

Touch, Value and Ivanoff: Digit Paintings

Noel Ivanoff's digit paintings are so called because he makes them (in part) by dragging his finger through wet paint. What better to stand for authenticity, individuality, expression and inspiration than this "touch", its capacity for creation evoking the finger of God in Michelangelo's painting on the Sistine Chapel ceiling? But the immediate impression of Ivanoff's austere colour fields might put a dampener on talk of the expressive gesture, and instead call to mind the American abstract painter Ad Reinhardt railing against "hand-working and hand-jerking", which he deemed to be "personal and in poor taste" (and god forbid one should "let the influence of evil demons gain control of the brush"). The truth is, though, Ivanoff's paintings sit somewhere between a gestural mode of abstraction (think abstract expressionism) and Reinhardt's fanatical purism. Ivanoff's process, detectable in the surfaces of the digit paintings, plainly says so.

Ivanoff applies a succession of layers of paint, each brushed laterally onto a prepared plywood support. Then he repeatedly pulls his finger through the surface of the final layer of wet paint, first an up-stroke, then down, working his way incrementally across the surface from right to left. Each stroke reveals something of the dry paint layer underneath, unearthing its timbre. To achieve straight vertical bands, Ivanoff attaches a vertical wooden strut, hooked over the top of the work, and runs his finger along its edge. He "sculpts" or "ploughs" the paint, leaving a channel, the concavity of which depends on the consistency of the paint and the pressure applied. Likewise, the ridges that form at the edges of the channels may be more or less raised. Within each band, repeated over and over, yet minutely varied, is a fine chiaroscuro, a subtle shift in the density of the paint produced by the rounded and slightly tilted end of the artist's finger. In their interaction with the horizontal striations in the paint formed by the bristles of the brush, the vertical bands establish a delicate, discrete pattern – a grid, mesh or weave. The collaboration of body and tool results in a "touch" that is finely balanced between order and variability, gesture and restraint.

At this point, you might be inclined to object, and to point to the object – this simple panel covered with paint, orange, yellow, red – this merely minimalist monochrome – and to declare that I am making a mountain out of a molehill, or indulging in, to use the scathing words of American writer Tom Wolfe, "exquisitely miniaturized hypotheses". But it is simply that Ivanoff's abstractions produce complex experiences, and small things become noticeable and magnified, because there are no big things to grab the limelight. The artist's finest decisions about density and hue, and his precise application of pressure and velocity, all become visible in time spent with the work. They constitute the character of each painting. And they are judgements of value.

The word "value" can describe the lightness or darkness of a colour, which is relatively straightforward. "Value" also pertains to the merit of things, such as paintings, which is complicated. Debates about good and bad, and the innumerable shades of value in between, come to an impasse over questions about who is making the judgement and what criteria they use. But the primary judgement belongs to the artist, who decides whether or not we get to see a work. For Ivanoff, for whom colour is both medium and subject matter, colour values are mixed up with the other kind, and both are complicated. A painting leaves the studio, worthy of exhibition,

if it hits a feeling that he recognises, or fits his sensibility. That has a lot to do with the precise colour values that emerge when the final layer of paint is applied – something of an unknown, because of the variables in Ivanoff's final act of partially uncovering the penultimate (typically lighter) layer. The marks left by the artist's finger can be more or less consistent in width and pressure, and the topmost colour rendered more or less transparent or strident. The outcome might be slightly off key, accepted or rejected as such. A good painting, in Ivanoff's terms, carries the fingerprint of the artist – almost literally (indexically) so – but it is also an extension, a stretching, a discovery, of what counts as his.

In this sense, Ivanoff's intentions differ from those of the American abstract painter Frank Stella, whose series of "pin-striped" black paintings, begun in 1959, are a significant precedent for Ivanoff's striated colour fields. Stella, in a moment when abstract expressionist (and existentialist) gesture had attained supreme value, decided contrarily to pursue an effect of unemotional blankness – and critics of the time agreed he had achieved it (though we might see Stella's paintings differently now). Ivanoff's particular balance of the personal and the mechanical is close to the ethos of other American painters of the late 1950s and early 1960s, known by the critic Clement Greenberg's term "post-painterly abstraction". Morris Louis, for example, like Ivanoff, used various contrivances – in Louis's case, wooden work stretchers that "sculpted" the surfaces of unstretched canvases draped over them – to direct or channel the passage of paint, the result betraying both the mechanics of the process and the artist's intuitive colour choices.

In the New Zealand context, and under Louis's influence in the early 1970s, Ian Scott's Sprayed Stripe paintings involved laying lengths of wood on the canvas as channels along which intense hues were applied with a spray can. Scott was consciously channelling, too, the matter-of-fact activities of the home handyman, while registering a personal response to colour and light. In Ivanoff's case, a love of carpentry – the skills passed on to him by his father – lies behind many of his methods as well as painting supports and implements. He speaks too of the painting as "a built thing", and of the process of painting as motivated by "wanting to do the job consistently, like a tradie."

The digit paintings bring into play two distinct meanings of the word "digit". In using his own digit (finger), Ivanoff divides each painting into increments or discrete units. The digit embodies both touch (gesture) and logic (order). Of course, the word might also be enlarged upon to call forth "digital" media, and a vast world of experience accessed by the touch of a finger, but by its nature defying touch. Ivanoff's paintings, on the other hand, in their immeasurable material detail, transcend the ponderous 0s and 1s of digital reproduction. In condensing his own feelings and judgements into a modest monochrome panel, Ivanoff gives us license to linger over "exquisitely miniaturized" painterly values.

- Edward Hanfling, 2022