



Jeremy Moon's practice has always seemed to me to bring together aspects of work and play with a particular succinctness, insofar at least as work is considered to be serious and play is not. As pieces of formal abstraction these paintings are as serious as any being made in Britain during the 1960s. They carry all the hallmarks of advanced practice at the time, being large in size, on eccentrically shaped stretcher frames, populated by 'hard-edge' geometric forms and, from 1964 onwards, painted using a newly available brand of water soluble acrylic polymer. But then there are just as many factors that appear to hinder an interpretation of Moon's work as an entirely serious enterprise. Colour is not the least of these, presented high key to allow works to assert themselves as purely visual entities, and in doing so discourage any hint of the de-saturated indexicality that would characterise conceptual forms of art-making in the coming decade. If buoyant colour is key to understanding these paintings' claim to autonomy as focal points of disinterested pleasure though, there is also a degree to which this kind of sensual engagement limits any discussion of their effect in more cerebral terms. Put plainly, they are too immediately enjoyable to be taken entirely seriously.

Compositionally these paintings undermine their own sense of seriousness too. Unlike those abstract artists content to closely identify the literal and depicted properties of their work, i.e. the physical shape of the canvas and the painted elements that appear upon it, Moon's tactics could be better described as a form of pictorial brinkmanship, one that pits the two against each other. As such, instability is something that worries at the edges of even his most static compositions. This creates a kind of ludic feedback that implicates the viewer through refusing to provide them with ample enough information to read the paintings entirely as a three-dimensional object, or as an illusionistic image. Caught somewhere between these two points that responsibility is instead conferred upon us, as on closer inspection even what appears to be a coherently singular motif is more often than not disturbed by the presence of some form of conflicting logic. Although not interactive in any functioning sense, these elements nonetheless remain in play, and at odds with the aesthetic certainty the paintings otherwise project.

Critics writing about Moon recognised that such 'tensions' were crucial to understanding his particular attitude, but chose to interpret these in the overtly formal terms the artist himself employed in published statements on his practice. My own reading is quite different and draws heavily on a recurring term in these descriptions: that of Moon's 'professional' approach towards art making. It could be argued that technical advancements like the shaped canvas and acrylic paint worked to suppress the subjective vagaries associated with a more gestural approach to abstraction. In its place they conferred upon works a technocratic aura, qualities in which the biographical circumstances of the artist played a reduced role. Yet in Moon's case, having only begun 'to paint seriously' in his late twenties, following a period of National Service, a Cambridge law degree and 'four years on the executive side of the advertising industry,' such conditions of enhanced professionalism aligned closely with his own biography.

In 1966, having had several studios in flats insufficient to comfortably accommodate canvases of the scale he wished to work Moon moved his young family to Kingston upon Thames, where he constructed a sizeable, purpose built space in the back garden of the property. Living in close proximity to other painters including Bernard Cohen, John Edwards and John Hoyland it was in this suburban context that many of his most ambitious works were made. This was an unlikely place for such ambition to reside when compared say with the Manhattan artist's loft, a site that carried with it both the connotations of light industry and a bohemian lifestyle. Suburbia by contrast is a setting predominately associated with consumption and leisure, somewhere reviled by architectural theorists of the period as a repository for middlebrow, Mock Tudor pastiche. While Moon's abstraction traded on its advanced technical appearance the fact remained that it was produced in a garden studio that in a manner of speaking could be described as a dramatically enlarged version of a potting shed. It was this structure that the sociologist Anthony Sampson once identified as symbolising 'what distinguishes contemporary British life from that of other countries', enshrining a compulsion to remain purposefully engaged even while at home.

If these paintings emphasise the work that went into their making, then the drawings leading up to their creation unabashedly privilege play as their central goal. In his own words Moon considered drawing a 'convulsive' activity, and the voluminous quantity of preparatory work he produced is testimony to that. The impression given by such material is not a sober appraisal of potential imagery, but rather an avalanche of competing ideas. Some of these we can trace to completed works, while others offer compelling indications of a host of directions left unexplored. Made in substantial quantities these sketches crept out of the studio, intruding into records of everyday life. Inscribed on magazine pages, correspondence, and even colleagues' exhibition invitations they are overlaid upon a personal topography barred to us by the declarative surfaces of the paintings. As such the appeal of the drawings is a forensic one, as they offer insight into decisions overwritten in finished works. Separately he also maintained a hand-drawn catalogue that acted as a kind of palimpsest for completed paintings, another type of game that recorded the circulation of these pieces in the world outside the studio.

In my mind the unique humour of Moon's practice, to use the phrase in a physiological sense without entirely dispelling its comic undertones, resides in how it sublimates the figure of labour within that of leisure. This is most evident when trying to understand how the subjective play embodied by his drawings relates to the diffident, workmanlike nature of his paintings, a freedom not so much effaced by the latter as productively suspended. What this dialogue between painting and drawing highlight are complex but nonetheless vital questions about the respective conditions in which an artwork is produced, and those in which it is subsequently encountered by a viewer. These circumstances effectively cast the artist in a role of 'leisure specialist,' in that their professional energies are addressed to a time in which others are free to engage with their artworks. The tensions manifest in Moon's painting reflect this contradiction, a kind of 'serious play' emerging from their inter-relation. Assessed using the inherently reductive logic of the historical canon there is a tendency to regard the cultivation of such a contradictory state as representative of doubt, and thus as correspondingly minor.

In direct opposition to this I would suggest that the significance of Moon's practice derives from how it deliberately problematises such a centralising imperative, and offers in its place a nuanced and substantially more realistic picture of the problems faced by an abstract painter living and working in London at the time. In turn, its continued relevance to a discourse surrounding contemporary painting lies not in its compliance to the tropes of formalist abstraction as it emerged as a hegemonic force in 1960s art. Rather it lies in the sophisticated alternative these works present to such an account –in how they tacitly acknowledge instability as a generative force.