

Alex Hanna: The Alchemy of Painting

It is possible for the same thing both to be and not to be.

David Hume

In the heart of the English countryside lies the small industrial city of Derby, and in its centre stands an unprepossessing looking Art Gallery and Museum. Should you choose to wander in, you'll discover a little known cultural gem, which deep inside contains a beautifully decorated room with the world's largest collection of paintings by Joseph Wright (1734 –1797).

One of those paintings is *The Alchemist Discovering Phosphorus* (1771). *The Alchemist* depicts a medieval chemist attempting to form the fabled Philosopher's stone, which legend held could turn base metals such as lead, into gold. In Wright's picture we see that instead of creating the Philosopher's Stone, the alchemist has inadvertently stumbled upon the glowing compound of phosphorus, an element so reactive it spontaneously combusts in its purest form, yet one so important to life it is used by plant cells to store energy, is a core ingredient of fertilizers and a principal constituent of human bones. Awed by his discovery, we see the Alchemist in Wright's painting drop to one knee and hold his right hand out in a motion which indicates silence is required in the sight of such beauty and magic.

Yet where Wright's fictional Alchemist only managed to unearth what was already present, Wright himself succeeded in converting the raw ingredients of pigment, oil and canvas into paintings capable of generating emotions in his viewers. Many of Wright's pictures, such as *An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump* (1768) and *An Iron Forge* (1772) are concerned with the transformations of matter, they are sophisticated masterpieces which act as portraits of where the margins lie between where life is and where life fails to be.

The Italian artist Giorgio Morandi (1890 –1964) also produced paintings which were preoccupied with the subtle balance of form and tone as an expression of the limits between being and not being. Morandi had initially aligned himself with the metaphysical painters who were active either side of the First World War, before finally settling on an output which was defined by apparently simple depictions of vases, bottles and bowls. This unassuming approach saw the production of an oeuvre of paintings which have become renowned for their reduced compositional elegance, delicacy of shading and quiet humility. They appear as artistic symbols of life when it is suspended on the very edge of nothingness, whilst simultaneously conveying a tentative sense of post-war joy and hope for the future, in part due to the decorative shapes and sensitive colours they employ.

An art which seeks to explore the visual boundaries between presence and absence is as rare as it is difficult to produce. The British artist Alex Hanna picked up this creative thread at the beginning of the 21st Century when he began painting a series of subtle still-lives around a limited variety of small items which range from used pill packets and bubble wrap, to bottles, empty incubators and pillows. At first glance Hanna's objects feel similar to Morandi's, yet on closer inspection we come to realise that his choices are more deliberately utilitarian. The pill packets in *Pill Packaging 1* (2012) for example, just as the small plastic container in *Incubator 4* (2013), are manifestations of designs which have been dictated wholly by their purpose. The beauty Hanna finds in these objects relates directly to ideas found in the British artist William Hogarth's (1697 – 1764) book *The Analysis of Beauty* (1753). In this, Hogarth argued that the shapes occurring in nature which attain the highest degree of elegance are those which most closely align to performing their function effectively, and it is these forms in turn which he believes have the greatest aesthetic impact on the viewer. For Hogarth, true utility is beauty made manifest.

Sixty years earlier to Hogarth's dissertation, the English dramatist and critic John Dennis (1658 – 1734) had proposed that the sublime should also be considered as an aesthetic quality, separate from, yet complementary to, beauty as a visual experience. He defined this in a journal letter titled *Miscellanies* (1693) which offers an account of the emotional responses he felt whilst crossing the Alps. Here he describes how the majesty of the mountain landscape induced a sense of terror in him which produced a "pleasure to the eye as music is to the ear", whilst simultaneously being "mingled with Horrors, and sometimes almost with despair." For Dennis this is a positive understanding of how fear can bring about insights when it is triggered by a sense of awe. In *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1756), Edmund Burke (1729 – 1797) went on to argue that the sublime and the beautiful are mutually exclusive, with either one able to produce pleasure and he specifically described the sensation attributed to the sublime as a "negative pain" which he called delight.

Ideas around the sublime experienced as feelings of awe in the presence of nature were beautifully expressed in art by the romantics, most notably by Caspar David Friedrich (1774 – 1840) in paintings such as *The Monk by the Sea* (1808-10), *Chasseur in the Forest* (1814) and *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (1818), all of which depict an isolated individual standing before a fateful geography. In *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*, for instance, a lonely male figure positioned in the centre of the picture, wrapped in a dark green coat with a walking stick in his right hand, pauses on top of a mountain in Saxony. Before him lie further mountains and forests cloaked in mist. His back is turned to us, as he stares out over the vast landscape stretching before him. He has the appearance of a man who stands on the precipice of something far bigger than the smallness of our humble lives. In seeking out nature he appears to have unintentionally happened upon the threshold of the abyss; the defining

boundary of human existence. In this way Friedrich's paintings act as more than a simple depiction of man contemplating nature, they act as metaphors for the unknowingness of death.

The sublime experience can be found in even the smallest circumstance and this is where Hanna's paintings take us, as he reveals that the edge of nothing can be found in what rests right before our eyes. When we look closer at Hanna's paintings, we begin to notice that his concern with subject matter is more than a passing interest in the surface shapes and reflections of practical packaging and how its expediency can render it attractive to our eye. Hanna's selection of objects creates an association with something more profound, it is a concern with the nature of how we care for one another. In this way he brings together the two concepts of beauty and the sublime and overlays them with a meditation on the nature of personal tenderness.

Through his work, Hanna reveals that whilst a genuine beauty can be found in utility, the truly sublime experience is found in our capacity to care for one another and to do so without the interference of the ego. This necessarily makes Hanna's paintings an exercise in reductionism to the point where they balance delicately on the edge between being and nothingness. To achieve this, Hanna's still lives appear to be almost monochromatic images, being of white or transparent objects set on a white table top against a white wall. These in turn are depicted in a narrow range of tones, which despite being studies indoors are painted using a classic 'plein air' palette. This is limited to the six colours of cadmium red, yellow ochre, lead white, emerald green, French ultramarine and ivory black, which in turn are laid out from left to right in an order which places the cool colours to the left of the white, and the warm colour to its right. The lead white he works with forms the core of this palette and has been favored by many masters of the past who include Freud, Monet and Rembrandt. They prefer its textural quality over other whites, the way the paint synthesizes and its ability to maintain the characteristics of the brush strokes on the worked surface.

Hanna mixes his paint with only the slightest hint of white spirit, a medium which tends to deaden colour, rather than linseed oil which many artists use to brighten it. In this way he maintains a sense that the paint is able to behave in its purest physical consistency on both the palette and canvas. The central role lead white plays in his paintings is important to Hanna, and in a conversation he described how "White has no value unless it's placed in a relationship to another colour" going on to say that "it is the context which provides the substance."¹ The idea of a context providing the terms which define the subject is fundamental to Hanna's painting, and just as colour provides the context for white, so the choice of objects offers the framework to the real theme, that of the beautiful and the sublime forming to create a contemplation on altruism.

All of Hanna's paintings relate to the care of the human body without actually depicting it, whilst his objects are almost always portrayed at life size which enhances our emotional

response to them. In this way he offers us a vision of the human presence by describing its absence, instilling in his paintings a tangible awareness of being. The first time the theme of absence as presence occurred in art was when Vincent van Gogh (1853 – 1890) painted his own empty chair, whilst living in Arles. Until this point, furniture had not been considered a sufficiently suitable core subject for painting. However, there is a precursor to van Gogh's painting in a drawing which depicts Charles Dickens's (1812 – 1870) study immediately after the novelist's death. The English artist Luke Fields (1843 – 1927) who had been collaborating with Dickens on *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* sketched out a picture of the authors' now empty room, with his vacant chair at its centre. Fields drawing traced the memory of Dickens' lost energy and was subsequently reproduced in *Graphic* magazine. Van Gogh brought a print of it, which was so important to him that he tried yet failed to acquire a second copy for his brother Theo.

In painting his own versions of the beautiful and sublime, Hanna seems to hold out a metaphorical hand which asks us for a moment's silence. And when we carefully study his still lives we begin to share with him in a meditation on the nature of utility, which like Hogarth, Hanna sees as revealing a truth far more fundamental than that offered by the changing shapes of fashion. Instead, his still lives offer up the undercurrent to style, the continuum which underpins all other considerations and contains a slow beauty which reveals itself only gradually. In doing this Alex Hanna helps us reflect on the nature of our own being.

Robert Priseman, 2014

ⁱ From a conversation between Alex Hanna and Robert Priseman on the 3rd July 2014.