

CASTLEGATE HOUSE GALLERY

Mainly Greens – Patrick Heron - 1964

Mainly Greens (1964) is a dedication to colour which celebrates the beauty of the natural world through abstraction. Patrick Heron's oil on canvas, composed of warm reddish tones and splendid greens, offers a rejection of subject matter and a celebration of feeling. But this image is by no means inert. "I hate all symbols. I love all images," proclaimed the artist in a 1998 interview. As much can be seen in this canvas; its formal qualities are the primary focus, and the meeting lines of the colours - the velvety red and the lozenge of green - change the sensation of each tone. The shapes are uneven, but balanced, and the eye is invited to flit from one colour to another. What emerges is a meditation on the sensations conjured by the natural world - the impetus for much of Heron's abstract work.

Heron's fascination with the natural world is not without good reason. The shapes of Cornwall's landscape, and the growth of an artist community in the fishing town of St Ives - borne of a shared desire to reflect the forms and colours of their environment through artistic production - made fertile conditions for creative development. Much of Heron's work began with ruminations on the light and the colour of Cornwall. His parents nurtured his artistic ability, and he was encouraged to create designs for Cresta Silks, his father's successful silk scarf business. From his early textile design to works like *Mainly Greens*, the importance of every inch of the picture space, and the interactions between the work's elements, is upheld.

Heron's long career saw much adjustment and fine tuning, but what endures is the celebration of the prosaic beauty of life through colour. As Heron's work moved further toward abstraction his ideals shifted. There had always been a preoccupation with colour, and of flat areas of colour, but previously the artist had looked to cubism. When working at Bernard Leach's Pottery in St Ives as a conscientious objector during the Second World War, Ben Nicholson and Barbara Hepworth had a profound influence on Heron's artistic growth. A sense of lineage between the serenity and physicality of Hepworth's characteristic sculptural forms - which respond to those of the natural world - and Heron's 'wobbly hard edge' abstractions can be traced. As is nature's sublimity, there is no ranking of colour in Heron's abstractions. Creating work in such an invigorating environment, informed by the influence of fellow St Ives artists, such vibrant work is unsurprising.

After the Second World War, St Ives became a locus of artistic exchange between Britain and the United States. This period saw Heron experiment with larger scale images that relied upon the 'interplay' of flat colour and texture. *Mainly Greens* is a fine example of this in its lack of hierarchical distinction; the 'action' of the work, a pastille of green on a dark, uneven orange square, is in the bottom left corner.

Prior to the war and the consequent ascendancy of American art as an emblem of cultural modernity and new ideas, the French school of art had exerted much influence on British art. The shift in direction had a dramatic impact on Heron's work. In 1956 the International Program at the Museum of Modern Art in New York organised the first contemporary exhibition of American abstraction in Britain, marking a release from the complexities of French masters and welcoming 'creative emptiness'. The exhibition confirmed and afforded Heron the opportunity to expand on premises he'd reached for previously.

In 1953 Heron had described the success of painting lying in the creation of an experience which contains the 'inescapable dualism' - this being its quintessential trait - to master sensation through the illusion of depth and the physical reality of the flat picture surface. As such, Heron moved away from figurative depictions entirely in 1956, and from then until the end of the decade he embarked upon a period assimilating these new ideas of abstraction which the shift toward American art had engendered. Heron embraced this unburdening of pictorial space in his glowing review in *Arts Magazine* of the same year, he described his fascination with the artists' 'denial of spatial depth'.

Mainly Greens grapples with this notion to form a work which prioritises the sensory over the mental. It is the impulse which permeates the artist's body of abstract work. Enjoyment hinges entirely on colour, shape and interaction. When talking about his own work, in art critic Matthew Collings' 1999 documentary series *This is Modern Art*, Heron had described the fascination with painting as one which is purely visual, and the darting of the eye, from one point to the next, as the stuff of rhythm. This tying of metre to the visual emphasises the role of colour in *Mainly Greens* as both the subject and the means of the work. The primary concern is colour, and what materialises is a work that changes with the light of different times of the day, that places no greater importance on one aspect of the painting over another.

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