

## Palinode. Green On Red Gallery 2005

### *Modernist Painting Redivivus: John Cronin's Abstractions* by Donald Kuspit

John Cronin's paintings are profoundly beautiful: their vibrant, sensual surfaces, composed of ingeniously nuanced brushstrokes, seemingly illuminated from within, have the "sensate-objectivity of beauty" that is the aesthetic core of art, as the philosopher Alexander Baumgarten argued. The illusion of inner light, giving the flat painting an inexplicable depth, has its source in the smooth, radiant aluminium planes underneath the paint as well as the outer light they seem to absorb and dissemble. Cronin's colors appear to reflect light even as they are suffused with it. Veiled and filtered by the atmospheric color, the subtly intense light shines with revelatory promise. Cronin's paintings are visual epiphanies: tours de force of perceptually "living form," to use the poet Friedrich Schiller's phrase.

They in fact have a peculiarly poetic format: the broad, linear brushstrokes seem to be written--scrawled--across the page-like surface. Rhythmically repeated, sometimes horizontally, sometimes vertically, each stroke seems to gain momentum as it streaks across the planar surface, reflexively elaborating itself in the course of doing so. Each stroke is climactic in itself--a sort of autonomous grand gesture--even as it remains embedded in the larger pattern of the painting. It is a kind of all-over painterly construction: simultaneously geometricized gesture and gesturalized geometry, each brushstroke remains bound to every other in a grid, sometimes more implicit than explicit. There is an air of controlled excitement to Cronin's paintings: the grid gives them a classical poise--pre-ordained structure, as it were--the headlong, tangible gestures have a romantic flair.

Cronin is a process painter, or, if one wants, an abstract expressionist. His painterly gestures seem inexhaustibly energetic, as though driven by hidden currents, although their (often) precisely delineated edges and (relative) regularity suggest a certain constraint, perhaps more imposed than inherent. However self-dramatizing and forceful, Cronin's gestures have boundaries. The great abstract expressionist achievement is to make paint seem like a freshly discovered, magically mercurial material, even as it also looks exquisitely refined and precious. It is Cronin's achievement; it suggests his total mastery of his material. But for all their conspicuous physicality Cronin's paintings are covertly sublime: they suggest romantic yearning for the unrepresentable. They have expressive significance as well as material power. Indeed, the more physically exciting they become, the more they seem dense with unutterable emotion. Ecstatically compact and intimate--Cronin eschews the mural expansiveness of late abstract expressionist painting, with its "metaphysical" pretensions--Cronin's paintings resonate with the unnamable "superfine feelings" that Kandinsky thought were the gist of abstract painting. If aesthetics "deals with the subtlest experiences of sensation," as the philosopher Johann Gottfried von Herder thought, then it necessarily deals with the subtlest emotional experiences. Each of Cronin's peculiarly delirious, moody brushstrokes is a singular aesthetic unity of subtle sensation and feeling. Compiled and structured in his painting, they hammer home the simultaneity of immediate sensation and subliminal feeling.

The palinode series, 2004 and Nightingale series, 2002 suggest that Cronin's paintings are not simply material process absolutized. Does the series allude to Keats' poem "Ode to a Nightingale?" The songbird is a familiar romantic symbol, all the more so because its melodies are often heard at night, making them seem mysterious. But I am arguing that the literary import of Cronin's paintings is secondary to their purity: abstract color-saturated works, they mirror, with whatever dynamic distortions, the flat surfaces on which they are painted. Indeed, they seem to

embody flatness--give it a painterly body, as it were. Their textural richness adumbrates their flatness, which informs every brushstroke. This flatness, repeatedly finessed and confirmed by every gesture, however extravagant, is the telltale sign of modernist painting--self-referential or "tautological" painting, as Clement Greenberg argued. Another important sign is the acknowledgement of the painting's edges, evident in Cronin's brushstrokes as well as in the fact that in some paintings they abruptly stop at the top edge of the work, in a way reminiscent of Morris Louis--one of Greenberg's post-painterly abstractionists. I am suggesting that Cronin is a modernist painter--but a modernist painter with a difference: he reconciles romantic expressivity and positivistic physicality, which Greenberg, the originator of the concept of modernist painting, said could not be reconciled.

Cronin offers us a new abstract "musical painting," as both Greenberg and Kandinsky called it--one in which seemingly staccato brushstrokes converge in a new harmony. One might call it a post-apocalyptic" abstract painting, to refer to a term that has been applied to Kandinsky's all-over paintings--or a post-"chaotic" abstract painting, to use the term that was applied to Pollock's all-over paintings when they first appeared. Like them, Cronin is a romantic, but his romanticism is less troubled and violent. One might say that where Kandinsky and Pollock orchestrate on a grand scale, Cronin's paintings are chamber music. Their romanticism is concentrated and insinuating rather than cosmic and outspoken, which makes for a deeper emotional as well as sensuous experience.

For Greenberg, romanticism, whether in updated Expressionistic or Surrealistic form, was old-fashioned compared to positivism, which is quintessentially modern. Positivistic modernist painting may convey what Greenberg called the mood of the *Zeitgeist*--he spoke, in very general, thin terms, of the "optimistic materialism" of early modern art and the "existential pessimism" of Abstract Expressionism--but this hardly meant that it was romantically self-indulgent. Impersonal fact rather than personal feeling was uppermost in it, he said--feeling, such as it was, was an epiphenomenal effect of candid, mastered fact. Since Greenberg wrote, modernist painting has become an academic cliché; flatness has been repudiated by such early advocates as Frank Stella and Larry Poons, and Greenberg's emphasis on the "material facts of the medium" as the be-all and end-all of art has given way to ideological conceptualism. Indeed, painting has been regarded as dead or in mourning for itself, as one theorist ironically puts it.

But painting has obviously remained alive and well, if one cares to look. So has modernist painting: Cronin breathes new esthetic life into it--by making it romantic, thus breaking the taboo on the expression of seemingly "excess feeling" that Greenberg said has more to do with life than art, which is always concerned with "decorative unity" rather than chaotic self-expression. (Chaim Soutine was his example of a painter who confused the two, thus failing as a painter however much he succeeded in expressing his conflicted feelings.) Restoring what Greenberg dismissed as "the preconscious and unconscious order of effects" that were beside the point of "the literal order of effects" that gave the painting its aesthetic authenticity, Cronin creates a psychodramatically new modernist painting. Cronin reminds us that each without the other is meaningless and uncreative, resulting in an aesthetically unsatisfactory--even creatively immature--art. One of the complaints about modernist painting, particularly in its post-painterly version, was that the expressivity had been leached out of it in the name of literalness. This is the reason that Stella and Poons questioned it while trying to make it more expressively resonant rather than simply esthetically self-sufficient. I think that Cronin has succeeded more than they have because he returned to the condensed easel format, as I have noted, which allows for a greater concentration of purpose. Without the deepening expressive effect, modernist painting becomes empty estheticism--hollow beauty, as it were--as seems to have happened in the work of Ellsworth Kelly, Kenneth Noland, and Jules Olitski in the sixties. There is a thinness to their surface that suggests expressive inadequacy.

In contrast, Cronin is a romantically dynamic literalist. In a sense, his works are postmodernist modernist painting, for they bring together what Greenberg thought had to be kept apart. Modernist painting had become routinely matter of fact and boring, but in Cronin it once again becomes a source of tangible pleasure. Indeed, Cronin's paintings are seductive--profoundly erotic. They have that "something strange"--something romantic--that the philosopher Francis Bacon thought gave "the proportions of (classical) beauty"--we see such proportions in the arrangement of Cronin's brushstrokes--their impact.

Cronin's expressive extension of modernist painting would be unacceptable to Greenberg, but Cronin's statement that his "work is concerned with painting in the age of artificial intelligence" would be more acceptable to him. It reinforces Greenberg's belief that modernist painting has a certain scientific bent. As he said, "the Neo-Impressionists were not altogether misguided when they flirted with science." The purer--more modernist--painting becomes, the more "scientific" and "consistent" the method of its making, and the more the final painting has a "technological" look. It becomes unequivocally artificial - an abstract version of what Baudelaire called an "artificial paradise"; there are no naturalistic illusions--no hint of verisimilitude of any kind. There is a certain "scientific" consistency and precision to Cronin's handling, however dynamic; the one does not preclude the other, as Greenberg noted. Also, the aluminium surface on which Cronin paints is a technological advance--indeed, represents "the technological age" in which Cronin says we live (but his romanticism shows that he refused to allow the age to be totally technological)--and gives the work a technological sheen. Glossy aluminium is certainly a more modern material--a manufactured material--than the natural cloth canvas or wooden panel on which paintings have traditionally been made. Thus to put old-fashioned oil paint on new-fangled aluminium is to renew painting that is, to make new perceptual effects and expressive resonance possible. If one compares Cronin's stripes with those of Gene Davis, Louis, and Noland, we see just how new.

Strange as it may seem to say so, in critically extending modernist painting by "modernizing" it through his use of aluminium planes and expressive excess, Cronin reinforces Greenberg's theory that modernist painting is inherently self-critical. As Greenberg famously wrote in his 1965 essay on modernist painting: "the essence of Modernism lies...in the use of the characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself--not in order to subvert it, but to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence." Cronin is clearly competent and disciplined, but the important point to be made about his work is that its critical "revision" of modernist painting gives it a greater "esthetic consistency"--Greenberg's term--than it had before, in the sense in which Greenberg said that consistency made for authenticity.

The quotations from Greenberg are from "Modernist Painting" (1965), *The New Art*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: Dutton, 1973), pp. 66-77