

## Gestalt Thinking

Amongst other things, Richard Kirwan's paintings address notions of pictorial signification. For Kirwan, pictorial or *pictographic* signification is a vehicle – or transmitter – for faceted markers of the artist's 'cultural memory', which punctuate broader notions of his lived experience. The paintings are not simply *aide-memoires* to recall a moment or experience; rather they are a new experience, fusing memory with material disciplines of painting.

Sometimes this is referred to as *ars memoriae* or *ars memorativa*, a practice which can be traced back to the 6th century BCE, when the Greek poet Simonides of Ceos first developed mnemonics used to recall specific memories. The broader umbrella of Memory Studies gathered momentum in the 1980s, during the decline of "the modern time regime", a term coined by the cultural memory theorist, Aleida Assmann.<sup>1</sup>

According to Assmann, during the 1980s, culture ceased to look to the future as the only purveyor of value and began to reevaluate the post-war epoch through the new testimonies and global commemorations marking the end of the second world war.

Following the fall of the Berlin Wall, Germany began to enter a 'new European memory' where it seemed that the past was becoming closer and closer.<sup>2</sup>

Another important factor in the development of a new cultural memory in the 1980s was the accessibility of the personal computer and the development of the world-wide-web by Tim Berners-Lee at CERN between 1989-1990. Computers and communication systems were no longer exclusive to the military or scientific community and gradually became ubiquitous household items.<sup>3</sup> The world and our capacity to access, store, recall, conflate and transmit memories was changing fast, and would never be the same.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Aleida Assmann *Is Time Out of Joint? On the Rise and Fall of the Modern Time Regime* Cornell University Press 2020

<sup>2</sup> Movies like *Back to the Future* (1985) and *Total Recall* (1990), hinted at ideas of time travel and memory. In the weeks preceding the fall of the Berlin Wall, new attitudes in fashion and pop music had penetrated East Germany. The track *Looking for Freedom* was number one in the German pop charts for eight weeks during the summer of 1989, culminating with David Hasselhoff's New Year's Eve performance at the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin on December 31 the same year.

<sup>3</sup> It is claimed that the first item ever purchased online was a large pepperoni and mushroom pizza with extra cheese, ordered from Pizza Hut in 1994, although some argue it was a copy of a compact disc by pop musician, Sting.

<sup>4</sup> In *Seinfeld* S9 Episode 8 '*The Betrayal*', Jerry jokes "...what the hell is email?" The episode runs backwards playing with ideas of time-lapse, so although aired in 1997, Jerry is referring to a joke made in 1995.

Not so long after the development of the world-wide-web, Richard Kirwan began exploring the use of a repeated 'asterisk' motif, during the artist's postgraduate studies at Goldsmiths College, University of London. Since 1992, this motif has been ever-present, although not always explored in isolation. For example, *As Above, So Below* (2007) a painting selected for the 25th John Moores Exhibition of Contemporary Painting, demonstrated a painting lexicon where schematic cartoon-like cells appeared to connect to each other through a graphic neural network. In recent years, Kirwan's main preoccupation has been, *almost* exclusively, the realisation of subtle explorations of the asterisk motif paintings.

On canvas, the asterisk motif has been achieved by 'masking-out' areas of a titanium white ground, painting the motifs in reverse, and placing them beneath a variety of chromatic interactions. The resulting effect of 'cutting areas out' is reminiscent to an early computer 'punch card' designed to hold digital information. By the *de facto* nature of this object, the punch card allows light to travel through, lending this object a dual functionality where encoded information could be read by a computer, but if held against the light, the punched holes would allow beams of light to fall upon the viewer in the configuration of encoded information.<sup>5</sup> Punch cards date back to the 18th century, originally developed to operate weaving looms mechanically, controlling the production of patterns through the information 'stored' on thin cardboard. Later, this method was adopted by computerisation and used until the mid-1980s, when information started to be stored on disks, which were cheaper and could hold more information, rendering the playful punch card obsolete.

As if breaking the painting's fourth wall, Kirwan's most recent paintings develop this idea further, by attaching three-dimensional versions of the motif to the surface of the work, now painted on plywood. The rigorously 'flat' execution of previous canvas works, when contrasted with this new approach, sets up a conversation between painting as illusion and painting as object.

The works *in relief* offer the viewer a concrete manipulation of the asterisk, rather than an abstract (or abstracted) version. In these works, discreet shadows are produced by the three-dimensional asterisks much like 'gnomons' casting shadows on a sundial. Both approaches – illusionistic and concrete – have in common the placing of the repeated motif upon a variety of tessellating subdivisions of the painting ground, where compartmentalised 'boxes' are divided along a diagonal, horizontal or vertical axis. Painted in high-chroma pattern formations, the adjacency of colours creates tingling, soothing or even melancholic sensations to the eye, where colour and pattern combinations appear to be channelling specific moods or feelings.

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<sup>5</sup> In Sanskrit *askadas kiraṇa*, meaning 'ray of light' or 'beam of light' is also referred to as *Kira* or *Kirwan*.

This latter point is key, as the preceding description could suggest concerns in seriality and detachment typically associated with the late Modernist tropes of Minimalism or Systemic Painting<sup>6</sup>. However, such references are not central, and the preoccupation seems to be somehow more personal. The given description of the work serves to illustrate the *mise-en-scène* and architecture employed by the artist, the purpose of which is to act as a vehicle for a totality of personal reflections, recollections, and assimilations of mass culture.

These paintings are sensory synaesthetic nets – or sponges which absorb information – released back to the world as encoded, syncopated light and colour. The process is conceptual and perceptual – but not memetic or confined to notions of meaning. These paintings operate as playful puzzles, riffing off titles for clues which may or may not let the viewer in – or possibly connecting us to the possibility of shared memory, no matter how unlikely this might be.

The approach the artist adopts is rooted in quotidian lived experience and does not discriminate between contextual associations and references. Colour choices might be informed by art history, but equally, the histories of architecture, design, and fashion – such as a chromatic arrangement of Issey Miyake's Spring/Summer collection seen through a shop window.

There is a notion of taste at play, in particular the appropriateness of taste,<sup>7</sup> a questioning of its possible role or function. Perhaps more important is the sensory pleasure that is acknowledged by the artist, and the generosity in sharing emotional experience through paintings employing a motif now in its third decade of investigation.

Just shy of a century ago, in 1926, Constantin Brâncuși sent a sculpture to an exhibition in New York. In October that year, *L'Oiseau dans l'espace* arrived in New York aboard the steamship *Paris*. Upon arrival, customs officials struggled to classify the abstract bronze sculpture that, according to Brâncuși, was inspired by the Romanian bird of folktale *Pasarea Maiastra*, famous for its plumage and song. Unable to grant entry into the U.S. without classification, officials eventually evaluated the polished bronze as a utilitarian object, under 'Kitchen Utensils and Hospital Supplies'. To their mind, the sculpture did not resemble a bird. More precisely, to qualify as sculpture, works had to be made or reproduced by carving or casting imitations of natural objects, chiefly the human form. Artistic definitions aside, this had serious fiscal implications, as artworks were exempt from import duty, but as this was not considered a work of art, the officials imposed an import tariff relevant for objects manufactured in metal (40% of the sale price). In what has become known as *Brâncuși vs. United States*, a legal battle unfolded, lasting four years, challenging the classification and tariff imposed to *L'Oiseau dans l'espace*. It is a key trial in the history of art; the judge ruling in

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<sup>6</sup> *Systemic Painting* curated by Lawrence Alloway at the Guggenheim Museum, New York in 1966, brought together twenty-eight artists including Jo Baer, Thomas Downing, Paul Feeley, Tadaaki Kuwayama, Agnes Martin, Kenneth Noland, Robert Ryman, and Frank Stella, illustrating the elasticity of this genre through a wide variety of seriality and system-based approaches to painting.

<sup>7</sup> Although written in the Victorian era, hierarchical ideas of taste stem from Matthew Arnold's book *Culture and Anarchy* where Arnold describes culture as taste. *Culture and Anarchy: An Essay in Political and Social Criticism* first published in *The Cornhill Magazine* 1867 and collected as a book in 1869.

favour of Brâncuși, acknowledging a 'new school' in 20th century art, and importantly, recognising Abstract art for the first time in the eyes of the law.<sup>8</sup>

Similar debates exist today through the persistent cultural production and manufacture of polysemic objects and *objet d'art*. Boundaries are often drawn between disciplines in the arts, but it's hard to look at the world around us without acknowledging symbiotic relationships. Is it possible to see Alessi's iconic citrus squeezer by Philippe Starck<sup>9</sup> without considering Brâncuși or even Jeff Koons? Cultural production has a way of filtering and permeating not only existing knowledge, but the production of new memories.

In many ways, individually or collectively, Richard Kirwan's work also brings the increasing arbitrariness of definitive categories to our attention, but rather than adding further distinctions through a 'subject', these paintings operate through a motif woven in gestalt thinking, where content is delivered all at once, through pattern, colour, and the beams of light that emanate.

Juan Bolivar

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<sup>8</sup> Margit Rowell *Brâncuși vs. United States: The Historic Trial 1928* Vito Publishing 2001

<sup>9</sup> Phillippe Starck's *Juicy Salif* design was first manufactured by Alessi in 1990