

IMAGES AND DIMENSIONS OF TIME

from *Mark Harrington EAST WEST*

Wilhelm Christoph Warning

Mark Harrington's work challenges you to enter into the phenomenon of time and space. His paintings resemble a time-machine, encapsulating their own generic progress, preserving it for when the viewer sees the final work. The artist, however, erases handwriting, brushstroke, gesture – all traces of the process, which could recall its creation in time.

At first glance he reveals us nothing about the path he took to create the final image. Mark Harrington irritates his viewer. He creates the basic structure of his painting mechanically-technically. Taking saw-blades and peg-like tools – randomly found, specially selected or even fashioned by himself – he draws over and marks the soft surface, allowing a framework of lines to emerge as a base. This act has its origins in a not exactly definable, genre mix. On the one hand, it has to do with drawing, so it belongs to the genre of drawing. But on the other hand, it has a lot to do with sculpture. The painter, who once studied sculpture, works here with the dialectics of high and low, penetration and accentuation, positive and negative, letting a structural relief emerge. A line-scape on to which he coats colour-layers – like a painter – and coats again and again with his spatula. The surface becomes flat and smooth. This also an imperceptible progress.

He says that he could imagine using other mechanical methods in his work. It is also not immediately apparent where he uses a brush. There are no typical painterly gestures to be found. Manual traces of individuality – which we have linked with the process of painting for thousands of years – are extinguished. Traces of the mode or origin are not to be seen. Behind all this is not only a de-individualization – a point tackled again and again in the history of Modern Art – but a “de-timing”, a timelessness. However, the artist does show the past and so creates a contradiction: working entirely with dialectics, he uses traces of the paintings' origins almost imperceptibly in order to compose inner-pictorial structures, find rhythms, develop dynamics. Lines. And very fine wispy lines that head off in their own direction. Splashes, daubs, smudges – which he allows to happen and incorporates into the creative process – crusts, crevices, deviations from the linear structure. The lines feature uncalculated, unintended “random” deviations. Despite “encapsulated time” Mark Harrington does open up his compositions, giving us a life-line to the past and thus to time itself. However, the viewer is still susceptible to a misconception of the chronological order, the sequence of each act. For a presumed last coat of paint could actually have been applied first. And vice versa. Anyhow, for Mark Harrington, the starting point is always deliberation. He always starts from the format of the canvas. Its proportion, the question of its form – whether rectangular or square – which special height or width – dictate later the dimension and composition of the painting and roughly the number and density of the applied lines. Here also the artist is treading the line between the worlds of painting and sculpture. The scraping and coating of colour being the equivalent of positioning sculpture in a spatial context. This he perceives with a birds-eye view from above – an empty field waiting to be composed and arranged. An act borne on the wings of time, Henri Bergson the philosopher pointed out, is “the fourth dimension of space”.

Mark Harrington takes the theme of time still further. In a discussion in 2002 he stated that a painting is a materially composed entity which includes time in the process. And

“Additionally the horizontally-linear, furrowed structure, inherent in the paintings, conjures the impression that things are happening in a time-given pattern”. The horizontal linear moment, characteristic for Mark Harrington’s work, distantly reminds us of notes in a music score, of lines with faded or blotched letters. Petra Gilroy-Hirtz called it a “canonical composition of the horizontal line”.

In recent years, this structure has developed into a different more decided impression of time, and, as it follows, space. The horizontal line dominates the painting as before. But Harrington has broken it up, interrupted it. Because of this, the paintings now swing to a different rhythm. It is as if they were filled with tiny pauses for breath, making the space and structure more lively and animated. A certain lightness and an impression of increased fragility have set in.

The lines which beforehand had run across the whole painting now start and stop at various intervals. They create a horizontal span of tension, settling, at closer inspection, on an exactly defined point, only to start again. In this way the horizontal structure is suffused with its own rhythm, varying with each line, with differing lengths and intervals. Moreover, the way the lines are placed one above the other, makes for an interesting simultaneousness of the unevenly spaced intervals.

Previously, the paintings were to be read and understood by their almost continuous, endless horizontal lines. This has now been augmented with clear, tension-charged points, which define the lines’ rhythmical relationship to and with one another. The fragile structure with which Mark Harrington arranges his deeply-layered colour-planes accentuates the horizontal and the vertical construction of the surface. But above all, the intervals, the “spaces between”, accentuate the rhythm of the lines. Put another way: the lines first define and delineate the empty space and then simultaneously fill it – although it is empty. Here a fundamental concept of sculpture is evident in the work. The concept of space is defined by above and below, top and bottom, before and after. With this, it appears that the paintings can also convey a notion of the inconceivable, impalpable dimension of time.

Between the “before and after”, the “past and future”, is the moment we call the “present”. Although we can experience and define it, we don’t know if it really exists.

This indefinable and inconceivable space between “having-just-come-to-be, and not-quite-extinguished”, is outlined here. What Mark Harrington is demonstrating, between a preceding-before and ensuing-after, is the quite special concentrate of the “here and now”. An abstract “de-timed” zone filled with time – this also a sign of the polarity or dialectics in the artist’s work.

The sense of time’s flow and its direction are accentuated even more. Although, and especially because the lines are interrupted, they lead the gaze from one side of the painting to the other. “A scope of movement” Mark Harrington says, “constantly disconnected, which only goes to intensify its impact”. And, one could add, a movement which also accentuates the vertical element in the artist’s spatial concept. In his most recent works the previously rather thin lines have become deeper and wider. They have their own hue, stand out graphically. With their blurred edges they almost give the impression of rotating cylinders creating three dimensional space with their spinning turns.

There is therefore an element of depth in the paintings which doesn't only come from applying different layers of colour. This allows one to penetrate even more into the unfathomable depth of pictorial space without forfeiting the tension of the surface.

On the contrary, in his latest, more complex paintings, the artist applies more layers of colour which make light and dark contrasting tones – like arteries – visible in the lines. Again, this has to do with the concept of time, which is why the artist speaks of the “duality” in his paintings and that they contain both elements: tranquility and motion.

Translation... *Paula Domzalski*