

text + work

James Barron + Eric Butcher

Hanging Garden

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Spaces; in, out, around (essay title)

The work in this show is an attempt at the selective articulation of the surfaces of aluminium structures through the use of paint and resin. It has been made through a process governed by specific rules. A thin transparent monochrome is spread across the surface of the aluminium and then stripped off, using a blade drawn across the surface. This procedure is then repeated, slowly building up an accumulation of residues.

The outcome is determined largely by the physical characteristics of the support; the imperfections of the metal surface, the burr of its edge; or shifts in the consistency of the paint/resin mix, or the build up along the edge of the blade as it strips the surface bare. Each tiny imperfection is amplified by the process of stripping, leaving a ridge of denser colour to register its presence; a 'register of failure' if you will. The finished piece is an accumulation of what I have learnt about that particular piece of metal through successive applications and subtractions.

In installation the surfaces project dramatically from the wall or floor, the transitions between surfaces being fundamental creative considerations, as important as how the painted surface has been achieved. The space around the painted surface is engaged, incorporating it into the work, creating a physical rather than pictorial presence. Through thin veils of translucent pigment the aluminium reflects light. Consequently the surface responds dynamically to changes in lighting conditions and the movement of the viewer, demanding active interaction.

Eric Butcher
2005

Spaces; in, out, around

And with your work the question of scale quickly surfaces. Large though it may be, monumental, muscular even and in the tradition of sculpture for a purpose, it has something also of the scale of jewellery with its painterliness and attention to detail. There is the detail of the support, rugged and necessary. There is the detail for the eye. Colour bands and tensions to draw in, seduce. This detail, the singular, is offset by the size and presence, the weight, of the pieces inhabiting the space, the room. Taut and flexing their muscle the pieces cling to, clamber over or cover like vine the walls. Some are as heavy as they look. Some appear heavier than in reality they are. And the painted surface flickers, mirrors and smiles enigmatically. We, the viewer, enter the space where fable and the forensic, the scientific, the fact collide and contrast.

text+work

The challenge of the radically physical remains. We are, as a species, determined to push the boundaries: onwards, outwards, up. This is our destiny, our necessity.

Sometimes we find consolation in the near.

And we talk. Or we make. We have a conversation so that we may hear ourselves more clearly.

This text is the result of just such a conversation. A long, slow conversation between two people leading very different, separate lives; a conversation between two practices, with long intervals of silence, absence. The world going on outside. It has been an interesting journey and has thrown up many possibilities.

Travelling

The journey, or journeys taking place at the same time, and over different times and in different ways across different lands, so that we can understand each other, so that we can find, in our individual experience, a common language.

A language we can inhabit, and share, that we can enter and leave as easily as one might change a suit, so that we can see from the other side of the field.

The journey, or journeys, taking place in real time also become metaphors for another kind of existence: in being simplified, they take on the quality of a fairy tale. When we look back on the past, we find the complexity of living has vanished.

There is no sense in asking, how is this journey to be made? We set off from different points and cross different regions, enter and leave different zones to arrive at separate destinations at different times of the day. If there is to be a common resolution, perhaps it should be found in the interpretation by a singer of a poet's song.

And with your series of small paintings a particular rhythm appears. Within themselves and towards the space around. A resonance, harmony, from one to the next and back and forward in not quite repetition [a chorus] reiterates something never quite achieved. This force of improvisation leads into a world whose pitch can be heard in work of this scale.

We travel in a desert. Certain words attract us and inspire; they seem to describe us intimately. Others seek to define us or define what is our reality.

Because we have the power of language and must fill the available space, we must be precise. Our poetry consists of the elegance and wit we bring to the table. We take space, we occupy; we define ourselves within space. Sometimes the form this takes may be two-dimensional, in the manner of a drawing.

My aunt once said: I have no desire to return to Spain. I knew it when travelling in an open car with Uncle Geoffrey from village to village, all the way from Perpignan to Marbella, in those days a tiny, sleepy fishing village, at most. It was just after the war. 1947, or 1949 I think.

And sometimes the form this takes is that of a reading. The kind of statement that makes you sit up and think.

(Eric) I'm extremely frightened of heights. Some years ago, when I lived in Germany, I agreed to go mountain climbing with some friends. I was struck at the time that I had no idea whatsoever how I would respond to the physical trauma of being high up on a mountainside. I might just get used to it and be okay, or I might get vertigo proper and faint or something, or I might just get ten metres up and freeze (and they'd have to call the fire brigade with a rather short ladder to come and prise my fingers off the rock face). Whatever the result, that is the sort of experience which provides a better understanding of oneself. But it's also an opportunity to create something out of that, to change, to develop something new out of the raw materials which nature has given us in our characters.

I think style in art is rather like style in life, a function of how one responds to something when fundamentally challenged. It's not something one can put on and take off like an overcoat. It's not something one can choose. When an impasse is reached, in art as in life, what does one do? How does one behave? How one goes about dealing with that challenge and the result is what constitutes style. That in turn becomes absorbed into one's established operating procedures and one's whole modus operandi evolves in this manner. It is a function of one's character rather than a superficial affectation.

The space where we meet

It is an odd sort of space; its oddness more apparent as one moves around, lingers there. Odd because there is no well-defined perimeter where it begins, ends and touches another space. This space is porous. I am told it was originally a tarpaulin warehouse, a working, functioning space. Today, I feel as if it is a place of transit: an open reception area from which an exhibition space has been claimed. The flow of people through the building has been channelled to one side, along the edge in what has become a corridor, a throughway. The passage of people is not only visible but also audible. Because the walls, massive freestanding pillars of wood, run the height of two floors, the movement is not only horizontal but also vertical. And because the corridor is in constant use the background is also foreground. Doors pushed open and swinging shut create a basic backbeat that falls with rhythmic insistence. This combination defines the space. A sense of emptiness is mirrored and compounded by the presence of sliding glass doors at one end of the gallery that open onto a small courtyard that itself does not lead anywhere in particular. How can such a space be occupied? When the edges are blurred, when standing there is like standing on a street corner.

Travelling across the land, he became aware of the way in which history, and human life, was stamped into – impressed upon – the landscape. The hills and the valleys, the woods and fields, farms and villages, and the towns and cities were so many layers of life, of thought, that had accumulated before him and as he sped through all this he reflected upon the accident of birth that had offered him the chance to see it all as spectator rather than actor.

How to render the space habitable so that it becomes a place to visit, so that others may enter it with desire, a feeling of well-being or joy, happiness even.

(Eric) It's more of a problem-solving attitude. How to make the surfaces function as objects within the space? How to lead the viewer through the space by setting up a series of formal relationships, 'encounters' which the viewer must negotiate? It's spatial composition, the same considerations apply as when thinking about

how to structure a painting: balance, contrast, the setting up of tensions, framing devices, leading the viewer's eye, and so on. The only difference is the inclusion of the third dimension in a more extreme or dramatic manner than is usual.

In the shadow of the Pyrenees, looking for just such a place it has very quickly become apparent that most old dwellings have been constructed within very specific limits, with well-defined purpose and particular materials, the latter reflecting the resources available locally, the former the position of the occupants. It also has become apparent that almost every space is adaptable and can be transformed. And why, when the old no longer fits or can be reinvented, let's throw up something new, here, in the midst of the old where it belongs.

A space: where it is possible to enter, stay for some time, and go without having to leave any kind of impression. Where the thought that it is necessary to leave an impression does not occur.

There is no dawn chorus here now, simply a wall of sound from first light until past dusk.

A dense song that shifts key, melodies criss-crossing, beats interrupting and unfolding like a jazz big band, until, as the light fades, the frogs start up in their own world, and the dizzy flight of the swallows in and out of the house is replaced by the silent swerving, looping paths of the bats.

The dwelling place asks for some kind of [continual] attention to detail – commitment. It is a living, breathing container and when we enter we may ask ourselves: Can we draw breath here and be relaxed, without emotion? Can we find a part of ourselves, or express something of our nature that we did not know existed?

(Eric) One of my central preoccupations, particularly in the larger scale more spatially intrusive pieces, is to make clear the nature and dynamic of an architectural space, clarifying, elucidating, but at the same time modifying the space. A painted surface, for example, which passes through a wall, from one room into the next, unites the spaces in the mind of the viewer, allowing them to see beyond what is

present. It also focuses one's attention on the relationship between surface, object and spatial environment.

And if a wall is falling down, how do we compensate? I am thinking here about borders, boundaries, edges of particular spaces – I could also be thinking of elements filling or occupying space. About making work.

(Eric) I came to realise that the subject matter in my earlier work was merely an excuse. At the time I lived by the sea and used to go for long walks along the beach, rekindling a childhood fascination with the ways in which nature weathers and erodes objects. Not just objects, but processes. The way sand and shingle, for example, are endlessly shifted and reconfigured by the elements, successive layers are built up and deposits left and so on. You know the sort of thing - the processes of nature.

I began to look at them more closely. Eventually these processes started to affect the way I behaved in the studio, slowly creeping into how I manipulated the paint. Indeed to such an extent that they began to take the form of an end in themselves rather than a means to an end. I was attempting not to illustrate their effects but emulate the actual processes, to act like nature.

Let's look at this in terms of practice

The empty space

Here we are considering the potential. We begin to conceive of the work to be made or consider the work in progress, now work that will be shaped by space, and that will also inhabit that space.

The studio

Here things happen, materials and objects are laid out neatly, precisely. The studio is not large, nor is it small, its size increased by the orderliness of the contents. A former pottery at the end of the garden. Light fills the room from skylights that extend across the ceiling. In one corner, near the entrance, scrapers, tools, brushes and paints and pigments are aligned in order by size or colour. If it is difficult to move about the floor because so many works in progress lie or are propped at various stages of completion, the visitor is quickly disabused of any sense of chaos because there is space enough to address each work in turn. Here work is initiated, drawings laying down the outline and structure; and here the work is developed through a series of increasingly delicate acts that emphasise the value of repetition with their precision and clarity; acts that make concrete the voice that has all the while been maturing. Until all that is needed is the context.

The exhibition

Here there is the transition from the inner to the outer; the mass to the articulate. With the installation of the work in a space where the viewer [the other] is invited, the practice enters the world. And that democratically: the work plays with the space, existing alongside the viewer. A dialogue is created.

(Eric) Ritual plays an important role in my approach. Part of that is merely about the daily practice of painting, (or anything else for that matter). The need to impose order on an otherwise chaotic activity. There is also the idea of habituation as a means of attainment, i.e. whereby a facility is achieved through an action becoming instinctive, unconscious. (I'm afraid I'm with Hume in considering the human intellect to be a weak and unreliable faculty when compared with the power of the instincts.) Hence there is an element

of performance in the elaboration of a surface. It's a record, of successive interactions - an almost identical path trodden on countless revisitings.

If anything ritual is a private affair, and if the aim, partly, is attainment, in the practice - the habituation - then there is also the recognition (and sense of relief) that nothing will ever be the same again and that we are neither looking forward to an ideal, nor back to a perfect state but living in the here and now.

When the mountains are present they are across the road, clear, physically part of our world. When they are absent, as today, it is as if they were never there. They are unimaginable. And when they are present, snow-capped or not, they are not simply a backdrop even, they climb in through the window and sit down with us.

Postscript

(Eric) Regarding colour: could you fill that out a bit? I'm not exactly sure what you are asking me. I think it's an important area, which we haven't covered though, so let's pursue it.

(James) Colour, yes, perhaps we can look at Judd, since he is somebody who interests us both. At one point he talks about colour and the history of art – colour as the knowledge of that history. I am thinking now of something he wrote: "The last real picture of real objects in a real world was painted by Courbet. After that no one was sure about the real world, so that when it came to keeping a color or an un-descriptive shape at the cost of accurate representation, the latter lost."¹

I am reminded of an incident when visiting the Musée D'Orsay not so long ago. There was a temporary exhibition and the queues were stretching back and around the entrance hall where hung several huge paintings by Courbet, and also L'Origine du monde, but no one was paying them any attention. In fact, all those in line could have stepped from one of Courbet's huge canvases, so self-absorbed were they, waiting.

(Eric) Colour and the history of art, yes. It is, of course, possible for art to mediate one's perception of colour in life (life imitating art), or at least the perception of reality being mediated by art. This isn't confined to colour. Some works of art are so specific that they relate only to themselves and one subsequently experiences an emotional state mediated by the work of art – an inversion of the normal causal relationship.

But to return to Judd, whose use of colour was remarkable. Particularly the work he did in the mid 60s/early 70s. It was most effective, for me, when he used colour as a transparent lacquer. That way he was able to exploit the surface

structure of the materials he was using – aluminium, anodised or brushed, galvanised or stainless steel – offsetting them in some cases against their inherent colours.

Similarly, colour, for me, is driven by material considerations. It's about facilitating and modifying the light reflected off the aluminium surface of my structure. In principle it's like a watercolour technique – I use pure, intense pigments and employ the reflective quality of the support to create the 'light' in the painting.

I have always used a restricted palette and added or subtracted colours from that palette gradually and tentatively. In this way the colours I use have slowly evolved over a long period of time. Michael Porter once said he thought my work proceeded in careful, incremental steps, like an argument. I like that analogy.

(James) Yes, a restricted palette is compelling in that it helps to focus the mind and consolidate ones knowledge. Colour enables us to remember. And in a world of forgetting how one uses colour matters.

James Barron
Artist + Writer

James Barron was born in Guildford in 1950. He has lived in London, Milan and Norwich – where he studied painting – and London again. He now lives in France.

Over the years his practice has developed from the idea of painting as object. He has worked with the analogy of music and its rhythms as a metaphor for time and distance. More recently, he has focused primarily on colour and its particular properties, especially in terms of frequencies and qualities of experience.

In the past, his work has been selected for the Oriol Mostyn Open, Kettle's Yard Open and the Rheinland-Pfalz Open in Germany. It also has been exhibited in Norwich and London on several occasions.

Writing projects include Gaps (catalogue essay 2000), 'SubwaySpecial - A Democratic Platform' (editorial work and catalogue essays 2001) and an ongoing series of small-scale publications presenting the work of other artists and writers.

Eric Butcher

Artist + Lecturer in Fine Art, the Arts Institute at Bournemouth

Eric Butcher was born in Singapore in 1970. He studied Philosophy at Cambridge University 1990-1994 and an MA in Fine Art at Wimbledon School of Art 2000-2001. He currently lives and works in Oxfordshire and London.

He has exhibited extensively in the UK and internationally, and is currently represented in London by Vertigo. Recent shows include Carbon Candy, Vertigo, 2004, a solo show at the Bologna Art Fair, 2005, and a two-person show at the Frankfurt Art Fair, 2005. He also co-curated Definite Article at Vertigo, 2005, showing alongside Roger Ackling, Marc Vaux and Cathy Wade, which travels to Toomey-Tourell gallery, San Francisco, in March 2006.

Recent commissions include major installations for the Open University in Milton Keynes, Morley Fund Management, London and Discovery Dock East, Docklands, London.



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9.00am – 8.00pm	Monday – Thursday (Term Time)
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