

ROBERT HOLYHEAD

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paintings and works on paper

with a text by Ingrid Swenson

In recent years, the British artist Robert Holyhead has attracted increasing acclaim for his delicately executed and intimate abstract paintings. His highly developed vocabulary of colour, shape and line is articulated through a personal visual language of positive and negative space created by the application and removal of paint. This exhibition of Holyhead's work offers – for the first time in a gallery presentation – the opportunity to consider the nature of his approach to painting by placing a group of recent paintings in relationship to a sampling drawn from his large production of watercolour drawings. This relationship provides important clues about how his work is made, a clearer insight into his studio practice and suggests, through this close investigation of his process, how Holyhead's work might be positioned in respect to broader considerations around abstraction.

On the three walls of the first gallery nearly a hundred small, same-sized, unframed watercolour drawings are carefully arranged on long narrow ledges in parallel groups of three to form a grid that may be indicative of a serial language. This means of display intentionally mirrors the way that he works with the drawings in his

studio. Drawings such as these (and they are drawings rather than paintings, despite the medium used) have been consistently produced by Holyhead over the past several years and represent just a fraction of the artist's output during this time. This cornucopia of ideas and plethora of possibilities suggests, as is often the case with the medium of watercolour, that these drawings have been quickly made.

In the second, larger gallery space, a group of six new modestly sized paintings have been specially produced for this exhibition. The sparseness of this element of the installation – with only two or three canvases on each wall – is in stark contrast to the large bank of drawings in the first space. Nevertheless, the direct connections between the two groups of work, and especially the progression from drawing to painting, is instantly clear. However, the distinction between these two aspects of his practice is less to do with any hierarchy of purpose or medium, than it is symptomatic of how each category functions within the artist's practice as a whole. For Holyhead, the watercolour drawings are not preliminary sketches for the painting. Instead they act more as test

sites or rehearsals, where the medium enables a multiplicity of ideas to be enacted – a rich feeding ground from which to extract a singular idea to translate from watercolour into oil paint. As such, these paintings could be regarded as solo voices – soliloquies perhaps – that have been individually identified and teased out from the simultaneous chatter and wealth of possibilities offered by the drawings. From another perspective, despite a formal similarity between a drawing and a painting, there is importantly not a process of transcription taking place. The drawings are constructive and additive; marks are made by brushing watercolour onto paper. The paintings however are constructed through the application of paint to a surface only for it then to be partially removed (by cloth, finger or brush), and in that act is the drawing of the painting.

Over the years Holyhead has devised a highly methodical process, to which he has rigorously adhered, for making his work. The gestural fluidity achieved in each painting belies their careful planning – an intuitive yet controlled approach that does not revel in spontaneity. From very early on, he has commented, painting ‘... was an

activity that held a certain type of seriousness for me, yet I didn't know what that seriousness signified... the only way to find out was to pursue it.' His pursuit of a particular idea of making work has led to as much as it has sprung from a very specific and considered studio practice, an investigation of which helps to unlock and understand the very specific position to painting that Holyhead has developed.

The studio for Holyhead is not a chaotic or messy place, but one of fundamental calm, order and quietude where considered and deliberate research and experimentation can take place. The paintings are made in two stages. He first determines the size and number of canvases that will be produced for the space where they will be shown. In PEER's case he envisioned that six would be the appropriate and maximum number. The canvases are then prepared by painting the ground with an intense, solid white using a broad brush that leaves very evident brush marks. It is important for Holyhead that there is nothing ambiguous about the fact that this surface – however pristine the finish – is clearly a painted one. Once the surface is thoroughly dry, Holyhead is ready to make the

selected drawings 2009 – 2012, watercolour on paper, each 21.1 x 15.2 cm

untitled 2012, oil on canvas, 61 x 33 cm

paintings. With a clear purpose that has culminated from an activity of rigorous selection, editing and refining from the numerous watercolours, each painting will then take one or two days, with the whole group completed perhaps within a month.

Each painting takes one predominant colour balanced against areas of white ground. Holyhead applies paint using a range of brushes or cloth. Sometimes he applies the paint with a relatively dry brush or cloth, as in the green painting in this group. At other times it is clear that a soft brush loaded with very diluted pigment was used or that gravity has also been deftly employed creating wave-like configurations across the surface, as in the brown painting from the group. Sometimes contrasting finishes or patina will be employed on a single canvas, as in the red painting, which makes for a rich surface tone as if one means of paint application is in dialogue with the other. When viewing these works, one is compelled to study them up close – both to scrutinise the variation of textures, and also to examine the edges of the coloured shapes that sharply delineate form from ground. These edges appear as if made using a straight edge, but in

fact these are achieved by eye through the careful removal of paint with a brush, cloth or finger. By this method Holyhead forms shapes of white (negative) ground against the coloured (positive) space, which together create 'poise and balance', often creating a tension between the painted surface and painting as object, particularly where the painted ground lips around the top and sides of the stretcher. The configuration of both gestural and geometric form against white ground reinforces the taut, yet essentially fragile balance of composition which is 'precise yet slightly awkward at the same time'. Holyhead acknowledges that this way of making a painting is a kind of enactment of the work; 'The surfaces I prepare in advance deteriorate and fall apart if I continue to wipe back the pigment. So really there's a performative element where it's not a case of painting a little bit, going home, coming back the next day, and so on. There's a certain amount of pressure time-wise. The longer I work on a painting, the more problems I come across because I have to resolve the painting to a certain point within that moment. I work very slowly, but then I have to execute the painting very quickly.'

This very disciplined process of mental as well as physical preparation that Holyhead undergoes could be compared to an athlete's months of training that ensures the best performance for a major competition, or an actor who will memorise lines and rehearse a part before stepping onto the stage to deliver that work to an audience. Unlike the steady production of the watercolour drawings, many months can pass between the making of one group of paintings and another and, as in the case of the six paintings for PEER, their production is often a direct result of an invitation to exhibit.

This cyclical way of working whereby long periods of slow, contemplative and explorative watercolour production is followed by the build up to – and quick execution of – a group of paintings, is a process which Holyhead has described as 'extremely stressful'. And like the athlete or the actor, a certain level of nervousness can be an essential ingredient to ensure the best performance. Although the margin for error is minimised and failure is rare with Holyhead's paintings, this meticulous and at times tormented process begs the questions – what compels him? For Holyhead, it is a desire to question one

of the central and enduring issues of art-making in general, and abstraction in particular. 'My enquiries come down to trying to answer the question "what is painting?" The more I think about abstraction and painting the more I understand that what I'm trying to make is a painting. I'm not trying to arrive at a conclusion.'

Although the term abstraction is the one most immediately and perhaps easily associated with Holyhead's work, for him it has its limitations, or even inadequacies. The notion of the abstract, it could be argued, proposes an inherent disconnection from the outside world. But, as the statement above reveals, Holyhead regards his paintings as being emphatic about their own materiality, and for him this precludes them from being narrowly defined as abstract. He acknowledges that, '...they're not representational in any sense. They don't rely on any sort of figurative imagery, yet at the same time there's a problem for me if I try to make pure abstract paintings. I don't even know what that is. The external world appears in a very complex and unrecognised way ... painting is a mediator, really, between me and a very abstract sensibility.'

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many thanks to those who have helped or contributed this exhibition, particularly Ingrid Swenson, Gemma Lloyd, Karsten Schubert, Doro Globus, Louisa Green, Ben Parsons and Peter White.

ROBERT HOLYHEAD (b. 1974 Trowbridge, UK) lives and works in London. Recent solo exhibitions include two presentations at Karsten Schubert (2009 & 2010). Selected group exhibitions include *British Modern Remade: Style. Design. Glamour. Horror.*, Park Hill, Sheffield (2012); *Corridor*, Oechsner Galerie, Nuremberg (2010/11); *East End Academy: The Painting Edition*, Whitechapel Gallery, London (2009); *Contested Ground*, 176, London (2009). In 2009–10 he was commissioned by the Government Art Collection to produce two site-specific works for the new British Embassy in Brussels.

He was awarded a five-year ACME Fire Station live/work residency in 2005 and in 2007 was invited on a three-month residency with Fundaziun NAIRS, Scuol (Switzerland). His work has been acquired by the Arts Council, The Government Art Collection, Tate and a number of private collections.

Two paintings are currently on show at Tate Britain as part of the display *The Space Between*. He is represented by Karsten Schubert and his third solo exhibition at the gallery will open in November 2012.

For more information see www.robert.holyhead.com

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This publication was produced on the occasion of the exhibition of paintings and works on paper by Robert Holyhead at PEER from 16 May to 7 July 2012

All quotations by the artist have been extracted from an interview with Anthony Spira printed in the exhibition catalogue for his exhibition at Karsten Schubert in 2010, published by Ridinghouse.

This hand-assembled booklet is in an edition of 500.

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We are grateful to
Paul and Louise Cooke Endowment
for their generous support
of this exhibition.



Supported using public funding by

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