

Art

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## Ommm. Hear the paintings hum

The huge canvases of Callum Innes are so intense, you soon find yourself in a state of meditation. Then you start to admire his fluid technique close-up ...

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**Rachel Cooke**

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### **Callum Innes: From Memory**

Modern Art Oxford, until 15 April

Callum Innes was born in Scotland, where he still lives and works, and there are those, I gather, who look at his vast canvases and see the heather blazing. Not me. I look at his work and think, somewhat predictably, of the great American abstract painters: Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, Brice Marden. This has something to do with scale and style, the way that his pictures, like theirs, are at their best in big, white, loft-like rooms.

But it is mostly to do with the way they make me feel. Sit in front of one of Innes's Exposed Paintings and you feel meditative to the point of not quite being able to struggle to your feet. It occurs to you that you might easily stay put all day, thinking your own dark thoughts and, possibly, taking the odd nap. His work, like that of Rothko and Newman, seems almost to emit a bat-like hum, so subtle is it in its construction, so strangely intense in its effect. It is not exciting, then, so much as immobilising. But is this a good thing or bad? Is Innes's work a balm for the urban soul or the painterly equivalent of Mogadon? I only wish I could be certain.

My hunch is that a really huge gathering of his work would confirm the former view. But this show, in the upstairs galleries at Modern Art Oxford, is on a more boutique scale, making judgment just that little bit trickier. Time is on your side - you can walk the entire space in less than 15 minutes - but it's also difficult to know how

representative a sample this collection is (which is why it is worth buying the beautiful book that accompanies the exhibition; it includes plates of many more pictures than you can see in the gallery and the effect is impressive).

Still, there is plenty to admire. The quality of the light in the gallery is fantastic and the space, midweek, never gets too crowded. Though there are notices everywhere warning you how fragile Innes's work is, telling you that it must not be touched, you can get pleasingly intimate with the paintings, scrutinising his technique. It involves the removal as well as the application of paint. And this is when it really starts to come alive, when you realise how complex it is.

Innes, born in 1962, studied drawing and painting at Gray's School of Art, Aberdeen, and then at Edinburgh College of Art. Then, he was immersed largely in figurative work. Since the late Eighties, however, his creative dynamic has been, as writer Richard Cork has put it, 'bound up with the need for subtraction'. What this means is that he pits paint against turpentine or shellac. But one does not cancel the other out entirely; rather, it leaves behind the memory of what was there before, hence the show's title. The work captures the transience of creativity even as it renders it permanent.

Innes has spoken of a crucial moment during the making of his work when the surface of the canvas starts to move and flow. Now, he might mean this literally: turps, after all, works on paint in a physical, chemical way, smudging it like dirt on a window. But it also, surely, refers to something more conceptual: the point at which the painting's emotional life begins. Perhaps this sounds pretentious. It is, a little. But once you understand what he's up to, the paintings have possibilities. They stop seeming so crowd-pleasingly decorative. His big blocks of colour, attacked by the turps, start to look like shadows, or sheets of rain, or mascara-heavy tears.

From Memory covers the last 15 years of Innes's career, in other words, from the time just before he was shortlisted for the Turner Prize in 1993. The show kicks off with From Memory 1989, a sketchbook drawing of a leaf whose image has been sunk on to corrugated brown cardboard. This, you gather, was a breakthrough picture for Innes, but it now seems atypical; it's just a little prissy. There then follows a middle section, in which you can see the smaller shellac paintings - they remind me of old-fashioned flypaper, black paint stuck to them in the manner of marooned insects - and some vast black canvases with streaks of colour on them, like light appearing through a crack in a door.

But the exhibition's climax is to be found in the final gallery: a series of canvases entitled Exposed Painting, Dioxazine Violet. This is mature work; it has a real sense of authority and not only because Innes has used a paint colour that brings papal robes irresistibly to mind. I love the way these works talk to each other, each of them subtly

different from the last. They form an echo chamber of colour and mood. One half of the painting shouts to another, but all that comes back - after Innes has set about it with his oily chemical - is a kind of ghostly cry. Stare at them for long enough and their murkiest corners start to resemble a shroud imprinted with the memory of what lay on it. Or perhaps this is just an over-the-top way of saying that their image stays with you long after you have left them.

• Laura Cumming is away

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