

Colin Booth
Paintings 2000-2005

The Mark of the Medium
Alex Coles

In Conversation
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Biography

Colin Booth

The Mark of the Medium

Alex Coles

Although Walter Benjamin is known within the world of the arts more for his exposition on the mass reproducibility of the image, in 1917 he wrote two essays on that most traditional of subjects: painting. 'Painting, Sign or Mark' is the longest of these two essays and while still relatively brief it nonetheless contains a substantial theory of the medium. Only recently has it been translated, hence its neglect by critics and historians of painting. At times 'Painting, Sign or Mark' is quite esoteric, attempting to personalise the very stuff of painting the – medium – rather than grind out an objective genealogy like many critics did both before and after Benjamin.

From the very outset, Benjamin boldly divides all painting into two opposing categories: painting composed through 'signs' and painting composed through 'marks'. Benjamin states that the first basic difference between these two categories "is that the sign is printed on something, whereas the mark emerges from it." The sign is thus something that is more graphic in character and though at times it is associated with figurative forms of painting it can also refer to an abstract painter like Wassily Kandinsky who composes his abstract pictures through a succession of graphic signs. By contrast, according to

Repetitions I 2000

Acrylic on canvas

109cm x 81cm



Untitled 2000
Acrylic on Canvas
38cm x 35cm

Opposite: **Dot Matrix VII 2000**
Acrylic on canvas
112cm x 84cm
Private Collection

Benjamin, “the realm of the mark is the medium.” The mark is thus something that is at one with abstract painting.

Colin Booth is a contemporary artist who fashions abstract paintings that nimbly operate in and around Benjamin’s theory of the mark. In fact, the earliest paintings in the present exhibition do nothing less than explore the myriad nuances of the mark. Light in feeling, these paintings are composed through a process in which off-white paint is poured onto an off-white background straight from a jar. The paint pools into disc-like shapes that interlock across the surface of the canvas to create a tight honeycomb-like compositional grid that lends it a pictorial tension. Nowhere is the grid regular: the paint often runs amok, breaking the circle as it streams off in myriad directions. Paint stuff and compositional structure thus counterpoint one another in a play-off that is very effective.

In ‘Painting, Sign or Mark’ Benjamin theorises about the relationship between the mark and composition in a not dissimilar fashion to the way Booth practices it in these paintings. “The problem of painting becomes clear only when we understand the nature of the mark in the narrower sense, while feeling astonished that a picture can have a composition even though this cannot be reduced to a graphic design.” Booth doesn’t ‘design’ the configurations that underpin his paintings rather he ‘finds’ them through the time-based process of actually applying paint to canvas.

The most recent paintings in the exhibition strike a very different chord to the earlier ones in terms of mood. Darker and more brooding, in them Booth addresses the mark in



a different way: through colour. Each of the paintings plays orange, blue or green discs off against a dark background. Or at least appears to do so, since a more reflective look enables the subtlety of the relationship between the discs and the background to reveal itself. This judicious optical effect also accurately corresponds with Benjamin's comments on colour and ground: "A picture has no background. Nor is one colour ever superimposed on another, but appears in the medium of another colour."

Focusing on 'Orange Hollow', a painting composed of two dominant colours, orange and brown, it seems as though, in the one instance, the orange is seeping through the dark brown viscous substance, when in actual fact the contrary is true, since the orange blips have been applied to the dark background. The result is that each colour now "appears in the medium of another." Not mere optical trickery, this effect is actually deployed for the emotional intensity it evokes. The other two paintings repeat the effect but in imaginatively different ways.

Orange Hollow 2005

Acrylic on Canvas
122cm x 153cm
Private Collection

Opposite: **Bluepoint III 2004**

Acrylic on Canvas
61cm x 56cm



Top: **Dot Matrix XII** 2003
Acrylic on Canvas
40cm x 36cm

Opposite: **Night Visitors** 2004
Acrylic on Canvas
122cm x 153cm

It is important to situate Booth's paintings historically, too. They occupy a place somewhere in the region of the paintings of Agnes Martin and Brice Marden. Both of these artists thwarted Frank Stella's early fascination with mechanical serial structure by re-introducing a sense of intuition into their paintings. This is palpably felt through the way they apply paint to canvas as a way of developing an already loosely conceived structure. Precisely how Martin and Marden do so is key to Booth. For while seeming dryer, more deadpan in tone, their paintings are in fact subtler, less obvious than those of their forebears, the Abstract Expressionists, without being as dry as Stella's.

Booth's paintings are composed intuitively and seriality is really only used to get the painting going: the structure of the dots simply gives him something to play against. The dots are a compositional trigger and the painting could lurch off in various directions depending on Booth's response to each stage of the production of the work. But for Stella the reverse is true: the adopted serial structure gets him out of having to make intuitive compositional decisions altogether. The finished form of the painting has been decided before it has been started. The painter assumes the role of an artisan who delivers the picture. Nothing could be further than Booth's experience of painting.

By finding a fresh way to work with Benjamin's notion of the mark Booth manages to situate his paintings firmly within the genealogy of abstract painting and so find a new way to tease the paradigm forward.

¹ Walter Benjamin, Selected Writings Vol. 1, p.84

Christine Kapteijn in conversation with Colin Booth

CK *To what degree do you think your painting can be interpreted as 'gestural', in other words investigating expression in the light of the physical process of painting?*

CB Gestural mark-making in the sense of a mark being made by a sweep of the brush, is present in my earlier works, but once I began pouring paint onto canvas in a methodical and repetitive way, it became subsumed in the process.

I called these paintings 'Repetitions' because at the time they represented a way of composing a painting that could be repeated time and time again. Although the paintings were generically similar, by breaking-up and interrupting the pattern of repetition, each painting looked different. Pouring pools of paint at varying intervals across the canvas became a kind of 'gesture'. Adding tints of grey to the white paintings became another kind of 'gesture'. Although I was using a process that could be described as systematic, in that the pools of paint were poured across the canvas in a regular pattern of lines, all the time I was making decisions that affected the outcome.

CK *Do you mean that a kind of systematic decision-making comes into it?*

CB: It does, but I would say that the decision-making process is more intuitive than systematic. I also think this process begins long before any paint is mixed and applied to canvas. I have to make decisions about the size and dimensions of the support. I deliberately use two inch deep stretchers to make the painting more of an object in its own right. It also alleviates the need to use a frame. It's common-place now, but until artists such as Frank Stella came along in the sixties and paintings were discussed in terms of their 'objecthood', decisions of this nature were not part of the process of making paintings.

As Robert Ryman said at the time, the problem for painters is not what to paint, but how to paint. So when I choose to cover a canvas with dots, I'm beginning to solve that problem. I know roughly what form the painting will take, in the same sense that a landscape painter will know they are going to produce a landscape, and I can focus on what really interests me, which is working with paint.



Opposite:
Yellow Field II (detail) 2003
Acrylic on Canvas
122cm x 142cm

CK *Does this process become like a kind of handwriting?*

CB Like text on a page, yes, almost literally. I start at the top left hand corner of the canvas and finish at the bottom right. But this is really only one element of the painting, particularly in more recent work. In paintings such as 'Bluepoint III' and 'If Only' I have been using glazes and varnish and the painted surface is materially more complex and spatially ambiguous.

The symmetrical pattern of the dots which runs across the canvas is still the starting point, but I am not actually working with symmetry. It would make life a lot easier if I could start a painting at one point and know it was finished at another point. That used to be the case with the 'Repetitions' paintings and in the later 'White Field' series. When the rows of dots were complete, there was a clear sense that the painting was now finished. But now the paintings are worked on over a period of time and are often left to be continued at a later stage.

CK *How would you describe that sense of revisiting the painting before its completion. At what stage is it completed?*

CB A painting is resolved or completed only when there appears to be nothing more that can be done to it. There is a sense of balance, a compositional balance if you like, which if I was to continue would probably be lost. Of course, there are times you continue anyway and the painting is either lost, or it develops in an unexpected way.

CK *Are you the only judge of that balance, do you think, or does the viewer also come into that?*

CB I can only bring my own aesthetic experience or judgement to it; what happens next is outside my control. There are times when people come to the studio and look at work which isn't finished and say 'don't do any more to it, I like it as it is', or else they will make well-intentioned suggestions as to what I might do with a particular painting. Often they are people whose opinions I respect, but I still can't allow it to affect my decision-making process.

CK *So you do distinguish between your vision of its completion and balance and their vision. You only paint according to your vision.*

CB I think that's true of any artist. The longer you paint, the more you realise you are essentially mining the same aesthetic seam. It's not always apparent that there is a connecting thread through all of your work, but the evidence is always there when you have an opportunity to collect a reasonable body of work together for a show.

Robert Motherwell touched upon an interesting thing years ago when he discussed the idea of an artist's identity: the stronger the work, the stronger the sense of identity. A lot of artists work is instantly recognisable because of this strong and immediate sense of identity. There is something about it which distinguishes

Orangeade 2004
Acrylic on Canvas
61cm x 56cm

it from any other artist's work. This is the artist's vision, if you want to call it that, and this is why they have to ignore advice, however well meant, unless it coincides with what they have already decided to do. Then it becomes confirmation and every artist needs this. In effect, it's recognition.

CK *How would you characterise the development that has occurred so far in your work. This exhibition brings together works from the period 2000 to 2005.*

CB In a nutshell, I think I've gone from making paintings which are highly seductive on the eye, to making paintings that are more complex, difficult and harder to fathom. The white paintings shown at the De La Warr Pavilion in 2001 were a kind of watershed. They clarified a number of my concerns as a painter, such as surface, light, texture and so on and they pulled them together in an unexpected way. I had been using a pouring technique for some time, but not in this orderly, structured way.

CK *Would you say there are any direct influences in this work?*

CB No, but these particular paintings did reconnect me with my very early interest in the work of artists such as Agnes Martin and Brice Marden. I think their paintings have the look of what is described as Minimalist, or Geometric Abstraction, but they are, or were engaged in a much more personal and intimate kind of painting. The hand-made mark and the sense of measured, intuitive judgement that informs their painting is something I could relate to and still do.

CK *Are there other painters you relate to in this way?*

CB One of the best exhibitions I have seen in the past couple of years was the Robert Ryman show at the Haunch of Venison. His new 'colour' paintings are probably his best work. Barnett Newman's 'Stations of the Cross', which I saw for the first time at the Tate Modern, are some of the most important paintings of the past fifty years. I also have tremendous admiration for Callum Innes, although I could never aspire to his geometric precision.

But to return to your question about how the work has developed. I think the most important thing is that I have gradually abandoned the geometric structure of the white paintings and introduced a looser, more intuitive, or emotional element into the work.

CK *How is this more personal and emotional approach reflected in the work?*

CB Probably by the introduction of colour and I'm also varying the way I'm using the paint. There is more visible texture on the surface. I'm using glazes and I'm mixing up different techniques of applying paint. However, I wouldn't want to put too literal an interpretation on it.

CK *But do you think the earlier white paintings could be termed as less expressive, more internal or closed works, whereas the colour in the more recent pictures reflects a more outward-looking expressive development?*

CB I think the white paintings represented a kind of purity, an aesthetic purity and could therefore be interpreted as less expressive.

CK *And do you think people are sometimes more comfortable with that?*

CB Absolutely. The paintings relate to early Modernism, they relate to the classic white architecture of the thirties and they also appear very contemporary because of the current interest in architecture and design. The aesthetic has been absorbed into our culture.

CK *We're talking about the development within your work, towards colour. How did that evolve. How did it occur?*

CB The white paintings were to do with clarifying structure and also with clarifying some of the formal issues within my painting. I think if something is white, or mostly white without the complication or even the distraction of colour, the structure of the painting itself is laid bare in front of you. In a sense these paintings were like a fresh start, a clean slate to develop from and the gradual introduction of colour has been one of these developments.

CK *Do you think these changes in your work might present a problem to the viewer who has seen the work evolve over a period of time?*

CB New work needs time to settle. I have problems sometimes in understanding why certain things have happened. I completed three, very large dark paintings recently which I called 'Looking Back'. They aren't in the show, nor are they illustrated in the catalogue, mainly because they are so difficult to photograph. They were exhibited in Hastings and the reactions, although far from hostile, were not encouraging. That doesn't bother me. I needed to see the paintings in a space outside the studio and I needed the opportunity to think them through and discover my own reaction.

I gave them the title 'Looking Back' partly because they are highly reflective and all the time they were in my studio, every time I turned around they seemed to be there looking back at me. I could also see my broken reflection in the surface. There is quite a lot of colour in these paintings, but they need plenty of natural light to be seen to their full effect and in this instance they were shown in a quite subdued, artificial light.

But the point I am making is that these more recent paintings do represent a departure

If Only 2004
Acrylic on Canvas
102cmx122cm

from the older work. If they are problematic to me, then they are more likely to be problematic for anyone familiar with my work.

CK *You have explained how you gave a title to those particular paintings, how do you generally arrive at titles for your work?*

CB In the past I have used generic titles like 'White Field' and 'Dot Matrix', but more recently I have arrived at titles in a more direct way. Either the painting itself suggests a title, such as 'Orangeade' or 'Pearl' or a title comes from direct experience. There is a painting in the show called 'Night Visitors'. This is a large painting of predominantly blue dots on a very dark brown varnish ground. It was completed last year and was one of the first paintings to really disrupt the geometric structure of the early dot paintings. It was a very troubling and difficult painting to complete and I used to wake up in the night thinking about it. Hence the title.

Other, still more recent paintings, have titles like 'Birdsong' and 'One Morning' which is probably more evidence of the way in which the work, as you say, is becoming more personal. To call a painting 'One Morning' may not mean anything to someone else, but is something quite personal to me.

CK *That's where it is different from painting that is mediated through the real world, it mediates only through you. In a way, that's a new, quite intimate development.*

CB Yes, and in a way you could say that their intimacy is reflected in the complexity of the surface and in the way you have to go up close to the paintings to see how they achieve their effect. This is where light is crucial to an understanding of the work, as the darker paintings in particular rely upon good strong light to bring out the depth of colour.

CK *Your pictures are not static are they, they cannot be captured or described properly by camera. You avert your gaze for one minute and they have changed already. That realisation is the strongest impulse in appreciating your work, they change with the changing light, which is why it's even more intimate, isn't it. You actually have to experience it to appreciate it.*

CB In my show in Folkestone last year I asked the gallery to switch off all the lights. I thought there was enough natural light to see the work and there was. In fact, going there at different times of the day and in different weather meant you always saw the work in a different light, literally.

CK *Is how they were produced within natural light essential in terms of their reality?*

CB I can't imagine producing the work I do working in any other environment. Every window

White Field IV 2003
Acrylic on Canvas
120cm x 150cm

in my studio looks directly onto the sea. The light on this part of the coast is a joy. It is never static and I think that quality is inherent in the paintings, which is something you picked up on. I have never set out to paint the view from my window, but at a subconscious level it must be making its presence felt.

How these paintings relate to the natural world is a difficult question to answer. The old notion of paintings as a window onto the world no longer holds and paintings possess their own, unique reality as objects existing in the world. But the visible world permeates everything. Perhaps these paintings, which I think of as inventions in the sense that they are not mimetic, mediate the visible world.

CK *Do you receive some ritualistic notion from these paintings?*

CB They are only ritualistic in the sense that painting itself is part of a ritual. The habit of going to the studio every day is a ritual and the methods and materials of painting are part of that ritual, but I think you can read too much significance into that. Each painting is a kind of conclusion of a process that may well be ritualistic, but the significance or true value of that process resides in the painting itself.

CK *Are the production and the engagement with your painting meditative experiences?*

CB Only in the sense that I spend a lot of time looking and thinking about each painting before it is complete, and anyone who sees it might choose to do the same.

CK *Then would you say that it is very important that viewers get past the surface of your paintings, that the surface can only denote the depth. That you need to be drawn from light into darkness, towards your own and the painting's internal reality?*

CB I think that the surface of the paintings are crucial to understanding the paintings. The surface is their reality. It is tangible and not an illusion. However, colour creates an optical illusion of space which perhaps what you refer to as the 'internal reality'.

With the new, much darker paintings in particular, I think you are inevitably drawn into this space, but at the same time you are conscious of the physical presence of the painting in your own space. And this is where idea of reflection comes into play. The varnish and coloured glazes make you acutely aware of the surrounding space and your visible presence in it. You are confronted by your own fractured image in the optical, internal space of the painting. So yes, you probably could describe it as being drawn 'from light into darkness'.

Tondo II 2004
Acrylic and varnish
on MDF
50cm diameter
Private Collection

Apollinaire Said

Apollinaire said

‘Come to the edge’

‘It is too high’

‘Come to the edge’

‘We might fall’

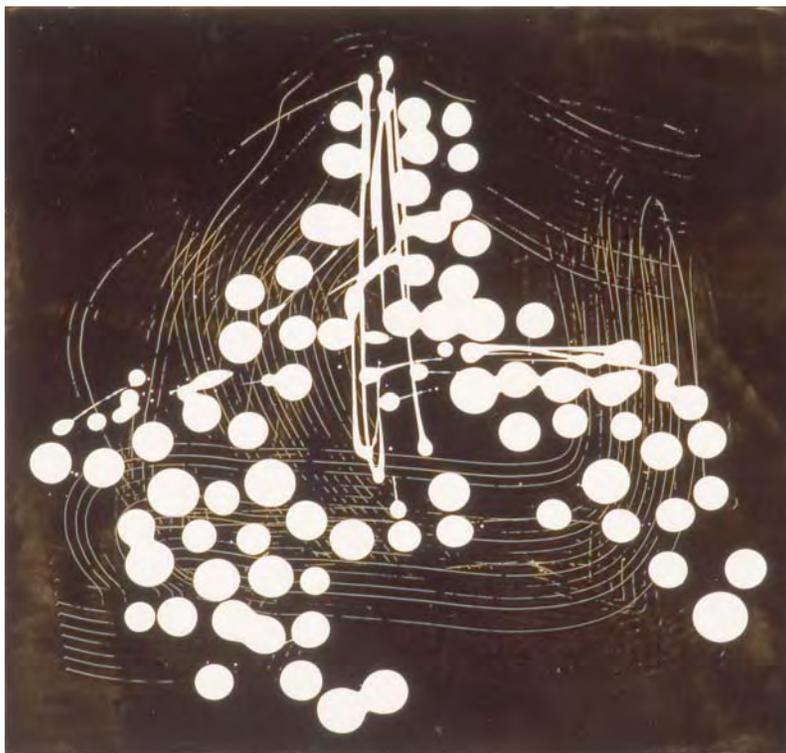
‘Come to the edge’

And they came

And he pushed them

And they flew

Anonymous



Untitled 2005
Acrylic and Varnish on Laminate
33cm x 34cm