Describing the appeal for him of Gaelic love songs, W.B. Yeats wrote that 'They seem to be continually straining to express a something which lies beyond the possibility of expression.'[1] Powered equally by myth and physical sensation, Celtic literature infiltrated verse in which Yeats himself tried to create a domain of indefatigable imaginative expectation. He set out to define the relationship between vast fluent ideas and ordinary life and, while his images could be exorbitantly extravagant, his style became an increasingly spare aesthetic refuge from the shapelessness of commonplace existence.

In the era after modernism we are living through, artists have given themselves the licence to explore comparable relationships. In paintings by Alexis Harding, although they harbour an extravagant intensity of painterly concerns – with matter, colour, gesture – that is pared down to a tactual directness, the thought is never fully dislodged that the allusiveness of picture-making to other events, real or imaginary, occupies one corner of the artist's mind. In the 1950s, when abstraction had conferred upon it by commentators a rank approaching that of a natural order within the artistic firmament, a deviation of the sort that Harding represents now was unthinkable by the most serious perpetrators of the idiom. But by the start of the 1980s the pure idealism that was modernism's Berlin Wall had already fallen and a decade was to pass before abstraction had fully reasserted itself, redefined and reinvigorated. Harding is a prime example of that new vigour.

As in the poetry Yeats wrote when a younger man, Harding's work implies the brand of activity that demonstrates persuasively what art can produce from nothing. The impression is conveyed sufficiently strongly in a gallery inhabited by the truculent, torn and abraded surfaces Harding creates. A visitor can go away supposing that the artist is absorbed in another world, in a perpetual engagement of mythic, Yeatsian proportions. Neither the source of that absorption nor the nature of the engagement, however, are readily disclosed to the spectator. Moreover, the language to define this face-off does not quite take shape mentally in the space between.

This space might be characterised as the distance between the observer

and the maker. There is no doubt – as there can be when looking at the ethereal surfaces of Morris Louis, the cool and ironic work of Ad Reinhardt or the autonomous pictorial statements of Ellsworth Kelly – that these surfaces have been made (rather than manufactured), and spillages of paint on to the gallery wall and floor, as in Halt and Cardinal, both 2006, suggest that the making has not finished. As their undisputed maker, Harding identifies himself with activity to the degree that permits a critical automatism into the construction of an image in a controlled way. As if to prove his abstruseness of method, even metaphors stall in the description of how he manipulates his materials. As often in the careful consideration of his body of paintings, the comparison emerges of the artist with a director in the cinematic sense of bringing into being, then watching, halting, intervening and advancing action as the flow of material accumulates. The sequence recurs until the coup de grâce is delivered on two constructively inconsonant membranes of paint. The method is partly an auteur's and is partly improvised in the way Ken Loach makes a film. The sensation that it has taken place in 'real time' is palpably present.

The relationship with material is fundamental to how Harding works. He allows paint to behave naturally according to its own properties within the constraints applied by the artist over an area of board. Temperature and time can be adapted to hasten the procedure, but often are not; a painting takes as long as it takes, and the artist is vigilant to the developments each minute brings. The decisive steps towards an image arise from responding to the interaction between viscous substances and subtle or sudden gradations of gravity. As he follows the slide between surfaces, Harding draws off fluid or increases the angle with a tilt, shift or gentle turn. He is prepared to deny as well as to coax stuff to act in a particular fashion, and to squeeze and to prompt skins to split and break.

This schematic working method is every bit a part of the painting as the image itself. Each piece starts in much the same way, a repetitive physical act for the artist. A grid of household gloss emulsion is traced over a dense field of wet oil pigment that has been brushed and poured on a panel of medium-density fibreboard (MDF). At this stage, Harding strives to maintain a texturally neutral surface. The grid forms by passing twice

over the surface a length of guttering perforated to let the paint poured into it run through. A large panel requires a studio assistant's help and they pace in near synchronised tempo the width and height of the board.

As the metrical, geometrical and striated treatment of this area is loaded with historical precedent, Harding's preference for a grid is especially polemical for critical outsiders. So is the thought that determines how tight the grid will be. The gauge comes from the choice of gutter: different lengths have holes punctuated at different intervals to make a close or open structure. But the nature of the grid is guided by the contact between gloss and oil paint, by how one wet substance takes to another that has already begun tightening and imperceptibly shifting in the slow process towards drying. The artist's actions at this stage respond to what he sees in the uncontrolled temperature of his east London studio. Once the format is laid, he might then leave the surface alone; the process has started and the painting is already underway without his intervention.

What follows has also been done a hundred times before; it is solitary and intense over a period of time defined by paint and temperature more than by the artist. The challenge before Harding is to approach each new instance as if unknown and to be prepared for surprises, since chance is the more forceful element than prediction. Because Harding has sliced thoughts of before and after from his assiduous watch on each actual moment, the encounter is not a duel or a chess match with their strategies and endgames. Chance introduces objectivity, however, and to it is attributable the characteristically anomalous, ragged edges of these paintings, commemorating the moment when skins succumb to gravity and to the general reordering of the physical composition.

In its collection of physical points that can be deformed, folded and unfolded without changing the properties of the physical and abstract elements involved, Harding's abstraction is essentially topological. Not unlike, for instance, the distortion of clay into a ball or rod, these paintings carry with them the traces of that distortion. The movement of paint against a single continuous plane both tells this history and

engenders a kind of cartographic space. Maps of the seabed depict a land-mass pulled, shaped and dumped by tectonic shifts, but in the more commonly seen physical maps of atlases, on classroom walls and in meteorological charts that record is obscured by the printer's blue solid that stands for water. Harding's images combine in a single painterly equivalent the paradoxical topology that these two types of map illustrate – stability and fluidity, opacity and density, continuity and discontinuity that create volumes and movements.

With the surface as the prime place of meaning, Harding sets up imagery that appears fleeting; caught between fixity and motion, it is like a fragment of implicit installations. The most radical dimension of the artist's attitude is to permit the image to spill beyond the coordinates of the surface itself as if daring miscegenation between his promiscuous materials and light, air and space to create new imagery. In recent years the artist's extractive process (rather than being a subtractive or sculptural one) has resulted in boundaries being deliberately widened to permit transgression from wall to floor. In this way, Harding proposes painting at its most real and knowable. The traditional opposition in abstraction of geometric and organic is supplanted by trajectories, fluxes and flows that allude both to the passage of time and, ironically, its suspension. Holding back the natural progression of the surface out into the space beyond the framing edge is like an act of will, a gargantuan intake of breath intended to halt a feared calamity accompanying the arrival of the next minute, to arrest evanescence.

When Harding was a student at Goldsmiths' College of Art from 1992 the contemporary art world was finally coming to terms with the redefinition of abstract painting.[2] The formal and decorative abstraction often shown in commercial galleries in the preceding decade gave way to forceful, 'remixed' and interrogative non-figurative painting. It differed from the modernist model in several important ways. Acknowledging the inaccessibility of Utopia, painters squeezed out idealism with greater plurality, and they borrowed freely a set of forms from the idiom's past without adhering to the social, political, moral or philosophical platforms they once signified.

This trend reverberated with the viewpoints of its leading figures published in magazines and catalogues. Gerhard Richter's comments became especially influential, as when he described his objective in 1988 as 'to bring together, in a living and viable way, the most different and the most contradictory elements in the greatest possible freedom. Not paradise.'[1] What is more, a revived concern for surface texture and handling, curves and inflections as in the work of, for example, Jonathan Lasker and David Reed - different in intent from the questionably incommunicative marks in a painting by Robert Ryman - raised the possibility in critics' minds of subjectivity in abstraction; that is, a link with a reality outside the work itself.

Harding has been prominent in developing this possibility in non-representational art in consequence both of his own experiments and of the milieu at Goldsmiths'. His tutors were Basil Beattie and Michael Craig-Martin, two leading figures in re-evaluating procedures in painting after modernism. Craig-Martin's analytical approach to the image informed Harding's attitude towards working the viewer towards deciphering a painting, while Beattie was influential in trusting to uncertainty and timing in setting up an image. Beattie's own adoption in mid-career of a brasher, 'dirtier' quasi-abstract attitude to marking his surfaces also represented a bold example in itself. But when Harding's three-year course commenced he might not have been aware of these arguments. His focus was on the figure, as it had been during his foundation year at Middlesex Polytechnic.

One aspect of his method had already been set, however, with his concentration on a single format that is revisited repeatedly. It may have contributed to his eventual reaction against the figure and his arrival at today's method. He began to obliterate the subject by pouring paint and scoring lines across the canvas. At the same time his physical relationship with the support changed. From being mounted on the wall it was moved to the floor, the domain of the action painter, and facilitated the mobility around the painting that his gestures now dictated. Surfaces also became denser after he took up emulsion and gloss paints and the cross-hatching of lines developed with more assertive marks.

The energy of the moment, the need for materials and the urgency in his forward motion led him to combine types of paint, abandon emulsion and return to oil.

Harding recalls his year before graduation as being occupied with technical experiments. His protracted observation of the behaviour of certain materials in particular situations has propelled him through his public career, being absorbed into instinctiveness. One result is that paints are never mixed in careful, consistent measures; the proportions of ingredients vary with each painting. These proportions are instinctual, raising the degree of risk possessed by volatile combinations. Incompatible substances can do unexpected things, just as people can act out of character. That risk has been integrated into the process, causing panic sometimes during the hours of watching, waiting, reacting and goading. He fabricates new tones by mixing colours recycled from past paintings and drained into an impure sump of oil and gloss residues preserved under a thickening skin in buckets in the studio.

He also learned at Goldsmiths' the internal mechanics required to convey a memorably large impact on a modest scale. His paintings in the mid-1990s had widths typically between half and three-quarters of a metre yet by concentrating on the core effect of the disrupted plane they resonated beyond their physical extent. This tactic heralded the arrival of his compellingly recalcitrant contribution to a discussion that was gathering pace. Common to these works is the precarious yet cautious sag of matter over the bottom edge. It denoted gravity, weight and movement across the surface, and simultaneously suggested lightness and the disposability of the image. The dislocated mesh of painted lines touch an historical nerve, like the record of a failed attempt to organise Jackson Pollock with geometry. Traversing the plane like reference squares on a relief map made unreliable by territories slipping out of grasp, the device cannot stop the plane disassembling into awkward, abrogated shapes like so much else in modern society. Opening an intellectual space between physical content and meaning has been an enduring quality of Harding's paintings, generating ambiguities that he has been at no great pains to resolve over the years.

Whether the grid is a trigger for his response to historical modernism or the residue of a figure against a conventional ground remain points of conjecture. 'Form' is a word he is reluctant to apply; asked for a more suitable term, he offers 'behavioural process'. As if to underscore its fleeting nature, he emphasises that what is seen now is the current state of the painting. It has arrived at the point recommended by the flow and orchestration of paint, as if determined by a narrative emerging in the painter's mind during his presence at the incubation of the image. 'In the studio I go to enormous lengths to animate the movement of a painting and stop this movement, freeze it at a specific moment in relation to the idea of each piece, make it static within an implied continued movement.' [4]

Yet while the motion of the surface has been arrested where Harding feels it should remain for the remainder of its life, what is seen is not necessarily accepted by the artist as its definitive appearance. Harding cannot rule out further change as a result of the characteristics inherent in the mercurial mix with which he works. 'When you put something down (like paint on a surface),' he asks defiantly, 'why should you expect it to be there when you return?' The proposition is fascinating: if interpreted as evading finality, the moment of commitment, Harding makes uncertainty tangible.

By 'subjectifying' his idea fully into an object, he retains its essential humanity. Aware of the traditionally transformative function of painting, Harding asks himself into what his painting is being transformed. The conventional stance of an abstract image, as a self-referential entity, is not, he accepts, entirely acceptable to his work. Harding hopes the viewer 'will find his own space' that may exist in the evidence of the painting, revealed in physical proximity to the surface. That it might also lie in the social landscape of the world outside the painting is not discarded as a possibility.

A further possibility is that an affinity with the body exists within these images. Alternative commentaries advance this prospect. One represents it as a play on the modernist concern with the primacy of figure or field. In another lies an attempt to pin down in language the

expressive personality projected by clues in the painting of allusions to the kinaesthesia of skin and tissue, to gathering and directing. Around these thoughts of the body and its fluids collect words as contradictory as suppuration and transfusion, and associations with danger and liberation, force and desire, loss and giving, death, grief and new life.

The urge to subjectivity that this vocabulary implies is a revealing element in new abstraction. Sean Scully, an artist more concerned with certainties and the architectural character of his painting than Harding, none the less prefigured in his work Harding's own concern to invest abstraction with emotion aloof from autobiographical origins. Scully has talked about subverting and humanising abstract forms into a synthesis of the body, the intellect and the emotions, a route that Harding seems to share, but up to a point. The Hegelian proposition that lies at the root of Scully's strategy – and was absorbed into utopian artists' faith in balanced composition – is clearly questioned by Harding's broken-down surfaces. Yet both painters place the self as the unyielding presence in the meaning of their work. Their method is intrinsically formal because, as Scully has said, 'the way to make abstract painting specifically emotional is... to make the relationship between the forms and the artist so deep that the articulation of those forms, in relation to the colours and the surface, becomes one of great joy and great pain, and that can be tuned to the point where those sensations can be seen as feelings, where they cross that barrier from something felt to being something seen.'[5]

Colour is a pronounced feature of Harding's work, and while colour is also an instrument of subjectivity, it does not follow that this artist has employed it primarily for pictorial or allusive reasons. Once again, Harding refuses to offer the viewer a map of his intentions; colour's first role is to make his paintings distinct and visible. His chromatic vocabulary includes blacks, dark hues and grey but also very physical bright colours such as red, blue, lilac, yellow, orange and pink. Although modernism prized the depth and clarity of monochrome for its self-defining inclusivity, Harding has never subscribed to the necessity of detaching his statements from commonplace life to ensure their authenticity; he is content for them to leak out into that world.

to work, colour combinations that jangle the optic nerve, by his mood and other artists' choices, they are not dictated by these experiences. Because his ideas are not synonymous with reality, Harding's approach is more scrupulous than a serendipity of visual impulses. Thus the spontaneous part of his work, the gesture, seems to carry the concept into the world and not the other way around. The selection of blood reds for Painting's Insides and Pulmonary Painting, both 2006, highlights the visceral, even carnal nature of his response to how his materials behave. The agitated, explorative, fluxive physical ferment of paint and process has a sensuous undertow analogous with Yeats' word sounds and verbal metaphors. Equating time and a kind of movement with passion, he portrayed a young couple who,

Nerve touching nerve upon that happy ground,
Are bobbins where all time is bound and wound.[5]

'The specific way that Pulmonary Painting behaves is towards an equivalent of the heart's circulatory action.' Yet Harding still expresses surprise at some of his own choices and claims not to control each one; enjoying too much the materiality of paint, he feels no need to clarify. A colour distorted unexpectedly by drying or by the quality of linseed can move a surface in a new direction, and an oily bed of burnt orange pigment with an overlay of a closely-meshed black gloss grid can become Slump-Fear, 2004. The viewer is at liberty to build a narrative framework that associates tone to stroke to image so long as the artist is not called upon to supply definite answers. 'I feel the painting declares everything: the paintings are their titles.'

Yet the most powerful force in Harding's muscular balancing act between content and meaning is the stalking presence of collapse. This prospect takes several forms. In Cross (Yellow/Black), one of three similar polyptychs from 2004, four separate panels are aligned to suggest the physical trajectory outwards of matter towards four opposing compass points. This particular configuration sets up the sensation of projectile movement that contradicts gravity. As the viewer moves closer to the

surface tracks of paint are visible in the play of light on the surface. They register the flow of the chequered skin of gloss paint that in each panel pulls away from the same corner, the departure point that the artist has turned to the centre of the formation. As it pulls away it also leaves a spectral impression of the departed grid and an uncorroborated intimation of latent interior space.

Important to Harding's process is that these gestures are unrepeatable; the outcome of a unique set of circumstances, each image belongs to an unimitated sequence of actions. In the painting 26 June, 09.45am, 2005, Harding followed this sequence to its logical and most radical end of sloughing an entire skin from one surface – the panel – to another – the floor. Its line of trajectory was the downward slope from the upper edge of a tall, floor-based panel of aluminium as it leant under the lip of the high moulding of a gallery wall in London.[7] The title records the moment of delivery on to the bare floorboards of the post-partum image. Significantly, the movement had ruptured the painting but preserved the topological whole. While not unprecedented in the history of art, it redefined the negotiation between object and the viewer's eye and body.

The logical conclusion to this painting was also evidence of its irrationality. 'This is the first time,' Harding had explained in anticipation of this installation, 'that the paintings will really be allowed to "lose it", not to be stopped, to make themselves and then destroy themselves. In this movement...another image will emerge.' The thrill of the almost theatrical spectacle of painterly parthenogenesis aside, the painting was inherently impermanent. It no longer exists, except in memory and documentation.

The possibility of 'losing it' is embodied in the floor-based found objects that Harding has collected for several years. The objects are municipal street barriers twisted violently out of rectilinear shape by the heavy impact of a vehicle. The interrelationship of the two media is telling and the artist once included these buckled railings in an exhibition with paintings.[8] Like Harding's paintings, they are records of unrepeatable

acts – this time of danger, accident and possibly death – that excite an impulse to narrative and flirt with the chances that restraint will stave off collapse. Unlike his paintings, the objects project reality unambiguously into the viewer's presence rather than attempt its equivalents. Moreover, they transfer the artist to the position of onlooker speculating on the residue of lost control, on the thrill-seeking joy rider or the tragedy of a hapless driver behaving out of character.

The prospect of collapse carries broader implications in Harding's work. On one level there is the collapse between abstraction and representation with the confident admission of direct allusion to actual events. Another is Harding's disposal of the traditional modernist interpretation of signs, such as the grid or cross, into an area of no overbearing importance. A third is provided by the image of the action painter whose physical energy distorts and ruptures the accepted organisation of the image. This energy leads Harding to flout the modernist demand that the only physical structure that matters is the front surface of the support. Yet if a critical dichotomy prevails in his work that draws attention to these contested prescriptions, the outcome is often that those same concerns re-emerge regenerated and ultimately revalued.

What this painter refutes, however, is exclusivity with the modernist dialogue. His work moves abstraction beyond its well-rehearsed efforts to rationalise phenomena towards a mode that is more open and humanistic, mixing it with traits associated with narrative, romanticism and the sublime. Desire enters these paintings at a point that entertains the possibility of an abyss – of a nothing heralded by the collapse of the spiritual ideal into inimical antipathy.

Just take this longing from my tongue
All the lonely things my hands have done.
Let me see your beauty broken down
Like you would do for one you love.[3]

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1 John P. Frayne (ed.). Uncollected Prose of W.B. Yeats, I, London: Macmillan, 1970, p. 377.
2 In 1992, the American critic, Roberta Smith, wrote an article with the headline 'Abstraction: a trend that may be coming back' (The New York Times, 10 January 1992). Although starting to fall back midway through the previous decade, such as with exhibitions in London by Neo-Geo American artists at the Saatchi Collection in 1987-8, the critical shadow cast by post-modernism over abstraction did not fully recede – in Britain as well as the USA – until around the time Harding began his undergraduate course. Important survey exhibitions that brought this new attitude in painting to a wider audience at this time include Unbound: Possibilities in Painting, Hayward Gallery, London, 3 March to 30 May 1994, and Nuevas Abstracciones, Palacio de Velázquez, Madrid, 25 April to 23 June 1996 (and tour to Barcelona).
3 Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, 'Interview with Gerhard Richter' in Terry A. Neff (ed.) Gerhard Richter Paintings, London: Thames and Hudson, 1988, p.29.
4 All quotes from the artist come from conversations and correspondence with the author since August 2004.
5 Sean Scully interviewed by Paul Bonaventura, Sean Scully: Paintings & Works on Paper 1982-88 (exh. guide), London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1989, p.3.
6 W.B. Yeats, 'The King of the Great Clock Tower', in W.B. Yeats, The King of the Great Clock Tower, Commentaries and Poems (1934), ed. cit. Shannon, Ireland: Irish University Press, 1970, p.1.
7 26 June, 09.45am was created at the Eagle Gallery for Time Share, a joint show with painter Jane Bustin. While Harding has used MDF as a support consistently since c.1997, he has used other materials. His first paintings after graduation in 1995 were executed on canvas, sometimes laid on masonite. This use of aluminium is unique, however, and was partly dictated by practical considerations. As the panel had to be lifted on several occasions, a light portable material of the length required was needed that would not flex.
8 At the Reg Vardy Gallery, Sunderland, in 2003.
9 Leonard Cohen, 'Take This Longing' (song lyric), 1974.