



Noel Ivanoff: *Skin Cradles*

Noel Ivanoff's formalistic painting practice has been marked by a sheer determination to innovate new possibilities in the language of painting's surfaces and supports. His explorations into painting as sculptural constructions were first seen in the crate-like works in his exhibition *Fabrication* (Vavasour-Godkin Gallery, 2007) and the floor box paintings in *Landing* (Enjoy Public Art Gallery, 2008), and have now culminated in *Skin Cradles* (Two Rooms, 2010). They have an assertively quirky and animated three-dimensional presence, which Ivanoff achieves through confounding the conventions of cradling. The functions of strengthening, straightening, holding and protecting are shifted. The stretchers and crates remain holding devices, but the cradle becomes a system within which the painted panels can be shaped under tension or the skins of paint are asked to conform to the elliptical hollows of polystyrene blocks.

With the *Convex (stretcher)* works Ivanoff first paints the panels vertically, using the process he formulated for his *Digit paintings* in 2009. He activates the paint by drawing his finger across the entire surface to create vertical parallel lines, while piling paint on both sides of the mark. With his purposely made set-squares, he controls this process so an overall consistency of finish is achieved across the painting. The upright panels are then mounted into horizontal positions on their own stretcher constructions and bent into convex curves, forcing a spring-like state, so that the paintings present themselves under tension. An integral relationship occurs between the ploughed paint application, the curvature of the panel, and the three-dimensional qualities emanating from the stretcher and wall.

These paintings have a multifaceted presence. The panels appear light, soft, rubber or plastic-like, 'shifty' and atmospheric in one moment, or heavy, solid, sharp and metallic, the next. After a longer look, you can feel somewhat uncomfortable, as you imagine the works springing forth, flying out at you or crashing straight down onto the floor, taking their 'frail' stretcher with them. The viewer is coaxed into an encounter around these works through the shifting sensations of weight, colour and material, creating the opportunity to reflect on the totality of these works and the space that contains them.

The *Cut block (crate)* paintings are wall works articulated by polystyrene blocks mounted within partial crate constructions. Several of the crate-panels are reformed to mount the blocks to the wall by acting as a shelf. Each cut to order form has an elliptical hole in its centre, which extends through the entire block to subtly intimate a cargo of fragile industrial forms or artworks. A painted area of flat orange covers 50% of these contrived expanses, with each work employing a different means of dividing these areas into half painted and unpainted surfaces. Quiet and intensely animated, the porous surfaces of the polystyrene seem to swallow immediate space, becoming wormholes to suck in the unwary. Drawn into viewing the insides of the painted holes from multiple angles, the viewer can revel in the magnetic pull into the elliptical volume and the seductive quality of orange surface after-glow and variations of white.

The freestanding *Concave (crate)* pieces consist of white painted panels mounted within partial crate constructions, bowed under tension to create an elliptical, concave curve that fits into the confines of each crate. These panels are pushed to great levels of tension by the balanced energy which presses them against their cradling supports. Sufficient opposing force counters the weight of the 'roof' above with a tension so palpable and intense that in any given moment these panels could burst out of their cramped quarters in a dramatic, Houdini escape.

These *Concave (crate)* works and the *Cut block (crate)* pieces suggest functional containers as well as a set of self-contained, painterly and sculptural elements. It is as if these works are their own packaging, storage, transport and display system, designed to be safely crated, moved and installed in an exhibition venue without any need of additional materials. This could suggest agency for each audience by being reconstituted in relation to the physical characteristics of each environment and the tastes and interests of those installing the works. Ivanoff asserts that "While acknowledging their utilitarian context, they refer to the utopian optimism of modernist abstraction, but reconsider this language, a century on, as an echo that is somewhat airless, yet still serving a valid function in today's visual culture."¹

Good point, and I believe that Ivanoff's works do not echo some postmodern pastiche, they rise above the empty signifiers of postmodernism and are more about being enriched by, than simply referencing the history of art and utilitarian design. The works in *Skin Cradles* are a relevant contribution to the formalistic art of today, because they are anchored as self-sustaining objects, rich in their own materiality and physicality, not just stacked full of empty references. Berlin-based writer Diedrich Diederichsen praised the *Formalism: Modern Art Today* exhibition (Hamburger Kunstverein, 2005) for its alternatives to a "world choked with referentiality."² I would like to believe that any of Ivanoff's works for *Skin Cradles* would have sat nicely in that company. While certainly showing itself to be aesthetically precise, Ivanoff's formalism is guided by intuition, chance and play, which allows his works to come across as hopeful and, if not utopian, then as micro-utopian. By micro-utopian, of course Ivanoff's works may be theorised via relational aesthetics, but in my opinion, it is the maverick, iconoclastic Richard Artschwager - whose practice has combined painting and sculpture to create "categorical confusion" by conflating Pop, Minimal and Conceptual Art - who is more relevant to the appreciation of Ivanoff's goals.³ "Nothing is ever just one thing with Artschwager,"⁴ and the same can be said of Noel Ivanoff's work, in which the potentially austere tone of formalism has been reinvested with a finely calibrated sense of humour, vulnerability and the artist's touch.

Erich Ranfft © 2010

¹ Email to the author, 24 July 2010.

² Diedrich Diederichsen, "Formalismus. Hamburger Kunstverein," *Artforum*, March 2005, vol.XLIII, no.7, p.231.

³ See David Frankel, "Curtain Call – The Art of Richard Artschwager," *Artforum*, November 2000, vol.XXXIX, no.3, pp.120-127.

⁴ *Ibid.*

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Front cover images

Convex (stretcher) painting 4

1000 x 1300 x 350mm
Acrylic paint on plywood, mounted
onto a cedar stretcher construction.

Concave (crate) painting 1

860 x 660 x 450mm
Acrylic paint on plywood mounted
within a crate construction.

Cut block (crate) painting 1

795 x 345 x 435mm
Acrylic paint on polystyrene form
mounted within a crate construction.

Back cover image

Concave (crate) painting 4

860 x 660 x 450mm
Acrylic paint on plywood mounted
within a crate construction.

Photography by Becky Nunes