

Fox Galleries is proud to present *Odyssey* by Tyra Hutchens. This new paintings are part of Hutchens's ongoing body of work, analysed and illuminated by Simon Lawrie in the following essay:

Filling the void: dark romanticism and deconstruction in the recent paintings of Tyra Hutchens

By Simon Lawrie

Much of modern and contemporary art entails a mechanism of de-familiarisation; objects are displaced from their natural context, formally augmented or distorted, portrayed and experienced in a new light. Amid the burgeoning visual languages of modernism, literary theorist Viktor Shklovsky proposed that 'the technique of art is to make objects "unfamiliar," to make forms difficult to increase the difficulty and length of perception'.¹ In other words, art can serve to counteract our habituation to the world and things. The operation of *ostranenie*, translated as 'de-familiarisation' or 'estrangement', is seen throughout recent art history, and contemporary art often relies on similar methods of repurposing, recontextualising or re-presenting everyday objects, subjects and situations.

Tyra Hutchens takes the unfamiliar not as an end but as a beginning, as cause rather than effect. In this new series of paintings and drawings, it is the recognisable itself that he renders problematic, inscrutable, and often uncanny. Objects and situations are grasped only cursorily, and seem to have an autonomous symbolic agency. These works waver between abstraction and figuration, destabilised by fundamental spatial ambiguities. Such visual equivocation immediately unsettles any bearing and gives the work an alluring complexity.

The exhibition marks a return to painting with oil on canvas for Hutchens, who has worked primarily with sculpture, installation, and drawing for the last decade. His process does retain aspects of these disciplines however; at some later stage in the painting process, with oil pastel on paper, he creates cut outs of provisional pictorial elements that are then arranged on the canvas to help determine the finished composition. He often relies on a classical conception of compositional harmony and pictorial balance, and employs traditional layering and glazing techniques, with underpainting giving a rich lustre and depth to each surface.

These are nuanced syntheses of diverse pictorial codes and styles, bringing together classical, modernist and contemporary tropes. Hutchens references specific paintings by reproducing a particular colour scheme or composition. For instance, *Melt* features a section of sky deriving from Salvatore Rosa's *Landscape with Mercury and the Dishonest Woodman* (c. 1650). The colour scheme and painterly sketched background in Velasquez's portrait of the dwarf jester Don Diego de Acedo (c. 1645) resurfaces in Hutchens' *Drop*. Elsewhere, Goya's portrait of Brother Juan Fernandez de Rojas (1800) is transformed into a mysterious dark heap topped by a hollow vessel in *Mound*. Echoes of certain moments in modern and contemporary painting are also apparent: the dislocated picture planes of cubism, absurd objects from the oneiric worlds of Ernst or Tanguy, and the dense materiality of Richter's abstractions.

Elements of romanticism resonate throughout Hutchens' work, pointing to his wider literary and philosophical concerns. The romantic movement can be understood in part as a reaction against certain developments of the enlightenment era. Its return to nature countered the scientific rationalisation of the natural world and the Industrial revolution. Its moralism and sentimentality contrasted with the cold rationality of empirical enquiry, a paradigmatic opposition between art and science that is perhaps less clear today. Hutchens' work could be seen as a contemporary parallel, questioning the psychological and cultural effects of our reliance on technology and impugning the environmental destruction of the anthropocene.² The spiritual glorification of nature that defined romantic painting is here stripped of its sublime grandeur to reveal a microcosm of inscrutable forces.

Romanticism has often taken a gothic turn in works such as Shelley's *Frankenstein*, itself a precursor to modern science fiction and horror genres, and it is this darker romantic strain that most clearly informs these paintings. In its initial impression, *Eclipse* sits uneasily between Rothko's colour fields

and Friedrich's ominous landscapes; a sparse area of dark reddish brown above a smaller blackish block suggests a traditional landscape composition. Despite his muted, shadowy palette, Hutchens' technique of underpainting gives an atmospheric glow to the painting, and a faint ring of light emanates from the upper half of the picture. Uncertainty and foreboding gradually eclipse beauty, as if a disastrous natural event is imminent. There is the sense of bearing witness to a cataclysm, an atmosphere of apocalypse. Yet at its etymological root the word apocalypse refers to revelation, highlighting the concurrence of destruction and production, of obfuscation and insight.

This dark uncertainty characterises many aspects of romantic thought. Indeed, at the heart of romantic philosophy and aesthetic theory there can often be discerned a traumatic subjective encounter with the emptiness of the real. As the American academic Robert Hughes has observed, romantic theories of art 'proceed from the given of a subject facing the void and elaborate a theory of art specifically as addressing that unspeakable ontological hole.'³ From Schiller and Heidegger to Sartre and Badiou, this encounter with a vacuous mute presence can be seen to define contemporary modes of being and artistic production. For example, Sartre sees the hole as a nothingness that haunts being by causing fear and anxiety, a kind of ontological horror vacui that is obsessively filled in order to create the semblance of wholeness and plenitude.⁴ The prevalence of romanticism in modern and contemporary theory is noted,⁵ and its darker side is particularly clear in poststructuralist thought. In this regard, it will be instructive to consider in more depth the aesthetic and ontological concerns of Lacan, thinker of the void par excellence. The mutual relations he establishes between language, ontology, and art can clarify Hutchens artistic and philosophical trajectory in these recent paintings.

Lacan reconsidered Freudian psychoanalytic theory and expanded poststructuralist discourse, which sought to destabilise meaning and undermine the binary structural hierarchy of language and texts. The semiotic insights of deconstruction were integral to this project, proposing that a signifier has no meaning in and of itself but creates meaning in its difference from other signifiers. At the same time, signs always carry the trace of their opposite; 'man' has no meaning except in relation to 'woman', and in this way a sign always implies or is constituted by its own absence. For Lacan, this aspect of language was also true of being itself. Being is predicated on desire, he contends, not in the sense of need or want but in the incessant striving towards an

unattainable object. As such, being itself is borne of a lack or absence. He explains that 'Desire is a relation of being to lack. This lack is the lack of being properly speaking. It isn't the lack of this or that, but lack of being whereby the being exists. This lack is beyond anything that can represent it. It is only ever represented as a reflection on a veil.'⁶

In Lacan's view, language comes between an individual and the world to create an irremediable division and alienation in the subject. Any experience of reality is determined by the systems of language used to order and refer to it. In short, 'the world of words creates the world of things.'⁷ This entanglement in the Symbolic order of signification and meaning eclipses what Lacan terms the Real, an order of authenticity beyond the endless play of signifiers that constitutes language and the psyche. The Real resists signification, remaining outside language and representation in a realm that is undifferentiated by conscious apprehension. Yet human reality is always mediated through language, which renders direct experience or pure sensation impossible. Hutchens undertakes an exploration of this problematic mediation while affirming the indefinite and the unfamiliar.

Poststructuralism had important implications concerning authorship and artistic intention. If the meaning of a sign is not inherent and is defined by other signs then a text, being constituted by signs, has no durable meaning in itself and defers to a larger semiotic system of intertextuality. In this regard, Kristeva proposed that 'any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another.'⁸ Furthermore, the author cannot imprint their intended meaning in a text, as this interpretation is always contingent and multivalent.⁹ It is perhaps with this in mind that Hutchens weaves together the stylistic and pictorial codes of painting's history and suspends any particular subject or meaning in indiscernibility.

The tendency towards abstraction in these paintings hints at the heart of Hutchens' project, the deferral of concrete meaning. In places, the texture and materiality of his approach recall the smears and trawls of Richter's abstractions. Informing Hutchens both technically and theoretically, Richter has observed that 'a picture presents itself as the unmanageable, the illogical, the meaningless... it takes away our certainty because it deprives a thing of its meaning and its name.'¹⁰ Throughout the exhibition, Hutchens' consistent oscillation between abstraction and figuration draws attention to the point at which sense coheres, where signs converge into comprehensible meaning.

Abstraction can admit the limitations of figurative representation by gesturing toward the unrepresentable. Analysing Shklovsky's theory of art in more depth, it becomes clear that he negates the possibility of direct comprehension of reality, instead 'locating real perception at an unspecifiable temporally anterior and spatially other place, at a mythic "first time" of naïve experience, the loss of which to automatization is to be restored by aesthetic perceptual fullness.'¹¹ For Shklovsky, art serves to redress the void of a lost and pure intuition of the world through the vital expressive potential of art's formal properties. In this way his aesthetic theory bears affinity with the romantic tradition and Lacan's conception of being and lack, suggesting an unattainable realm akin to the Real.

Hutchens' recurrent motif of the cylindrical vessel presents a patently Lacanian figure. In 'Ethics of Psychoanalysis', Lacan posits the object of a vase as symbolic of his insight that presence is determined and constituted by absence:

This nothing in particular that characterizes it in its signifying function is that which in its incarnated form characterizes the vase as such. It creates the void and thereby introduces the possibility of filling it. Emptiness and fullness are introduced into a world that by itself knows not of them. It is on the basis of this fabricated signifier, this vase, that emptiness and fullness as such enter the world, neither more nor less, and with the same sense.¹²

The vase defines negative space and gives shape to emptiness, it allows the void to exist. In other words, 'if the vase may be filled, it is because in the first place in its essence it is empty.'¹³ Crucially, the model of the vase also allows Lacan to illustrate the nature of discourse and art as created from nothing and defined in relation to a lack. For him, art articulates and gives shape to the void of objects and signification, where 'the fashioning of the signifier and the introduction of a gap or a hole in the real is identical.'¹⁴ A vase can be considered as 'an object made to represent the existence of the emptiness at the center of the real that is called the Thing,' where 'this emptiness as represented in the representation presents itself as nihil, as nothing'.¹⁵ Similarities emerge here between Lacanian ontology and the romantic elements of Hutchens' work.

Hutchens' dynamic objects populate an uncertain expanse that is defined by mixed spatial cues. Potentially microscopic or macrocosmic, the atmosphere in these paintings invokes the mysterious and counter-intuitive realm of quantum physics. In *Hover*, a fleshy canister seems to float in a suspended and abstracted pictorial space. Hutchens' brisk brushwork belies a careful composition, without any visual markers by which to gauge the proper scale or nature of these objects. *Slide* depicts a similar cylindrical agent in a more obscure and animated situation. The radicality of quantum theory lies in its break with empirical reality and its inherent unintelligibility.¹⁶ For instance, the concept of wave-particle duality suggests that a quantum-scale object can take two different forms and be in two separate places at once, discounting any objective standpoint of observation. Indeed, the atoms which compose all living and inanimate things consist mostly of empty space. Existing language can only approximate quantum behaviour, interpretation is indefinite and meaning is elusive. In this sense it shares aspects of poststructuralist thought, in particular that of Lacan,¹⁷ and parallels Hutchens' suspension of the sign in undecidability.

The ubiquitous vase-like figure in Hutchens' recent work is conspicuously phallic. It is worth noting how, for Lacan, the symbolic phallus becomes an emblem of signification itself and metonymic of representation. In 'Signification of the Phallus', he describes it as a pure signifier that simultaneously

denotes its own lack in castration. It allows meaning to emerge by pointing to a lack of meaning.¹⁸ *Apart* presents a tubular object and its spectral twin occupying an unspecified scene. The title when pronounced invokes both integration and separation, a part and apart. The two objects offer competing notions of positive and negative space, and tensions arise between opacity and penetrability, substance and immateriality.

Below offers similarly phallic motifs in an atmosphere of cataclysmic romanticism. In a dramatic rupture, vessels are thrust from a surrounding black void toward the centre of the image. Rendered in fleshy paint that resembles terracotta slip or wet skin, these phallic forms protrude and encroach upon a perturbed landscape. Lacan's proposition of the interdependence of being and lack finds a visual correlate here. The phallus, as prime signifier and basis of representation, emerges from the surrounding emptiness. If, as for Lacan, these vase-like forms are indicative of signs in general, then Hutchens' image becomes asemic, hovering in the space of meaning without allowing any to be conferred. It is perhaps a depiction of meaning's own mechanism, where hollow containers emerge from nothing to be filled with anything.

Artists are rightfully wary of being pinned down with explanations, and Hutchens' new series of paintings certainly avoids such fixity and stagnation. Meaning is contingent and precarious, issuing forth in ambiguity from between forms and abstractions, figures and grounds, styles and histories. The trauma and calamity of a dark romanticism colours these canvases, offset by the ontological and semiotic insights of Lacanian theory and deconstruction. These enigmatic works address the lacuna between words and things, between representation and reality, intimating an existence that is anterior to our experience of it. Hutchens' synthesis of pictorial schemes, objects and environments creates an atmosphere of liminal familiarity: equivocal entities and indefinite spaces point to the inherent instability, but also the potentiality, of meaning in our relationship to the world.

1. Viktor Shklovsky, *Theory of Prose*, Dalkey Archive Press, USA, 1991 (1917), p.16

2. See Hutchens' previous exhibitions *Remnant Culture* (2004) and *Acceleration Interrupted* (2006), which explore the intersection of technology, culture and consciousness: <http://cargocollective.com/tyrahutchens/About-Tyra-Hutchens>. See also Sheridan Palmer's essay in this catalogue, which touches on Hutchens' ethical and environmental concerns in the present exhibition.

3. Robert Hughes, *Ethics, Aesthetics and the Beyond of Language*, SUNY Press, 2010, p.183

4. Jean Paul Sartre, 'The Hole', in *Existentialism and Human Emotions*, trans. Hazel E Barnes, New York Philosophical Library, 1957, pp.84–90

5. For a thorough and philosophically oriented account of this tendency see Justin Clemens, *The Romanticism of Contemporary Theory: Institution, Aesthetics, Nihilism*, Ashgate, Aldershot, 2003

6. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book II: The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis 1954–1955*, ed. Jacques Alain-Miller, Cambridge University Press, 1988, p.223

7. Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan, Tavistock Publications, London, 1977, p.65

8. Julia Kristeva, *Word, Dialogue, and Novel. Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. Leon S. Roudiez, trans. Thomas Gora et al., Columbia University Press, New York, 1980 (1977), p.66

9. See Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', in *Aspen*, no. 5–6, Fall–Winter 1967, Roaring Fork Press, New York City, <http://www.ubu.com/asp/asp5and6/index.html>; Accessed 10 May 2016
10. Gerhard Richter, Dietmar Elger and Hans Ulrich Obrist, *Text: Writings, Interviews and Letters 1961–2007*, Thames and Hudson, London, 2009, pp.32–33
11. Lawrence Crawford, 'Viktor Shklovskij: Differance in Defamiliarization', *Comparative Literature*, Volume 36 Issue 3, January 1984, p.218
12. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959-1960*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, Routledge, London, 1992, p.120
13. Lacan, 1992, p.12
14. Lacan, 1992, p.121
15. Lacan, 1992, p.121
16. For a brief but relevant overview see Tom Chivers, 'The 10 weirdest physics facts, from relativity to quantum physics', *The Telegraph*, 12 Nov 2009, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/science/6546462/The-10-weirdest-physics-facts-from-relativity-to-quantum-physics.html>; Accessed 25 April 2016
17. For a more detailed exploration of these affinities see Slavoj Žižek, 'Lacan with Quantum Physics', in Jon Bird, Barry Curtis et al (eds.), *Futurenatural: Nature, Science, Culture*, Routledge, London, 1996, pp.270–292
18. See Jacques Lacan, 'Signification of the Phallus', in *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink, W. W. Norton and Co., New York, 2006 (1966), pp.575–584

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