ALMINE RECH

Peter Peri
Uncting

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The Less You Know

Outline for a story that isn't a horror story, though it might at first resemble one: The painter paints—an abstraction, a grid, a controlled Cartesian situation. At close of working day, he flips off the studio lights, goes home. The painting, after dark, creaks and stirs: under silvery moonlight, the lattice detaches from the canvas, shimmies, strikes angles, overlaps and doubles itself. Soon there are two grids, differentiated. They converse and, in the conversation, recursive thinking transpires. As night hours go by, the painting gets smarter, its parts conspiring, mind developing and bending idiosyncratically. Morning. Studio lights flash on, the painter steps in. The painting, startled, freezes...

Abstract painting is a less egoistic business than it might appear, one in which the painter, ideally, is effaced. A representation can verge on being a thing in the world, but is always double-faced, comparative with—relatively close to or distant from—what's depicted; an abstraction, ideally, totes none of that baggage. It aspires to being-in-the-world on its own terms, a presence, an embodied intelligence that makes you forget its maker, that has perhaps *escaped* its maker, and the end result is not so much viewing as encounter. You look at it and it returns its own gaze, blackly, confidently.

At this point, we could follow the artist back into recent time and hike some of the branching research trails that might lead them—an artist of Peter Peri's approximate age, size, weight and build—to make paintings like that, or set up the conditions for them to bring themselves forth. We could tabulate nihilist 20th-century philosophers (and quote for ballast), summon the historical trajectory of modernity and its shadow relations to schizophrenia, madness. But this is room tone, essay tone. What leads an artist to their endpoint is rarely that relevant, is brambled with chance intellectual encounters, and seems particularly irrelevant to artworks bounded by what transpires, in the exhibition situation, between viewer and viewed. Shear it away.

Or let's say that the conditions of the modern are *there,* inevitably (no grids without memories), but as a kind of ambience, mingling with and coloured by other atmospheric conditions, and operant as forces swirling in your peripheral vision during the looking. Suggestions recur: of the moon, and moonlight, in circular sculptural forms that are silvered—like the silver painterly grids—and given titles like *Moon-Face,* 2015. Femininity and the moon are aeons-old if obliquely and mythologically connected, and there are also abstractions of women here. One drawing refracts a woman in tears. Elsewhere, if women have historically and lamentably been objectified by the male gaze in art, in Peri's sculptures they gaze back, hieratic, frontal, assured, while also suggesting themselves as surrogate viewers—of the paintings and drawings, of you. The hierarchical idea, inherent in the reception of artworks, that the viewer looks, browses at will, and goes unchallenged, is here upended.

Even geometry loses its historical consoling role in which, from the Golden Section to modernist usage of the grid, all is well ordered and Apollonian. Geometry here, by contrast, is rogue. Grids have their glimmering wavering doubles; or glossy sections, like days highlighted in a calendar, will unpredictably punctuate the flat surface of a blackened abstraction. A sculptural cylinder, a little head, will remind one of the source from which it was seemingly cast, a roll of tape. In a drawing, not only will geometric shapes be compromised by a fine, uncanny hirsuteness—this fineness, this refined delicacy, a cipher of acumen somehow, is reprised in Peri's infinitely light-touch mark-making on canvas—but, up close, the drawn forms will be speckled with words, some of them obscene. Or elsewhere anagrammatically so, as with the word 'Uncting'—the show's title—which nevertheless means 'anointing'. One might consider this corruption; given such double-dealing meanings, though, it might better be seen as an unshackling, a crowbarring open, a suspension.

Consider the balanced forces in play here, the careful orchestration of *not* arriving at anything so reductive as a 'reading'. The paintings, drawings, and sculptures must, first, assert themselves as personalities. (This, indeed, is the strange animist challenge of much of Peri's art to date, an explicit staging—we might venture—of art as meeting, an open exchange, between you and the artwork.) Then everything that they hold back is compensated for, or feels to be, by a mixed scent of intimations: again, the modern, the moon, bodies, the feminine. Reception here is a dynamic ricochet between you, the object in front of you, and the complex of suggestion that seems to be, rather, around it. To break down the personal nature of this relation would be to reject a central tenet of abstraction: that it not be just another way of representing. The title of one painting, *Bodies, Bodies, Bodies,* comes from Polish writer Witold Gombrowicz's diaries, written in exile, and describes a relational process: how bodies on a beach affect each other in a deforming manner. But that mantric phrase might be opened up, in this context, into a poetics of inflection, because merely to call anything here a body—which, to an extent, would be justifiable—is to shut the whole interplay down, to refuse its generous challenge. A challenge which includes navigating the fact that you might think, in a context of other abstractions that verge on a figure, of an ostensibly nonfigurative black grid as a *someone.*

Peri's grids, notably, are not embedded in the canvas and not even straight. They seem pinned and dangled from the upper corners, to float slightly above the surface at slightly off angles. A painting like that—it's asserted particularly in *Bodies, Bodies, Bodies*, which involves an explicit double grid—is a doppelganger of the grid, one that has decided the formal framework today might have to go somewhere else, might best to be depicted as already saying goodbye to its fixity. Something similar may be said of Peri's sculptures and drawings, which give you something you recognise, something conservative, unpromising—a relation to a schematisation of the figure—but uncouple it, tunnel into it and situate it, in the case of the furred drawings-of-sculptures, in something like time. Apply as much or as little of this to selfhood and self-development as you like; these are just threads, a sketch for a reading—and, in a mode of working as dependent on the imagination and as invitatory of it as Peri's, every word may constitute a narrowing.

On reflection, forget I spoke.

Martin Herbert