

# Harvey Taylor

## Interviews Amanda Ansell

HT: What are you working on at the moment?

AA: I'm continuing a series of 30 cm by 30 cm canvases. The works are made up of synchronised swirling paint lines, repetitive gestures, and self-similar arrangements. These are derived from my experiences of being immersed in the riverscape outside. They reference an experience of observing water and feeling in unity with nature. The series uses a self-perpetuating method; one gesture leads to another gesture. The composition may contain a circle form within the square which has many curved lines making up that final circle. Alternatively, I have a swirling form as a surface background and then I place another curved line formation over the top to merge with the bottom layer. Eventually, the layering up of curved lines moves on to a final formation for the piece.

HT: Did you always work in squares? Is it significant that they are in a row of squares? Is it a square that you can turn around or upside down?

AA: Not always. The square format has so many possibilities for this series of work and yes, I like to turn them around. Because the work is about looking into the picture space and the surface quality. If I use a square, I don't have to consider whether it's landscape or portrait. The square makes things a little bit easier for me. Most of the time, I see them as separate pieces but when paintings are made about the same time they can sit well together, and I can exhibit these as a diptych or triptych. Ideally, the square paintings would have a good amount of wall area around them and be positioned fairly low on the wall, so there's the set-up or effect of looking into the water, looking into a painted picture space.

HT: How do you start your paintings? Do you start with a bare canvas, or do you stain it first? Do you let the layers dry? Do you use the same colours?

AA: I still stretch my canvases. I prime the stretched canvas and then apply two layers of unbleached titanium dioxide to provide a stable ground for all the colours I lay on top. If starting with a swirling line all-over background, I will use three to four colours and refer to a bank of curved line formations as a starting point. If it's a circle painting, I tend to start with a terre verte glaze. Terre verte is a favourite colour as it has this amazing translucency. So, if you add an oil paint that has a high tint power - for example, Prussian blue, you still maintain a high translucency and can cover a large area. These initial layers are left to dry, probably for a month, to seal everything before I apply more layers. I then set aside a whole day for a wet-in-wet painting session and will commit to working on one piece at a time. Here, I will

prep four to eight colours in total. I choose colours from the landscape around me and these reference the time of day or seasons. They are usually analogous colours and within this range, I will select a dark, a mid-tone or two, a light, and a bright. Zinc white is my preferred white as it is semi-transparent.

HT: So, you start with a controlled gesture. Are you working on the floor, or are you working on the wall? At this stage, do you have to allow time for drying, or are you just going in and moving the layer around until you are happy with that?

AA: Most of the time I am working on the floor otherwise it could be quite messy. Also, if I worked on the wall with liquid paint, gravity would come into play, and I would have drips. This is interesting and adds to the visual effect that it is just paint on a canvas but could detract from the surface quality of the work and that harmonious shallow picture space that I'm striving for. Although there is drying time between the base layers and the first layer, when it comes to the painting of curved lines and the arrangement of these swirls of paint this is a wet-in-wet painting session. Happy accidents do occur and sometimes a painting can be resolved quite quickly. Canvases are put aside to dry for another month, and then I will return to them to see if the painting is working for me. For example, I might add a band of colour or an additional glaze layer to bring forward the layer underneath.

HT: So, you can almost picture what that will be like? What happens if you put the glaze on and it doesn't look how you want it to look? Would you work on it some more?

AA: Yes. There are times when the glazes haven't worked out for sure, and I have to find a different solution. I have good knowledge of what colours make other colours sing and can produce the end quality that I'm looking for. When trying to complete a painting, I often return to things I have tried and tested before. Repetition can create a different result.

HT: When you mix up a particular tone of green, do you think you can remember that and how to mix it up two years later? What are the colours you would write down?

AA: I save photos of colours in the landscape on my phone so I can reference these at a later point. I also save colour blends in a list of notes for paintings and make a record of the successful combinations. If I know the specific green I would like to use - say a shade of viridian, I will refer to it by its oil colour name. If it's a memory of a green observed in the riverscape outside the studio, I will create a name for this. It could be called new spring grass, ivy green, or spring willow green. Spring willow green is a favourite. It's a lime yellow with an earthy tone - it's specific to the first willow leaves in early spring. I keep returning to this hue of green, so I know how to mix it up without referring to my notes on what is required.

HT: You also do some drawing. The lines are precise. How do you manage to do that? Are you holding an incredibly large pencil or working very quickly? It's almost like you are getting in shape to paint again or practising how to record your gestures.

AA: The pencil drawings are a way for me to think about a day's work in the studio, to get into a rhythm, or to free up head space. I started doing this about six or seven years ago. I look outside the window to record curved lines from the flow of the river or the wind disrupting the water's surface. I record this movement in a very quick drawing with a standard 2B pencil. It is a practice, and it reminds me of calligraphy masters who repeat the same gesture or mark over again. I also use these drawings as reference material when making watercolour paintings. I take note of a C or S curve within a drawing and this provides a starting point for a curved line gesture that I can build upon and overlap with more lines. I can revisit the drawings because something else will pop out and resonate with me and become another point of departure.

HT: How do you think of your titles? Do you know what they are called before you start, halfway through or at the end? Are you drawing on a bank of words as you draw upon a bank of colours?

AA: It's not always easy. I have a name for the painting at the start and this will change by the time I decide that the work is finished. An example is a painting that started off being called *Hello Yellow*, then *Hello Green*, then *Hello Green and Yellow* - after a walk around the garden and seeing the daffodils in full bloom against the vibrant spring green grass, I changed the title of this work to *When the Daffodils Bloom Again*. So yes, I usually know the title towards the end, when the glaze layers are complete. I have a list of titles that I refer back to. I note down words or phrases from reading or listening to music or when someone says an interesting phrase.

HT: I see some connection between the thinking behind your work and that of Howard Hodgkin. He referred to memories of a place and then worked towards representing these layers of experience. Like Howard Hodgkin's work, I suppose your painting is about time, too.

AA: I recall seeing the *Howard Hodgkin: Absent Friends* at the National Portrait Gallery in 2017. It was so exciting to see an abstract painter being represented at the Portrait Gallery. It worked because his abstract paintings are about emotions and a human presence. It was wonderful to see his early figurative works and to understand how the figurative foundations moved through to the abstracted elements. I agree that tuning into memories, colour associations, layers and time is also part of my making. Working with oil paint in layers is a slower process. I almost know what I plan to do three steps ahead but I don't think this is any

different from planning to paint a portrait - you would know what your stages are. Nowadays, I like to plan.

HT: Are there any paintings you abandon? Perhaps, paintings that don't go according to plan?

AA: Some paintings go wrong, of course. They get to a stage where they have to become experimental artworks. So, I use these to practice a gesture and something may come out of that that I take forward into another painting. Sometimes I sand the surface back. This doesn't happen often, only when they look too scruffy. I add an all-over muted green tone and try a swirling gesture on top to kick off something new. There are particular colours I rely on to bring a surface alive again. Michael Harding's Bright Green revitalises a dull painting, lifts the darks, brightens the whites and gives an all-over vibrant zingy-ness, and hopefully, then it becomes a starting point for something else.

HT: You went to art school in Norwich and London. Is there any advice that you had at art school that has stayed with you till now?

AA: I had some great tutors at Norwich Art School and The Slade and have also encountered some good mentors in my working life. My tutors were supportive and stretched me in a good way. There are some things I remember which have served me well. It is important to keep things moving as a painter and I had one tutor who would tell me when she was fed up with seeing the same thing on my studio walls. That taught me to put paintings away and come back to them. Turn the paintings around, or turn them to the wall. Jenny Saville was encouraging as a personal tutor – we talked about the stuff of paint, paint as flesh, consistency and viscosity – this made me think about the material I was using and its potential to emulate something real or imagined. It's also about knowing your material - the paint and medium and what it is capable of doing. Another told me that no matter what I was doing in life and whether I had a studio or not, don't stop making drawings and notes for potential paintings. Don't lose the joy of observing and drawing in a sketchbook.

**Interview completed on 7 April 2024**