

Alan Uglow is a moralist. Not the tiresome sort that collars and harangues the viewer; there's no sermon. The mode of address is exemplary rather than exhortatory. The moral vision is contained within the work, physically embodied by it. The redemption it proposes comes through a radically sharpened perception, a Blakean redemption of the senses rather than the soul. His vision is implicit in the lucidity of conception, the rigor with which the images are crafted, and the refined sensual touch that gives flesh to the ideas.

These qualities struck me at once in *Sign*, the first work of Uglow's I saw. The encounter was something of a shock – the discovery of painting on this level from an unfamiliar artist always comes unexpectedly. *Sign* is a diptych, but not a conventional one since its two panels (each roughly 7 by 6 feet) are hung opposite each other rather than side by side. In the first, *Sign (Black)*, two small ebony rectangles, one vertical and one horizontal, are placed at right angles to each other near the top and left side of the painting. On the second canvas, *Sign (Red)*, two similar small rectangles colored a bold Soviet red, float just inside the center of the top and bottom edges. Because the stretchers on one side of each picture are almost 5 inches deeper than those on the other side, the face of each painting is set at an acute angle to the wall. The opposite side of each picture being the deeper one, the panels form a pair of wedges that would make a shallow box if placed face to face.

Beneath, around, and against the small colored rectangles lie the diaphanous white planes that compose the infrastructure of most of Uglow's paintings. These layers of superimposed planes parallel to the picture surface are distinguished from each other by the alternating horizontal and vertical direction of the brushstrokes. Both through this alternation and through their varying translucency, these planes suggest a complex space, indeterminate yet not vague, within the apparent flatness of the picture. As the eye is drawn into the successive layers the impression of depth grows, yielding an unexpected and langorous sensation of openness. Once inside these strata of white one discovers other floating rectangles, submerged ghosts, visible only because of their slightly greater opacity.

Uglow has the ability to make all his colors seem the apotheosis of a given hue: his red is Red; his black, Black. The vermilion field, for example, that covers most of the large painting *Remembrancer* – interrupted only by small white squares at each corner of the red field and bordered by a narrow white band along its bottom edge – brands itself on the eye as a standard against which all other reds might be defined. Nevertheless, for me, it's the opalescent curtains of white paint, their slow way of absorbing light and then releasing it to the eye with hypnotic deliberation, that comes first to mind whenever I think of Uglow's paintings.

Inside these edifices of ice and ivory normal time is suspended. When one finally withdraws his gaze, and mundane time reasserts itself, the radical clarity of Uglow's perception – the translucent architecture, the enamel light, the slow disclosure of pictorial incident – has insinuated itself in the mind as the perfect definition of a new and unique sensory experience.

Uglow came to New York from London in 1969 because he was excited by the American work he was seeing in the English galleries. Both the work of older artists like Barnett Newman, Ad Reinhardt, and Mark Rothko, and that of younger ones such as Donald Judd, Robert Morris, and Robert Smithson, indicated to him that something was brewing in the States he didn't want to miss.

It was the moment when Minimalism was at its zenith, and some of its ideas – especially its insistence on a monadic, precise statement of the visual idea in a form whose simplicity emphasized the inherent qualities of its materials as well as its involvement with the phenomenology of perception – shaped his conception decisively.

Although painting, from the Constructivists to the “theological” wing of Abstract Expressionism, exerted a strong formative influence on Minimalism, Judd, Morris and its

other major exponents stated their ideas most effectively in the three-dimensional object rather than on the canvas. The phenomenological preoccupations of Minimalism seemed to dictate a secondary role to painting.

The challenge of successfully translating these ideas to painting was taken up in the late sixties by a number of artists whose work – in contrast to the uninflected surfaces of the early Minimalist painters such as Frank Stella or Ellsworth Kelly – was characterized by the development of what might be called “significant surfaces”. The ghostly facticity of Robert Ryman, Brice Marden’s silky skins of paint, and Uglow’s veils of white all transpose the Minimalist concern with the literal surface of plywood, Corten steel, or anodized aluminium to painting by restricting themselves to a single distinctive paint quality spread over the entire picture surface. These are all highly inflected surfaces that call attention to themselves through understatement rather than bravura.

Unlike Ryman and Marden (whose painterly antecedents are primarily in Abstract Expressionism, as their all-over structure attests) Uglow’s floating rectangles and his palette of white, black and primary colors have deep roots in Malevich and Mondrian. Perhaps these European influences explain why his work differs from that of his American colleagues in another important way: the implication of illusionistic space produced by his translucent superimposed planes. The paradox that one is so acutely aware of the literal painted surface and at the same time of this deep space opening out behind it (slowly, slowly) makes Uglow’s work particularly germane at this moment when so much abstract painting has abandoned the Greenbergian dicta of flatness and self-reference to explore the world behind the picture plane.

His attention to the literal qualities of surface has taken a new twist in a series of small paintings on copper. The assertive identity of the metal, its color, reflectiveness, and smooth surface, is integrated with the painted areas by a process of wet-sanding. The fine grooves left by the sandpaper echo the horizontal and vertical direction of the brushmarks, drawing the copper into a dialogue with the paint while allowing the metal to retain its distinctiveness.

Uglow has adapted the phenomenological aspect of Minimalism to his own purposes in still another way. This becomes clear if one compares a bi-partite piece like *Sign* with a work such as Richard Serra’s *Plunge*, in which two slightly tilted Corten slabs (both 8 feet square and 9 inches thick) are placed 32 feet apart. The disposition of both Uglow’s painting and Serra’s sculpture makes it impossible to see both elements simultaneously from the front. One can only turn from one to the other trying to remember the part not seen in order to imagine the whole. Only from the side can they be seen together, but this circumstance creates a crisis of peripheral vision because of the distance between the elements, a crisis that is intensified because of the ambiguity of the angled picture plane in Uglow’s piece and the tilt of the slabs in Serra’s. Both works confront the fragmentary nature of perception, its dependence on a specific viewpoint, and the vagaries of visual memory – all issues very much in the spirit of Minimalist thinking about perceptual phenomenology.

In his most recent piece, commissioned by “Century 87,” an international exhibition of artworks created for specific sites in Amsterdam, Uglow has further extended this aspect of his endeavor. The Noorderkerk is a Dutch Calvinist church of the sort familiar from the paintings of Pieter Saenredam. On each of its four walls Uglow placed a large panel of a single color: red, blue, yellow, black; a tape loop played through loudspeakers placed under each panel added a sound element to the visual. The sound, which alternated rock’n roll with spoken words, emerged at times from all four speakers, while at other times it migrated around the room from speaker to speaker.

The effect of the whole was a mixture of homage and disruption. The intrusion of Uglow’s brightly colored panels into the mellow rust and ochre stone interior of the church was

in part a nod at those paintings of Saenredam (admired by Uglow) that punctuate the monochrome vastness of an empty church with brightly colored banners. Yet the four succinct drumbeats of primary color also disrupted the pious stillness of the church interior in an aggressive way very different from Saenredam's – so much so that the pastor insisted the red panel be placed behind the congregation where it would be a less distracting (or corrupting) influence, an inadvertant testimony to the suggestive power of color.

The tape violated the accustomed silence of the church even more emphatically than the panels, pummeling it with the forced beat of the band or seducing it with an ominous murmuring voice. For the duration of Uglow's installation the stone womb of the chapel became a vaguely threatening stageset in which vestiges of the past were pricked by splinters of contemporary culture.

To assert that Uglow's painting has a moral vision poses a question. Can one say such a thing of a painting, especially an abstract painting, a thing which exists in a state of absolute silence? I spoke before of the radical clarity of Uglow's perception; this, I think, is the mechanism through which painting – with or without benefit of figurative imagery – can convey such a vision. Cézanne's exploration of the disparity between the conventions of pictorial representation and the fragemented way in which we actually see things; Ad Reinhardt's disclosure of the surprising plenitude and eloquence of the deepest colors – these revelations foreclose one's habitual view of things, alter one's perception at its most basic physical level, and force a reassessment of every perception in light of a new awareness. The repercussions of this experience are limited only by the viewer's sensitivity and imagination. Given these two faculties, the effect of this sensory shock can, must certainly if the response is profound, penetrate to the viewer's deepest values.

This is not to propose a Modernist utopian ambition for abstraction; it's simply a description of the means through which it transcends formalism and attains a broader significance. Whether any art form can lead the way to a better world is at best problematic. The only certain thing is that abstract painting is at least as effective in its method of signification as any other aesthetic strategy. To confuse the organic life of abstraction either with the failed ambitions of early Modernism or with the sterile theorizing of late Greenberg is (with apologies to Barnett Newman) to confuse birds with ornithology.

The question of the nature of a moral vision expressed in abstraction has nothing to do with virtue and vice, at least in the conventional meaning of those words. Painting itself is sublimely indifferent to the positive or negative valence of the values expressed. Whether the vision is one of cynicism or spirituality, the medium's only demand is that these values be stated with absolute frankness. In its simplicity the passive substance of the paint reveals any attempt to flatter, to deceive, or to feign qualities the artist lacks as an unbearable or ludicrous ugliness.

Uglow's paintings not only accept this demand for frankness, they embrace it. Their taut surfaces and translucent structure offer no hiding place for the cheap or fake. This, rather than any moral program naughty or nice, gives them their special beauty. Failing this demand, the ideas, the craft, the sensual imagination would be laudable but ultimately meaningless academic achievements. By rising to the demand Uglow allows these qualities to resonate, endowing the paintings with the power to stop the viewer, to draw him in, and to effect a revelation for the senses.

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