

DANNY ROLPH interviewed by Paul Carey Kent

Abstractions of Everything

Danny Rolph makes complex multi-level 'triplewall' paintings and also work on canvas and paper. They share a teeming sense of the numinous world reflecting the range of Rolph's interests: it feels as if there could be everything in there. That openness feeds an all-over energy reminiscent of Pollock's classic drip paintings, which Rolph himself describes as 'amazing in the control and anarchy of their dance across the surface'.

Rolph is slightly unusual name, isn't it?

People often link it to the German Christian name, but it's Huguenot, and probably used to have an 'e' on the end. My family were in the East End for generations, and I grew up near the top of a 1970s tower block near the Barbican.

Do you think that has fed into your work?

Maybe there is a sense of modular units and of looking over multiple perspectives. And I tend to look down when working, in that I paint flat on the floor. These things can feed in subconsciously: I remember reading how Peter Halley had thought he was working with pure geometry, and then noticed that he was reproducing the bars on the window of his studio.

What led you into art?

An amazing art teacher, Ian Rutherford. I bunked off a boring lesson and wandered into his room, and he opened a book on Mondrian and asked what I thought it showed. I said they are paintings of light coming through from behind a structure (he told me later he'd asked that often and other boys always saw Mondrian two dimensionally). Then he gave me oil paints instead of the powder paints we had in lessons, and told me to just run with it.

What is the twinwall and triplewall which you use?

It's an almost clear polycarbonate, mainly used for conservatories in England, though it is used more widely for buildings in Japan and Germany. I paint and collage on all the surfaces. The triplewall has one layer either side of a fluting down the centre. The reason I started using that, rather than twinwall, was that optically it shifts things round more and provides an extra level of obfuscation.

And how did you come to use it?

I was on a scholarship at the British School in Rome in 1998, and feeling frustrated at the lack of spatial dynamic in my paintings. Then some drawings I was working on were blown onto the floor and landed on their flip side. That interested me because it registered as the impression of the initial expression. I thought about using glass or perspex to catch that in my paintings, but glass was too heavy and fragile and loaded with religious history, and perspex bent too much. Then the Director of the British School suggested I go to a Roman hardware shop. The owner took me into a storeroom full of twinwall, and I knew instantly it was right. It has a sort of tangible emptiness, and I liked its being an everyday industrial material: I'm a massive fan of Judd and Andre, and truth to materials was really important in my early work.

Would you like to make a conservatory out of your triplewall paintings, returning them to their origins?

I would like to make a building. Architecture is a big inspiration for me, and I'd create a space in which the division between painting and architecture becomes irrelevant.

How do your various strands of work relate to each other?

Gradually over the years I've tried to bring the unusual spatial dynamics of the triplewalls into the work on canvas. Obviously they do different things, as canvas absorbs the paint (though I then shine it up to give it an echo of the triplewall), whereas it sits on the surface of the triplewall with a more transgressive graffiti-like quality. But they do now bounce off and inform each other. In the same way I've been keen to bring collage aspects from my drawings into the triplewall. So the three strands of triplewall, canvas and paper are in dialogue.

The triplewalls are increasingly complex yet appear controlled. Do you plan them?

There is no pre-planning, no. It is instinct informed by all that I am: no reference to photography, just memories. 90% is done fast, the last 10% is the tuning which creates what I sense is the right degree of disorder and also makes it more overtly pictorial. That 10% takes longer. I used to show the triplewalls leaning against the wall to present them sculpturally as expanded painting, but after looking at – for example – Matisse, I saw that you can have it all up there: space, light, colour, architecture...

The works have rather familiar titles...

I can't bear 'Untitled' – that's a dull way of hedging your bets. But my titles are mainly for listing purposes rather than to describe the work, and at the moment I'm using the sequence of British Prime Ministers for my paintings. The drawings shown with them are 'PMQs' – as in Prime Minister's Questions – because they are interrogations after the paintings. I don't draw in front of the paintings, though, so I have to rely on memory and the drawings become twisted takes on them.

What about the show's overall title – 'Automatic Shoes'?

It's from Telegram Sam by T Rex. I think it's funny and somewhat preposterous. That combination reminds me of Picabia. He's a massive influence on painters like Kippenburger, Oehlen and Salle for his attitude in sending up modernity as well as his techniques. And the superimposition of images in his overpaintings can be related directly to the triplewalls.

Where do you find your collage material?

At least half is just found in the street – I came across a book of Spanish cathedrals on the street yesterday which looks promising... I like the idea of someone discarding something and I reclaim it to re-emerge elsewhere. I also visit car boot sales, and pick up books and photocopy elements from them.

Do you read a lot?

I'm always reading: 19th century ghost stories, philosophy, Marx, popular physics, phenomenology. Music also feeds in – experimental jazz, funk, late 70's trance disco.

So there's a sense in which your work tries to have it all, isn't there?

There are a lot of competing elements, yes, and that really excites me. My reading in astrophysics comes to mind. How do we make sense of the beginning of time? That nanosecond before $t = 0$ interests me, when everything which will make up the universe is there together. I have no hierarchies: my only idea from the age of 15 was to make a painting, and so I don't see abstraction as a separate style – the formalism of some dry-arsed abstract painting is just so dull, as if making it too interesting would signal that you are not a Marxist any more.

Given all that, how abstract are they?

There is a sense of the familiar. People have said in a riddling way that they are like 'representations of abstraction'. I like to see them as open-ended crosswords: all the clues are there, but it's as if you have the grid from The Times but the clues from The Telegraph. Right crossword, wrong clues.

How much do you alter as you go along?

Plenty. And I'm in good company. Look at all the under and over painting in Matisse – his great 'Red Studio' was only painted red on the last day. I can overpaint a triplewall, or rip bits off. If it leaves a mark, that can be incorporated. That's in line with the history of painting at the end of the arm, Venetian style, rather than making designs into which the colour is plopped, like the Florentines. I love artists like Tintoretto, Tiepolo and Hals for the risks they take, the potential for failure, for messing up.

Is Cubism an influence in your work?

Not so much Picasso, but Braque for how he brings drawing, colour, touch, edge, greasiness, sand, and all these cruddy things together to emerge with a new version of space. I feel a real affinity for his late work, in which what's real and what isn't in space and time just get pulled around, and you feel the effect first and then the craft comes forward and leads you back into the effect. Also Gris for colour and Leger for volumetric space...

Would it be right to describe your love of colour as almost childish?

Well, I have three boys and that directness of children is amazing. And I give my children things to colour in, and incorporate the results into the work as collage. That way the boys are not just a handy labour force but also, in a way, a part of me put into the painting. As for me, I just feel the colours intuitively – I rally against any theories of colour. The choice is emotive and just is: there's no such thing as a 'right colour'.

The works all strike me as active and forward-looking, but they do vary in mood, don't they?

Yes, and I like that. In 'Automatic Shoes' I'm showing six works which are all the same size and on a blue sapphire ground, so the effect of their special differences will be overt – how some recede into space like looking at the stars, one is like a big shop window selling everything off, one feels like a great big game of kerplunk in space, and there are varying amounts of chaos. Because my work comes out of random thoughts it doesn't just relate to the history of my painting, but to things I read, hear, imagine... I think of Bergson: we are the perpetual present and my aim has always been to record my presentness without any hierarchies. I may be in the studio but my mind is somewhere else: some feel like they paint themselves, and I can't remember afterwards how I made the marks...

Finally, if you could live with any work of art ever made, what would it be?

The National Gallery's 'Battle of San Romano' by Uccello, just ahead of a Matisse.