

# ROB SHERWOOD: A POETICS OF CONSTRAINT

by Rye Dag Holmboe



Rob Sherwood's main preoccupation seems to be the relationship between structure and disruption – the possibilities of establishing a certain regularity through the use of a grid which must then be undermined. The grid has been a constant presence in his paintings, where it functions as both a generative device and as a material constraint. It enables him to test and explore the relationship between expression and construction, all the while suggesting that the potential of past structures and discursive registers – the grid, the colour chart, the monochrome, the activity of painting itself – remain unrealised and open to innovation. But what is particularly compelling in Sherwood's practice is the way in which this preoccupation isn't only a formal procedure. Rather, it is the means to visualise tensions in our own lives between feelings of composure and feelings of uncertainty as well as the historical conditions that call for their elaboration in paint.

These tensions are embodied in the new paintings exhibited at the Federica Schiavo Gallery in a markedly different way than they were in the works presented at London's Hannah Barry Gallery two years ago. In the earlier paintings the pictorial surface was emphatically flat. The same sized grid was used, with every square measuring 1.5 by 1.5 centimetres, but each was filled with paint in such a way that the brushstrokes were barely visible, sometimes not visible at all. For Sherwood these chromatically saturated paintings were 'designed' rather than painted. From this perspective they might be understood as attempts to evacuate any last residue of subjectivity from the productive process, and with it any trace of the time of making. When combined with the only minor tonal adjustments the artist allowed himself (as with the three large monochromes painted in 2011 titled *Red*, *Blue* and *Yellow*), the resulting paintings produced a kind of optical blockage in the viewer, whose eye was unable to pass beyond the bright, flickering hues of the painted surface. For all their dazzling purity – and indeed their beauty – these works were resolutely silent, and in their flat, screen-like materiality they appeared almost atemporal, perhaps even forgetful, as if verging on the amnesiac.

The present works, however, call for a different kind of attention, one that reintroduces temporality into the artwork and allows for the spectator to be implicated – both optically *and* somatically – as an active

participant in the paintings' inner logic. In the magisterial *In Streams* (2013), for instance, we encounter the same structuring grid as we did in the earlier paintings, but here the work plays on several spatial registers at once. The upper-central portion of the canvas is filled with a dense patch of chlorinated blues and greens which at a distance resembles a frosted cloud. When you focus on this portion of the canvas the surrounding space becomes indistinct and the colours at the periphery of the pictorial field – flat reds, yellows, pinks and blacks – merge into one another, as if breathing upon the edge of your vision. In spite of the work's quiet impassivity there is something disorientating in the effort to take everything in at once.

But your impression of the painting changes as the viewing distance changes. When you approach *In Streams* what was a predominantly optical experience is modified by the work's spatial aspects. The paint contained in the squares that compose the cloud-like shape are slightly soiled and the paint has been applied thickly, often leaving behind fragile peaks that spill out of their geometric containers into neighbouring squares, pushing the pictorial field forward into three-dimensional space. In this way *In Streams*' cold unworldliness gives way to a tactile dimension and opens up, if not exactly an illusionistic sense of perspectival recession, then at least a depth of field that is decidedly absent from Sherwood's earlier paintings.

Unlike the previous monochromes, moreover, where the combination of chromatic saturation with serial order and modular repetition seemed to re-enact contemporary fantasies of technological precision – one of the founding myths of digital technology and the 'information age', a point I will return to – here the precise, sharp lines of the grid remain visible on parts of the unprimed canvas, as do splashes of green paint Sherwood uses as spatial markers to orient himself as he works. By allowing for the superimposition of three visual systems to remain visible the artist 'lays bare the device,' as the Russian Formalists used to say. The painting reveals how it was made and so becomes as much about the process of making and the temporality imbedded in that process as it is about the final product. But an equally important point to make here is that, if the presence of a grid functions as both a means to structure the pictorial plane and as a means to acknowledge that plane as a discursive register that makes disruption possible in the first place, here gesture is not wholly submitted to the determinations of geometry. Instead both structure and disruption enter into an unresolved dialectic: gesture disrupts the structure that enables gesture.

It might seem tempting at this point to enter into a discussion of technology and technological determinism, particularly as it bears on the question of the digital. The reception of Sherwood's paintings has often veered in that direction, and indeed the artist has previously worked with digital media in an installation titled *The Warp and The Weft* exhibited at London's Son Gallery in 2012, which, among other things, explored questions of digital degradation and its attendant temporalities. But I would hesitate to think of a work like *In Streams* as being explicitly 'about' these technologies, and not only because such a reading would probably lead to tendentious comparisons between a painted grid and a pixelated screen. The problem lies elsewhere. To think of each coloured square as a 'hand-painted pixel', for instance, and so to understand Sherwood's painting straightforwardly as a ruinous 'representation' of the high-resolution digitised image – whether we call it impersonal, ahistorical or simulacral – would bring us perilously close to the fetishization of the 'hand-made' so prevalent in contemporary commodity culture. In this respect think of the current fetishization of the hand in 'original' artisanal products, which, to borrow Roland Barthes' term, simply serves as an 'alibi' for the alienated society which produces and consumes them.

This is not to say that, in the absence of an explicit reference to digital technology, these issues are not present in Sherwood's paintings. On the contrary, the fraught relation between the gesture as fetish and the

gesture as both a disruptive and constrained form of expression is precisely the relation that is enacted on the pictorial field of a work like *In Streams*. Nor am I suggesting that there is no connection to be made between his paintings and the structure of the digital image *tout court*, or that the handmade – the forms of knowledge produced by the hand – cannot be understood in certain contexts as a disruption of it. There are, no doubt, as many ways of looking at Sherwood's works as there are shifts in light, and such lines of inquiry may prove fruitful. But his works do not need to be attached to these discourses in order to do this work, which forms part of the very weft of the paintings themselves.

In the small-format paintings encountered in the series *Her Eyes On (#1-5)*, for example, the question of fetishism and its relation to the handmade is exacerbated and seems to receive a reflexive, almost parodistic treatment. The series comprises five small-format wooden panels, each painted in different shades of white. These vary from soft greys to greys with a faintly metallic sheen to whites very slightly tinged with pale yellow, though all use the same sized grid and share a similar leaden gleam. As you allow your attention to linger on the works, however, their specificities become apparent. In each the surface of the pictorial plane is irregular. The paint has been applied thickly and the brushmarks remain visible, so that what at first seemed even, or neutral, betrays the marks of hand and process – the time of making. The surface, moreover, is punctuated by a series of small horizontal or vertical strokes. These lend each painting varying degrees of surface tension and luminosity, though this last effect is always tempered by the scumbled surface of the pictorial plane, which absorbs more light than it reflects.

Significantly, the sides of these paintings have been covered in gold-leaf. This materialises their edges and transforms the paintings into reliefs of sorts or, better, into what the art historian Rosalind Krauss has termed 'paintings-as-objects.' That is, objects to be seen as much as paintings to be looked at. But the gold leaf is also a source of radiant light, a light that dissolves the paintings' edges into a golden halo. This lends the works an iconic quality that is particularly difficult to negotiate because the painted surface of each work does not invoke any of the metaphysical abstractions often associated with the monochrome: timelessness, purity, transcendence, the sublime, and so on. Instead the scumbled, almost crumbly surface of the pictorial plane is impassive, wall-like. If the halo of light produces an aura of imminent revelation that aura is sabotaged by the insistent materiality of the painted surface.

Similar operations unfold in *Outlined in Stark Clarity* (2012-3) and *Field* (2012), with similar consequences. Both works set up an interplay between a sense of the handmade and a lacquered, nearly industrial finish. Both are based on process and repetition but, as with the series *Her Eyes On (#1-5)*, in each the pictorial surface is punctuated by horizontal and vertical brushstrokes, variables that introduce a sense of randomness or contingency that breaks the grid's invariant logic. But what is peculiar about these paintings is that the bright colours used – in the first every imaginable shade of brilliant yellow, in the second a vivid and variegated green, reminiscent perhaps of that rare meteorological phenomenon the 'green ray' – are somehow deprived of their evocativeness. The visible brushstrokes and the thickness of the paint may override the constraints of the grid, but the sheen or veneer that has been applied to the surface neutralises this underlying dynamism by locking any residual movement with stillness.

What are we to make to the contradictory operations we encounter in these works? Writing about the fetishization of gesture in relation to Abstract Expressionism, the recently deceased artist Mike Kelley made a suggestive point. 'It is interesting,' he writes, 'that all this hermeneutic analysis of stains – non-iconic signifiers, pure effects of support or tonality – tends to define, in fact, a new art of iconic devotion.'

What Kelley meant by this was that the break up of representational or iconic forms in Abstract Expressionist painting led to the fetishization of the trace, understood here as the semblance of pure expressivity and spontaneity. But with Sherwood's recent paintings this fetishization is resisted because the grid functions as a matrix that is both generative *and* constrictive. Moreover, if the halo that surrounds the paintings in *Her Eyes On (#1-5)* and the seductive sheen encountered in works like *Field* or *Outlined in Stark Clarity* allow us to imagine them as icons of devotion or symbols of desire, the promise of fulfilment in the ritual of viewing is foiled. No revelation takes place except for what might be termed a negative epiphany. In the end what we see is no more – but also no less – than the play of light on a thickly painted surface.

The way the various operations that unfold in Sherwood's paintings always return the viewer to the material facticity of paint is one of the most remarkable qualities of his work. And it is also this emphatic materiality that problematises the question of whether or not these paintings are abstract. Sherwood's works are never representational or figurative, at least not in any straightforward sense, which would make it easy to describe them as 'abstract paintings'. At the same time, however, their insistent material presence and the way they reflexively acknowledge their own constructedness or 'facticity' – a term which stems from the Latin *facere*, which literally means 'to make' or 'to produce' – makes them resistant to any association with temporal invariants like the immaterial, the ineffable or the immutable, which is how abstraction is usually understood. Sherwood's paintings allow time to unfold in space. The memories of their making are gathered up inside them and the viewer can only experience these memories through a series of complex operations, a process which itself takes time.

In his novel *Slowness*, Milan Kundera writes that capitalist modernity is obsessed by 'the desire to forget', and it is to fulfill that desire that it gives over to the demon of speed, which for him is closely tied to contemporary forms of abstraction (think, for instance, of streams of information and cross-border capital flows). From this perspective the temporal operations embedded in Sherwood's works and the temporality that inheres in our experience of them seem to undo the clear-cut opposition between representation and abstraction. Because Sherwood's paintings do represent something – the time of making. And if they are about anything, then perhaps we could say they are about the relation between slowness and memory. In the 'information age', a time when life seems to be moving at such speeds that we are in danger of forgetting things altogether, whether we can meaningfully call the desire to remember embodied in Sherwood's paintings 'abstract' is a moot point. In many ways there is nothing abstract about them.

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on the cover: Rob Sherwood, *In Streams*, 2012-2013  
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