Tom Henderson

General

The British artist Tom Henderson loves the light, strong colours, mirrors, plywood and cast acrylic. His tools are mechanical cutters, dry point pens and car lacquer.

Although his works are hung flat on the wall, they are no standard painting. They are situated somewhere between painting and sculpture, between the 2nd and 3rd dimension. And none of his works can be fully appreciated, if viewed statically. It is the spectator’s movement in front of the works, the ever-changing viewpoint, which brings them to life and unlocks their secrets. A flat, dull black surface can become a multi-layered, intriguing object, if viewed from the right angle. As for anything in life, it is all a question of perspective.

Tom Henderson was born in 1976 in London and discovered his love for art at school under the careful tutelage of his ceramics professor Gordon Baldwin. After school, he studied fine and applied art at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne, where he soon focused on becoming a sculptor. Richard Serra was then his absolute idol.

He was always intrigued by objects and things, which got the viewer involved, forced to actively participate in the artistic experience. Tom Henderson’s pieces are thus at the same time intellectually stimulating and pure aesthetic reduction. His art can be best described as poetic minimalism.

After having finished university, he moved to London where he lived and worked for many years. In 2009 he decided to move with his family to the south of France where he is free to devote his life entirely to his art.

Tom Henderson likes to work in series, which are all variations of his main themes. Movement, chance, optical illusion and the artists enduring curiosity for what you can do to a material. Those who offer the greatest scope are his favourites. Tom Henderson has always been fascinated by the sculptor’s materials and like Richard Serra he complies a list of what he can do with them or even to them. Wood he considers a friendly and patient material, which gives you calm and allows itself to be cut, glued, coloured, twisted, chiselled and will hold up on its own. The same applies to cast acrylic, which has the added benefit of being translucent, so you can work both sides and the edges and making it look like it glows from within.

All of his works have the unifying quality, that you can only really experience them, if you are prepared to move and change your viewpoint.

If the viewer moves from left to right in front of one of the big scratched works like in Flatland or the Wall series, he will see the surface changing like moiré silk. Or the light catching in the mirrored lines scratched into the big swats of acrylic paint. Or the different mirror reflections in the oblique series, which only appear, if you move.

All the pieces in Tom’s work show a bold and daring use of colour, although surprisingly colour does not follow any deeper idea or philosophy – it is applied purely for its aesthetic purposes.

Works:

The Oblique series are big wooden pieces which play with a hidden and displaced perspective. This type of perspective is well known from Hans Holbein’s “*The Ambassadors*”, which if looked straight on shows a bizarre grey object. If viewed from the side, it turns out to the depiction of a skull. The same applies to the Oblique works – only if the viewer is prepared to move to the side will he be able to grasp the full depth of the piece. In fact perspective is everything, for depending on the viewer’s standpoint, he has no perspective, or he becomes the vocal point of the work himself or yet again he can see all angles of the piece at the same time.

The way the wooden panels are spaced along the embedded mirror is dictated by famous quotes, which add an interesting intellectual twist to the whole viewing experience.

The Dry Point Series deals with the ideas of barriers and frontiers – real and perceived ones. If faced with a wall head on, it can help to step aside, to decide whether it is really as surmountable as it appears on first glance.

The Wall series plays with our perception of what we think we see and then discover the hidden optical illusion, where our mind has to make a conscious effort to see the “other” picture or perspective. Like the *Flatland series* the *Wall* pieces are situated somewhere between the 2nd and 3rd dimension, depending on the viewer’s willingness to get drawn in. Tom Henderson got the idea from his favorited past time as a child, when he was obsessed by those magic eye books, where you had to find the embedded 3D picture in the maze on the page. The twist here being, that he works have multiple perspectives, thus the spectator has to move around, to get all the different angles. If he stays put and look straight on to it, like he would with any normal work of art, he would get nothing.

The series Dry Point Diptych is a true minimalist reduction of all the themes so far encountered. It has the lacquer and the cast acrylic, it has perceptively two sides but is in fact one sheet. It is scratched and painted, it reflects the viewer, if he takes the right viewpoint, but essentially, they are a Henderson homage to Barnett Newman and the classic minimalist arrangement.

The Flatland paintings are works that consist of random squares on a flat surface that reveal a three-dimensional world beyond by actually reflecting parts of the paintings immediate environment. The squares themselves are fashioned by a process of finding regular squares within the lines of a loosely drawn grid. If chance allows four lines to intersect to create a square I remove the oil paint from this area of the mirrored surface to reveal tiny, individual, seemingly disconnected, reflections of the world in which we live.

The works exist, both as two-dimensional, perspective free, abstract paintings but with portals to the reality of our three-dimensional realm. In a way, this is only the beginning because if you start to include the movement and motion of someone viewing the paintings then angles and reflections change and everything is therefore also relative to the fourth dimension, time.

The title of the series comes from a science fantasy novella called ‘Flatland - A Romance of Many Dimensions' which was written by an English clergyman and schoolmaster called Edwin Abbott Abbott and published in 1884.

Pseudonymously written by ‘A Square’, Flatland is a charming, if slightly pedestrian, tale of imaginary beings or polygons that live on the Euclidian plane. It is both a comment on Victorian society of the time, as well as an examination of the possibility of further dimensions. The book starts with life on the two-dimensional plane populated by lines, triangles, squares, pentagons, circles and so forth where regularity and the number of sides determine social status. One day ‘A Square’ is visited by a three-dimensional sphere which he cannot comprehend until he is taken to tri-dimensional Spaceland to see for himself. What follows is a pretty complex mathematical exploration into the idea of multiple dimensions beyond those that we know and understand. Unfortunately, towards the end of the book after returning to Flatland enlightened, our two-dimensional hero is actually imprisoned for arguing the existence of other dimensions!

The artist read ‘Flatland’ years ago but it was only recently that he started to see some kind of correlation between his work and the book. A major priority of his work, not just the paintings in the Flatland series, is to make art that happens in the no-mans-land between the second and third dimension, somewhere between painting and sculpture where if it is successful it exists in both or neither.

The Cave paintings, part of the Flatland series, are a reference to Plato’s idea of the reality of forms. All we see of perfection is its shadow cast onto the wall of a cave by a flickering fire. In our world, there is no such thing as perfection. Everything we have and try to produce follows the law of Entropy – man’s vain effort to create perfection out of chaos.

The series Arc-Light sees the artist’s favourite material cast acrylic in a new role. The sheet is being cut up in hand drawn grids – same base principle as in the *Flatland series*. The edges are then sprayed with colour and all the pieces put back together to form a *Flatland* grid, where the colour arcs from one edge to the next, giving an almost glowing impression. The grids, unlike the *Flatland* series pieces, are wonkier, they imply tried regularity, but fail to achieve it. This of course comes back to the Plato and cave idea, that we all know in our mind the perfect form, but only have imperfect copies around us.

The group of works including *In a Landscape* and *Distant Hills*, are part of the Arc Light series. They reduce à la Mondrian a given landscape to its essential components – geographic grid and base colours. The effect is quite startling, as the coloured edges of the cut-up pieces of cast acrylic seem to seep into the picture plane – like the work was lit from within with lots of coloured LEDs.

The polygon series is a further development of the wonky arc lights, where the artist actually follows a proper sculptors path and constructs the pieces from the outset. Shiny aluminium flaps are fastened together with hinges, painted on all sides and hung on the wall with nails. The final appearance is determined by chance and gravity, as they will give rise on its final form. Here Bridget Riley may be the inspirational source as much as Agnes Martin’s delicate hues of colour planes. The most fascinating aspect of the Polygons is probably, that the light the issue is neither on the picture plane, nor behind it, but seems to come from within.

Isabelle von Rundstedt

August 2017