

The approach

Phillip Allen
Coarse Grain

Preview: 13th July
14th July – 6th August 2022

Phillip Allen in conversation with The Approach

The Approach: What's with these unusual surfaces and the title of the show *Coarse Grain*? What are the works made from? They resemble those sweets from the '70s 'Rainbow Drops'; there's always been a gustatory feel to your paintings – is this part of your research?

Phillip Allen: They're made using small polystyrene balls mixed with an acrylic primer...

The Approach: ...like what you fill bean bags with?

Allen: Exactly.

The Approach: That must be pretty difficult to paint on, with not much scope for slippage or facture or densely layered brushstrokes etc.? All that lovely stuff we expect painters to do.

Allen: They're quite unforgiving surfaces, and so I had to rethink how I approached making a painting. It all came about as a natural extension of my thoughts from my previous works...

The Approach: ...the *Deepdrinking* ones?

Allen: Yes, the general thought was to heighten the inseparability between colour, materiality and image making; to flatten out and coarsen those elements we associate with painting. This pictorial clumping of information led me to think about the difference between fine and coarse grain.

The Approach: When I think of coarse grain, it feels like something in which fine detail has been smoothed over or not yet emerged.

Allen: Yes, it's an attitude I've recently gone into when painting.

The Approach: So, the 'Rainbow Drops' surface become a visual metaphor for this?

Allen: As a result of painting on this surface, we're forced to think in a coarse grain manner. Then there's the resulting visual dimension of a surface or background that is ever-present as foreground.

The Approach: When looking at the paintings it's sometimes hard to prise the imagery away from the support. Are they landscapes? I sometimes see landscapes.

Allen: Well, perhaps not landscapes in the traditional sense - but I wanted to evoke an idea of somewhere.

The Approach: ...like a landscape.

Allen: Well, I heard this phrase a while ago 'horizon of expectations' in respect of understanding tropes, and this stuck with me and so I based the imagery loosely around this phrase.

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The Approach: And yet there are paintings included in the show which are far more what we were expecting from you.

Allen: There is a lineage and connection between the two sets of work, from the coarse grain thinking of one set of paintings, to the others which may seem more fine-grained in their approach.

The Approach: Fine-grained in what sense?

Allen: Fine grained in the sense that I'm trying to visualise more complexity and painterly nuance, you know...differing types of painterly information.

The Approach: For me, the lineage between the two sets of work would be that both have an evolutionary quality to them...literally! Both the coarse grain paintings and the *Deepdrippings* paintings remind me of bacteria or some amoeba-like organism. There is this microbe feel to them – things clinging to stuff and breeding. How much of the painting process is decided by you, or is it the paint making the decisions?

Allen: I try to get myself into good feedback loops while painting. So, what's been done informs what needs to be done. But there are a lot of false starts and dead time.

The Approach: I'd imagine your studio would have a number of nice blank canvases, ready for you to "express" yourself.

Allen: No not really, it's a little more chaotic than that and I never want to 'start' a painting, I always want to be in the middle of making a painting.

The Approach: How can you never start something? That sounds impossible and implausible.

Allen: Well, when new painting surfaces are delivered to the studio I have them lying around for months and am using them to clean excess paint off brushes etc. I consider these painting surfaces as just objects in my studio, it's only after a while once the studio mess has somehow trespassed onto their surfaces that I may begin to consider them as ready to receive "expression".

The Approach: So, you do start paintings, it's just the fact that this starting point isn't some grand gesture or the drawing out of an over-used motif. Would you then consider that the start of the paintings is this technique of including a border or threshold at the edges of your paintings?

Allen: Yes, I would consider that.

The Approach: But then in some of these new paintings you've allowed the paintings to be a little more untethered, starting at the centre and spilling or fizzing outwards. Is this transition intentional and do you see a difference between the works with a border device or without one? And how do you see it functioning anyway?

Allen: With the polystyrene paintings, I see those lumpy borders have been incorporated into the whole surface and so the edge has become the centre or perhaps it's all edge... The surface as a physical thing is so dominant that the paint struggles to be articulate.

The Approach: Your paintings have an inherently psychedelic quality to them, by the virtue of their intense and dense nature. They are the painting equivalent of the moment when, on drugs like mushrooms or acid, you slip from consciousness to the psychedelic unconscious. I'm reminded of Terence McKenna and his descriptions of the Faberge egg being like DMT goblins with their jewel-like encrusted appearances... Do you find yourself in a meditative state when painting? How do things peripheral to your painting (i.e. listening to music, a podcast) influence your work?

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Allen: The idea of 'visions' is interesting. You could say a painting by its very nature has links with hallucinations, visions, mysticism etc. The fact that a painting - in its most basic form - is simply an image floating on a wall also makes it a kind of perception without object.

The Approach: And finally, where do you get your ideas from?

Allen: Which ones??? I watched a talk by Carol Bove recently where she said, and I'm not quoting verbatim, that 'art people' are drawn to a powerful experience where you lose yourself and everything becomes luminous.¹ This luminosity is my find-spot.

Phillip Allen (b. 1967, London, UK) lives and works in London, UK. Exhibitions include *Deepdrrippings*, Miles McEnery, New York (2020); *Deepdrrippings*, Luca Tommasi Arte Contemporanea, Milan, Italy (2019); *Deepdrrippings*, The Approach, London (2019); *Deepdrrippings*, Kerlin Gallery, Dublin, Ireland (2017); *Tonic for Choice*, The Approach, London (2014); *...the urgent hang around*, Bernier/Eliades Gallery, Athens, Greece (2010); *Classified* (group show), Tate Britain, London (2009); *Phillip Allen*, Milton Keynes Gallery, Milton Keynes, UK (2006); *Archipeinture: painters build architecture*, Le Plateau/Frac Île-de France, Paris, France; Camden Arts Centre, London, UK (2006); *British Art Show 6* (group show), Touring Exhibition organised by Hayward Gallery, London (2005); *Phillip Allen: Recent Paintings*, PS1 Contemporary Art Centre, Brooklyn, NY (2003). Paintings are included in the collections of Arts Council England, British Council and Tate, London.

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¹ *The Koons Effect: Part 1*, Live from the Whitney, Recorded live panel discussion 12th November 2014, The Whitney Museum of American Art, accessed via YouTube