

Julie Umerle: An Exploration of Mark-Making

'First and foremost, "mark" is a product as well as a process,' writes Kelly Baum.¹ 'More specifically, it is an end that cannot be separated from its means.' Marks may issue directly from the artist's hand, via a brush or a palette knife in contact with the canvas, or there may be some attempt on the part of the artist to hand over control and distance him- or herself from the process. Even so, the resultant marks are the traces of an artist's action. When Jackson Pollock poured his paint directly from the can, or dripped it from a stick, for example, his direct influence might have become less apparent, but, nevertheless, it was still his bodily movement that choreographed the encounter between paint and canvas. Harold Rosenberg spoke of the abstract expressionists as producing 'events' rather than 'pictures'. 'The painter,' he wrote, 'no longer approached his easel with an image in his mind; he went up to it with material in his hand to do something to that other piece of material in front of him. The image would be the result of this encounter.'² For Julie Umerle, this assertion might hold in part, but, influenced by minimalism and post-minimalism as well as the 'new American painting', her work is an exploration of mark-making of many different types.

The works closest in spirit to the 'encounter' alluded to by Rosenberg are those in her *Transoxide* series (2015-16), built up on wet stretched paper with a coloured ground, as a successive layering of white paint and flicked splatters of ink. With the initial colour pulled across the sheet with a large brush, forming a 'grid', the accumulated layers veil this underlying order with their seemingly haphazard clusters. Suggestive of multiplying cells, reproducing bacteria, or dark stars in a bright sky, there is an element of the organic, echoed also by the splitting and cracking of the ink on the surface, varying in degree according to the specific mixture used in each case.

These paintings are an experiment, both in mark-making and materials, and typical of the way in which Umerle works: progressing from one piece to the next, continuing an idea, cycling through open-ended series, pushing boundaries and exploring elements that fascinate her along the way. The physicality of the medium and her attention to surface are countered, however, by a strong compositional element within the structure of the paintings.

Drift III (2016), for example, is a reworking of an earlier piece that got damaged. Attempting to recapture what it was she loved about the previous work, Umerle has, nevertheless, both subtly repositioned the looming black shapes, and, per force, submitted to the will of gravity and the pull of the paint itself as it drips down the canvas. Here, as is also the case for *Naples Orange* (2013) and *Buff Titanium* (2013), the drips result directly from the pressure of the brush as it is swept across the softly coloured, divided ground – an interesting contrast in terms of direct contact to the remote mark-making of the *Transoxide* series' flicking approach, treading that fine line between directing what you want the paint to do and letting it do its own thing; between precision and chance.

The *Rewind* series (2014-16) sets out to isolate and refine the marks from the *Drift* paintings, positioning them tightly within the square frame of an unprimed canvas, exploiting the pictorial space to the max. With the omission of the drips, the process is obliterated, and the mark-making becomes defined instead by technique. Similarly, the loss of action asserts both the flat forms and the flatness of the canvas itself. This is, as Charles Harrison termed it, 'painterliness, freed of depicting function'.³ First in black, and then, in the later paintings, in red, the series invites the viewer to hit the pause button and observe in still meditation. With the black shapes, it is like looking through space, aiming towards infinity, while, in contrast, the red shapes appear to jump forwards, escaping the pictorial frame and entering the viewer's own personal space. As the 'painter of black', Pierre Soulages, said: 'It's important to experience aesthetic shock, which sets in motion our imagination, our emotions, our feelings, and our thoughts. That's the purpose of a painting and of art in general.'⁴ Umerle certainly achieves this, both by her stripping bare of these shapes – revealing the 'nakedness' that Robert Motherwell attributed to abstract art – and by the large scale of many of her works, which seem to shout out to you, compelling you to stop and look, engaging you in what Mark Rothko described as 'an immediate transaction', drawing you in 'to create a state of intimacy'.⁵

Early in her career, Umerle was advised by Robert Ryman to avoid naming her works after feelings and, indeed, she describes her feelings as being shut off when she is at work, as she becomes engrossed in the creative process. Viewers' responses are always subjective, and any

associations they make, be they figurative or emotional, are entirely their own. The black *Rewind* triptych offers something of an enigma code, suggesting an order in which the hieroglyphs might be read, inviting the viewer to attempt an interpretation. Take note, however, that, as with the Holy Trinity, each of these three entities might be more than one thing at once and, overall, no satisfactory understanding might be attained: it is, perhaps, equally a matter of submission and belief.

Just as Motherwell saw his work in terms of 'a dialectic between the conscious (straight lines, designed shapes, weighted colours, abstract language) and the unconscious (soft lines, obscured shapes, *automatism*) resolved into a synthesis which differs as a whole from either'⁶, so Umerle's work treads a similar path, proving that formal and spontaneous procedures are not necessarily incompatible and that mark-making truly is both a means to an end and an end in itself.

Anna McNay, July 2016

Notes:

1. Kelly Baum, 'Rothko to Richter/ Mark-Making in Abstract Painting from the Collection of Preston H. Haskell, Class of 1960.' Essay to accompany the exhibition of the same name at Princeton University Art Museum, 2014. Available online at: <http://artmuseum.princeton.edu/story/rothko-richter-mark-making-abstract-painting-collection-preston-h-haskell-class-1960> [Accessed 18/07/16]
2. Harold Rosenberg, 'The American Action Painters', 1952, reprinted in Ellen G Landau (ed), *Reading Abstract Expressionism. Context and Critique*, Yale University Press, 2005, pp189-197, p190
3. Charles Harrison, 'Abstract Expressionism' in Tony Richardson & Nikos Stangos (eds), *Concepts of Modern Art*, Penguin, 1974, pp168-210, p172
4. Zoe Stillpass, interview with Pierre Soulages in *Interview* magazine, published 05/08/14. Available online at: http://www.interviewmagazine.com/art/pierre-soulages/#_ [Accessed 18/07/16]
5. Mark Rothko, from excerpts from a lecture given at the Pratt Institute in 1958, noted by Dore Ashton and published in *Cimaise*, December 1958. Cited in Harrison (1974), p195

6. From a statement in Sidney Janis, *Abstract and Surrealist Art in America*, New York, 1944, cited in Harrison (1974), p170