Paint Under the Finger Nails – Stewart Geddes

Many years after he'd seen the 1959 exhibition, 'The New American Painting' Albert Irvin would say he couldn't conceive of an equivalent experience for an artist today. [1]

The Tate exhibition was the last in a series during the 1950s that explored the new art emerging from across the Atlantic. The previous year had seen the Jackson Pollock solo exhibition at Bryan Robertson's Whitechapel Gallery, and in 1956, the hugely significant but wider Tate survey, 'Modern Art in the United States', in which the final room was occupied by the Abstract Expressionists. But 'The New American Painting' was the first time they had been presented to the British public en masse. [2]

Curated by Dorothy C. Miller under the aegis of MOMA New York's International Program, the show travelled to eight European cities and played a significant role in shifting attention from Paris to New York as *the* centre for "...advanced tendencies..." in the visual arts.[3] Interestingly, evidence has since emerged to suggest the exhibition was part of an arm's length, CIA sponsored, Cold War tool – an expression of the freedoms one could experience in the West.

Irvin later recalled being struck by how different the work of each artist was, which led him to consider the possibilities of a visual language of his own.[4] However, it was the scale and gestural bravado of the works that impacted on Irvin immediately, and convinced him he must fundamentally rethink his own art.

Irvin's encounter with Abstract Expressionism was part of a wider process of change. It coincided with a period when he was doubting his personal and spikey form of Social Realist painting - a mixture of Francis Bacon and Kitchen Sink influences – and was beginning to contemplate the possibilities of abstraction. Crucially, through his close friend and supporter Nancy Wynne Jones, he was introduced to St Ives painter Peter Lanyon.[5]

Lanyon, who originated from Cornwall, was only four years older than Irvin, but early involvement with the British avant garde via his wartime 'tutors' Ben Nicholson and Naum Gabo, had led to radical developments in his work. To Irvin, being in the orbit of such a seriously regarded artist at this critical phase, became essential in his own development.

During family holidays in Cornwall Irvin was able to extend his conversations with Lanyon and the wider St Ives School. Soon this was

augmented with a lecturing post at Goldsmiths College and the debates amongst fellow staff including: Basil Beattie, Harry and Elma Thubron, Kenneth Martin and Andrew Forge, and later, John Bellany, Jon Thompson and Michael Craig-Martin. Significantly, Irvin was told by Forge, the Head of Fine Art, that he must not teach more than three days per week. Irvin recollected, 'He insisted I had more time each week in the studio – four days – and importantly, paint under my fingernails'.[6]

A period of intense experimentation and exploration followed from this time and throughout the 1960s. Irvin entered the decade with a form of abstraction reminiscent of the 'teachers' who inspired it, but exited teetering on the edge of his own mature language.

The early 1960s works often adopt an analogous palette of reds, and contrasts thick, broad patches of paint with fragile, meandering lines; sometimes yellow, sometimes black. The colouration anticipates Irvin's later luminous palette, but the encrusted paint surface is closer to contemporary St Ives' painting. Surprisingly perhaps, Irvin then abandoned rich reds in favour of black.

Looking to reconcile varied, large slabs of black with tiny 'fingers' of saturated colour, these works show Irvin attempting to balance asymmetry and disparity. They also reveal his reflections on historical art, and appropriating its lessons into his practice. In relation to the 'Black Paintings' it's known that Irvin was thinking about Velazquez's 'The Infanta Margareta in a Blue Dress'(1659), where he was fascinated by the play in scale of the monumental infant princess' dress, and her tiny fingers resting on the edge of her volumous skirts.[7]

Irvin was first alerted to a deeper reading of art and the role it could play in his own work when he met the progressive art collector, the Reverend Walter Hussey of St Matthew's, Northampton, during the early part of the war. Hussey possessed a significant collection of Modern British art including works by Jacob Epstein, Matthew Smith, Stanley Spenser and Graham Sutherland.[8] Exposure to this and the conversations between them were an important formative experience for the young artist.

Later, when Irvin was called up to join the Royal Air Force, the contrast between the daily danger of sorties over occupied France, and the civilizing experience of looking at art, became profoundly affecting. Art's 'rationing' - when one painting a month was brought back to the National Gallery from safe exile in a slate mine in Manod, Wales - only added to Irvin's appetite. He talked of "devouring" his monthly supply when on leave.

The 'Black Paintings' show Irvin beginning to use thin veils of paint for the first sustained period, but the shapes are essentially an outline 'filled in'. Soon this gave way to the paint's fluid consistency leading the process, and a more negotiated arrival at form. Irvin's great friend and fellow painter Basil Beattie has commented on his memory of the fumes from the huge quantities of turpentine Irvin was using to thin paint (see interview 'Several Other Gears' from this catalogue).

A brief phase of vaporous, rotund forms in 1966, where the paint can be seen spraying down and across the canvas, was replaced with vertical and diagonal dagger-shapes, and his palette noticeably heightening once more. These works have a broadly egalitarian disposition of elements, where the extreme major/minor distribution of forms present in the 'Black Paintings', has been set to one side.

Toward the end of the 1960s Irvin left his home-based studio, and began making much larger paintings. He first joined the newly founded cooperative group 'SPACE', in their large Thames-side warehouse at St Katharine Docks and then, in 1971, he moved on to an old Jewish School in Stepney Green, East London, where he remained for the rest of his life. Soon after relocating, Irvin tried acrylic paint for the first time.[9]

It's hard to overstate the significance of the change in medium for Irvin. Working on his large canvasses both vertically (against the wall), and laid flat (just off the floor), he took to acrylic's properties immediately. Working horizontally stopped the inevitable run of water-thinned paint from top to bottom, and by placing the canvas stretcher on large cans, he was able to reduce the drying time of the saturated surface by exposing the back of the canvas as well as the front.

Irvin began constructing painting 'tools', including improvised squeegees made from card with which he pushed the paint across the surface in parallel, diagonal bars. He used the diagonal gesture in tension with the horizontal and vertical edges of the canvas to deliver a vivid dynamism, resonating with the urban environment in which the works were made. The organization of these paintings often allude to musical composition as Irvin partitions the canvas into three 'movements' of: a major dynamic of diagonal stripes, running into a minor resisting counter movement, and resolving itself in narrow fingers of colour, reminiscent of the 'Black Paintings'. This period of painting also represents the first mature phase in which the artist has located a truly personal voice. His confidence is palpable, and the rich and luminous palette typically associated with Irvin takes off.

In order to establish the primary colour mood of a painting, Irvin began by "sullying" an already damp, bare canvas with a stain of acrylic. Into this he would then cast 'chains' of light tints.

Retrospectively Irvin recognised the effect as reminiscent of the flack trails he witnessed coming up to greet his Bristol Beaufighter during the War. Although he wasn't looking to mimic the seen experience, he talked of these early experiences as significant. Similarly, he remembered leaving a blacked-out Britain by ship for flight training in Canada, and the mesmerizing image of the sparkling city lights of Halifax on the Nova Scotian coast. These unusually positive recollections from a time of mortal danger perhaps demonstrate Irvin's predisposition to a celebratory psyche? It was tested at times, but he always came back to it. Irvin also speculated that the skills he developed as a flight navigator – of plotting a journey through three-dimensional space on the flat surface of a map - as central to the later abstract painter's conceptual framework.

As the 1970s progressed Irvin's use of squeegees moderated and he increasingly reverted to the brush once more, particularly house decorators' brushes. He became re-attracted to the nuance of pressure, speed and direction that a brush could deliver. Later, the standard decorator's brush was replaced with a multi-ferrule hearth brush – a brush used to clean out fire grates. Irvin observed that the separate ferrules offered a more recognisable brush mark on the large scale.

The brushed mark was a core communicative element for Irvin. It acted as a signifier of the presence of the artist and the decision-making taking place. Irvin talked in matter-of-fact terms of marks accruing, "…like entries in a diary…"[10]. But, he noted, "…they carry import too. They're like pockets of experience"[11]. In relation to this he highlighted the central importance of the autographic mark, and why he didn't use a studio assistant, because, "It's important that the mark on the canvas is the mark I've made"[12].

Irvin's colour 'architecture' now looked to coordinate an analogous palette – a palette of colours from the same zone of the colour wheel – punctuated with smaller proportions of complimentary colour – colours from opposite sides of the colour wheel. This reconciliation of opposites was a repeated tactic of Irvin's, and the forms the colour took up were often characterized by an interplay of differences: straight with curved; the horizontal with criss-crossed. Over time new forms were identified and became embedded in his visual vocabulary [13]. Irvin's combination of oppositional forces even spilled into the creative act itself, and he often quoted the pianist Alfred Brendel's maxim for creativity as "…a combination of strategy and ecstacy…" [14].

Over several decades until 1980, Irvin received regular, if moderate, acknowledgement for his work. He exhibited on several occasions in Germany as well as widely in Britain, and received two Arts Council bursaries. On one consequent trip to the United States in 1968, he met with Robert Rauschenberg, as well as early protagonists Jack Tworkov and Grace Hartigan.[15] However, Irvin came to wider public attention after selection by artist curator John Hoyland, for the 1980 Hayward Annual Exhibition, in which a room was dedicated to his work. One important outcome was the offer of representation by Peter Lanyon's former art dealer, Gimpel Fils. Soon after, Irvin gave up his regular teaching post at Goldsmiths College, although he continued to travel around the country as visiting tutor at several art schools.

Throughout his long career as painter/teacher, strongly advocated the importance of visual intelligence. He considered Britain a nation prejudiced in toward the cultural primacy of the written word. As part of his evidence he cited the annual celebration of Shakespeare's birthday on St George's Day, and the near total ignoring of Turner's birthday the same day. By way of a small re-balancing act - although he always insisted there was no intended denigration to Shakespeare's contribution - Irvin gathered a group of artist friends for a celebratory dinner in Turner's honour at the St Katharine Docks studios on St George's Day 1969. The dinner became an annual event and continues to this day.

When Irvin exited the doors of the Tate at some point in early 1959, he was changed by an experience of the eyes and brain in tandem, and a resolve to embrace abstraction was irrevocably established. After years of exploration, a visual opulence emerged to stand as testament to his belief in the essential and enriching power of the visual arts. Irvin was not blind to the darker side of human capabilities – but ultimately, he found ally in Matisse's principle of an art of "…the joyousness of springtime, which never lets anyone suspect the labours it has cost…"[16]

1. Interview with the author. Geddes, S, *Stewart Geddes in Conversation with Bert Irvin,* Turps Banana Magazine, Issue 13
2. The exhibition opened on 24th February 1959, and closed on 22nd March. London was the second European venue for the exhibition, having previously been shown in Paris. The earlier 'Modern Art in the United States' of 1956, was a much wider survey of contemporary American art, and the Abstract Expressionists were present only in a single, final room. Nonetheless it was a much anticipated and highly influential exposure of the Abstract Expressionists to the British public. The Royal Academy's 2016 exhibition 'Abstract Expressionism' has been the only exhibition dedicated to the Abstract Expressionists artists in this country since 1959.
3. Dorothy Canning Miller (1904 – 2003) has been described as one of the most influential curators of the 20th century. Trained at MOMA New York, she became curator of the museum's collection, and was one of very few women to hold such an important curatorial role at that time.
The phrase 'advanced tendencies' was used to describe, what in contemporary terminology would be, 'cutting edge'. An example of documentation where the term can be found is:
https://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/press_archives/2342/releases/MOMA_1958_0025.pdf
4. Interview with the author. Geddes, S, *Stewart Geddes in Conversation with Bert Irvin,* Turps Banana Magazine, Issue 13

5.Nancy Wynne Jones was a significant figure in the St Ives art community when she turned her home into studios for artists and writers during the 1950s and 1960s. Previously she had lived and studied in London, when she met Irvin, before enrolling at the St Ives School of Painting where she painted under the guidance of abstract painter Peter Lanyon.
6. Geddes, S, *Stewart Geddes in Conversation with Bert Irvin,* Turps Banana Magazine, Issue 13
7. 'Life to Painting'. Moorehouse, P, *'Life to Painting'*, Lund Humphries Publishers, London. Over a period of two years, Irvin and Paul Moorehouse talked extensively about the developments in Irvin's art in preparation for the monograph
8. Irvin had been evacuated there from London when his school was relocated. Having completed his studies, Irvin enrolled at Northampton School of Art, and through winning a painting prize for a religious subject that Irvin was introduced to Hussey. Through his extensive record collection, Hussey also introduced the young Irvin to classical music, and helped develop a passion in him that was second only to painting.
9. The St Katharine Docks' studio was founded by partnership Peter Sedgley and Bridgit Riley who had formed the organization 'SPACE'. Its role was to find and develop studio spaces for artists. SPACE continues to this day.
10. Interview with the author. Geddes, S, *Stewart Geddes in Conversation with Bert Irvin,* Turps Banana Magazine, Issue 13
11. Ibid
12. Ibid
13. Typical of this was the relatively late identification of the quatrefoil form. Irvin liked the mixture of its presence on the grandeur of the Doges' Palace in Venice, and its prosaic ubiquity in pubs. Geddes, S, *Stewart Geddes in Conversation with Bert Irvin,* Turps Banana Magazine, Issue 13
14. Interview with the author. Geddes, S, *Stewart Geddes in Conversation with Bert Irvin,* Turps Banana Magazine, Issue 13
15. Irvin met with both artists whilst in the United States in 1968. Irvin requested his friend Basil Beattie send over several of his canvasses from London, so he could discuss his work with Tworkov whilst in New York. Jack Tworkov and Grace Hartigan were both in the original 'The New American Painting' exhibition. Hartigan was the only woman included.
16. Flam, Jack D., *Matisse on Art,* Phaidon, Oxford. From a letter written in Vence, dated 14 February 1948, to art historian and curator Henry Clifford, in relation to Matisse's pending retrospective exhibition at the Philadelphia Museum of Art of the same year.