



Prospect and Refuge

Artist Q&A:

Callum Green

David Surman: I have a couple of questions that I'd like to ask each artist in the show and then some more specific ones. The experience of artists has diversified greatly in recent years so it's always intriguing to get a sense of where and how they're working.

The exhibition is inspired by the ideas of Jay Appelton, particularly his observation that our ingrained comprehension of the landscape influences our aesthetic sense. Could you describe your journey to the studio or place in which you make your work, the place itself and your view from that place.

Callum Green: My journey to the studio is a short cycle across south-east London (weather permitting). It's certainly not the most idyllic commute but it's got its charms. I think the grey of the post-war tower blocks and London sky in the winter have had an impact on what I've been making recently. On better days I'll take the scenic route down to the river.

The studio itself is in an old propeller foundry in Deptford. My studio is a partitioned space in a large sky-lit room so really doesn't have much of a view since there are no windows out, only up. That does make you very aware of the light and how it changes through the day and the throughout the year.

Typically of art studios, there's no heating and with a glass roof also no insulation so it's a bit of a greenhouse - freezing cold in winter and an oven in the summer. (Spring and autumn though... perfect!)

DS: Should a studio be a comforting place or an antagonistic zone with potential artistic hazards? Do you clear away obstructions to make a clear way toward opportunity or do you trap yourself in order to find new intensities?

CG: I'd like to think of the studio as a comforting space but mine rarely is. It would be lovely to think I could clear away the obstacles and focus on a painting in some monk-like state until it makes sense but in reality I work in clutter; there's lots of paintings under way at any one time that get worked periodically



with ideas bouncing around the walls and the floor.

The way I work is generally to set up an obstacle (or maybe better to describe it as a sensation) and then work against it. So the paintings work as a series of sensations interacting to activate the 'picture'.

DS: For the past few years you've been diligently paring down your methods, and are now working with a very refined language of gestural marks, smears and wipes onto a smooth ground. What makes for a successful painting? How do you know when you've got something working in such a pared down process?

CG: The work has gotten more pared-down for sure and more defined in its materiality. The surfaces are fastidious and allow the paint to slide and be pulled right back which also allows the colours to really sing because the oil sits on the surface rather than being absorbed.

I think it's always been about a sense of 'on-ness' and activation but maybe over the last couple of years I've gotten to understand what's at the core of the paintings and focus on not overworking that. The question for me really is what is enough to activate a painting? I guess it's hard to describe when you know something is 'on' - it's hard to put that into words - I hope that's what the paintings are doing.

DS: The work bears some relation to that of action painters of the mid-twentieth century, though I can see that you deliberately problematise those connections by using thin paint, the smearing of decisive marks and so on. Could you talk about your relationship to this, and how do you feel about the English abstract painters like Hodgkin and Hoyland?

CG: I have a difficult relationship with the mid-century action painting. I'm clearly drawn to it but I do have a problem with the idea of expression imbued in it. I think of my work as more straight-faced maybe. I'll set up these gestural layers and then knock them back. That might just be disrupting the gestures by pulling back through them or by setting up another kind of language over it. Maybe that comes from a sense that that kind of painting is not something that can feel relevant now? It's too sincere.

In terms of Hoyland and Hodgkin I have a particular love for Hodgkin; it's his lyricism and that particular poise. I think it's that gay gaze that's immediately apparent but in no way explicit. And there's a carefully honed slowness in the making that's reflected in the viewing that stands apart for me and is at odds with Hoyland's ballsy brashness (not to say I don't love that brashness too).

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DS: The paintings in the exhibition have titles that allude to landscape, and in many cases your titles point to the world of day-to-day life. You also keep sketchbooks that contain drafts or sketches for paintings that have a diary-like quality. How does painting and being a painter fit into your life, is it a way of making sense of things, or does it occupy its own space as a practice?

CG: I don't necessarily see painting as way of making sense - it has its own space. To me there's a logic in building a painting that I'm more conscious of when I'm making.

The titles can be diaristic; they often come from day-to-day dialogue and I guess try to connect the gesture of the paintings to these snippets of language that somehow allude to bigger ideas or imagery. That might be something from a chat with someone or something you overhear that made you laugh, a stupid meme, or quite often just a way of bluntly describing the painting to myself.

For instance my piece in the exhibition 'October (Constable Sky)' was painted in October, so it has an order in that sense, and I was thinking about those skies in Constable, there's one in particular where he overlays the grey cloud and pulls it right across with a rag and gives this illusion of a fleeting storm over a brighter sky.

The sketchbooks do operate as a kind of studio diary - they're not so much sketches but keep a record of the colours I'm using. They're deliberately un-precious. Colour combinations and marks will appear that inform the paintings but I don't set out to sketch a painting, it's more of cyclical process of making and recording.

DS: I'm curious about the role of feeling in your work. Sometimes the paintings lean into the optical or sensory aspect of the surface without necessarily having an emotional charge, whereas others definitely employ aspects of atmosphere and mood to communicate sensations of longing or nervousness. There's also humour and irony, I don't think it's a clearcut thing, but I would love to hear your thoughts on this.

C.G.: I'm really glad that that contradiction comes across. I'm definitely interested in that interplay of the banal and ironic and the genuine. I don't really paint with an emotional charge but that reading will always be there, especially in abstract painting, so I think you have to accept that that reading is present. I have no problem with people engaging with the work on that level, even if it wasn't in my intention, that's really out of my hands. That's something I play with. In past work I was really getting at a sense of dry humour in what on the face of it could appear quite a serious approach. I always thought of it as more tongue in cheek and funny in its banality. But over the last year or two I think I've gotten less self conscious of that, it is what it is. Who cares if it's cringe? Maybe it's both.

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There's joy in painting, sometimes there's misery and to be honest there's the boredom of pottering around the studio too. I don't think you can paint outside of your lived experience so it creeps in. I'll see it in work where I hadn't thought about it and realise that maybe there is an emotional charge that I hadn't even considered.

DS: Thank you for your time!

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