

Douglas Kirwan - Open Works 1.

In 1993, a comet named Swift-Tuttle came hurtling across our skies. Astronomers have ascertained that it passes us by regularly (about every 133 years) and they have stated that it could quite easily collide with earth.² This is not a typical rocky object like the ones that usually penetrate our atmosphere. Swift-Tuttle is up to 15 kilometres in diameter, weighs tens of millions of tonnes and could hit earth at a velocity of over 200,000 kmh. If it does collide with earth on one of its orbits, it will completely obliterate all life. I am interested in this phenomena because it succinctly summarises something we know about ourselves but rarely discuss - and it puts Darwin's theory of natural selection into perspective. If we can be 'selected', we can also be 'de-selected' as fast as you can click the cursor on your computer.

I introduce this truism here because I feel it helps to establish a context for the whole body of Douglas Kirwan's work, at least over the past seven years since I have known him. His recent sculptures, to my eye, further reinforce this; the sense of the underlying ephemerality of existence (for us). They are beautifully crafted forms, clearly figurative, yet poised between states, like matter reconstituting itself. They convey to me this sense of our mutability, the precariousness with which we 'are' or 'aren't' according to the whims of cosmic processes which clearly have no interest in us at all.

Kirwan's new paintings, on the other hand, move away from his past concerns. There is still the subtext of a temperamental matter-world but the human presence within it is now an *active participant* rather than a casualty. This means that the paintings are contextually unlike the sculptures. The fact that both are developed simultaneously is testimony to Kirwan's conviction that art practice can be many things at the same time. "I have a big problem with 'single-mindedness' - an artist who has worked across the timespan that I have, is more than one person," he says. This is a valid point and is consistent with a range of post-structuralist traits that influence us: multiplicity, fragmentation, diversity, difference and so on.

Kirwan's paintings are unlike anything I have seen. They originate from an abiding concern on his part, to reinvigorate painting for *himself* and not as a counter to subdue painting's critics. He seems to be confronting a predicament similar to that of a group of American painters in the 40's. Barnett Newman, recounting that period said, "In 1940, some of us woke up to find ourselves without hope - to find that painting did not really exist," that painting "was dead". "The awakening inspired the aspiration . . . to start from scratch, to paint as if painting never existed before."³

One senses that Kirwan, like Newman, doesn't see an end to painting but that it has the potential to move laterally towards another objective. Kirwan's success depends on his ability to

shift our perception of the known. To achieve this he seems to navigate a world 'between'; a kind of mental cyberspace where he can inscribe unnamed ideograms on a shallow field of colour and texture and effectively form a conduit between what we *do* in the world and what we *think* about it.

Kirwan's paintings seem to oscillate between these two conditions, between an outward world that is modelled and modified by the human subject and the more obscure regions of unquantifiable experience. Art of this nature can never be a simple narrative of recognisable objects. Instead, his forms work on the periphery of language, relating to it but resisting any of its assigned meanings.

Kirwan is not alone in this area. He shares it in various ways with a diverse group of artists which may include Hugh O'Donnell, Prunella Clough, Gunther Forg, Brice Marden, Terry Winters, Jake Berthot among others. But where these artists invariably create an unnamed sentient space that is *organically* connected to the world we inhabit, Kirwan takes a different path.

At this juncture, his work swings away from nature and towards a revisionist site which has more in common with the late Manhattan paintings of Mondrian. This is evident on at least two levels. One involves Kirwan's recognition of the grid as culture's natural state, and the other is his use of colour. Yve-Alain Bois says of Mondrian, "He was attempting . . . to formulate an "achromatic" theory of colour, to find an articulation of colours that would borrow nothing from the natural order . . ." 4.

Kirwan also seems to distrust the comfortable iconography of nature. His blues, yellows, greens and maroons do not come from the garden. They are *synthesised* in the way that a Moog synthesiser transforms a bird's song. He uses water-based acrylics and a hair-dryer. This enables him to keep his colour 'pure'. "To blend the colours would ruin them", he says.

It is this desire to free painting of its earthy origins, to present a pure form within a cool framework which is not 'weathered' by the world of expectation, that distinguishes his work. He is thoroughly aware that this process produces an alien aesthetic. It is part of his strategy to culturally and aesthetically open a new file for art, to perhaps reassess Barnett Newman's desire "to paint as if painting never existed before".

Kirwan's polygonal figures further reinforce this process. They do not represent anything you can touch - in some works where the 'box' or 'house' shape appears, it is not this accidental referent that interests him but the structure and what it can imply. He sees these shapes much more as directional indicators or 'pointers' than objects. They assemble for a moment on Kirwan's underlying matrix of gridded dots and a curious dialogue seems to form between them, like

electricity arcing between points. They 'speak' to one another, sometimes humorously, often awkwardly.

In some works, they warp and twist in odd polymorphous configurations and strangely, seem defective and purposeful at the same time. It is this dichotomy of character that furthers Kirwan's intentions; to examine things anew. Seen collectively, the work presents a complex field of anti-rules and anti-aesthetics - which of course is the point. Inevitably, they create their own program, their own internal logic.

In a society like ours which is tranquillised by the market forces' packaged taste, it is refreshing that some artists are mining for something deeper, no matter how uncertain the ground. Importantly, these artists sustain the possibility of disclosing something that might transport us for a moment, away from the abyss of style-consciousness and towards something that will engage us longer than the customary quick turn around the gallery. Douglas Kirwan is one of them.

Robert Hollingworth

NOTES

1. A term used by Umberto Eco "The open work assumes the task of giving us an image of discontinuity. It does not narrate it; it *is* it. It takes on the task of a mediating role between the abstract categories of science and the living matter of our sensibility.." - *The Open Work*, 1989, P 96.
2. The Bulletin. January 12, 1993, P30-33.
3. Art News. April 1967, P 29.
4. Yve-Alain Bois - *Painting As Model*, 1993, P175.