Notes from the Surface: Chaos Suspended

“For him, to get one’s bearings on the world meant to conceive all its contents as simultaneous, and to guess at their interrelationships in the cross-section of a single moment.”

― [Mikhail Bakhtin](https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/3858028.Mikhail_Bakhtin), [*Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*](https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/229152)(1929)

It is an unnerving process, to stand on the surface, and to think about what exists beyond it. Beneath our feet, vast outcrops retain the secrets of deep time. Sometimes artefacts make their way to the surface, offering glimpses of how the world was once inhabited. We marvel at their ancient symbolism and consign them to museums. There, they will be ordered according to prevailing narratives, their stories persisting only in our imaginations. The skies overhead contain similar mysteries. Occasionally, debris passes through the Earth's atmosphere in a ball of fire that craters the landscape. Despite our efforts to comprehend the universe – to instil human order in the cosmos – the prospect of infinite space remains truly suffocating. These dual realms, above and below, make us shrink. Perching on this thin veneer – this space between – we must engage all of our senses.

Across the paintings that feature in Ronnie Hughes’ touring exhibition, ‘Strange Attractors’, it is easy to become absorbed in surface. Primed boards and taut linens support painted compositions that are all-consuming, in hues that are saccharin sweet. Recalling ornate textiles from different eras, these works present patchworks of garishly patterned fabrics. Fibres are magnified to echo the dense structures of latticework. Intersecting lines dart across surfaces like criss-crossing yarns. The dual paintings *Bundle I & II* (2015) appear like a collection of things, bound together with tangerine twine. As secure as a well-wrapped parcel, this tender pairing is the epicentre: their highly-worked surfaces are stead-fast, yet they bulge and fray at the edges.

On a material level, craft and the handmade are widely evident here. Paintings like *Weaver* (2015) have the proportions of a Persian carpet. Held in glorious tension by the frame, interwoven painted bands follow the weft and warp of loom-work. There is something very soothing about repetition. On more than one occasion, I think about the silk wall hangings and ‘pictorial weavings’ of Anni Albers and her meticulous preparatory sketches on gridded paper. Weavers are conscious of every new colour and how it will interact with existing colour schemes. In this instance, muted lilacs, moss greens and slate greys – remnants of the artist’s earlier palette, rooted in the west of Ireland landscape – form a neutral backdrop for a scattering of brightly-coloured squares. As far as is discernible to the human eye, these small synthetic cubes are evenly distributed across the surface. They create depth, optically advancing towards the viewer like land beacons viewed from the sea. Increasingly, they resemble tiny laser beams, flashing pixels or glitches of corrupted data. They recall a nostalgic age at the threshold of digital advancement, when rudimentary computer games like Space Invaders and Pac-Man blazed cinematic melodramas across the screen. The early 1980s ushered the start of the digital age, when a whole spectrum of newer, more sophisticated apparatus would always be available to replace outmoded technology.

The fate of painting in the digital age has been subject to endless debate. Advancing technology has vast implications, not just for how paintings are conceived and composed (the pictorial frame now increasingly screen-like), but for the ways in which digital reproduction disrupts the haptic encounter of art. It is a tactile conversation about materiality and the painted surface – about handmade, sculptural objects, rather than two-dimensional images. Here, we interrogate the ‘touch quality’ of mark-making, paint viscosity and the places where brushes daub a canvas. The objecthood of painting, it seems, is predicated on the most minute and primitive details.

**Ordering Systems**

Until the late nineteenth century, the concept of chaos was, for the most-part, ungraspable. In its awesome obscurity, chaos was perceived as something mystical, immeasurable, fearful. Later, someone recognised that, despite its apparent randomness, chaos is actually repetitive. It is self-organising and predictable. According to this new theory, long-running dynamical systems – like the natural entropy that builds in a swinging pendulum – can be tracked and visualised through predetermined mathematical patterns. This drive to grapple with disorder – to map abstract systems against some spectacular index – is central to human existence. Across the painting practice of Ronnie Hughes, this grappling impulse is highly evident, but it is encrypted. Digging deep to look beyond the painted surfaces, we find implicit references to all kinds of human systems – from quantum physics and genetic coding, to cosmology and colour theory, even language itself. Using robust, structuralising motifs, the artist makes these immaterial systems appear more tangible.

Paintings like *Palette* (2016), for example, allude to pre-twentieth century scientific advancements in colour theory. Here, rainbow circles settle on a waxy grey background, while triangles – depicted in thin, painterly layers – settle in the foreground like translucent Perspex prisms, offering overlapping viewing lenses. Elsewhere,in *Lenticular* (2016), a sequence of green-coloured discs hovers against a distorted, almost digitised background. This painting reaffirms the effects of colour in conjuring optical illusions and depth across a surface. We are reminded that colour is always relational and that the material quest of painting – the search for an authentic palette, each colour humming at a different frequency – is a process defined by alchemy.

In making visible the relationships between primary, secondary and tertiary colours, there is no greater illustrative symbol than the colour wheel. Paintings like *Colour Mechanics* (2016) and *Whirr* (2017) suggest various configurations of this wheel. The former subsumes four-sided stars to further dissect colour gradients, while the latter juxtaposes multiple blue-toned discs, conveying kinetic movement, dynamism and the passing of time. However, the solitary wheel-like form depicted in *Polychrome* (2013) is breath-taking in its simplicity. Etched into a neutral backdrop, the lone disc floats within the frame like something ethereal, other-worldly and divine. Its variegated inner-structure has the quality of smooth enamel, echoing some ancient, decorative artefact. As an amulet or talisman, it also recalls the Pagan sun wheel, devised to track the sun’s journey across the celestial sphere. This potent diagram speaks of fertility and ancestry, but it also retains the secrets of language. From this spoked-wheel configuration, each letter of our alphabet was formed.

But the wheel’s primordial symbolism was not exclusive to pre-Christian cultures. The Buddhist Dharma Wheel, for example, signifies deep-seated moral wisdom, discipline and focus. A suspected eastern influence is detectable elsewhere in this painting: scalloped edges fringe the composition, channelling the decorative architecture of oriental temples. Like the prehistoric lozenges and spirals of Neolithic art, the wheel conjures associations with ritual and worship. Often used in funerary rites to decorate vaults and tombs, they mark the metaphysical thresholds between life, death and rebirth. With spokes that lead us back to the vital centre, this universal symbol denotes all things cyclical and infinite.

**On Carnival**

For all their grounding in rational systems, Ronnie Hughes’ paintings are vexed with human failings. The artist’s attempts to instil order – through the use of grids, lines and geometric shapes – are deliberately sabotaged by his own human touch, which frequently renders these structures skewed, irregular and flawed. Collectively, these paintings hint at the onset of a system falling apart, yet exist in a moment before collapse. They chronicle chaos suspended. In *The Space Between* (2015), we get a sense of things teetering on the brink. A continuous line spirals inwards, like a vortex or blackhole. Some elements are dragged downwards, while others hover at the edges, inevitability. When encountering small-scale works, we can conceive them as concise objects or windows into other realms; however, larger works invariably prompt us to think about their scale in relation to own bodies. Many of the paintings in ‘Strange Attractors’ reference the absent figure and implicate us, the viewer, in their playful scenarios. As misshapen and jagged as crushed metal, the concentric stars of *Detonate* (2016) suggest the dual acts of explosion and implosion. The composition seems to pinpoint a moment when the whole universe crumples in on itself, absorbing all the world’s colour into a vacuum.

This notion of a world turned upside down was articulated by Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtinin his writings on the Carnivalesque. For Bakhtin, the medieval carnival was a place where the normal inhibitions, strict conventions and hierarchies governing everyday life were temporarily suspended. The carnivalistic mindset was characterised by ambivalence in which dualities – such as new and old, high and low, birth and death, sacred and profane, wisdom and stupidity – could freely coexist. Drawing on this principle of duality, we can view visually distinct works by Hughes as sharing common conceptual motivations. The monochromatic painting *Carnivale* (2017) presents a myriad of silvery-grey discs against a backdrop of semi-opaque columns and chequered patterns, while the series ‘Circus I – VII’ (2017) shows candy-coloured rectangles enacting various square formations. Where one surface seems explicitly chaotic from the outset, the other leaks chaos with close-reading. From a distance, the Circus series seems to depict perfectly-composed grids, but on closer inspection, there are gaps and mutations – as if the forms have outgrown prescribed codes of conduct, or have chosen to blatantly defy them.

Among these ‘Strange Attractors’, there is a deep desire to interrogate systems, to know them intimately, and to find playful ways of dismantling them. These works manifest an almost fetishistic preoccupation with surfaces – kaleidoscopic, multi-coloured and intoxicatingly synthetic. Here, viewers encounter the material process in an immutable final layer. Previous activity is secreted below, embossing it like braille. Across these surfaces, the performance of painting is enacted – spontaneously, with no formal plan – absorbing the artist in an intuitive feedback loop of testing and reworking, creating and unravelling.

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