

## ALAN UGLOW

### Painting as Matter-of-Fact

BOB NICKAS

THE RECOLLECTION OF MY VERY FIRST, OR LAST, visit to Alan Uglow's studio does not come readily to mind. The passage from the frenetic energy of the street to the calm and tranquility of his workspace registered in exactly the same way on my visits over twenty years: relief to be inside, and amazement at the sense of distance created there. Even if the visual and auditory noise of Chinatown and the Bowery was just a few flights down the stairs, it might as well have been a million miles away. Uglow always worked in the front of the studio where it was brightest, with four west-facing windows, and where the natural light held a softness that accentuated the color and surface of his paintings. The translucent glass in these windows further softens the light and makes it impossible to see outside clearly, to be distracted by the city skyline or the street below.<sup>1</sup> On a typical visit, having just been pinballed about on the teeming sidewalk—aware that for the artist, the human obstacle course was a daily occurrence of comings and goings—I would notice how he was able to make space, physical and cerebral, in and around the work. It was not simply remarkable, but a matter of necessity.

Where to start? If you had asked Uglow, he might have suggested we start at the beginning, as if it was perfectly obvious, practical, and did not really matter just as long as one got things underway. We can imagine the artist in his studio seeing every next painting as the matter at hand. Paintings demand and are given attention. The work gets done. As the years go by, the attitude remains the same and the work is continually, elegantly refined; then one day, as it inevitably happens, there is no next painting.

With the passing of an artist, we often tend to think of a body of work as similar to an object which can be held in the palm of our hand, viewed from all angles and understood. We see an arc in its entirety—the very beginning, the unfolding and development, the end — and situate ourselves wherever along the way we came on board for the ride, following through from there. But not so fast. Unlike the street below his studio, Uglow was anything but fast—in his way of thinking about his work, making work, and being. If it is possible to venture a guess, consider the possibility that his patience was nearly glacial compared to yours and mine. Just look at the work itself, with its sureness, its calm and direct presence, and the sense of its always having been there. Inevitable, one could say.

It is sometimes the case that painters possess and display what their paintings do not—imperfections, unexpected tics and signs of discord, certain particularities of the living. Despite contradictions in how art and artists carry themselves, it is precisely the unseen correspondence and the incongruence between the painter and the painting that animates the work, allowing it to perform and behave as it does. Uglow's art and his demeanor can be described as poised and elegant, yet he himself could also be scrappy and barbed, though articulately and rather convincingly so. His paintings are both immediate and reveal themselves slowly over time, and for all their reserve, they are always welcoming. We may approach them as if they had traded places with the man who painted them, standing before us, or leaning casually against the wall, waiting to be engaged. We make the approach and wonder: How do we examine the surface of a painting? How do we examine the surface of a man? And how, if it is possible, do we go deeper? Because lives—even those with attendant evidence and clues, like those of artists—are not neat and tidy, and an arc is not necessarily so effortlessly traced. As much as we might imagine otherwise, the more closely we look, the more we come to understand that Uglow's paintings did not make themselves. Any number of decisions that went into his work are visible, and careful viewing rewards with subtle surprise. What the passing of an artist may occasion is a reevaluation of what we know or think we know about a body of work and its place in the world, and it cannot help but gain a heightened immediacy and a greater emotional weight. Just as the artist before us, we are compelled to take everything into account.

When Ad Reinhardt mockingly wrote, "Action painting speaks louder than voids,"<sup>2</sup> he reminded us that all painters do not operate at the same volume. His interplay of words/voids suggests that a pared down visual language may be the ultimate carrier of meaning, and as he famously concluded, "A cleaner New York School is up to you." When Uglow first came to visit New York in 1968, a year of global unrest, he was not merely awed by soaring towers of steel and glass and the kinetic backroom scene at Max's Kansas City (illuminated at the time by a fluorescent red Dan Flavin memorial to the victims of the Vietnam war); he also found himself in the company of Barnett Newman at dinner one evening and in front of Jackson Pollock's *Blue Poles* (1952) on another, amazed by both. While the fractious aspects of the New York School represented an oppositional taking of sides—Newman and Reinhardt had well-known disagreements—we think of Uglow as someone who would ultimately side with himself, who put the "true" in truant, and discovered his own way of tapping into something that passed from action to energy; energy concentrated and compressed. And when it came to exploring ways for abstract painting to go on in the 1960s and 1970s, he was not alone: Jo Baer, Dan Christensen,





68/88, 1988

Mary Heilmann, Brice Marden, David Novros, Robert Ryman, Alan Shields, and Peter Young, among many others, pursued similar objectives during those decades when the object of art—and painting, in particular—was questioned, and when both a rise and eventual fall of post-studio practice was witnessed.

By 1979, ten years after Uglow settled in New York, much had changed. The kinds of paintings that were more readily exhibited and written about, for one thing, ushered in the sort of revolving door we see with the medium today: from abstraction to representation, from warm to cool, from push button and scanned to handmade, and back again. We now find ourselves in an art world where the literal and figurative ground periodically shifts and settles without any particularly seismic events. Maybe it has always been this way—every sort of work is being made at all times and everyone, patiently or not, awaits his or her turn. Viewed retrospectively, Uglow's work is extraordinarily consistent over the course of his career, a span of close to fifty years. In 1988, for example, the artist engaged a fabricator to reconstruct, albeit with different materials, an irreparably damaged painting from 1968, which resulted in the work *68/88*.<sup>3</sup> Looking at the painting today, it feels as if no more than a few days have passed between them, whether in the twenty years from the original painting to its remaking, or the twenty-five years from then to now. Consistency of vision is not as touched by the passage of time as other, more wavering, ways of seeing. Despite waning attention for certain kinds of work and with the occasional lapse of external demand and opportunity, it is apparent from beginning to end that Uglow's work never for a moment evinces any crisis of faith. It is worth considering in this context that despite outward appearance, Uglow's work is not about abstraction *per se*, but the ordering of space. This was made abundantly clear in his 2010 exhibition at Museum Haus Esters in Krefeld, Germany, where the graceful harmony and structural integrity of this Mies van der Rohe building and Uglow's art fortuitously met. This was also one of the rare instances in which his paintings were seen in a space other than a "white cube," in relation to windows and transparent planes, to the interplay of inside and out, to nature and the nature of our perception of the world around us.

In addition to the painters who impressed Uglow during his early years in New York were three sculptors: Bill Bollinger, Fred Sandback, and Al Taylor; It is also tempting to consider his work in relation to Donald Judd's furniture and to Imi Knoebel's painted constructions. The artist who made the greatest impression on Uglow as an art student, however—and this may register unexpectedly for some—is Alberto Giacometti, with his perfectly attenuated and solemn figures. These figures—in his drawings and sculptural works—are corporeal lines in space with an implied sense of movement, abstract and human at the same time, simultaneously austere and warm. This is one way of looking at Uglow's

paintings, which have a relation to the body in motion and at rest, and continually find ways to animate light and color that draw us towards them, while at the same time maintaining a certain distance that both invites engagement and requires respect. It is, in a word, what we hope for in others and expect of ourselves. There are implicit codes of conduct, unspoken and at play, in Uglow's work, and it is in this space of austerity and warmth that his works exist, as did he himself.

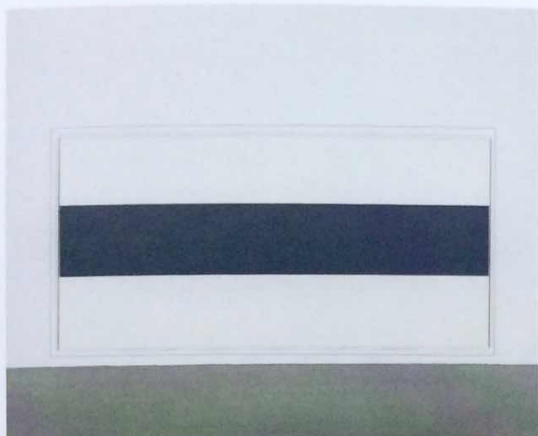
What is notable among the various trajectories of painters from the 1960s and 1970s is how they were able to come into their own in the 1980s and 1990s, as their work was put into play in the context of a younger generation. In addition to Uglow, Mary Heilmann and Olivier Mosset, though all quite different in their approaches from one another, are notable in this regard. In any number of settings, their work was shown in the company of paintings by artists such as Mark Grotjahn, Jutta Koether, Steven Parrino, Rudolf Stingel, and Dan Walsh, and it was of mutual interest to both generations. These sorts of lively interactions continue, and not only where paint and canvas is concerned. In recent group exhibitions, for example, it has been interesting to see how Uglow's work interacted with a chainlink fence sculpture by Cady Noland, and with an office filing cabinet by John Miller.<sup>4</sup> As minimal/industrial structures, and with a direct relationship to the vernacular world of objects, order, and demarcation, the pairing of these works reminds us just how closely Uglow's structures may be aligned with social and sculptural concerns. It is not difficult to see how this relates to the objectlike nature of his paintings and their presentation, as well as to those works which are directly drawn from his observations in the everyday.

The sculptural works *Süd Curve* (1993), *Coach's Bench* (1997–1998), and *Torwand (Red) / Torwand (Blue)* (2004), a diptych with circular cut-outs—the original, intended for soccer practice where a ball is aimed at and kicked into each hole—are all derived from objects Uglow photographed on his many visits to football fields and stadiums in England, Germany, Iceland, The Netherlands, Tenerife, and the United States. This amplifies how several architectural and sculptural aspects are addressed in Uglow's canvases, as well as in works on copper, aluminum, fiberglass, and MDF board. They integrate ideas of order, structure, facade, volume, surface, mass, interlocking parts, building blocks, blocks of color, angles and points of view, the physical properties of chromatics and light, support, material, and movement with the artist's concern at all times for what happens spatially between the viewer, the work, and the room. Today, all too often, what is casually referred to as “the performance” was rather broadly identified as the “theatricality” of minimalism in its heyday. Some art, then and now, can actually bear what would otherwise be no more than an extravagant claim and turn out to be, as



*Coach's Bench*, 1997–1998





*Midnight Blue*, 1990



The artist at *griedervonputtkamer*, Berlin, 2001

Uglow might well have said, “up to the test.” An aspect of high performance exists, in particular, with two 1990 paintings that reference by way of color, sleek finish, and their sources, some well-engineered machinery, *Midnight Blue* and *Bordeaux Red*, which Uglow referred to as “Alfa Romeo” and “Maserati,” respectively. Both are hung close to the floor—or ride “low to the road”—further emphasizing their facture: auto lacquer on aluminum.<sup>5</sup> Sports cars such as these, which can be seen as painted sculpture, offer an image of speed. Even when they are standing perfectly still, they possess a sense of possibility and anticipation.

The format for *Midnight Blue* and *Bordeaux Red*, four by eight feet and hung just 3 inches above the floor, derives from one in particular among the paintings Uglow left with a friend in London at the end of the 1960s, which were later damaged. While one of these was subsequently remade—the previously mentioned *68/88*—a fourth work, *Seeing Red* (1990), was also based on this prototype. All works include an enameled aluminum frame that is affixed directly to the wall, and which defines, but does not actually come into contact with, the edges of the four-by-eight-foot panel suspended from behind on metal bars and projecting out from the wall. The frame thus articulates the painting as it reinforces the illusion that it hovers in front of the wall. While this framing device was soon dispensed with, the format of long low panels set just above the floor recurred in Uglow's work for more than twenty years, and attained, along with the *Standards*—an important series of paintings from 1994 to late 2009—the status of an identifiable signature. In addition to these four framed panels, we find *Green / Black / Off-White* (1991), the *Stadium Series* (1992–1996), the *Equator* panels (2000–2003), *Blue Line* (2006), and *Gold Top* (2009), all of which place the upper edge of the work within reach of the viewer's hand. An adult of average height views the painting from a distance as one might see a cabinet at the far side of a room. In close proximity, we are confronted with a painting which requires that we lean forward or even squat down to examine its surface and detail. Here, it is of interest to point out a snapshot of the artist taken from the back, stretched out on the floor and looking at one of these “low riders.” The photo reminds us that in each of these works we encounter a formidable solid mass that simultaneously invites intimacy.

While Uglow produced sculptural works, installations, prints, and photographs over the course of his career, he is first and foremost a painter, and it is important to identify the place that his *Standard* paintings and the silkscreened *Portraits of a Standard*—the photographic representations of the paintings installed—occupy in his overall body of work. These paintings and their perspectival partners are set on wooden blocks on the

floor.<sup>6</sup> Painting for Uglow, just as life, was always “in the balance,” and never more visibly so than with these works. Set upon the blocks and leaned against the wall, they appear to have just been placed, or about to be taken away. Installed in this way, they acknowledge the provisional position of all exhibited art, and the artist’s desire to see his work where it properly belongs, while also admitting to being an interloper of sorts. The presentation of these works is close to the way that they—and paintings, in general—are seen in an artist’s workplace, propped on blocks or paint cans: a common visual occurrence in the studio, though more unusual in the gallery or museum, where art is meant to be physically and metaphorically elevated. There are also paintings by Uglow that are hung higher on the wall, and these include a number of works that he designated as *Hanging Standards* (2006–2008), which are mostly medium-sized, as well as small-format paintings that are approximately head size, and hung at eye level. But the works on blocks and near the floor oblige us to address the issue of presentation directly. Paintings hung low to the floor give the room its own horizon, and expand on this linearity. The works set on blocks have their feet on the ground, as do we, occupying a similar space proportionate to human height, corresponding to the extension of our arms, and accounting for our field of vision from head to toe. With the *Portraits*, the wooden blocks are photographically doubled, as are the floor and wall, which are seen up against their counterparts in reality. If we may, for argument’s sake, say that the paintings are “aware” of their surroundings, then the *Portraits* are hyperaware of the predicament in which they find themselves, of their own condition.

For an artist who was particular about, and not always pleased with, the reproductions of his paintings, the *Portraits* exert a re-assertion of control by “letting go.” Uglow engaged with effects particular to the photographic and screening process, to mechanical operations that are at odds with the refinement he pursued and achieved by hand. The color in these photographic images sometimes appear to have edges that are “burned” or solarized, overexposed, with gritty chromatics, quite unlike the color in the paintings they record. Uglow experimented with representation here as nowhere else outside of his photographs, allowing himself to visually and spatially distort our view of his otherwise precise arrangements. These works somehow merge painting and photography, the printing plate and the negative. In the *Portraits*, we see a painting from an angle, and it seems to pivot either towards or away from us, as if it was a gate or a door. As a photographic image, and especially when the painting appears to pivot in this way, the represented *Standards* are much more screenlike than the actual canvases, appearing as if they could be slid to left or right, to either open onto or enclose a space. Both the paintings and their representations are portals of a kind, and the spatial dislocations give



The artist, Amsterdam, 2002



pause for thought. We are in motion as we make our way around galleries and artworks, around other bodies in a space. We find vantage points for ourselves, whether or not we are conscious of the exchange and its implications, and whether we find ourselves looking at people or paintings, though in the presence of others we may naturally tend to be more guarded.

With the *Standards*, we acknowledge more than formal considerations—their size being a regulated seven by six feet—or those that involve the staging of the work and its direct relation to architecture. We also reflect upon the intentions and aspirations of the artist. Standards are not merely units of measurement, but come to bear upon our expectations for quality and goods delivered—standards as a given, standards held to and met. Uglow, like any artist operating from a position of confidence vying with uncertainty, was not immune to the anxiety of things going wrong, and always set the highest standards for himself. In a world where “conceptual” paintings are routinely made by assistants, when we look at the *Standards*, we understand that only Uglow could have painted these paintings. From a distance, the graphic quality of the composition is formidable, the colors crisp and glowing, whether blocks, bands, or thin lines bisect or delineate the structure or perimeter of the picture plane, appearing to have various weights, ephemerality, and densities. Upon closer inspection, we see that some lines have been given an “after-glow,” a highlight above and below a more solid line. In the later *Standards*, Uglow employed metallic pigments such as silver, copper, and gold, and at times mixed small amounts into other colors for added luminosity. The quality of light in his painting comes not only from his reliance on bright white, but because he at times also mixed white with other colors, including transparent reds and ultramarine. At other times his use of iridescent color heightens the work’s reflective properties. The way he plays color off color is masterful, as with one of his most distinct pairings, of red and white, where the temperature is finely tuned by degrees. “I like this build-up,” he once said, “from white through to color, a balance of equilibrium, on the one hand, and disjunction on the other. For example, at high pitch, red and white are both red-hot and white-hot, or red can cool white, and vice versa.”<sup>7</sup> In his paintings we often see that what at first appeared to be a white field is actually comprised of two or three different tonalities of whites that are quite distinct from one another. The grounds for these paintings were typically created with up to forty coats of paint, and there are areas where the surface, rather than evenly flat, is subtly raised or precisely incised, with edges as sharp as this artist’s observations and pointed remarks. Looking closely from oblique angles, we appreciate how meticulously assembled and painted these seemingly effortless paintings are. They reward our attention over and again.



Among his final paintings is one that is classic Uglow in every sense, yet hints at something new that was beginning to be explored at the time—an asymmetrical symmetry, an off-balance composition that introduces a feeling of harmonic discord that had not previously been seen in his work. *T-3* (2010) is composed of three elements: a long horizontal bar with two smaller vertical bars above and below, at about its midpoint; then, placed slightly off center and played off one another, a red bar has an angled, rather than flat, top edge, and a black bar has an angled bottom edge. This gives them the appearance of being poised and about to pivot on the long horizontal gray band. It thus becomes their balancing bar, and the overall image, as pared down as it is, suggests a sculptural, abstract/figurative display of acrobatics, which in turn serves as a metaphor for the act of painting itself. Since this is a painting by Alan Uglow, we observe a balancing act performed in all its complex simplicity and grace.

We need quiet to hear ourselves think, and for many artists it is in the quiet that things are seen. Some listen to music when they work, and Uglow listened to a great deal, including ska, reggae and dub, Iggy Pop, the Clash, New York guitar groups such as Television, the propulsive groove of the German band Can, classical music and opera, and one of his longest running soundtracks, *The Fall*, for English punk at its most shambolic. That said, when an artist needs to concentrate—and there is much concentration in these paintings—when a palpable sense of undivided attention is required, only quiet will do. In those few moments it took to get from the noisy street to Uglow's studio, we come to appreciate how he needed to have, and to share with us, a sense of order and beauty that stands in stark contrast to the chaos and endless messiness of the world. He was, after all, a child of the war, born in Luton, England, in 1941, coming of age in the post-war years, and in many ways reborn on the streets of New York in the late 1960s and early 1970s. That he came to settle on the Bowery—and maintain a studio there until the end of his life—is fitting, since the human drama that is, or was, the Bowery provided a vivid backdrop for artists and writers as diverse as William Burroughs, Robert Frank, and Eva Hesse, as well as marking the end of the line for the “lost men” who haunted its saloons and cheap rooms—parallel legacies and realities Uglow responded to and dignified with the jewel-like paintings of his sublime *Hotel Series* (1987–1989). At that time, the Bowery held some of the last traces of old New York and its historical connection to the Old World, to the Bouwerie and New Amsterdam, to the merchant seamen and docks of its nearby, now theme-parked waterfront. Even more than twenty years ago, Uglow was aware that the city had begun to disappear. The works that comprise the *Hotel Series* can thus be seen after-the-fact in relation to the great collective abstract “portrait” of another restless and reoriented European artist, Blinky Palermo,



and his masterwork, *To the People of New York City* (1976), which was completed near the end of his life. In these works of Uglow and Palermo, we cannot help but be reminded of how the rhythmic vibrancy, the pulse and sound of the city, was first put forth in wholly abstract terms in Piet Mondrian's *Broadway Boogie Woogie* (1942–1943), and the unfinished *Victory Boogie Woogie* (1942–1944).

Alan Uglow, the man, was a realist, and very often troubled by and sharply critical of the political and social state of things, but you could never claim that he was a realist painter. Although his work can be accurately described as non-objective, it is clear that he fully intended to represent, with all the faculties of his mind, eye, and hand, what was truly real—to be alive and aware. What could be more real than an art which aims to foreground the very notion of consciousness? And if it is not an image of consciousness we aspire to—whether one is the artist or the viewer—then what exactly are we asking of ourselves? How did we get here? And where are we headed? Uglow was not polemical in this way, and he did not spar and take sides, preferring to get on with the work at hand. You sometimes had the feeling that his need to make a painting was not all that different from someone who sets out to construct a wall—and as the son of a master carpenter, he had much appreciation for materials and labor—a wall not necessarily meant to keep anything in or out, but to see what it looks like, to derive some measure of satisfaction from what he had done. Uglow never solemnly expressed platitudes such as, “The work speaks for itself.” This was certainly not his style. The artist Lisa Beck has aptly observed, “[what] strikes me so much about his work is a quality of exacting description that is beyond language or even image.”<sup>8</sup> The painter makes the painting, Uglow would insist—and the writer interprets the work. As is often the case in art, however, this situation is unavoidably for-better-or-for-worse, and Uglow was at times suspicious of the very word “art.” As he once remarked, “. . . so many things are loaded with art, or artfulness, and they’re often the worst things. I make work to see if I want to see it . . . . In the studio, I don’t think, ‘Now I’m making Art.’ It’s more like, now, I’m getting into trouble.”<sup>9</sup>

Some artists are able to imbue painting not only with their own qualities of character, but also with a desire to show us how the world might appear, and this holds true for, and is central to, an understanding of Uglow’s work. Few of us are able to get close to an artist. Most only ever see work in the gallery or museum, or as a reproduction in a catalogue or magazine. That his work often defies being apprehended by the camera reminds us of the degree to which his paintings and their subtleties require the viewer to be present, attentive, and in motion. You have to *be there* if you expect to see anything—to catch yourself in the act of looking. Having access to the artist and the studio affords

a privileged view behind the scenes. We count ourselves very lucky indeed to have the trust and the insights this allows. Even so, there is something special that happens when we walk into a gallery knowing little or nothing about the art and the artist, and are confronted with a purely visual experience, which Uglow might have characterized as "no baggage, no strings attached." The line would be delivered in that warm but terse English accent and you could only silently agree. But if you suggested trying to forget what you know, Uglow would probably tilt his head and raise an eyebrow—nothing more would need to be said. It is the no-nonsense, matter-of-fact nature of the man that continues to amplify and modulate these qualities in his work. Situating himself in the here and now, placing the paintings practically at the viewer's feet and grounding both paintings and viewers: Alan Uglow takes perception elsewhere.



## NOTES

- 1 According to his wife, Elena Alexander, Alan Uglow had asked the building's superintendent to install panes of clear glass at the top so that he could look out to see the sky; the super did so shortly before the artist died. As relayed in an e-mail from September 15, 2012.
- 2 Ad Reinhardt, unpublished notes, Archives of American Art, quoted in Lucy R. Lippard, *Ad Reinhardt* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1981), p. 124.
- 3 Upon moving to New York, Uglow had left his paintings in a friend's basement in London, assured that it was watertight. All these paintings were subsequently destroyed in a flood, and all he had left was a contact sheet from the photographer who had documented the work. *68/88* was based on one of these images and the artist's memory of the original painting.
- 4 Uglow's work was placed near Cady Noland's in the group exhibition *Stand still like the hummingbird*, curated by Bellatrix Hubert, at David Zwirner, New York, June 28–August 3, 2012, and close to that of John Miller's in *Standard Operating Procedures*, organized by Piper Marshall, at Blum & Poe, Los Angeles, July 14–August 25, 2012.
- 5 Uglow notes on the process of applying color in these works; see pp. 65–66 in this publication.
- 6 The dimensions for each block were carefully specified as 1 ¼ x 1 ¼ x 5 ½ inches (3 x 3 x 14 cm).
- 7 "Two People in a Room: A Conversation between Alan Uglow and Robert Nickas," in *Alan Uglow*. Exh. cat. (Cologne: Kölnischer Kunstverein, 1992), p. 57.
- 8 E-mail correspondence with the author, September 21, 2012.
- 9 *Alan Uglow*, Kölnischer Kunstverein, p. 57.

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### **DAVID ZWIRNER**

525 West 19th Street, New York, New York 10011 davidzwirner.com

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