

“I would like to tell the story of how beautiful it is, life. Of the sky, of the birds. The light against the eyelids. But also of how it never quite allows itself to be described, and that it doesn't matter.”

Johanna Ekström

During the first half of the 1980s Tricia Gillman produced a series of powerful, lively and colourful paintings which at the time had considerable impact on many of those who encountered them. Looking at these same paintings today they delight and intrigue in ways similar to when they were first exhibited. Although much else in the world has changed since, and we may discuss painting differently than we did at that time, some of the fundamental qualities to how paintings are produced and are received remain constant, even if we are not entirely certain why. Our curiosity and pleasure in a continuous search for meaning is part of what gives life to paintings and of how we are forever drawn to them.

Tricia Gillman is an artist who fully understands this essential condition not only in relation to any prospective 'audience' for her work, but significantly it is at the heart of an ongoing conversation with herself. And for an artist with generosity of spirit this is something she works with and not against. Over the past four decades Gillman's approach to her art has been prolifically productive and, as a life-long continuum, her painting has never become overly settled. She is forever prodding at the edges, realising new forms, forever testing material qualities and pondering possible meanings. Looking back across the span of time it is evident Gillman's journey has not been one for fashioning an individual 'style' to meet the expectations of others. This does not mean there are no lines of consistency, be it in the physical handling of paint or the exploratory use of its elastic grammar. From early in her painting career the inherent values of colour and physical properties of paint applied to canvas have been maximised to the full. These qualities have not only been developed with confidence and intuitive skill, but they have also been employed firmly on her own terms.

Across the six paintings that form this exhibition we can sense the ambition and vigour with which Gillman approached her painting in the 1980s. Qualities that

appear as fresh and immediate as we may have experienced them four decades ago. Very apparent, as if occurring in front of us, is the speculative manner in which Gillman has used dynamic but perfectly balanced colour, to articulate a *felt* sense of space that is much more than a bodily orientation towards the act of painting, or any physical space suggested by composition or image form. You can sense her relish in grappling with the essential paradox at the heart of all painting, which is the mobilisation of a visual language and representation of space on a singular flat surface, while at the same time providing account for the complex nature of experience. And doing so by handling a most tactile of mediums heavily laden with coloured pigment.

What exactly is being felt - being expressed - is uncertain but when we look at the selection of paintings in this exhibition, over a period of only three years there is a noticeable shift in attitude between opposing positions commonly associated with painting: between free-flowing and structured composition and between exterior and interior space. In the earlier paintings, seemingly quick spontaneous gestural marks, bright in colour and tone, appear to dance across a deep immersive coloured 'field'. The later paintings lose something of the spontaneity with the suggestion of a more deliberate schematic arrangement of identifiable forms. Throughout any change, colour remains something of an unavoidably intense and dynamic experience. The blue, green, and turquoise which dominate the earlier paintings are alive with luminosity and vibrant zest. The green, pink and white are no less powerful and immersive but are handled in a manner that seems more measured and consciously structured.

In the paintings *Como*, *Beech*, and *Carambola* (from 1982) while there may have been the suggestion of abstracted flora and other organic forms floating in a sumptuous atmosphere, later in *Pink Place*, *Formal Garden* (from 1985) and *White Walk* there is greater indication of specific imagery and fabricated objects held within space which has become more demarcated. A structural and conceptual shift of this kind could reflect change in emotional and bodily condition from one perhaps carefree, full of energy and excitement, to one more contained, measured and reflective. An open landscape, contained garden, or a room are psychological states as much as they may be physical, haptic environments.

Good painting never fully reveals itself or explains to the viewer what is occurring and why. This ambiguity is a key mechanism for maintaining the viewers engagement, for much of any painting's interpretation is through what the viewer brings to the work. Those of us who experienced Gillman's paintings for the first time in the early 1980s we were living very much in a different era. (A good indicator is to think of the desolation of London's docklands at that time.) This was a time of both excitement and challenge as many social and cultural assumptions were coming under question. To someone like myself, a young art student, very much wanting to establish an identity and future relationship to art, Gillman's paintings resonated quite profoundly, suggesting a new positive way forward with possibilities that felt tangible.

These paintings offered qualities distinctly individual with a self-confidence that was not overbearingly pre-determined. Qualities the artist, it felt, wanted to share and the space her paintings conjured up, did not keep the viewer at a distance but was a welcoming invitation. With the palpable sensations of raw colour and physicality of paint one could sense the pleasure in reinvigorating the language of painting while at the same time finding new meaning for the history of its traditions. There was an assertive handling of paint which may have been understood as sometimes audacious, but Gillman was reminding us it could also be equally explorative and sensitive. Something in common with the expressionist abstraction of De Kooning and in Britain the work of Gillian Ayres and Alan Davie. The excitement of such handling was set against a purity and flatness of colour that one enjoyed in the work of artists like Matisse or John Hoyland. Yet within the broad colourful areas that Gillman established across her own paintings there could be detected a touch which was delicately playful, a witty use of imagery and quotation absent from the often aloof, conceptual rigour of minimalism which at the time had characterised a lot of more recent painting.

To those of us seeking new ways in art, what Gillman was making evident is how allegiance to any given conceptual doctrine or attitude of style is not necessary. At the time, her work demonstrated not only how painting can be anything you might want it to be, but also how it can become something that up until that point you didn't

realise was available. It is an attitude she has maintained throughout the further development of her work. There may have been changes in scale and materiality, but the work has refused to be defined too narrowly and has evolved in correspondence with Gillman's own developing life as a person and, significantly, as a woman artist.

While a painting is absolutely a product of the social and historical circumstances within which it was made, to encounter that same painting some decades later is not quite the same experience. The extent to which Gillman's paintings reflected the period of their making is perhaps less the point. Part of their strength is in how we are able to behold them according to our experience now. It is possible to experience this same energy anew, the same revelry in the material substance and emotional joy of colour. Take for example the prominent yellow diagonal 'streak' in the lower left of *Como* 1982. This seemingly spontaneous and continuous stretch of paint feels as though it could have been made only yesterday. What remains difficult to register is how much this is a mark of delight or frustration. It could be both at the same time. More significant perhaps is how formally the resonating yellow against blue suggests something perfectly in place and the result of its own condition, a gesture that had to be made there and then.

When it comes to making gestures with paint, Gillman shares something in common with possibly all painters. Van Gogh's swirls, Pissarro's dabs, Frankenthaler's drips and stains are the results of a desire to assert something. But what exactly is nearly always a point of conjecture. If these marks have anything in common though, it could be the need to say, 'I exist'. Perhaps fairer to suggest, and this especially applies to Gillman's marks, is that 'we exist'. Me the maker and you beholding what I make. We existed then, and we continue existing now. At its most fundamental, mark making in paint is a physical and emotional act. (The yellow 'streak' a case in point.) At the same time such gestures are tied to the act of looking and become a matter of perception often concerning the unknown as much as the known. Painting is easily understood as an outward search beyond the self, or equally a search within the self. For something to be found, or grappled with, amongst the stuff of the world. The production of paintings – pictures – are thought to offer a viewpoint, or means of entry, which can lead us towards the something we supposedly seek.

In the moments that we behold them, the collective marks contained within paintings like *Beech* and *Como* are received as a totality. However, they are the accumulated residue of fragmentary moments. What is not always visible is the dwell time between various actions either fast and frenzied or slow and measured. A finished painting is static and mute existing in the now. It is easy to think of these paintings as the manifestation of dynamic 'expressive' energy but, when deemed by the artist to be finished, considered perfectly balanced, harmonious and poised, all proceeding time and energy is collapsed into a singularity of stasis. At this point the painting becomes less the expression of time and more the continuing subject of time. It is from here on that a painting will again come into being and repeatedly so; each time someone looks at it. And with each occurrence the experience and meaning will be different, if ever so slightly.

Looking at Gillman's extended career it becomes evident that a major concern of her work is very much the attempt to map the special experience of time, in its varying measurable and perceptual forms. Moreover, it is the question of how to grasp and comprehend the ephemerality of life, how experience and its description continuously dissolve into each other. De Kooning referred to such conditions as 'slipping glimpses'. Gillman has her own term for this dynamic steady state which she applies to Braque's late studio paintings, whereby at its best, the key elements of a painting are in a permanent condition of being 'unpinnable downable'. In other words, a fine balance between flux and being firmly grounded. Critically for the painter this requires an openness to possibilities as well as the skilful handling of what may present itself. Gillman's current work takes on a character that could be described as 'quieter' yet continues to reflect principles and concerns, the foundations of which were being laid in these earlier paintings. For example, the recent *Moment Fields* series are very much about how the experience of time is not linear and continuous but through the accumulations of momentary fragments.

The world to which a painting is reacting will be as particular as it is universal. Sitting behind the romance of painting, and any exotic qualities of objects and place, can so often be found a resistance to contemporaneous situations including violence and oppression. 1980s Britain was a period of considerable change, in some ways

presenting opportunities in others much less so. The memories of youthful summer sunshine and pastel shade pop during 1982 is not an accurate reflection of certain realities including the challenges through which Gillman forged this work. The positive qualities present in her paintings are all true, especially the energy and warm colour, but not necessarily as they were readily understood during the early 1980s. Although known to be lurking in corners, much less discernible under the surface of her paintings will have been the challenging circumstances of a young woman working in the aggressively prejudiced 'macho' environment of painting departments found in some British art schools at the time. The vitality of a painting like *Carambola* is the evidence of a proud celebration of female energy and sexuality that is powerful and hot. This celebration was in clear defiance of what could often be an overbearing atmosphere of lifeless patriarchal formalism with its accompanying behavioural attitudes. To express emotional strength in this manner was also in reaction to wider social circumstances. The heat and bright colours that characterised the South African landscape of her childhood to Gillman did not only mean hedonism in the sun but also the sense of latent danger both natural and political.

Learning something of this background is important as it helps with the re-evaluation of forms and the contexts out of which they arise. Equally, it can confound our possible naïve assumptions. Certainly, it helps us further appreciate the commitment and drive which an artist like Gillman possesses: the energy that is embodied in her paintings. Whether such specifics alter the fundamental experience of painting itself is less certain but Gillman has always laid bare the very realities of that experience. In the work of an artist to which we are drawn, intuitively or otherwise, what we are able to feel is not necessarily the particularities of someone else's experience, but a shift in perspective different to one we knew before.

While Gillman's paintings may not have not altered physically since they were made in in the early 1980s, we have, and significantly, the world around us has. Therefore, our perception will be different. But a quality that has always been present from when these paintings were made is how Gillman is reminding us to be *aware*. Be aware and receptive to ever possible and multiple meanings. And when

reconsidering these paintings today, what we also share with her is the acknowledgement of how the world ultimately avoids singular description and that, surely, is much of the beauty.

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