

# "British Abstract Painter Danny Rolph and Martin Holman Talk About The Latest London Exhibition By German Artist Anton Henning", *Miser & Now*, ed. Keith Talent Gallery, London, issue ten 2007, pp. 58



## BRITISH ABSTRACT PAINTER DANNY ROLPH AND MARTIN HOLMAN TALK ABOUT THE LATEST LONDON EXHIBITION BY GERMAN ARTIST ANTON HENNING

**Martin Holman:** Anton Henning has made two installations at the Haunch of Venison comprising work from this year and last. In all he used four spaces: in one he installed the monumental-sized painting, *Interior No. 371* (Loph), and in the adjacent room was Oasis which covers the top floor with a mixture of work that appears to go in several stylistic and formal directions. It is indicative of the approach we have come to expect from this German artist since his first solo show in London at Estimote in 2002. There Henning created Minkley Makey Lounge over two rooms injected with a high dose of the colours, design peculiarities and furniture types that quickly semaphored a picture of the 1950s into minds today. I don't remember interiors being quite so exuberant at the time except in magazines; the influence of mechanically reproduced imagery on memory may have been the point. The strongest impression was not made by the paintings, hung against the bands of colour in wonderfully bilious ochreous tones like tanning lotions, but by the overall comic sensuality of an installation playfully outrunning the edges between art, architecture and design. I was left on that occasion wondering how the piece functioned beyond that generic level. Oasis takes forward a bold aesthetic environment; what stood out for you about this work?

**Danny Rolph:** Not an individual object, rather a specific attitude. Henning's confidence in modernism is refreshingly robust: it allows him to make important points about the idiom and still have the playfulness you find in, say, Matis. This show is like being on board the Queen Mary at the end of the 1950s and surrounded by luxury goods and a high standard of Art Deco. It is all carried off with wit, charm nostalgia but not as an exercise in irony.

The associations flood for me as well. Walking around the first floor was like being in a collector's private gallery where the paintings are good but not great, and not as remarkable as the design commissioned to set them off. The hoxy wood or veneer frames brought to my mind the Edgar J. Kauffmann office designed by Frank Lloyd Wright in 1937 that is now in the V&A a modernist power environment of interpenetrating lines and extravagant surfaces.

That calculated datedness is a positive element, I think, it brings you up close to the work. The film that was related to the painting next to it (both titled *Interior No. 371*) conveys the sensation of a painter's eyes working across a surface of another artist's image for the first time, in this case a sort of modernist canvas with looping lines and those playful, controlled colours that Henning uses. He understands quality very well, judging just how much or how little a work needs to function on its own or as part of the bigger 'picture' as it were. There is a light touch in those loops and serious potential in their chalky surfaces.

Yes, the camera took a Big Dipper journey around that one, swooping, rising and turning on the lines. Again, an example of the sustained sensuality in this work – Henning wants you to experience physically as well as visually and mentally (it's part-funfair and partly (and seriously) synaesthetic). He gives these occasional nudges in another direction to move us on. It's orchestrated – or tour-led – but he offers the spectator, literally, a walk-on role.

Definitely; we become a character in a sort of charade. It's as if the Shah of Iran was on the Queen Mary, sharing his cabin with beautiful objects d'art he's collected, when the passengers are told to abandon ship. We are the people – the pursers who are taking account of these possessions – who find this beautiful abandoned room. Henning presents this phantom of the real: it may have occurred to him in a dream but he has worked it out to give material shape and resonance to a fantastical vision. There is an engaging romantic quality in what he does.

Metaphor seems to be the modernist device used for that purpose of proposing alternative worlds or systems. In the painting I was conscious of being asked to disregard boundaries demarcating the flow of art history, for instance, or distinctions between different genres. Abstraction was layered over cabinet portraits, portraits over landscape, successive generations, such as Picasso or Lichtenstein, combined ...

... and very ambiguously. The work displays a compelling diffidence. But not in an ironic way. There is genuine warmth in the influence he acknowledges from modernist painting on the way he works. By paying serious attention to the handling of the work, he evades the charge of being pastiche. Looking back to figures like Picasso I think let Henning take a great and worthwhile legacy of technique and oddness forward with a huge dandyish wit. Picasso liked flashy sports cars and the company of glamorous girls; he was wealthy enough not to have to work. Yet he made memorably awkward work: those late nudes looked back stylistically or outrageously sideways at parallel idioms while driving modernism ahead, never being totally brilliant but always consistent. Henning is similar: his work never reaches a real high as it never needs to. He maintains similar emotional weight throughout.

Anton Henning, *Oasis* (2006), detail



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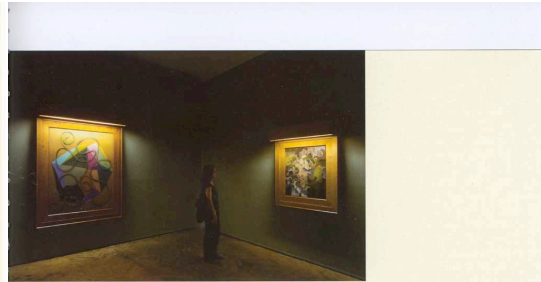
*That is particularly evident in the top-floor installation, Oasis, which is set out like these objects d'art you mentioned, on plinths that look well-crafted and are reminiscent of the frames downstairs. The big carpet literally provides the framing structure here; it's based on one of Henning's own rectangular abstract paintings which, just as you say, does its job but is not outstanding. Its function lies elsewhere, and all manner of objects congregate on this fertile pile on the room's arid hard flooring. I particularly like the nod to Duchamp with the porcelain urinal partition-cum-shark fin plying the placid surface of its plinth.*

Absolutely, and they fire off a metaphor about activity that is as exciting as it is futile; and I find that wonderful. Henning offers a narrative charge that does not patronise collectors or viewers, something that I feel can happen in work propelled by post-modernist irony, such as Kippenberger's. The balance here is well tuned. This is very hard to achieve, if he had let the charade fall at any point by over-designing the work into the space or varying its emotional weight, then the spell would have been broken. Paintings are nailed together and rest against upturned screens on top of plinths. This is pretty wild and the space accepts the work quite naturally; the blue with which the walls are painted kind of symbolises that this all amounts to a single character, and that character is the artist.

*One character, in spite of mixing divergent strands of painting, film, sculpture, furniture, interior design? And Henning wrote and played the looping score of the looped soundtrack in the film on the first floor, that sweet classical-styled piano piece ball-bent on inducing a response from us. He shows a remarkable facility in several different areas without betraying any struggle!*

But he keeps to one artistic personality, and I think it all relates to painting. Otherwise this would appear like a parody. Instead we get a sense of someone walking in other people's footsteps through a story hall together with wit, charm and intrigue. Mike Nelson comes to mind. His spaces only reveal themselves when you walk out and the experience of what you have seen is

Anton Henning, Installation view showing, from left, Portrait No.19, Portrait No.29, Interior No.342 and The answer (my friend)



Anton Henning, Installation view showing, from right, Portrait No.29 and Portrait No.19

etched firmly in memory. By establishing a consistent level throughout, with no obvious peaks and troughs, Mike allows the massive psychological narrative that underpins the installation to slot into place in our heads. Henning has allowed the installations to interconnect and as we leave, going downstairs floor by floor, replaying the thoughts we have just had in the galleries.

*I think time is the strongest metaphorical feature. There is even a memento mori-type piece on the first floor opposite the film where music fills the room. A fan set into a tabletop spins round on an axis powered by the breeze from an electric fan. On one side is a man's portrait; on the other is a skull. In the circumstances, it is quite startling; the title, The Answer (my friend), perhaps alerts us that something is about to happen without our foreknowledge although, to complete the implied song lyric, it 'is blowing in the wind'.*

We have to piece it together. Henning locates a time; nostalgia is a key element and this exhibition tunes into the evocative power of spaces – which is, after all, a traditional function of painting. That is why I love the last room with the big painting [Interior No.339 (Loop)]. With its flourishes of handicraft, it resonates with the standardised modernism selected for massive generic mural decorations in post-war public buildings, somewhere like the United Nations in New York. The style broadcasts belief in utopian values.

*These historical associations aside, Henning evidently enjoys moving materials around, displaying brushstrokes and multiplying textures. The crafty techniques that spill out to catch your eye keep to that steady level you mentioned of not being top notch, looking intentionally a little slapdash. Elements play their part and none is individually modified by its inclusion; the effect is cumulative. That square top of Henning's wovees through the presentation; I even wondered if it denoted the artist, that single character presence. But maybe it is there to maintain the hum of consistency, doing the occasional turn there, as the single object on the ground floor, for instance, that visitors see on arrival and when they leave and here, peeling in its sinuous lines those palliative depreciated pigments he uses in his paintings like beginners' cloisonné. His pleasure is infectious: is he showing off?*

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Yes, and it's okay. There is too much humility around! Henning confronts Mic's motto of 'less is more' in a captivating way. More is more. History is more.