

**Andy Harper: Archaeology in Reverse**.....

**Newlyn Art Gallery** 6 July to 28 September.....

Brain functioning seems to be immanent in Andy Harper's twinned abstract paintings. The technique of hinging a painting to its doppelganger or ghosted image is repeated throughout the show. The method is about reflecting inherent neurological patterns of thought applied to painting and this process gains critical weight through the emergence of metaphor.

The admirably uninhibited and strange *Glass Alba*, 2011 stands out as a mindful and beautiful diptych. The original image, a vague insect-shaped portrait that suggests zany and exaggerated colourful floral shapes was mono-printed on to a second canvas. When peeled apart the surfaces must have had the quality of painterly sludge resulting in a thin printed image on the duplicate. Both paintings were then worked with brushes into their current state in a visual conversation. The face and eye regions take on the appearance of deep spatial thickets. Expanding eye openings are contoured by frond-like, wet-into-wet gestural painted marks, buds and smears. Likewise, the predominantly white-on-white double

has gestural marks experienced in symmetry. It is possible to say that intricate pathways in Harper's mind have been extensively triggered by the symmetry, medium, method and memory, yet my inkling is that the inception and reception of these images is more than the sum of their neurological parts.

Centrally located in the exhibition space and carrying the title of the exhibition, several recent large canvases are joined together to form a zigzag structure similar to a folding Japanese screen. From each side of the screen we see the front of some of the paintings next to the backs of others, so that highly worked surfaces over mono-printed fragments are seen alongside the reverse surface of canvas and wooden frame. Again there is an abundance of plant forms, in this case integrated with architectural pattern, while vestiges of the early modernist abstraction of Futurism and Vorticism make these visually dynamic works. Around the walls, smaller rapidly made paintings composed of thin linseed oil washes, gestures and printed marks continue the visual doubling but the pairs are re-shuffled so that the juxtapositions do not directly match up with a mother print. The overall effect is a room full of reflective comparative studies where remembered symmetries are visually rewarded as the viewer

finds pieces of a complex puzzle by walking, turning and looking back.

Not surprisingly, the artist is also interested in the conceptual space and methods of artificial intelligence. His early work, however, rich pattern paintings of bio-diverse plant forms reminiscent of the landscape of Max Ernst's *Europe After the Rain*, 1940-42, were informed by JG Ballard's post-apocalyptic science fiction *The Drowned World* of 1962. Anticipation as an antediluvian presence remains hanging in the air of this show.

Margaret Bowden, in her 1990 book *The Creative Mind, Myths and Mechanisms*, draws out a fascination with AI not as mindless mimicry but as a potential catalyst of human creativity. The point made is that the conceptual space presented by the methods of artificial intelligence can enable human beings to conceive what would normally be 'unthinkable' thoughts: 'A computational approach gives us a way of coming up with scientific hypotheses about the rich subtlety of the human mind.' The titles of Harper's works likewise playfully mirror the methodology of neuroscience or AI yet, to his credit, critically point to wider ethical issues: *The Position Generator*, 2013, a painting of a machine, for example, could mean the scientific/didactic generating of ideas, or it might ironically refer to the political positioning of aesthetics as

scientific fact rather than the development of taste through social history.

Neuroscience is seductive and popular because it offers to aestheticise the cultural confidence and euphoria of scientific exploration and discovery of a modern age, and is applied as research to many fields. As genetics recede, the brain and advanced technology of neuro-scanning is the new frontier. The ability to watch a CT scan of increased blood flow to specific parts of a person's brain as they visually experience the face of a loved one and then observe a comparable action due to the experience of aesthetic pleasure seems convincing aesthetic evidence.

The shifting double-take of Andy Harper's entropic *Archaeology in Reverse*, 2013, teeters as cognitive dissonance between the aestheticised cocoon of brain science and political and ecological realities. An analogy may be drawn with the dilemma of Beatrice and Robert in Ballard's *The Drowned World*; they are reluctant to leave somewhere that feels safe but is ultimately destructive due to catastrophic changes in the weather: 'Perhaps these sunken lagoons simply remind me of the drowned world of my uterine childhood – if so, the best thing is to leave straight away ... There's little hope of standing up to the rainstorms and malaria.'

**Stephen Lee** is a sculptor.