

Amanda Ansell

Interviews Julian Brown

AA: Julian, we have known one another since we were both studying Post Graduate Painting in London in the late 1990s – and I remember the structure of your paintings back then and how you maintained a connection to a grid structure beneath the abstract gestural paintwork. With this in mind, can you tell me more about your method now? How do you approach the creative process from conceptualization to completion of a painting?

JB: When I first moved to London, I was making large, dark brooding landscapes but as soon as I arrived this working became irrelevant to my new surroundings. I became interested in the grid systems of artists like Peter Halley but definitely wanted to retain an element of expression in the work. With the grid also came my interest in colour; I realised I could use colour as a tool to break things down further. As my process developed, drips of paint started to break down the very formal structures, then I started leaving pencil marks from the grids. I became interested in embracing all the details a lot of art at the time was editing out; the history of making, the incidental drips and pools of paint. I really wanted the viewer to unpick how the paintings were made, now it's all just part of the language and is the driving force of the work.

The grid still plays a vital part in my work because it underpins all the gestural painting on top, it allows me to be quite expressive but with purpose. Conceptually I think I'm either putting chaos into order or order into chaos.

AA: Your recent work features a crescent moon, half-moon, or circle shape. As you have mentioned, these shifting forms sometimes drip and merge into one another. Can you discuss where this form originates from and its significance for you?

JB: Everything that happens in a painting is a result of what's happened in previous paintings. So, the crescent shapes are a development of simple gestural sweeps of the brush. But as these forms evolve, they start to take on their own significance and create their own language setting off thoughts, and sensations that unlock the subconscious-

I can vividly remember making a painting where something was happening on the canvas. My mind meandered back to a scene from my childhood home – I recollected a humble landscape painting made by my mother shortly after she fled Poland around the time of the Warsaw uprising. I remember observing the painting like a love letter to her past. Etched into

the landscape was a world of folklore and tradition. Elements that happened in that painting, the compositions of floating boats, trees and crescent moons still resonate in my work.

AA: You have mentioned your Polish heritage in relation to using simple shapes and organic forms. How else do your cultural roots inform your practice?

JB: I grew up in a very rural part of Dorset in the 80's and in those days you had very little cultural influences around other than the ones your parents gave you. My mother had a recollection of Polish 'Wycinanki' cutouts among paintings and drawings she made which had a very strong Polish identity. My father was a graphic designer and had this massive Bauhaus book, so I often think my work is a combination of these two influences. Subconsciously I wonder if I'm still trying to please both of them in my work.

AA: I immediately thought of Patrick Heron when thinking of other artists in connection with your work. The association is primarily because of his use of the part-circle floating forms and the juxtaposition of colours to explore the ensuing interaction. There is also a link to the West Country, water, and the different sensations of light when we perceive colour. Are these significant factors of the work?

JB: I lived near the sea as a child and do now. For me, the sea represents a sense of freedom and the part circle shapes offer that same sense of freedom from the constraints of the grid. But also, these floating forms create a weightlessness and buoyancy that allows for forms to sit on top of each other. The transparency of the sea is also interesting.

AA: Yes, the colour in your acrylic paintings is vibrant and pops out at the viewer, creating a similar illusion of depth. There is a connection to OpArt and using warm and cool hues and tints to create contrast and vibration. Can you explain your approach to colour and how you decide what works for you?

JB: I always think of colour in terms of luminosity, that you have to create light that shines through the canvas. I always appreciated this from the early Italian Renaissance paintings, how the light washes of underpainting allowed the work to glow. I remember making a series of paintings where I eliminated the use of white which makes you think about how to create and knock back colour and crucially how you use transparency to create colour - a bit like watercolour painting.

AA: When working with a gestural brush mark, we have a tendency to think about what happens by chance, enjoying the paradox between control and chaos. What is your experience here? Do you ever have a struggle with the degree of control?

JB: A thread throughout my work is a constant battle between order and chaos, I like to break things down and the grid is such a great structure to dismantle. In some of the recent works the grid has disappeared but on these works I spend ages sanding and preparing a very manicured surface so this underpins the process. This is very key to why I use the grid system or very deliberately built-up surfaces because they underpin or control the gestural marks. These in a sense set up systems where chance can overtake the paintings. I want to allow as much chance in as possible, this is what drives the paintings and informs future works.

AA: Can you reveal what other difficulties you come up against in your practice?

JB: The reality of being a painter can be difficult, firstly just the space and time to make the paintings, especially around a family life can be challenging. I'm very aware of the privilege it is to just be able to do this.

I also found recently that with demand for your work comes a lack of ownership; it's hard to hang on to work – and keep things back. It's important because sometimes you need to live with paintings to truly understand what's happening in them.

AA: I agree – spending time with particular pieces of work is an important part of the process. One of the things I enjoy about seeing your paintings close up is how actively a sense of touch resonates with the viewer and how this informs the interpretation of the abstract forms and visual sensation. With touch and gestural expression, we instinctively connect with the individual and the handmade. What are the main themes or emotions that you want to convey through the work?

JB: I definitely want the viewer to feel the enjoyment in the making process, it's that childlike sensation of wonder in discovering and experiencing new things. Touch is a big part of this because in a sense painting is a tactile medium, I use brushes, rollers, printing techniques, my hands and collage. It's all very handmade which I feel in the digital world is a really positive thing we have in the language of painting, maybe all we have left.

AA: By chance, I found a postcard of yours from 2001 tucked inside my copy of Agnes Martin's, 'Writings/Schriften'. On the back, I have scribbled, 'Mind knows what the eye has not seen'. Agnes Martin continues to write that 'what the mind knows is perfection'. I have a feeling from your work that the more subtle the colour and marks become, the more actively the painting encourages contemplation. Could you discuss the calm and reflective side of your practice? Would you say you are a painter striving for perfection and or a state of reverie?

JB: This is interesting because I would say that 80% of what I think about is colour. How colour influences the work subconsciously is fascinating. The subtle use of colour I feel is

more grown up, calmer and more reflective. As in life when you grow up you use all your experience, slow down and contemplate your next move.

In this sense, I'm looking for perfection from the process, how the paint reacts to the surface and the perfection of the marks. I'm always slightly wary of perfection though. I can think of plenty of my favourite artists who seemed to have mastered their art, and once this happens the work loses its edge. I'm very mindful of the importance of imperfections.

AA: These interviews focus on the realities of what it is to be a painter, so I'd like to finish by simply asking you how you keep yourself motivated about your practice.

JB: I just love making paintings, I'm not sure I could do without it. I'm inspired by colour every day and the wonder and excitement it brings. There is something transformative, and magical about when I put pigment on canvas, all my preconceptions disappear and I'm at one with the painting.

Interview completed on 16 October 2023