

# UNCHARTED PLANET: PAINTING'S CARTOGRAPHIC TENDENCIES BY JONATHAN PARSONS



**An Orrery for Other Worlds - Andy Harper**

2010

Oil on acrylic sphere

Painting, broadly, tends towards one of two extremes. Either it insists upon its status as an illusory window, requiring us to suspend our disbelief about everything that appears to be going on behind its taken-as-read transparent surface, however stylised or schematic; or it explicitly deals with the problem of being a bunch of coloured materials and becomes just another one amongst a multitude of objects vying for attention in our visual field. But there is a third way, which allows a variety of significations to occur simultaneously and is more akin to the shifting semiotic territory of cartography. Maps are the only type of widely used two-dimensional images that exhibit qualities of the three types of visual sign known as icon, symbol and index. They are iconic in the way that they often mimetically resemble the layouts of the topographies they indicate. They are symbolic in the way that they are abstractions and descriptions of that topography, with arbitrary design features and agreed conventions. And they are indexical in the way that, initially, they are derived from a physical transfer of the proportions of surveyed topography, which is almost a physical link to the spaces that the final map eventually signifies.

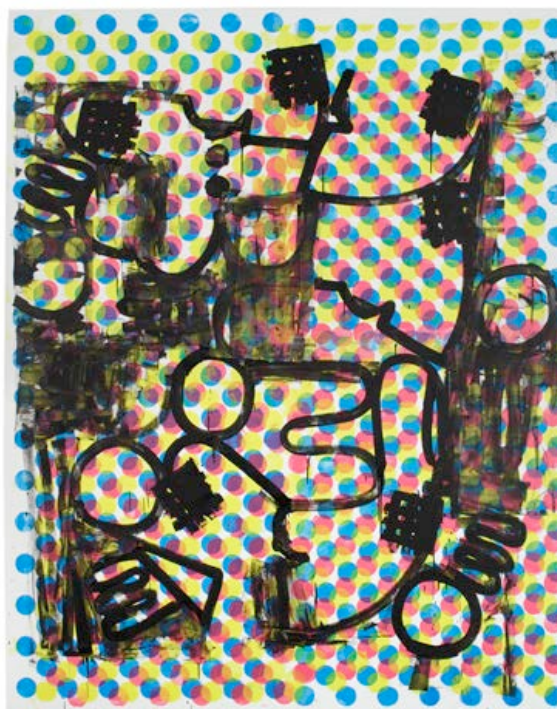
Andy Harper's *An Orrery for Other Worlds* – a large oil painting on an internally illuminated acrylic sphere, which was specially made as the centre piece of his exhibition of the same name at Aspex Gallery in Spring 2010 – prompted me to revisit this idea of the cartographical way of painting, something I had been working on for some time. I have always been interested in painting that is entirely intermediate between window and object; that indicates its status as flat material whilst exploiting the curious power that a marked up surface has of indicating illusory pictorial space. I am also involved in curating painting and Harper's exhibition was programmed at my suggestion. This focus on painting stems from my view that art is an artificially constructed reality that provides experiences unavailable from natural reality and that painting is the practice that seems to deal most urgently with what is accepted as real and what can self-consciously display its own artificiality.

The idea that there are collective 'movements' in art is no longer credible. Descriptions of the world are invariably driven

by categorization, classification and specialist terminology. This has led dealers, art historians, curators and other commentators to coin labels, which are then retrospectively applied to a variety of practices that may, or may not, have been connected in some way. The Modernist insistence that progress in intellectual culture was not only possible, but approaching its zenith conveniently ignored non-Western, non-20th Century and ‘outsider’ practices, as well as denying the fact that any one kind of cultural production always takes place alongside a multiplicity of others. Is it, then, worthwhile looking for commonalities between the outputs of artists who may be culturally, geographically and temporally separated? It can be argued that, for the purposes of curatorial practice and of understanding how visual practitioners deal with the problems of existence, this is essential. Curators bring together groups of artists for a variety of legitimate reasons, but they sometimes make overblown claims in relation to newly identified tendencies or movements, even to the point of naming an ‘ism’. There is no real consensus any more, except perhaps that of an obsession with marketing. At least there is also no longer the pretence of progress. The current historical context is plurality and the dissolution of hierarchies. An artist can be earnest or can take the piss; be studio-bound or a project manager. Despite all of this, I will take the risk to suggest that the cartographic tendency of painting is actively being explored by a large number of current painters and that the tendency itself is a symptom of this plurality of signification, heritage and acculturation. In addition to Andy Harper I will name just a few of these artists: Ghader Amer, Andrew Bick, Ingrid Calame, Stuart Cumberland, Pia Fries, Joanne Greenbaum, Dennis Hollingsworth, Jonathan Lasker, Julie Mehretu, Aaron Morse, Bernard Piffaretti, Katie Pratt, Monique Prieto, Danny Rolph, Nicola Tyson, Sue Williams, Christopher Wool. The origin of this way of working can be traced to certain developments in painting and art criticism of the 1950s.

In 1958 Leo Steinberg, reacting to Jasper Johns’ and Robert Rauschenberg’s work, ‘felt the end of illusion’. In *Other Criteria* <sup>(1)</sup>, he describes the ‘flatbed’ picture plane, a horizontal ‘work surface’ that is ‘a matrix of information’ where ‘pictures no longer simulate

vertical fields’. The ‘flatbed’ reversed the vertical Renaissance picture plane representative of ‘things’ – arising from vision and nature – in favour of a horizontal transverse section containing ‘signs’ – arising from action and culture. He characterised it as a ‘palimpsest, cancelled plate, printer’s proof, trial blank, chart, map, aerial view. Any flat documentary surface that tabulates information in a relevant analogue of [the] picture plane – radically different from the transparent projection plane with its optical correspondence to man’s visual field.’ This is



**CMYK-240-2LG – Stuart Cumberland**  
2009  
Oil and alkyd on linen, 240 x 190 cm

also quite different from the 1940s idea of the ‘all-over’ painted composition. He continues: ‘The flatbed picture plane lends itself to any content that does not evoke a prior optical event. As a criterion of classification it cuts across the terms “abstract” and “representational”’. Yve-Alain Bois describes Johns’ early programme as ‘the total equivalence of the object and its field’. In his conference paper *Kelly’s Matrix Revisited* <sup>(2)</sup>, Bois shows how, in the early 50s, Ellsworth Kelly had also produced formulae for anti-composition, which disturbed and rendered undecidable any spatial attribution of figure and

ground. Important elements of Kelly's approach were the transfer of seen forms and the monochrome silhouette. In order to perceive the shape/colour combination for the final work it became necessary to 'forget the image'. Rather than 'making a picture', Kelly presented an object of seeing 'as is', by direct transfer. In this context, perceiving a 'figure' is a selection of the 'winner shape' and Bois relates this to Merleau-Ponty's description of 'seeing spaces between trees as things'. Image-making here becomes a route to 'selective' seeing, to mapping; what Gerhard Richter referred to as the 'apprehension' of the visual field <sup>(3)</sup>.

There is a fundamental difference between an 'image' and a 'picture'. Research into what constitutes an image has been largely scientific. In Remote Sensing – the science of gathering data using artificial satellites – 'image' is defined as: 'a spatial distribution of a physical property such as radiation, electric charge, conductivity, or reflectivity, mapped from another distribution of either the same or another physical property' <sup>(4)</sup>. A painted surface can certainly be thought of as a spatial distribution of reflectivity, but it is not always mapped from another distribution of that property – it can come straight out of the artist's head, or be the result of some predetermined procedure. The correspondence between a painting and the rest of the physical world, therefore, is convoluted and problematic. In contrast to an 'image' so defined, a 'picture' is semantically equivocal – it conveys little information that can be universally agreed upon. The term 'Picture' originally meant the process of painting and the result of painterly representation. The flatbed approach produces pictures of the world that are far more ambiguous than the straightforward imitation of visual appearance. Velázquez, Hals and Manet, for example, produced highly complex depictions of the visual field that display acute awareness of their own materiality, but they are not flatbeds. Their brushstrokes are indexical to the flat surface whilst producing illusory pictorial space, but, ultimately, they still ask us to completely buy into that space behind the panel. In contrast, true flatbeds can introduce the three types of visual sign to their surfaces and these can appear singly, or all at once: mimetic

iconography, such as mechanically reproduced or hand-painted perspective images (as in Andy Warhol's screen prints or Chuck Close's grids); texts and other symbols (Alighiero Boetti's collectively produced biro installations, for example); stand-alone indices of the flat surface or physical traces of objects that are not inherently pictorial (such as Johns' repeated use of isolated and dripping aerosol haloes and hand prints and Frank Stella's full frontal displays of paint application). The fact that Steinberg's flatbed 'lends itself to any content that does not evoke a prior optical event' means that work made in this mode will tend towards the 'pictorial' rather than the 'imagistic' (as defined in the terms of Remote Sensing) and, in the extreme, towards a surface tracking of



**Cicada – Jasper Johns**

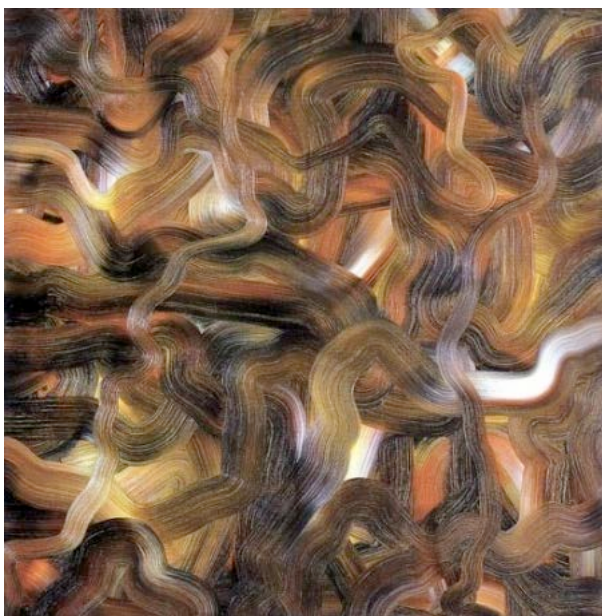
1979

Oil on canvas, 122 x 91 cm

material across the picture plane; to cartographic co-ordinates.

Cartographic tracking across the painted panel occurs in many disparate painters' works, as I have mentioned. My curatorial focus is on the output of artists who restrict themselves to working on a surface bounded by distinct limits, who are part of a tradition that

can be referred to as ‘easel’ painting. In most cases their work results in flat rectilinear panels. Harper’s *Orrery* is an exception and complicates matters in an interesting way. Firstly, it has no edges – its boundary is the surface area of the sphere it is painted on. Secondly, it is a physical globe instead of a notional space. Notional or imaginary spaces are one of the logical outcomes of painting’s cartographic tendencies. Johns’ *Cicada* of 1979, for example, posits a notional space that can be read as the map of a torus. The primary-coloured scheme of markings and texts ‘wrap around’: the right hand edge matches up with the left hand edge; the top with the bottom. In the *Orrery* there is no concession to two-dimensional flatness, so Harper’s brushy wanderings meet up directly with themselves. Finally its status as an ‘image’ is not straightforward – it does not mimic anything in particular, but is all the same highly suggestive of familiar floral and faunal patterns of growth. This is true of all of Harper’s current works, including those on discrete rectilinear panels. The antecedents for the brushy mark making in the *Orrery* and Harper’s wider oeuvre are the brushstrokes of Richter’s *Rot-Gelb-Blau* (*Red-Yellow-Blue*) series from the 1970s. These are flatbeds of curved meandering marks of constant width, which produce illusory pictorial depth. Richter’s brushstrokes had their origins in the greasy finger markings that he would repeatedly make on his emptied childhood dinner plate. Harper’s approach to mark



**Rot-Blau-Gelb – Gerhard Richter**  
1972  
Oil on canvas, 150 x 150 cm

making emphasises the fact that the painterly surface can be endlessly suggestive of natural formations: the surface and movement of water; geology in the landscape; planetary surfaces; clouds of dust and vapour; the earth viewed from the air. The *Orrery*’s title indicates that it should indeed be read as a model planet. The painterly surface is also suggestive of (and sometimes comprises) natural processes such as flow, extrusion, striation, bundling and traces of contact and movement. It is largely through the use of these latter set of actions in which Harper’s practice excels. He is surprisingly, and refreshingly, open about his methods. He mostly employs variations on brush markings, using a variety of standard and specialist brushes. He also uses decorative effects tools, such as wood-grain rockers and makes marks through removing wet paint by scraping or wiping into it. He sometimes shifts the paint around using jets of compressed air.

Applying carefully selected materials using a handcrafted approach is the reason why painting can operate in the cartographical mode – no other process enables indices to co-exist on the same surface as the other types of sign. It is an irony that the words and images presented here are the product of an information technology that has entirely bought into the worldview of the transparent projection plane. Still and movie cameras of every description employ the single optical viewpoint model of the Renaissance and CGI strives to imitate all of their aberrations and technical artefacts. Every computer has an illuminated window through which can be viewed the illusionistic virtual environment of the animated graphical user interface, depicted in glossy shallow relief. Television screens have developed ever more sophisticated ways of effacing their own materiality in the service of displaying views of somewhere else. The vast majority of representations produced today are made using this now global orthodoxy of the transparent projection plane mapped on to a rectangular grid of pixels. It is the principal mode of image capture, production, storage and display, but it can only ever produce icons or symbols. Only in the layouts of painted pictures is it possible to combine actual physical connections to referents with both resemblances of external objects and with denotations that lack dependence on

resemblance, or any real connection to an external referent. And only in painting is this particularly desirable.

The simultaneous cartographical assemblage of signs on the flatbed points to another of painting's unique and powerful characteristics, one that is common to all assembled still pictures. The constituent parts of such a picture, which have been built up over a period of time, can be seen together and all at once. This simultaneity gives painting a phenomenological quality in that it exists in isolation from the processes that brought it about and exhibits features contrary to those processes. Since it continuously exists in a completed state, it displays an appearance that persists beyond the limited duration of the actions of its construction. It becomes a kind of repository and redistributor of time. The many moments; hours; months of its assemblage are collected upon its surface and distilled into a perpetual display. The sum of its production time is therefore continuously augmented beyond its date of completion and this increasing sum is constantly available to the viewer. This temporal 'greater than the sum of its parts' characteristic gives the constructed still a gestalt presence. It operates in the present, for and of the moment. The manufactured still image, then, not only accrues and disseminates time, but is also the physical embodiment of present, past and future. The cartographical flatbed adds to this matrix the sophistication of all three types of visual sign and points to the continuing viability of painting as a discipline.

David Hockney recently made a case for the desirability of painting to contribute to the return to a pre-Renaissance view of the world<sup>(5)</sup>. He relates this to how the control of images passed firstly from the people to the Church, then on to the mass media and now is perhaps returning back to the people. He asserts that the static lens of a camera is only one – rather boring – means of depicting reality. Even the spherical photographs of Google Earth Street View have a single viewpoint at their centre. Hockney describes how the theory of perspective necessitates that the viewer remains stationary at a notional location, with the vanishing point standing at infinity (God is remote from us). Before optics and the invention of perspective, painting made

use of multiple viewpoints whose vanishing points were anywhere and everywhere – infinity was within the moving eye of the viewer (and God was within us). Hockney relates this to the continuing importance of a Cubist approach to depiction. The complete dissolution of the Renaissance picture plane, however, is not just about multiple or moving viewpoints because they remain predicated on the acceptance of notional views of a pictorial space. It is the multiple significations of painting's cartographic tendencies that can truly liberate us from post-Renaissance paralysis. The cartographical flatbed approach embraces not only the multiple viewpoints of Cubism, but the texts inscribed within it and within Dada, Vorticism and Futurism – along with the latter's conceptions of time, speed and action. It embraces the material surfaces of Minimalism and the dirt of Arte Povera, the supposed fineness of 'Good' and the excrescences of 'Bad'. Along the way, it has charted a shift from the individual to the participatory. It is like a roving scanner sampling multiple images, all modes of signification and the gamut of material transformation. It enables an infinite capacity for reinvention within the persistent mode of production called 'easel painting' and allows it to remain a medium that continues to be relevant to cultural debates in the contemporary world.

#### Notes

1. Leo Steinberg, *Other Criteria*, Oxford University Press, 1972, pp. 82-91
2. Yve-Alain Bois, *Kelly's Matrix Revisited*, paper presented at Ellsworth Kelly conference organised by the Serpentine Gallery at the Victoria & Albert Museum, 2006
3. Gerhard Richter, *The Daily Practice of Painting*, The MIT Press, 1995, p. 35
4. Cited in James Elkins, *The Object Stares Back*, Harcourt Inc., 1996, p. 69
5. Tom Hodgkinson, editor, *The Idler No. 43*, Idler Books, 2010, pp. 25-53

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