are not 'wall paintings'. They are, equally and to a similar degree, wall bound but not entirely bound by their wall. Alan Charlton would handle it more eloquently by simply stating that his paintings relate to each other but also to the space in which they are installed. Whether it is a square hole painting, slot painting, channel painting, equal part, single panel, detail, line, or panel painting – this is his nomenclature and developmental typology – the space inside a painting and out is as important as the painting itself.

His paintings in most, if not nearly all cases, are not specially made for a space. Still Charlton aims for each to feel as if they were in their place. Like so much of what he does, it is an approach grounded in honesty: that to the space a work exists in, honesty to the way a painting is made, and an honesty to the way a viewer encounters the work. My earliest and, I should admit, for too long, my only encounter with Alan Charlton's work was to hear it mentioned as the fodder of tutorial advice lent to bemused and befuddled students of painting. I am preparing myself now to deliver much the same soon; as a material example of a practice that might show one how to constructively and productively fend off exactly such advice and get on with some honest and independent work, thought and labour.

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