

CHARLES TYRRELL, Ten Years
An Essay by Aidan Dunne
Royal Hibernian Academy, Dublin, 2001

FOREWARD

Unlike the theatre or music where a director can return again and again to a body of work to deepen and hone their understanding and presentation, visual arts tends towards the once-off project. I have always envied their opportunities and thankfully now find myself once more working with Charles Tyrrell, an exception not the rule in my practice.

Charles Tyrrell is probably the best painter of his generation in Ireland. It was a generation forged between a belief in painting and its possibilities and the rigour of conceptualist and minimalist strategies of the early seventies. For the past fifteen years he has resided in a remote area of Ireland where the intensity of his explorations into paint's non-rational and rational qualities have produced work anything but remote from the essential artistic questions of our time.

This exhibition confines itself to the artist's work from 1990 to 2000, a logical progression from the Surface and Structure exhibition that we did at the Douglas Hyde Gallery in 1987.

We are indebted to the many enthusiastic collectors of this work for their generosity in lending to this show. My gratitude also to Aidan Dunne, a long time commentor on the artist, for his excellent exegesis of the work. Many of the logistics were more than ably handled by my colleague Ruth Carroll. The Taylor Galleries were generous in their support and assistance with all aspects of the exhibition.

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Patrick T. Murphy Director

arguing painting

Since 1990, Charles Tyrrell has made several series of paintings in his studio on the Beara Peninsula in West Cork. The location, a remote, spectacular headland dramatically situated overlooking the Atlantic, is worth mentioning because, although it is tempting to read

references to landscape into the colours and textures of his work, he is, in an undogmatic but resolute sense, an abstract painter. There is no conscious representational connection between his painting and the world of appearances. In fact the relation of his painting to the world beyond it is eloquently expressed in his own formulation, that he abstracts towards rather than from the real, “travelling towards an image that has its own reality”¹, but always starts from “a point of bland, abstract logic.”² The impetus is from a Platonic realm of pure abstraction to “an image that incorporates the human reality of confusion and fallibility.”³

As it happens, abstract logic is a particularly appropriate term because you will not find a more concentrated, closely argued body of work in Irish art. In its rigorous tracking of possibilities within precise, unyielding (if not quite unchanging) stylistic parameters, it is akin to Sean Scully’s almost relentless use of the stripe, and in a way Scully is an obvious comparison, yet beyond their shared qualities, of concentrated abstraction and what might be called a work ethic, he and Tyrrell are not particularly alike as painters.

If you think of abstract painting as a language, Scully’s syntactic unit is the stripe, capable of infinite permutation but structurally consistent, endlessly rebuilt into different sets of internal relationships. It is difficult to pin down a comparable syntactic unit in Tyrrell’s work, though it might seem that there are some candidates. For example, the system of diagonal subdivisions within square formats that he favours, implicitly or explicitly, may be one such candidate. Yet diagonals in his work function much more as grids than stripes do in Scully’s. The point about a grid is that it is uniform and indefinitely extendable. While the diagonal network serves as a structural underpinning and also as a foregrounded structural element (that is, in demarcating areas of different colour or tonality) in Tyrrell’s painting, it doesn’t become a motif, a building block, like the stripe for Scully. It’s more a neutral linear scaffolding, indicating potentialities that may or may not be picked up. Significantly, it might also function as a metaphor for any network of meaning, including language, or an iconographic system.

Several qualities stand out in the paintings. Apart from the grid structure, variously highlighted and down-played, or, you could say, confirmed and implied, there are the related, evidently insistent impulses to formulate and demarcate a motif, and, over a period of several years, to reconcile two bisected, divergent motifs. It is not too outlandish to appeal to an example from geology to convey the peculiar effect of the latter paintings, in which adjacent portions are both linked and separate, like certain geological faults, in which a

piece of uniform terrain is fractured, misaligned and distorted along a fault line in any one or combination of a variety of ways. But here it would be as well to remember Tyrrell's cautionary note about the direction he works from. That is, we shouldn't presume a pre-existing coherence at all.

These factors relate to but do not entirely explain another consistent characteristic of the paintings, which is that they actively resist reading in various ways. Surface disjunctures such as those implied by similar but different motifs are one of the ways they do so, and also other details of surface organisation, by which areas are blocked out in patterns that militate against our viewing them in terms of conventional hierarchical compositional structure. We are quietly prompted to negotiate their surfaces in different, piecemeal ways. This process is explicitly addressed in several paintings from 1992. *March 1992*, for example, presents us with a sequence of three distinct banded areas, demarcated by vertical divisions. There are suggestions of common underpainting, and the surface is prevented from becoming incoherent, is actually firmly locked together, by an exceptionally strong grid framework of both verticals and diagonals. *Couple (1992)*, orientated around one vertical division, straightforwardly offers a mismatch, instituting a theme that is to dominate a great deal of Tyrrell's work over the decade. Again, the grid holds it all together, but we are left in little doubt that two mutually exclusive systems of meaning, or personalities, or factions, are united in a way that doesn't belie their fundamental difference, even incompatibility.

Divide I (1993), assures us of the underlying cohesion of the grid with its imposing double statement on the right-hand side. But such insistence is necessary given the emergence of a cryptic, arched form on the left, out of a field of densely worked, clotted grey pigment. In 1993, another characteristic device makes its first appearance in the *Dreamfield* paintings, works that, Tyrrell notes, took him by surprise 4. The linking, underlying grid is indicated in the form of four cutaway corners in which we can glimpse the beginnings of the diagonals.

Tyrrell refers to these corner-pieces as "protecting or guaranteeing the grid" 5, and, "pinning down the field" 6, which is not otherwise indicated in the pictorial space, so that in each case a small, anomalous form, a box-like composite, is left to float freely against an amorphous ground. When, in 1999, he began to use aluminium as a support, it allowed him to scrape paint away from the background, leaving contained forms against slick, mirror-like grounds, implicated in an underlying structural grid by virtue of the cornerpieces.

Resistance to being read is also there in Tyrrell's persistent refusal to allow a motif to become a recognisable representational token, and his linked rejection of a coherent pictorial space, apparent throughout his variously titled paintings of 1993–1994, and two subsequent series, the 1995 and Shadowline paintings. As he puts it, he sees himself "keeping one step away from making something recognisable."⁷ Interestingly, this inclination is underlined by the unmistakably defensive character of many of the forms, which give the paintings the appearance of being literally armoured against us – against, that is, the possibility of interpretation, or the possibility of a specific kind of interpretation.

Usually the surfaces of the paintings have a distinctly worked, contested air. They suggest ground that has been churned up. They are the residual evidence of processes that have swept across them in wave upon wave of effort, in some respects like a description of Hughie O'Donoghue's pictures as being like a terrain over which a battle has been fought. It could be that Tyrrell's use of the metaphor of conflicting systems has antecedents in the two distinct kinds of mark that tended, in juxtaposition, to constitute his paintings. Between them they reflect the polarity of his points of departure and arrival, from logical abstraction to "human fallibility and confusion." That is, the hard-edged, linear mark and, equally, the relatively smooth colour field as opposed to the gestural, expressive brush-stroke and the variegated, agitated field with its landscape and atmospheric associations.

At times he has pursued a dialectic between these kinds of mark and the categories of meaning they might imply, specifying August Blue (1992), for example, or March 1992 which can certainly be read, from left to right, as a schematic account of winter ceding to spring – or, equally, if not very helpfully, not. However, throughout the first half of the 1990s, between the Borderland paintings of 1991 and the 1995 paintings, the dichotomy between the two kinds of mark is systematically undone. There is a similar quality of touch to both the fields of colour and the geometric scaffolding. The point of convergence is a mutual sense of being provisional, contested. Again, more recently, aluminium streamlines the process in allowing him to work surfaces without accumulating layer upon layer of pigment.

To say that the paintings resist interpretation should not be taken to mean that the painter is against them being understood. It's more a question of the level at which he believes that they can be understood, the level at which he believes they can function. In this regard they are certainly about their refusal to be pinned down in terms of meaning.

That is, they are about something that cannot quite be depicted, though they continually approach depiction. Similarly, in relation to the Shadowline paintings, he refers to Conrad's notion of a man being shadowed by himself⁸. The line marks the imperceptible shift from innocence to experience, from youth to an awareness of death and disaster. The individual is shadowed by a sense of his own mortality, but more than this, he comes to realise that, as it might be phrased within the terms of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, an intimation of mortality, in the form of a central absence or lack, underlies the field of desire within which he operates.

Writing about Lacan, Malcolm Bowie cites Frank Stella on painting as reminding us "that what is not there, what we cannot quite find, is what great painting always promises." ⁹ Stella speaks of the artist "looking for this elusive something," something he cannot see "even though he is quite certain that what he is looking for shadows him every moment he looks around. He hopes it is what he cannot know, what he will never see, but the conviction remains that the shadow that follows but cannot be seen is simply the dull presence of his own mortality." What does he do? "Painters instinctively look to the mirror for reassurance..." ¹⁰ In fact Tyrrell looks to the reflective surface of polished aluminium, within which he tries to define an indefinable form that is anchored to, but never quite explicable within the networks of meaning represented by the grid. To pursue, in an informal way, the L Lacanian line of interpretation, he declines to construct a recognisable motif within the Imaginary order, that is to settle for an agreed but essentially spurious meaning and identify with a mirror image. It's worth noting here that the series of centrifugal paintings he made in the late 1980s, all based on a square segmented by two diagonals, circulate around an unmistakable hollowness at the centre, an idea that comes through in some of the subsequent Borderland series.

He clearly prefers the shifting ground of the Symbolic order, that is the Dreamfield of the freed-up grid in which things exist provisionally, on what Lacan terms "an assumed foundation of absence." ¹¹ But equally, the many paintings which exhibit a faulted or mismatched structure could be said to demonstrate the limitations of the Symbolic. In each case, neither proposed system within an individual painting can claim greater validity. Since then, the emergent, anomalous individual motifs, the forms searched for and defined within the field, nudge us towards something else, perhaps a Real which resists assimilation within either order, the mysterious something that is always "one step

away from” being recognisable and nameable. This may be the chimerical object of desire or, on another level, the central absence that shadows the painter.

The notion of depicting what cannot be depicted extends back to the Taoist formulation:

The name that can be named
is not the constant name
the nameless was the beginning of heaven and earth 12

Marcel Duchamp’s last, perplexing work, the installation Given 1) the waterfall, 2) illuminating gas, could be seen as an attempt to dramatise this idea very much in terms of a Lacanian notion of desire: through a closed gate we glimpse a nude woman, her legs splayed, her exposed vagina the emblem of, variously and simultaneously, erotic desire, absence and origin. Gustave Courbet’s notorious painting Origin of the World is essentially based on the same idea, including the notion of showing the unshowable within a particular societal framework.

One way of looking at Tyrrell’s work is to say that within it he attempts to renegotiate this position in relation to his own time and place. His painting evidences a persistent uneasiness about language that is related to an unwillingness to pin down, label and articulate what the painting is or, the standard question, what it is a painting of. It is always aiming for what cannot be seen, perpetuating desire by indefinitely postponing its satisfaction. The idea is that so long as we do not know what it is, there is room for it to function. What it is is perpetually out of reach in the way that the object of desire is perpetually out of reach because it is always somehow beyond what we imagine it to be. It is, as Lacan would have it, defined by lack, by absence, or, in Derridean terms, it is “always already absence” 13. It is by definition what we cannot articulate. By this formulation, Tyrrell’s aim in his work is to engineer a perpetual, ongoing openness, a space in which our eyes can desire.

Aidan Dunne

FOOTNOTES

1. Artist’s statement, Shadowlines catalogue, 1998
2. Conversation with the artist, September 29, 2000
3. As 1
- 4, 5, 6, 7 As 2

8. The title is from Joseph Conrad's novel *The Shadow-Line*, based on his early sea-faring experiences and first published in installments in 1916.
9. Malcolm Bowie, *Lacan* (Fontana Press, L London 1991), p 169, citing Frank S Stella's *Working Space* (1986)
10. As 9
11. Lacan quoted in Bowie, p92
12. Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, trans D. C. Lau (Penguin, London 1963) p57
13. Denis Donoghue, *Ferocious Alphabets*, Faber and Faber, London 1981, p158

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