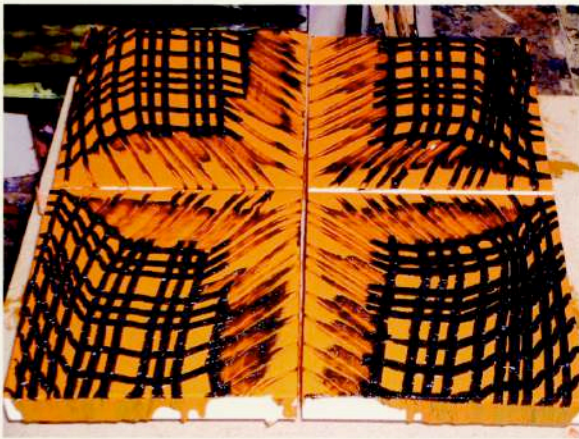


Charlsworth, J.J., 'Painting by the Skin of Your Eyes' (London: Andrew Mummery Gallery, 2003)

Painting by the Skin of Your Eyes

AH's paintings started out with grids. They still do, though they now go further. This is what happens when a thing presents you with the logic of what it might become in the future. Or rather, because what something might become can never be anticipated – the future can't simply turn up in the present – we recognise it as a kind of pressure, a tension that exists within the object as it is now, uncomfortable



and aching to stretch, wring, and expend itself in the production of something different. AH's paintings started out with grids. In retrospect, the drama of stress and release that each of AH's paintings embody can be found in the transitions that have taken place in his work as a whole. If at first these wrinkled skins tended to hold close to their supports, gripped with this strange seizure that affects all AH's surfaces, then later they began to tear and break, ripping open and declaring how

fragile these curious membranes were. In the process, they revealed something else, drawing back to expose their viscous insides, like the gentle pulling away of skins on tomatoes that have been soaked in boiling water, or the sticky flesh under a scab prised off by an impatient schoolboy.

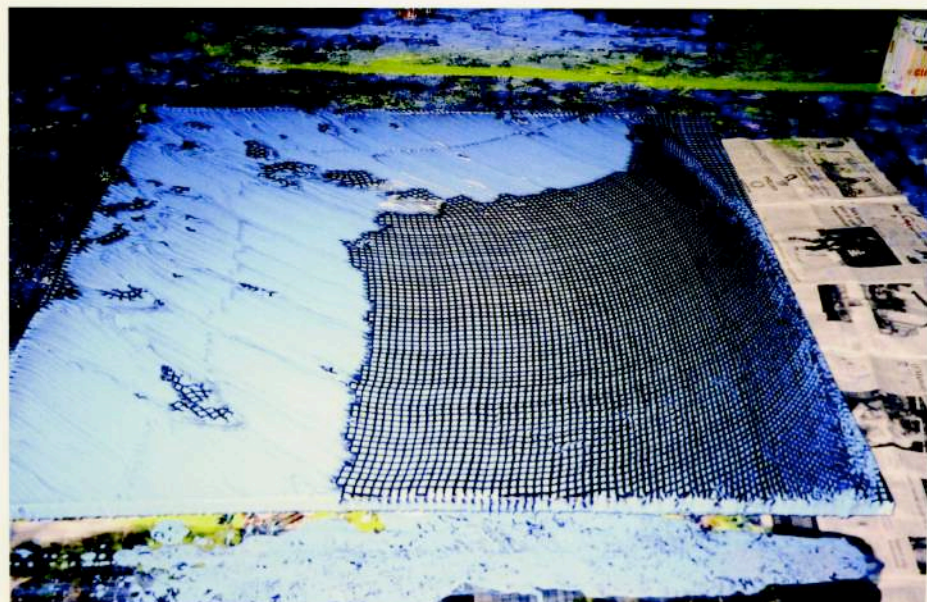
A history of Paint, quick-dry

The logic of AH's paintings, the purpose of their playful chemistry, and their precarious and intoxicated vertigo of collapse, emphasises their inescapable materiality. This is neither big nor clever – it is after all only paint, and modern painting has for a long time been conscious of the physical attributes of its medium; AH's admiration for the work of Frank Auerbach and Francis Bacon points to the significance he attaches to paint's physicality. But AH's innovative use of chemical reaction is to make the dumb materiality of his medium into something active, fractious, misbehaved, laughing, riven with dissent and raucous arguments, rather than passively subservient to the wishes of its maker. If art painting's history consists of the changing expectations of painters regarding the purpose their art served, this has always been with the sure knowledge that pigment and medium are there, ready, willing and at their command. Renaissance studio apprentices were trained in the business of mixing paint, to ensure the quality of the materials the masters would put to use. Paint's history, though, is very different to painting's history; whilst modern art heralded revolutions in vision, the business of paint has always

been about harmony, stability and permanence. It's only in the post-war period, and particularly with the advent the new experimental movements of the 1960s, that the ingrained technical habits and assumptions governing modernist painting could be questioned and opened up; new materials and new paints, synthetic plastics and acrylics offering a universe of new formal possibilities.

Nevertheless, this didn't lead to the extinction of old media anymore than it did away with painting itself; but more often than not, experimenting with painting's media has been sidelined in favour of an interrogation of painting's philosophical and aesthetic foundations, more so because formalist innovation has fallen into disrepute in the decades since. Just messing about with paint for the sake of it would these days seem to lack commitment and seriousness, but messing with paint is what AH's process paintings do, yet their results are far from trivial. AH's chemical contradictions are an immediate affront to the harmonious use of physical medium in painting, and his technique is more than merely a seductive formal conceit, however appealing this is visually. For if his oil and gloss suffer violently allergic reactions to each others' presence, producing their surprising convulsions, knots and wrinkles, their physical encounter has aesthetic consequences that turns on its head a recurrent problem in modernist painting, that persists today, and turns in fact on the physical status of the paint medium as a visual entity.

A frequent observation of AH's grids is that they invoke the paradigmatic form of high modernism, and that their collapse is a playfully ironic post-modern gesture of negation. From this position, an easy link might be made to the Rosalind Krauss' classic 1978 essay 'Grids', in which the critic finds that the grid's longevity in the art of the 20th century is due to its ability to support both rationalism and spiritualism, symbolism as well as materialism. It's worth considering Krauss' essay not for what it offers



to an interpretation of AH's painting, but to illuminate the particular work that AH's painting does against the conventional formulation of modernism in painting, and which emerges from the special effects of antagonistic paints he employs.



For Krauss, the modernist grid permits historically opposing conceptions of art to coexist in a single, persistent conventional form. The grid, she suggests, allows for the scientific rationalism of colour theory and physiological optics to cohabit with the transcendental impulse of symbolism. Conceptual abstraction and material simplicity become synonymous. 'Behind every twentieth-century grid', she writes, 'there lies – like a trauma that must be repressed – a symbolist window parading in the guise of a treatise on optics.'¹

Krauss' observations on these two distinct conceptual trajectories are intriguing for what they leave unsaid. For in effect, both rationalist and symbolist narratives in Krauss' account treat the grid as both surface and screen of projection, as both a physical presence in its own right and a surface onto which the representation of the visual world can be mapped. The image that Krauss' symbolists use – the image of the window – suits their purposes perfectly: The window paradoxically represents the unrepresentable – emptiness or the void – by celebrating vision as the representation of absolute subjectivity, whilst at the same time negating vision's objective encounter with reality. But equally, Krauss' rationalists turned to the grid as screen in order to objectify the 'site' of vision itself, duplicating the retinal surface and mapping its matrix onto the surface of modernist painting. Both Krauss' narratives end up in the same subjectivism, but from opposite ends: One is a window opening onto nothing; the other is a screen of projection onto which is projected nothing but sight itself.

This dualism is a core problem in the modernist tradition in painting, whether one finds it in mid-century abstraction or the recent return to painterly figuration. A painting is always potentially a self-

1. Rosalind Krauss, 'Grids', in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Mass; MIT



referent surface onto which visual form is organised, or the screen through which one sees a space beyond, or both. And one could argue that in order to do this, modernist painting organises another relation of interdependence, and another dualism, this time between paint and support. Whether the paint covers the surface seamlessly and hides itself in the illusion of a 'window through', or makes itself physically evident against the visible material of the support, painting's usual articulation is the co-dependency between a coherent, homogenous field of plastic material, which is permitted to exist as it does because it is applied to a secure, stable and vacant support. Paint, in all its colours and consistencies, is set out upon the pristine emptiness of the supporting surface, and in this field makes its claim as a window through to other objects, or as a physical material in its own right. But this physicality is invariably subservient to a primarily visual sensibility, because however wildly or dynamically the painter may use their paint, it nevertheless remains a performer upon the stable scene of the canvas. Modifying Krauss' terms, the support serves as the analogue of the retinal 'screen of vision'; but this analogue, the support, disappears, even if it is visible, because we tend to assume that the organisation of paint upon it is more important than what the paint is organised on.

This problematic to-and-fro between object, matter and visibility, and the attempt to break this cycle of repetition puts AH's paintings in historical sympathy with the work of such artists as Lucio Fontana, Frank Stella, Robert Rauschenberg, or the work of the painters of the French Supports/Surfaces group; artists of the 60s and 70s, rather than the sceptical re-treading of modernist convention of more recent post-modernist trajectories in painting. If these artists variously grapple with the conceptual confusion that exists between materiality and vision, expressed in the usual symbiosis between medium and support, then AH's paintings furthers this inquiry, but in this case by endangering the stability of the conventional relation between the two.

AH's skins of twisting, ecstatic and irritable paint are at war with themselves; if they initially appear to secure the surface of the support, using the conventional sign of the grid to bring medium and support into material and visual proximity, they just as soon start to slip, tear, gather, droop, sag, drip. The visual bond between the field of paint and the field of its support is immediately violated; the skin of paint, now floating on its own still-wet substrate, become a physical object again, no longer primarily a visual surface, because in setting itself loose it contradicts that visual field that the support is supposed to demarcate. AH's skins are no longer homogenous surfaces securely concealing the whole of the support, nor an array of painted marks dependent on it for their coherence. Instead, impishly and with tongue-in-cheek, they gainsay a founding assumption of painting – that the medium should stay where



you put it – creating a perverse scission and doubling-up in which the image-surface loses its grip, becoming in that instant an object-surface.

The logic of AH's paintings works itself through these various antagonisms. In earlier paintings, AH increasingly pushed the drama of this separation through the intervention of gravity, allowing the skin to slide, fall and tear. As it did so, it would form viscous trails across the underlying paint. In some of the most recent paintings, AH intervenes physically, grabbing, dragging and pushing the skin to form great rucks and swags, exposing ever greater areas of blurred sub-paint. If this exposure is becoming more pronounced, it is perhaps for the reason that it confirms the purpose of the painted skin's act of transformation, from a screen into which our vision projects itself, to an object that joins the world of material things around it. And by falling away to reveal something more viscous and undefined beneath it, the paint mimics the discovery of flesh beneath the skin – a tomato's round acid redness, the sticky yellow-pink of a schoolboy's scraped knee. AH's skins are veils – not veils pinned up through which to peer at the world beyond, but veils to be drawn back, revealing to us that there is nothing there, except the tender, concrete reality of the paint itself. The sign of the grid, balanced and ordered, conceptually clear and impassive, an infinitely extendable space in which nothing ever happens, is here wracked by spasmodic convulsions, clutching its stomach as the oil and gloss disagree like beer and wine on a Friday night. But whilst bringing painting back to its material base like this, AH's painting nevertheless welcomes back qualities of expression, gesture, drama, and emotion; of pain, or anger, or excitement or amusement – the difference only that these are to be seen not through the screen of painting, but witnessed in the flesh of paint itself. In this AH's paintings happily toss away a conception of painting in which matter and vision oppose each other through the agency of the artist, replacing it instead with a surface in which both are inextricably fused, dynamic, angry, and in love.

JJ Charlesworth
October 2003