

Daniel Hutchinson, *The Painter's Painter*

I was excited about meeting gallery artist Daniel Hutchinson ever since I had seen a few of his pictures at Jamie Angell's Gallery last year. This enthusiasm only intensified over the course of the last several months when I mentioned his name to young painters and artists around the city, some his former students from OCAD, and received effusive praise for Daniel as both an artist and as a teacher. Several painters remarked about how thoughtful Hutchinson was about his own practice. For an art critic, the chance to converse with such an artist is a much anticipated pleasure. So I gladly took up the offer to visit the artist's new studio in Hamilton as he prepares for his upcoming solo show at Angell Gallery.

I've remarked before that when the history of this moment in Canadian painting is written, Angell Gallery will serve as a cornerstone institution integral to identifying and showing some of the most talented artists working in the medium today. And perhaps no gallery artist epitomizes the true rigor and ambition of today's advanced Canadian painter as much as Daniel Hutchinson.

A telling anecdote: when I sauntered into Hutchinson's gallery on a chilly Saturday afternoon I almost mistook one of his canvases for a tabletop as I searched for a place to put down my coffee. I asked him what he did to prepare his canvases and he casually mentioned that he had applied over eleven coats of white paint to the canvas already, sanding it down each time to achieve this smooth tabletop finish. And this was before he really began painting. Such exhaustive preparation is what helped mobilize the play and reflectivity of light as the subsequent painting took form. But I think the story illustrates several other facets about Daniel's paintings. His works are finely crafted, as much as they are painted, they are artifactual, as much as pictorial, and the fortuitous metaphor of the picture-as-table (in distinction to Alberti's picture-as-window) evokes the "tabular aesthetic" prized by British pop artist Richard Hamilton --that is, these are *conceptual* spaces as much as they are pictorial.

While a glancing impression of the artist's deceptively austere and minimalist canvases may lead one to see Hutchinson's work in the lineage of Malevich who inaugurated the black monochrome as a sign of painting's endgame in 1915 (two years before Marcel Duchamp exhibited his equally apocalyptic Urinal in 1917) or the black monochromes of Ad Reinhardt or black on black paintings of Pierre Soulages, Hutchinson's paintings are monochromes only semantically. Certainly, the artist often uses low tonal value dark paint (an assumption this show will challenge), but his pictures are rather teeming with pictorial incidence and delicate, refined brushwork. And while Hutchinson prizes the compositional aesthetic of the allover, his pictures are resolutely pictorial and sensual, instead of calculatedly non-objective. But like Soulages and Reinhardt, Hutchinson's pictures promote and reward long durations of immersive looking as they dramatize the gaze of the viewer. And what he also shares with the most advanced modernist painters is an impulse to reduce his parameters of

expression in the hopes of plumbing and mining them for their full creative potential.

We can broadly characterize artists as more or less rigid and stringent or stylistically eclectic. Picasso, who moved nimbly through several dominant styles throughout his career (academic painting, Analytic and Synthetic Cubism, Neoclassicism, etc.), was surely an eclectic stylist, absorbing influences whenever they suited his changing purposes. On the other hand, Matisse pursued a singular problematic, that of the decorative allover, from almost his very first painting till his very last large cut-outs. We tend to think of modern painting as ruled for a while by one or two essentializing narratives, promoting stylistic reduction and stringency only giving way to a post-historical period of “anything goes” eclecticism after Warhol. But even in modernist painting the distinction is heuristically useful. Frank Stella shifted dramatically from the deductive structures of his early works to a kind of maximalist theatricality, while others such as Robert Rauschenberg or Agnes Martin remained faithful to one or two elementary procedures or compositional structures. I think Daniel Hutchinson is a rigid stylist, but this stringency is more procedural and conceptual, rather than based on any surface morphology. Whether it be Daniel’s internalization of particular weather patterns, his confrontation with the spectre of theater or in this upcoming show his use of the index as artsource, Daniel is an artist interested in limiting his resources in the service of heightening creative effects.

The upcoming show at Angell Gallery promises even those familiar with Hutchinson’s corpus several surprises. First, the artist moves even further away from the figurative and towards full blown abstraction, facing head on the problem of ornament and the decorative. Second, while the motif of the dark monochrome persists, Hutchinson introduces vibrant colors and floral motifs drawn from local textile stores and visits to the nearby tropical greenhouse. One work the artist showed me was produced through a technique similar to Surrealist *grattage* where the artist picked up patterns from the wood panel floorboards of his studio space.

As a category of non-compositionality the “index” (like the readymade, monochrome or grid) is a category of modernist art that eliminates or somehow thwarts the choice and subjectivity of the artist so as to introduce chance and aleatoric effects into the production of the artwork. There is an ideological investment in the category of the index as well. If an artist is *de facto* a product of her society and social and cultural institutions then anything s/he produces through choice will be tacitly complicit with bourgeois idealism and ideology. How does one confront then the heroic task of producing *new* art? And how does one motivate new forms once figuration and illusionism are seen as formally exhausted? The semiotics of the index operates like an arrow that points to something else either by directly mapping a surface onto another or pointing to an absent referent. Certainly the artist still exercises choice in what index to map and how to use the medium to do so.

Over the past several years, Hutchinson has developed a sort of indexical regionalism in his work. The first breakthrough came when the artist was serving a residency in a seaside town in Sweden where he began to explore the dynamics of place and geography. With nothing but the roaring weather engulfing his cabin-cum-studio Hutchinson capitulated and introduced the motif of the weather and ocean into his work. Perhaps not since Courbet's seascapes have bodies of water been committed to canvas with such painterly conviction and single-mindedness of purpose. Hutchinson erases any orienting sense of horizon or landscape so that the viewer is engulfed by an oceanic sense of rhythm and pictorial dedifferentiation.

The aesthetics of the topsy turvy and the oceanic appear again in the upcoming show into two large black paintings called respectively *Fold* and *Mirror, Mirror* but also in the series of paintings entitled *16 Days at Sea*. These are not representational or mimetic works by any means. Rather it seems that through a kind of pictorial automatism Hutchinson has captured the rhythm of vast expanses of water. The brushstrokes are mapping contours of idealised and observed forms while also taking cues from the rhythms and perturbations of each preceding stroke, one after the other, top to bottom of the picture plane (or 'picture-as table') until a field of marks maps out the smooth flatness of the support *and* its own self-generating morphology. Certainly the motif of waves are present if we want to see them but there is a larger feeling of undulation that serves as a kind of palliative balm for overstimulated and overstressed contemporary eyes.

In the upcoming show Hutchinson also playfully uses painting to absorb and cite other media. By superimposing different indexical registers in some paintings Hutchinson creates an "off-register" effect that suggests Xerox photocopying, the scan lines of the televisual or digital monitors, and while none of this is by any means overt, the effect persists as a sort of ghostly superimposition in paintings such as the ephemeral *After the Clouds Passed (impressions on your eyes)*. This "intermedial" effect is also suggestive elsewhere in the rich luxury of satiny textiles that obliterate and opacify our vision or screen our eyes. In the impressively dramatic *It Could Be You*, the artist stages the battle between the abstract and the decorative where the black monochrome is encroached upon by floral ornamentation.

While Hutchinson's upcoming exhibition shows the artist embracing neoavantgarde strategies as never before there is nothing "anti-aesthetic" about these works and it is a testament to how through such a reduction of means and elements Hutchinson is able to achieve complex pictorial effects of rich density and vigor. I invite you to consider these works with me afresh at the Angell Gallery's upcoming exhibition of the artist's new works.