

Gabriel Hartley

Skies

6th May - 25th June

Gabriel Hartley is a Modernist painter in the 21st Century

Let's wheel back for a second. Western modernism movement daddy Clement Greenberg's version of events has the whole journey of painting climaxing in the 1940s, in tingling apotheosis, with abstract expressionism. Centuries of painting, according to this one guy, had brought us to a moment of empirical, elemental clarity about what the medium is supposed to be and do. The exciting, retrospectively way-too-much central idea of Greenbergian modernism was that painting had reached its ultimate form, its final evolved state, like a saint, or a Pokémon.

And this was, at first, a macho American story, of Jackson Pollock and Franz Kline and Willem De Kooning, the destiny of white men arriving at their journey's end. Once everybody realised this was a goofy, incorrect idea, modernism then yielded and fragmented, in Morris Louis and Mark Rothko and Helen Frankenthaler and Sam Gilliam and Ellsworth Kelly and Tsuyoshi Maekawa and Jean Dubuffet and Lee Ufan, to better reflect a discussion that was moving past the idea of the painter as heroic conqueror. Modernism entered a decade of experimentation and openness to multiple histories, not just one, and a collective resolve to keep the conversation about painting — specifically painting — in progress. In fact, this movement was in full flow, in the middle of its next evolution, when pop happened. And conceptualism happened. And post-studio happened. And nothing was the same.

Postmodernism was primed to take over, and it did so, immediately. Art history went totally elsewhere. The story of painting, the quaint philosophical stakes of pigment on support, was suddenly secondary. And this is no big deal, nothing to get hung about. The last 60 years have been great. Art schools started filling with new, urgent discussion of technology, consumerism, desire, reproduction, identity, all those juicy bones we've been gnawing on since pop. Seventeen, by the by, has played its part in exhibiting and pushing these themes and scenes. It was founded on that energy. Postmodernism rules, obviously.

This is not Gabriel Hartley's milieu. Hartley is, nominally, a painter of this postmodern generation, yet he has imagined a parallel path for his practice. Hartley has a kink where the midcentury adventures of painting continued to grow and remain modern alongside — yet totally apart from — the dominant revolutions of technology and culture. He paints a different version of history and arrives at now.

Hartley has made thick oil works in the mushed, specifically British idiom of Frank Auerbach and Leon Kossoff, and he has carved up and swam on those vertiginous, gloopy fields. He has made speckled combination paintings like the scuzz of a city wall, in many skins of paint and spray that fuse together in pigment rilette. At times his surfaces seem glazed, at times they seem dusted. Considered and chaotic. Often in between. For this exhibition, his third at Seventeen, Hartley has made inky, soaked fields that read, variously, as spores, rust or mould — time, frozen and dissolved into linen, deeply worked yet super flat.

Hartley teases at subject matter, but won't commit to it. *It Never Entered My Mind* (2022), a pale two-foot canvas built up of colour fields divided by light inky lines, is predominantly covered with invasive transparent grey blotches. The latent country landscape in the simple boxed-out background, in greens and yellows, is rained upon and muted. At the same time, *It Never Entered My Mind* resembles an object that actually got rained upon. The blotches — their origins, their intent — never reveal themselves, and all told it is impossible to know what to call this painting, or what it depicts. Hartley's marks suggest a surrender to mark-making, a surrender to content. Hartley's paintings, in this way, carry a mystery as his marks take on a life of their own.

## Seventeen

Within one practice, Hartley has read the whole library of paint application, from emphatic grandstanding certainty to spectral disintegration and field-mouse shyness. He knows confidence because he has practiced it forever — the modernist faith in gesture, the fluency and singularity with the medium, is lionised at the Royal Academy, and goes back, one could argue, to the faith of Turner. It is bracing, this confidence, and it inspires a viewer to join the artist on the journey: this is exactly how Clement Greenberg got so swept away. But Hartley also paints with doubt and the provisional, choosing the later modernist faith in taking chances, the understated mysticism of John Cage, submitting to the world and seeing what it reveals once you've had an inkling of how complex it actually is. The paintings in this exhibition know both this confidence and this submission.

The continuing pleasures of paint allow for its constant evolution through the years and ensure its currency, its dignity. Painting couldn't end; why should its story end now? Hartley's position, as the modernist painter in the 21st century, is to make art of his daily life in the indeterminate space that painting still richly affords, even after Frankenthaler, after Gilliam, after Sigmar Polke, after Wade Guyton. In this exhibition, called Skies, there aren't particularly any skies. Narrative never firms up like that; Hartley's paintings aren't 'about' stuff like that. Hartley's Skies are an idea and a space. These Skies are planes across which Hartley may travel, and a repository for his past experiences, and a canvas for his dreams and impressions. Life continues, painting continues. This is how it all feels to Gabriel Hartley. Seems like a healthy way to see the world today.

William Pym  
Kent, April 2022