

A painter shows his true colours

Visual arts

JOHN HOYLAND

The Arts Club

LONDON ★★★★★

John Hoyland emerged as one of Britain's leading abstract painters in the Sixties, exhibiting with both the influential Situation group in 1960 and the New Generation artists – along with Patrick Caulfield, David Hockney and Bridget Riley – at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in 1964. Later that year, he went to New York, where he met leading Abstract Expressionists including Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko.

His early work features broad, calm rectangles in the manner of the American Color Field painters, but Hoyland's distinctive contribution has been to break with the modernist insistence on a flat surface and to put perspective back into abstract painting: his mature work is characterised by depth and texture, in which strange objects float in the foreground or middle distance,

against an often mysterious background, in a way that is oddly reminiscent of Miro.

The Sheffield-born Royal Academician enjoyed a major retrospective last year at Tate St Ives; this new exhibition showcases work from the past eight years. What is stunning is the vitality of these 10 enormous canvases, several as much as 10ft square. Powerfully affirmative, full of light and life, they combine the romanticism of Rothko with the macho energy of Pollock. Superimposed on to shimmering, luminous backgrounds are brilliant, explosive splashes of colour and activity. Acrylic is applied in a thin wash that shrinks on the canvas to produce a delicate craquelure. Over this, slabs of thicker paint are allowed to run down the canvas, and over these are bright geometric shapes in bold impasto, often squeezed straight from the tube.

Some of these paintings seem to hover on the boundary between the abstract and the figurative. In *Leaping Wizards 2-07-2003* – inspired by the swifts that circle around the artist's house

in France – black figures wheel and dive against a luminous blue background, with a spiral of bold red acrylic like a setting sun at the bottom left. The same serene, joyous quality characterises *For Ever 8-06-2004*, though the treatment here is more abstract and less susceptible to interpretation. Two circles float on a shimmering ultramarine ground. One, positioned almost in the centre, is only a slightly lighter blue, so that it barely seems to emerge from the background, like a jellyfish in the sea, while the other; towards the bottom right of the canvas, is a bright Catherine wheel of red, green and yellow.

In several of the paintings, vertical stripes are deployed, somewhat in the manner of Barnett Newman, to divide the field, creating a sense of tension and even conflict. In *Memory 4-07-1999*, the canvas is partitioned two-thirds of the way across by violet, yellow and green bands; to one side, outlined in red paint, is what looks like a human form, possibly that of a woman. The drips that run from this sketchy figure



Vibrant and atmospheric: John Hoyland's 'For Ever 8-06-2004'

suggest blood, or tears, and, against the deep blue background, evoke an atmosphere of mourning.

Libertine 12-02-2001 has a dark, demonic energy all of its own. A scrawled, black graffiti-like figure, contained – imprisoned? – within the cool green panel to the left seems to push against the central barrier to penetrate the realm of orgasmic colour and light to the right.

While abstract painting can sometimes seem difficult, cerebral and aloof, Hoyland's canvases are vibrant, tender, atmospheric – and richly enjoyable. The poetic titles, and the inclusion of the date – a practice he has maintained for decades – suggest that the work forms some kind of emotional autobiography, though many defy literal interpretation.

Maurice Cockerill, a

fellow Royal Academician, has called Hoyland “the Muddy Waters of British painting – relentless, driven, and still an old rascal”. The sheer energy, scale and ambition of this recent work abundantly demonstrate that, at 72, Hoyland has still got his mojo working.

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