THE INVISIBLE HAND. **Ben Street (12/7/20)**

"The strongest feeling I have, and it's confirmed the next day or the following week, is that when I leave the studio I have left there a 'person', or something that is a thing, an organic thing that can lead its own life, that doesn't need me any more, doesn't even need my thoughts about it."[i] Philip Guston's comment in 1965 remains startling to anyone who isn't a painter. The aliveness of paintings – their growth and decay, their bumps and aches – is something instinctually known by painters but not usually acknowledged by art historians. In fact, there's no useful language in art history to account for it. On the screen of the lecture theatre, or the page of the book, the painting is stilled at a particular moment in its life, and that moment becomes what the painting *is* for the student or reader. Art history is, then, mostly a study of photographed works of art, which means it's really a study of frozen moments, which further means that the aliveness intrinsic to painting remains something in the purview of specialists only. The term 'lens-based media', which became a way of categorising video and photographic works of art some years ago, should really be used to describe paintings too, at least as they are most commonly experienced. This is not a complaint against the reproduced image; it's simply a call for honesty about what those images really are, which are snapshots in the ongoing life of things in the world. Stills, not movies.

Here's an example. I have a postcard here of a favourite painting, Cima da Conegliano's *Baptism of Christ* from the church of San Giovanni in Bragora, Venice, made around 1492. Unusually for a postcard bought in a church (and I've got a few), its reproduction of the painting's colours seems remarkably faithful. The crystal blues of the distant mountains and the bizarre array of hovering multi-coloured seraphim, like jelly babies, are sharp and rich. In the church itself, the painting sits high above the altar, too far from the visitor's eyes for any of these colours to be clearly experienced. Lateral windows spill a changing light across its surface. Flip a switch and an electric light washes it a sickly yellow. Neither helps. The postcard that you leave with, though lovely, is not what you

saw. And so the uneven relationship between the living object, gradually decaying on the wall of the church for which it was made, occasionally energised through ritual, and the photographic postcard, probably printed from a photograph taken when the painting was last cleaned, becomes central to its existence in culture. This *Dorian Gray*-like, bifurcated existence is what people mean when they say they found the *Mona Lisa* disappointing. They've just seen that split for themselves, in front of their very eyes.

All of this is a way of framing Alexis Harding's paintings as works that announce their own aliveness, even to the point of somewhat defeating their own existence in reproduction. There's a literal aspect to this. Some of his paintings do in fact go on being painted after Harding has stepped away from the canvas. Dense, gloopy paint slips down their surfaces and onto the floor, like a tree root seeking moisture. But even the works that seem visually contained by the edges of their supports aren't quite: their surfaces, rucked and corrugated, attest to an unfolding series of events. Often played out in these pictorial events are ideas of rupture, in which the force of gravity and the drying skin of applied colour are pitted against each other. They are, in other words, animated by an aliveness that is a metaphor of the viewer's own. More than that: it *is* the viewer's own.

Harding's painting *The Invisible Hand* - whose title alone seems a pretty apt description of the work of gravity on its broken surface - resembles a Frank Stella left out in the rain, or an Ellsworth Kelly made out of melting chewing gum. But Harding's paintings don't demand that these allusions be made; they're preoccupied by the matter of matter, not the backstory of painting as a medium, or second-hand formalist concerns. There's joy to be had in attending to the slapstick disarray of the lines of found colour that, over time, have swerved off course, bled into each other, and crashed into a heap. The well-worn comedy of matter's misbehaviour – spillages, slippages, stains, and so on; the stuff of any number of cartoons or comedy sketches – is underscored, traditionally, by a fear that things might not be as containable as they seem. The terror that matter might overwhelm our ability to control it is what lies underneath the laughter. What's happening in Harding's paintings is to do with a porosity of matter that is,

I think, animated by that same observation, but from the opposing position. The instability of painted matter, its aliveness, becomes a way of thinking about the nature of your own.

Pink Divide, meanwhile, reinvests the what-you-see-is-what-you-see formalism of mid-century American abstraction with a bodily suggestiveness it traditionally lacked. Swerving rainbow stripes lose their physical integrity about halfway down, busting out of their skins to bleed into pink. The painting's corporeal association is there without needing to be named. But the aliveness of Harding's paintings is in their making, too; as the artist has noted, "Time is always here, key decisions that are made within a split second, or that develop at the rate I imagine nails or hair growing, or the aging of skin". There's a double timeframe operating here: the relative speed of the artist's application of colour to the surface, and the gradual, elephantine movement of the paint as it reacts and slides against other paint surfaces it meets. In a slight adjustment of Guston's quote, it's not living beings that Harding is creating exactly; he, in his words, "just sets them off." The animation is part-willed, part-automatic; allowing the matter of paint to be what it is, under certain conditions, enables it to take on bodily metaphors it arguably always had. It's as though paint itself – paint in a Cima, or a Stella, or any painting – always had a kind of parallel to the bodies of those who made it, and those who saw it. We just never noticed it before.

Harding's tondos, such as *French Ultramarine/Silver* or *Lilac Tondo,* do what tondo paintings have always done: they repeat the circular shape of their support internally, like an echo. It might be assumed that the theological meanings generated by this network of circles in medieval or Renaissance tondos was sloughed off by modernism, and its formal devices retained. But for Harding, as a painter equally engaged by the legacies of formalist painting and the strange animation of a painting left to its own devices, something of that philosophical complexity returns. The embodiment of the divine, the central tenet of Christian theology, granted paint the ability to transcend itself, to be more than what it seemed to be. Harding's tondos engage in this legacy by staging acts of transformation that are, if not theological, at least geological, or

maybe even biological. What resembles the tectonic splitting of prehistoric landmasses is, at the same time, like the cracked skin of a riverbed, or the breaking of human bone. Far from still images, these associations are moments in a process of renewal, regeneration, and revival. They are a reminder that paint is the best metaphor available to us to speak of such things. By allowing the paintings to complete themselves, Harding also enables the free flow of interpretation, allowing matter to do what it does: to tell us what we are.

In reaching for words to describe the specific qualities of Alexis Harding's paintings, I find myself using a sequence of verbs – sliding, slipping, breaking, blending – which is, I suppose, the closest art historical writing like this can get to evoking the particular aliveness of his work. The stillness of a written language is like that Cima postcard: it's something held tight rather than launched into a trajectory. As Guston put it, these are paintings that perhaps don't need my thoughts about them. I'll contend that Harding's paintings set in motion ideas that might stand articulation in the service of thinking through their implications for painting and its viewers. Painting speaks in matter – is, because of its aliveness, always speaking – and Harding's paintings stage that explicitly. Their coming-into-being is deferred; they seem ready to move again. In *Ice-Breaker 2019*, two surfaces shift against each other, on the verge of, though never quite reaching, total collapse. Because it's a force external to the painting's own that splits the creamy paint apart, there's a material porosity that goes beyond that of the painting itself. Harding's painting stages vibrancy, but it's that of the world we share. Giving, in Jane Bennett's words, "the force of things more due"[ii], Harding's paintings overspill their boundaries, making painting something that happens, and that goes on happening, on and on and on.

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[i] Guston, Philip, in Coolidge, Clark (ed.), *Philip Guston: Collected Writings, Lectures, and Conversations*, University of California Press, 2011
[ii] Bennett, Jane, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Duke University Press, 2010