

Gerard Hemsworth: After Urban Garden
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NOTHING IS AS IT SEEMS

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An enormous bunny rabbit gazes at the horizon, huge mushrooms sprout in clusters in the rain, while gardens filled with schematic flora and fauna host a range of children's cartoon figures engaged in apparently innocuous activities. Welcome to *Hemsworld*; the parallel universe of Gerard Hemsworth's work. This exhibition involves both paintings and prints that touch upon the theme of gardens and a host of other issues that have preoccupied Hemsworth in recent years. The works reprise a range of his standard figurations: bunnies, cartoon figures, schematically drawn mushrooms, grass, rocks and rain, all set upon fields of dense matt colour. We are treated here to a cross section, a small slice, of this timeless, imaginary world seemingly unconnected to our own, where very little happens, and what does happen seems at once both banal and unmistakably uncanny.

On one level, *Hemsworld* is a happy place, populated by figures drawn from children's colouring books doing child-like, innocent things. Yet at the same time, both the images themselves and the titles given to the works often suggest that something is ever so slightly amiss. There is seldom anything more than a suggestion of this, but it is there nonetheless. For example, the painting 'Mary, Mary' (2010) consists in an image of a little girl's legs and feet standing in a garden. She stands slightly pigeon toed, facing the viewer but with only her legs visible. The angle of the feet towards each other suggests a certain coyness, or hesitation, or perhaps uncertainty. The narrative clue offered by the title 'Mary, Mary' connects on one level with that uncertainty; perhaps she has been a naughty girl? But then again perhaps not, and anyway, how naughty could she have been?

This then brings us to one part of the semiotic complexity of *Hemsworld*. It is a sort of paradise lost. The smooth flawless forms, the pared down simplicity of the images, the lack of any external corrupting elements, all suggest a perfect pop art paradise. Yet niggling little doubts find their way into this paradise; shame, pride, disappointment, even environmental degradation are suggested if not explicitly invoked. It's hard to imagine a more anodyne image than the diptych *Whispers* (2009); a group of children pass on a secret as they play in a garden. It's an image, almost a clichéd image, of innocence personified. Yet one cannot help asking, why do they need to share a secret? What are they hiding? Secrets suggest shame, and with shame comes the morally treacherous gap between what we do and how we represent what we do, between who we are and who we project ourselves to be. This is characteristic of Hemsworth's work. They set up a subtle but highly productive contradiction between an initial,

and often puzzling perception of innocence and a subsequent sense that all is not what it seems; a paradise that undoes itself with irony.

II

The works in this exhibition are broadly based on the subject of gardens, though the term 'broadly' doesn't begin to accurately qualify such a description. One of the problems Hemsworth's paintings pose is how to understand their relation to the world we inhabit? *Hemsworld* is, as we noted, a nowhere world: timeless, visually schematic and populated by figures culled from cartoons and children's colouring books. It is on one level a world of abstraction. Forms are drawn in outline against dense, monochromatic fields of colour: rocks or mushrooms or figures might be outlined in heavy painted lines of black or white or rust, but they always retain the colour of the field onto which they are painted. Other forms such as grass, flowers and rain are drawn in one colour directly onto the colour field. These latter figures add both colour and architectural structure to the monochromatic fields on which Hemsworth constructs his scenarios. And although his figures may vary in shape between different works, they are mostly the same within individual works: each clump of grass, each flower, each raindrop is more or less the same as each other in each individual painting. But why should we think of this kind of figurative painting as abstraction?

In a sense of course, this is just an oxymoron; figurative painting cannot be abstract painting. But at the same time, we can conceive of figurative painting that both draws upon and offers a critique of modernist abstraction; that mimics abstraction in certain ways in order to explore both its potential and its limitations. We would have to term such painting figurative, but at the same time it might be that what matters most, or at any rate matters a great deal, is its engagement with abstraction.

And there certainly is a sense in which these paintings mimic the operations of modernist abstraction. The flat surfaces of deep matt colour invoke the austere simplicity of the monochrome; every surface is a unified colour field, made by hand but somehow perfect, empty of any subjective gestural marks or processes. For Rodchenko the monochrome marked the end of painting, the reduction of painting to its logical implications, three fields of primary colour: red, blue and yellow.¹ In Hemsworth's case we might see the monochromatic fields of colour upon which his paintings are constructed as a starting point, a return to the ground zero of painting as a place to begin again. But of course he doesn't rest there. Figures are superimposed on the monochromatic surface. They are, slightly strange figures, highly stylized and repetitive, and either suffused with the colour of the background field or monochromatic additions to it. There is also something quite abstract about the arrangement of the figures He arranges them across the surface of the painting in a way that ignores perspective, and hence any imputation of illusion. But at the same time his placement of these figures often tricks the eye into creating perspective for itself. The figures often look as if they are inhabiting the same

illusionary space, but actually they are not. They share a surface, a colour field, and we can if we choose see them as bearing no narrative relation to each other at all; rather as shapes arranged on a coloured field.

Many of the works in the exhibition are like this. In *Modernist Garden* (2009) Hemsworth arranges three similar forms: rocks outlined in pink, vertical and horizontal white lines (sometimes intersecting) and grey clumps of grass on a grey brown colour field. This appears to be the most abstract painting in the exhibition. The clumps of grass constitute a sort of border on the bottom and on one side of the painting, with the rocks and lines arranged in patterns in the interior of the square surface. One might be looking at the garden from a satellite; at any rate there is enough figuration to suggest a garden. But as one looks at it the figures make as much or more sense as forms and colours on a two dimensional field. We are thus left with a typical Hemsworthian contradiction: a figurative painting of a garden that morphs into an abstract arrangement of forms on a flat monochromatic surface, an abstract arrangement of form and colour that is unmistakably a garden.

We might say then that Hemsworth has worked out a formal language of painting that combines both abstraction and figuration into a productive tension. Though suffused with the formal properties of abstract painting, they tell stories and invoke narratives about themselves and the world we inhabit. One of these narratives is about painting itself, and how it might go forward after the death of high modernism. Hemsworth is interested in modernism and what he can use from it, but he is no formalist, his intention is always to suggest meanings that go beyond the apparent autonomy of the surfaces and internal narratives of his paintings. *After Modernist Garden* (2010) retains some of the design features of *Modernist Garden*. The painterly clumps of grey grass again form a sort of frame along the bottom and one side of the image, horizontal white lines suggest some sort of movement, possibly wind or rain falling sideways, while two rocks (this time outlined in black) are clumped together on one side. But there are additions too. The ground colour is a much darker brown/grey and two stylized yellow seagulls fly above the head of an enormous bunny rabbit outlined in pink. In this work the figures (and figuration) are more dominant, there is less slippage between the figuration and abstraction because the figures relate to each other in some kind of illusory space. In a way we might see the relation between these two paintings as illustrating something more general about Hemsworth's approach to painting. Hemsworth's project is at least partly an engagement with modernist abstraction through the prism of both conceptual art and postmodernist critiques of this way of painting. After modernism comes postmodernism, or at any rate a kind of painting that rejects the purely formal properties of painting as its true and correct subject. Yet at the same time, postmodern painting no longer aspires to offer the viewer a window on the world, either visual or psychological. What it offers instead is meanings in the

plural; a range of hugely disparate formal operations unified, if at all, by the production of multiple meanings.

III

Hemsworth's work has been described as having been part of a group or movement of 'semiotic figuration' during the 1990s, which is to say painting with an acute awareness of the sheer range of possible meanings a figurative image can generate.² One response to this indeterminacy of meaning was a sort of figurative reductivism, whereby figuration came to be about constructing signs for things rather than representations of them. In this respect, we can see the bunny in *After Modernist Garden* or the mushrooms in *Throng* (2006) as not so much images of a specific bunny or cluster of mushrooms as generic significations of the general category of thing: bunnies or mushrooms, children or rocks or flowers. One would be unlikely to mistake them for anything else, and yet as such 'agglutinations' or generalised significations, they lack the specificity to evoke the identification necessary to inspire emotion or pathos or indeed interest in the viewer. The *mise en scene* of a typical *Hemsworth* painting denies the viewer anything approaching an emotional connection with the characters. It would be like identifying with a road sign or an IKEA instruction booklet.

In this sense we might say that they are as much about how paintings generate meaning as they are about a timeless abstract world of bunnies and children and gardens. Or to put this slightly differently, the very lack of incident or textured detail in these paintings poses the question of how it is possible for them to generate such a plethora of complex meanings. Yet both elements are crucial to the project. The simplicity of the images is the key to the complexity of the paintings. *Garden Pond* (2009) is an almost childlike pattern of circular forms defined in black and grey, a single curved white line and a series of slightly curved, rust coloured marks on a blue/green background. It is both a garden pond and an abstract painting, and this tension leads us beyond its apparent simplicity to the tension between figuration and abstraction in the recent history of painting, to the issue of how paintings, stripped of their capacity to represent the physical or psychological reality of the world, can nonetheless tell us something about ourselves. It's not that the paintings purport to answer the questions they raise, but rather that the tensions they embody push the viewer beyond their jokey simplicity towards something more complicated and indeed irresolvable.

Something similar, as I suggested at the beginning, is true of the narrative incidents documented in *Hemsworth*. Child-like figures whisper to each other, are gently scolded (or not); rabbits stare Buddha-like into the middle distance. One is forced to ask, what is this about? How can such sophisticated painting be put in the service of such simple, pointless narrative? And that of course is the point. The narratives are not as simple as they seem when we consider them in relation to the titles Hemsworth gives the works. The titles inject a note of (often ironic) caution; about the possibility of innocence, about taking anything, including

painting, too seriously, but perhaps most of all about one's own assumptions. By constructing an innocent world that turns out not to be innocent at all, it asks us to consider the uncomfortable question of why we value innocence? Why do we associate innocence with children and gardens? Why do we need to think of it as something we once had, but have now lost? But it's not just about innocence. Hemsworth's work also asks us rather difficult questions about what we expect of painting. Do we expect it to be about serious subjects, profound personal or political issues? And if so, why? Hemsworth offers us paintings about silly subjects that raise a host of complex possible meanings and questions. This contradiction is wonderfully seductive. They are superficially superficial, with the effect that they implicate us in a process of constructing what they mean for ourselves.

¹ Alexander Rodchenko, 'Working with Majakowsky' in *From Painting to Design: Russian Constructivist Art of the Twenties* (Cologne: Galerie Gmurzynska, 1981), 181.

² Nick De Ville, 'Altered States: The Mutability of signs in the recent paintings of Gerard Hemsworth' in *Strictly Suburban: Gerard Hemsworth* (Southampton: John Hansard Gallery, 1998) ISBN 085432 682 0