

Almost Nothing: Chris Villars interviewed by Alan Nicholson (November 2002)

*If I may, I'd like to begin this short interview by quoting the famous final statement of Samuel Beckett's *The Unnamable* (1958), which you undoubtedly already know:*

[Y]ou must go on, perhaps it's done already, perhaps they have said me already, perhaps they have carried me to the threshold of my story, before the door that opens on my story, that would surprise me, if it opens, it will be I, it will be the silence, where I am, I don't know, I'll never know, in the silence you don't know, you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on (Beckett 1958: 414).

There is surely something of Chris Villars' art in this. In your self-interview of September 2001, you suggested that you'd painted your 'last picture' and that you're 'repeating [yourself] already'. To my mind, you painted it long before that, which is exactly what makes the work interesting for me, and I'd like to limit this interview to two linked aspects of your work: representation and repetition, beginning by asking you for your thoughts on 'your' own repetition today.

I take it that what you call 'my own' repetition here is where I use the same formal design for a number of pictures. What varies then is the colours used and consequently (since they are generally landscape paintings) the time of day represented and/or the mood expressed. This repetition either occurs over a long period of time - in which case it is just me revisiting a theme (e.g. the numerous *Window* pictures I've done over the years) - or else it occurs in a small group of pictures done at around the same time. The latter might be best described as "sets" since they are generally intended to be seen together, as there is meant to be some significance (or at least interest!) in the combination as a whole. Examples of such sets are *Fields in Sunlight/Fields by Moonlight* and *Autumn Trees/Winter Trees* (pairs), *Three Trees* and *Vapour Trails* (triples), *Rothko Windows* (quad). There are also sets that don't involve repetition. For example, *Road to Nowhere 2/Self Portrait/Nothing* and 3 of the 4 *Watcher* pictures are meant to be triples.

Importantly, a second form of repetition exists in the work: the act of representation itself. Often, however, it is your titles rather than the paintings themselves that evoke the mimetic relation to the object. They anchor the art in a specific and rather old fashioned relation to the world, which is exactly what the painting forever threatens to escape in its move towards abstraction. How do you name works and what are your thoughts on this tension between the painting's lexical and graphic components?

You're dead right Alan, the titles are part of the works. In nearly all cases, they tell you what the picture represents. Figuring out what it is isn't meant to be part of the experience, so the title tells you straight off. Since one of the things my pictures try to do is to be as abstract as possible without ceasing to represent something, this explanation by way of the title is in many cases essential. Take a painting that is a vertical rectangle divided horizontally into two equal parts. Say the top part is

orange and the bottom part black. That could be a totally abstract painting - maybe, if it was big enough, a painting by Ellsworth Kelly. But mine's called *Another Sunset* and is therefore immediately seen as representing that. If it succeeds in expressing anything at all it is completely dependent on the title indicating, and in this case (as in many others) also qualifying, what is represented. By that I mean that it is not just called *Sunset* but *Another Sunset* - the *Another* conveys a certain wearisomeness that is hopefully reinforced by the blankness of the painted image. So, you can see why I'd say that, in most cases, the title is "part of the picture". How do I name them? Well, again in most cases, the title is part of the original idea I have for the picture. I'm walking along, I look up, I see something and an idea for a picture pops into my head. And the title is usually there along with it. I couldn't paint a picture without a title - I wouldn't know what it was!

It seems to me that a third component of repetition can be located besides the repetition of form and that of the object: the repetition of reference: the visual citation if you like. Taking the dissolve of Autumn Trees and Winter Trees by way of examples, one senses the presence of Bridget Riley here, whom I'd suggest is fundamental to all the work, not because of her experimental optics but because of her own explorations of nature and its relation to abstraction. Hence, in this case, and I think in many others, the referencing cuts across the lexical/graphic relation, furthering its tension. The Rothko Windows series, would be another example. How do you view this referencing of others' work? Secondly, what are your thoughts on the use of it to dissolve the nature/abstraction duality?

Yes, Bridget Riley inevitably comes to mind when you look at *Autumn Trees* or *Winter Trees*. And, in that case, that is how it happened for me too: I did the paintings, then I noticed the resemblance to those wonderful recent paintings of hers that look like leaves on trees seen against a blue sky filled with sunlight (or something!). It's not usually like that, usually the reference is explicit from the start. The referencing is done for various reasons: Sometimes the image is straightforwardly pinched from someone else (*Moon Path* from Milton Avery, *Pink Cloud* from Mondrian), sometimes it's a joke and/or a homage (*RIP - IKB* for Yves Klein, *Glance* for Philip Guston), sometimes there's a strong stylistic influence (pictures related to Frink, Moore, Riley and Rothko come to mind). Another aspect of this referencing which has recently become interesting to me is that it can enable a picture that in itself is completely abstract to nevertheless represent something - i.e. it represents a painting that is (or might have been) by another person! I've recently done two pictures called *Newman Voices* which imitate (in my style) pictures by Barnett Newman. These pictures are abstract, but they *represent* pictures that might have been by Newman!

Against the blue expanse, the abrupt Riley diagonals of Autumn Trees enter into a new series of referential relations (with Yves Klein say). Similarly, the 'window frames' of the Rothko Windows series abstract the Rothko abstraction by returning it to the real via the idea of

framing or the window. Could I suggest that in your most successful pictures, these repetitions proliferate across the picture plane, its multiple directions making the art itself?

That's an interesting idea: But are any of my pictures like that? Do you think there are any in which the references to others constitute the whole work?

Perhaps I'm not making myself sufficiently clear. I'm not in any way suggesting that an intertextual reference to another artist is the sum of the work. When these various repetitions (and there are undoubtedly many more) combine in 'harmony' (forgive the old-fashioned term), they constitute a drama that envelopes the work, making it greater than the sum of its parts. I think the Rothko Windows series achieve this. One quickly becomes lost in a myriad of repetition. For example, by pushing the literal and metaphoric together in the title to suggest a 'looking in/out' at Rothko and also Rothko as the 'frame of reference', there is a disturbance in the spatiality of that frame. This then doubles when the viewer considers the returning of the frame as a literal representation of a window frame, which acts as a means of naturalising an abstraction whilst leaving enough of that abstraction to provoke the necessary trace of the out/inside. Does that help in anyway or should I just move on?

Yes, that helps. There is a play going on here between a take on Rothko and literal representations of views through a window. Hopefully something of additional interest emerges from that tension - "greater than the sum of the parts", as you say. Similarly with Riley, Klein etc in other pictures. What's going on here is not thought out in advance on my part. The idea for a picture comes to me complete and this kind of analysis of how it works and what it means comes afterwards for me too. I was looking through David Anfam's catalogue raisonné of Rothko's paintings and saw a painting that immediately suggested to me the third *Rothko Window* (brown frame, night view over the sea). I soon evolved this, simply by applying to it my rather trite "time of day" colour combinations, into a set of 3 pictures, adding *Rothko Window 1* (yellow frame, bright sunlit landscape) and *Rothko Window 2* (red frame, sunset). Whilst painting 1-3, I decided to add 4. This is a more ambiguous picture, on the one hand also a night scene with the ground moonlit and/or perhaps covered in snow, and on the other, because of its contrast with the others (being only black and white) suggesting some kind of transcendence or other worldliness. Unusually for me, there is supposed to be some additional interest in the *Rothko Windows* in that they can be read as a series from left to right.

It interests me that what you've been describing in the previous answers could be called the 'post-modern' (and I use this term without any denigration), particularly because the majority of your references are to Modern painters. What are your feelings about the relation between simulation and art, and simulation and nature? Are these exclusive terms?

I'm not familiar with these terms, Alan. In particular, I don't understand what you mean here by "simulation". Can you elaborate?

Apologies: I lapsed into theoretical speak-easy. What I mean by 'simulation' - in relation to the post-modern anyway - is the idea that all one has to hold onto nowadays are simulations of other simulations, images of images if you like. A famous literary example of simulation in post-modern literature is 'the most photographed barn in America' in Don DeLillo's White Noise (1985). The barn has no origin in that you can only photograph it after it has been photographed. The image precedes and produces the barn. So perhaps I can simply rephrase the question by asking if you think such simulations enter into your representations of nature?

Yes, "simulations", in the sense you've indicated, do enter into my representations of nature and of others' art. Sometimes my paintings of nature are based on an image (say, a picture of a sunset) seen in a film or TV show, or a photo in a magazine, rather than a sunset experienced directly in nature. My representation of a classic Rothko in *Rothko Window 3* was based, as I said before, on an image in Anfam's book. So, in your terms, you could say that my painting is a "simulation of a simulation" (image of an image). But where does this terminology get us? Isn't an image of an image of a sunset often just an image of a sunset! But I suspect I'm just revealing here my total ignorance of post-modernist thinking!

Where it would get us, at least in terms of those who bemoan such things, is our removal from 'actual' sunsets, or in the case of the DeLillo example, a removal from 'actual' barns. I would prefer, however, to say that the sunset is already removed and that to talk in terms of the actual or even the real, is basically to fall into a trap of a nostalgic imaginary. One no longer sees the sunset in itself because the images produce the sunset, insofar as our seeing is mediated by a multitude of images that in various ways say 'sunset'. In terms of my original question then, I'm interested in how thinking in this way might relate to your representation of a sunset or nature more generally. The use of abstraction, which often evokes the Modernist image seems crucial here.

Returning to the relation between the represented and form in your work, one thing that interests me is your representation of what might be called natural 'transitory objects' by abstract hard lines. The recent 'vapour trail' pictures are good examples of this. Would it be fair to say that it is only in abstraction that things become definite?

I paint things using hard lines because that's how I see them! Maybe I've come to see them that way over the years because that's the only way I know how to paint them. I've really got no idea how to paint things with fuzzy edges! From a different point of view, I also paint with hard lines because I want the painting to be capable of being seen as abstract. That triangular shape there in the *Vapour Trail* paintings could just be part of a totally abstract composition - like something by Hans Hartung for example. I want the painting to be ambiguous, oscillating between flat abstraction and 3-dimensional representation. So, you could say, I make things more definite than they really are so that they can be seen as abstract.

It is exactly in that 'oscillation' that I also perceive this tension between the modernist and the post-modern, the echo of another artist / artists and the image. Is this ambiguity a maker of space for you, a way to let the paintings breathe perhaps?

Yes, you could put it that way. In the final analysis, that ambiguity is what those paintings are about. It's what I'm trying to paint and what, if anything, is interesting about them.

You've mentioned that some of your work is to be seen as diptychs or triptychs, which besides disrupting the space around the picture frame specifically evokes a religious methodology of relation. Is representation itself a spiritual act for you and/ or do you consider it a politics? Indeed, could your work be approached through its 'iconicity'?

Yes, at the end of the day, I would say that representation is for me a spiritual act (by "at the end of the day" I mean, allowing for the fact that I don't usually say that kind of thing!). At least, I try to make it a spiritual act - I don't always succeed. Where I have more of a problem is in deciding to what extent this implies it is also a religious act. I guess this reflects my personal quandry with respect to religious faith and, as such, is beyond the scope of this discussion. Some of my pictures clearly have religious themes: *Three Trees* (a crucifixion triptych), *Hope*, various *Spire* pictures... It would be very pleasing to me to know that any of my pictures raised this kind of issue in anybody's mind, because it would indicate that something that was an issue for me whilst painting was successfully communicated in the work.

So you consider your work as a means to communicate the self? I find this fascinating because for me as a viewer, your art is working towards a sort of exhaustion that empties the self out - this is what I meant when I said that I believed you had painted your last picture long before you made a statement to that effect. How then does this communication interface with the repetitions that we've been discussing?

Well, Alan, this interview is seducing me into saying a lot more than I normally say - even to myself! I don't normally think about what the paintings express or communicate - I just paint them! Mostly I'm just thinking about the one I'm doing at the moment and I've forgotten most of what's gone before! I say that not to cut off this discussion but to explain why I'm probably not expressing myself clearly - I haven't got these things thought out in advance! I guess in the end I would say I consider my paintings a means to communicate a view of the self and the non-self (the world) and the relation between the two. I don't have a unitary or settled view of that relationship and I guess the paintings express various, probably even contradictory, things. Some paintings might hint at or toy with (it's no more than that!) religious ideas, whilst others explore other ideas. Your comment that you perceive my paintings as "working towards a sort of exhaustion that empties the self out" is very interesting to me as that's an idea I'm often trying to express - to

abstract or simplify the self and/or the world so as to represent them as being almost nothing.

Well, I hope the seduction is not altogether unpleasant!

Not at all! It's great to talk about myself! But it does flagrantly contradict the rather pompous stance I took on this issue in my "Self Interview" (paintings make their own statement and should need no commentary, etc)! You've certainly raised a lot of issues of interest to *me* - I hope they also prove interesting to anyone who reads this!

References:

Beckett, Samuel (1958), *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*, trans. Samuel Beckett and Patrick Bowles (New York: Grove Press).

DeLillo, Don (1985), *White Noise* (London: Picador).