**A Code of the Heart**

Let’s start with something abstract: it feels appropriate. An art encounter, when it works, tends to occur in a tricky-to-build cognitive space, one where the viewer doesn’t quite understand what they’re looking at but, inveigled, *wants* to. The artist, via design or fortuity or both, cues both positive confusion and the desire to master it and then indefinitely delays such mastery, continuing to tickle eye and mind along the way. That’s a stack of generalisations, perhaps, with not much to grip onto, not enough nouns. But it might come close to the initial range of impressions a viewer has in front of a Ronnie Hughes painting. And this despite there being no such thing, really, as a typical Ronnie Hughes painting, only what the artist—inwardly protean like the rest of us, but seemingly cannier than most at reflecting it—came up with on that particular series of trips to the studio.

 Nouns, then. Here’s *The Space Between* (2015). The eponymous space, red and punctuated with well-tuned hits of colour, might be that between a science diagram and a cartoon, both formats with deep cerebral appeals—one touching on knowledge and understanding, the other nostalgia. Or the space might be between divergent interpretations, the coloured molecular balls here either collecting at the centre or flowing outward from a cluster, centrifugal or centripetal. This might be a microscopic, cellular thing or a schematic of something vast, cosmic. It’s a bit Saul Bass—the graphic artist’s famous titles for Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* come to mind—and somewhat ghosted with space-age optimism in general, harkening back to a halcyon point when science would answer everything. Maybe it’s a painting made by someone who was young then—as Hughes was—and bought those hopes, but is now older and questioning them.

 And so, for an abstract painting, this one appears amenable to—if not quite containing—content. It has, seemingly, *implications*, and this perhaps needs spelling out given the still-prevailing assumption that abstract art doesn’t have an ‘about’, but rather just *is,* an autonomous thing-in-the-world*.* Hughes’ art, on the meta level, takes up a space between those very positions and is, seemingly, well aware of how it stages a viewer’s situation in the middle ground. After all, he called his touring exhibition *Strange Attractors*, a reference not only to chaos theory but also to the status of successful paintings per se. They attract us, and strangely.

So pay attention to the titles, at least to some degree. *Transponder* (2016)has an appellation that refers to a device for translating a signal, which under these circumstances might seem almost a tease. We may think we can’t know what the original signal was that’s been encrypted into this composition, a fluorescent pink grid, overlaid first with tan horizontals and then with a pick-up-sticks arrangement of multi-coloured diagonals, all sorts of little pleasurable modulations of colour transpiring amidships. To call an abstract painting *Transponder*—to outright *say ‘*there’s something behind here, but it’s encoded’—is to speak and not to speak, to say only that you are saying. To call a painting that and insert it into a field of canvases that look different from each other is to invite the viewer on a search for subtle common ground. We know the artist is speaking in tongues. What’s the translation?

One consistency among Hughes’ paintings of recent years is that they often look like explanations of things that can’t explained, like charts and schemas with their essential key missing, as if, again, convincing sense-making belonged to another time. Sometimes there’ll be a literalist clue, such as the title *Stream* (2017) for a richly layered painting (Hughes’ building up of surface in glazy paint strata is a materialist analogue for how his art might operate in the realm of meaning). But what kind of stream, a mountain stream, a data stream, a stream of colour—as the painting’s rainbow palette implies—or what? The painting looks a little like a modern jazz album cover; the percolating and wavering lines might be modernist transcriptions of rhythm. After a while you notice that what appeared to be a vertical structure is in fact somewhat off, tilted. In the company of Hughes’ paintings you notice this happens a lot, certainty projected only to be undermined. A series of drawings entitled *Refraction* (2017) construct crystals out of lines, at once seeming to build something and interrogate it. The questioning feels unfinished, in play; it’s hard to say, ontologically, if the thing depicted is there.

The above is by way of suggesting that the viewing experience Hughes sets up might be both self-contained and analogical. The experience of working our way towards a never-complete understanding of a colourful, sociable and yet intractable article—one of his paintings—could be just what it is, and might also reflect something larger about life lived, experience, pervasive doubt. There is another quality, though, that regularly radiates from Hughes’ art. Consider *Badass* (2016). To hear him tell it, this work sprouted from a process of experimentation with letterforms and then complicated itself into a near-abstraction, one that nevertheless still bears some afterglow of language. It’s on the verge, appropriately, of articulation. Within that, though, one noticeable thing is that, for all the painting’s resolution, it retains an air of tension—the parts, the weave of curvilinear forms that float above a ground further back, and the orange circles stacked like Connect-4 pieces in the middle, seem to be jostling. The composition is temporarily at rest, but it seems like a pause in a struggle.

 Note this composed anxiety and you start to see it threaded throughout Hughes’ practice: the jittery circles being pushed, in *Cascade* (2017)*,* through some mechanism—reminiscent of a coin-pusher arcade game—or just passing under it, who knows. An outwardly more straightforward work like *Colour Mechanics* (2016), which suggests Goethe’s colour wheels readapted by children’s illustrator Eric Carle and nested with origami star-shapes, has at once a certainty about it—these things are very present, sure of themselves—and a quality of off-ness. All the geometry is bent and few of the colours seem quite familiar; nothing from the tube, everything corrected. The tweaking is part of the pleasure of the work. It humanises the chill of the geometric, accommodates it. But it also stages Euclidean clarity as a kind of other, which the painting battles with. The disquiet is understated but there.

 It’s worth pointing out that Hughes has not always been an abstract painter. Earlier in his career the artist, who spent formative years in Belfast, made figurative work that was strongly issue-driven, and a viewer familiar with those works might, at first, wonder where that content went, where this seeming serenity and glow came from. (Because ‘moving to rural Sligo’ is too easy an answer—you take yourself with you when you go.) It’s arguable, though, that the former never did wholly disappear, was only sublimated and broadened out. If we take an artist’s history to be forever ghosting what they do in the present—for despite Hughes being a singularly various painter, he’s also still just one person, carrying his own history around in his head—then we might find that his present, ‘abstract’ art is no less circling around conflict than what came earlier. The conflict is only less local, perhaps more located in the inner self. And, conjecturing outward, one might even see these two types of skirmish as connected: political conflict as an expression of an endless irresolution and barely-managed dissatisfaction in the human organism. It has much to do, one would say, with existential territory that must be approached gingerly if not to collapse into melodrama: what it feels like to be human, coping with disappointment and countering it, finding new enthusiasms, living with the unfixed. On one level, at least; again, it’s possible to explore these paintings as purely formal propositions and in this respect they deliver too. But that’s not all they are.

 The all-that-they-are comes through via a process of blindsiding, a process far removed from—that has maybe learned something from—art that tries to win one over with a political position, or with condensations of focused angst. A first experience of Hughes’ art in the gallery is far from that. It is, rather, of a chromatic sun-shower of colour and amenable form and pictorial versatility, even effortlessness, and the result is that one drifts closer to the source. Only then are the work’s skewed angles and quiet frictions apparent, and even so they’re countermanded by ‘positive’ qualities—an unresolved argument in itself, yet even this suspension massages the pleasure centres somehow. The impression before this point was something like that of a crew of colourful individuals, smiling and murmuring over yonder. You’ve moved in to hear what they have to say—they seem at once attractive and strange, these entities—and it turns out they are speaking a cryptic code, but somehow a familiar one: a code of the heart.

*Martin Herbert is a writer based in Berlin.*