

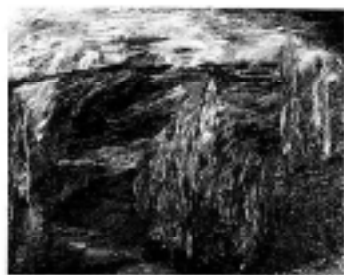
INTRODUCTION

Nicholas Alfrey

David Taborn's recent paintings confront the spectator with dense fields of pictorial incident. Surfaces are packed with detail, tonal and chromatic organisation is pushed to a point of reckless complexity, and their intricate and continually disrupted spaces defy negotiation. At the same time, the paint is applied in a bewildering range of gestures and processes. The overall effect is both exhilarating and demanding.

Richness and density have long been qualities characteristic of Taborn's work, and were as memorably in evidence ten years ago when he last exhibited in Nottingham. At that time his paintings offered a demonstration of how enthralling abstract art could be once the austere imperatives of high modernism had been relaxed enough to permit the free play of atmosphere and the illusion of space and light. But the complexity of the new pictures springs from an altogether different principle; not only have the artist's working methods and experiences changed in the intervening years, but the larger situation of abstract art itself has changed around him.

Landscape references had become explicit in many of the paintings Taborn exhibited in Nottingham back in 1982. The whole painted surface could be viewed as terrain: tilted away, lit up, built over, carved into, even partially dissolved. The picture space, even though often disclosed in an elliptical way, could still be resolved into foreground, mid-ground and distance. *Cyclades* is the largest of the paintings of this phase: the heavy impasto and brooding atmosphere convey a sense of ruin and encroaching darkness. Subsequently, however, Taborn has come to regard this neo-sublime idiom with considerable suspicion, wishing to distance himself from the portentousness that had suddenly become so prevalent in British art; he has also an underlying mistrust of the readiness in England to explain abstract art as landscape and vice-versa, or to think of landscape imagery as an escape clause by which to evade the full rigours of abstraction.



Cyclades



Machu Pichu

In *Machu Pichu* (1984), beyond a foreground tangle of scrolls, a deep receding plane seems to be marked out as a sort of landing site. How to read this if not as landscape? But what we might at first see as a sheer rock face closing off a valley of enigmatic monuments is also the abrupt insertion of an alien element, the single broad gesture of a spatula loaded with grey dragged over a still-wet base of Venetian red. It draws attention to the painting process, to the fact that a painting is the sum total of marks made in a variety of ways. At several points here these marks resist absorption into any coherent pictorial and spatial order.

In several of the paintings that follow (*Coming Up for Air*, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*) potentially sublime effects are kept at bay, partly by a sweetening of the overall palette, partly by keeping individual motifs small, so that no single feature imposes itself over any other. The space is not commanded by a single vantage point, and separate pockets of light and brief perspective sequences keep occurring across the pictorial field.

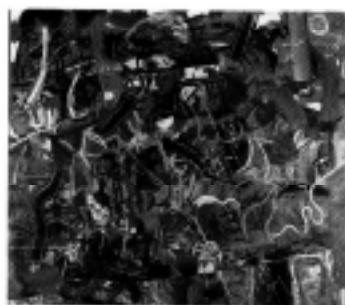
Apart from an increasingly sceptical attitude towards landscape elements (space, atmosphere) as usable ingredients in the painting, the question of working method had also become of pressing concern. It is undeniable that his most successful paintings to date depended for their effect on a powerful physicality, with densely-layered surfaces sometimes built up over substantial periods of time (the most extreme case is *Mantle*, whose richness is the outcome of years of intermittent activity). Was this physicality essential to the painting, or was there a way of achieving transparency, economy and directness without any loss of force? Taking an opposite tack, Taborn produced an occasional watercolour, as minimal as late Turner, where a simple motif of portal or avenue is dissolved into veils of colour. *Mingled Remains* (1985) is one of the few surviving works where comparable effects are sought

in oils: a delicate mesh of colour, turning to an ominous filtered red on the right, as if a wooded recess has been illuminated for night-fighting.

Early in 1989 at two exhibitions in London, at the Woodlands Gallery and then at Gallery 202, Taborn showed a group of paintings in which visual complexity is combined with a new directness of approach. These paintings offered convincing proof that a transformation of means had now been achieved. In paintings like *Red Line Calls Time*, clean colour accents float against a space no longer bounded by foreground or horizon; at the same time, a fluent and inventive linear aspect is allowed full play. The transformation is due to a change both in technique and attitude. By working with alkyd resins directly on to a linen ground, fields of colour could be established at the outset, and the initial compositional elements deployed quickly. But it was the experience of working with the composer Nigel Osborne on a project with Ballet Rambert that brought about a perhaps unexpected resolution of purpose. In a process where improvisation, invention and performance were central, it became possible to recognise that a painting could be the outcome of a sequence of marks and gestures where everything has to count within a given time as well as within the canvas space (*Exeat*, 1989). It was even possible to think of such a sequence as forming a narrative of a kind.

Between the Cold Moon, the Earth and Crystal Palace and *Crystal Palace Agape* (both 1988) are the two outstanding paintings of this phase; they are lyrical and strangely uplifting in effect. In both, a whole gamut of painterly marks and traces is carried on a loose linear armature of arcs and ribbons, discs and streamers. The paint is brushed, poured or dripped, applied wet or dry, thick or thin, varying constantly from soft-edged to sharp focus.

In the paintings completed since the Gallery 202 exhibition the fundamental approach may not have altered any further but the character of the work certainly has. The two *Crystal Palace* pictures had readily legible motifs which could be understood as either floating in space or adhering to the surface. In subsequent paintings, such as *The Crossing* or *Invitation Only* (both 1990), but especially in the most recent group, shown at the Grob Gallery in February-March 1992, the texture thickens and the space fills up with incident. Individual motifs are often brighter, harder, sometimes quirky and vividly animated. The juxtaposition of different painting processes gets exaggerated too, so that thick whorls or heavy bosses of encrusted pigment can build up; elsewhere delicately marbled passages are dovetailed next to slabs or stripes or tiny galaxies of spattered paint. Some sections are glazed over, others cancelled out or obliterated altogether. However emphatic individual episodes or devices may be, no single order emerges, whether of space, structure or narrative; the paintings are governed by a principle of discontinuity.



Idiot Greens

The linear aspect which has become progressively more evident in these works, and is most strongly marked in the two most recent, *Factual Nonsense* and *Idiot Greens*, has opened up a new rôle for drawing in the working process. Since 1989 Taborn has worked frequently with charcoal and pastel on paper and has produced a series of elaborate finished compositions. These drawings are often openly indebted to the masters of twentieth century abstraction; Kandinsky, Miro and Gorky. The tone often seems playful, though there is no suggestion here of the calculated ironies or the knowing disconnectedness that characterise the allusions to the past made by so many contemporary artists. They are a frank celebration of what has already been achieved in abstract art, and an affirmation that the tradition is still a vital one. The drawings run parallel to the paintings,



Untitled Pastel

though they clearly feed ideas into them. There is a limit to the layering and opacity a pastel can be made to carry, but while they may be more immediately accessible than the oils, in their complicated luminosity and energetic invention they do begin to approach the paintings' satisfying density.

The confident and assertive surface of the new paintings, and the sense of abundance they convey, are deceptive: beneath lies a world of unstable relations and fractured systems. As well as a virtuoso display of what might still be done in painting, they offer also interrupted glimpses of various twentieth-century approaches, from Kandinsky's apocalyptic improvisations to Miro's creatures and Pollock's webs, but no one vision or set of laws can ever prevail amidst the multiplicity of cross-cut elements. For all the excitement generated, the paintings are underscored by the recognition that all propositions have only a limited and uncertain force.