

## **Craig Gough: Color as a Lifeline**

**As a New York-based writer, I am often troubled—and I might also say fatigued—by the persistence of the New York’s adherence to gestural abstraction. This is not to dismiss the genre’s achievements, which can be characterized as highly accomplished. Instead, I hope to enjoy the paintings as they are: often casually eloquent examples of art produced within a relatively narrow spectrum of expressiveness. The problem lies in the fact that abstract expressionism and its idealized conveyance of feeling have been remarked upon and apotheosized to the point where the movement feels like an exercise in cultural posturing, rather than an experiment in art. As a result, it is experienced as a celebration of the more jingoistic aspects of the American way of life, which remains determined to present the ab-ex moment as culturally unique—as though handed to us by the providence of the gods. Indeed, we treat the three major artists of the school—de Kooning, Pollock, and Gorky—as angelic messengers gifted with an astonishingly new style. While I fully recognize that American art of the mid-twentieth century must be recognized as major, I am just as determined not to let my praise slip into idolatry, as sometimes happens with critics writing on such painting. One can sometimes pay tribute more effectively by criticizing first; the tendency of American writers to rehash ab-ex art as evidencing a legacy of nearly celestial implementation needs to be taken down a notch—or two.**

**One major reason for undoing the rhetoric of America’s cultural achievements is that abstraction in general, and gestural abstraction in particular, do not belong to New York alone. Our history needs a revisionist perception, one that recognizes that strong abstract painting exists not only in America, but also throughout the world. But not enough work has been done: although there are exhibitions here that measure the achievement of European abstraction, unfortunately we have not done so with art from the Pacific Rim, in particular Australia, which has a strong tradition of its own in painting, but which has**

**been marginalized culturally in America because of its youthful art history and geographical location. An accomplished abstractionist such as Sydney-based Alun Leach-Jones, now in his prime as a painter, offers a window into the complex set of cultural influences that are his generation's legacy, which also work in marvelous ways in the paintings of Craig Gough, who maintains his studio in Central Victoria.**

**It must be said of Gough, the subject of this essay, that he is a well-traveled artist, with stints in New York City. So he has had the chance to see first hand the paintings New York is known for. Remarkably, however, Gough has gone his own way as a painter, creating notable color-based abstractions that both talk to and fend off the weight of the New York School. This does not mean that his engaging, lively style as an artist would not fit here; instead, the manner of his luminescent art, which hints at figuration often enough that the term abstractionist does not completely describe him, feels different in both external approach and internal intention. The perception that Gough is a global practitioner of his vocation, and that his art reaches out toward an inspired dialogue based on both similarity and contrast, makes it clear the independence of his thinking belongs to a much broader perception of painting than the examples of abstract expressionism would allow. In fact, the particulars of Gough's achievement—the saturated colors, well-developed compositional structures, and delicate balance between figurative and nonobjective art—represent a remarkable foray into what can only be understood as an international language.**

**In Gough's hands, painting is protean, something that eludes any easy characterization. His style, which aligns with high culture, is an inventive composite of overlapping passages of color, often intimating landscape without directly reporting on it. Popular culture's postures and organic treatment of form has pretty much been internalized in America; for example, we can see the influence of the comic book on the bent canvases of the late New York painter Elizabeth Murray. But Gough is a different kind of artist, someone who has made his way through the**

**accomplished colorations of the French, in particular Matisse—hence Gough’s emphasis on reverie and evocative form instead of popular culture. Given that America is imperial in its cultural distributions, and that it is a major source of primary popular imagery, it makes sense that so many of our artists give the nod to a Disneyworld imagination. But Gough is doing something different, which is linked to historical lineages that sustain him as a painter. The colors themselves—luminous examples of blue, yellow, reds, along with forest greens—aim toward contemplative mind rather than try for aggressive stimulation, often the hallmark of recent American painting. There is a unspoken clarity of intention in Gough’s work, allowing him greater freedom for nuance and perception.**

**One can see the amplifying color in the artist’s recent efforts. In Primary No. 2 (2014), the painting is wonderfully reticent, mostly abstract in effect but also evoking a window, a flight of stairs, perhaps the back of a chair. Structures and perceptions become one and the same, relying on passages and fields of color that relate to each other harmoniously. On the left, a geometrically outlined blue field angles downward from the top of the painting; it gives way to large organic and straight-edged fields of yellow, luminescent against the orange and red ground. Toward the bottom right, one finds a blue rectangle—Gough’s blues seem to come from another, more perfect world—that stands on top of an organic olive-green form. While the figurative hints give the painting its compelling structure, the composition also is strengthened by the impressive balance of hue and shape. Primary No. 2 is a memorable study of how color and form merge to affect the audience, using means that are expressive beyond the sum of their parts. The intuition that the paintings adhere to an abiding sense of nature is built upon Gough’s keen sense for fields of color, developed in relation to the rest of the painting.**

**The work is terrific as a picture. Yet there is a larger question that needs to be asked of paintings as a genre, which has been on the defensive for a while. Actually, the dispute seems nearly absurd when one considers that no matter how entrenched—or**

**moribund—painting appears to be as a contemporary genre, it is clear that its relations to the past and its importance to the present remain strong. In fact, painting may well be cared about in ways that performance art and high-tech art are not. This has to do with the prestige given conceptualism, one of whose consequences is the emphasis of intellect over other aspects of fine art. Painting of course can be conceptual, but it does not necessarily feed off ideas. Instead, at its best, it aligns with craft, feeling, and thought. Gough's work fits this arrangement of qualities extremely well. The lyricism of his art shows that poetry in pictures still survives, despite the depredations of current life. That its continuance should be questioned seems far from the point. Instead, we need new ways of talking about—indeed, justifying—the current paintings we see. This is because as a genre, the picture is not going away. Indeed, it is spreading worldwide as a category—for example, figurative oil painting from China has developed into a strong practice of its own.**

**Yet Gough's strength as a painter demonstrates a genuine awareness of historical convention. This means that his acuity as an artist exists in dialogue with the past—and not as a merely derived activity. In *Blue Space 3* (2007), the composition is more conventionally a landscape, depicting homes, an entryway, and vegetation. The blues and even the blacks put forth a visionary radiance, a description that I feel is key to the appreciation of Gough's art. For an American viewer, there is some sense of a connection between Gough and the German-American painter Oscar Bluemner, also an advanced colorist who felt that emotion and hue are interwoven. The similarity may not be terribly close, but its existence offers evidence that in today's world of painting, picture-making's inspiration turns on individual connections rather than broad cultural affiliations. This means that achievements such as Gough's are mediated by personal enthusiasms, not by belonging to major movements. Pluralism, evident in American art since the early 1970s, has become worldwide. As time goes on, and travel becomes a commonplace activity for artists—for painters in particular—it will likely turn out that individual passions, regardless of culture and even of**

**epochal movements, will determine the context of the picture, which no longer owes allegiance to any particular period or place.**

**Primary (2013) also is conceived of as a place in addition to its abstract qualities. It shows a fiercely red cube with two windows on the top of the wall facing the viewer; they lead to a house-like structure in the left window and plant-like forms in the right window. The sky is yellowish-orange, and on the facing wall, there are three geometric shapes: one blue, one green, and one yellow, the latter with a slightly rough top. The magnetism of the painting is undeniable; it draws the viewer's eye inexorably across the composition, surprising him or her into recognizing the wonderful self-sufficiency of the picture. As a work, Primary not only stands as a reference to primary colors, it also implies that the artist is referring to primary matters of importance. The painting thus becomes, in addition to its brilliant use of hues, a comment on what holds sway in art. One of the strongest aspects of Gough's work has to do with the way he balances color with structure; the sense of fabrication is a major part of experiencing his art. These structures are not overly complex, but they necessarily establish a basis for the more lyrically explorative aspect of his painting. They respond to formal analysis quite well, but for this viewer their staying power has to do with the poetic exuberance of their expression.**

**One of the most important things we can say about Gough's art is its craft, which is not appreciated by what Americans call the New Casualists, whose sense of design quite literally falls apart on the floor. Perhaps the movement is a healthy reaction toward the market's dominance in what used to be purer areas of art-making. But it of course neglects a major aspect of why we appreciate art—namely, its constitutional makeup, which deters the imagery from isolating itself in, or disintegrating within, the picture. Gough never forgets how deeply a picture's interior framework supports his explorations in color. The interaction between simple artifacts like a wall or a window allow him to bring out his considered and, to a degree, well-organized and -**

**contained explorations in the diversity of colors he chooses to work with, which can best be described as abstract in effect. One can only remark with admiration about the deftness with which he chooses to build his sequences of pictures. As for craft and technical skill, they are surely there but take a slightly secondary place to the most salient aspects of Gough's art—its emotional lyricism and sense of place, both in non-figurative and figurative terms. In America, this sort of painting would do very well, but it would be mistakenly grouped as belonging to the precedents of the New York School. Actually, Gough's art is more original than that; it cites its own rules rather than acquiescing to the influence of a historical style.**

**The independence of mind and hand evident in Gough's paintings shows us that there is still considerable room for the construction of pictures. It may be true that painting no longer exists as the most exalted category of art; however, its place in current culture does not mean that its energies have been depleted. Gough views color as a lifeline to perception; his highly skilled use of color enables him to communicate powerful emotions in his art. The larger context of painting's achievement, in a time when the context of art's social relations and its political commitment, as opposed to esthetic study, are being championed, will no doubt continue to be challenged. The doubt surrounding the medium is part of the spirit of our time; it is not a sign of failure on painting's part. Gough makes art that stays in our memory; it conveys a lyricism that we now need—just as we needed it in the past. Perhaps it is most effective to say that he builds an architecture of sympathetic emotion; his paintings make a claim for feeling just as much as they occupy the mind. In the long run, what matters most in art is the way it delivers excitement and solace, two qualities seemingly at a distance from each other. In fact, it may well be that they are closely affiliated, supporting each other just as they do in Gough's art.**

**Jonathan Goodman**