



GEORGE BLACKLOCK Fictional Spaces

In the world of screenwriting, people are heard to mutter 'Less is more.' Or 'If in doubt, leave it out.' This refers to the need to 'show not tell' - to create space in the script for the visual element. The problem with many Hollywood films is they leave everything out - apart from the hook that makes us want to know what happens next. Everything, in other words, except "the story."

I saw a film called *Gerry* recently¹. Some have said this is a boring disaster of a movie, but others adore it. It's about two young men who get lost in a desert. And that's about it. Sitting watching a preview the other day, and able to surrender to its immensely long camera shots, to its equally long silences ... I felt something important happening. Despite the fact that, in the conventional sense, nothing is happening. Your eyes roam ceaselessly over the murderously beautiful landscape, you dwell on minuscule details and tiny changes - your mind is freed. You escape the tyranny of 'story' but you find and remain in narrative, like a warm current in a colder sea. Your emotions are not being manipulated, they are being engaged. Above all, you are not being told what to think. The choice of music was significantly non-directive too: it's by Arvo Pärt - dedicated to God, a music of contemplation.

I refer in my own teaching to a preference for the term 'narrative' over that of 'story' in order to encompass a wider range of possibilities as to how to engage a viewer. As an artist George Blacklock of course has very different concerns to mine, but the term 'narrative' is an important one to him too. In fact, it takes us to the heart of his practice.

He remains committed to 'abstraction' and rejects the notion that it is some kind of cul-de-sac or, even more damning, that it is in some sense passé. Referring to Richard Diebenkorn, he sees the final abstract work of that artist as the beginning of something not the end of something and foresees 'a next step.' That is looking forward. Looking back, Blacklock acknowledges his own formalist

training at art school in the 1970's, which is really another way of saying that his earliest predilections remain the foundations on which his practice has been built. Though remaining true to that chosen route, he asserts his conviction that an abstract painting (that is, one that does not depict the world outside it) need not - indeed should not - remain only the sum of its technicalities. It must aspire to go beyond its own formal properties. He sets store by aspiration, citing with approval Umberto Eco, who has written (in an extended critique of popular TV, so taking us back to my opening analogy) of 'the tension between what is and what should be.'²

If we look at the paintings in this show, all completed during the last two years, we see the same essential duality occurring in all of them: there are two flowing curvilinear shapes, and these form the feature which strikes one most forcibly when viewing each painting. Each time it is the same but yet it is different! The artist uses that apparent repetition as an essential strategy. As he puts it, "it creates a shift in another direction. It becomes a gateway to another space, it opens us up to thinking about how the painting feels." We think about the feeling we derive from one painting as opposed to what we derive from another ... This is the fictional space to which Blacklock refers in the overall title to the exhibition. And it was this idea of his which set me thinking about that film: with extended shots of two men walking, on and on, unchanging - this too becomes a gateway, we enter a subjective garden of reflection.

In a recent conversation with George, I commented on *Urban Narrative - Echo 2*, (2001) a painting I particularly like. I used the word 'lyrical' - then felt the need to apologise! We can easily fall prey to an inhibition about art like his: we feel it must be thought of as 'rigorous' and a word like lyrical is inappropriate. Blacklock didn't find it so. Nor does he reject the notion of beauty as amongst the aims he sets himself for his work. On the other hand, it's true he doesn't want it to come too easily... He refers to 'that Mediterranean colour sense' epitomised by Matisse and built around a certain correctness in colour as something he tries to be wary of; as against that, he puts his own preference for a use of colour which is less comfortable, more "muddled, and messed up." His choice of the word 'urban' among the titles he gives to his work is a reference to this approach.

Blacklock is big on doubt. He describes himself as 'suspicious of certainty.' Doubt is an essential element he brings into the studio where, as he puts it, 'the process of painting is my thinking.' That an idea can precede the act of making is foreign to him, as is the notion of work being fabricated by other people on the basis of an artist's instruction, be it a drawing, maquette or whatever. His art is not 'a demonstration of anything' but the product of time spent working through a whole sequence of doubt. You can see it in the paintings: the shifts and changes, the accumulations and removals. And linking to the doubt is his embrace of 'compromise.' A bogey word in current fashion, he rejects that negative connotation. When he is working on a canvas, he sees each action as compromised by the next - purity is impossible, it's a dead end, it must be compromised through the

reality of experience. Thus by the sequencing of actions, one compromising the last but bringing at the same time something new, there is a process which leads the artist to a place he couldn't have predicted.

An important source of Blacklock's work has been the iconography of religious painting, particularly such themes as The Annunciation - the visit to Mary from the angel Gabriel to tell her she is to bear the Son of God. It's important not to fasten on to such sources as the subject matter of the work, which is there to be enjoyed within the language of its making - colour, texture, shape. On the other hand, those sources are very much in the artist's mind and such key shapes - the two figures, held in a web of tension - have been fruitful in supplying a structure to which Blacklock has returned over and over. In talking about his work, he has used music as an analogy : specifically, he's referred to twelve bar blues as a structure which restricts and through that very restriction creates the pressure for invention, for development.³

Some of the paintings are titled '*Tior*.' This is T.I.O.R, and stands for The Intractability of Relationships. This might seem a dour kind of phrase but it refers primarily to the relationship the artist has with the work and that's a friendly kind of tussle! As with the religious references, it doesn't betoken the subject matter of the work in any simplistic sense, and certainly should not be interpreted as extending only to the current narrow definition of 'relationship' to mean something going on between lovers. I would venture that it refers as well to the complex visual relationship those curvilinear shapes have to each other. As we move from painting to painting, we can see how they confront each other here, are separated there, whereas in another they connect, and yet again they quite flow together.

There seems to be a progression here. The artist himself says that his drawing tends to be a couple of years ahead of his painting, and we can see in the aquatint, *Where Will and Power are One*, 2001, that the two iconic shapes have become linked, a new development. Blacklock characterises drawing as an activity where speed allows innovation, and since errors are more lightly disposed of, it encourages risk. For a long time, he couldn't make this development work in painting. Yet we can see in the paintings how the vertical line between the figures starts to go. This development emerges from a change of method. Or perhaps it requires that change - it is in the nature of Blacklock's way of working that one may never be sure which

precedes what. The characteristic pulling of a card 'blade' across the surface is no longer coming from that line out to the right and out to the left but involves instead a movement right across the picture plane. The linking tendrils begin to be more visible and powerful until - particularly in *Tior VII* - the tendrils have gained weight, balancing the once-separated shapes to achieve a single fusing structure. In *Narrative* - for R.S. the vertical has replicated itself across the painting in a whole rhythm of lines, with the pulled horizontal forming a stave across them.

'Tendril' is the artist's word rather than mine and it's notable the extent to which he uses anthropomorphic terminology in talking about the work - in fact, in thinking about the work. It is a kind of subjective figuration, a private language; these ways of thinking may not be readable in the finished painting, they are nonetheless a part of its genesis. With George Blacklock's paintings, there is a dynamic going on within them, and it's the same as that established between the painting and the viewer. It is one of challenge. It is a pushing and pulling, a teasing and confronting. This is a source of energy, and of feeling - which is then released from the work like smoke from a censer.

Hugh Stoddart

1 Written by Casey Affleck and Matt Damon, and directed by Gus Van Sant. The film's title comes from an American slang term meaning, to put it politely, 'to mess things up.'

2 Umberto Eco. 'Misreadings', McClelland & Stewart/Tundra Books, 1993

3 Catalogue for Meridiano de Greenwich, 2002