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Activated by colour

The European expression of gestural abstraction

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VIBRATION OF SPACE
Heron, de Staël, Hartung, Soulages
Waddington Custot Galleries, until July 9

This small but ambitious exhibition brings together works by Patrick Heron, Hans Hartung, Pierre Soulages and Nicolas de Staël – four European exponents of gestural abstraction, the international style that took root on both sides of the Atlantic in the years following the Second World War. Referred to as *art informel* or lyrical abstraction or “*tachisme*” – a word coined to suggest truth to materials (*tache* as “blot, stain, mark”) – it was an art of process rather than of finish. For Heron, writing in 1953, the task was to rediscover “the vibration of space”, the relation of depth to flatness which the geometrical abstraction of Mondrian had abandoned, and to explore colour as the primary means for realizing pictorial space.

The *tachiste* moment was brief, and its dogmatic shyness – manifestos were out of fashion after the war – was perhaps its undoing: there was a tendency to convergence (“too many artists have too much in common”, wrote Heron), with results that were often muted or depersonalized. Herbert Read in the later 1950s had a vision of *tachisme* “leaving its colourful wreckage on a thousand canvases”. Heron himself in 1949 had pointed to the internationalization of art as a sterilizing process: a knowingness about elsewhere that upset the balance between external influence and private resource. He came to believe that non-figuration no less than figuration feeds on “a certain place, a special light”, is untranslatable and untransatlantic.

Heron had come to abstraction with an educated eye, and his early figurative work was accomplished. He grew up partly in St Ives, where he returned during the war as a conscientious objector, detailed to work in Bernard Leach’s Cornish pottery. His formative influences were not the Slade School in London, which he attended half-heartedly in the late 1930s, but his time as an apprentice potter and then as textile designer for his father’s Cresta Silks factory. The Cresta designs – compositional invention played against figurative motif – were exuberant and sophisticated. When he began painting full-time after the war he already largely knew what he was about.

This included a belief in decoration, as an organizing principle, and in applied art as the provincial repository of an ageless abstract wisdom – he could speak of the “submerged rhythm” of a Leach pot as utterly contemporary. His writings (on pre-war art for the *New English Weekly* in 1945–6; on his contemporaries – Roger Hilton, Peter Lanyon, Bryan Winter, William Scott – for the *New Statesman and Nation* from 1947 to 1954; on American art while London correspondent for *Arts NY* between 1955 and 1958) see figuration as a landing strip for abstract considerations. This informed his sense of new painterly possibilities for flatness or emptiness, his veneration for the fishnet “alloverness” of Bonnard or the graphic linearity of late Braque. And everywhere he saw signs that in advanced art – of whatever period – form is communicated by planes parallel to the picture surface: that depth and form are juxtaposed flatnesses, activated by colour. It was as a colourist that Heron made his

contribution to St Ives after he settled there permanently in 1956. His early abstractions look strikingly innocent and hopeful beside the other work in this exhibition, particularly the most accomplished of these, “Yellow Painting with Orange and Brown-ochre Squares” of 1959, when he was moving out beyond a narrowly considered *tachiste* preoccupation with compactness and density of forms.

Heron is the central figure here, because he

larges would later refer to a cracked window in the Gare de Lyon, glued together with tar by the workers, as pointing the way ahead for his art. Their practices during and after the war were born of scarcity. Soulages began painting with commercial walnut stain from necessity, but the expressive possibilities of an impoverished medium informed the series of stained abstractions he exhibited in the late 1940s (and which precede the canvases on show). His signature black was both rich and poor, its glossy reflexivities set against the penury of gesture; likewise the curious oscillation in Staël between opulence and austerity, in which the colour grey belongs to both, are more to the point than his shifts in and out of abstraction.

One of the underlying impulses of immedi-

example of Braque, in whom slowness of execution balanced speed of apprehension. For all of these painters the continuing sovereignty of Cézanne had to do with an art in which doubt and certainty “lie side by side in every gesture of the brush”.

An intriguing hesitancy on display here involves the relative smallness of these works, even after the Europeans could see what Americans were doing with an uninhibited scale. Heron noted the framed and “nested” quality of Staël and Soulages, as of an activity suspended inside the picture space. One of the latter’s works in this exhibition, “Peinture 1949”, is a scoring of black vertical and diagonal strokes through which a lime green light glimmers, but it measures 4 inches x 3 inches – abstraction bound in a nutshell. Heron’s early Staël-like exercises suggested to him that smaller scale demands more candour of touch, which was confirmed when Georges Braque explained (Heron visited his Paris studio in 1949) that his smaller canvases needed more impasto to express emotion more directly, whereas the larger canvases worked indirectly.

Staël was in a sense the purest *tachiste*, with his mosaic-like tesserae of colour blocks, his appositional procedures, his surfaces built like dry-stone walls. But he was forever undecided about what Heron called “that troublesome entity, the subject”. Soulages remarked that Staël was essentially a figurative painter; most of all perhaps in his abstract works, with their rigid vanishing points, their perspectival dramas, their exact depiction of the distance between forms. The exhibition includes Heron’s “Square Leaves” (1952) – his first exercise in abstraction, as tentative as its title suggests – and also includes four Staël canvases, painted between 1953 and 1955, from his last and most explicitly figurative phase. They predate Heron’s actual conversion, but are too late to illuminate the influence of Staël on Heron, for whom the later work lacked “the wonderful decision of the non-figurative works made between 1946 and 1950... when everything was put on with a spatula in great blocks half an inch thick, bricks of paint”.

Heron’s move to abstraction was more restless than this exhibition can suggest, and he was writing with urgent analytical brilliance about Bonnard, Matisse and Braque while looking at his first abstract expressionists. Heron and the British artists of his mid-century generation responded openly – St Ives more openly than London, and London more openly than Paris – to their first sightings of the New York School. Reviewing the exhibition of *Modern Art in the United States* at the Tate in 1956, which showed somewhat belatedly the work of de Kooning, Motherwell, Pollock, Rothko and others, Heron welcomed and was elated by the scale, economy and boldness of the paintings, finding confirmation in their resolute use of visual “emptiness” and spatial shallowness: “we shall now watch New York as eagerly as Paris”.

But the more he watched the less he was convinced. The problem had to do with means and



“Ochre Skies April 1957” (detail) by Patrick Heron

set out to re-establish continuities with French art, and because his weekly chronicles for the *New Statesman* trenchantly reflect a postwar sense of both predicament and opportunity. For Heron or Lanyon or Hilton, the experience of war had put paid to any “pure” or doctrinaire abstraction. Soulages, Hartung and Staël were likewise transformed by the war, and their solitariness of purpose is what most strikingly connects them. Hartung was German and Staël Russian, and both were stateless at critical junctures; they both joined the French Foreign Legion (Hartung lost a leg in action); Soulages was conscripted into forced labour in 1942 and subsequently went underground for the remainder of the Occupation. The canvases of Staël and Soulages, several of which are on show here, inhabit both ruin and reconstruction; Sou-

late post-war abstraction is therefore a haunted awareness of materials. These practitioners of “thick” non-figuration preferred house-painting brushes or spatulas or engraving tools (anything to hand in preference to the most obvious means to hand), and the surfaces of the pictures at the Waddington Custot galleries repay attention. Staël in a letter referred to pigment as “a familiar unknown” (see Mark Hutchinson’s review of Staël’s letters, p28). The three larger canvases by Soulages on display employ wide brushes with squared-off ends, as if refusing to allow the stroke to betray the gesture of the hand. Instead of fluidity and speed there is diffidence. Heron was quick to intuit the resonances of gesture considered as hesitation, and as a critic his answer to the creative haste of Picasso (or Pollock) was the

then with vision. Impressed by their rejection of European sensibility in questions of *matière* and their renunciation of virtuosity, he was dismayed by the lack of colour resonance (excepting Motherwell, whose “dry opulence” resembled Soulages), dismayed by the organisational sameness and the recurrence of a centrally placed “figure”, by the serial and systematic repetition of motif and device, the “harshly brittle” paint, the overt rapidity of brushwork, and, above all, by a too obvious consistency of tempo. He was therefore sceptical of the ends in view, the *terribilità*, the vehemence: “it is a terribly cramping thing, to be bound by a rigid concept of what freedom should look like in a painting”. All this ran the risk of a new academicism, and Heron sensed in retrospect that this first generation had “gone into production” rather than advance beyond the formats which each had arrived at by 1950.

Heron blamed “an age in which false notions of the ‘spontaneous’ dominate”. What the canvases on show at the Waddington share is not gesturalism so much as a productive relation to the idea of gesture, and one of the lessons of American art was to deepen by counter-example the *arrière-pensées* of European artists on this subject – that *tachisme* was not the same thing as action painting. It was Soulages who recalled Heron’s attention from American to French developments. Soulages is the most austere of the painters on show in thinking of the picture as a wall, in the single-mindedness of his material occupation of a flat surface, and in his refusal of expressive resources: “The traces left by the painter’s gestures do not form an itinerary to be followed. They do not invite the viewer to retrace the movements of the painter in action, trying to communicate some emotional impulse”.

In Hartung’s case, again, the impulse was “investigative” rather than unpremeditated. The primary gesture was only the starting point, albeit indispensable. He transcribed earlier drawings, replicating their meshes, whirls or zigzags. In these prepared forms what seems like improvised scribbling is meticulously transferred to canvas, a process that ran counter to the supposedly spontaneous gestural forms for which he became celebrated. The effect is a combination of arrest and a release of energy. In particular his use of the zigzag (as a child he would try to trace the zigzags of light before he heard the clap of thunder: “it was my way of warding off lightning – if my pencil was as quick as the lightning, nothing bad would happen to me”). This has its counterpart in Heron’s mature jigsaw shapes, beyond his tentative beginnings on display at the Waddington, and deriving from aspects of the Cornish landscape. All the painters in this exhibition kept their separate distance from the idea that gesture implies self-expression, and this is its real if hidden subject.

Staël killed himself in 1955. Heron went on to choose many paths as a philosopher of colour. Soulages and Hartung were loners first and last, and in a sense were the real survivors. Hartung only started to work expressively, directly onto canvas, in the 1960s, after the zeitgeist had dispensed with gestural art and a preoccupation with materials. Soulages (still at work today, aged ninety-six) has refused steadily to dilute his practices. The exhibition focuses on a decade which can seem so introspectively busy with clarifications as to have little time to look over its shoulder – and was consequently caught out by what came next.

Brothers and Others

Murky waters and family secrets in the Florida Keys

ANDREW IRWIN

BLOODLINE
Netflix

Bloodline, the Netflix original drama, inhabits a strange double life. It is, on the one hand, a crime thriller – filled with murderous drug dealers, double-crosses and dead bodies surfacing in murky waters. And on the other, it is a complex study of a certain kind of family – whose saccharine respectability is bought at the expense of emotional suppression and the implicit threat of violence.

In the first season, made available last year across thirteen episodes, we are introduced to the Rayburn family. The ageing patriarch, Robert (Sam Shepard, gruff and taciturn) and his wife, Sally (Sissy Spacek, at once manipulative and fragile), run a family hotel in a scenic corner of the Florida Keys. The business is small, but they have (for reasons never fully explained) earned a reputation on the island for their decency and civic-mindedness. They have four adult children – John (Kyle Chandler, a square-jawed, by-the-book cop); Meg (Linda Cardellini, a sharp, beautiful lawyer with a penchant for adultery); Kevin (Norbert Leo Butz, the hot-headed youngest son); and Danny. Danny (Ben Mendelsohn), the eldest sibling, is the blackest of black sheep – a constant disappointment, who even into middle age has been unable to grow up and settle down, living in Miami with a history of petty crime and drug addiction.

In the first episode, we find the family gathering to celebrate the forty-fifth anniversary of the parents’ inn. While the loyal children have already gathered on the beach with other guests for an implausibly wholesome – and yet hyper-masculine and faintly coercive – tug-of-war match, Danny is noticeably absent. He is sitting in a little bar not far away, debating whether or not to come, haunted by guilty memories from the family’s past.

Danny finally shows up, and soon asks whether he can stay, move back into the inn and work for the family business. John meanwhile, as a detective in the County Sheriff Department, is investigating a powerful drug ring and a number of half-burnt corpses that are turning up in the water. Danny’s presence proves a profoundly destabilizing force, demanding that the Rayburns revisit old wounds – the death of the fifth sibling, Sarah, in childhood and the abusive treatment that Danny suffered after he was held responsible.

Layers of guilt are revealed gradually through hazy flashbacks, and the writers skillfully shift the audience sympathy as further fragments are uncovered. Danny, torn between shame and resentment, views himself as the victim, excluded from a family that never gave him a fair shot; the others vacillate between pity and anger as he becomes involved in drug smuggling and his behaviour grows increasingly harmful. The story explores the dissolution of a family forced to examine its own manufactured mythology; but



Ben Mendelsohn as Danny Rayburn

it is also a more general examination – a look at the coercion underlying the image of the normative American family (John’s wife and teenage children are ciphers, with a distinctly Mattel aesthetic, both son and daughter all high-fives and coiffed hair). When the spectre of Danny’s grotesque Otherness descends, the only natural response is force.

The show’s action is inextricable from its atmosphere. Filmed on location in the Florida Keys, the imagery is dazzling, charged at once with light and menace, vast clouds rolling over crystal water, soft winds and oppressive heat. The Keys’ geography encompasses both white-sand beaches and thick swamps, positioning it in a kind of in-between space; at one moment the interplay of signifiers evokes the sinister past of the Deep South, along with the madness and quiet terror of Southern Gothic – and the next, we could be watching cruise ship adverts for paradise islands. The show’s pacing is surprisingly languid – at least in the season’s first half – lacking the addictive quality of recent Netflix “prestige” dramas. But thanks to some well-judged flash-forwards in the first episode, the whole plot is framed by the knowledge of what is to come. Danny will be killed and John will destroy the body – the question is simply why.

The second season was made available last month – yet at first glance (beyond the financial considerations) there was little call for a follow-up. Series One set up a story with a clear and well-balanced arc, and guided the audience through it, constructing tension and resolving decisively. It is hard not to wonder whether the showrunners would have done better to follow the “anthology” model favoured by *True Detective* or *American Horror Story*, with a new story linked to the last only by theme and mood.

In these new episodes (only ten this time),

we follow the three surviving siblings as they deal with their guilt and the tightening fear of being caught. Their scheme to evade detection in the dying episodes of Season One is unravelling and the police refuse to drop the case. John is running for Sheriff; and Kevin, racked with anxiety, faced with financial ruin and permanently coked up, is on the verge of a breakdown. Tension is higher in this season; the atmosphere feels closer and more suffocating. And yet, without Danny – both the question of his fate, and the bold, discomfiting performance from Mendelsohn – the show has lost its direction. Instead we have a proxy in the form of Nolan (Owen Teague), Danny’s previously unknown teenage son, filling in big chunks from Danny’s past and injecting some mystery into the plot (as well as a good dose of TV-grade rebelliousness, helpfully signified by a facial piercing and ever-handy cigarette).

This season, however, builds in thoughtful ways on the show’s most interesting theme – the question of how long one can sustain a life in bad faith. None of the characters lives with a clear perspective on the present and how the past informs it. Instead, both at the individual and family level, memories are refracted, and stories are created and repeated until the most convenient version is adopted. Danny had built a world populated by antagonists and hallucinations of his dead sibling; John now takes his place. Danny’s role as the menacing Other is absorbed, eventually becoming internalized in John (he even takes up smoking in imitation of his dead brother). Danny’s ghost sits with John and taunts him; and yet, when asked whether he feels guilt, John replies “You can’t think like that”, convinced that his essential decency justifies any crime. The show’s strapline is “We’re not bad people, but we did a bad thing”; in the next season, narrative logic surely dictates that this distinction will collapse.