

Awkward angle of perception

Rebecca O'Dwyer

As is well known, the word 'orbit' refers to a set route or path around a given point: we on earth orbit the sun, just as the moon orbits us. Perhaps less known, though, is that the word is etymologically coupled with a distinct sense of the optical: from a fourteenth century French word for 'eye socket'. Seeing, in this understanding, is always underscored by a sense of movement or voyaging: when we look at someone or something, we simultaneously tread a track around it. Perhaps we come close to this object, but we don't get to touch it.

I kept this double meaning in mind when thinking about Diana Copperwhite's recent paintings. In this latest exhibition, *Crooked Orbit*, these are large and at least initially discordant works. It seems as though no colour has been left aside, from lurid fuchsias and cobalt blues, to neon yellow and swatches of minty green. Recurring throughout the canvases, there is also a gradient effect achieved by loading the brush with different shades of paint; and this has a consequence of suggesting that these paintings have almost outgrown the tools of their creation, those tools then being forced to convey, through colour, as much as they possibly can. Sometimes these gradient interventions are vertical and regular; at others, they are less uniform, cast in a halting semi-circle or upturned 'u'. Throughout, they act to create the impression of space within the paintings: in one, a narrow swathe of grey, pink and white, has the look of an outstretched arm, a slight sag in the middle where the elbow could be; in another, a flat vertical plane of what looks like four gradient drags cuts a dint of architectural space. But, even when working in unison, each of these is just one gesture, loaded to capacity and worked until it dissipates, the paint run out or stopped short from further decline. Representation is at most, *never quite*; cast as it is though a series of distinct marks, the whole remains fragmentary, gestured towards but never quite pinned down.

Back in 1952, the critic Harold Rosenberg referred to the painting, then, as, 'an arena in which to act — rather than as a space in which to reproduce, re-design, analyse or "express" an object, actual or imagined'.¹ And indeed, there is something of this notion in Copperwhite's paintings; but, whereas Rosenberg idealised this notion via a romantic conception of the Ab-Ex artist, Copperwhite seems more preoccupied in acting *through* a particular mode of experience; namely, a contemporary one. The mediation of experience by technological form, and informational vertigo in particular, seem particularly central. Her colours appear to

¹ Harold Rosenberg, 'The American Action Painters,' *ARTnews*, December 1952, p. 22

almost anticipate technology; they “pop,” vigorously, as if destined for HD viewing. The gradient device, too, holds echoes of Photoshop, as a quick and rudimentary device for filling 2D space, a half-hearted simulacra of depth. Copperwhite’s paintings hold a flatness not dissimilar to that of the computer screen: their components dispersed and equally weighted — some nodes of resistance notwithstanding — everywhere. And, despite the range of tools used — paintbrushes, of course, but also what looks like scrapers, sponges, and, as the paint drips downwards, simple gravity — this sense of flatness persists. Reference points appear relative to each other within a system of ceaseless sedimentation, where each neither replaces nor updates: more, and then more, and then more. Restless, here the eye cannot linger for long.

Recently, an unforeseen idea was put forward: that there are in fact nine, rather than eight planets in our solar system. Located, speculatively, on the far side of Neptune, another huge planet — guessed to be at least ten times the size of Earth, and somewhat unimaginatively titled ‘Planet Nine’ — has been making its (non)presence felt in one particular sense: it causes our solar system to tilt. The planet, scientists claim, has an orbit markedly askew from our own; and, as a result of its huge gravitational pull, it has caused our solar system to become crooked in turn. Learning more and seeing better, in a strange way, has meant acknowledging this indelible wobble. This *crooked orbit*, then, might come close, or dip and falter and even crash into its object; wonky and awry, it might also come closer to something proximate to a greater immediacy of seeing. Or, it might not: it is only a title after all, nothing but a string of words that may or may not serve to ground Copperwhite’s recent paintings. But there is something in the word’s dual-meaning — its admixture of seeing and journeying — that appears redoubled in the process of looking at Copperwhite’s works. To see them is to look at them, but at the same time to be brought on a journey — no simple Bildungsroman — that works to communicate the humdrum dissonance of contemporary life.

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