

## Phillip Allen

### The Approach

Phillip Allen's work is abstract painting of a dense and sociable kind. Its vast spaces are filled with teeming hordes of small forms, coloured blobs that congregate along axes or radiate from distant nodes. In one piece the blobs line up along plunging shafts of blue and brown, like space-age commuters moving towards intergalactic hubs. In another, they crowd around empty ellipses, while behind them broad spokes of bleached yellow and green fan out from a remote core or light source. In a third, they attach themselves to vertical stalks, like globular leaves - or the bulbs of funky 1970s-style standard lamps. In fact, a whiff of 1970s design, platform shoes and psychedelic album covers, hangs about the whole show, not least in Allen's taste for bright but grating, glaringly synthetic colours.

His landscapes, if you can call them that, are animated by the buzz of constant movement - many of them, apparently, by the radial motion of the controlled explosion. They are cosmic in scale, but their grandeur is deflated by the agitation of the blobs, which come across as busy and gregarious life forms. The images are framed above and below by thick, toxic swirls of congealed paint, ice-cream scoops of turgid colour that hang on to the borders and call attention to the contrived nature of painterly space, reminding us that those vast interplanetary expanses are conjured out of pigment. Here, as elsewhere, the sublime is a trick of the hand - and the artist is keen to break his own spells.

There are constant echoes in Allen's work of a symphonic strain in early abstraction - of Robert and Sonia Delaunay, David Bomberg and particularly Frantisek Kupka, with his rippling, centrifugal patterns and luminous epicentres. But in Allen's paintings the Modernist precedent is refracted through a 1970s mirror-ball aesthetic. Kupka's soaring accents give way to trippy fields of torqued flowers. This is familiar terrain; Beatriz Milhazes, for one, has been exploring it for years, although her work carries more conviction. Milhazes' floral starbursts have a brassy decorative zest, while Allen's exuberance deliberately has a duller sheen. The sublime, his work seems to say, is just another hand-me-down.

There is something at once witty and vaguely academic about the artist's approach to abstraction. His shadows, for instance, are at times inconsistent, falling first to one side and then to the other. Elsewhere they appear to float in mid-air,

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as if the atmosphere itself were dense enough to bear them. Or they fall on a tangible surface, but there is no telling what has cast them. They toy with the rules of both traditional figuration, with its internally coherent lighting, and the optical abstraction of Kupka and the Delaunays, in which shapes have no volume and hence no shadows. In the process they show once again that abstraction and figuration are not logical, mutually exclusive categories but clusters of conventions. Allen plainly takes pleasure in swapping those conventions around and picking them apart at the seams.

After a while you start seeing quotation marks everywhere. He satirizes the caked surfaces of Art Brut with his projecting swirls, and artists such as Robert Rauschenberg with his trickling lines of paint. In looking at the art of the past Allen is absorbed mainly by its failures and contra-dictions. But his targets are sitting ducks - that is what makes his work academic. Who still believes that shapes and colours have transcendent properties that override our habits of association? How much still hinges on the distinction between abstraction and figuration? How disturbing today are the gestures of Jean Dubuffet and Rauschenberg? Allen looks back at the grand claims of earlier painters and exposes them, with gentleness and humour, as wishful thinking. He charts the passage of their motifs from the hothouses of the avant-garde to the design studios of the 1970s. But what is to be gained from pointing out, once again, the flaws and unexpected trajectories of ideas that have run their course?

Allen addresses once urgent issues in a funky-comic register. There is a dusty charm in his throwaway erudition, his clever sifting through the thrift-shop bins of 20th-century painting and design. However this is meagre fare. His pseudo-landscapes are a bit like the proto-beings that populate them: busy and cheerful but unclear about their destination.

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