

The new paintings of Peter Joseph

'Of necessity the most exalted project [and also the] most difficult to conceive with precision, to undertake, and above all constantly to pursue in the arts [...] is to *submit the production of a work to the conscious will* without this strict condition, deliberately adopted, being allowed to harm the essential difficulties, the charms and the grace, which must be effectively carried by any work of art that aims to lead men's minds to the delights of the mind.'

Paul Valéry ('Mallarmé')

For those familiar with Peter Joseph's previous work this exhibition will be regarded as something of a special event, compounded by a remarkable surprise. For after more than thirty years devoted to the making of paintings whose format has become signature, and which has seemed capable of infinite variation of proportion and colour, and unvarying constancy of spirit, the artist has arrived at two quite distinctly new modes of image. Though this is the first time these new works have been exhibited in this country, the change has not been sudden: nothing happens *suddenly* in the art of Peter Joseph. In parallel with the new works over the last two years, he has in fact continued to make paintings in the familiar formal style, in which two colour rectangles, one within the other, one enclosing the other, neither dominant, subtly interact. The change is, however, momentous: it is not simply one of format, but, in certain aspects, of manner, and, in crucial aspects, of mood and feeling.

The new formal structures are, if anything, even simpler than that of the 'border and centre' series: in the one case there is a central horizontal division in which one colour is disposed above (or below) another; in the other, the central division between the two areas of colour is vertical. Inevitably, these formal divisions bring to mind the fundamental (and classical) distinction between the definitive horizontality of landscape, in which the limits of the visible world are defined at the line where land or sea meet sky, and the insistent verticality of the standing human figure, defined inescapably against the horizontal earth. As in the earlier work, in both of these new formats (in professional parlance significantly termed 'landscape' or 'portrait') the economy of a simple two-colour limitation is observed, though the dynamic of colour interaction is necessarily different, as is the nature of the disposition of the paint on the primed surface, which also plays a crucial part in the difference.

In the 'border and centre series' the alignment of inner and outer rectangle is always perfectly symmetrical, whether the format of either is horizontal or vertical. This centred enclosure with its symmetrical surround creates an impression of utter stillness, an image of surface space whose colour *areas* (or shapes) are in a constant stasis of proportionate relation, whatever may be the optical and affective dynamic of their *colour* relation. 'Colour' wrote Matisse, 'exists in itself, has its own beauty.' And realising that he had to 'get away from imitation, even of light' he declared, '[it] is enough to invent signs. When you have a real feeling for nature, you can create signs which are equivalents to both the artist and the spectator.'

The perfect order and precision of the design (*disegno*), or the architectonics, of these pictures, and the subtle perceptual oscillation of tone-colour (*colore*) between the two shapes they invariably comprise, may be said to correspond respectively to the tangible and the intangible, to the object in the world and to the atmosphere and light within which it exists. The consciously determined and principled symmetrical proportion that governed classical architecture gives these paintings their specific objectivity of presence,

their quality of *eurythmy* - the 'beauty and fitness in the adjustments of the components' - described as a fundamental principle in architecture by Vitruvius. This structural arrangement of elements also 'exists in itself, has its own beauty'; it is of a kind that 'leads men's minds to the delights of the mind'. And it is also true that the colour in these paintings - always of mixed pigments - is, in itself, of course, materially objective. But its *effects*, experienced subjectively, are a function of light, immaterial, indeterminate and constantly variable. In each painting, then, shape and colour fuse into a *sign*: an equivalent for both artist and spectator of a condition of being in the world. It is the sign which engenders the complex of thought and feeling that constitutes response.

The new paintings have no such enclosed and ordered formality of structure and colour. The colour areas may be open at their boundaries, giving way to uneven areas of untouched primed canvas at both the canvas edges and their central line of contiguity, where there is frequently a ragged and imperfect meeting, leaving what resembles in the vertical paintings a crack of light between colour masses, or, in the horizontal works, a thin and irregular broken line of light on the horizon. Even where one of the colour areas appears to terminate centrally in a straight line of division, closer inspection will reveal it as imperfect, or broken at some point, usually close to the canvas edge, and the other colour will, in any case, invariably fail to meet it in even approximate exactitude. As well as these aspects of imperfection, disorder and imprecision at margin and centre there are irregular and apparently arbitrary patches of untouched primed canvas within the colour areas.

The imposed order of classical architecture, with its enclosed serenities of arrangement and its existence in the natural world of light (in Wölfflin's words, 'it must be seen') is the structural and thematic ghost that hovers behind the 'border and centre' works. (They are most certainly *not* informed by the mental aridity, the static abstract purity, of planar geometry.) By contrast, the new paintings acknowledge, with a more direct freedom and immediacy of reference, the dynamic kinesis, the movement and change, of the natural world as given. In the 'horizon' paintings it is sky, land and sea, and the division between them that are inescapably invoked; in the 'vertical' paintings the upright symmetry of the human body is the informing principle, evoking the kind of natural physical empathy we feel when confronted by figurative sculpture. In the former, air and space are the elements, as they might be in the paintings of Boudin or Jongkind that Joseph invokes as particular inspirations. In the latter we are aware of objective solidity in circumambient space, as we are when we look at the sculpture of his greatly admired Maillol, its grace and power governed by classical formality.

These effects - as of the natural phenomena of landscape and figure - are by no means simply a function of the symmetrical structures of these paintings, however powerful a determinant of response those predominant formal aspects must inevitably be. The work is still governed by a resolute economy of colour, but a charged contrast has replaced the subtleties of oscillation that characterised the one-within-the-other relation of the two colours in the earlier paintings. The intuitive procedures by which the colours of each painting are determined remain the same, and their matching and meeting in the paintings is prefigured in the same way as ever, by preparatory painted swatches brought together in experimental preparatory 'drawings'.

Along with colour, brushwork and the play of paint on the primed surface play a crucial part in the creating of the effect of natural light and movement: here it is lightly brushed, there spread in atmospheric washes of varying density, here deployed by the turn and

pressure of the wrist with feathery delicacy, there by the sweep of the arm in a bold outline of strong hue; these effects are as various and unpredictable to the eye as the endless variegations of light and shadow that animate land, sea, cloud and sky, or of dark silhouette that give substance to a body seen against light. The irregular patches of untouched primed canvas also act as reminders of natural phenomena - a white wave crest, a fragment of cloud, light on water, marine and atmospheric disturbance. These associations - of the light, space, objects and weathers of the experienced world - are involuntary; yet, paradoxically, even as arbitrary elements of facture please the mind with reminders of natural things, so do they act insistently upon the eye to bring it back to the painting as object, the painting as painting.

The likeness of things in the paintings to things seen and felt is a consequence of complex perception; it is brought into being by visual convention as well as by a temporary construction of the eye. But these paintings, as I have just suggested, immediately escape from the trap of mimesis as the eye registers their improvised abstract informality. For these are works, paradoxically, at once determined and free, whose every nuance of colour, plane and edge is unpredictable, yet which are made with great deliberation to correspond closely to the unpremeditated 'drawing' that is their model. Their cloudy shimmerings and sharp definitions of outline, their interplay of contrasting colour, lighter and darker, their flashes of light, are by no means merely the imitation of automatic or accidental aspects of the maquette; they are, rather, products of 'the conscious will' of the artist, seeking to realise in paint an experience analogous to that of our visual experience of the world, and to make material colour on the canvas surface as intangible as the natural light we inhabit.

It would indeed limit the complex and subtle pleasures these paintings offer to the eye and the mind, to feeling and spirit, to read them in any simple way as approximate pictures of the world (land, sea and sky) or as analogies to the body (vertical, symmetrical). As ever, it is the ambition of Peter Joseph's art to discover the image that will release inner thought, inner energies of feeling, those of which we are certainly aware but which to attempt to articulate would be to discover their essential inaccessibility to speech: 'Whereof one cannot speak thereof one must be silent.' That we find in them intimations of the phenomenal serves to intensify their essential objectivity: '... it has to be recognised that that it is an illusion and yet it is solid fact. It's not landscape, it's a painting... I'm painting a dream, a memory, a remembrance, a possibility.' A painting is a painting.

Paul Valéry wrote with a sharply refined realism of these things (I am adapting freely from his essay 'Poetry and Abstract Thought'): 'A [painting] is really a kind of machine for producing the poetic state of mind by means of [forms and colours]. The effect of this machine is uncertain, for there is nothing certain about action on other minds.' Writing of Degas, and his frustrated ambition to express ideas in poetry, Valéry remarks, 'these secret phrases which he called ideas, all these intentions and perceptions of the mind, do not make verses.' To adapt again: 'There is something else, then, a modification, or a transformation, sudden or not, spontaneous or not, laborious or not, which must necessarily intervene between the thought that produces ideas - the activity and multiplicity of inner question and solutions - and, on the other hand, the [visual] discourse that is [painting] which is so curiously ordered, which answers no need *unless it be the need it must itself create*, which never speaks but of absent things or of things profoundly and secretly felt...'

What Valéry called 'the delights of the mind' are of course a component of what we might properly term intelligent feeling, which encompasses them within the ambit of value as truly defined. As Peter Joseph himself has expressed it: 'A painting must generate feeling otherwise it is dead. But there are innumerable movements of the spirit that emerge and disappear. The aspiration is to find that moment when feeling is not just emotional expression, but is transformed into value.' These delights of the mind may be philosophical, may be imaginative or poetic, may be those of recognition, memory or of remembrance: whatever, and whenever, they are conditions of the complex spirit, definitive of an examined life, a life worth living.

Mel Gooding January 2007