

Gerard Hemsworth: Hidden Agenda

Kunsthalle Bern and the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, Ridgefield, CT

ISBN 978-3-941185-89-0

ENCHANTMENT AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Thomas Lawson

It was winter in Edinburgh, and I awoke in the dark, drank a cup of coffee and ran for the bus. At the airport the usual standing, waiting, being searched, passing through; and then another coffee and a not very inspiring croissant. The sky begins to lighten as we take off. Dozing on the plane and then, dreamlike, we are coming down across the Thames, which glitters in a bright winter sun. Bathed in this brittle light, London seems enchanted. I give the address to the cabbie, who immediately has a list of excuses about the difficulty of getting there. I call Gerard and give the phone to the driver, who argues and finally agrees. As we drive he explains it is all the fault of the Olympics, that construction of the new stadium has closed all the access roads into Hackney Wick. After much looping back and false turns we stop at a train station and I get out. Gerard appears from around the corner and leads me on, through a maze of old industrial buildings, some bearing the signs of gentrification. As we walk he tells me that his son explained the etymology of the area's name: originally a hamlet or group of houses, not enough to be a town, a place without a church. The inference being that Hackney Wick was, and remains, some what god-forsaken.

We turn into a yard, busy with some inscrutable industry, enter a door at the back, and, down a corridor find the studio: a quiet, sky-lit room far removed from the bustle of the city. I feel a bit like a character in a spy novel; a password spoken quietly, and a door opens on a secret haven withdrawn from the world, a laboratory of sorts in which to consider and reconsider the parameters of painting in today's art world.

I have known Gerard Hemsworth for some time now, and I've been privileged to enjoy several long conversations with him over the years. He is someone who clearly knows much, but plays that knowledge close, as if it might escape and cause damage somewhere. To prevent this calamity from happening he hides behind a mask of studied drollery; conversation is punctuated by long draughts on a cigarette, philosophic pulls of tea, long quizzical looks, and then, a sharply observed remark delivered with a raised eyebrow. Little by way of everyday information is volunteered.

Hemsworth has pursued a long career devoted to a careful consideration of painting's options, meanings and tactics, and his work is very much like his conversation. The paintings have always been made with extraordinary deliberation and care; they are not flashy, and definitely not brushy. For many years they presented a blank face to the world,

but came impeccably dressed. They have always had a severe elegance, distinguished by an economy of design. By that I mean they were monochromes framed with a minimal arabesque, a teasing suggestion of what it might take to become a painting. They certainly dealt with the decorative, but could never be dismissed with that cowardly qualifier 'merely.' In their stubborn silence these works demanded a serious response; they framed a set of enquiries into the nature of art and its bond with its public, and demanded that that public audience pay attention.

Assuming I would be spending the day with a new group of similarly contemplative works, I was taken aback to find instead a group of paintings that were outrageously absurd; provocative in an odd, slightly uncomfortable way. Overall the paintings were of a piece with Hemsworth's earlier work; they were deliberate and deliberative, with questions of scale, colour, and relationships all carefully worked out. They were large and insistent. But instead of variations on the monochrome here I was confronted with exploding mushrooms, perverse teddy bears, tempestuous piglets. We settled in with a cup of tea, Gerard looked me in the eye, and paused, "Well, it all began with the bunny." By this he meant a painting called *Between Heaven and Hell*, 1998, a title suggestive of Hemsworth's existential ambivalence. The painting is immediately and insistently absurd; a large pale blue canvas on which sits a rather schematic outline of a rabbit atop a small rise, apparently looking over the dales to circling gulls and billowing clouds beyond. The sketch for a ridiculously sappy Easter card perhaps, but looming large on the wall like a threat to a viewer's sanity, monumental in its silliness. It appeared that the curlicues at the edges of earlier work had simplified into half circles, and migrated from the edges to the centre to create an image instead of a frame. Hemsworth confirmed that indeed there had been a frame painting edged with bubbles - circles and half circles really - that had opened up the idea of creating a picture, and dispensing with the frame. Finding himself in the trap of repetition, caught in his own rigour, he needed a new point of departure, and this reinvention of the bubbles opened up the chance to explore the ridiculous.

Paintings tend to be discussed in terms that rarely penetrate the surface. If there are gestural marks plotting the application of pigment, then they are somehow the bearers of content. If the surface is sheer and impenetrable, then it is on that surface that meaning lies. If there is an image, iconographers spring to work. If a painter has been incautious enough to talk of childhood or lost love, then all is laid bare. But before all that there is preparation and process, and I always want to know how the paintings are made, how the primary decisions are taken. Hemsworth's answer was revealing, as it was in two parts, ambivalent as ever. One concerned the way we understand images in our daily lives, the other concerned the daily life of a painter in modern times. Nothing particularly unusual there, but for the twist that found the questions surrounding representation coming to the fore in the mind of a

painter who had previously submerged the image under the blank gaze of the monochrome. Asked about process and Hemsworth began talking about a ten-year project to uncover a set of images that would allow him to undermine the seriousness of high modernist art, while giving him space to continue his own, very serious investigations of art's embattled relationship to the mainstream.

The bunny was an accident of sorts, the kind of rudimentary image one might make while playing around with curves and half-circles. But the vista opened up to view under the bunny's eyes was the strangely domesticated menagerie of children's books, the simple figurations of early learning and colouring books. On the surface these kinds of images are taken to be unproblematic, simple and innocent, but taken out of context they easily become very troubling indeed. That Hemsworth chose sources that date to his own childhood adds an extra turn of the screw. Is he finally, and inscrutably, dropping hints of an autobiographical sort? But even setting aside such potential for psychological interpretation, what is the adult mind to make of an imaginary world of giant mushroom forests and spanked piglets?

Working out of these cartoon-like images, Hemsworth isolates and simplifies, reducing the already rudimentary to the most telegraphed of outlines, marks almost divorced from their referents. Scaled up to fit the life-sized canvases, these drawing elements are masked out with tape over a neutral ground. A decision is then made about colour; dark or light, muted or bright. The colours themselves are 50s design colours, a muted green/brown, lilac, yellow, taupe, pink/grey. Another interpretative clue perhaps. This ground is then applied flat and matte. Once dry, the tape is removed, the resultant lines filled in. The whole process thus is almost, but significantly not quite, mechanical. This could be done by assistants, or by using the tools of more commercial reproduction, the tools of the print shop. But the painstaking repetition is the product of careful handcraft, the diligent work of the singular painter, alone in his studio. The result may have an impersonal quality, but it is made with an intense investment of personal time and attention.

It is the contrast between this extreme care, the painstaking deliberation of technique, and the absurd banality of the appropriated images that first trips the brain. Issues of scale and proportion further confuse, just as the inflation of the childlike to adult size threatens the stability of perception. Consider *Now Then*, 2008, a full size vertical field of fleshy pink, on which the figures of two sobbing piglets outlined in grey hold the centre of attention. Deftly located in a storybook space by the smart deployment of a few lines suggesting grass, paper blowing in the wind, light reflecting off water, these odd creatures are dressed up as small children, but are scaled up to a larger than life size. This shift in scale turns them into freaky monsters upset at having ripped a pathetic looking teddy bear in half, distantly

replaying the horrific scene in Goya's painting of Saturn eating his son. The charm of the children's illustration is turned against itself, inducing a squirm of recognition as we see plainly the violence of sibling rivalry that the cutesy drawings are meant to disguise, or at least defang.

In a number of these paintings Hemsworth addresses the violence and psychic turbulence of childhood in a fairly overt way - the ripped bear, a wielded axe, an explosion. In others the threat is more veiled - a snake in the grass, a creature/child hiding, or waiting alone, an abandoned scooter. In all there is a pervasive sense of existential dread, a maelstrom of uncontrollable thoughts, feelings and anxieties, hiding in plain sight beneath the placid exterior. A kind of moral ambivalence bleeds into psychic terror as the individual viewer ponders questions left unanswered. An imaginary world originally conceived without irony is turned into a place of alarmingly post-ironic innocence, a place, that is, of pure terror, though a dead-pan presentation. This forces the viewer, through the sheer will power of a poker-faced refusal to offer clues, to confront something ordinarily left unsaid.

But if these paintings seem indirect, what of the near featureless landscapes where story is implied, not shown? Coming at them cold a viewer might rest on the formal questions of what we see, repeated marks indicating various surfaces and possibilities, various ellipses, straight lines, curved lines, irregular rectangles - devices to direct the activity of looking. These are hieroglyphs of a sort, shorthand from the world of commercial art, from children's book illustration to Saturday morning cartoons. But if we come at them from these more figurative works, or even a piece like *Frightened Rabbit*, 2007, we intuit something far darker. This is a somber, grey-green painting dominated by six ovoid shapes that may be supported by parallel bars in a paler blue-grey. Having by now spent some time with these hallucinatory works, I recognize them to be mushrooms, giant mushrooms. And between them flashes the dust puffs of a fleeing cartoon character, getting out of harm's way as fast as its rotating feet can carry it.

Following the fleeing creature we now leave the strange enchanted forest for an equally disturbing space, a one dimensional zone where the small detailed flourishes that suggested an environment in the earlier paintings now take centre stage. As an example we can consider *Matter of Opinion*, 2008, a diptych in brick red with a mural pattern suggestive of grass and flowers. This is a very flat picture, but the repetition reinforces a perception of motion, another hint of animation, but now without any sign of animal or human presence. This of course is the space of a contested modernism, full of reference to the struggles of painting in the later 20th century. It is a pure, painted space, self-sufficient in its mirroring effect, a reference to the interiors of late Pop paintings perhaps, self-consciously abstracted, stylishly representational. The colours

suggest interior space, but the graphics point outdoors. The overall effect brings us back to the fate of painting.

If, in *Matter of Opinion*, there is a hint of wildness, in a series of related garden paintings - *Formal Garden*, *Urban Garden*, *Garden Pond* - we are clearly in a manicured, ordered space. Calm but unsettling, this is the suburban dream of quiet retreat turned to designer prison. There is a conscious lockdown effect, a closing off of interpretative modes of thinking and observing. Here the syncopated marks make patterns on eyes and in head, but give up nothing. The shifts in scale from the colouring book inspired paintings have now morphed exponentially. Every line and shape threatens the sanity of anyone trying to understand it. A raindrop wields the full weight of a dagger to the heart.

As dusk fell and the studio grew crepuscular, these stylishly bleak places began to seem increasingly terrible and of a mind with the god-forsaken territory. It was time to leave, first a short train ride out of the encircled Wick and then a taxi, confident this time, back to the airport. All around was rush hour bustle and adult normality, people going home from work, from school. But weirdly, back on the streets everything seemed reduced, somehow smaller and certainly less terrifying. I had escaped the enchanted garden with its discontents and anxieties, and returned to the banal world of security checks and impatient waiting. But then drinks in the lounge as the board lit up with possibilities; Antwerp, Paris, Dusseldorf, Berlin. Here was a tangible opening to the fantasy of moving on, looking for revelation and discovery. But each destination was in essence familiar, and none could be as uncanny and subversive as the enchanted world of Gerard Hemsworth's paintings.