

I Heart New York

'The city seen from the Queensboro Bridge is always the city seen for the first time, in its first wild promise of all the mystery and beauty in the world.' **F. Scott Fitzgerald**

THAT WAS SCOTT FITZGERALD on New York in the 1920's. But, what kind of mystery and what kind of beauty? In the late 19th century New York was where the urban and the modern fused. It's where the idea of the modern became tangible; concrete. The steel, the glass and the geometry have become the grammar of modernity and innovation it's syntax. I think that what Fitzgerald meant was that to see New York was to see 'the now'. To experience change. To feel alive. To be present in ourselves; and there lies the metaphor. To paint is to be present in ourselves and to look at painting is to be present in another. Painting as a discourse.

'Everything you can imagine is real.' **Pablo Picasso**

Few people who've ever bought a T-shirt with the slogan – I and the symbol for a heart – have misconstrued it as 'I heart'. Juan Bolivar is one of the few. It's obvious that Juan is ignoring convention. But why? Because it draws our attention to the business of thinking. This is thought as play.

Ever since I first saw Juan Bolivar's work at Tim Sheward Projects in London in 2012, I've had a sense of the 'beautiful mind' at work in these spare and exquisite paintings. I enjoy his slightly out of whack way of thinking; that and his discipline. It's this synthesis that makes Juan's paintings worthy of serious attention.

Juan's paintings make no apparent claim to authenticity or originality. It's simply not an issue. The notion of justification has become facile. The myth of expressive integrity has been exposed as an unsustainable absurdity. Integrity isn't a matter of choice. Wearisome debates as to whether painting is relevant or whatever are long buried. These days we have bigger fish to fry. His work is intelligent without being academic. He doesn't appear to lose sleep musing over 'academic kabbalah'*.

'The picture is a fact.' **Ludwig Wittgenstein**

New York's pre-eminent position in the history of 20th century modernist painting was one of the reasons why in the spring of 2013 Juan Bolivar at the age of 46 eventually went there. His other reason for going was to see the MoMA show *'Inventing Abstraction 1910-1925'*. It would be Juan's first time in New York and his paintings would be changed by this visit. They would begin to embrace the personal as well as the public; the playful and the theoretical.

In this group of paintings he has fused his experience of the MoMA exhibition with that of New York; the hot dog stands, the streets, the cabs and the culture. Juan has referred to some of these paintings as souvenirs which lends this project a sense of purpose. It's this kind of focus that distinguishes these paintings as both ambitious and evolutionary.

'America is the country of the art of the future... Look at the skyscrapers! Has europe anything to show more beautiful than this?' **Marcel Duchamp**

Those already familiar with Juan's paintings will know that his work can quote Mondrian and Malevich whilst simultaneously referring to heavy metal bands such as AC/DC, Iron Maiden and Def Leppard. This is not an arbitrary connection. Heavy metal was one of Juan's first loves. This is autobiography. To state that early abstract paintings and heavy metal music are different is banal. What is remarkable is that they are of equal significance to Juan. As memories they equate. Juan sights the fanzine as a cultural and metaphorical link. The fact that they might at first seem incongruous bed-fellows is what makes the synthesis all the more remarkable. Cultural pluralism at work. It's a similar pleasure to hearing Homer Simpson mention Wittgenstein; simultaneously subversive and delightful.

'I came to New York to be a fine artist – that was my ambition.' **David Byrne**

Whilst in New York Juan absorbed the sights. But he absorbed them in a particular way. He saw them refracted through his experience of the MoMA show and visualised them by referring to paintings in the exhibition. He was particularly interested in the paintings of Sophie Taeuber-Arp, Piet Mondrian, Wladyslaw Strzeminski and Kasimir Malevich. Paintings that had long ago become icons of the abstract.

Unsurprisingly, Malevich's *Black Square* made a massive impression. Malevich claimed that his painting was year 0. A subsequent visit to Ground Zero had a profound effect. Juan later discovered that the two experiences had become conflated; not by design but by memory. For Juan, the inappropriate gesture or thought won't be ignored or suppressed. It's slowly filtered through reflection.

In a beautifully written passage (in his essay *'The Fly in the Ointment'*) in the catalogue for his exhibition *'Geometry Wars'* at The John Hansard Gallery in 2008 Juan acknowledges a growing sense of inappropriateness about his behaviour. He's not alone in that respect. He's being candid. Irrespective of what might be termed inappropriate, these paintings are subtle and good natured. A welcome change from the 'serious' and the abject which has become the institutional and academic norm. Juan's paintings elucidate with minimum drama.

'If people never did silly things nothing intelligent would ever get done.'

Ludwig Wittgenstein

Juan Bolivar is full of surprises. For someone who admits to being unaware of post-modernism until 1998 – that's 20 years after notions of originality and

authenticity had first been problematised – he’s certainly caught up. His work isn’t postmodern it is post-conceptual. Juan’s paintings effortlessly epitomise post-conceptual painting. It’s intelligent, un-ironic, humorous and thoughtful. His work appears to be at ease with its materiality. A significant part of the legacy of early non representational painting. The painting as its own object. This is one reason why Juan’s paintings are executed with such precision and care. A profound respect for the discourse that is painting and an established sense of the painting as object.

‘Life doesn’t imitate art, it imitates bad television.’ Woody Allen

Paintings such as *‘Broadway I’* and *‘II’* which reference Mondrian’s New York are painstakingly colour matched and are exactly the same size as the painting upon which they’re based. Juan’s method involves a refreshing and irreverent take on transcription. He’s not merely appropriating but consciously mis-appropriating. Riffing. He knows what is predictable and consistently reacts against it; this lends his paintings a refreshing and somewhat playful appearance. Which leads the Checker Cab depicted in *Broadway 1* to appear planted at the bottom edge of the painting; likewise the police car and fire engine in *Broadway 2*. All are schematic and rationalised.

‘Most of what’s on television is rubbish.’ Pablo Picasso

As a child Juan had poor health and was often confined to bed. It was on such an occasion as this that he discovered Leonardo and Asterix on the same day. It’s because of this ranging curiosity that he seems to have an unorthodox sense of hierarchy, and it’s this ethos that extends to all aspects of his work. Juan is clearly an intelligent and thoughtful painter. He embraces the legacy of conceptual art. For a painter to attempt to deny or ignore this is perverse. Denial and ignorance are the enemies of creative thought.

Paintings like *‘Wall Street’* which is based upon a painting by Sophie Taeuber-Arp refers to the ivy league ethos of the financial sector in an effortless manner. The tie depicted is that of Harvard. Are these Tom Wolfe’s ‘masters of the universe’?

There are two small paintings in Juan’s show that employ text and both bear witness to a conceptual legacy. But they represent much more than that. *‘The Armory 2014’*, a sign displayed in a museum or gallery that says Wet Paint can’t be ignored. It’s either incongruous or begging to be misinterpreted. Fuel for thought. Either way it’s funny. And *‘No Idling’*, a sign seen in a New York street seems to be offering moral guidance rather than a legal imperative. To see the world in this fashion is to delight in it.

The same goes for the rather touching painting entitled *‘Dumbo’*. *Dumbo* is ostensibly a landscape, a synthetic landscape. The title is a conflation of the acronym Down Under the Manhattan Bridge Overpass (DUMBO) and the eponymous Disney animation. So Dumbo becomes a tiny sad grey painting. I

found myself scrutinising this painting as I felt I'd missed something. I hadn't. It really was that sad.

'A serious and good philosophical work could be written consisting entirely of jokes.'

Ludwig Wittgenstein

Juan's paintings in spite of their appearance are fuelled by a sense of the tragicomic. None more so than the painting entitled 'Ground Zero'. This painting which refers to Malevich's Black Square and the events of 9/11. Juan describes this as a delicate balancing act. To achieve this he has employed a kind of second order meaning.

Juan refers to the candle vigil as a public display of grief without depicting it. He relies instead upon our associative powers. A solitary match is summoned to represent the tragedy and pathos of remembrance. A dreadful hopelessness or a wild optimistic?

He conflates the act of painting and that of remembrance. Painting becomes synonymous with expression and gesture. Put simply; to paint about love necessitates that a painting is crafted lovingly.

The painting becomes its subject as well as its object, if that doesn't sound too esoteric. This isn't strictly formalism although formal values and strategic thinking play a large part. It's not about being right. It's about being prepared to speculate; to see what happens. It's about thinking. It's remembering what you're doing whilst painting.

'I love New York; I've got a gun.' **Charles Barkley**

So what's new? The persistence of illusion in abstract and non-referential painting is well established. In the 1960's the American critic and curator Robert Rosenblum observed that Jackson Pollock's paintings were anything but flat. He likened the strands and webs of paint to interstellar and cosmic space. There's also a constant confusion between abstract and non-referential painting. Abstract painting uses the world of appearances as a reference or starting point and 'draws out' – abstracts.

Whereas non-referential painting; Malevich, Mondrian and Kandinsky take the ideas of theosophy as their foundation. The idea of a higher order that is esoteric and spiritual in nature. By around 1907 all three of these painters were members of the Theosophical Society. They were probably aware of books like 'Thought Forms' written by Reverend C W Leadbeater (and Annie Besant). Some of them may have owned a copy.

They may also have known of the work of Hilma af Klint from the late 19th century. She believed her paintings and automatic drawings were dictated by a higher psychic power. But all of them believed in 'man's possible psychic evolution'. It was seen as a 'trading up' from the material to the spiritual. The realm of the abstract became an aspiration.

This also approximates to the title of a book by the mathematician and esoteric theorist P D Ouspensky (see bibliography below). It shouldn't come as a surprise that early abstract and non-referential painting owed more to theosophical thought than avant garde 19th century painting. The conventional thinking that Cezanne and the cubists were precursors is speculative and stylistic, where as theosophical doctrine is programmatic and ultimately – abstract.

One school of 20th century painting that chimes with Juan Bolivar's work is that of the Precisionist movement, a group of american painters who were active in the 1920's and 1930's. The movement included Charles Schiller, Gerald Murphy, Charles Demuth, Ralston Crawford and the photographer Paul Strand. The curious thing is that they were influenced by the same paintings and the same city as Juan – almost a century earlier. They were active in the 1920's and their crisp, abstracted urban aesthetic can be seen in the paintings of Stuart Davis. Davis is arguably the most important american painter of the 20th century. His biography is the story of urban America in the 20th century; from 'ash can' to minimalism.

As I said at the beginning painting is a discourse. A great conversation between ourselves, our past, our fears and our desires. That these paintings employ a tragicomic narrative shouldn't surprise anyone.

'Oh dear. Now the end's come off...' **Oliver Postgate & Peter Firmin**

*'academic kabbalah' is an expression first coined by the critic and novelist George Steiner.

GRAHAM CROWLEY

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A New Model Of The Universe by P D Ouspensky

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Books

Graham Crowley - Collected essays and interviews

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