

Paintings and essay

**Clem
Crosby —
Between
surface
and
event**

University of Central Lancashire

1–27 March 2018

Clem Crosby — Between surface and event

Paintings by Clem Crosby
with an essay by David Ryan

To accompany the exhibition at
Hanover Project
University of Central Lancashire

1–27 March, 2018

Bb

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Clem Crosby, *Cycle of Filth*, 2017

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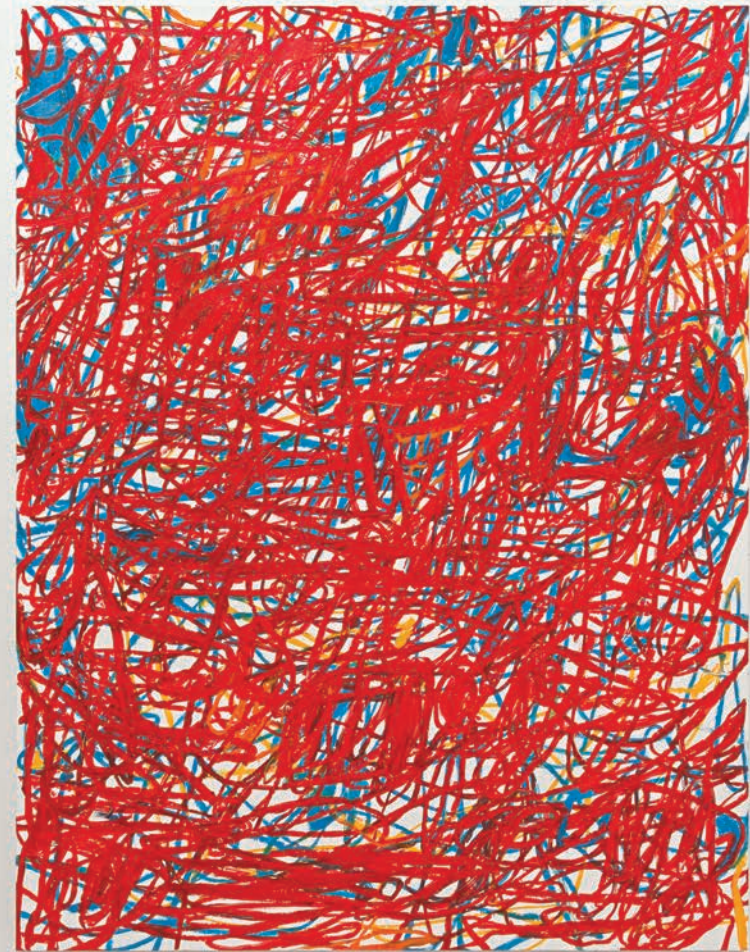
Acknowledgements —

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Clem Crosby
2018

Paintings, Clem Crosby —

Rated X 1
Oil and oil bar on Dibond
58 × 45 ins (147.5 × 144 cm), 2017



Rated X 2
Oil and oil bar on Dibond
58 × 45 ins (147.5 × 114 cm), 2017



Cycle of Filth
Oil and oil bar on Dibond
64 × 48 ins (173 × 122 cm), 2017



Shake Me Cold
Oil and oil bar on Dibond
68 × 48 ins (173 × 122 cm), 2017



The Apostate

Oil and oil bar on Dibond

65 × 48 ins (165 × 122 cm), 2017

16



The Naturals
Oil and oil bar on Dibond
64 × 48 ins (173 × 122 cm), 2018





Candy Skin
Oil and oil bar on Dibond
44 × 34 ins (112 × 86 cm), 2017



Shaker Loops
Oil and oil bar on Dibond
44 × 34 ins (112 × 86 cm), 2017



Sparkle Plenty
Oil and oil bar on Dibond
44 × 34 ins (112 × 86 cm), 2017



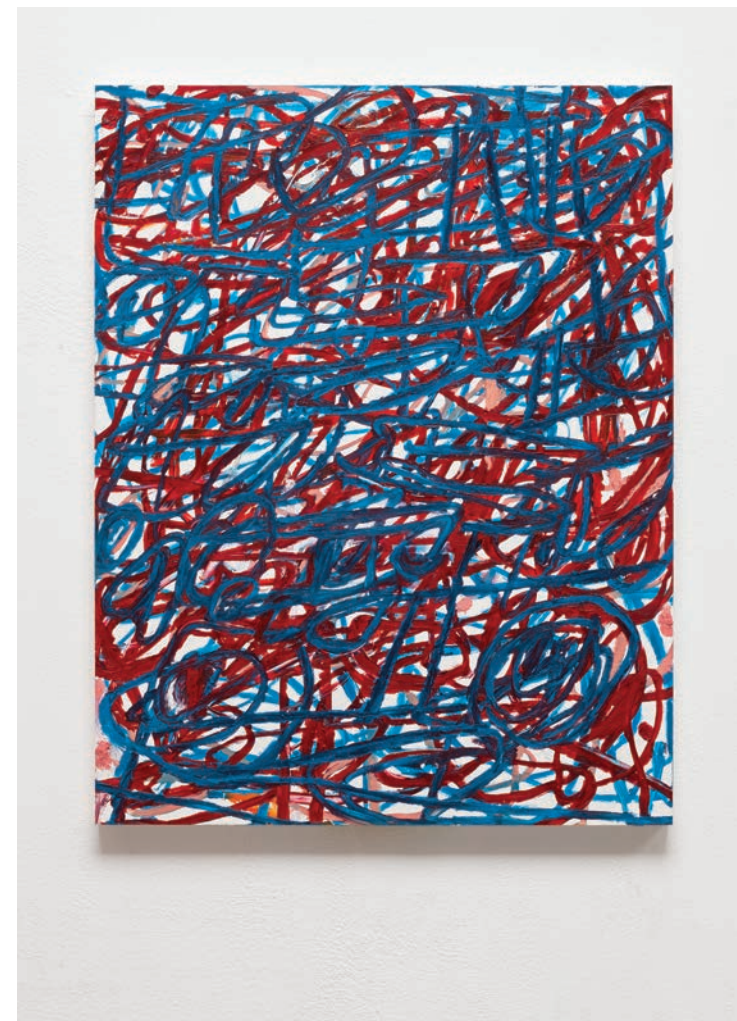
Blurt
Oil and oil bar on Dibond
30 × 24 ins (76 × 61 cm), 2017



Spun Sugar Blah, Blah, Blah
Oil and oil bar on Dibond
24 × 18 ins (61 × 46 cm), 2017



Lamentation
 Oil and oil bar on museum board
 24 × 18 ins (61 × 46 cm), 2017



Shook Ones
 Oil and oil bar on museum board
 24 × 18 ins (61 × 46 cm), 2017

*painted space:
linear volumes (bodies) —
blocks of colour/tone —
(interruption — unreadable forms passing over to colour —
the quantity or 'duration' of colour...) —
controlled, structured, uncontrolled,
indeterminate; cloud, noise, inside,
outside, figure, architecture, landscape —
ornament, depiction; felt, inhabited space;
accrued flat surface space...*

I wanted to begin with these rather general notes on painting from my own notebooks. They are born out of questions of how we think about, or convey our experience of, painting; as in most studio jottings, they are simply pointers, possible speculative connections, markers. And While they refer to my own thoughts, albeit in the process of trying to assess 'what happened', I want them simply to preface this discussion of Clem Crosby's recent work as a reminder of the incongruent and often uneasy relationship of words to the acts of making and looking at painting.

I first became aware of Crosby's practice in Brian Muller's curated exhibition *Real Art – A New Modernism – British Reflexive*



Clem Crosby, *Untitled*
Oil on canvas
26 × 25 ins (66 × 64 cm), 1993-94

Painting in the 1990s. The 'real' in this context being a grounding in everyday reality, a physical materiality that engages a phenomenology of viewing. The work by Crosby that was included here took the form of monochrome paintings, but not of the kind which seem born out of a fear that any event or form would disrupt their elegant presence. On the contrary, Crosby's were rough surfaces, with the labour of covering made explicit and marking the surface. The colour was (usually the vehicle of the monochrome in fact) in his own words, 'murky' or 'muted'. As a viewer one sensed the limits of the surface, the relation of the edges to the process of covering, each addressing the body of the viewer whilst simultaneously projecting the traces of the original activity of embodied process. These are, to some extent, the modalities of minimalism, as transposed into painting.

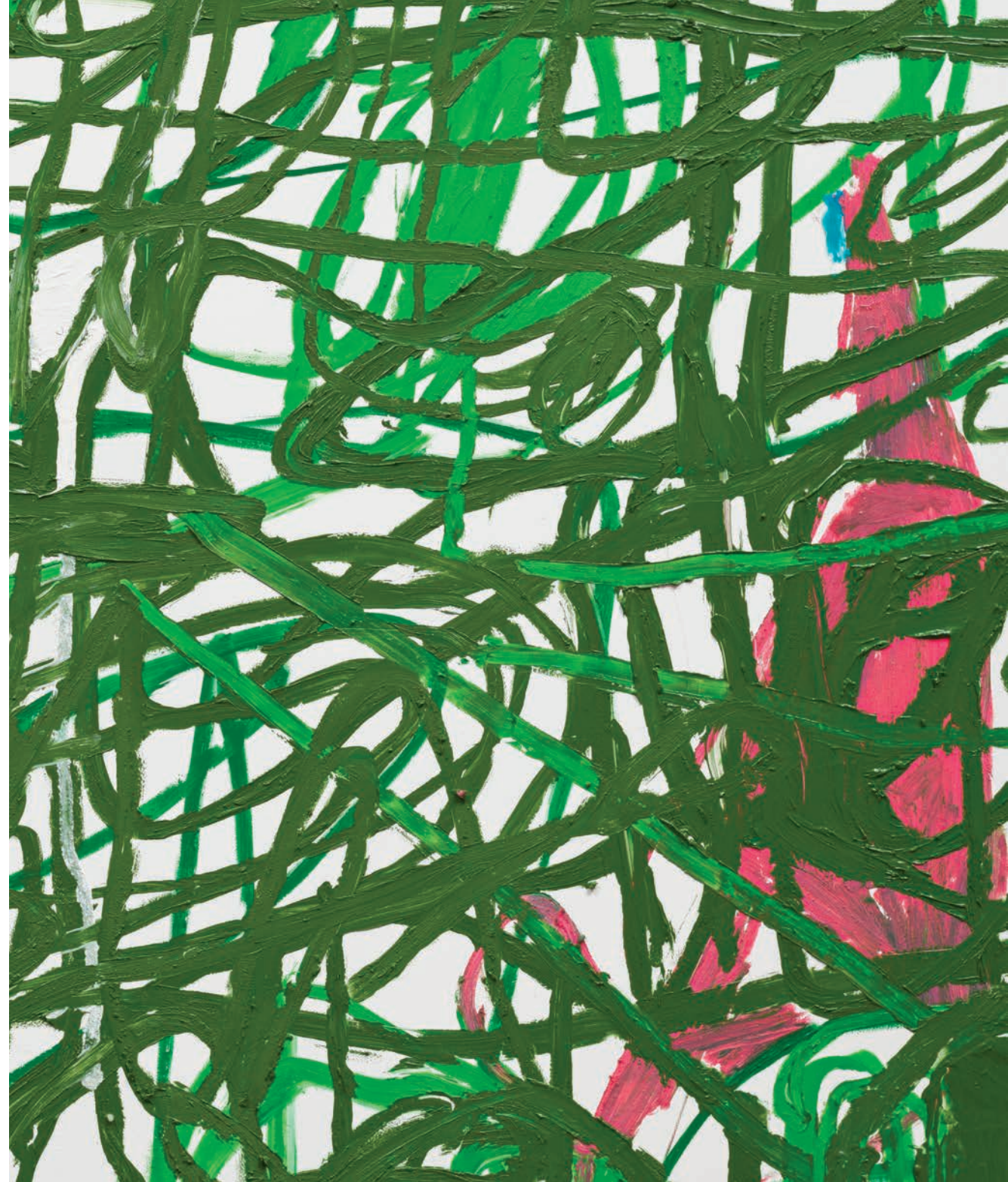
My next encounter with Crosby's work, although aware of his ongoing activities after this exhibition, was in the group exhibition at Richard Salmon's Gallery, some years later, called *Vivid*. Here was a different set of possibilities: the work utilised a Formica surface that allowed the rich and fully loaded brush gestures to skate across this 'fast' surface and to be rapidly erased in a playful give and take between mark and erasure. It was as if what was latent in the earlier paintings had now been given free reign, form somehow liberated from the surface itself, and now generating folding and meandering gestures, lines that become organic clusters, leaf-like structures, each heavy and ripe in purples and blacks. Of a different order to the 'coverings' of the early monochrome paintings, these works created a new interplay

between different modalities, or modes of operation—namely, a form of abstract expressionism with, we might say, a memory of minimalism (note the historical reversal). This dialogue between surface and event has informed his paintings since this time, and the advancing of both a physical objecthood and a painterly constructed virtual space is certainly present in the very recent work.

In the new paintings, we can sense a different set of inflections within this dialogue; the surface is articulated in such a way that it is latticed, overlaid and ‘inscribed’ with marks. These meshes form various densities, rhythmic pulses, and wave-like processes where a sense of space is both emerging and submerging. Gesture, here, attempts to assert its singularity in knotted densities only to fall back into ‘describing’ the surface itself. And yet, what becomes singular for one piece doesn’t necessarily stand for the whole set; in that, through an operation of zooming in and out, opening or closing in, both in terms of bounded focus and of density, the ‘framed’ sensation of each painting changes completely.

Hence, a painting like, *Sparkle Plenty* (page 23), will seem of a very different order to *Candy Skin* (page 21) despite the shared procedure. *Shake Me Cold* (page 14) might lie between the two extremes of the previous paintings, and might be a useful mid-ground to examine. What kind of space are we confronted with? The answer lies in what we might call a ‘field condition’; I mean this in a sense that is not necessarily connected with the usual sense of field in painting: namely, colour field painting, although there might

Shake Me Cold
Detail, 2017



be some overlap (albeit from a very different perspective of making) with Pollock's fields. It has more in common with the field in contemporary physics or architecture, where the field is not necessarily about 'wholeness' or 'all-overness' but rather nets, elastic forms, and warping surfaces that create their own events.

Similarly, *Shake Me Cold* initiates a knotted space that bends, converges, and warps. There is a seriality of rhythm to the piece, with its echoes and repeated mirroring of forms. While this gives the overall form a coherence, it is also a space in which one could get lost. No sooner do we attempt to follow the logic of the line do we then come across an interruption, or a stoppage, perhaps a surprising momentary submergence of the line by marks of another colour. Linearity, here, often sets a trap; as a viewer one might think to 'grasp' the line, to understand the armature as a drawing—but it becomes labyrinthine, an Ariadne's Thread that leads to multiple places and nowhere in particular.

Colour also gives these paintings their particularity: a feel, a density, even a temporality or given speed. In Crosby's own words he sees himself as somebody who uses colour but not as a 'colourist'. Perhaps this is slightly disingenuous on his part, as the colour always works, is always 'weighed' against the concentration of marks and the needs of the surface articulation. Often, as in *Shake Me Cold*, the colour operates in two different iterations of hue and tone, here, a darker olive or sap green shadowed by what is possibly an emerald. Amongst this intertwining play of the two greens is a stronger contrast: a series of colour accents that might seem rather like 'foreign bodies'—they appear to be more solid,

object-like (almost) yet also in other places more ephemeral, like things washed up or caught in a maelstrom of another activity. These are the pink forms that mark the surface at various points and sometimes, like at the bottom right, edging out at its extremities. Repeated horizontal lines across the surface, again wave-like in their rhythmic insistence, accentuate this surface motion as dynamic and the pink elements as submerged detritus of almost residual false starts or other directions of thought.

Materially, the quality of mark is interesting, consisting of both oil paint and oil bar on Dibond, a lightweight synthetic aluminium support. This gives the mark an unusual agility whilst retaining its pigmented weight, and also providing a clean and swift erasure, the traces of which abound in these works. This resulting material process allows a physical engagement with both surface and event and whereby the viewer can connect directly, viscerally, with the field of making. The sense is one of a completely tactile and haptic sensibility at work, navigating and negotiating the forms that are brought into being.

To get a sense of the form in these current paintings, it might be useful to rewind and consider some of the paintings in the earlier exhibition, *My, my shivers* (page 36) at the Pippy Houldsworth gallery in 2015–16. Within the eponymous painting, insistent serial patterns are repeated throughout, forming blob-like forms that puncture the space. Colour, again, is a field of a dominant hue with accompanying accents—here an indigo-like blue accompanied by greens, ochre and a light violet; each of these colour accents allowed to impurely mix with gestures in their



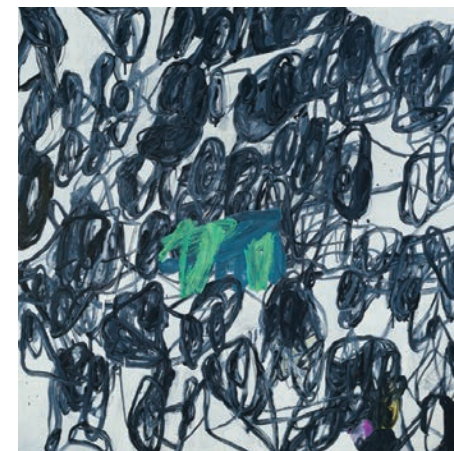
Clem Crosby, *My, my shivers*
Oil and Formica mounted on Dibond
31 × 41 ins (78.7 × 104.1 cm), 2015

proximity. Line, on the whole, is much thicker than in the current paintings, forming a wonky diagonal flow to the movement of the gestures across the whole surface. ***Arcadian*** (opposite), from the same show, although using a similar set of procedures, creates a very different sense of repose: a floating space, with two green accents focusing the centre of the painting around which the forms hover and group. ***In Triple Speed*** (opposite), a smaller painting which, as the title suggests, seems to have layers of tempi, creates

more a feeling of a vertical drop to its forms. ***In Triple Speed*** (below), also shows the explicit process of erasing and reworking that underpin these paintings with its scrubbed upper centre, and 'out-painted' whites covering and obscuring while re-establishing the white ground. In the above paintings, the freely serialised gestures create a darker, accumulated sense of drawing, with thicker brush marks coagulating into circular or oval blob shapes. These blobs seems to stand for things, the proximity of things; we can get a similar sense (although opposite, in fact, in representational terms) of the identity of specific objects draining

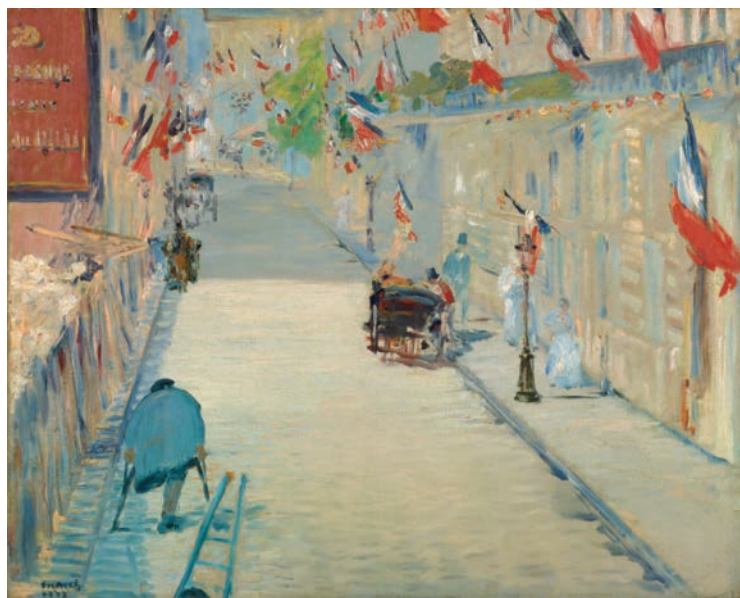


Clem Crosby, *In Triple Speed*
Oil and Formica mounted on Dibond
30 × 24 ins (76.2 × 61 cm), 2015



Clem Crosby, *Arcadian*
Oil and Formica mounted on Dibond
48 × 48 ins (122 × 122 cm), 2015

away into the presence of a set of gestures in Manet's 1878 *Rue Mosnier Decorated with Flags* (below). Here, a ceremonial celebration is translated into a field of perceptually oriented marks, 'feeling' their way across objects, proximities and distances. Crosby, of course, works the other way around—where the 'feel' of



Édouard Manet
Rue Mosnier Decorated with Flags
Oil on canvas
25.75 × 31.5 ins (65.4 × 80 cm), 1878
(Image: Getty Research Institute's Open Content Program)

drawing the field creates a psychologically charged space that can connect with perceptual memories. Despite overlaps in terms of forming the paintings, his work stops short of the figurative phantasms of Jean Dubuffet or Asger Jorn, and there may be more resonance with the mid-sixties Guston, where monumental presences emerge from the paintings only to frustrate precise recognition (later to become more specifically the bloated heads, hands and objects etc., of the late period). Also, it is interesting to think about how the edges in the 2015 paintings operate, with the overall drawing veering off the edges, making the surface hover between a thing and an aperture, not unlike, in fact, the Manet.

Within some abstract painting, again thinking of Pollock, or Dubuffet's *Hourloupe* paintings, this field is both materially held and, in the imagination at least, potentially infinite. The painting being a sample of potentially infinite space. With the Manet, the aperture space of painting is more like that of a photograph—where we are aware of possible spatial extension beyond the frame (in fact a very meticulous 'framing') yet it is, somehow, inconceivable and irrelevant, so perfectly bound is the image. A similar sense of framing is in operation in Crosby's paintings, with each painting creating its own snapshot of spatial organization and particular 'address' to the viewer. In this way, the body and the movement of the body is crucial to these paintings, both in terms of the motion of making and the proposition of the resulting form to the eye itself.

Returning to the present paintings, we can sense a slightly different approach to both the gesture and field. It appears more

intricate and web-like in these new paintings, with each painting allowing the surface articulation to morph into object-like forms—we can see this in *Shaker Loops* and *Sparkle Plenty*. This notion of emergent form and its interrelationship with surface creates an organic interconnection between figure and ground. Architectural theorist Stan Allen¹, talked about a similar possibility in his 1985 book *Points and Lines*:

One of the potentials of the field is to redefine the relation between figure and ground. If we think of the figure, not as a demarcated object read against a stable field, but as an effect emerging from the field itself—as moments of intensity, as peaks or valleys within a continuous field—then it might be possible to imagine figure and field as more closely allied. [...] Hence the study of these field combinations would be a study of models that work in the zone between figure and abstraction, models that refigure the conventional opposition between figure and abstraction, or systems of organization capable of producing vortices, peaks, and protuberances out of individual elements that are themselves regular or repetitive.

Architectural models of how form behaves aside, the new paintings such as *The Apostate* (page 16) show a deep affinity with this organic ebb and flow of the field, merging and weaving figures, peaks, moments of intensity and vortices. Related to this is the directed motion of the whole—the unspooling of the form or

gestures across the surface, whether the trajectory of the rhythm is horizontal, vertical or diagonal. This relates to a hinterland where drawing and writing merge. There are several takes on this, each worth examining briefly in relation to the present paintings. In *The Apostate*, at the top centre (page 43) we clearly see a set of marks that appear like an inscription, forming letters of sort and which underscores the rest of the painting operating almost like script.

Theodor Adorno², the German philosopher and sociologist, thinking about post-war informal painting in his unfinished *Aesthetic Theory*, noted, “the concept of *écriture* has become relevant. Inspired probably by Klee’s drawing that approximates scrawled writing. [...] all artworks are writing, not just those that are obviously such; they are hieroglyphs for which the code has been lost; a loss that plays into their content. Artworks are language only as writing.” It’s tempting to consider who Adorno had in mind in the first part of that quote, perhaps Henri Michaux, Jean Fautrier, early Emil Schumacher, and many other European painters active from the later 1940s to 50s, but it also, of course, fits the work of American Cy Twombly.

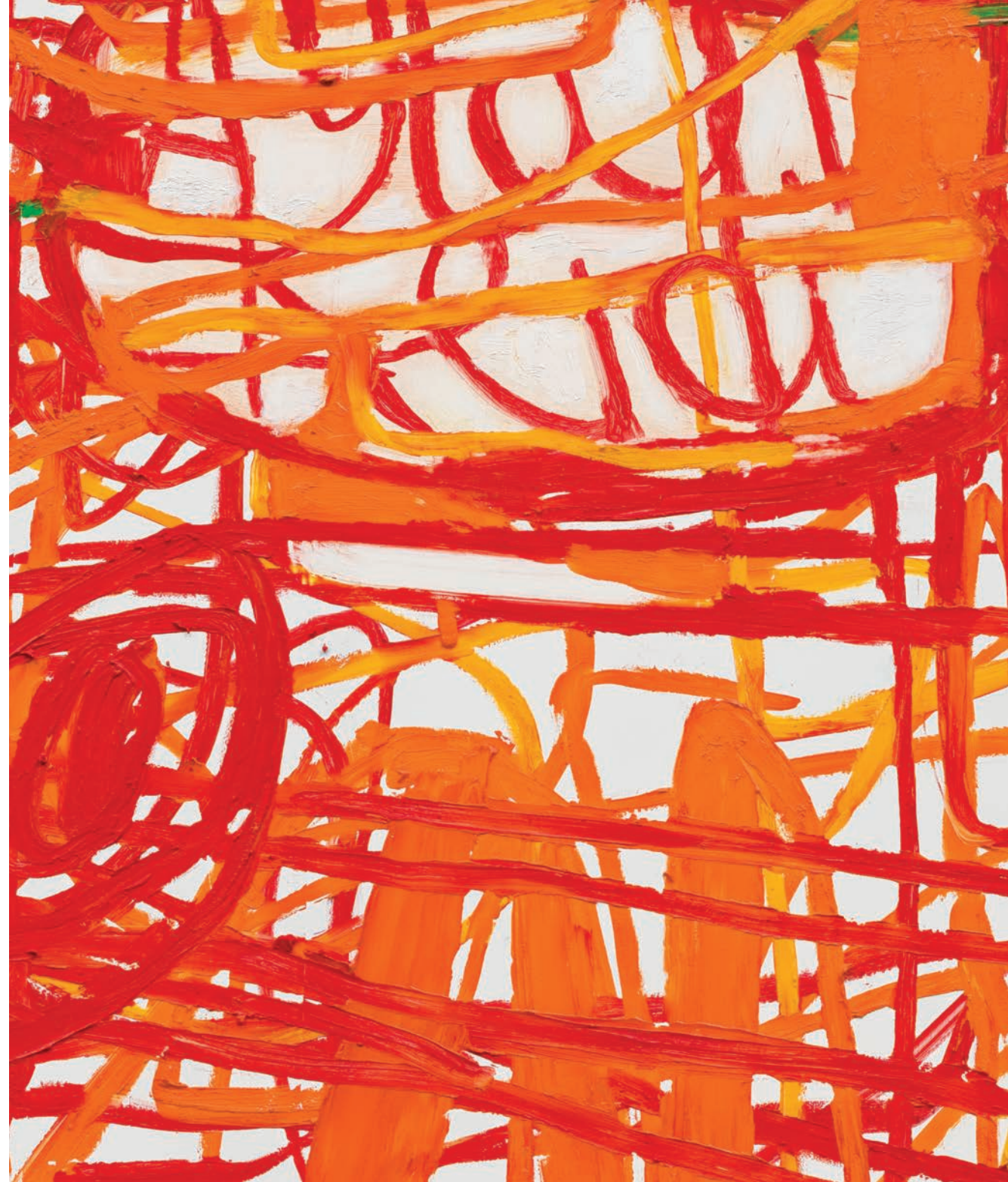
Attempting to define the difference between writing and drawing, anthropologist Tim Ingold³ suggests “Writing is a *notation*; Drawing is not.” But with somebody like Twombly this distinction falls apart—are not Twombly’s inscribed invocations of Pan or Apollo a fusion of notation and drawing? Or even his repeated scrawls that form an imprecise or ambiguous notation of sorts? For Adorno, the irony of this ‘approximation’ to a communication system, was that the modern work of art (in his terms) refused any

easy communication. Yet the work underlines its *possibility* to communicate through miming this system of communication, while the ‘enigmatic quality’ of the work remains (“hieroglyphs for which the code has been lost”), not to be *literally* decoded for a fixed meaning nor *mechanically* ‘understood’.

To go back to *The Apostate*—we see the written letters at the top of the painting overlaid in willful obfuscation, falling back into an accompaniment to abstract rhythms that cross and obscure it. This is a complex painting with its various accumulations across the plane, rather like knotted wood, combining with a colour range of hot orange, cadmium yellow, and scarlet, together with an odd trace or hinted residue of green. It is also a full, dense, space, although the white ground is still very present (Crosby sees these grounds as still implicitly dealing with the monochrome as a starting point) and occasionally marked by overlaid opaque white as a ‘corrector’. This too connects with the gesture of writing, which is not only an additive procedure ‘on’ a surface, but also, as the Czech philosopher Villem Flusser⁴ saw it, the origins of this gesture is in engraving, marking, scratching away at materials, as much a removal and ‘de-structing’ as constructing: “It is a gesture of making holes, of digging, of perforating. A penetrating gesture. To write is to in-scribe, to penetrate a surface. [...]” In one sense, this description might not be too far removed from the painterly activities that Crosby initiates in the current painting. It captures something of the physicality, the act of making that I feel is so important to these paintings.

Igor Stravinsky, the great modernist composer, in a 1957

The Apostate
Detail, 2017



interview discussed why he composed at the piano and not at his desk. Sound is physical, he stated, and discussed how it was important for him to connect with its materiality directly; then reminding us of the deaf Beethoven in his late years sensing the vibrations of the sounds of the piano with a wooden rod held between his teeth and touching the instrument's soundboard. Proof enough that sound should never be abstracted into a set of symbols devoid of body. Stravinsky finishes by saying how important the concept of *Homo Faber* was to him—the human being as maker—as a key to the artwork. I suspect Clem Crosby would be sympathetic to such an outlook, that we must begin with 'stuff', material, together with a body sensing and finding its way through that material.

I began this essay with my own studio jottings: notations of a sort, that attempt to grasp what is beginning to become apparent through the process of making a set of paintings. Some might find resonance with Crosby's painting, others not. A notion of flow, a missing link in my own notes, is something that seems central to the paintings under discussion. While this flow often turns in on itself or is interrupted, it continues to be revitalised in some way, until it fulfills its 'function' as a painting. This is a material flow, but as Adorno hinted above, the artwork—and especially I think in this kind of materialist-based painting—doesn't simply communicate any easy correlative receptive flow.

Painting can be stubbornly mute while still fascinating and absorbing. Artworks, Adorno goes on, "are question marks, not univocal even through synthesis. Nevertheless their figure is so

precise that it determines the point where the work breaks off. As in enigmas, the answer is both hidden and yet demanded by the structure." Their processes, from beginning to end, we might say, includes both the question and the answer—for the artist at least. For the viewer, on the other hand, they must work to find their own answer or key to the enigma. This chimes with these recent paintings, whereby they are almost 'written' (and yet eschew coded linearity) and are as much about concealment as revealing.

What remains sedimented, and not easily accessed, is Crosby's heterogeneity in his approach; this is apparent in his studio, where we can see an avid collector of images and news cuttings at work; in short, creating a direct engagement with the world and its visual nature that is allowed to surround his practice. This infuses the work, I have no doubt, and creates a generosity to this practice that only at the most superficial glance will appear hermetic.

David Ryan
2018

References —

1. Allen, Stan, *Points and Lines*, Diagrams and Projects for the City, Princeton, 1999 (Page 40)
2. Adorno, T.W., *Aesthetic Theory*, Continuum, New York, 2007 (Page 41)
3. Ingold, Tim, *Lines*, Routledge, London, 2016 (Page 41)
4. Flusser, Villem, *The Gesture of Writing* <http://www.flusserstudies.net/node/207> (accessed December 2017) (Page 42)

Biography —

Clem Crosby

Lives and works in London
clemcrosby.com

Collections —

Tate Archive
City Museum, Leeds
Microsoft Collection, U.S.A.
U.C. Berkeley Museum, U.S.A.

Curation —

Barrier, Phyllida Barlow
Curated by Clem Crosby
Tannery Arts,
London, 2004

Commissions —

180 Monochrome Paintings
The Young Vic Theatre,
London, 2006
(Permanent installation)

Commissioned by:
Haworth Tompkins Architects /
The Young Vic Theatre

Runner-up:
The Stirling Prize 2007

Solo exhibitions —

2018 **Between surface and event**
Hanover Project,
University of Central Lancashire

2015 **My, my shivers**
Pippy Houldsworth Gallery,
London

2014 **Short Ride in a Fast Machine:
New Paintings**
George Lawson Gallery,
San Francisco

2012 **New Paintings**
George Lawson Gallery,
Los Angeles

2011 **Continuum**
Pippy Houldsworth Gallery,
London

Paintings
Rachmaninoff's,
London

2010 **Paintings**
George Lawson Gallery,
San Francisco

2006 **Paintings**
Gallery Weinberger,
Copenhagen

180 Monochrome Paintings
The Young Vic Theatre,
London
(Permanent installation)

2005 **Paintings**
Program,
London

Group exhibitions —

2017 **Five Years at Heddon Street**
Pippy Houldsworth Gallery,
London

2015 **Contemporary British
Abstraction**
The SE9 Container Gallery,
London

Promise of Palm Trees
Breese Little, London

At The Point of Gesture
Wimbledon Space,
University of the Arts, London

2014 **Making Matters**
Platform A, Middlesbrough

2013 **Line Drift Loci**
Campbell Works, London

**Emergence: une proposition de
Erin Lawlor, Katrin
Bremermann and Yifat Gat**
Hôtel de Sauroy, Paris

At the Point of Gesture
Curated by David Ryan
Lion and Lamb, London

Curators' Choice
Pippy Houldsworth Gallery,
London

Are You Alright?
New Art From Britain
Museum of Contemporary
Canadian Art, Toronto

2012 **13th Venice Biennale of
Architecture**
Venice
From New Perspectives:
Presented by Marcelle Joseph

Projects
EBB & Flow Gallery, London

2010 **Profusion**
Beacon Art Project
Calke Abbey, Derbyshire

Fade Away
(Painting Between
Representation and Abstraction)
Transition Gallery: touring to
North Gallery, Newcastle

2008 **Presque Rien 2**
Laure Genillard Gallery, London
*with Larry Bell, Ceal Floyer,
Susan Collis, Clay Ketter, Gavin Turk*

Blitzkrieg Bop!
Man & Eve, London
*with Simon Bill, Ian Davenport, Peter
Lanyon, Gillian Ayres, Peter Saville*

Walls Have Ears
Man & Eve, London
*with Simon Gallery, Stephen Nelson,
Brian Griffiths, Sarah Jones,
Bridgid Lowe*

2006 **Tate Britain**
Drawing Symposium/Exhibition

2001-2 **Vivid: British and American
Abstract Art**
*Curated by Sotiris Kyriacou
with Diana Cooper, Jonathan
Feldschuh, Dennis Hollingsworth,
Dona Nelson, Thomas Nozkowski,
Jonathan Parsons, Martyn Simpson,
Daniel Sturgis*

Group exhibitions (continued) —

2001	<p>British Abstract Painting Flowers East, London</p> <p>Minimalism: Then and Now U.C. Berkeley Art Museum, California <i>with Carl Andre, Anne Appleby, Scott Burton, Dan Flavin, Mary Heilmann, Felix Gonzales-Torres, Donald Judd, Sol LeWitt, Brice Marden, Joseph Marioni, Barnett Newman, David Rabinowich, Ad Reinhardt, John Zurier, Ulrich Wellmann</i></p>		<p>British Painting Gallery Hollenbach, Stuttgart <i>with David Austen, Simon Callery, Jane Harris, Richard Kirwan, Joan Key</i></p>
		1997	<p>Painting Overgarden, Copenhagen <i>with Torgny Wilcke</i></p>
		1996	<p>Contemporary Art at the Courtauld Institute, London <i>with Marc Quinn, Callum Innes, Liz Rideal, RB. Kitaj, Julian Opie, Simon Callery, Brad Lochore, Paula Rego</i></p>
2000	<p>Fact and Value – New Positions in Painting and Sculpture Charlottenborg, Copenhagen: <i>with Tim Allen, Sybille Berger, David Batchelor, Simon Callery, Ian Davenport, Julian Opie</i></p> <p>Howard Yezerski Gallery, Boston: <i>with Katarina Andersson, Carol Kaufman, Marie Rafalko, Brian Zink</i></p> <p>Galerie Hollenbach, Stuttgart: <i>with Sybille Berger, Richard Kirwan</i></p>		<p>Jerwood Painting Prize Lethaby Galleries, London <i>with Glenn Brown, Jason Martin, Jules de Geode, Anthony Green, John Hubbard, John McLean</i></p> <p>About Vision: New British Painting in the 90s Museum of Modern Art, Oxford</p>
		1995	<p>A New Modernism Southampton City Art Gallery <i>with Tori Begg, Ian Davenport, Peter Davis, Zebedee Jones, Jason Martin</i></p>
1999	<p>Between Colour – Polychrome Painting Patricia Sweetow Gallery, San Francisco <i>with Ulrich Wellmann</i></p> <p>Lisson Gallery British Art Fair, London <i>with Jason Martin, Julian Opie, Don Brown</i></p>		<p>Five British Painters Galarij S65, Belgium <i>with Tori Begg, Peter Davis, Zebedee Jones, Jason Martin</i></p>
		1994	<p>Painters Lisson Gallery, London <i>with Robert Hunter, Peter Joseph, Alex Landrum, Jason Martin, Sam Reveles</i></p>
1998	<p>SoLo X9 Artists Berry House Clerkenwell, London <i>with Liz Rideal, Susan Hillier, Dryden Goodwin</i></p>	1993	<p>Wonderful Life Lisson Gallery, London <i>with Damien Hirst, Gary Hume, Callum Innes, Jason Martin, Sam Taylor-Wood</i></p>

Clem Crosby — Between surface and event

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