**Three Paintings by Roger Hilton**

**RED**   
*August1953 (Red, Ochre, Black and White).*  
   
In 1953 Hilton began to title his work sequentially by month and year.  It was his way of asserting a kind of formal austerity, a desire for something tougher and less provincial than anything he had so far achieved.  ‘Try to simplify your colours as much as possible’, he told himself in one of his many rules, ‘choose four or five colours and stick to them’ (1).  Within a few months he was producing his most fluent and concise work to date, and the two pictures completed in august - one on a blue and the other on a red field - were among the most vibrantly coloured and formally resolved of the new images.  The red picture in particular appears as reductive and plain as its title, employing only four unmixed colours on its surface, and yet its forms remain virile and dynamic: ‘Mondrian unlaced, with the corsets off’, as Andrew Lambirth describes it (2).  
Hilton must have encountered De Stael’s work during his frequent visits to Paris, and looking at Composition 1950 (now in the Tate collection) it is hard not to see the Frenchman’s formulation of a simultaneously compact and expansive space at work in August 1953.  There is the same vertical format, and the same forceful incursion of black, applied with a palette knife, into a coloured ground.  The open field of white and red is both punctuated and punctured by irregular blocks of ochre and black which move around the border of the picture before leaving its confines altogether.  The action is supple and muscular, suggesting a warm-blooded body twisting in space before breaking out of it.  ‘It has become an instrument’, Hilton explained, ‘a kind of catalyst for the activation of surrounding space’; and yet it wasn’t long before he started to chafe against this formula, feeling, as he told Terry Frost, ‘that there was a certain tiresome emptiness about abstraction’ (3).    
So what was happening?  Here was an artist judging himself by European rather than domestic standards and beginning, despite Patrick Heron’s praise for his first show, to find himself and others wanting.  There is a curious tension between the language of spare articulation on the one hand and his barely contained anger and impatience on the other.  In a recent essay Adam Phillips explores the difference between two kinds of creative experience, one where the artist seeks to fashion himself (‘the modeller’), the other where he intends to reveal something separate and apart from the self (‘the carver); ‘in one version the self is the instrument, in the other it is the obstacle’ (4). The formal constraints of Hilton’s procedure - the lists, the commands, the sequential dating and the reduced palette - suggest a need to impose some order and control over his darker impulses.  ‘One is almost frightened of the desire to paint’, he wrote, even though what one senses here is his palpable excitement at seeing those very impulses push through, creating something faster, more improvisatory, less ‘tidy and neat’.  In August 1953 the carver is giving way to the ‘Promethean’ modeller, the ‘existential man’ as Lawrence Alloway put it, ‘making himself in the present by his actions’ (5).  The paint has become the means of animating a self that, as Heron understood, ‘begins and ends with paint’ (6).

**BLUE**   
*Newlyn 1, c.1957.*

‘Whatever happens to be there is potentially material to fashion the self with... the only thing the Promethean has to complain about is how the world resists him’.  The danger of this, Adam Phillips goes on to say, is that, ‘the Promethean self is prone to feel that he has let himself down’ (7).  The parallels with Hilton are instructive: his vehemence, his frustration (with himself and with others), and his sense of failure and exhaustion (‘Painting is hell’, he told his wife, ‘I don’t want it’), but also his instinct to release himself bravely into his work.  With the appearance of charcoal in his painting, the robustly delineated shapes of 1953 were replaced - as in October 1956 (Brown, Black and White) for example - with something altogether more fretful and visually disturbing.  
Newlyn I is painted on a double square that opens sideways and lengthways. It is vigorously brushed from end to end and, although not as physically large, it has the same kind of American scale and space as Motherwell’s Spanish Elegies (as well as containing what looks like the ghostly husk of one of Motherwell’s hanging black ovoids).  The five colours are rhythmically spaced across five unequal but subtly modulated panels of blue and white.  The hurried drawings, one scribbled in liquid green, the other rendered in thick dry black, are offset by a shot of vestigial yellow in the top left corner.  If its formation, controlled by strong vertical and horizontal markers, is one of classical order and balance, its rough corrections and re-workings recall the similarly awkward irresolution of Matisse’s The Moroccans (1916).  It also displays an extraordinary command of blue, something else that Hilton shared with Matisse; it glows beneath the white washed surface on the right of the painting, while the way he brushes it in on the left makes it simultaneously advance and recede in space.  There may be less of it here than elsewhere - in Blue Newlyn 1958, The Aral Sea 1958, and March 1963 for example - but it is used with the same concentrated charge.  
The spare colour and the ordered field are disturbed however by urgent bodily marks and scribbled graffiti; they mess up and deface the sea air of Newlyn in a way that seems wilfully transgressive, their smudged matter deliberately negating the lyrical fluency of his earlier work.  Hilton increasingly talked at this time about the articulation of the self rather than the mediating of the natural world in paint.  In the same year he painted Newlyn 1 he wrote that, ‘the technique has been built up not so much for the purposes of representing the visual world as for being an instrument capable of embodying man’s inner truths’ (8).  Note how he uses the word ‘embodying’, because increasingly it is with reference to the human body - physical, tactile, and sexual - that Hilton becomes ‘Prometheus enflamed’.

**BROWN & WHITE**  
*July 1960.*

It is doubtful whether, ‘the explosive expressionism of his ragged and sometimes brutal symbols’, as Heron claimed in 1958, can really be said to be, ‘utterly tamed by the purely pictorial realities of his extremely varied colour and his sense of formal balance’ (9).  Freud described the individual as a war between creative and destructive forces, and this was now being played out with visceral force in the work and the man.  There is nothing tame about July 1960.  Sandra Blow was closer to the mark in perceiving the risks inherent in the feverish speed of his procedure, which, ‘like a wild jazz pianist who lets go and takes great chances improvising’, involved a sort of dark libidinous energy that was akin to Francis Bacon’s work at the time, and which she described in both cases as, ‘a mixture of elegance and abattoirs’ (10).  Rough on himself and rough on the viewer, Hilton was now very close to the wellspring of his energy, to the addictive drives and carnal appetites which signalled the increasingly ungovernable ‘return of the repressed’.    
July 1960 is a masterpiece of forceful economy.  It is balanced and incisive, deploying a dark square field of umber inside a larger square of untouched ground and suggesting a similar diagonal shift to August 1953.  Its loosely applied forms also operate within a similarly exacting colour range, each one sized and placed for maximum impact.  At the same time, their boundaries remain stubbornly unrefined and uncorrected, allowing the raw mass of earthy pigment below to push hard up against the pendulous milky white shape above it, as though attacking the object of its desire.  It is more disturbingly direct than Heron admits to in his language – ‘haunted by a sort of nostalgic eroticism’ - and draws its visceral charge from being just barely encoded in the formal abstract relationship it propounds.  The means are minimal, the method fearless and vital; it is full of mutinous energy, the ‘blood, sweat and tears’ he had talked of before, which he held in check for a while (until 1955 perhaps) but which no longer seemed his wish to conceal or deny. The structure may be ‘neoplastic’, but the mood, as Hilton says, is ‘fleshly, lecherous and lurid’ (11).  
July 1960, executed with the punch of a boxer’s glove against a swinging ball, or of excrement contaminating white skin, is no longer so clearly comparable to De Stael and Motherwell but appears much more obviously attuned to the ‘anti-art’ surfaces, the scribbly elegance and smeared matter, of Cy Twombly’s 1961 Ferragosto canvases.  Twombly is currently being honoured with a retrospective at Tate Modern and it is interesting to speculate whether, had Hilton lived longer, he might have been similarly celebrated in old age(12). As it was, he died in 1975, trapped to a degree by what he feared, the bracketing of his work within the St.Ives school, confined to a convenient geographical and social movement that over time appeared insulated and marginalised from wider international currents.

Hilton’s radical individualism would always make him harder for painters to emulate than to admire.  This makes it difficult to trace with any degree of historical certainty his stylistic imprint on the current scene; perhaps all one can do is selectively identify his presence in the practice of certain contemporary painters.  The tensile structure and emotive colour that recalls De Stael and Motherwell, his two contemporaries in Europe and America, finds certain echoes in the work of Sean Scully; while the intensive use of charcoal in his later work, as well as the awkward placing of muscular forms on an open canvas ground, is visually reminiscent of Tony Bevan’s practise. Aside from the masculine heritage implicit in such formal affinities, there is what could be characterised as Hilton’s self-confessional mode, one that might well have, if he had lived longer, drawn the attention of the YBA generation.  The sexual frankness which disturbed his own time is, thirty years on, fully alive in the work of Sarah Lucas and Tracy Emin, the latter’s scratchily urgent and scatological drawings in particular recalling Hilton’s own graphic impulses; likewise his refulgent colours and carnal gestures, which appear to be in tune with the work of some younger British painters, perhaps most noticeably in that of Cecily Brown.  
More generally however, Hilton’s expressive and self revelatory approach seems at odds with the prevailing desire of artists and curators for a kind of painting that is more knowing and distanced, more conceptually austere (or ‘tidy’ in Hilton’s phrase).  European painting today is much more inclined to treat the medium as a vehicle for irony or as a useful tool for referencing the abstract vernacular; the ‘cryptic abstract fragments of Raoul de Keyser’ cited by Merlin James in connection with Hilton (13), seem more obviously aligned to this tendency, as do the elegant but bloodless exercises of Tomma Abts, the Tate’s Turner Prize winner in 2006.  Had he witnessed it, Hilton would have hated what he perceived (even then) as the curse of theory-burdened commentary, the industry of the ‘Courtauld ninny’ over the passion of ‘a Dostoevsky. Or a Hilton.’ (14)

Luke Elwes (June 2008)

Notes

1.    Roger Hilton in a note to himself, dated 25/10/55. This and the following words by the artist are drawn from the extensive notes and correspondence collected by Andrew Lambirth in Roger Hilton, The Figured Language of Thought (Thames & Hudson, 2007).  
2.    Andrew Lambirth, Roger Hilton (Thames & Hudson, 2007), p.92.  
3.    Roger Hilton, in the statement he supplied for Lawrence Alloway’s Nine Abstract Artists (Tiranti, 1954); he wrote to Frost in the following year.  
4.    Adam Phillips, On Not Making it up, given as one of a series of Wolfson lectures entitled ‘The Varieties of Creative Experience’, and published in Side Effects (Penguin, 2006), p.81.  
5.    Lawrence Alloway, Nine Abstract Artists (Tiranti, 1954).  
6.    Patrick Heron, recollecting his review of Hilton’s first solo exhibition at Gimpel Fils, June 1952 (in Introducing Roger Hilton, Arts (NY), May 1957).  
7.    Adam Phillips, p.85.  
8.    Roger Hilton, artist’s statement (Exhibition catalogue, ICA, 1956).  
9.    Patrick Heron, Arts (NY), May 1958.  
10.    Sandra Blow in conversation with Andrew Lambirth (published in Roger Hilton, p.134-5)  
11.    Roger Hilton, artists statement (Exhibition catalogue, Galerie Charles Lienhard, Zurich, 1961)  
12.    Cy Twombly’s retrospective is at Tate Modern until 14 September 2008; thereafter, it travels to the Guggenheim Bilbao and the National Gallery of Modern Art in Rome.  
13.    Merlin James, The Burlington Magazine, April 2008, p.267.  
14.    Roger Hilton, in a conversation quoted by Chris Stephens in Roger Hilton (Tate Publishing 2006), p.6.