

It has never been just about the eye

Paul Bonaventura

In his keynote speech to the eighth meeting of the European Network of Heads of Schools of Architecture in 2005, the renowned Finnish architect Juhani Pallasmaa suggested that the historic supremacy of vision has recently been strengthened by countless technical inventions at the expense of hapticity, the sense of nearness and touch. Today, he said, 'there is a growing concern that this uncontested visual hegemony and repression of other sensory modalities is giving rise to a cultural condition that generates further alienation, abstraction and distance, instead of promoting the positive experiences of belonging, rootedness and intimacy'.

The former Professor of Architecture at the Helsinki University of Technology and former Director of the Museum of Finnish Architecture quoted from Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the French phenomenological philosopher, in arguing for an integration of the senses in the production and comprehension of artistic phenomena: 'My perception is not a sum of visual, tactile and audible givens: I perceive in a total way with my whole being: I grasp a unique structure of the thing, a unique way of being, which speaks to all my senses at once... We see the depth, speed, softness and hardness of objects – [Paul] Cézanne says that we see even their odour. If a painter wishes to express the world, his system of colour must generate this indivisible complex of impressions, otherwise his painting only hints at possibilities without producing the unity, presence and unsurpassable diversity that governs the experience and which is the definition of reality for us.'

Pallasmaa explained in his talk that seductive visual imagery in all areas of modern life was promoting a retinal culture, which is deliberately conceived to be circulated and appreciated as instant and striking photography, rather than being experienced gradually through a

physical spatial encounter: 'The first offers mere images of form, whereas the latter projects epic narratives of culture, history, tradition and human existence. The first leaves us as spectators, the second makes us participants with full ethical responsibility.' Together with *The Eyes of the Skin - Architecture and the Senses*, his classic book of holistic architectural philosophy that is required reading on architectural courses around the world, Pallasmaa's *Touching the World - architecture, hapticity and the emancipation of the eye* gives verbal shape to Simon Callery's ambitions for his art.

Simon Callery is an artist who is interested in making paintings and drawings that, instead of creating timeless forms of geometry, stimulate all the senses concurrently. Just as Pallasmaa wishes for an architecture that articulates the experiences of being in the world and strengthens the sense of reality and self, so Callery longs for an art to frame and structure those experiences, providing time with a human measure. Since the mid-1980s he has been producing work that declares its presence through scale, colour and surface texture, providing us with an opportunity to engage the body and the mind in coming to terms with its concrete qualities. His canvases enhance and articulate our awareness of frontality, horizontality and verticality, and advance our appreciation of touch - touch as the unconsciousness of vision, touch as the hidden knowledge that enhances the sensuous qualities of the perceived object.

Some of the artist's earliest paintings show the influence of Cézanne and Giorgio de Chirico and depict urban scenes in Cardiff, where Callery studied painting and sculpture as an undergraduate. However, a thoroughgoing interest in cityscape only properly developed after he moved to east London in the late 1980s, when his curiosity for the panorama spread out beneath his apartment spilled over onto his canvases. Following his relocation to a more spacious studio, Callery began producing large-scale, luminous works that took their inspiration from the skyline of the City and the curves of its famous river. Five metres and more across, these monumental paintings create an encounter for the viewer that is just as much physical as visual.

Callery's solo show at the Tate Gallery in 1999 marked the emergence of a series of insistently experimental paintings in which suggested architectural details play an integral part in structuring images whose impact is evocative rather than descriptive of place. Some of these canvases are asymmetrical, some correct the optical illusion that makes tall paintings appear top-heavy and some lean against the wall. Some canvases are encased inside a secondary frame while others employ a subframe, which has the same dimensions as the painting and is simultaneously a part of and separate from it. In his most recent work, Callery has taken this experimentation one stage further. Now he is asking us why we shouldn't expect to find a canvas in the corner of a room or hung close to the ceiling, whether there is anything unusual about a painting made from a series of identical stretchers stacked up on the floor or an open-sided painting, which is tipping out from the wall.

This questioning of what constitutes a painting carries with it echoes of the dissolution of painting that took place in Italy in the 1950s, when artists abandoned the orthodox, picture-plane route to abstraction. Painters like Alberto Burri and Lucio Fontana lacerated and perforated the canvas, curved it in space, pressed, layered or stretched it. Any residual interest in making pictures was replaced by an exclusive concern for the substance of painting, a radicalised approach that freed the way for occupying the canvas with materials and objects foreign to art, and ultimately led to the innovations of Arte Povera, Nouveau Réalisme and Pop Art.

As its underlying focus has shifted from cityscape to a more general awareness of landscape so Callery's work has witnessed a coming together of his painterly and archaeological interests. In 1996 the artist was given an opportunity to work alongside archaeologists from the University of Oxford who had recently embarked on a wide-ranging investigation of prehistoric and Romano-British sites along the Ridgeway, a chalk downland in central southern England and one of the oldest trackways in Europe. Nobody at the time, least of all Callery himself, could have expected the association to flourish in quite the way it did. Oxford's archaeologists invited the artist to accompany them on three major digs over a seven year period, out of which emerged *Segsbury Project*, an extraordinary collection of paintings and installations that made visible the rich correspondence between the two disciplines.

‘Landscape-based painting has mostly been about finding ways to represent its appearance,’ explains Callery. ‘If you don’t want to do that, what do you do? What can you do with landscape if you don’t want to paint pictures of it? How can you create an equivalent for the experience of landscape in painting? Archaeology gives me access to landscape under very particular and unique conditions. Being with archaeologists in the field gives me an informed perspective on landscape that I do not get anywhere else, and it connects with ideas about temporality, which have been at the heart of my work for a long time. When I’m on an archaeological excavation I have this possibility to confront time as a quality for the painting. I grasp it through responding to the physicality of the landscape. My awareness of time comes from a relationship and a response to the material landscape, not to the way it looks, but to the physicality of it.’

The artist’s exposure to the ways in which time is perceived in archaeology has led him to a recognition of how it can function in painting: ‘My idea of temporality involves having an awareness of yourself within the landscape, of finding your own place in it, but it’s also about a conception of where you fit into the continuity of landscape use, about how you are active in landscape and connected to the ways in which other people have been active in that same landscape in the past. You begin by looking, but the act of looking gives way to something more physical, more sensual. That ordering of the way in which the senses become engaged leads to a greater contextual awareness. Only by experiencing a sense of self are we able to engage fully in the mental dimensions of the imagination.’

Quite probably because of the effectiveness of the encounter, Callery came away from Oxford in 2003 with a number of questions left only partially resolved. To what extent is contemporary art able to represent a multi-dimensional experience of landscape? How can contemporary art embrace the advances that other disciplines have made to our understanding of landscape? How can contemporary art rise to the challenges posed by the forces that define land use today? To address

at least some of these issues the artist has embarked on an Arts and Humanities Research Council practice-based fellowship at Wimbledon College of Art, University of the Arts London and is spending time with Oxford Archaeology, an independent archaeology practice that has been contracted to undertake excavations in advance of construction of the Thames Gateway. The Thames Gateway is an area of land stretching 40 miles east from inner London on both sides of the River Thames. The area has been designated a national priority for urban regeneration and the on-going analysis of landscape in change has prompted Callery to produce a significant quantity of new work, some of which can be seen in the current exhibition.

Over time, Callery's attention has been drawn to the myriad circular shapes that repeatedly crop up in the excavated landscape as pits, postholes and ditches although his fascination for things rounded can also trace its provenance to an encounter with a wall-mounted Tiepolo ceiling painting in the Gallerie dell'Accademia in Venice. Together, these phenomena add up to a moment when, as writer Rachel Withers has described elsewhere, an embodied sense of form and structure has impressed itself on the artist as needing to be understood through reconstruction and reinterpretation in the studio. Taking the dimensions of the showing spaces into consideration, Callery has elected to hang four new Thames Gateway-inspired pieces at the Westbrook Gallery. These include one of his largest Pit Paintings called *Woolwich Teardrop*, which dominates the ground floor space, a smaller Pit Painting, and two related works downstairs.

The Pit Paintings comprise a consecutive series of round canvases built around complex wood and metal armatures and take their titles from the excavated holes in which our ancestors stored food or rubbish. They come in a variety of sizes, but all of them are physically compelling, and they encourage the viewer to enter into a mobile relationship with them. Initially, each of the canvases was perfectly circular, but some of the newest pieces incorporate an elliptical component and a geometric line whose endpoints lie on the curve. This is true of the front face of the large painting in the present show, which combines a measured, mechanical half-circle with a section of a cut-across, hand-drawn ovoid. This permits us to look beyond the upholstered exterior façade into the interior of the painting and inspect the structure that supports it and holds it proud of the wall.

The form of the armature is arrived at through trial and error and the consequences of these adjustments are only partially obscured in the finished piece. Callery wants viewers to explore the inner workings of his paintings and come to grips with a different idea of finish: 'How do you connect the way of making with the implicit logic of how it must be made? What I mean is how do you avoid losing focus during the making? I have all this material piled up underneath a painting during its making. When I need to do something, when I understand what I need to do, I can just take something from the pile and do it in the most expedient fashion. That's the way it has to be made. If I start elaborating then I lose that purity of something being made in the only way it can be. Each piece has elements of that and elements that are more planned, but things always get modified in the making. I find it very difficult to find the form I want at the outset. I need to establish a balance between the initial impulse to make and the necessity of carrying it out directly.'

The dynamic of taking something first experienced horizontally in the open air, like an excavated storage pit, and using it vertically indoors finds its source in *Trench 10*, the majestic 20-metre cast of an excavation that represented the climax of *Segsbury Project*. The Pit Paintings also take account of how visitors to an archaeological site perceive individual features as they move around them. The artist admits that these objects work in the way that paintings work while disobeying the conventions that one normally associates with painting and argues that this makes for a creative tension: 'There are all kinds of ways in which paintings are presented that I sometimes find much more interesting than what is actually depicted on the front surface. For example, there is no reason why painting cannot express physicality as its prime means of communicating rather than the image. There are different ways of responding to painting. It has never been just about picture making. It has never been just about the eye.'

'If you're looking at a painting that has been made for a uniquely specific context, such as a Renaissance altarpiece in an Italian church, where it is integrated within the architecture, the way it is presented is expressive. It might be unusually tall or in darkness or in a niche, and this physical aspect is significant. In these situations I'm happy to see work in low light, and I don't mind if the surface is obscured by reflected light because you can focus on things like location and proportion, seemingly incidental things that are important. These are the aspects of painting that I am trying to explore in my work. What I am suggesting is that there are many ways of understanding paintings that call attention to all our senses, not just vision, and activating and animating those senses as a means of creating an experience is my major preoccupation.'

Up to the present the artist's best-known paintings have been pale. It was only when he realised that he wanted to use colour as material that Callery was able to heighten his palette and apply it more liberally. Most paints include pigment of one form or another, granular solids that contribute colour and substance to the paint. Some are natural, others are synthetic, and they all have different physical properties. When we react to paint on the surface of a canvas, we not only react to its colour and transparency. We also react to its other attributes. As well as his trademark, radiant whites, the newer paintings and drawings feature earthy blacks, blues, purples, reds and greens. In the past Callery's oils sat on the surface of the canvas like a skin. Today, his water-based distempers are soaked into the fabric, which sucks in the light, although some areas are covered in a more reflective surface film of emulsion. Callery has acknowledged previously that in a 'filtered and indirect' way the memory of colour in Venetian Renaissance painting is also working itself out here.

The drawings are closely related to the paintings and present us with the edges of scrolls of paper that have likewise been infused with pigment and arranged in blocks of one or two colours. The artist describes all his works with paper as drawings to underline the fact that the material nature of the work is of primary importance, and they focus our attention on repetition and irregularity. What the drawings share with the paintings is their interest in depth. Each scroll of paper is glued and clamped over a wooden former. When this is removed it leaves a void and the greater part of the finished drawing, made up of a number of these scrolls arranged side by side, consists of deep, empty space, much like the contents of an emptied storage pit whose defining walls are marked by the residue of repeated staining.

Simon Callery's tactile, embodied work creates an experience for the viewer that elicits a genuine physical response, which activates our senses and fosters a powerful identification and projection. Echoing Juhani Pallasmaa's finely wrought buildings in his native Finland, his precisely made paintings and drawings ensure a correspondence between material form and the innate sense that the body has about it.

Paul Bonaventura is the Senior Research Fellow in Fine Art Studies at the University of Oxford