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Mercurialism

Chris Cran Makes Forms Matter

by Nancy Tousley

One day in May, when I was thinking about Chris Cran's new abstract paintings, what seemed like an apt phrase to describe them—"the inverted sublime"—slipped into mind as if from the ether. I typed the words into Google Search to see if the term was in use. At the top of the page was Jean Paul, a prolific 18th-century German Romantic writer, philosopher and critic who is little read today in North America. His immense popularity in his time was for his humorous novels and short stories, but in 1804 he also wrote an important essay on aesthetics, which he playfully entitled *Die Vorschule der Ästhetik* or *The Pre-School of Aesthetics*. He wasn't known to me, or to Cran. But with a bit of research a serendipitous connection between Jean Paul's literary theory and Cran's work, as a contemporary Canadian painter working more than 200 years later, came into view. In his primer on aesthetics, bucking the dominant High Romantic ideas about the sublime, Jean Paul conceived the idea of "the inverted sublime or the romantic comic" and defined it as humour; he embraced humour as a modern aesthetic quality. The writer seemed to fit the artist to a T.

Humour has always been at the core of Cran's art and play; the curiosity to see what will happen if he does this or that is the energy that impels him in the studio. Looking at Cran's new work—and even at his work as a whole—through the lens of Jean Paul's ideas on aesthetics illuminates ways in which the conceptual underpinnings of his painting have deep connections to philosophy. Understand, though, that humour is not the same thing as comedy. Humour here figures as an aesthetic experience, the frisson arising from the contrast or contradiction of unlike things pushed together. The sharp surprise a reversal of expectations brings, as if from nowhere, the back-and-forth interplay between apparent polar opposites that never resolves but constitutes an ongoing mutual critique. Jean Paul and Cran each have an interest in the tension between irreconcilables, what professor of comparative literature William Coker, writing on the philosopher, calls "a poetics of antitheses."

Unlike joking or teasing, humour "turns its back on reason and falls down in worship of the idea," Jean Paul writes. "That is why humour sometimes revels in its own contradictions and impossibilities." As the inverted sublime, "it knows no individual foolishness, no fools, but only folly and a mad world; unlike the common joker delivering sideswipes, it does not single out a particular folly: rather it hauls down the great, but—unlike parody—in order to put it down next to the small, and raises the small, but—unlike irony—in order to put it next to the great and thus to annihilate both, because in the face of infinity all is equal and nothing." With ideas like this, it is no wonder that scholars place Jean Paul in line with Immanuel Kant, Søren Kierkegaard and Slavoj Žižek.

Chris Cran, installation view, "Full Circle," 2023, Wilding Cran Gallery, Los Angeles. All images courtesy the artist and Wilding Cran Gallery.



1

1. *Matter of Form Series #1*, 2022, oil and acrylic on canvas, 76.20 × 60.96 centimetres.

2. *Matter of Form Series #5*, 2022, oil and acrylic on canvas, 76.20 × 60.96 centimetres.



2

Infinity is “simply infinity of contrast, that is a negative infinity,” which is to say infinity is a conception that exists only in the contrast that separates the infinite from the finite, thus attaching the one to the other as if their definitions lay in their opposition. The human quandary is this: “I divide my inner self into finite and infinite factors (human finitude and the infinity of desire) and let the latter proceed from the former,” Jean Paul writes. “This is when man will laugh and cry: ‘Impossible! This is too crazy by half!’” But this laughter mixed with pain has an underlying earnestness; it gives us something to think about.

Cran’s “Matter of Form,” 2022–2023, a new series of paintings shown for the first time this spring at Wilding Cran Gallery in Los Angeles, set me thinking about an inverted sublime in response to the formal qualities of the paintings. The theory is in the rhetoric of their images. The paintings are similar in design and not large, not small. Their surfaces are painted a flat, matte black with a large, eccentrically shaped “cut-out” at the centre of each one. The black both establishes and negates the picture plane, while the cut-outs open onto a partially occluded view of luminous, silvery abstract forms that appear to be pressing forward against it.

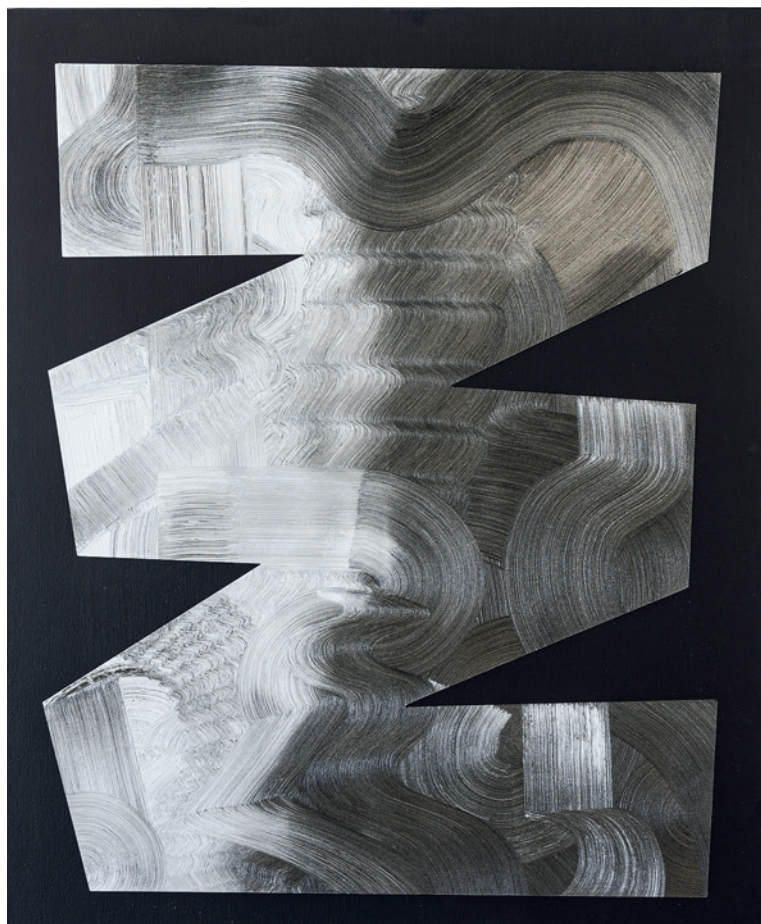
Both revealed and framed, these accordion folds, undulating ribbons, rippled swaths, circular swirls, thick switchback curves and other abstract figures, dry brushed into silver oil paint, catch and reflect light on the ridges of the strokes that made them. Translucent and opaque colours—alizarin crimson, hansa yellow, ultramarine deep blue and red, and titanium white, each mixed with silver—suffuse them in selected areas. The paintings’ radiant shapes change with fluctuations in the light and, as if responding to a viewer’s movements, the forms appear to move. Seen from one side, then the other, they shift mysteriously from positive to negative, concave to convex, light to dark and back again. With random changes in point of view, pockets of deep space open unexpectedly behind the picture plane to exhibit a startling three-dimensionality. More than simply the effects of illusion, these animated surfaces activated by perception alert viewers to their role as participants in the visual and psychological dramas of the paintings.

The “Matter of Form” paintings evoke the sublime and simultaneously upend it, most noticeably by inverting matters of great and small. The 18th-century painter of the romantic sublime, Caspar David Friedrich, portrayed the terrifying vastness and power of nature with images of immense skies, oceans and mountains spread before a diminutive human observer who gazes upon such scenes overwhelmed and struck with awe. Twentieth-century painters, like the abstract expressionists Clyfford Still, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman, whose work was dubbed abstract sublime, engulfed the viewer with huge canvases, intense saturated colour and all-over energy, relocating the sources of sublime aesthetic emotion from the natural world to its manifestations in art. Straddling the 20th and 21st centuries, Gerhard Richter has provoked sublimity and uncertainty with the dragged, scraped and striated surfaces of his monumental squeegee abstractions.

Cran’s new paintings invert the sublime in a more human scale. Instead of overpowering the viewer and casting the viewer’s gaze outward into a space that cannot or can only barely be taken in, they pull the gaze into a seemingly limitless interior space that brims with light-filled forms, that offer only an occluded view. Instead of experiencing a loss of self in immensity, the viewer is put on alert to pay close attention. A perceptual flip occurs in the figure-ground relationship. What appear to be cut-outs, portals into the space of another world, instead become strange, incongruous images/objects floating in a black void.

Cran has made abstract paintings before in his serial explorations of painting genres—self-portraiture, portraiture, still life, landscape, etc.—contextualizing abstraction as if it were just another genre, which he sometimes calls, with tongue in cheek, his “abstracts.” Humour is inherently a part of Cran’s approach to painting and its rhetoric, codes and conventions. His initial influences and inspirations came from 1940s, ’50s and ’60s advertising, commercial graphics, pulp paperback and magazine illustration, comics and reproduction technologies like the halftone dot screens. It was as if Cran had stripped the high art of painting down to the basics and rewritten its most high-minded visual texts in a common vernacular style. A contradiction couched in subject matter and style is immediately set up between these opposing forces, with their incongruity, a condition of humour, as the baseline. This incongruity is the place where humour resides before any other decisions about a painting have been made.

To bring humour to a matter as serious and exalted as painting, as Cran did from the beginning of his career in the theory-driven art world of the ’80s, was rebellious and transgressive. Humour was low. It flew in the face of critics, who found it unacceptable; it broke the rules and inverted values. It whispered that you could act up in class and get away with it. It cozied up to art’s tasteless opposite, kitsch. In the forced marriage of high art tropes and work then generally considered kitsch, Cran declared his separation. For him, this was a no longer vital paradigm of high art, late-stage Greenbergian formalism and the long list of dos and don’ts that went with it.



1

1. *Matter of Form Series #2*, 2022, oil and acrylic on canvas, 76.20 x 60.96 centimetres.

2. Installation view, "Full Circle," 2023, Wilding Cran Gallery, Los Angeles.



2

His large abstract paintings of the 1990s and the mid-2000s, whose different effects stem from Cran's interest in photographic seeing, evoke a contemporary sublime by using the rhetoric of light and space and modernist monochrome abstraction. Their lineage is the abstract sublime. In the monochrome paintings of the '90s—which are black, silver, red or blue—light reflects off the silvered ridges of brush strokes whose very real materiality as objects places them at the threshold of reality and illusion, visibility and invisibility, as if the subjective apprehension of the sublime could be called forth simply by a trick of the light, like a Pavlovian response. But there is more to it than that.

The silvered brush strokes are objectified, yes, but somehow, they slip in and out of view through the surface sheen of the paintings, appearing and disappearing with the play of light and shifts in viewpoint. If they represent anything, it would seem to be the unknowable and the unstoppable. In the most “sublime” of these paintings, given their combination of beauty and terror, overall black fields of circular swirls advance upon the viewer with relentless force from seemingly fathomless depths, adding time to the rhetoric of light and space. Were it not for the physical limits of the canvas, their *horror vacui*, edge-to-edge patterning might extend theoretically to infinity, an engulfing, claustrophobia-inducing infinity. The fear summoned by Cran's black monochromes is the existential terror of extinction.

In the abstract paintings of the 2000s, Cran enlarged the vocabulary of forms he made with brush strokes and interposed and layered them to make the space of the paintings deeper and more complex. The painting surfaces are highly active, perceptually responsive and yet elusive. Moving back and forth in front of these abstractions, a viewer might experience the illusion of movement across the entire perceptual field. Spaces that exist within another world, as if just on the other side of the picture plane, might open suddenly and as suddenly close. With the “Matter of Form” series, combining the figurative elements and illusions of the earlier abstracts with aspects of an intermediary series he'd called the “Framing Device Paintings,” Cran returned to abstraction.

Look at the black in the “Matter of Form” paintings. As a positive surface, the black gesso performs in two ways: it frames the cut-outs and defines them as openings or portals. As a negative space, it reads as a black void that surrounds the forms and turns them into incongruous objects, that is, objects of thought rather than actual things. The “matter of form” depends upon which way a viewer looks at it. Is there an infinite, light-filled beyond to gaze upon through these portals? Or is the sublime beyond—which they appear to reveal—nothing more than an illusory object of thought?

And what is to prevent the viewer from looking at it both ways? The matter is existential; it hinges on uncertainty. The viewer sees the flip happen and experiences the uncertainty on a small scale, because the special instrumentality of Cran's abstractions lies in the nature of their illusions as perceptual events. They are, in addition, events that can be repeated, going back and forth, back and forth, with the same result, to pose a question that never can be answered. Which is it: finitude or infinity? Is it all or nothing? Here is where laughter might erupt, from pleasure in watching the switching illusions and anxiety in not knowing what to think. Uncertainty, provoking anxious laughter, could be the crux of the inverted sublime. “When man looks down, like in the old theology, from the supernatural to the earthly world, the latter passes by, insignificant and vain,” writes Jean Paul. “When, like humour does, with the little world he paces out infinity, there arises that laughter in which there is pain and greatness.”

Cran switched the visual terms in the midst of working on the “Matter of Form” series in a painting named *Untitled, 5 Ovals*, in which he removes the framing device and the former indeterminacy of foreground and background disappears. The surface of this painting has become an expansive all-over field of silvery forms punctuated by five black ovals. Where the perceptually ephemeral surface evokes the vast and limitless sublime, the five ovals, arranged three over two, open onto a dense black void. By laying down the black gesso ground, it is as if to say that nothing lies beyond the sublime. *5 Ovals* suggests there is no hope of transcendence or unifying a self that is divided by finite limitations and infinite desires. The deep holes neither float nor flip; rather, they disfigure the luminous field and puncture the painted veil, demonstrating that after all the sublime is an illusion. Thus, the answer to the question posed by the new series, “Matter of Form,” must be nothing. But if this is so, then the subjective aesthetic experience of beauty is the consolation.

Like many contemporary artists whose work could be said to address it, Cran never talks about the sublime and never connects it directly to humour, the way Jean Paul does in his aesthetic theory. But Cran's beautiful, mercurial abstract paintings speak to Jean Paul's divided self, to the finite condition of beings and to their infinite desires. They demonstrate how understanding of the world is intermittent, incomplete and changeable. ■

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