

Thinking and/or Seeing Noel Ivanoff's Sliders

Noel Ivanoff's practice often skirts the peripheries of painting. In the past, he has mounted paintings inside partially constructed crates, literally freighting his works with the armour required to transport these fragile surfaces across the globe. He has detached his paintings from their stretchers, bringing these invisible supports to the fore and redeploying them—not to shore up a painting's flatness—but to contort and flex the picture plane in actual space. For his *Digit* paintings, he dispensed with the brush altogether, using guides to steer the tip of his finger (or 'digit') through a bed of wet paint in uniform lines, like a tractor ploughing a field. In such projects the physical boundaries of the work extend outward, taking in the studio environment they are produced within and simultaneously edging closer to the artist's body.

It's useful to recall these works when considering his *Slider* series, which Ivanoff has developed and exhibited since 2012. Within his schema of artwork-studio-artist, the series brings the process of mixing colour into the final exhibited painting. As he initially described, the body of work focused on a mixing action typically 'reserved for a palette (usually horizontal) prior to the paint being applied onto the painting (usually vertical). To play on this', he continued, 'I execute the paintings horizontally, using squeegees and jigs, in an effort to collapse the distinction between palette and painting, preparation and execution.' His earliest *Sliders* were considered complete at a point where this partial mix of paint is preserved at the edges of the colours, which was also a point where the 'purity' of these tonalities was frozen in a state of stress, pressed together with a corresponding colour with unyielding pressure across the face of the work.

His means of producing the works has remained consistent, however when I recently met with Ivanoff in his studio he described this series as focusing on a simpler task; seeking out a support that would 'provide slip'¹. This phrase succinctly captures something salient to the grouping of works in the exhibition *Bandwidth*, that is, they represent a move away from viewing the painting surface as analogous to the artist's palette, and towards painting as a site of action. Key to this is Ivanoff's chosen support, an aluminium-faced laminate with an acrylic core. Since the metallic surface doesn't allow any absorption of pigment, it remains in constant tension with the paint. Ivanoff's painting procedure, then, is finely

¹ Noel Ivanoff, as notated in studio visit with the writer, Saturday 3 August

tuned to activate a careful equilibrium between these two materials, the thin outer skin of paint and a reflective support. In this, material and ground waver in a continual back-and-forth, as thin veils of paint amplify tiny crevices in the substrate, and a single grain of dust caught in the squeegee exposes a shard of reflective aluminium across the length of the painting. In all these instances paint's relationship with the reflective support is like a paper-thin strata. The process results in a fine buildup at the edges of the painted sections, with residue at the top and bottom of the work resulting from commencing and completing the stroke, and accumulation at the sides from the release of pressure at the boundaries of the squeegee. Ivanoff leaves narrow bands on each side of the painting untouched to demarcate the point of contact between paint instrument and the picture plane, and amplify minute variations in pace and pressure applied during the moment of making.

These palpable reverberations of the making process can be likened to a mechanical exposure. Ivanoff's loaded squeegee provides a means to extrude a single movement across the painting plane, forensically scanning the surface of the painting and amplifying the interplay of light, surface, medium, pressure, and duration. Like a flatbed scanner, Ivanoff's materials are agnostic to what they are exposed to—they simply record and index the outcome of this 'slip', providing a snapshot of material forces exerted within the time it takes to complete the sliding action.

Each painting presents a unique colour; yellow-tinted red, crimson-tinted red, blue-toned red; cyan-toned blue, green-tinted blue, violet-blue, and so on. Seeing the works exhibited together, you would think that this consistent approach would read as a kind of typology, that is, that the family resemblances between the colours would be foregrounded over the unique attributes of each painting. In fact the opposite occurs. The combination of exposing the unique wavelength of each colour makes each read in a profoundly singular way. This seems to be result from the unpredictable reciprocity of each colour to the aluminium surface. A darker green appears to merge with the aluminium, resulting in a vibrant array of metallic tones and an illusionistic sense of depth and movement. While a lighter green applied in a fractionally thinner opacity seems somewhat objectified, like static or noise floating above the ground. Each artwork has its own frequency which creates variations in the degree of illusionistic spatiality that is conveyed in the work, each implying a different atmosphere or sense of mass.

In an art historical tradition, we might describe the works as reductive painting; the act of paring back the means of producing a work towards a refined end — to what Julian

Dashper once described as the artwork ‘being everything that it’s not.’ Yet, we also should acknowledge a workshop-like method of producing the works — which is marked by a distinct lack of anxiety. While connected with a love of painting, the discipline of crafting his own bespoke tools, each indispensable to these paintings, has thinly-veiled links to activities quite disconnected with non-objective painting. As we’ve already discussed, the practical studio environment (crates, armrests, jigs, and so on) is deliberately brought into the orbit of the exhibited works. Likewise, Ivanoff’s custom-made apparatuses can be likened to the routine problem-solving done by carpenters, mechanics, joiners, technicians, and so on, in the course of their work. In this sense, to flip Dashper’s schema, the paintings *are* everything they *are*, and in the process, they pay homage to the practical intelligence of uncelebrated producers/makers.

Writing about artworks that approach this kind of zero-degree of painting sometimes feels like being stuck in a loop. I find myself describing the paint’s actions as a stepping stone to explore broader implications. But when I reach those implications, I’m drawn back to the stubborn materiality of the paint. The ‘how’ explains the ‘why’, which circles back to the ‘how’. Philosophically, such tautologies can be difficult for the Analytical thinker, who knows they’re in trouble if a premise is the same as its conclusion. Yet, in the Continental tradition, as with some of the best modernist poets, such tautologies have sometimes been embraced as a way to ground something stubbornly factual about perception. A case in point is the Portuguese poet Alberto Caeiro (Fernando Pessoa)², who Bruno B eu describes as a kind of ‘zero-degree poet’³. Like Ivanoff, it is the sense of disarming simplicity that Caeiro employs that enable us to see things with a profound clarity. This particular passage seems to resonate:

What we see of things are the things.

Why would we see one thing when another thing is there?

Why would seeing and hearing be to delude ourselves

When seeing and hearing are seeing and hearing?

What matters is to know how to see,

To know how to see without thinking,

² Alberto Caeiro is one of dozens of pseudonyms adopted by Fernando Pessoa. Pessoa described these ‘poets’ as heteronyms, each with an entire biography and personality which was inflected in ‘their’ writings.

³ Bruno B eu, ‘For Your Eyes Only: The Logic of Seeing in Alberto Caeiro’s Poetry’, *Fernando Pessoa and Philosophy: Countless Lives Inhabit Us*, 2021, p.279

To know how to see when seeing.
And not think when seeing
And see when thinking.

But this requires deep study,
Lessons in unlearning.
And a retreat into the freedom of that convent
Where the stars, say poets, are the eternal lungs,
and flowers the contrite believers of just one day.⁴

In Ivanoff's works I see a similar insistence on attention, through his perseverance in continually laying bare and observing the chromatic range of unique colours. Such singularities stress the reciprocal relationship with the reflective support. The paint both floats above the support and reverberates from it to ensure that the 'how' of these works is not distinct from the 'why'. In this way the works are both verbs (doings), and nouns (things). In compressing the making process into a single gesture, Ivanoff creates something neither laboured nor fleeting, occupying a space which curiously disguises and indexes their rudimentary construction, thereby opening up a space between illusion and material fact.

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⁴ Alberto Caeiro (Fernando Pessoa), *The Keeper of the Flocks*, XXIV, 1914