

STUART ELLIOT

MUTED AND MUTATED: A LIFE OF 'PAINTING'

What we are first faced with, in Stuart Elliot's practice, is an invisible mechanism at the heart of the work determining the logic of its production and reception. His work appears as painting, but is barely painting. Painting as a category seems too singular a limit from which to deduct any certainty about how the works address you. In this exhibition individual works are combined to constitute relationships and dialogues, opening them up to syntactical readings, which in turn throw into question their inherent qualities. In Elliot's practice, the logic of this symbiosis is immanent.

The paintings themselves offer up a range of constructive strategies. Compositional



Untitled [47], 2010

ruses seem to play out in a number of significant ways; as monochromes; as all-over strategies; as incomplete all-over strategies; or as variants of complex figure-ground formations. The all-over strategy is clear in *Untitled [45]*. The repeating ready-made animal print motif constitutes the

work's entire surface. However the print fabric is translucent rendering an ambiguity between support and surface. It destabilises any sense of the all-over being situated on an irreducible limit of painting. Unitary or primary forms do not seem to be the signs under which works like *Untitled [45]* or all-over gestural works like *Untitled [42]* are organised. The contrary is surely the case.

In many respects these works hinge around the crisis that Minimalism historically engendered; how we think about composition and how it can be said to function in artistic practice and spectatorship. Donald Judd's call for the medium category of specific objects was in response to what he saw as the passive address of composed works; painting and plinth-bound sculpture (further polemicised as being specifically European forms). Similarly Robert Morris's gestalt-driven works moved the High Modernist avant-garde not so much away from painting but toward strategies of anti-, non- and auto-composition. Elliot's positioning of the all-over and the monochrome problematises the conventional readings of these species of painting making them subject to a mode of reception where division and displacement have compositional attributes. In his hands they are open and fragmentary rather than totalised and reductive bringing to mind artists like Michael Krebber and Wade Guyton. Similarly works such as *Untitled [47]* situate a figure-ground reading within a complex schema. The masked-off areas, anchored to the edges of the painting, work simultaneously as shape and ground. If hung in proximity to *Untitled [38]* it becomes clear the shapes are articulations of the 'negative' ground of a geometric star form he appropriated from an Islamic tile motif and has used in a number of works. As five shapes, grounded with open brushwork and different colours they form five possibilities, or fragments, of all-over forms. The oscillation of readings and the shift from the one to the many, reveal something of the underlying mechanism I allude to in the opening paragraph of this essay.

Elliot's grouping of works raises further questions about their address to the spectator. In



Untitled [45], 2010

conversation he describes each combination of works as being an instance and that each instance transforms how the paintings appear. I would be inclined to describe this practice as one where the wider rhetoric of the works can be said to be material to his practice; from the production of the individual works to their final presentation. However Elliot's description of each instance of the works points to a further quality that seems important in the understanding of his production. Each painting is strangely neutral or indifferent in the address they make to the viewer. They are equally instances of how they can be seen to appear as painting. It is as if the paintings do not dramatically seek the attention of the spectator, rather it is that the spectator must become attentive to them. This quality can be likened to a 'turning away' from the spectator. I'm tempted to position Elliot's practice here in line with the Diderot/Friedian mode of absorption but this is not the appropriate place to develop such a discussion. However the structure of the works, in

themselves and their combinations in exhibition, seems to add up to a complex 'dispositif' which can be considered as a wider mode of address strategy and within which each painting's constructive strategies are geared. The spectator is 'deflected' from maintaining a singular position in relation to the works. Instead they combine as a series of fragments serving to offer up yet more possibilities. If they deflect, it is against being understood holistically, as approaching any sense of resolution.

This structuring of conventions of painting, abstraction and spectatorship, within a temporality that can be described as instances of endless possibilities, problematises discursive undercurrents that all too often exemplify practices



Untitled [38], 2010

that resemble 'painting'. Critically, Elliot's work has no relation to painting as being in crisis, under threat, dead, resurrected etc. These are not works that trade in a personification of the afterlife of the genre in the guise of vampires or zombies .



Untitled [42], 2010

As instances of mutation, they align more with biological metaphors, their endless unfolding and conjoining perhaps point to an evolutionary impulse. For example the monochrome in Elliot's work is not the delimiting structure we have come to know as being at large in the 'wild'. It is more accurately a 'trait', distilled from basic attributes.

For these reasons Elliot's practice is not easily assimilated as strictly painting. Pictorial schema like the all-over, monochrome and figure-ground are played out, or performed, through single paintings as a productive logic and not as figures that demonstrate an inherent conceptual agenda. We are deflected from fetishizing the search for a ground zero of something that is nominally and eternally 'painting' toward something that might turn out to be closer to a species than a category.

Mick Finch, 2010

ⁱ It is worth noting Jean-François Chevrier's work in formulating how the tableau form can be understood. In Michael Fried's book, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (Yale University Press, 2008), Chevrier's formulation is crucial to Fried's use of this third term when discussing painting and photography, avoiding describing each of these mediums in terms of the qualities of the other. The category of tableau offers the possibility to understand object-image forms as structured in terms of what Chevrier states as fragmentation openness and contradiction (arguably in opposition to totalised form, closure and the literal which are the markers of the plastic paradigm ushered in by Minimalism).

ⁱⁱ Elliot's position is closer to Guyton's in that the address of the works is in terms of the possibilities the relationship of the works to their underlying mechanisms offer. Krebber plays out strategies within an idea of painting as being fatally inhibited by its closure, the impossibility to open it out beyond its sense of failure. The incomplete or the fragment in Krebber is thus distinct from Guyton and Elliot in this sense.

ⁱⁱⁱ This idea of tableau as 'image-object' is central to Michael Fried's recent book in which he explores a structural relationship between painting and photography as associated pictorial forms. The concepts of apparatus (mostly associated with Althusser) and dispositif (associated with Foucault and Agamben) bear many structural similarities to these emerging formulations of the tableau where questions of ideology and signification are at work.

^{iv} Fried's work on Diderot in *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (University Of Chicago Press, 1988) became the structure for his critique of Minimalism in his essay *Art and Objecthood* that was first published in *Artforum* in 1967. Fried used Diderot's sense of theatricality to typify the condition of spectatorship at work in the Minimalist paradigm with unitary and gestalt structures situating the spectator within the work, constituting a direct address of the work to the spectator. Absorption, the counterstructure to theatricality, amounts to the work turning away from the spectator.

^v Deflection is how Elliot himself describes the movement at work in the structure of spectatorship being described here. It is important to note that Fried's 'Beholder Discourse' is an ethical position in relation to modes of address in artistic practice. Elliot's position stands very much on the same ethical ground.

^{vi} I'm thinking here of David Reed in the guise of vampire and Steven Parrino as chainsaw zombie.