

Clytie Alexander
Conversation with Jim Long

Jim Long: I'm facing east, at a plywood table in a barn in Northern Vermont, and am startled by the light on this October morning. The overall clarity and intensity of the daylight fills the entire landscape and seems to be a clear solid material that has displaced the light one is used to seeing. The experience is remarkable, physical. There is no atmosphere or distance. Everything is substance, bright and planar. On my table is the transcript of a recent conversation with Clytie Alexander about her new work: paintings and drawings of a high order of achievement that address color, space and experience with exceptional clarity and conceptual rigor.

JL: These paintings, the "Diaphans", engage, in reductive form, an essential abstract/concrete planar experience: one senses the wall, the perforations of the Diaphans, light and color simultaneously as a natural phenomenon and as a carefully constructed visual experience.

Clytie Alexander: Well, as reductive as the Diaphans appear to be, I have a problem with "reductive" because as a description, the word is usually misused and even though I do use minimal/limited means, I'm aiming for a solution which is "additive".

JL: And your concern with "additive" can include natural elements. "Reductive" is an approach to analytical thinking. It's not necessarily a matter of simplifying.

CA: You brought up the wall as part of my vocabulary. I'm interested in architecture so when I look at a wall I see a structure, and when I begin to work it's by making a space frame. I install a number of units on a wall. This extends the wall and begins to delineate and define space between and within the boundaries of whatever I'm working on at the moment - canvas, paper or aluminum.

JL: You referred to a sensation of multiple perspectives once you arrange these units on the wall.

CA: As you look at the beginning elements or walk in front of them, there is no fixed point of view, no spot in the work where the eye will rest, especially in the Diaphans. Because of the perforations. They flicker as you move around them. The eye scans instead of reads. My interest in scanning comes from my experience of looking at South Asian art and architecture.

JL: The paintings are open, transparent and new. Like proposals. Knock off the sides of a canvas and you're left with a frontal plane and the wall behind which participates because of the perforations.

CA: I first came across ideas of space and perception in California. And also, there was a lot of talk about Cezanne in the UCLA art department when I was there in the mid-1960's. Before that, I encountered (and it was a real encounter) Islamic architecture in India and became

acquainted with jali - pierced stone screens. So permeable boundaries have always intrigued me, though I put aside any ideas about perforation because I couldn't figure out how to...

JL: Perforate other people's walls? (laughter)...

CA: No, perforate my own (laughter)... but one thing I've always done when I've reached a dead-end on a two dimensional surface is to punch through it. Literally. Why not try to find a multi-dimensional solution by making a hole in a two dimensional surface? The Diaphans can be viewed as paintings. At the same time they're not paintings, they're not sculpture and they're not 'objects'.

JL: We share a reluctance to frame the experience of painting in words. My first experience of painting was one of immateriality - of an effort to hold something elusive: to paraphrase a sutra - the real picture is in the mind. You studied Indian dance and music when you lived in Dhaka, Bangladesh. That takes abstraction back thousands of years.

CA: Studying Indian music and dance fine-tuned my senses to the idea of physically inhabiting a common space or middle ground.

JL: A middle ground that has many complex facets, structures, and rhythmic surprises.

JL: The new ink drawings suggest another way of thinking about surface. What is the relation between mark and plane, and what about calligraphy?

CA: I don't think of the drawings as calligraphic because I'm not thinking about gesture as I make them. I think about defining a surface using a continuous line within the limitations of the paper. The paper is translucent, so light enters behind it as it does the Diaphans.

JL: In both, then, you're making an event. There's a history within the residue of frame or boundary, you retain around the Diaphans.

CA: An event that has a beginning and an ending on an actual edge. But visually they don't begin or end. When the drawings and Diaphans work, they twist and turn and go all kinds of places. I'm not sure that without real edges or boundaries this could happen.

JL: The fabrication process creates an initial situation where the holes predominate. The action of painting, working from both the front and the back, integrates the perforations into a new experience. You are actually changing the frequency of the light that emerges from the wall and permeates the piece. It changes the perception of the surface.

CA: I'm interested in the Diaphans because they appear to be so simple. I've taken contradictory ideas and turned them into a mark. I want to take these elements and see if I can go somewhere unfamiliar to me. I work with a set of abstract notations. There is no image. The solution, what we see, takes place between the viewer and the work. I'm aiming at a "gap" - a fissure, a break, a discontinuity, a dissonance - something "missing" that hints at

an underlying rhythm, at cosmic noise, at how the microscopic world interacts with the macroscopic one, something we don't see but we know is there.

JL: But what you call the “gap” we shouldn't think of as subject matter. A viewer always comes to an artist's work in the middle of its history. There is always a distance. “Subject matter” and “systems” help to close that distance, but it is always there.

CA: I resist subject matter and systems but inevitably I'm part of them. I'm also subject to process. The process of making the Diaphans is different than painting or drawing because the technical fabrication is not done in my studio, but in Los Angeles by Jack Brogan.

JL: You've managed to detach the surface of painting in order to reveal a complex relationship between the surface of paint and the surface of the wall behind. Is there a “foreground” for you anymore?

CA: I'm not sure there ever was a foreground for me. I don't move through ideas in a linear way. If I'm walking down a street, I'll cross from side to side so I don't see the same thing twice. Maybe I'll go around the block and then the next time come at the same street from another direction. But I'm still on the street and there is still a beginning and an ending.

JL: And this random walk introduces modulations of surface, plane and field. The holes predominate until they are corrected by light and color and the space comes together.

CA: Yes. I'm interested in the space between the Diaphan and the viewer as proposal, an invitation, a suggestion. The questions I ask of my work are: What are surfaces? Where does a surface begin and end? Where are its edges and boundaries? How does a surface become part of what is behind it? Which colors can make a surface disappear or engage the space around it? Can I build light, or use existing light? How much can I eliminate? How can I amplify the experience of looking?

There's an all white Diaphan. It's very elusive. And I wonder, is it enough?

New York City
October 2007

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