

Writing about Henry Ward's Shed Paintings in the midst of their production is to drag a living practice into the past tense. I mean *in the midst* almost literally: Ward paints with such regularity that it's safe to assume that he is, right now, at work on another one. Art is always written about after the fact, but what to do when the lag of time between making and writing is so short, and getting shorter all the time? It's a fine line for a writer to walk, and it's the eternal problem of writing on the art of your times, especially times like these, in which each new day brings new calibrations of human social life, new ways to worry. I'm writing about Ward's paintings, then, not in the way newspaper columnists are right now musing over the great sourdough revival of April 2020 – not, in other words, to tie a neat historical bow around especially complex times that are still unfolding, complexly – but to give credit to their liveness by *not* fully enunciating what I think they're up to.

Much as that sounds like an easy get-out, the intention is to keep the paintings in play as generative objects, which they are both in the literal sense – shapes and marks leaping from one painting to the next – and in an imaginative one. Their slippages in and out of things known or seen (of which more later) allows them to keep on activating new thoughts in any receptive mind. The forms in Ward's works are both part of a kind of unfolding visual alphabet *and* drawn, somehow, from an experiential territory shared by anyone who looks at them. These might look like polar opposites – an inner and an outer, a personal typology and an everyday vernacular – and maybe they are; but it's those two ideas, held in quiet tension but coexisting, that keeps the paintings live, that keeps them generating new thoughts. Not being one thing or another is how their continual sense of revelation is sustained. It's not quite that Ward's paintings hold resolution at bay, as certain paintings do. It's that they set off chains of possible resolutions all the time – this *and* this *and* this *and* this. Their particularities of size, colour and line read as proposals for the creative possibilities of a straitened situation. They are, in that sense, paintings for and of our time.

How this productive openness works within the paintings can be seen everywhere. In the painting made on *April 1st*, for instance, slanted triangles,

drawn in paint that slips between opacity and translucence, drift both between scales (craggy mountains, shark's teeth, stalagmites) and the referential and the purely formal, always occupying many positions at once. The points of these shapes pierce a field that is also laid on top of them, so a push-and-pull spatial dynamic keeps their possibilities open. The marks laid down by Ward do something marks in paintings don't often do: rather than demarcate or divide, they build potential by acting both as lines and as fields. The effect is to generate a porosity between parts of the painting. See how the jagged stripes on the painting's bottom third are both drawn like the route of rivers on a map, and thickly painted and gestural, like a river's own surging movement. *Both* and *between* are words you find yourself reaching for again and again.

I want to push this word *porosity* a little further by thinking of the way in which Ward's recent paintings work in parallel, like improvised variations on a musical theme. That's not to suggest that his production is serial, exactly: they are independent works, made to live independent lives. But the intense nature of Ward's sustained practice over the course of 2020 means that the paintings invariably speak to each other, and the opportunity this publication provides is to return them to a condition of apparent simultaneity, allowing them to build rhymes and resonances. What to make, for example, of the way those triangular mountain-like forms we just saw return, flipped and darkened, in *April 5th*, or as an interlocking semi-pattern in the painting from *20th April*? Each presents new possibilities for a language of shape, one which is defiantly and productively hybrid, open to new configurations and relationships. Because a shape can, over the course of weeks or even days, undergo this kind of translation, a space is opened up for a viewer's imaginative purchase. The play of forms is a kind of invitation. Ward's paintings, seen en masse, can feel like a sustained celebration of what painted forms can produce, and how they can always keep that space open. Part of that is in their contingencies of touch, their vocabulary of scuffs, stains, smudges, the brush thudding on the surface like a drumstick or creeping across it, leaving its trail. Beyond this kinetic appeal – the effect of a hand's, and also a body's, closeness – is an aural one, in which the painted surface keeps hold, somehow, of the sound of its own making.

If these are paintings that call up sound, then that is part of their relationship to space. The porosity mentioned earlier, in which marks and shapes echo across the weeks and months, is there too in the way the studio's own dimensions factor into the production of the paintings. Made, as their title suggests, in Ward's shed, these are paintings attuned to a particular kind of spatial experience. The cocoon-like intimacy of a shed, which brings with it cultural associations of enclosure, privacy, obsessiveness, brings too an aural dimension conventional studios tend not to have. The (imagined) quietness of their making, in which the rasp of a brush's bristles feels acoustically close, is more connected to the body of their maker than it might be in a larger interior. By preventing the artist's stepping back, the shed's space stages that closeness, obliging it. And containment, if of a loose and partial kind, is in the shapes too. The sense of things inside other things is one of the main effects of Ward's vocabulary of shapes. By turns suggesting seeds, bags, organs, clouds, socks, pods and pockets, these shapes enact attitudes of enfolding and enclosure, while always, thanks to their deployment across a range of other works, remaining voraciously open to more meanings, more thoughts. I'm thinking here of an artist whose work is perhaps not immediately brought to mind in relation to Ward's: Arshile Gorky. Gorky's work of the 1940s makes use of a similar oscillation of the painted or drawn line and the colour field, and by doing so enacts constant shifts in scale, from the bodily interior to the landscape. As in Ward's paintings, these shifts are kept continually in play, so the life of the paintings, which is partly in the visibility of its marks but also in its openness of form, goes on and on.

Colour is another animating factor in thinking *across* this body of work. Ward's palette feels much of the time like a component of ideas of variation and generation implied in other aspects of his practice. As shapes body forth other shapes, so too do colours. Ochres put to use in one painting (from *27th August*) as buzzing, springlike elements return, only two days later (*29th August*) with their intensities dialled down, and then a little later (*31st August*) partially masked by ribs of a paler greenish-yellow. Experienced sequentially, these paintings have an orchestral sweep, one instrument's voice rising and falling in the mix, but perhaps it's truer to think of everyday sound, the acoustics of the

different spaces we move through and inhabit. To call Ward's palette muted, which it sometimes is, is to call up this acoustic component, in which one colour often semi-masks another in the same way that sounds interweave in any given setting. This is also how the paintings themselves build a sense of place. In the painting from *25th August*, the veiling of dense marks in washes and scumbles generates a certain spatial effect, but it's an experiential rather than a mathematical one. If anything, these are remembered places, called to mind in a moment of stillness. In Ward's works, colour is an index of their closeness to this lived, if distant reality, not only in their largely earthy or bodily palette but in their tonal inconsistencies too. A colour's heat is always tempered, its force always countered by its slipping into something else. Even the brightest colours in Ward's paintings never maintain their energies for long. Ward's process is one of managing those energies, letting the whole painting speak. If this effect suggests something not quite being said, that's of a piece with the effect of a remembered place or event many of the paintings imply. Not fully articulating a shape, or allowing a colour's visual weight to drain, is not only a way of saying many possible things at once, it's also a way of not quite saying anything, or, better, keeping closure at bay. It's a quality shared by Philip Larkin's description of trees 'coming into leaf / Like something almost being said.'

We often hear of the 'attention economy' as an animating force in how social media companies generate income for advertisers, which is after all why they exist. A side effect of the emergence of image-sharing apps like Instagram is their ability to grant artists a platform for the dissemination of images of their work, and with that has come a still-nascent recalibration of the relationship not only between an artist and the public but also between a work of art and its viewers. What is obviously missing in the experience of mediated imagery of paintings – the sensory dimension of scale, touch and smell, or those components of art that aren't easily described or assessed in words – is made up for, in many cases, by the effect of proximity these images provide. Sliding a thumb across the surface of your phone while scrolling through a sequence of images generates an effect of intimacy that wouldn't otherwise be there in a gallery space or studio. While the physical paintings *themselves* remain disembodied, the bodily relationship

between the viewer and the viewed is a new and curious effect of the interface. Attention, in this context, is played out through bodily engagement. The greasy marks of the hand's actions on a phone's glass surface, easily visible when the device goes dark, become an index of time spent looking, stopping, pinching to get a closer look. These are, in a strange way, painterly marks. Seeing Ward's paintings in this format, which is how they initially become visible in the world, as works in progress or finished objects, brings forth curious sympathies or correspondences between the movements of the artist's brush and that of the viewer's fingers. This is attention translated into gesture: both painting and looking in the digital age might be characterised in the same way. The hand and the eye are collapsed into a single exploratory gesture.

Time spent painting and time spent looking are, in Ward's paintings and their life onscreen, made parallel. Unlike the lag of time between making the paintings and finding words to explore them, as I have tried to do, painting and looking can be woven together as one and the same thing. Words always come after the fact; in the words of one of Ward's heroes, Philip Guston, 'they call it art later.' Attempts to characterise one's own historical moment are almost always doomed to failure: it's as true in the history of art as it is in any other. But works of art themselves, by *not* characterising, by *not* fully saying, can in fact embody common ground, shared territories. The equivocal spaces of Ward's paintings are sites of not-knowing, spaces of uncertainty, and in such a way give voice, however muted, to how it actually feels to be alive at a particular time and place. These paintings draw their energies from the stuff of life – especially the sensory experience of place and the act of calling it to mind, something with additional poignancy at time of writing – and, returning it to us, usher us inside.