MUMMERY+SCHNELLE

T +44 20 7636 7344
F +44 20 3205 0192

83 GREAT TITCHFIELD ST
LONDON W1W 6RH

INFO@MUMMERYSCHNELLE.COM
WWW.MUMMERYSCHNELLE.COM

Alexis Harding

Press selection

MUMMERY+SCHNELLE

T +44 20 7636 7344
F +44 20 3205 0192

83 GREAT TITCHFIELD ST
LONDON W1W 6RH

INFO@MUMMERYSCHNELLE.COM
WWW.MUMMERYSCHNELLE.COM

Sumpter, Helen. "In the studio: Alexis Harding", *Time Out*, (26 November– December, 2009)

In the studio *Alexis Harding*

Alexis Harding uses the reaction of gloss paint poured over oil paint to create paintings over a period of up to three months, in which abstract grids, lines and arrows appear to be dramatically hanging and sliding off their canvases. He won the John Moores Prize in 2004 and has a new exhibition at Mummery + Schnelle. His studio is in a former factory in Stratford.

Your work seems to be as much about time and movement as abstraction...
'I'm pleased that you've said that. Although I use modernist devices such as the grid, and more recently lines and arrows too, I've always tried to avoid cold descriptions of the paintings such as "process-driven abstraction". They are more about imbuing paint with behaviours such as leaving or escaping. And there is a visible durational element in that you can see how the paint surface has moved and wrinkled, either through gravity or by myself physically massaging and squeezing it.'

What about the series of 120 small works in your new exhibition?
'They are all unseen works made during the last six years on the cardboard backs of old copies of an exhibition catalogue of mine. They've been given the title "Bi-product Depositories" because they began initially as a means of using unwanted paint and other materials created during the painting process.'

So are they now a body of work in their own right?
'I'm sure that they will feed back into the main paintings but they do have their own recurring motifs such as tower blocks and heads, which create a type of speedy, schematic illusionism. Now I'm thinking that "Bi-product Depositories" may not be quite the right title. Perhaps they are "Wayward Accomplices".'
Interview and portrait: Helen Sumpter. Alexis Harding's exhibition is at Mummery + Schnelle from Nov 27-Dec 19 (see Soho to Hampstead).

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Bonaventura, Paul, "Raw and Beautiful – Alexis Harding in conversation with Paul Bonaventura". *Contemporary*, Issue 88, No. 99, (2006)

RAW AND BEAUTIFUL

Alexis Harding in conversation with Paul Bonaventura

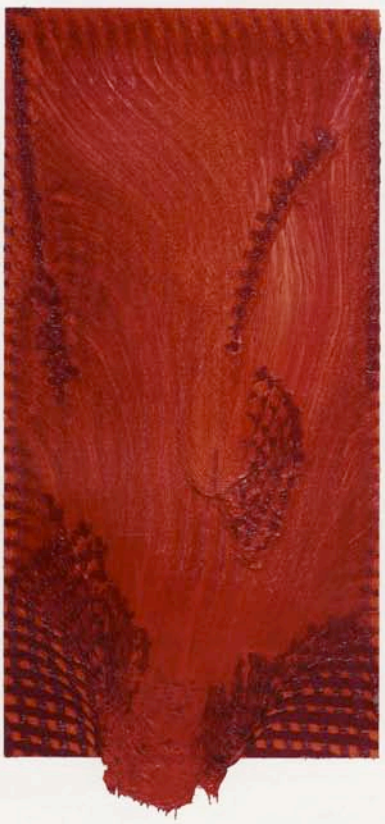
ALEXIS Harding was born in London in 1973 and studied at Goldsmiths College, London between 1992 and 1995. Since then, he has had solo exhibitions at Andrew Mummery Gallery in London, Galerie Katherina Kröhn in Basel, Galeria Pedro Cera in Lisbon, Marella Arte Contemporanea, Milan and Rubicon Gallery in Dublin, and his work has been included in numerous international group shows.

Typically Harding creates abstract paintings that are made by pouring household gloss paint through a trough or gutter onto a canvas or MDF support previously covered with oil paint. This initial action is quick but the drying process takes several months, and the different ways in which the artist directs this process generates the final, architectonic image.

PAUL BONAVENTURA: Up until recently you have intervened in the ways in which the paint shifts over its support, managing its movement until the work achieves some kind of resolution and leaves the studio. In the three large paintings in the exhibition 'Time Share' at the Eagle Gallery in London in 2005 – *26 June, 09.45am, Double/Cross and Pulmonary Painting* – you allowed the genesis of the work to continue during the period of installation. As a consequence, some of the paint – either the underlying layer of oil paint or the gloss paint surface mesh – found itself on the floor. This development would appear to be a natural progression of your studio-based approach, but it also suggests that you have become less controlling of the work's genesis, more removed from its history.
In a conversation earlier this year for the quarterly painting magazine *Turps Banana*, when I asked you about this new approach to making, you replied: 'Someone said recently "a founding assumption of painting is that the medium should stay where you put it". I like questioning this in my work, implicitly and literally.' Why precisely do you like questioning that very basic tenet of art and have you taken the process forward since its first appearance in the Eagle Gallery show?

ALEXIS HARDING: I think I have a tendency to see if I can do this because I am partly in and partly out of control when I'm working. Perhaps these site-specific paintings are more extreme, and out of control in a different way from the pieces made in the studio. These wet, temporary things try to bear up to the world around them. They try to fit and squeeze into and assert themselves within spaces outside of the studio. They're trying to get out more. They also exist and are reliant on a much shorter allotment of time to that which operates in the studio, where paintings are worked on over a much longer period.

These newer paintings are made and then destroyed, only existing in the viewer's memory and the documented photograph. The work regularly breaks, rips and destroys itself in the studio and for a long time it was only me who experienced this. These temporary pieces embrace and declare this 'problem'. They accept a kind of crisis of method. The recent painting *Halt!* (2006), which I made in Dublin for my show at the Rubicon Gallery in the spring, felt to me like some kind of unwarranted intrusion, like an uninvited guest alongside a family of static paintings.



In terms of the medium staying where one puts it, I think in every painting ever made the substance and material does alter over time; like us, it moves and changes colour. A difference in the things I make, both in and out of the studio, is that I deliberately accelerate this process and try to make these ideas explicitly visible. *Painting's Insides* (2006) is about this very thing. It's an image of every painting's insides, the chemical interior of perhaps every painting that ever existed. It has turned itself inside out for the viewer.

PB: What do you get out of making site-specific pieces that you don't get from your static paintings?

AH: I get a strong sense of performance from these works, which is different from the studio-made paintings. There is an urgency to them: they generate adrenaline in me and put me in an awkward position where I am forced to react at a quicker speed. In all my work I want to get across the sensation that the action has taken place in 'real time' and in these even more so, where the paintings suggest that the making of them has not yet finished. With the site-specific pieces I am compelled to extend this moment for as long as possible, evading finality in some way – in not wanting the experience of making to end for the viewer or myself.

PB: Would you like all your future solo shows to include temporary site-specific pieces or do you see this new development in your work as having a clock ticking over it? Do you think you might still be making site-specific paintings in, say, five years' time?

AH: Yes, the clock has just begun ticking... It feels like I have a lot to do.

PB: You have often talked about your paintings as if they have individual personalities with which you enter into physical and emotional dialogues. That might surprise some viewers who regard you as an artist who is interested only in formal matters.

AH: At the moment I need the work to be controlled and formally specific in its movement and collapse, so the idea and the process are one. But when something works it usually arrives through irrationality and chance and absurd actions, and devices the painting asks for. So to me the work isn't made in a formal way. The activity feels more like a strange bodily and topological farming in the studio and my relationship with materials, although fundamental to the work, feels unorthodox – and virtuoso on a good day... I sometimes talk about the work like this to offset its programmatic beginnings and because I remember each path the painting took in its making; for example, a painting I really had to care for and nurse, taking it down off the wall for two months, compared to a painting that I completely ignored and then shook violently.

PB: How do you know when a painting requires care and nursing as opposed to being left alone? What determines the level of physical interaction with a painting?

AH: The paintings themselves determine this. Sometimes I try to remain very sensitive to what they are suggesting and where they want to go. At other

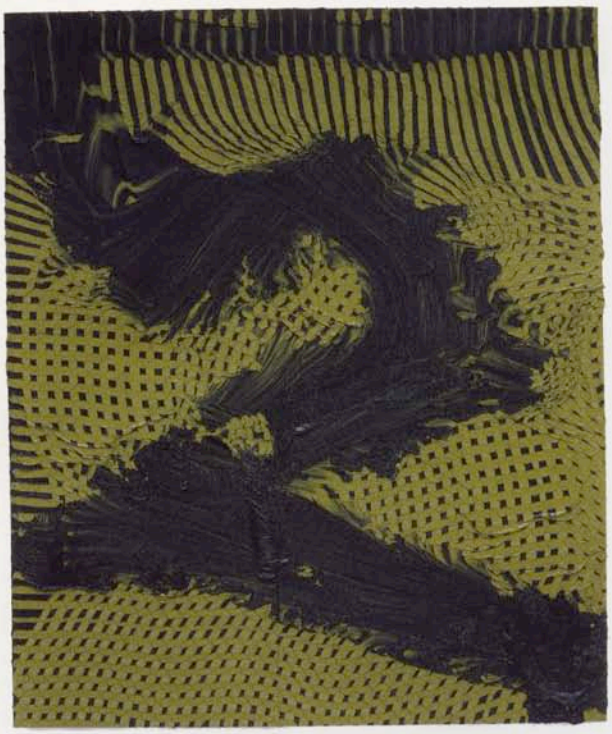
Opposite: *Painting's Insides*, 2006. Courtesy: Rubicon Gallery, Dublin. Above left: *Pulmonary Painting (Red/Red)*, 2006. Courtesy: Rubicon Gallery, Dublin. Above right: *Halt (Site Specific Painting)*, 2006. Courtesy: Rubicon Gallery, Dublin. Below: Exit, 2006. Courtesy: Gentili Gallery, Florence

times I deliberately go against them and lead them astray. A painting like *Exit* (2006) can be agitated and explorative while another, like *Pulmonary Painting (Red/Red)* (2006), can operate within its relationship to the body and its fluids. There was a need for me to squeeze and lance the wet paint under its dry skin. A lot of these paintings feel like they undergo surgery of some kind – the kinaesthesia of skin and tissue, of gathering up and directing. I realise that I am controlling these paintings as I have set them up, but I set them up not knowing what to do with them. They need to take responsibility and have a role in their own making. After all, the movement and (expressive) gesture in the work is not made by myself, but by the product of the sliding of the grid away from its anchorage as it is pushed or as gravity takes hold.

Even though I do think and feel that the fact that the paint wrinkles is being used to signify an urge to subjectivity, the painting is responsible for its own dissolution rather than being the result of my own sensibility.

PB: But surely your sensibility comes into play and dominates the painting as you decide when and in what ways you will intervene in its genesis.

AH: Of course my choices are informed by what I see on the way to work and by my mood and everything else, but they are not dictated by these experiences and the paintings just don't feel like they are made in this way. You are right in saying that my sensibility is at play as I want the paintings at the moment to look like they have been made rather than manufactured, so they are quite raw and beautiful. But when something works it can happen through just watching it occur and being detached or through improvisation and chance. There is a kind of critical automatism that happens in the studio that I am trying to understand and work through. I trust that one's sensibility is located somewhere within this, but I am in no rush to find it.



Paul Bonaventura is the Senior Research Fellow in Fine Arts Studies at the Ruskin School of Drawing & Fine Art, University

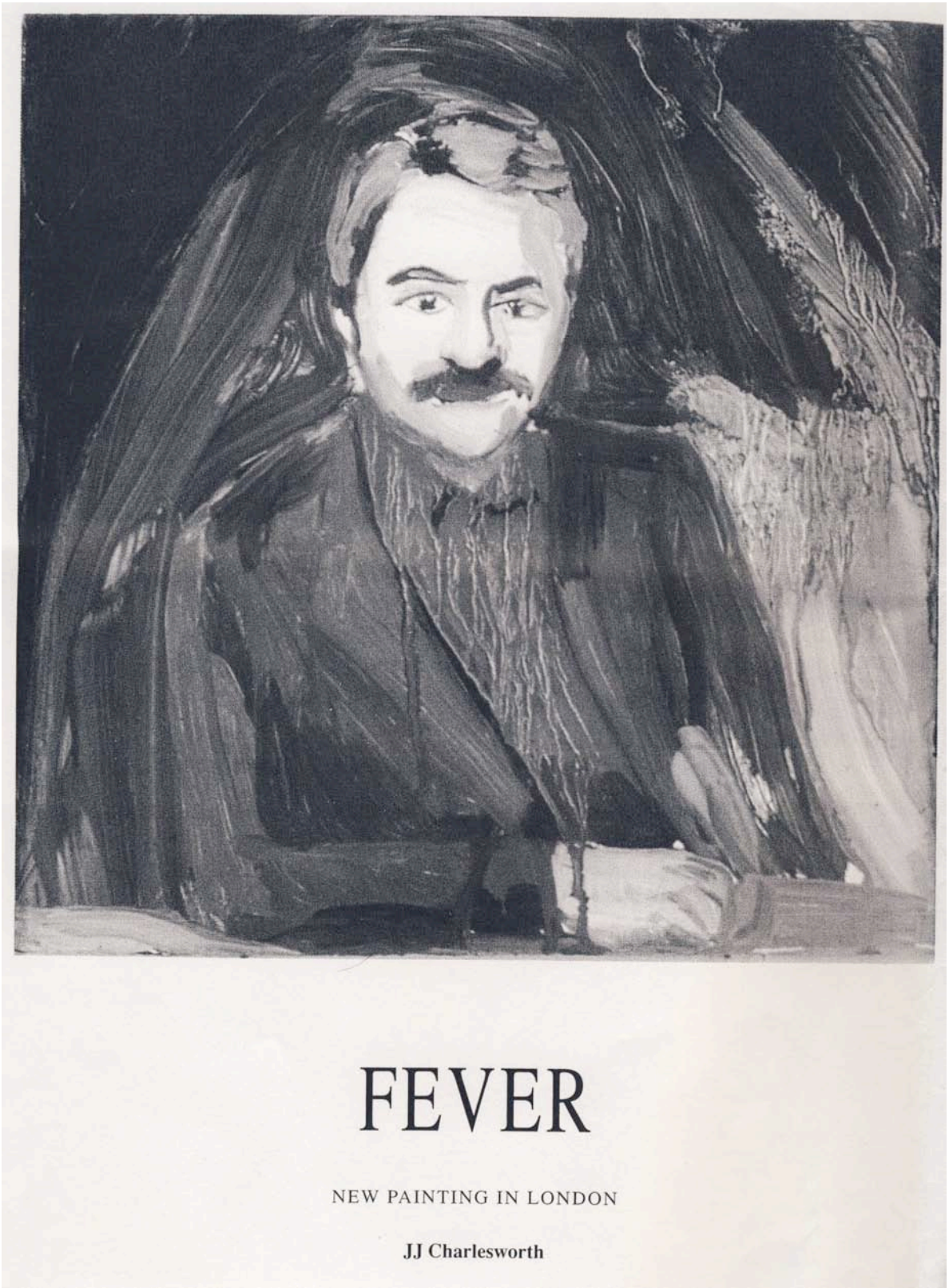
MUMMERY+SCHNELLE

T +44 20 7636 7344
F +44 20 3205 0192

83 GREAT TITCHFIELD ST
LONDON W1W 6RH

INFO@MUMMERYSCHNELLE.COM
WWW.MUMMERYSCHNELLE.COM

Charlsworth, J.J., 'Fever: New Paintings in London', *Flash Art*, Vol. XXXVII, No 239 (November-December 2004), p. 84-87.

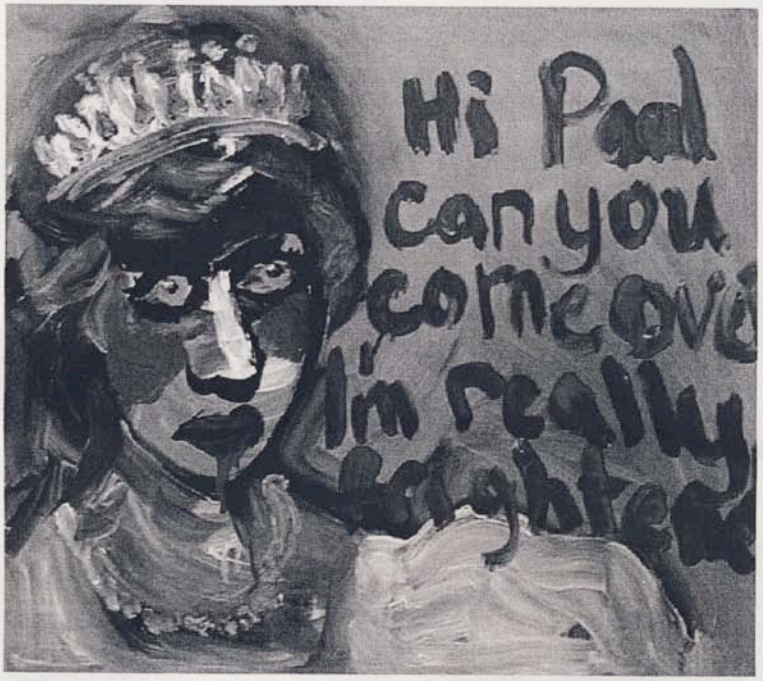


CONTEMPORARY PAINTING has a sort of fever right now, symptoms of which are a wild delirium, fantastical imaginings that render ordinary life grotesque and absurd, and the melancholy of a modernist hangover. The UK scene in particular is currently enjoying an epidemic of fresh paint. In October the John Moores prize exhibition at the Walker Gallery in Liverpool was dominated by unreal landscape and psychodrama. During the Frieze Art fair in October, an artist-curated exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts, "Expander," showcased over 20 young London artists in a show dominated by painting. And Charles Saatchi, after two years of relentless buying, is preparing a big exhibition of newly acquired new work under the unambiguous title of "The Triumph of Painting." Painting works. Painting sells. And in the process, a particular new language and set of concerns is taking shape, one in which both subjectivity and fantasy are taking on a key role, and in which critical reflection on the nature of painting takes second place to a post-critical resurgent aesthetics of affirmation.

The artistic precursors for the new generation of painters are hardly obscure, rooting the current mood in the slow, steady reassertion of painting in the mid '90s. London painters' ongoing preoccupation with the landscape genre, mixed with a modernist painterly self-consciousness, for example, would have been harder to establish without such older figures as Peter Doig. The diverse reinvestment of landscape in the work of young painters such as Dee Ferris, Michael Aschroft, Nigel Cooke, or Christian Ward indicates that 'tradition' is no longer a dirty word. The landscape genre, painterly values, and aesthetic engagement — pleasure even — are all returns to traditional values. And as with Doig, the 'modernist settlement' in painting — the recognition of the painting surface — is everywhere present, in Cooke's open skies that turn into drab walls, in Ward's psychedelic paint marks that become rock and vegetation, and perhaps most excessively and triumphantly in Ferris's collapsing and reforming washes of heady, luminous, Turner-like color, obliterating and revealing the content of her paintings simultaneously. Figuration may have been back in painting for a long time, but not for many years has it been exploited with such unambiguously positive curiosity.

Alongside the lush imaginings of these painters exists a more urban tendency in which a direct, often strongly biographical approach to figure and content is combined with an aggressive, untutored handling of paint, its stylistic guarantee being the uncorrected drip. A proclivity for moving fast and keeping the paint loose and unworked energizes the work of painters such as Sophie von Hellermann, Chantal Joffe, Anna Bjerger, Dawn Mellor, and Liz Neal, painters who exploit the apparent instability and informality of their lo-fi approach to emphasize and distance their subjects. Developing the gawky informality of earlier painters such as the American Elizabeth Peyton, painters such as Joffe, Mellor, and Bjerger use painting as a tool against the impersonal nature of photography, as if by refusing to compete with the photographic image's sophistication, and mindful of a too-sophisticated alternative painterly route, their functional styles reassert the idiosyncratic, the psychological, and the personal. Inner life, represented as a

From top: STELLA VINE, Hi Paul..., 2003. Oil on board, 54 x 61 cm. Courtesy of the Saatchi Gallery, London; MICHAEL ASHCROFT, Jungle Mist, 2004. Oil on canvas, 82 x 103 cm. Courtesy of MW Projects, London.
Opposite: ANA BJERGER, 129 Swedes No. 3, 2002. Oil on board, 17 x 22 cm. Courtesy of MW Projects, London.



From top: MATHEW WEIR, Seascape, 2004. Oil on canvas, 26 x 37 cm. Courtesy of the artist; ALEXIS HARDING, Slump/Fear (Orange/Black), 2004. Oil and gloss paint on MDF, 183 x 183 cm. Courtesy of Andrew Mummery Gallery, London. Opposite from left: DEE FERRIS, Sentimental Thriller, 2004. Oil on canvas, 184 x 184 cm. Courtesy of Corvi-Mora, London; VARDA CAIVANO, Untitled, 2004. Oil on canvas, 41 x 31 cm. Courtesy of Victoria Miro, London.

photographic moment given form in paint, are at the core of the work of Joffe and Bjerger, and a playfully sardonic observation of the contemporary status of femininity erupts in the fantastical eroticism of work by Mellor and Neal. Moving somewhere between them is von Hellermann's knowing bohemian romanticism, depicting cool types inhabiting an idealized metropolitan demimonde full of strange, hedonistic encounters and drifting in a dirty, magical unreality.

The informal nature of much of this painting means that subjective attitude often counts for more than the particularities of formal engagement. Informality — 'bad' painting — is the supposed stylistic guarantee of spontaneous, autodidactic, expressive authenticity, the vehicle for an equally authentic subcultural subjective content. The trouble is that informal painting can only trade so far on its appearance before attitude becomes the decisive factor in how it is understood. A curious example of this tension can be found in the attentions paid to the bizarre clique of retro-expressionists known as the Stuckists. For some years an embarrassing sideshow of the British contemporary art scene, the Stuckists have nevertheless been given a retrospective during the Liverpool Biennial. What is interesting is that in their bad-tempered denunciation of the 'conceptual art mafia' that supposedly dominates art in the UK, the Stuckists' celebration of spontaneous, autodidactic, expressive authenticity in painting comes out remarkably similar to some of the less interesting informal painting that is so hot in the 'insider' art scene. So similar, in fact, that Stella Vine, ex-wife of Stuckism's eccentric founder Charles Thomson, should find her daftly sentimental Diana-homage *Hi Paul, Can You Come Over* bought by Saatchi to hang alongside hipper 'bad' painters such as Neal and the German schlock-expressionist Jonathan Meese. If how painters paint ceases to matter, then the expression of subjective attitude cannot help but become the decisive aspect of a painter's approach, regardless of whether it is staged as knowing posture or earnest commitment.

The dual ascendance of an amateurist, informal directness on one hand and the recourse to art-historical tradition and painterly technique on the other suggests a growing disinterest with painting as self-critical reflection, and a greater investment in painting as a primary site of expressive and aesthetic affirmation. The curious convergence of modernism, romanticism, and symbolist intoxication, fired through the prism of contemporary psychedelia and a dilettante fascination with art history, posits painting as the scene onto which an individual's inner desires and compulsions are played out and fulfilled, rather than put into contradictory self-interrogation.

It's striking in this light that the winner of the John Moores prize for painting should be Alexis Harding, a painter who came to much earlier attention for his often extraordinary exploration of what in the early '90s was still being called 'process painting,' the cool, postmodernist hangover associated with Goldsmiths painters such as Ian Davenport and Jason Martin. Harding's collapsing, rippling grid of acidic gloss and oil paint, given full flight in the prize-winning *Slump/Fear (Orange/Black)* (2004), is beyond the easy 'process' label, inasmuch as the physical and visual drama enacted by his particular processes goes beyond secure, contained painterly resolution towards an almost avant-gardist ethics of catastrophe and willful self-destruction.

Harding's success is well deserved, but it only serves to illustrate the recent shift from a painting that could still be about painting as a 'problem' to painting in which problems dissolve into the affirmative cultural logic of escapism. As Mustafa Hulusi, curator of "Expander" suggests, the turn to 're-enchantment' and the consequent recolonization of figuration in painting has more than a little to do with a disenchantment with cultural life in general and with the culturally critical role art was once thought to play. For a recent generation of artists, art is fast becoming a site in which the shortcomings of contemporary life are compensated for, and without a strong conformist culture to fight against, it's no surprise that art's value can no longer be tested through acts of transgression, and that tradition, continuity, and history should consequently reassert themselves.

This return to the past, and particularly the apparent resurgence of painterly and expressionist values, should be treated with care. There are plenty of conservative critics who would wish for this to signal a neat effacement of the difficulties and disruptions of 'modern' and 'postmodern' art, and there is certainly a tendency amongst artists to exploit the ready public for an art of fantasy, biography, and sentiment, hooked into art-historical pedigree and the subjective experience of contemporary reality. If ideas such as the virtuoso painter, expression, and emotional content have reappeared as the veracity of their postmodern critiques has waned, it is only because these ideas went some way — not without contradiction — toward recognizing what painting is still good for. The question is not the return itself, but whether this process of return is made naïvely or with a degree of exploratory speculation and historical awareness.

Just as many young painters are re-examining the merits of informality and romantic immediacy, others are pursuing a more analytical investigation of painting's ontology and history while nevertheless eschewing the cool cynicism of late '80s and early '90s. Recent RCA graduate Mathew Weir, for example, pushes the kind of photorealist-painterly game established by Glenn Brown against more troublesome content, using trompe l'oeil to represent in heightened detail already synthetic, culturally loaded representations. Another Royal college graduate, Argentinean Varda Caivano, makes forays back into a tropicalized modernism that makes rich use of cubism and lyrical abstraction with a curiosity that reexamines modernism's universalizing rhetoric.

Throughout these new investigations, a different interest in aesthetic potential is being elaborated, one which is certainly retrospective, sometimes reactionary, but which is continuously engaged in painting's living potential during a period when the demand for it has expanded beyond anything conceivable in recent decades. The rediscovery of historical languages and the reassertion of the individual artist as the site of subjective, expressive authenticity go hand in hand with painting's assimilation of attitudes that allow it to engage rather than confront a wider public. It makes for a strongly positive, readily commercial scene in which antagonism is replaced by affirmation; this might be a sign of contemporary art's response to a wider culture averse to conflict and wary of the grand claims of avant-garde or critical art. At their best, however, those ongoing historical problems of art's cultural status and role are examined anew through paintings that are conscious both of the proximity of failure and retrospection, and the necessity of parsing and reworking the possible terms of painting's success. ■

JJ Charlesworth is a writer and critic based in London.

Schwabsky, Barry, 'Alexis Harding', *Art Forum International,* XLII No. 5 (January 2004), p.166

ALEXIS HARDING

ANDREW MUMMERY GALLERY

Baudelaire, as everyone knows, advised the critic to adopt "an exclusive point of view" but with the proviso: "provided the one adopted opens up the widest horizons." Today, when a chic eclecticism seems seductive to so many painters, one wants to issue them a similar warning: Let your technique be as narrow as the eye of a needle—as long as a realm wide as heaven awaits on the other side. (Of course, you'll never be sure until you've passed through it.) One model could be Alexis Harding, who's been achieving divergent effects of great specificity through a single method he's used since the mid-'90s. A grid of enamel gloss is applied to a monochrome field of wet oil paint; the chemical incompatibility between the two results in a puckering and warping of the surface, and the artist helps this process of distortion along by pushing and pulling at the paint during its long drying time and, above all, by encouraging the effects of gravity to allow the paint to slide around, and sometimes even off, the support, from which it can hang like rags (if the painting's hung fresh enough, some of it can even be found puddled on the floor below). The titles of previous paintings give a pretty clear idea of the results: *Slump Fear*, 2001; *Ruinart*, 2001; *Collision*, 2001; *Collapsed Painting*, 2002. Harding's is a punk formalism in the tradition of Steven Parrino and Angela de la Cruz, but with the difference that the decline and fall of the painting happens within it, so to speak, rather than to it.

Harding's most recent paintings and drawings (along with the one sculpture included here) suggest, however, that he might be wondering whether his chosen technique, with its exacerbated tension between accident and design, is still able to generate significant variation or whether it's become a restrictive formula. A few paintings betray a certain anxiety that the process itself may not be providing sufficient emotional weight—notably those such as *Cross (orange/black)*, 2003, or *Breeding Lilac (wet diptych)*, 2003, in which the artist has constructed a further level of patterning by abutting similarly done panels. (Curiously, the paintings in which a single plane has been internally divided—I am thinking of *Fourfold*, 2002, and *Quartet [Golden]*, 2003—are stronger.) Yet most often Harding's mastery of his process still allows for a palpable sense of discovery, and the paintings' elegance—underlined by their typically crisp, exuberant color—does not foreclose identification with the emotional or psychological overtones that their built-in metaphors of breakdown and disruption inevitably generate. These paintings can be slapstick or melodrama, but at their best—for instance, *Nine Lines*, 2003, or *Painting (B) red oil/orange gloss*, 2003—they inhabit an enigmatic zone somewhere in between.

The drawings and sculpture show Harding in an exploratory mood, looking at ways to mess around with grids without sticking to his patented system—in *Postage Drawing I*, 2003, he does this with the adhesive surrounds left over when you've used the stamps they frame—and ways to use the system besides messing up the grids. These projects suggest he's likely to have another good trick up his sleeve by the time he needs it.

—*Barry Schwabsky*

MUMMERY+SCHNELLE

T +44 20 7636 7344
F +44 20 3205 0192

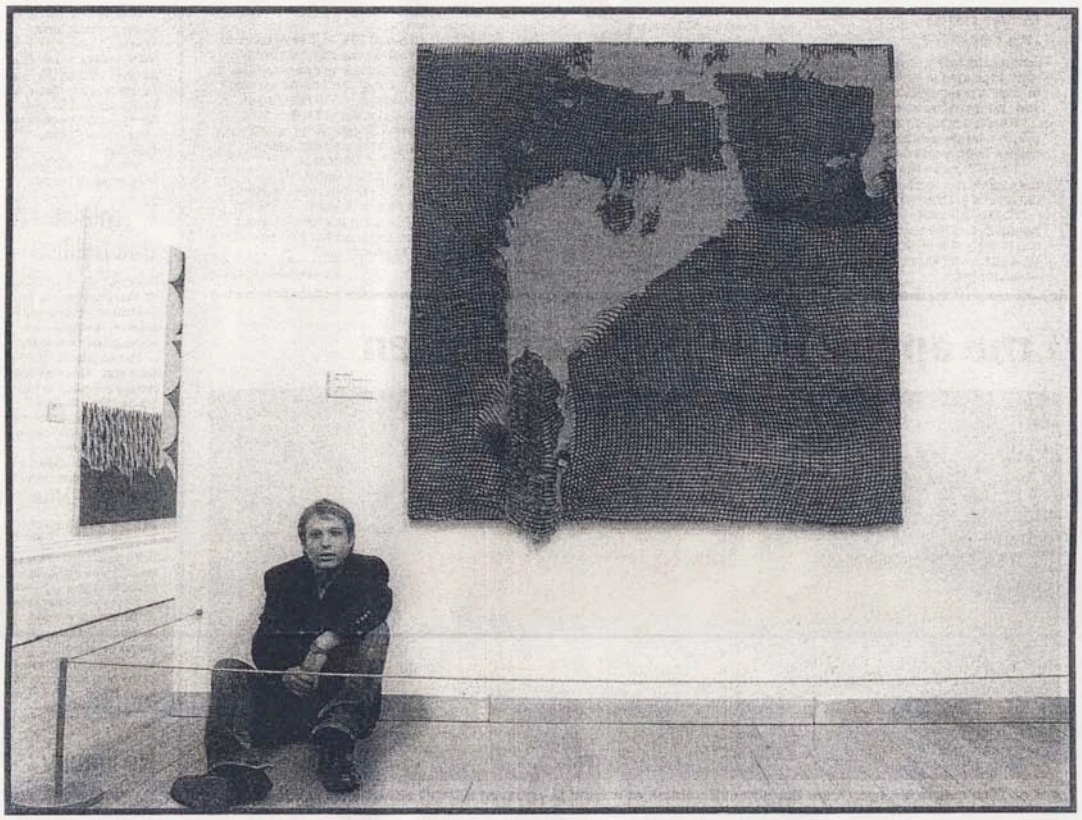
83 GREAT TITCHFIELD ST
LONDON W1W 6RH

INFO@MUMMERYSCHNELLE.COM
WWW.MUMMERYSCHNELLE.COM

Brown, Chris, 'Months Watching Paint Dry Lands Artist £25000', *Daily Post* (12 September 2004).

DAILY POST Friday, September 17, 2004

Months watching paint dry lands artist £25,000



Artist Alexis Harding takes in the news that his painting Slump/Fear has won the John Moores 23 competition Picture: ANDREW TEEBAY

BY CHRIS BROWN
Daily Post Staff

THE winner of Britain's biggest painting competition was announced in Liverpool's Walker gallery last night.

Slump/Fear by Alexis Harding won the prestigious John Moores 23 competition worth £25,000.

The oil and gloss work, which took months to dry because of the amount of paint, will be put on display as part of the Liverpool Biennial.

Slump/Fear was picked out of a record 1,900 entries.

The judging panel, which included former Pulp musician Jarvis Cocker, whittled the pictures down to a 425 shortlist.

Of these, 56 entries were chosen for the exhibition, which will run at the Walker from tomorrow until November 28.

Harding, 31, from London, said: "I am just gobsmacked by the win.

"I have just come over from an exhibition I am doing in Milan so it is all a bit much to take in at the moment.

"The paintings take months to dry because there is so much paint and I manipulate the image as it dries. It has taken years for me to make sure the technique is right and build up the size for the paintings. They are getting bigger all the time.

"I'm just really surprised by it all."

As well as the £25,000 prize, the Walker will also buy the piece as part of the John Moores collection.

Four other prizewinners will each receive £2,500: Andrew Grassie from Edinburgh for The Making of the Painting; Dougal McKenzie of Edinburgh for Last of the French Night Marcher; Sarah Pickstone of Manchester for The Park II; Alex Pollard of Glasgow with Outlaw Vortex.

Julian Treuher, keeper of art galleries at National Museums Liverpool said: "The jurors had to make some difficult choices to create this year's outstanding exhibition.

"Congratulations to the winners and thanks to all the artists. It is their creativity and talent – and their capacity to renew and reinvent the language of painting – that is the final justification for this exciting show."

As well as Jarvis Cocker, the judging panel included Ann Bukantas, the Walker's curator of fine art, Callum Innes, former John Moores winner, artist Gavin Turk. The announcement was made by judge Gill Hedley, the director of the Contemporary Art Society.

She said: "It was a hard decision, which is a good thing – there is so much good work here you want to take your time.

"The hardest thing was picking the first-prize winner.

"It shows what is happening in painting in 2004."

chrisbrown@dailypost.co.uk

The only criteria is excellence

THE first John Moores Liverpool exhibition was held at the Walker in 1957.

Sir John Moores was an amateur painter who wanted to encourage young artists and bring contemporary works to the city.

Its success led to the competition becoming an established event which still has links to the Moores.

Since 1999 it became part of the Liverpool Biennial arts festival and is now the biggest painting competition in the country.

Although 47 years old, the event still has the same principles at heart.

All entries are judged purely on merit and the jury is not told the names of the artists. Anybody can enter with no set criteria other than excellence.

Detail from Alex Pollard's Outlaw Vortex

It shows what is happening in painting in 2004

T +44 20 7636 7344
F +44 20 3205 0192
83 GREAT TITCHFIELD ST
LONDON W1W 6RH
INFO@MUMMERYSCHNELLE.COM
WWW.MUMMERYSCHNELLE.COM

Tan, Eugene, 'Alexis Harding and Neil Taylor', *Contemporary Visual Arts*, Issue 20 (2000)

Alexis Harding and Neil Taylor

by Eugene Tan

Painting is going through a somewhat difficult period at the moment, so we are frequently being reminded. One result of the ever-raging debates over painting's 'death' is that some painters have turned to re-investigating and deconstructing painting's premises, especially that of abstract painting. By doing so, they are, in a way, attempting to disprove it's end by showing that painting and abstraction did not necessarily end in the 1960s, when Clement Greenberg's writings on abstraction were discredited. Artists working in this fashion have usually been labeled 'process' painters, so-called because their work have tended to involve deconstructing and exposing the process of a painting's construction and incorporating them as part of the finished work. The painting processes which are incorporated in the finished work then functions in an indexical manner, revealing the manner in which the painting was made. These processes therefore take on a crucial role in the viewing process, in most instances, becoming the subject of the painting. The work of Alexis Harding has, therefore, unsurprisingly often been perceived in this context, for one of the most striking things when looking at his work for the first time, is a curiosity about the process which he has used to make them.

When making his paintings, Harding first pours on a layer of oil paint onto the surface of the painting, which is laid flat. Gloss paint is then dripped on, using a modified trough to form a grid. The painting is then left in the studio until it is sufficiently dry for a skin to form on the surface of the painting. The painting is then hung on the wall, allowing gravity to pull the surface of the painting down. During this drying process, Harding observes closely and when he feels that the paint has been stretched as much as it can without ripping, he will lay the painting flat again and allow it to dry for another period of time before hanging it up again. This process is repeated several times until Harding is satisfied that the painting is finished, a process that can take several weeks or even months, depending on the size of the painting.

T +44 20 7636 7344 83 GREAT TITCHFIELD ST INFO@MUMMERYSCHNELLE.COM
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It can therefore be seen why Harding's work is often perceived in the context of 'process painting'. However, unlike other process painters, process is not the central emphasis of Harding's work. Instead, his work is in many ways about the now unfashionable and romantic notion of simply engaging in the act of painting. Though the materials and processes he uses are very different to the traditional notions of painting, the underlying concerns are somewhat very similar. Because of the long period of time needed for each painting to be finished, Harding develops a rather close attachment to each of them, carefully manipulating them and watching over them, making certain that they do not misbehave, that the surface of the painting does not rip and slide off the support, as it has done on several occasions. The act of painting, for Harding, is thus a somewhat romantic one, just waiting and observing how the paint reacts to the alcatory process he has devised, before deciding what to do to the painting next.

It is therefore not surprising that the visual outcome of Harding's paintings reflect this sensibility. For when looking at Harding's paintings, the viewer is at the same time, both attracted by the sensuality and tactility of the paint, and repulsed by the wrinkled skin formed on the surface of the painting, which in some paintings resembles gory and gruesome human epidermis. It is this dichotomy of attraction and repulsion, which I believe, is interesting about Harding's work. This repulsiveness in his paintings is not unrelated to the romantic notion of the sublime, not Kant's notion of the sublime but Burke's, who related it to a sensation that is simultaneously, both repulsive and compelling. The fascination of Harding's work is therefore the dual way in which his work can be perceived; entirely process based, thoroughly theoretical and academic, while at the same time, engaging with the very issue painting has always been about but which has largely been ignored during the modernist phase of art, that of sensual pleasure and the sublime.

Another artist, whose work engages with a somewhat romantic notion of painting, but with different results, is Neil Taylor. His *Desert Paintings* are based on the rather romantic notion of his experiences in the desert. Working on curved wooden panels, Taylor often juxtaposes two contrasting fields in his paintings, one a monochromatic one

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while the other a scrawly, expressionistic line drawing. Although his paintings are based on the time he spent in the desert, they also engage in a way with issues about painting, especially that of the abstraction/representation dichotomy. This is because when unaware of the subject the paintings have been based on, they appear to be abstract paintings, and therefore questions the notion of whether they can be considered abstract, being based on a subject matter. They also, in a further way, question actual definition of the term abstract, for although it is a commonly used term in art, it's definition still raises controversy as to whether something abstract can be derived from nature or whether it is something non-referential.

The curved surfaces that Taylor works is another aspect. For although the viewer is aware of their concave or convex surfaces when they approach the paintings, this somehow becomes lost when looking at them and they seem to appear flat. This optical illusion that is created brings to mind the principles of classical architecture, the way their proportions are not symmetrical but yet visually give the impression of being so. In Taylor's paintings, the curved surfaces are openly exposed as part of the painting, revealing that what is being perceived is an optical illusion. What Taylor's work, therefore, exposes is not it's constructive process as in the work of other 'process' painters, but rather the mechanics of visual illusion and perspective.

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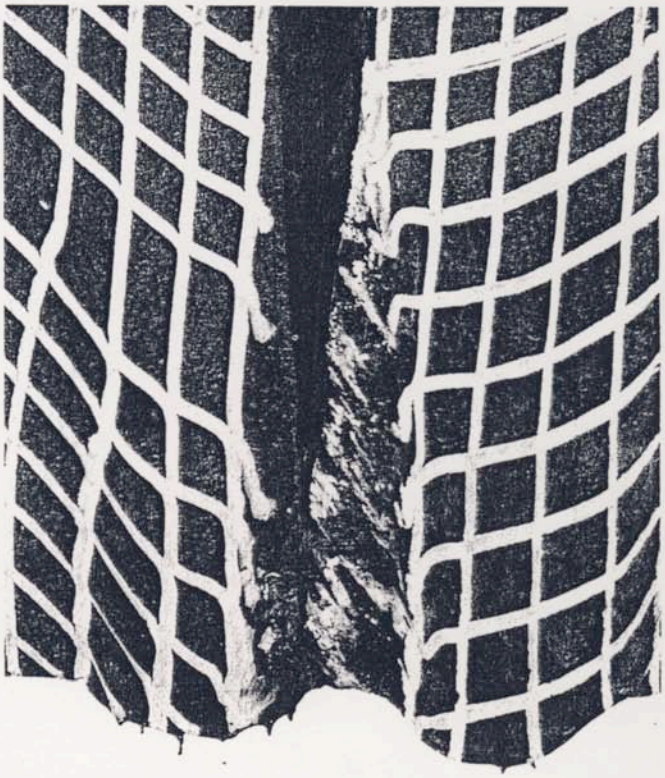
Crowe, Daniel, 'Liquid Change', *Butterfly* (2000), (Interview).

Liquid Change

Alexis Harding, an artist with a studio in Deptford, talks to Daniel Crowe about his influences and loves. Harding makes work by applying oil paint onto various wet painterly surfaces and letting them dry over several months.



DC – Paintings with solid, toy bright fruit in. Paintings with cows and sheep in. Paintings with boats and buildings in. Paintings with people in. Why have you none of these things in your paintings?

AH – That's incredible! How did you know what my late paintings will look like? The work does hold and use toy bright colour, it also uses an armature and structure close to collapsed architecture. And it certainly is driven through my relationship with people and around ideas about portraiture. I am interested to see if I can, through an image and paint, emanate a specific feeling of, say, a volatile love affair or a collapsed building. If you look around my studio you can see many pictures of 'things' – collapsed buildings via earthquake and terrorism, aerial landscapes, photographs of cities, photos of the moons surface – and many photographs of people and heads. Having these images around me helps me make the paintings. It's a kind of osmosis.

DC – You have said that you are 'involved' in your paintings, that you watch them being made. And though the initial process is swift, you still have to hold your breath for months to see what happens. It sounds like you are talking about a relationship with somebody, or perhaps the development of a child.

AH – I feel involved and implicated in some terrible long term problem I have developed. I tend to work on a great number of paintings simultaneously, partly through a process of distraction and partly because the paintings take months to make (the drying process of the paint). Watching the painting's surface change and behave differently each day feels to me absolutely like being and seeing people from day to day. The work spends time sleeping (drying) horizontally – between three weeks and three months – after which it is woken up and hung vertically on the studio wall. Somewhere along the line I have found myself a father catering to the needs of twenty different painterly babies, screaming and giggling at me for attention. Of course most of these will not survive, having formally or chemically not worked.

DC – So the genesis of your work, where you lay down the

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paint to dry, seems to be, in a way, the embryonic stage of the painting. Time, gravity and physical forces appear to have a significant influence after this, where you are able to 'coerce some kind of tenuous beauty through geometry and disciplined manufacture'. What I think is consequential here is the fact that you have a very close relationship with every stage of the painting. The paint mixing, the application, the drying, the possible grafting of paint-skin from one surface to another, and the hanging. Do you operate in this absolute manner intentionally?

AH – This way of working was not a calculated decision. The different ways paint can behave, and the troughs and lines of guttering I use to make the work and to get the paint down – all developed through serendipity, risk taking and mistakes made at college. Now, I do attempt to allow the work to be driven through a flamboyant and intentional manner. I talk to my paintings, I ask things from them, try to guide and position them, which they sometimes love and sometimes resist. They want and need this order and positioning from me, so they can do their own thing. Some sit there in a stubborn sober beautiful manner whilst others snub me by ending up in an drunken heap on the studio floor. It fascinates me that through the very setting up of constraints, and the decisions which go into making the painting, it is possible to produce a work which reeks of flexibility and emotional energy.

DC – I feel that the final judgment on some of your paintings (especially the more battered wrinkled up ones) could be analogous to a sonnet or elegy. I find your work deeply lyrical and consistently precise. The delicate nature of the surface and the various particular markings allow the spectator to enter the work with ease and heightened curiosity. But works like Zombie Karoke, for example, are harsh and violent. They can look like ripped flesh at the same time as reminding us that we own a lovely pink suede jacket. I think you like the jarring effect between these two conflicting perceptions. It seems to create a vast space where…

AH – …Yes – the space you describe is what I think of as the 'Zone'. It's bittersweet; an oxymoron. It is my aim to enter this zone and pull out a static image, littered with incident, through liquid change. I feel a piece is successful when it holds these two elements simultaneously. The colours I use and the surface itself are both beautiful and repellent.

DC – In 1839 Delacroix made a Michelangelo in his studio and took the overtly autobiographical step of draping his hero with his own neckerchief. Do you ever nod to other painters in this manner. Is it possible?

AH – Autobiography is interesting only up to a point. But desire, flirtation, violence and sex are the drives that make me go into the studio and make paintings. I use two opposing types of paint, wet into wet, into one another. In some paintings they caress one another and in others they argue, collapse and fall apart. The results are formed by my understanding through experiment and observation of the way these two different painterly substances react with or against each other and the effects that time, gravity physical forces have upon the paint. My control and different treatments of the process allow me to create work which is more than simply an illustration of this way of working, the process of liquid change seems to create a tenuous order out of potential chaos. In thinking about your question though, I feel more comfortable nodding to others outside my own work, even though, of course, many artists such as Frans Halls, Francis Bacon and Sigmar Polke have influenced me and the work I make.

DC – You mentioned this morning a desire to make a painting called Boudoir. You said it would be a lilac painting, which would look like the smell of cheap perfume. It would be sexy and camp, optimistic, though somehow melancholy. When you shared this with me, the methods of Count Frankenstein popped into my head, and I felt that each stage of your painterly process would somehow offer another intrinsic part to the painting's personality. It would certainly, over several months of drying and prodding (lying supine on a slab) become the Boudoir painting you initially desired. Am I a fawning fool for thinking this?

AH – Yes and no. I can remember describing what I wanted the painting to 'hold' on the phone to you that morning, whilst mixing up a large tub of Lilac and Violet oil and gloss paint. Of course, the painting behaved in a manner which I could not foresee until I made it.

DC – I see. You have been quoted in the past as saying you love, and indeed are seduced by, the skin-like top surface on a mug of warm milk. Similarly with the daubs of pinkish paint in Cannaletto paintings, such as the Venice Regatta series in the National Gallery. When a painting of yours leaves the canvas and begins to reach towards the gallery floor with sumptuous though sinister folds of dried paint, I experience no longer just artists oil. Emotions like desire and violence appear to be embodied. Is this an interest in the 'flesh' of certain experience?

AH – Completely. I'm beginning to see, with more clarity, what I am asking from abstraction. This is whether the paintings I make can emanate a specific emotional 'hit' of experience to the viewer. To achieve this I try to be as new and innovative as possible with the paint, as well as with the technical devices which assist the construction of the work.

DC – Do you seek moral catharsis in aesthetic satisfaction?

AH – Certainly. Let me just lay this painting flat for a few hours. You were saying?

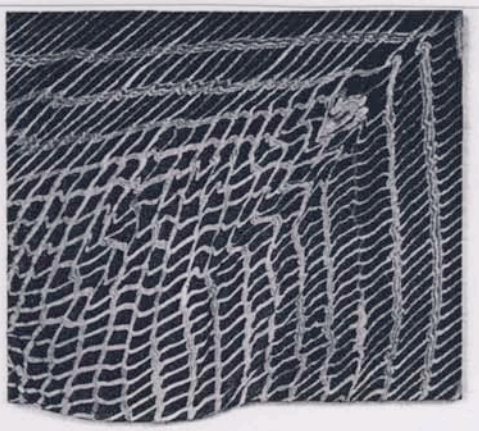
DC – When, if ever, do you enjoy a Big Mac?

AH – Often. However, the work is not the result of some clean, perfect mass produced process. It takes minimalism and twists it into grunge despair and exhilaration.

Alexis Harding is currently participating in the Nat West Art Show, at the Lothbury Galleries, 41 Lothbury Street, until 28 August. He will be exhibiting paintings at the Andrew Mummery Gallery, 33 Great Sutton Street, 16 September to 25 October. Also, new paintings at the Rubicon Gallery in Dublin from 15 October.

Archer, Michael, 'Alexis Harding: Andrew Mummery Gallery', *Art Forum* (December 1998)

from *Art Forum*
December, 1998



Alexis Harding, *Portrait of B.N. on the Tube*, 1998,
oil and gloss paint on fiberboard, ca. 31¼ x 36¼".

LONDON

ALEXIS HARDING

ANDREW MUMMERY GALLERY

For those artists whose concern is with painting itself, certain factors are all but impossible to avoid. One is the privileging of the process of making rather than an end result. Another is the presence—real or notional—of the grid as an index of the relationship between painting and the world, an aid to the task of reconciling support surfaces, frame, and the configuration of the paint matter. Alexis Harding's work is not, in these terms, disingenuous. The grid is unabashedly present in this show, pulled and distorted, broken and attenuated, both grid and the process of its coherence being disrupted central to Harding's practice.

Harding's paintings begin with the laying of an oil ground on the horizontal fiberboard. A trough with regularly spaced holes punched in its base is then filled with gloss paint and twice passed over the still-wet oil. The second pass, at right angles to the first, describes a loose grid. Then the painting is allowed to dry, a months-long process of mingling, puckering, slipping, breaking, and smearing. Because of the large amount of paint used, a skin quickly forms under which the still-liquid remainder acts as a lubricant for movement on the surface, refusing to let it adopt a fixed position. The tilting, turning, and more aggressive treatments of the still-wet fiberboard cause the skin to break and be swept across the underlying layers, furthering the distance that each work travels from the initial application of paint to final display.

In most instances, the ultimate, thoroughly dried painting remains stable. Delicate in appearance, as if nothing more than a strong breath would cause the forms to metamorphose once more, there is nonetheless a certain stability evidenced. The parted "curtains" of *Untitled (Split)*, 1997, droop off the bottom edge of the fiberboard, but should not move again. This achieved stability is largely what we see, yet we are not left with a feeling of reassurance or certainty when looking at these paintings. *Cover*, 1998, a tight black and purple surface, has been "finished off" for the exhibition, the final few drops of paint squeezed out to spatter onto the wall and floor. The dark red seen in *Liar*, 1998, the largest work in the show, is an extreme case of this kind of "assistance." Still wet at the time of the show's hanging, its skin was pulled off the metal panel on which it was laid and smeared around the edge and onto the wall, releasing a trapped liquid remainder that splashed down and puddled on the floor below. The tenuous status of *Liar* is exemplary. Completed or destroyed, a specifically installed object-painting whose functioning as a commodity is denied by its rootedness, it points up the ambiguous relation in Harding's painting among the "finish," "conclusion," "end," or "termination" of a work. While all the things these terms signify are in play in the making and viewing of the work, they are not congruent. It is never over.

—*Michael Archer*

Buck, Louisa, 'UK Artist Q&A', *The Art Newspaper*, No. 85 (October 1998)

UK artist Q & A

Alexis Harding

Currently showing Andrew Mummery Gallery (until 24 October), 33 Great Sutton St, London ECIV ODX, ☎/fax +44 (0)171 253 5318
Represented by Andrew Mummery Gallery
Background Born 1973 London. 1992-95 BA Goldsmith's College, London.
Track record Solo shows include: 1997 "Project room", Galerj S65, Alast, Belgium. Group shows include: 1995 Lost in Space Gallery, London; Stephen Friedman Gallery, London; 1996 Karsten Schubert Gallery, London; Rubicon Gallery, Dublin; New Contemporaries '96, Tate Gallery Liverpool; Camden Arts Centre, London; Stephen Friedman Gallery London; 1997 Andrew Mummery Gallery, London; Ikon Gallery, Birmingham; John Hansard Gallery, Southampton (touring); 1997: John Moores Liverpool Exhibition 20; 1998 Laurent Delaye Gallery London; The Nat West Prize (shortlisted), Lothbury Gallery London.

You've invented a process whereby paint is poured into a trough with a regular row of holes drilled into it and then the trough is drawn across a panel of wet paint to make a grid that settles into a wet painted surface. Because you use different kinds of paint, they react to each other as they dry and strange textures and effects emerge—sometimes the paint slips right off the edges. How much control do you have over what happens?
I try to guide it but it always resists—and that's when the dialogue begins. The paint can take between one and three months to dry, so it's a long process. You make a decision and put the paint down, but it's such living, breathing stuff that it will change on its own afterwards, however much you try to manipulate it. And that's the fascination, to see what it will do. The emotional impulse behind the making is important. I often feel that I have quite a maternal relationship to the paintings: I live close to them over a long time, I've got to come back every day to check on them, and often they're put to sleep horizontally at night and then put back up on the walls for some of the day.

Do you keep a record of how paintings have responded to time, gravity and different circumstances?
No, they are not programmatic—I never write a recipe down. Just mixing up the paint is a very personal thing. You feel the consistency of the paint and try and see what it will be doing in three months time. I've come to accept that seven out of ten paintings may not work out; it's just part of the daily practice of losing things, which one does anyway.

It's almost as if you give the paint an identity.
Yes. Often the paint collapses into corners, or lips hang off the edge, and I imbue this with lots of narratives. There are the different sorts of paint—artist-quality oil paint and domestic gloss—that fight and flirt with each other, but also amongst the paintings themselves I like it when there's friction, when they can rub up against each other. A lot of the paintings have been about kissing or couples and that's how I made the formal aspects hinge with the emotional impulse—hanging a diptych together so that the lips almost touch. If the paintings in a show look like they are hanging on for their lives, if they have that kind of fragility, then something's starting to work.

Alexis Harding reflects on his work

Earlier paintings that I've seen are monochrome or soberly coloured—now your colours are much more vivid and varied.
There are brighter colours coming through now and a kind of flirtation with decoration. I'm trying to see if I can make really beautiful paintings with some kind of repellent sting.

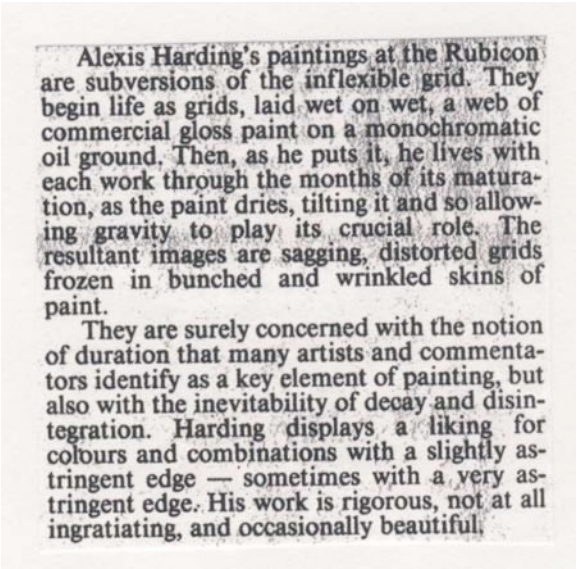
How do you want people to respond to your paintings?
The last thing I want them to be is dry, sober abstract paintings—even though I'm using and devising a lot of those kind of methods. They must have an emotional hit. I worked figuratively right through college and although the image slowly disappeared, I still feel that the paintings are hinged around ideas about heads or characters or families. Some people find them beautiful and some find them repulsive and I love that kind of oxymoron.

Influences?
A lot hinges around my everyday life and the people I see. In terms of artists, the School of London, and especially Francis Bacon and the way his use of paint was completely process-driven. I love the fragility of his heads, the way you feel that if you sneezed, they would just disappear.

Future projects?
A solo show at Rubicon Gallery, Dublin 15 October-7 November

Interview by **Louisa Buck**

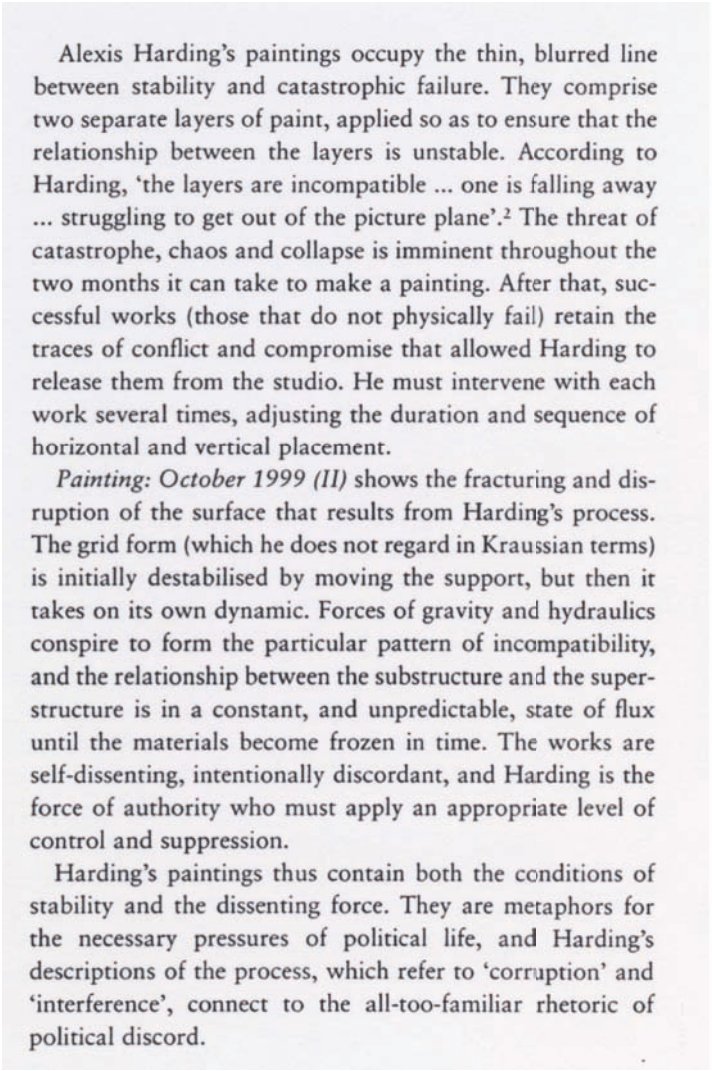
Dunne, Aiden, 'When Artists Choose Artists', *The Irish Times* (21 October 1998)



Alexis Harding's paintings at the Rubicon are subversions of the inflexible grid. They begin life as grids, laid wet on wet, a web of commercial gloss paint on a monochromatic oil ground. Then, as he puts it, he lives with each work through the months of its maturation, as the paint dries, tilting it and so allowing gravity to play its crucial role. The resultant images are sagging, distorted grids frozen in bunched and wrinkled skins of paint.

They are surely concerned with the notion of duration that many artists and commentators identify as a key element of painting, but also with the inevitability of decay and disintegration. Harding displays a liking for colours and combinations with a slightly astringent edge — sometimes with a very astringent edge. His work is rigorous, not at all ingratiating, and occasionally beautiful.

Lawrence, James, 'Low Level Dissent', *Contemporary Visual Arts*, Issue 30 (1998?)



Alexis Harding's paintings occupy the thin, blurred line between stability and catastrophic failure. They comprise two separate layers of paint, applied so as to ensure that the relationship between the layers is unstable. According to Harding, 'the layers are incompatible ... one is falling away ... struggling to get out of the picture plane'.[2] The threat of catastrophe, chaos and collapse is imminent throughout the two months it can take to make a painting. After that, successful works (those that do not physically fail) retain the traces of conflict and compromise that allowed Harding to release them from the studio. He must intervene with each work several times, adjusting the duration and sequence of horizontal and vertical placement.

Painting: October 1999 (II) shows the fracturing and disruption of the surface that results from Harding's process. The grid form (which he does not regard in Kraussian terms) is initially destabilised by moving the support, but then it takes on its own dynamic. Forces of gravity and hydraulics conspire to form the particular pattern of incompatibility, and the relationship between the substructure and the superstructure is in a constant, and unpredictable, state of flux until the materials become frozen in time. The works are self-dissenting, intentionally discordant, and Harding is the force of authority who must apply an appropriate level of control and suppression.

Harding's paintings thus contain both the conditions of stability and the dissenting force. They are metaphors for the necessary pressures of political life, and Harding's descriptions of the process, which refer to 'corruption' and 'interference', connect to the all-too-familiar rhetoric of political discord.

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Harding, Alexis, 'Rhythm for Reasons' *in John Moores 20* (Liverpool: Walker Art Gallery, 1998), p.68-69. [Exhibition Catalogue]

ALEXIS HARDING

RHYTHM FOR REASONS

Oil and gloss paint on aluminium

61 x 56; 61 x 56; 61.5 x 56 cm

Currently my works are made by pouring gloss paint through a trough onto a support covered with oil paint - wet into wet. I work very quickly, in series, to begin with; but then I have to hold by breath for months to see what is going to happen. Each painting is made differently and then left horizontal, 'put to sleep', to dry. The drying process is very important; it takes between three weeks and three months, depending on the specific image I attempt to achieve. I seem to spend a lot of my time watching paint dry and intervening at the right moment. I want to set up a system to catch, or trap the image. Seventy percent of the paintings fail; thirty per cent will survive.

I see *Rhythm for Reasons* now as being simultaneously seductive and repellent, full of optimism and extreme doubt. I like the way in which the triptych contains the feeling of three exhausted portraits after a good night out, and also how the image functions differently 'closer to' than it does from a distance. I try to allow the work to be driven by the image and the process simultaneously. It has 'worked' when these two elements collide, producing an image littered with incident that at once recalls what I wanted to happen and is a complete shock and surprise.

Alexis Harding was born in London in 1973. He studied at Goldsmiths' College 1992-95. His exhibitions since 1995 have included *New Contemporaries* Tate Gallery Liverpool and Camden Arts Centre 1996, group shows with Stephen Friedman Gallery London 1995 and 1996 and Andrew Mummery London 1996 and 1997; *Die Yuppie Scum* Karsten Schubert Gallery London 1996; *Loaded* IKON Gallery Birmingham 1996 and *Finish* Spacex Gallery Exeter 1997.