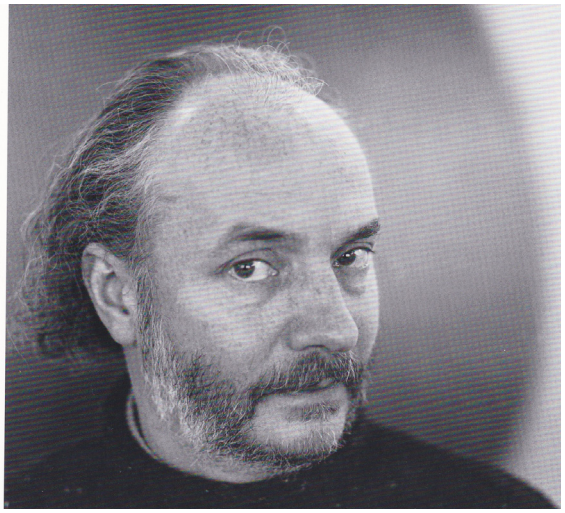

TREVOR SUTTON AND HIS PAINTINGS
Hugh Stoddart

Not so long ago, Trevor Sutton found a cache of some of his earliest work, art school stuff. The pieces he's still rather fond of were done on graph paper - long lines of strong colour 'filling in' the lines of squares to form elongated layers and rhythms of colour; they made ribbons. But the piece which stays in my mind came from a preoccupation he had at the time with sweets. It's a small drawing of an ice lolly, a 'split' (fruit flavoured on the outside, ice cream inside): I felt I was looking at a typical subject of Pop Art, a bit of mass consumption, fed through an utterly inappropriate sensibility. This was an Ur-Lolly! The grain of the wooden stick was celebrated with waving grain patterns; the shiny ice transposed to a carefully built-up matt surface.

Here is a friend rather than a kindred spirit. With a sigh of relief, I approach his work - yes, and his way of working - with the admiration of someone whose nesting instinct encompasses his desktop, so it's messy. Trevor's studio isn't like that. It's neat, it's ordered, it's 'fertig' - that useful German word which means 'being finished' but with the added implication of 'being ready to start something else'. The notion that creativity comes out of chaos is dearly held in our culture. In the cultures to which Trevor is drawn (his first visit to Japan he still recounts with animation, he clearly experienced both shock and revelation in large measure) the opposite pertains. And like a locomotive with certain carriages attached, our notion of creative chaos pulls behind it the idea of 'the artist in a hurry' and the reverence for youth. That an artist 'did her best work before she was thirty' is the kind of phrase we hear a little too often; and the Christ myth (the great artist dying young) pops up quite often too, particularly in pop.

Such clamours seem to stay well outside the big windows of Trevor's studio. He's not in a hurry. Competitiveness he finds distasteful. Fiftieth birthdays aren't a problem. He will sometimes return to a painting after a considerable length of time (even years) and work on it again. Much of the paint might be removed and/or covered over - but the traces remain, the fact of previous work is still there. Certain other cliches also run off his back: firstly, that a painting's significance is related to its size (the bigger the better): for some time he made really quite small pieces and even now they're no larger than three feet across (well, an inch larger, but I'll return to that). Another daft notion is that the 'proper' material for a painter to work on is canvas: Sutton stopped using that some years ago. 'I don't, he says, 'like the weave'. Instead, he paints on narrow blocks. By this I mean his chosen surface is one side of a construction reminiscent of a flush-finish door: a sandwich thick enough to achieve a 'floating' of the painting away from the wall, but not so thick as to make the sides a visual issue. He wants the paintings to remain 'anchored'. The sides are painted, perhaps a very pale grey or perhaps another colour: not white but always a background. This in a very quiet way, is the drama of his work.

Trevor Sutton makes paintings for a viewer who is prepared to give time and concentration, but his work commands attention at the outset not by hurling an image at you but because it is so strikingly speaking a language at variance with the surroundings. It sets up a stall of opposition to the visual and aural clutter with which we live. His work quietly beckons you over: here come and look at this ... it's someone doing the three-card trick. I'm referring only to the visual puzzles with which he plays in his work. He's had recourse to a ruler on occasions, so vehement has someone been that two identical distances within a painting are not the same: most notably this illusion occurs when a semicircle passes through the middle of a square and we swear it doesn't. He is aware of, and enjoys, these ambiguities in his work - one might usefully evoke here that old one of 'Is it two faces or is it a candlestick'. Similarly, there are many paintings which measure 37 inches across. Though that's partly a private slightly playful abjuring of the obvious, he thinks it possible people 'see' that discrepancy, i.e. our ability to measure is greater than we consciously realise. An analogy with music is useful: we 'hear' tiny shifts in pitch even if we lack the measuring and describing tools available to someone who reads music.

In previous work Trevor has wanted a solid and opaque surface to his painting - using very small brushes to achieve it - but this, as he put it, began 'to bore him' and he felt that what was going on underneath was more interesting. The archaeology made its claim: the paintings are now, therefore, a record of their making. Though he does occasionally rub down and begin again, more often he applies a fresh layer of paint, and he uses glazes as well to build towards the colour which finally satisfies him. Either way, though, all these processes form part of the history which remains to be read in the finished work. One is reminded of multiple exposure: several images are retained, superimposed on the one photographic plate. This results in a satisfying rich and sensuous surface to the painting: good enough to eat!

Trevor works on the horizontal, then hooks the work on the wall to consider the result. He admits

to the element of ritual in the way he works: there are self-imposed rules in operation though that's not to imply some kind of weirdly obsessive activity ... In achieving the complex variations of colour across the surface of the painting, there is no mixing when wet, no working at a particular area in isolation. This is crucial. These paintings are, as Trevor puts it, 'not pictorial'. Instead, he always repaints the whole surface and redraws the lines which form boundaries between one area of colour and another. And there is a fruitful paradox here: the adherence to prescribed processes allows the unknown (the unpredictable) to enter. These paintings are not pre-planned except in their barest essentials: they're empirical, organic.

There is simple geometry. The same basic ratios recur, particularly the divisions of three and two. The sizing reflects this: 15 inches across, then up one half (though deliberately it's not exact) to 22 inches, increase by two thirds to 37 inches ... We see it in the divisions within the paintings too: the point of intersection between square and circle is a quarter or a third along the line - and so on. And recently he has worked often with a simple duality: the circle and the square, the divided circle, the curve and the straight, the dark and the pale. Why should he work with these building blocks, one wonders. Well, where should one turn for an answer? A therapist? A priest? For Trevor it's about simplicity and focus: the creatively reductive. He draws a lot of inspiration from music, and the significance and satisfactions to be found in these choices he makes (and, for that matter, in the paintings which result) - as so often with our response to music - cannot be neatly nailed down in words.

Here is a painter who admits to an abiding interest in decorative art and draws inspiration from it. Similarly, he is happy to see connections with ceramics, with pots being at least one way people might read his work. In other words, referring again to the visual puzzles of his work, he is aware that we can see a curve as implying a 'hollow' and the edge of a container of some sort. I recall him expressing fondness for the way people take his paintings into their lives, hanging them within a domestic environment. He doesn't shrink from that, he doesn't disdain it; in cultural terms, he seems to reject any hierarchical division between art and craft; relevant here, I think, is his expressed wish to demystify wherever possible the process of making paintings. And though he is committed to abstraction, he speaks about the sources for his work, and reveals them in titles - be they places (as in the *Windmill Lane* series), people (*Andrea*), or music (*Pagin' the Devil* is a jazz composition by Lester Young). And though these sources cannot of course be accessed just by a glance at the work, he measures the success of that work by the degree to which they have the 'atmosphere' he wants them to have. It's as if those sources must be transposed into a kind of satisfying visual weight. This is fundamental - essentially, this is what drives his impulse to make art. If eyes were hands, we would take these paintings in our hands and understand that source, a kind of Braille against our skin.

The new work can be characterised as being more about the 'outside' than has been the case in the past - meaning, particularly, landscape. The work in his solo show of 1993 (Smith Jariwala Gallery) was more concerned with the inside, meaning architecture. We see, in paintings from that time, sharply delineated shapes set within the square or the circular 'ground'. The shift to the outside is expressed strikingly by shapes which have escaped. A recurring visual theme now is the eclipse - one shape clipped by another (*Wheal Dream*, for example, or *Edinburgh*). This change has, perhaps unconsciously, informed the shift towards areas of blurring in the work (particularly around lines between different areas of colour). There is a sense of things that are less fixed (ghosts of lines visible, layering of paints and glazes), more a feeling that the painting is grappling with things which are constantly in flux. These circles are in orbit… The duality in many of the paintings has reverberations of 'the horizon'. Perhaps the term 'meridian' is more useful.

Trevor Sutton is prepared to take on the notion that all his work is in some way a selfportrait, though obviously that's not an easy thing to feel, or quite follow; it's utterly not overt! Perhaps more revealingly, he has said that he wants his art to stand in the same relationship to the world as himself. That seems to me to be a good aspiration.

"Submerged beneath the public styles, schools, and theories of art, independent of isms and unamenable to criticism, is the private mind of the artist. This is the realm of fantasy and desire, of dream and obsession, of secret need and stated programme, of Idea and idée fixe. It is the part of art that gives resonance to structure and meaning to the marks and shapes the artist makes: it is the part that is 'impure'. In the vast field of broken idols, worn out legends and obscure signposts, it erects its own myth." Sidney Geist.
From a catalogue essay, New York 1961