

On *Depthplunge*, a new series of work by Alexis Harding

By Chris Townsend, October 2007

Alexis Harding's paintings have always sustained an ambivalent but intimate relationship with modernism. The grids that he made until recently undertook a critique of that foundational modernist device. As the filmy surface of the grid slid over its unstable, monochromatic matrix Harding was able to show entropy at work in what was understood as a stable screen through which to view and make sense of the world. That critique, however, might have been as much addressed to a general notion of ontology that informs Enlightenment thought, a challenge to scientific certainty and rational ordering, as it was to art. After all, we might – in a more sympathetic reading of modernism's philosophical orientation than is often provided, for example by Rosalind Krauss and Yves-Alain Bois – understand its artists, particularly those falling under Henri Bergson's influence, as themselves concerned with a mutability of time and space, and a sensibility of the subject, that precisely opposed the reifying of Newtonian thought in particular and the Enlightenment episteme in general into the spatio-temporal regulation that characterised the chemical-mechanical age. If the grid was, in its horizontal dimension, symbolic of the measurement of the globe and the ordering of its nations – within European empires - and its nature – as raw materials that might serve those empires, in its vertical dimension it was, equally, the ordering of the subject in space. The vertical grid was the means to arrange, to systematise, the subject in space. But if the grid was the foundation of an ordered portraiture that, as Louis Marin pointed out, both promoted and perpetuated an ordered system of hierarchical power, it was a device for representing the world that, even as it achieved mimetic supremacy through its technological embodiment in photography, was profoundly undercut by modernist art, by Picasso and Braque within cubism, and by Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase*. Viewed in this way, Harding's work is as much in continuity with a certain strand of modernist practice as it is critical of modernity's epistemic impulses and assumptions.

With his new paintings it seems as if Harding has not so much changed his relationship to modernism as shifted his orientation, the plane in which that relation is expressed. Where the grids were very much concerned with portraiture, and therefore with the erect, vertical subject, here, using broad vertical strips of contrasting or compatible colour across a monochrome field, we might generalise Harding's interest as being with landscape. This holds whether we are in the imagination of the horizontal, where we might see some of these wavy bands of paint as river channels or canals, or the vertical, where they may take on the symbolic properties of drapes, waiting to be pulled back from a window or a stage. Furthermore, where the grids were at one level concerned with a failure of opticality, or an insistence that vision does not equate to a static subject, here we might recognise temporality as the principal thematic.

The notion of entropy, that late-modernist paradigm of decay and transformation put into play in the 1960s and 1970s by Robert Smithson and Gordon Matta-Clark, is always present at the heart of Harding's paintings. Indeed, as a governing mechanism – produced by the chemical imbalance between the paint of the field and the paint of the 'figure' – it is perhaps more explicit here. The grids tended to produce small striae as they slipped across their field before settling, slumped, towards its lower edge. The effect, in detail, was to produce in the residual monochrome – even when it was rendered in orange or red – a kind of textured patterning akin to those grooves made by Reinhardt with the end of the brush in his otherwise impenetrably dense canvases. The collapse of the *modern* mechanism produced its own *modernist* symbol in farewell. In the new works Harding's stripes produce their own painting rather than a residual texture. The trace left by the sliding strip of colour is itself 'painterly'; it leaves in its wake a thinner line of colour that divides the upper reaches of the field in the manner of one of Barnett Newman's 'zips'. In the development of these paintings it is almost as if one genre of late-modernist practice (the stripes of colour field painting) were reaching back into its own, immediate history, to produce abstract expressionism.

In enacting such an 'archaeology' these works make visible the contradictions bound up in Michael Fried's claims for late-modernist painting, especially colour field, as a practice whose investigation of the surface escaped contamination by notions of theatricality and performance. Here we have action painting where all the action results from the painting's own, involuntary, agency, in contrast to (and, yet, aesthetic contingency *with*) abstract expressionism's simultaneously emphasised and elided performance of both painting (in Pollock's case) and, more generally, of a raw, ahistorical, un-subjectivity (in the work of Newman, Gottlieb and Rothko amongst others). Late modernist 'purity' reveals its grounding in the self-conscious performance of art and self as nature. In these paintings it is as if all the claims for 'tranquillity', all the high seriousness of the autonomous work of art and its remove from history into nature, which characterised the work of Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland and Jules Olitski (and even, as a façade for emotional depth and turmoil, that of Rothko) had been rudely interrupted by events. These 'events', furthermore, are not those arranged by man – outcomes of an ordered, rational schema – but rather of temporality repossessing the polluted domain of nature.

If, perhaps, Bataille and his conception of flux, articulated as *informe*, was the hidden, but dominating presence in the grid paintings, with these 'landscapes and windows' it is hard to avoid Smithson. The paintings are not simply landscapes: again and again in their colouring and in the crumpled skeins of paint that accumulate like mud on the edges of clear channels, we are referred to the polluted, the industrial. It is as if Harding were taking us on his own tour of the 'Monuments of Passaic' and, instead of offering as vista the architecture of industrial modernity compelling us to look at its surrounding nature – the chemically saturated canals and the flood-plains of sluggish rivers. In exploring, and revealing, the formal problems of modernism, Harding makes clear the formal problems of modernity. The evasion of history and temporality within aesthetics, characterised by the late-modernist escape from time and its claim for the work of art as autonomous and natural, is concomitant with an evasion of responsibility for the effects of a culture that imagines it can regulate both nature and time. Time, as unbounded effect, returns to claim both art and world.