

## About an abstract from a larger hole

Martin Holman, 17 January 2010

There is a quality about Danny Rolph's images that could be described as protozoan. That association at first seems surprising because the proliferation of acute angles, jagged coloured shafts and polychromatic zigzags like speed streaks into the supposed interiors of these works at first suggests other parallels entirely: the purposeful world of the constructed, mechanical and architectural, perhaps, or the disembodied digital counter-realities of CGI.

Yet the contradictions and contingencies characteristic of organic life's evolutionary struggles strike me as an appropriate allusion on this occasion. One reason (the flippant one) is that both confirm the presence of intelligent life in constant anticipation of the next stage. Rolph is, after all, one of the foremost makers of visually and intellectually stimulating imagery in his peer group of painters that emerged from the Royal College of Art in the first half of the 1990s.

The more pertinent reason, however, is that the elements on the surfaces in Rolph's paintings appear to colonise and multiply by a sort of fission. Fission is the preferred method of augmentation among protozoa. It is accompanied by immense energy and a rejection of stasis. Similarly, forms and shapes in the space of a painting made on the distinctive industrially-manufactured plastic cellular support that Rolph uses called Triplewall give the impression of having counterparts in other parts of the image. They offer an echo (rather than balance) of where the eye has already been.

The sensation of parts in relative motion is inescapable in this new work. Dynamism has its point; it is not a ploy or tiresome artistic trope. It puts us in mind (a stock phrase that sounds right for the interpretation of Rolph's strategies) of other instances of this particularisation with which we have become graphically familiar in the past few decades. It has a root comparable with natural projections. Those incongruous unicellular formations with their urgent thrashing movements at the bottom of a microscope know what they are doing, the evidence for which surrounds us with every aspect of the lives we lead.

How we apprehend that link between the imperceptibly tiny and self-evidently and palpable everyday is also a factor in this artists work. Science is the art of observation and critical deduction through experiment. In my opinion Rolph encapsulates in the way he works what it is to observe in the most active sense, so much so, indeed, that his sensitivity to the possibilities presented by that faculty is readily acquired by the similarly avid viewer.

Observation is systematic, attentive and critical in order to ascertain fact. In this respect Rolph is like a wonderer at the night sky at the dawn of the Age of the Enlightenment, with a belief in progress and a questioning of traditional authorities to pierce unknowing with reason. His tools, though, are unquestionably modern, informed by the modern scientist's ability to abstract from perceived phenomena such information as can help model a proposition of their make-up.

The Triplewall painting Lloyd George implies perpetual motion; only the intermittently painted rim, like old-fashioned photo corners securing the corners, fasten this concentration of space tokenistically on two dimensions. Rolph organises his output into chronologically-based series to which he applies names usually found in chronological lists such as the roster of officeholders - British prime ministers, for instance, or Italian football managers. Curiously, this practice is one of the few instances of the artist presenting a

categorical fact: the painting is named, pointed to and not mixed up with another. The name, however, bears no relation whatsoever to what the visitor is drawn to look at.

On the emerald blue surface beyond the frontal plane of Lloyd George a constellation seems to be convening in another dimension. Its identity is indistinct; the surfaces the viewer looks through of vertical channels giving on to vacant chambers confuse and fragment what lies behind, between and to the side of the forms in front. The distant galaxy is entirely painterly, the scatter of drips as rhetorical gesture to assume the resonance of poetic metaphor. Although we cannot extract fact from this spillage of artistic DNA, the compulsion becomes apparent that in some way these details must add up.

The adding up is the task of the artist and his audience, and the totals never tally. That putative night sky in points of light in the allusion of trackless, infinite space that Rolph delights in is reached through a congestion of shapes, colours, textures, adhesions, reflectivity and absorbencies that renders even the fittest onlooker breathless, mentally clutching a tightening intellectual chest against the dizzying push and pull of stuff, straight edges and curly silhouettes, directions ahead and pointers back and to one side.

What Rolph constructs is, in the context of painting, rather spectacular. It is not straightforward: meaning is never explicit and space is graphic and ambiguous. If the spectator is pleased by the optical profusion alone one suspects that Rolph would not be put out. Painting can be a matter of what you see is what you get.

That the paintings offer much more is apparent and insistent. Rolph proposes an experience to those with time and acuity to invest that is the equivalent of a major warp factor acceleration from the miniscule to the inconceivably cosmic and grand, or into a notion of pictorial space that seems inexhaustible (like an echo of Renaissance pictorial perspective) while being physically measurable (Rolph's paintings on plastic project up to two centimetres from the wall to scotch rumours of illusionism).

Rolph is not an isolated figure with interests ranging widely from the patterns in children's clothing to the characteristics of Black Holes. British art has had its legions of engaging eccentrics, but Rolph is an artist in the thick of current ideas, in dialogue with other prominent practitioners contending with the contemporary realities of a world that generates more information than its inhabitants can ever comprehend. It is possible to position him adjacent to Matthew Ritchie's cosmological information structures that take in action painting, string theory, molecular biology and comic books (although Rolph does not share Ritchie's mythological slant), and the idealised spaces and virtual environments in the cool, materially cosmopolitan collages of Ian Monroe.

It may be a generational thing. The British-born, USA-resident Ritchie is Rolph's senior by about three years; American Londoner Monroe is five years younger. Julie Mehretu (born 1970) may be closer in discourse than either men to what Rolph intends. These two painters use layering to span great distances on the picture plane (an area, of course, that Rolph multiplies by employing the back and front of superimposed layers of translucent material). One distance is historical. In Rolph's case the viewer samples geometric abstraction that conceivably refers to Mondrian and Futurism; the projection into imagined space that the Renaissance master Uccello calibrated with graphic perspectival devices (some of which Rolph deliberately quotes with the lance-like diagonals in Ramsay Macdonald); and the enveloping scale of heroic post-war American art (James Rosenquist comes to mind).

With the elusiveness of fact new narratives take shape, aided by chance and intuition. Whether the direction is towards the concrete or towards the unravelling of reality (a kind of counter-archaeology), the sensation of possibility exists without the implication of an end point. This is not a weakness in his painting but its strength, instilling as it does

contradictory emotions that unsettle and excite, reactions that oscillate like a patient's temperature. Painting is not obliged to supply the full picture, or any picture at all.

Mehretu has described her panoramic and highly-worked canvases as story maps of no location, Rolph similarly lays out a cacophonous built environment of mental, physical and philosophical states. Cut from magazines are glimpses of elegant furniture, Italian Gothic church architecture and comic characters of popular fiction. Rolph illustrates his personal biography photographically (himself as a teenager; his young sons) as one of numerous visual incidents that seize on the anxiety of identity, like keep-sakes in a wallet that can double as clues to the authorities seeking answers in the event of an accident. Details pull both ways.

Because this exhibition includes work on paper as well as paintings on Triplewall and canvas, a strong idea is formed of how Rolph works. The importance to him of drawing is particularly clearly implied. Images in graphite and coloured pencil do not have to anticipate what the artist might do with paint and collage. Elements reflect on paintings already made through as Rolph tries to recall the shapes and relationships that had transpired in those images. That reminds us that processes do not move inexorably forward but shift this way and that, slipping and eddying.

Rolph draws every day, often experimenting with line and density and how they articulate an idea of space. He gathers abstract impressions from any source that attracts him in the course of a day's travelling by foot, bike, car or train, and after playing with his children and while observing the welter of events that go into the passage of a day. He acknowledges that material is everywhere; he is in league with the world. Consequently, his paintings have the climatic quality of a place gone through and felt sensuously, a feature evident in the work on canvas.

Apparent, too, is the influence of collage on his conception of space and edge, of how one type of painted stroke abuts or impairs another. The effect is like intersections of time, of shape and colour passing, like traffic at a busy junction. Light gets fragmented across the swift passage of contrasting surfaces, glinting or blurred, fading and rising. Rolph senses the pressure from history, the present and the future on his back to move forward.

And so do we. That pressure is not always gentle, not always expected. It is seldom resistible.