

HEAVEN CAN WAIT  
*I cannot live with You*  
*It would be Life*  
*And Life is over there*  
*Behind the Shelf*

Emily Dickinson

Sometimes there are many barriers to where we want to be. There is always something in the way, something blocking our vision, as we catch a glimpse of heaven.

To call a painting **Paragon** is a daring move, but in many ways, in her works of that title, Julie Umerle offers up a perfect paradigm for painting. The **Paragon** paintings give us two spaces and, as in most of the recent work, one acts as a foil to the other. One side of the canvas proposes an infinite space, a space to step in to, to escape to, to retreat to. The other side situates the viewer firmly in front of the work. The surface requires that you notice it - the paint thick with quartzsand keeps one at bay - you are in the present, the here and now. The **Paragon** paintings make us aware of our sublunary state - we are here but we want to be there. Something is in the way. But perhaps we are glad of it.

These paintings from 1993 set up Umerle's current parameters. There is hardly any trace of the painterly expressionistic handling that informed her much earlier painting. Geometry is now asserted as a means of pictorial construction, but there is no sense that these works align themselves with others to whom they bear a superficial resemblance. For example, Umerle's **Wrap** series - six paintings with the same geometric format - have little to do with say, Blinky Palermo's constructivist project or Peter Halley's conceptual abstraction. Umerle has felt her way towards this project, introducing a hard-edged element purely as a means to an end, as a way of keeping the painterly in check.

In the **Wrap** paintings again there are two surfaces: two spaces. The dappled ground is the deeper space which, as you look into it, becomes almost hypnotic. When viewed at a distance, several of these paintings have an airy atmosphere. Like the throbbing tremor of the eye's aqueous humour an image appears to dissolve as if we are seeing atoms - we feel as though we are watching air. The format of the paintings re-enforces this idea of expansiveness. The hard-edge opaque paint that 'wraps' the grounds crosses at the lower left hand corner, but our sense of symmetry leads us to expect the middle of this cross to mark out the centre of the painting. The lopsideness thus formed implies that the painting extends beyond the boundaries of the stretcher - there is a sense that what is before us is only a part of a much larger painting. The opaque linear addition has another function; it acts as a spoiler. Like the built-up surfaces of the **Paragon** and **Flock** paintings, it prevents the viewer from stepping into the ineffable voids that the paintings' grounds propose. It crassly obliterates the soft surface underneath, acting as a bar, preventing our escape.

These are material paintings in every sense. The grounds' potential for spatial depth is effectively curbed and we begin to view these paintings as the almost sculptural bringing together of two surfaces which denote, not different application of paint to a shared surface, but rather two quite different materials juxtaposed.

However, in the chronology of this work, a shift can be discerned which seems to be of consequence. The last painting of this series, **Wrap VI**, has a blue/brown ground onto which a thicker purple band is placed. In this final piece (Umerle is quite sure she couldn't add to the series) the hard-edged application of paint begins to soften, the boundary begins to bleed. In previous works this edge, whilst not manufactured with machine-like precision, is definitely preserved. Here the distinction between the two surfaces is allowed to break down.

This is also true of Umerle's most recent paintings, entitled **Overlap**. Because these are monochrome paintings the division, whilst still in place, is not as distinct as before. Here we have lost the sense of the balance of opposites: instead there is a much smaller shift from one plane to another. The opaque area now feels less like a barrier and more like a covering up, a gentle muffling. The unusual use of watercolour on such a large scale, coupled with the pink hue, sustains this softened effect. In these last works we find a new resolution; frustration has subsided, here promise and fact collide. We learn from them that though our ultimate desires may be deferred, the states in between have their own pleasurable sensations as we seamlessly slip between them.

*Rebecca Fortnum, 1995*