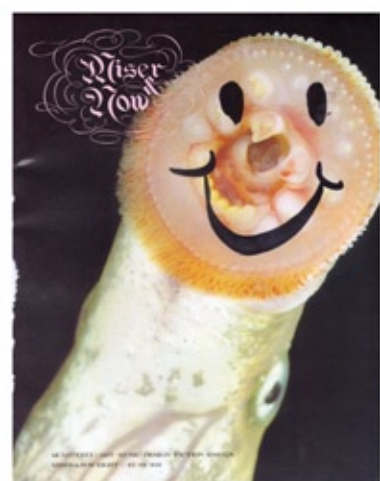


"The question faced by much abstract painting today is what meaning it can contain to keep it from ornament. In the company of surprisingly few others in Britain, Rolph has consulted the index and proposed a feasible response."

Martin Holman, Summer issue, 2006



It is not possible to dismiss history from the structure of Danny Rolph's paintings. One history is the medium's: Rolph evokes the twenty-first century complexity of experience through a craft strongly associated with the past. Another is his chosen idiom's history: Rolph has gravitated deeper into formalism in his newest canvases, abstracting form to focus on the real – like a hybrid that reconciles Mondrian's early landscapes with his last geometric compositions. And a third history is the grandest of all, the cornucopia of small and huge events that spin ceaselessly on completion into the ether or on to the ground around us. Or, more accurately, it is the history that builds itself inexorably into the pages of books, into websites, minds and memories.

'Everything is retained,' Rolph explained to me as we looked at a large painting last autumn, 'everything comes back in some other way'. The piece comprised three layers of Twinwall, the fluted plastic sheeting that Rolph began using in the late 1990s to work out questions that were nagging him of registering touch on, and organising space beyond, the flat surface. The light-weight construction, a kind of tangible emptiness, supported simultaneously six surfaces of jostling mark-making, and a pageant of sharp edged, rounded or blocky space-shapes, some collaged and all integrated with colour. In some respects the effect was like a layman staring into a stockbroker's screen and trying to make sense of the accumulation of rapidly changing, multicoloured share prices mobilising options here and highlighting trading backgrounds there with varying prominence.

Information abounded, yet Rolph perceived no dilemma or crisis in this profusion. As references multiply in his paintings, they overlap to the point where the reason for their inclusion gets clouded. But that reason is never wholly lost on the viewer; it is the consequence of being absorbed into Rolph's work. For the artist, it is the consequence of being absorbed into Rolph's work. For the artist, it is the consequence of being Danny Rolph. His finished work, generous as it unquestionably is to its audience, is primarily an aid to the artist: he is assessing his own position in the world.

That the universe is so full of matter, material, amazes Rolph. We know it is full, but Rolph is amazed by a magnitude beyond common imagination. The eminent American physicist, Leonoard Susskind, has used string theory to suggest the extent, showing that black holes retain the information about the objects they swallow. In fact, black holes suck information out of their vicinity, keep hold of it and, when they reach a certain size and evaporate, release it, although in a thoroughly mixed up state.

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David LaPlante
Signs and the Signs
2002-5
Mixed media on canvas

From this point Rolph's paintings set out. The precision of the shapes he makes belies just how mixed up the regurgitated information might be, orbiting in a suspension of colour, drawing, facture and possibility. His approach helps to get a dialogue going that implies the forces around us – of time, location, architecture – that the artist can occupy with his imagination. In the context of black holes and string theory, Rolph's fascination with the skeins of highways and ribboned freeways, the clashy colours and abutting or zoned structures of Los Angeles and Las Vegas comes to mind as an apposite metaphor for the epic performance of mixed signs, analytic procedures and unresolvable questions which his larger paintings more and more present.

The 'new abstraction' of the mid-1990s, moreover, has sanctioned this

wide-eyed headiness. It has marked a turn away from the purity and flatness of mid-century non-objective art towards exploring new possibilities. Gone is the earlier utopian standpoint, and in its place painters set the ideal against rough reality. Take that reality to the extent proposed by scientists like Susskind, and the choices before Rolph become clearer (and you might also get Ross Bleckner).

Alternatively, consider Jonathan Lasker, Thomas Scheibitz or Philip Taaffe. An image is created of abstract forms painted as if they were figurative, generating a tension between reality and illusion. This analogy provides a viable context for viewing Rolph. Exploiting new imagery derived from the street outside, or fractal theory, poor taste, plastic tape and magic markers, microbiology, children's clothing or brand logos, he has argued a relevance for his art in our times. Above all, his work projects painting as an active space where things happen.

Surface confusion, like the complicated nature of our experience of the world, is the first impression left on the viewer by Elsewhere, 2002 – 5. Telescoping out from this evaporating black hole of a composition is, conflictingly, the signpost to the formal and intellectual vitality of the painting. Because, sandwiched between multiple painted surfaces, a notionally compacted space oscillates forward and back among vertical and horizontal forms. Within that space playful colours, reminiscent of 1970s chic and modern high-street packaging, and unrecognisable graphic emblems imply associations with which to construct an interpretation. The process resembles computer windows propelling information on to the virtual space of a monitor screen. Our initial disorientation dissolves, with this realisation, into another possible world, where we can reflect back on our sensations of the actual world we inhabit.

The power of his painting, as with others that Rolph has made since 2001, comes partly from personal experience (which, being personal, sidesteps tradition) and partly resides in its congenial formality. Rolph creates a framework where marks and gestures shun surface uniformity with drips and streaky brushwork. Like Scheibitz, for instance, Rolph unleashes a variety of conversations – on life, originality, nature, craft, science, fiction or representation – with the vocabulary he chooses.

Decorativeness, an element here as it is in life, becomes a route to meaning as much as the placing of forms or the exchanges between lines, textures, gravity and scale. But whereas Schiebitz tends towards frontally-fragmented, inconclusive images redolent of social malaise, Rolph analyses and constructs a shallow space with conceptual rigour towards an overarching coherence. His strategy is perhaps not surprising in a painter whose earliest mature work, fifteen years ago, spot lit processes characteristic of Modernism's final years.

One feature that Rolph injects into contemporary abstraction is an interest in objecthood that has been bypassed by peers more concerned by forces and relationships. In Elsewhere and four years of painting on Twinwall is displayed his fastidiousness about combining through collage items from numerous sources – his own smaller canvases from some time back, photographs and fragments of recycled watercolours. By avoiding in this way favouring one style over another, the resulting fusion of construction (rather than making) and presentation preserves elements of minimalism in his practice as well as puts on show his abiding respect for heroic figures like Johns and Twombly.

That attitude extends to concurrent work in other media. Rolph uses watercolour in a regular routine that has infused a calligraphic fluency into his handling of oil and acrylic that almost masks the individual qualities of those materials. He has long enjoyed setting in motion internal rhythms within his paintings. Inscribing variegated textural contrasts into the forms and shapes he invents demonstrates that Rolph, unlike many contemporaries, is not afraid of drawing his viewers' attention to the technique of moving paint. This craftiness is a strength: it often heightens rather than undermines his aim of rendering modern experience aphoristically in two dimensions

Recent sequences in acrylic – the small-scale Axiom paintings and the larger Hinterland series – make great play of this possibility. That occurs as a product of Rolph's transfer to canvas the lessons learned in manipulating forms in space; taking up clear and translucent plastics had been a means to that result – the bugging

Steve Rolph
Elsewhere
in a series
Mixed Media on Trawlwall



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Steve Rolph
Hinterland, 2004
oil & acrylic
Acrylic and Oil on canvas

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— Maria Helena —

Steve Rolph is represented by White Gallery

questions largely unbugged – as well as its own productive outcome. The time span in the title so Axiom series – typically 2001 to 2005 – measures that journey, and the canvases embody it: Rolph has painted over older work, folding in the experience of the intervening years.

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