

The Painter's Discipline: Aesthetics and Form in Scottish Painting

Abstract

This paper concerns the practice of Glasgow-based painter Louise Hopkins. Most known for her detailed, laboured repainting of furnishing fabrics, Hopkins appropriates found images and everyday mass-produced fabrics into her work. Founded on the interstices between semiotics and formalism, her aim is the turning of found images into painting. Unraveling this particular aspect of her practice will form the central concern of this paper. Based on ethnographic research with the artist, this paper will explore the artist's commitment to the discipline of painting through the lens of an anthropological analysis and specifically, how her work evokes modernist concerns with aesthetics and formalism long since thought dead. In what follows I will address how artists are currently engaged with aesthetic concerns, ensuring its continual transformation and revival and how, like the medium of painting itself, its prophesied death has never really materialized.

Introduction

Glasgow-based artist Louise Hopkins is most known for her detailed, laboured repainting of furnishing fabrics. Founded on the interstices between semiotics and formalism, Hopkins appropriates found images and everyday mass-produced fabrics into her work. Using them as a material support, she refashions their surface, remarking and re-inscribing them with gestural, expressive forms that offer a stark opposition to the printed text, line or diagram. Her add-ons are distinct. Often hand-painted, playful and simply executed; they contrast with the anonymous printed matter that is easily recognizable. As particular kinds of signifiers, however modified, they form a dialectical relationship with the personal mark of the artist. Her starting point, then, is the stuff of the real world; already formed and circulating and having its own identity and context. The images prior, often collective meaning, is distilled through an aesthetic intervention on the pictorial surface that is both formal and indexical.

Within each painting the weight between content and form is deliberately measured. Upon completion the work offers multiple readings. Possible thematic concerns are present – political, social, geographical. But this also corresponds with a commitment to the medium of painting. Indeed, as the Fruitmarket Galley’s Fiona Bradley noted, her aim appears to be the turning of found images into paintings (2005). Unraveling this particular aspect of her practice has been the crux of our conversations and I want to take it as the point of departure for this paper.

But to study the painter’s practice as an anthropological task sets up a number of problems. The first is reconciling the use of aesthetics within an anthropological analysis. As I hope will become apparent in this paper, Hopkins’s regard for form in her work necessitates a dialogue with the aesthetic. But, for both art theory and anthropology, the term’s history and importantly its associative values, have ensured its stigmatization. The second factor, then, is the baggage within art itself that surrounds this term. Whilst the contemporary western avant-garde has since its inception in the early years of the 20th century, through such early movements as Dada, initiated its own war against aesthetics, with the most recent and definitive wave of anti-aesthetic sentiment stemming from Hal Foster in the 1980s, the ‘anti-aesthetic’ trend within art can be observed across multiple specialisms and movements. The legacy perhaps of its deconstruction is the fragmentation of the term, for the field of aesthetics is now no one thing (Fenves 2002:349). For at the same time that Rancière (2004), amongst many others, Nicolas Bourriaud (2002) in particular, were advocating the recognition of the inherent political nature of the aesthetic, art historian Noel Carroll (2003) was noting a return to aesthetics through an interest in beauty. For Carroll this is a backlash to the fixation on meaning and ideology, often through illuminating socio-political issues; for him ‘today’s art world seems obsessed with messages, often messages of a stridently political cast’ (2001). He notes, however, that such work is itself an advancing charge against the dominance of pictorial aesthetics in art within the mid-20th century. What is clear from this picture is the disintegration of aesthetics as a delimited field within art. But also its relevance, its transformation and continual revival is a clear sign that like the medium of painting itself, its prophesied death has never really materialized. The call to reject aesthetics entirely, as well as its simultaneous expansion into areas beyond its traditional remit, such as the political, have of course found favor within anthropology.¹ Its reinvention an attempt to divorce it from its

¹ Ingold (1996); Sansi (2015); Gell (1998); Pinney and Thomas (2001).

association with 'arts for art sake', in which meaning is inherent within the object itself. Its rejection on these grounds within the context of Scottish art, however, does not ring true ethnographically. If we accept that the anthropology of art should be able to theorise and account for art making practice wherever it might be found, including here in UK, the question then becomes how we account for art making that does – for the artist – involve a correspondence with aesthetics. This does not however imply an absolute autonomy for the artwork, as a critical position. Instead something much more nuanced occurs. In what follows I want to use the term 'aesthetic' to signal something quite specific; a return, if you like, to the pictorial surface and the relations that the artist cultivates through it. By focusing ethnographically on this topic I hope to present a possible way forward for an anthropological engagement with aesthetics that is responsive to its continual uptake within the arts.

Scottish Formalism

Sitting in a coffee shop in Glasgow's southside, Hopkins said that she was an artist interested in making paintings in the world. Specifically this for her means turning everyday printed materials into paintings: appropriating them into the discipline of painting and correspondingly into the art world. To achieve this process a number of things occur. In concrete terms, the surface of the image is recast: the content of the map or song-sheet is not painted over but brought into a dialogue through attending to its forms. Printed lines are extended, areas of the image are penciled in or covered over to draw the eye to what remains. In doing so the source image is pushed into itself: its autonomy as a surface with a specific set of formal relations is heightened, moving it into, as the artist described it, the 'liquid medium' of painting. The extent that this occurs is unique for each work: within some the original surface is erased through a building up of additional marks, within others both are given equal weight, sometimes harmoniously, whilst in others it jars. So, alongside these gestural movements of the brush there is also a considered attempt on the part of the artist to illicit a change of status through attending to these forms. To be a painting then, to make paintings, for Hopkins, is intimately bound up with the formal properties of the work. Such an approach to the 'liquid medium of painting' can be characterized as a type of formalism, and indeed it is through Hopkins's reliance on form that we arrive at a consideration of aesthetics in her work. The marrying of aesthetics to formalism goes back to Kant, of course, and for however embattled the term aesthetics has become, aesthetics relies on the formal properties of a work of art for its affect. Correspondingly then, formalism is intimately tied to the notion of aesthetic experience and judgment.

This aesthetic formalism can be traced back, in Britain at least, to the early decades of the 20th century through the writing of Bloomsbury author Clive Bell and artist Roger Fry.² Under the idiom of Bell's 'Significant Form' theory, first published in 1914 in his manifesto *Art* (see Harrison and Wood 1992), formalism decried Impressionism and Post-Impressionism due to its reliance on the visual and instead advocated that an art work's form was primary, that is, its composition, colour, brushwork, line and tone. Typically it also alludes to the appreciation of such qualities as symmetry, harmony, rhythm and proportion that are contained within the object itself. For these earlier theorists on formalism, any contextual reflection was seen as axiomatic to a formalist aesthetic: the work's subject should be of secondary consideration, as should its relationship to the observable world. For Bell, in particular, formalism heralded the legitimate means of divorcing art from observation. And as a mode of criticism formalism relegated the work's historical, social and iconographic possibilities to the background.

What is of further interest here, is what can be considered as aesthetically relevant within this framework. For some, such as Arthur Danto, formalism and the aesthetic are coextensive (Carroll 2003), for others aesthetics should not be equated with formalism at all (see the formalism versus cognitivism debate). A middle ground is suggested by Nick Zangwill (2000), who advocates that aesthetic experience demands a 'moderate formalism'; in which some part of the art object is premised on a consideration of its formal properties. Regardless of its configuration with the aesthetic, formalism's ascendancy throughout the 20th century was definitive. Heralding the advent of abstract art, it dominated contemporary practice until the 1960s when postmodernism began to break its hold. Formalism, as a movement, epitomized high modernism for many, through which art objects were championed for their autonomy of form and purity. Through it modernism's progressive search was enacted, offering a solution, or perhaps an escape, for all that was of value was contained within the boundaries of the work itself. With its decline formalism became more fractured and, like the term aesthetics itself, it has been subject to continually revision and re-imagination in light of contemporary concerns (see Zangwill 2000). But aesthetic formalism as a historic task is so intimately tied to modernism as to be interchangeable with it. As art historian James Elkins notes, the term aesthetic is a 'near-synonym for Modernism itself, a way of signaling Modernism's commitment to value' (Elkins and Montgomery 2013). Aesthetic formalism is a further

² For more recent criticisms of formalism see Walton (1970) and Danto (2005).

iteration of Modernism's supposed stance towards value, and in particular, how it can be identified and located. Thus, formalism as a technique is often co-opted to evoke a dialogue with what has come before.

Within the Glasgow art scene in which Hopkins is based, aesthetic formalism is imagined to be largely defunct. The notoriety of the conceptual artists that Glasgow has produced over the years, including Douglas Gordon, Martin Creed and Christine Borland, has aided this impression. Despite a significant number of artists whose work can be seen within this light, for instance Hayley Tompkins and Victoria Morton, its presence has gone under the radar.³ That is, its use as a framework for analysis and interpretation is comparatively slight. Associative concerns that map onto this idiom such as composition are equally dismissed through their association with a movement long since thought dead (see Ardalan 2013). For even those artists that do work with such concerns, and voice them, such as Glasgow-based painter Merlin James (1996:42), they themselves recognize its retraction:

‘concerns with light, composition, touch, colour, scale – all the once central concerns of painting – seem off the agenda now. It is thought almost naïve to talk of those interests in the face of the currently overwhelming preoccupations with subject or ideology’

Whilst James proffered this opinion on the state of formalism in 1996, a little over ten years later, Glasgow-based critic and writer, Alexander Kennedy (2013), took up this debate and refuted the dichotomy that James presents between an overt subject and the work's form. In 2009, Kennedy asked whether there was ‘now a place for high Modernism in Scotland’, by which he means a certain type of formalism. Through examining the artwork of sculptor Martin Boyce, Kennedy noted the ongoing commitment to formalism in Scottish art. But the assumption that it is incompatible with ‘contextualist approaches’ is taken to task. As indeed, for Kennedy, is the belief in a high modernism that we strive to emulate: there is not ‘a pristine historical context waiting to be plundered’.

Kennedy suggests that Boyce's work is indicative of a recent reintroduction of formalist interests in Scottish art, but for Kennedy ‘from the position of a quasi-Formalist’. Which he

³ For instance, Richard Wright, Hayley Tompkins, Victoria Morton, Merlin James.

defines as the process in which ‘continually deconstructing, emptying and repositioning one’s use of universal Modernist signifiers is never complete’ (2013). Boyce’s work, suggests Kennedy, is a ‘melancholic modernism’, a second wave movement that refutes the ending of the first. But as a second wave it is not able to offer the ‘truth’ that the first postulates. As curator Daniel Pies coins it, Boyce’s work is a correspondence with ‘the undead dreams of modernism’ (2015). Here, the artwork speaks to the original, but does not wholly adopt its intention. As Kennedy notes:

‘By utilizing such mythic forms, by quoting and seemingly misappropriating them, to a certain extent, creates a dialogue with the ‘original’ work, which is now only a memory’.

But this dialogue is not antithetical to addressing what is happening within the artists’ surroundings but instead can be a ‘unifying trope’. Boyce’s work is constituted through what has come before, but without collapsing itself into an echo of a past, more rigidly defined, formalism. It has become something, necessarily different from its ancestors. Daniel Pies (2015) delineates this difference in Boyce’s work through the artist’s inclusion of what modernist formalism previously rejected in its search for an essence, ‘a pure form in art’. As he suggests Boyce’s modernism is contaminated through:

‘inviting back into his works all the pariahs that modernism had driven out with great effort in the historical process of dogmatization: narrative and the psychological, the popular and the paranoid, the unplanned and the quotidian’.

For Pies the content, or ‘cultural source’ of this contamination can be found in contemporary culture. Now ‘inscribed on the surfaces of some of his works like scars of their former everyday lives’ (ibid). A comparison here with Hopkins is clear. And in Pies analysis of Boyce’s work we can see a confirmation of Kennedy’s assertion that contextualist and formalist approaches are not now incompatible, but in fact may be complementary. I will take this stance as my starting point for thinking through the paintings of Louise Hopkins. In relation to aesthetics, we can note that a contextualist approach by definition includes the political and social aspects of art making that have been historically absent from the anthropology of art; an absence that has been corrected by the call to go ‘beyond aesthetics’ (Pinney and Thomas 2001). But in what follows I hope to show how aesthetics, for the artist,

is not antithetical to contextual concerns, but coalesces with them. For curator Ulrich Loock, Hopkins's paintings are not autonomous, that is 'self-sufficient'. For him, in the hands of Hopkins 'painting is the medium of the production of a difference within what already exists, of a shift' (2005:77). For this to be achieved, the balance between form and content is exactly evaluated. In what follows in the remaining part of this paper I want to explore how this balance is orchestrated through a number of avenues within the artist's work, namely, in her treatment of the pictorial surface, her understanding of images, and importantly, her relationship to other paintings and painters. It is to these that I now turn.

Appropriated Surfaces

From collages to the readymade in the early years of the 20th century, the modernist trope of appropriating found imagery has not wavered since the supposed decline of the paradigm that gave rise to it.⁴ With it the myth that the pictorial surface is a neutral support for the artist, there to be erased and covered, was dispelled (see Krauss 1986). Instead the artist is in correspondence with the surface; for Hopkins folded paper, maps, envelopes, graph paper, song-sheets or magazines are all used as a surface in her work. But none are neutral, for each offers the artist an opportunity to engage with the specifics of the surface as an image. It is this particular designation of surface-as-image that runs throughout her work and facilitates her interest, as she revealed to me, of her fascination in the relationship between printed matter and painting. But like collage, for example in the work of British artist Eileen Agar or Nancy Spero, the associations engendered by the appropriated image are mediated through the very forms present in the printed matter. But unlike much collage, where forms are juxtaposed against each other, their formal arrangement serving an ideological point, Hopkins's responsive marks are more normally derived from those already laid down. Appropriation, here, is akin to a form of copying. In 'Grid (Grey)' (2003), Hopkins has drawn on grid paper an additional layer of squares, jutting out of the original, creating a three-dimensional effect in which her marks are both emulating and also extending the forms present. Again, in 'Untitled (145)' (2003), the artist adds black painterly marks to the gaps between the lines of the page, enhancing the form she appropriates.

⁴ In the 1980s, the term appropriation is most notably connected to neo-minimalism. But as a term that designates the integration of pre-existing imagery into a work of art, appropriation is commonplace across multiple disciplines.

The delicacy of Hopkins's alteration to the surface of the image, its subtlety and connection to the forms already present, does as Grey Hilty note, have the effect of rendering Hopkins's overlays 'self-generated and natural adjustments to found reality' (2005:41). This effect is most notable in her furnishing fabric series. Painting on to the reverse of found furnishing fabrics initiated the artist's career. Dating from the 1990s, she has returned to this manner of working numerous times. As can be seen in 'Aurora 13' (1996) (see figure 1), one of the earliest in this series, the artist reversed the cloth and 'goes over' a section of the floral design revealed. Retracing the steps of the original artisan, the newly painted forms hover over the underlying image, with new and old tussling for attention. This appropriation-as-copying, and her repetitive pre-planned agenda, has overtones of the 'artist-as-technician' or 'artist-as-constructor' that was so central to 'appropriationist art' of the 1980s. But as John Roberts notes, artists have now internalized and taken as given this identity (2007:11).



**Figure 1: 'Aurora 13' (1996) Oil paint on reverse of patterned furnishing 183x130cm
Copyright of Louise Hopkins. Photo credit: Ian Nichols.**

Typically, the fabric that Hopkins acquires for her paintings is floral in design and has a kitsch appearance. But, as can be seen in 'Untitled (282)' (1999) (see figure 2), she also works on figurative imagery. In this case, once reversed, the background and all the lighter

areas without black print surrounding the two figures is painted into by the artist with small black painterly marks. This technique differ from 'Aurora 13', as previously seen, in that the marks made are not an exact copy of those already laid down. But in the work's overall isomorphism, in which the boundaries between the artist's mark and the master print are blurred, the appropriation is nevertheless complete. Its narrative, in this case one of courtly love, is enveloped but not dissolved. This anchoring to the native form of the print ensures the work remains figurative, that is referential, subverting the possibility of the work becoming wholly abstract.



Figure 2: 'Untitled (282)' detail (1999). Oil paint on patterned furnishing fabric 146 × 130 cm. Copyright of Louise Hopkins. Photo credit: Heidi Kosaniuk.

The task of appropriation is of course to re-contextualise that which is borrowed, adapted or copied, and Hopkins's work does this through a subtle alteration in her mark from its source. Thus, while her forms emulate those already present, strokes of paint follow the direction of the underlying image, the overall re-articulation is disruptive. Motifs become darker, their rhythm thrown off; the tone shifts and the work is transformed. In her habit of stretching the furnishing fabric over the edge of the canvas's frame, Hopkins's highly worked all-over effect echoes that of contemporary Glasgow-based artist Richard Wright. Wright's site specific

installations are composed of tightly decorated and detailed imagery, often with gold-leaf, painted directly onto the walls, ceiling or floors of buildings. His regular ornamental style transforms these sites, and re-energises the viewer's architectural perspective. But unlike Hopkins, Wright's paintings are made anew with each installation. For Hopkins, the fabric is employed to do half the work; each new mark made, each new form, pushes the whole into a dialogue with a different sphere. For Hilty, Hopkins's pictorial interventions revolve around addition and subtraction. As he notes, 'she is interested in how an image can be altered by relatively simple touches' (2005:42). This attentiveness is at the heart of Hopkins's aesthetic approach. As is the term image. In conversation with the artist she regarded all the various printed matter that she works on, collectively, as images; for her the image denotes the printed form prior to any alteration on her part.⁵ All surfaces that she transforms start as images.

In his classic text, 'What is a Image?' James Elkins offers up a distinction between the picture and the image. The former refers to the physical object itself, the latter 'denotes a memory, ideal, idea, or notion of a picture' (2008:4). But within Hopkins's practice we see the confluence of both terms in her use of the word. For her the image is both a physical presence that she touches, manipulates and decorates, but it is also a representation of something. And this representation also plays into how she transforms its surface. For the purposes of this discussion then, following Hopkins, I will retain the use of the word image, but if I may, included within this designation is the image-as-picture. For Hopkins's attentiveness to the picture surface, from the outset, does not preclude the origins and associative connotations derived from the image, for the image defined as it is by its pre-existing identity, is a structural component for her work. The very use of printed matter, much of which speaks to how information is constructed and circulated, means that the work cannot be wholly collapsed within a formal register. The image's very discernibility prevents this from occurring.

Making Space

On the occasion of an exhibition organised by Kingston University in 1996, on fellow Glasgow-based painter, Merlin James, writer Juan Cruz, in the exhibition catalogue described in relation to James' paintings the metaphorical significance of space, and specifically the

⁵ For discussions on the image see Ingold 2011; Ranciere 2009; Gell 1996.

room for understanding James' work; for the room is both a literal motif in his paintings and a device:

'if the painting is thought of as being not *of* a room but as being *itself* a room, the metaphorical register may come in. In this case the painting is a space within which things might happen – open to the occurrence of certain possibilities. Like a stage, the room is both fully determined, set in its physical make-up, and an open arena in which something may be intuited' (1996:8).⁶

Cruz's analysis is applicable here to Hopkins. And indeed, the artist herself uses the metaphor of space to describe what is happening on the picture plane. Played out on the picture plane, the juxtaposition of forms for Hopkins creates 'a new space, you could say; a visual or psychological space'. Unlike the work of Merlin James whose figurative depictions of space – interiors, domestic homes and buildings – is both a motif and a metaphor, Hopkins uses only the metaphor of space as an explanatory device to describe how she navigates the forms that pepper the surface of the painting. As she describes it '[the surface] becomes this space that I can move around'.



Figure 3: 'Setting' (2012). Pencil, Correction Fluid, Ink on catalogue page. 25 × 20.7 cm. Copyright of Louise

⁶ Touring exhibition sponsored by Kingston University, 1996, entitled 'Merlin James: Paintings, Drawings, Prints 1981-1996'.

In reference to her piece 'Setting' (2012) (see figure 3), where she has painted onto a catalogue page displaying cutlery, she notes: 'The cutlery was flat and I moved behind it. So the figures are made of cutlery or they are holding it: but it's this weaving in and out'. This 'weaving in and out' of the pictorial space also has the effect of pushing her work closer to the medium of drawing. Historian Norman Bryson (2003) differentiates drawing from other mediums – specifically painting – through his suggestion that the original surface of the work remains open and not hidden behind layers of pigment, a notion which Hopkins shares when she notes that for drawing, something of the white paper remains.⁷ Typically within a drawing, then, the picture's figure-ground organisation is central to the work's composition, its efficacy determined by the clarity of a form's edge. This is true of Hopkins. But she subverts the delineation between figure and ground to the extent that a reading of the image as entirely a drawing cannot be sustained. But the assumption of paintings' all-over quality, and the corresponding flatness of the picture plane, is not entirely embraced either.⁸ Hopkins is explicitly aware of this oscillation in the process of making a painting, and the need to maintain a productive correspondence between them, as she explains:

'There is a really distinct moment in the process of making a painting where every bit of the paper, or surface, has been covered by paint. And I think in that moment it is almost like a curtain being closed. Its like suddenly there isn't that breathing space. And then to find another bit of breathing space, maybe a way through, the person making a painting has to do something else.'

We can see this played out in 'Setting' (2012): the four figures that would seem to occupy the foreground, with the white edge of the forms painted using correction fluid, are in stark contrast to the black background, but do in fact move backwards through their hands wrapping around the cutlery and it becoming part of their bodies. The cutlery, which belongs to the original background image, simultaneously gets pushed forward when integrated with

⁷ However, this definition of drawing calls to mind any number of contradictions. Bryson's categories of drawing and painting are, then, really concerned with how a work is made and the transformation of a drawn surface. If we follow through with Bryson's definition, a work that is infused with lines and covers the entire sheet of paper is a painting. Any mark on a paper that keeps the surface exposed can be defined as a drawing, even if it does not use the traditional materials of drawing (for instance Richard Long, Tim Knowles, and Kristján Guðmudsson). But any drawing that starts off as such but that eventually covers the surface in its entirety is no longer so, becoming instead a painting (see Benjamin 1999).

⁸ Again, there are a certain assumptions being made here. But the point is to stress that the deviation from the assumption of an overall-ness in painting, how it is achieved by each artist, is what distinguishes them.

the imposed figures. The picture's effect is also Hopkins's technique; 'weaving in and out' of the space created by the figure-ground system. This engagement with what constitutes the foreground and background in her work activates the entire surface as an arena for her to work in; forms can both push back and move forward. Not exclusively a metaphor then, space is a technique of construction.



Figure 4: 'Europe Map (Green)' (1999). Acrylic ink on map 107 × 101 cm, framed. Copyright of Louise Hopkin. Space is also referred to, or more specifically geographical boundaries, in Hopkins's recurring leitmotif of maps. In an early study 'Europe Map (Green)' (1999) (see figure 4), the sea is painted in and shapes and lines painted to resemble or imply place names, to ensure that the sea no longer divides the countries presented but instead becomes one homogenous landmass, which Hopkins describes as 'simulated land'. Her painterly graffiti does of course present clear political and ideological messages. Whilst many of her map paintings were completed over a decade ago, the representation of a world that has abolished, or perhaps been

catastrophically denied geographical borders, could not be more timely. Regardless of their current resonance, maps, of course, are sanctified representations of how the world is supposed to look, and are rich in allegorical and metaphorical significance. And whilst the political and ideological intent here is clear, for Hopkins the work did not start out with this aim. As she expressed it, the work's overt messages only revealed themselves through the act of painting: 'this didn't start out as my intention but more the discovery that it became possible through making the painting in the way that I did.' Upon her reflection on the processes involved in making this painting in particular, it's possible to get a clearer idea of what 'making the painting in the way that I did' involves. She expressed how the final work was only realised through repeated attempts. For she was:

'searching for how to make something that was convincing and coherent as a single land mass when viewed from a distance and close up. And also finding out what kind of painted marks left enough space for a viewer to move around the map without being too directed or restricted. Looking for a 'right' balance of open and closed. Part of this involved doing lots of tests and paintings that didn't quite work as a way of finding out what level of expressiveness was required, what felt too expressive or over-emotional, what felt too tight. Thinking *in* painting, or through painting; not knowing beforehand.'

This again returns to Hopkins's use of space to explain how she navigates the surface of the work. Forms then require space, and whilst she suggests that it is the audience who needs space to move around the image, for the eye to roam, perhaps this is partly realised through the movement within the forms themselves, as Henri Focillon notes, 'form is inseparable from movement' (1989).

Hopkins's aspiration to ensure that the work is 'neither too directed nor too open' is normally engineered, as in the case of 'Europe Map (Green)' (1999), through her controlling the legibility and access to the information contained within the image. This is also central to its ideological affect; the absence of information gives the audience an opportunity to re-interpret the meaning of the image. As Fiona Bradley, curator of Hopkins's exhibition 'Freedom of Information', at the Fruitmarket Gallery in 2005, notes, such pieces as the maps detail how the artist is intent on 'imposing her own system on the flow of information' (2005:17). Her skill in doing so is often orchestrated through her engagement with the text within the image,

and the creation of lozenge-shaped openings for the audience to read the text underneath. As a particular technique we can see how this has evolved through her work over a number of years: For instance in 'Map (Black) 3' (2001) (see figure 5) Hopkins paints around whole sways of words, creating a patterning across the surface of the painting, but in 'Black Sea' a few years later in 2003, she has limited this to four words across the entire canvas, with the rest painted in black acrylic ink. The title for the work is the only signpost of the image's prior life.

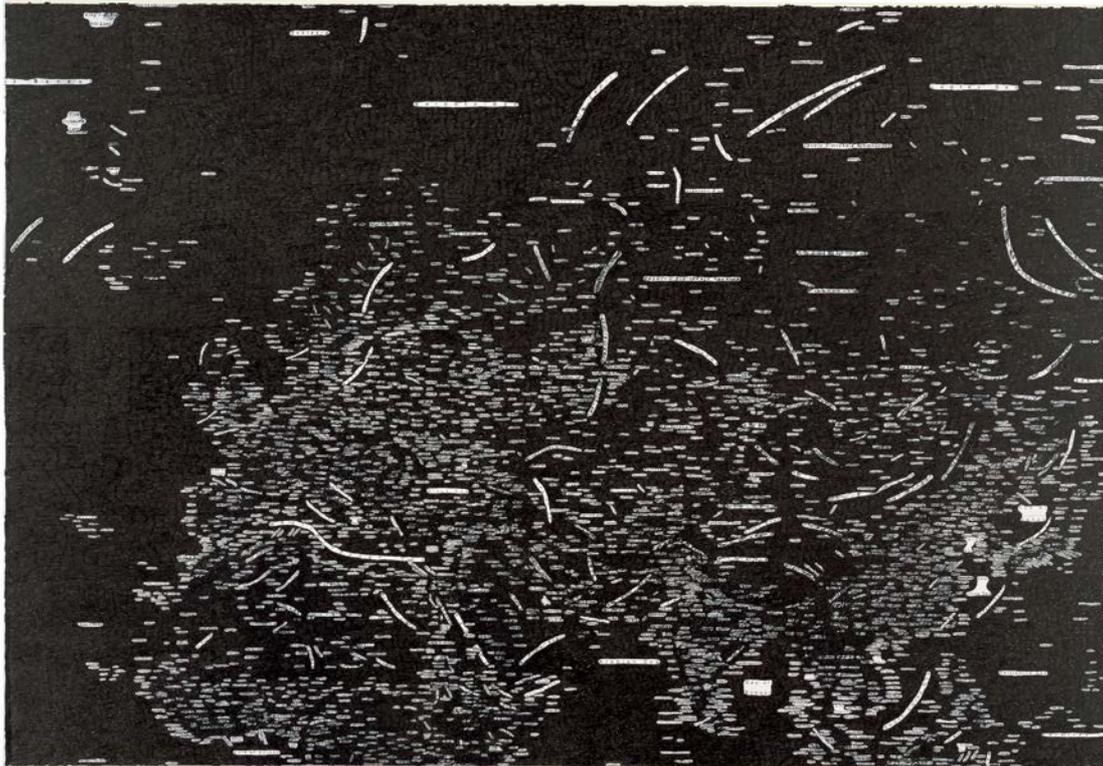


Figure 5: 'Map (Black) 3' (2001). Pen on map 82.5 × 105 cm, framed. Copyright of Louise Hopkins. Photo credit: Heidi Kosaniuk.

Beyond the map series, the technique is reversed in her piece 'Untitled (A-Z) (1)' (2001) (see figure 6), in which Hopkins has erased the road and street names, leaving only the diagrammatic print of the A-Z. In her paintings made on pages torn from a book, such as 'A of the Was' (2005) (see figure 7), again, segments of writing are painted around, revealing only 'connecting words', as she phrases it. Words that can identify any narrative within the writing, any meaning, are covered over. This engagement with the content on the pre-existing image through a highly ordered and pre-determined system is not however at the behest of the aesthetic, or as Hopkins coined it 'my perception of the work'. For the chosen method, the chosen system of painting, has to achieve a resolution with the painterly marks she imposes.

Inevitable this means that the correlation between form and content is not consistent in each work. In a recent exhibition, held at Dovecots Studio, Edinburgh, entitled 'The Scottish Endarkenment' (2016), Hopkins experimented with this oscillation across a body of paintings. For the show she brought together a selection of works to form one larger piece. Whilst some had overt themes others were more gestural and lacked any clear reference point, but in uniting them to form a whole Hopkins was able to further articulate how, as she phrased it, 'this diversity can coexist'.



Figure 6: 'Untitled (A-Z) (1)' (2001). Acrylic ink on A-Z pages 39.7 × 44.8 cm, framed. Copyright of Louise Hopkins. Photo credit: Heidi Kosaniuk.

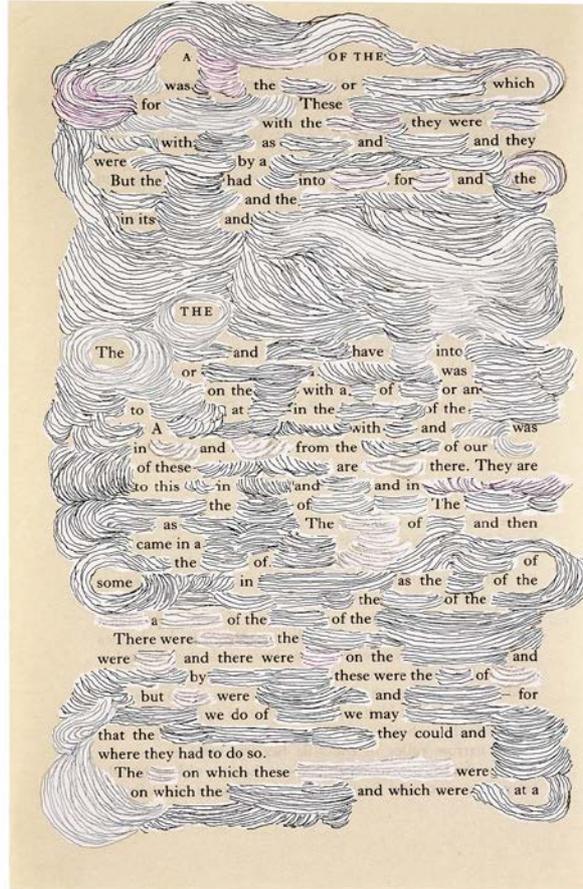


Figure 7: 'A of the was' (2005). Correction fluid, ink and coloured pencil on page from book 30.5 × 24.5 cm, framed. Copyright of Louise Hopkins. Photo credit: Heidi Kosaniuk

The term image itself, as Hans Belting tells us, defies reification (2011:2). Hopkins's work shares this ambiguity, and whilst an image that she works on can be full, as in the case of a photograph she painted onto in 'Liverpool Chamber of Commerce' (2000) (see figure 8), in can as easily be devoid of any signification, save for itself, for example in 'Envelope 1' (2013) (see figure 9). What unites these works is Hopkins's alteration, which however minimally, interferes with what it touches. For instance in 'Green Watercolour' (2008), its almost somatic tone sits in stark contrast to the ordered print of the grid that lies underneath. This overlay, in which equal space is given to the ordered form of the graph paper, restricts the work and prevents Hopkins's mark from taking on an emotional, expressive quality. Unlike the work of Callum Innes for instance, the phenomenological gesture of painting is mitigated and held back. The design, format, and demarcation of the forms across the printed image, and the information contained within it, such as a world map in 'Small Brown Drawing' (2007) (see figure 10), is of course highly engineered. But once cast next to

Hopkins's hand drawn mark it is simultaneously exposed, for the viewer we 're-see' these images, but they also take on the role of the merely mechanical; fabricated as opposed to composed.



Figure 8: 'Liverpool Chamber of Commerce' (2000). Acrylic ink on magazine page. 39 × 45 cm, framed. Copyright of Louise Hopkins. Photo credit: Heidi Kosaniuk

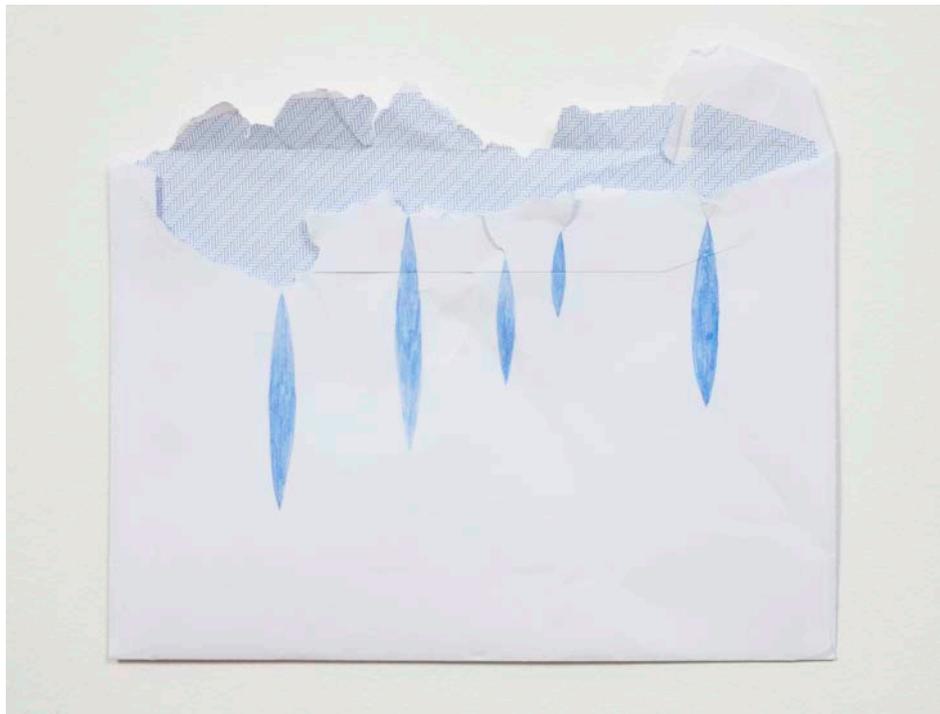


Figure 9: 'Envelope 1' (2013). Watercolour on envelope 18.5 × 23 cm. Copyright of Louise Hopkins. Photo credit: Ruth Clark

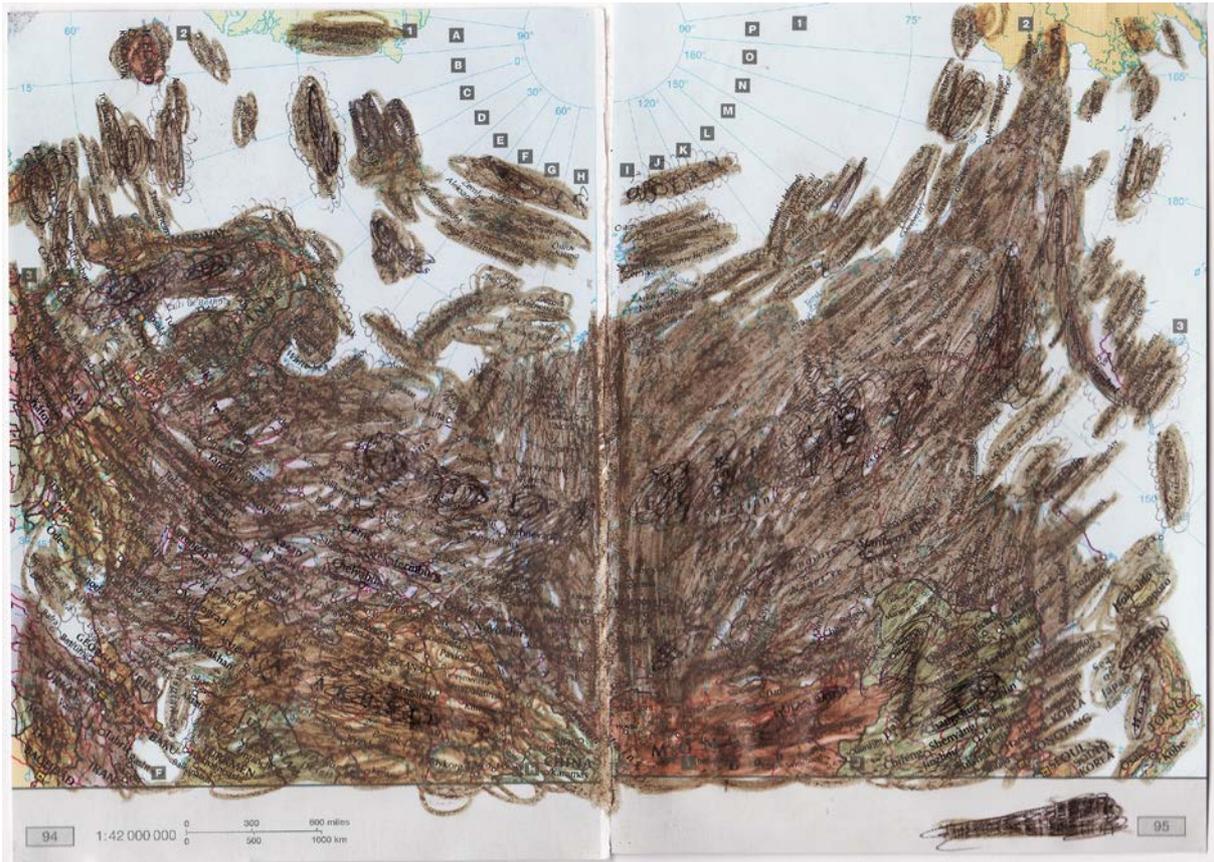


Figure 10: 'Small Brown Drawing' (2007). Coloured pencil and pen on atlas pages 15 × 21 cm. Copyright of Louise Hopkins.

Again, her closeness here with the medium of drawing is particularly telling. 'Small Brown Drawing' (2007) shares much in common with Benjamin Buchloh's observation, in reference to the drawings of Eva Hesse, that the medium is premised on a dialectical opposition between what he terms the 'authentic corporal trace' and the 'the externally established matrix' (2006:117). And whilst this is self-evident in this particular work, with the gestural marks of the crayoned surface almost ensuring this reading, this proposition can be applied beyond this one piece to her work more broadly. Moreover, the circulating, mass produced and pervasive image, in opposition to the singularity of Hopkins's mark, could arguably be in support of a Benjaminian condemnation of the image (Benjamin 1999). This potential critique of the unquestioned representational authority of images is married with a choice of printed matter, such as catalogues and magazines, which simultaneously confronts the futility of being a consumer. Upon a preliminary reading it would seem that their authenticity – and what they represent – are taken to task in her work, where the mark of the artist, re-inscribed into the imagery, reveals her opposition. But such a critical position may also ring hollow. Akin to her furnishing fabric series, these works also suggest a nostalgia. The laborious technique involved in her furnishing fabric paintings is a form of homage to the skillful

execution of the original. And in her paintings that decorate magazines and consumer catalogues there is an echo, a memory, of the more defiant societal critiques that we witnessed in 1950s Pop Art, for example.

Moreover, the technique employed here by Hopkins is specifically reminiscent of the medium of collage, which again reinforces this double orientation. For collage, as Richard Brereton suggests, is a technique that fuses disparate elements in order to provoke questions (2011). But these questions are implicitly a critique. However in Hopkins's work, her interpretation of the printed matter is not so definitive and can be read as both a critical commentary of how we live now as well as a nostalgia for what has come before. For J J. Charlesworth, in reference to her 2008 exhibition, 'Harness', this ambiguity is derived through the humor on the page. Recalling the painting 'Rings' (2008), where the artist has drawn severed fingers on to the displayed jewelry, he suggests that 'Hopkins has an intimate grasp of the absurdity of recognizing one's own ineffectuality, while still turning it into a weapon of sorts' (2009). But the intention for this weapon is, in the end, unclear.

In all of these paintings this deliberately measured ambiguity of thematic meaning rubs up against the actuality of the painting. As a further layer we witness in her work the overriding task of investigating the nature of painting itself. What is revealed in her work is the breakdown or rupture between printed and painted form; for in her hands the distance between each category is barely present, and she shows us how minimal the shift from one realm into the other can be. This is of course not merely a pictorial resolution, a way of articulating the difference between each form, but it too is also ideological. This aim is realized though through the very physicality of the paintings themselves.

Materiality

In her 2005 exhibition 'Freedom of Information', Hopkins showed 'Untitled (011)', made in 1998: A crumbled ball of paper, flattened, with the shadows pencilled in. It was part of a series of such pieces that the artist has repeatedly returned to, as can be seen in its sister piece made in 2000 entitled 'Untitled (0100)'. This collection of work epitomises the artist's delicacy in addressing the 'why' of painting. The minimal interference on its surface has transformed the object's physical presence and by association its value; it has been reassessed and made anew. But as Hilty, points out 'its pristine (artless) past remained a presence beneath the surface' (2005:39). But this process of transformation is also violent, and relies on a physical

manipulation of the original object. The images that Hopkins works on are often torn, cut, and erased. Whilst her additional marks are delicate, her handling before her pencilled touch is not. This treatment adds to the sense that the transformation of the work for Hopkins is premised on a physicality. But this is not a type of modernist ‘formlessness’, as delineated by Yves Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss in 1997 (*Formless: A User’s Guide*), which is premised on a ‘base materialism’. As Bois notes, Georges Bataille’s ‘inform’, first conceived in 1929, which is the source of their thesis, was considered an ‘operation’. According to Bois ‘it is neither the ‘form’ nor the ‘content’ that interests Bataille, but the operation that displaces both of these terms’ (1997:14). The displacement in Bataille’s theorisation – which is driven by a declaration of the futility of art – is an abandonment of the categories of art: a reduction to matter alone. Hopkins’s paintings are not so reduced, and fall short of being the heir to a predetermined rejection of the productivity of the form/content axis.

In returning to the physicality of the work, we can note that it incorporates, or perhaps is enabled by, the materiality of both image and painting. In conversation with the artist she distinguished between the materiality of each:

‘Painting might well be images but they are something else as well, because of their materiality. And that’s what interests me about turning something that is printed into a painting - is that it slows things down. It takes it more into the material world. And often for me, in that sense, its kind of, it’s a form of protest.’

Hopkins’s use of the designation ‘materiality’ here speaks to the wider shift in our theorization of seeing in recent years. From an ocular process to an embodied one, visibility now incorporates the somatic.⁹ The desire and intention that she has for her paintings to *hold* a different physicality to the image evidence of this shift.

But in her comparison, images are almost devoid of materiality, or more particularly, they do not operate in the material world in the same way that paintings, for Hopkins, do. Whilst materiality may in fact allude to more than the material essence of a work, incorporating as it

⁹ Art historian James Elkins in ‘On Some Limits of Materiality in Art History’ (2008) notes that with the downfall of Modernism, and its endorsement of an ocular vision, seeing is now quintessentially embodied. Consequently, as Elkins notes, ‘art history is no longer an archivist’s or iconographer’s paradise, driven by textual sources: it has become attentive to the physical *stuff*, the presence, the material of the artwork, its bulk, its human scale, and even its “base materiality”’ (2008, italics in original).

does the socio-cultural heritage of the object (see Knappett 2007), when the term is employed in comparison with the image, which as Bradley notes brings with it ‘a wealth of meaning based on recognition and social context’ (2005:15), the materiality of the painting loses its anchor in a context. That is, it becomes merely physical matter. As Bradley shows in her analysis of Hopkins’s work, in which she contrasts the work’s underlying images, and their ‘social context’, with painting, which for her can be encapsulated in the work’s newly imagined material surface only. Here painting is collapsed solely into its concrete appearance, and in contrast to the overt signposts within the printed image, the painting seems to be disavowed of any association beyond its frame. But following Hopkins, we can note that she has not embraced a physicality – what she regards as its materiality – of the image at the behest of a context: painting is also fully contextual, that is relational. This context, I would argue, is bound up with the history of her discipline. The forms on the surface of the painting are not only a correspondence between the printed matter and the artist’s painted material marks, but these also reach out to echo paintings she has seen. For in accounting for how her forms are constructed she returns to the tangible connection her work has with other paintings and painters.

A Repository of Forms

In conversation Hopkins described how her reference points, whilst working, were ‘embedded in the history of painting’. But what she means by this is quite specific and is not synonymous with the critical discourse on painting that is usually the preserve of art history and theory. The socio-cultural history of the work and its corresponding relationship to styles, movements, or trends is, for Hopkins, less of an interest than a work’s form and composition. From Giotto’s frescos of 1305 in Padua, Italy, to the work of Swedish artist, Hilma Klint, Hopkins looks at her artistic ancestors through the lens of their work’s structure: combined and collected into a repository of forms that enable her practice. She recalled the work of Lucio Fontana, in particular the 1947 ceramic sculpture ‘Battle’:

‘It’s a 2D and 3D piece. It’s a bit like a standing painting made out of clay. That’s the way I see it. To me it’s very much a painting. Remembering something like that, amongst other things, helps me to make certain works, to make certain paintings. Its not wanting to literally make that myself, but there are certain qualities that help me. It’s to do with the essence of it and the structure. Its those two things. The structure,

how this incredible punch of a painting holds together with all that gesture and at the same time the punch, the essence of that.’

Hopkins recollection of Fontana’s work corresponds to art historian Henri Focillon’s writings on form. While quintessential a formalist, his ‘The Life of Forms in Art’ (1989), which was written as a rebuttal to the iconography of Panofsky, offers a treaty on dynamic form through his contention that ‘form is alive’. Their ‘perpetual movement’ (Molino 1989:26), in which forms are ‘living entities, evolving and metamorphosing over time’ (Molotiu 2001), allows him to speculate on the morphology of forms across diverse styles and eras.¹⁰ But pertinent to Hopkins, is Focillon’s recognition that this movement is integral to how form is perceived across works and traditions:

‘For the creator, there is no form without movement. This is primarily because artistic creation, like all creation, is production about and based on the forms transmitted by tradition; the artist stores inherited forms and elaborates his or her own forms in a dialogue with forms from the past.’ (Molino 1989:26)

The term dialogue is apt here in its ability to describe the movement of form across artworks. But this should not be misunderstood as emulation. As Hopkins clarified in relation to Giotto’s frescos at Padua: ‘I think those works have a kind of grace, which is not really what I consciously aspire to at all. But its what drew me to them; the form of it’. A distinction can be made here between how the final form looks once completed and its formation. Hopkins’s interest is in the latter. The process of formation is inherently one of how the work is structured. As she notes in reference to 14th century Renaissance painter, Paolo Uccello, and his painting, circa 1456 ‘The Rout of San Romano’, which she knew about from her late teens, it was ‘how a painting can be structured and built’ which resonated and stayed with her. In conversation, the artist went on to directly link her interest in this Renaissance painting with her furnishing fabric work, ‘Relief (739)’ (2005). A diptych stretching almost three meters in length, its densely worked green foliage spills into a patterned surface, enhanced by the additional small black painterly marks of the artist. The pre-existing elements within the

¹⁰ The bodily determinism presented in the thesis, as Jean Molino acknowledges in the book’s introduction, for as Focillon notes ‘the meaning of form is above all the rhythm of the body, the movement of the hand, and curve of the gesture’ (1989: 21), is also its limitation.

fabric are further structured through the artist's touch, its a tightly orchestrated, almost overwrought, form that was for her predicated on, in this instance, what she had witnessed in the work of others. As she said: 'the process of making 'Relief' I think comes from, builds on those, my early experiences of looking at paintings'.

Thus, the forms she creates speculate on how she still sees past artwork and would suggest that the formal properties of other artist's work is of greater consideration than their subject matter; for it is the form that is carried through. This is entirely in keeping with Focillon's contention that a work's formal properties are its singular importance. But he would take it one step further, and advocates the opposition between form and any subject it may refer. As Jean Molino points out, in the introduction to 'The Life of Forms': '[for Focillon] form must be separated from signification, or rather from all other signification than the purely formal: 'form signifies only itself''(1989:21). This extreme formalism does not hold for Hopkins's work. Nor perhaps should it. But Focillon's work offers an interesting way of thinking about form that accounts for its specificity. Articulating her work in relation to what has come before took the form of an explicit engagement with the history of painting in a group exhibition called 'The Beholder's Share' (2010). The show addressed how contemporary artists respond to the genre of painting, beyond parody or irony, in their work. What the exhibition suggests, but does not resolve, and which can also be applied to Hopkins's practice in its entirety, is how far a correspondence with other forms can also be an index of the artist's historic antecedents.

So, is the manner in which she builds up forms, observed and learnt through the work of others, one way of positioning her practice in a wider art historical context? And too, for anthropology, do these connections constitute an ethnographic context, if you will? For Hopkins's practice has been seen as a descendent of cubism, in her interest in the fragmentation of the pictorial surface and play with depth, but also German-born painter Gerhard Richter. And in her use of commercial imagery her work also recalls Surrealist and pop influences. But running alongside these influences are forms seen and remembered. Teasing apart these connections and linkages so as to understand how forms are relationally constituted is central here. And is made more complex by Hopkins's occasional, more direct reference to particular genres of painting in her work. For example in conversation with the artist she cited 'World Map' (2001), in which much of the surface of the map is covered in a single shade of blue, as an attempt to evoke the genre of monochrome painting. The work's

structure is emulated to the extent that it becomes the intention for the piece. But like much of Hopkins's work, she does not embrace this entirely. For the image is not wholly painted over, certain pieces of text are left to direct the viewer as to the underlying image's origins. These signposts build up layers of meaning, from the connotations derived from the image to the painting technique employed by Hopkins, and their overall affect is to disavow any singular reading. Elucidating these connections can be more easily realised in the work of someone like Merlin James. For James, the manner in which he takes up the works of others, often old masters, is more easily discerned and is closer to a thematic concern.¹¹ And whilst she shares with James a modesty of scale, Hopkins's relation to the paintings of others is more structural and something closer to the knowledge of how it is made, which can be best expressed, I argue, as the discipline of painting. Making a painting, then, is also a projection into a discipline. This process can be tied to what Fuglerud and Wainwright have called a 'field of imaginaries' (2015:11). A concept they use to suggest – in critique of Tim Ingold (2006) and others – that our engagement with the material world is also one that extends beyond our 'immediate material environment', and towards 'a nexus of projected futures and remembrance which enfolds humans with the material world' (ibid).

Conclusion

The primacy of painting's material essence – as signalled by an aesthetic attentiveness to the work's surface – is not in contradiction to the relationality of Hopkins's forms. Rosalind Krauss, in talking about the medium of collage, does set up a division between discourse and presence (1992), in which one always seems to have the upper hand. But for Hopkins, though, this division is not wholly evident, nor hierarchal; neither one is subsumed beneath the other. Overall then, we can say Hopkins's work is of its time, when medium specificity can only be partially the answer. Hopkins can be distinguished from early modernist artists for whom, as Ulrich Loock notes:

'something is realized which cannot be realized other than in painting. Such a picture is the formulation of a world where only the laws of painting apply.' (2005)

¹¹ As Merjian notes (2013:72) 'there is a long list of artists he's either on record as admiring or references directly in the titles and imagery of his own paintings. It includes Delacroix, Poussin and Morandi, as well as less well-known figures such as William Nicholson, Jean Helion, Serge Charchoune and perhaps surprisingly, the supremely cool stylist Alex Katz. James will quite happily take a detail from someone else's work as a subject. He doesn't copy it, although resemblance can be overt, and he doesn't translate it. It just becomes the subject for the painting like any other subject'.

Through retaining a glimpse of the world, Hopkins prevents her pieces from becoming entirely medium-bound, which would arguably rid them of their affect. The relations that Hopkins sets up on the surface of the paper are thus not wholly contained within it. And correspondingly, her aesthetic attentiveness does not then merely signal the formal distribution of plastic elements across a composition, but a fluid, wide-ranging context that integrates all the elements within her composition. For their interrelationship is orchestrated through form. But as Roger Sansi has noted, ‘our understanding of the art object today is still partially based on its irreducibility’ (2015:70). This irreducibility is not however without purpose: through it the foundations are laid for Hopkins’s attentiveness to the surface in the present. But this is also a projection into the future. Through attending to the material forms on the paper Hopkins is able to realise the conditions that constitute a painting. It is this aspiration for the pre-existing image that we witness in her work. This commitment to the act of painting appears to preside over and above any one particular reference. Within the context of Hopkins’s practice the aesthetic is not inward-looking but signals the present-ness of her engagement with the surface of the paper. Her attentiveness to the transformative ability of the mark, both her own and the printed, illuminates the confluences within which a contemporary aesthetic is situated.

List of Figures

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Figure 1

‘Aurora 13’ (1996)

Oil paint on reverse of patterned furnishing fabric

183 x 130cm

Photo credit: Ian Nichols

Figure 2

‘Untitled (282)’ detail (1999)

Oil paint on patterned furnishing fabric

146 x 130cm

Photo credit: Heidi Kosaniuk

Figure 3

‘Setting’ (2012)

Pencil, Correction Fluid, Ink on catalogue page.

25 x 20.7cm

Figure 4

'Europe Map (Green)' (1999)
Acrylic ink on map
107 x 101cm, framed
Photo credit: Heidi Kosaniuk

Figure 5

'Map (Black) 3' (2001)
Pen on map
82.5 x 105cm, framed
Photo credit: Heidi Kosaniuk

Figure 6

'Untitled (A-Z) (1)' (2001)
Acrylic ink on A-Z pages
39.7 x 44.8cm, framed
Photo credit: Heidi Kosaniuk

Figure 7

'A of the was' (2005)
Correction fluid, ink and coloured pencil on page from book
30.5 x 24.5cm, framed
Photo credit: Heidi Kosaniuk

Figure 8

'Liverpool Chamber of Commerce' (2000)
Acrylic ink on magazine page
39 x 45cm, framed
Photo credit: Heidi Kosaniuk

Figure 9

'Envelope 1' (2013)
Watercolour on envelope
18.5 x 23cm
Photo credit: Ruth Clark

Figure 10

'Small Brown Drawing' (2007)
Coloured pencil and pen on atlas pages
15 x 21cm

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