

# Exhibitions

## An exhibition of paintings by Patrick Heron exposes the guiding principles of an artist who wanted to share ‘the elation of perceiving what is’

### Patrick Heron

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by TOBY TREVES

It remains a surprise what colours are prepared to do to one another. Everyone knows that a blue next to a red on a picture plane will lie further back than the red, but who would have guessed that an area of wriggling ultramarine next to one of solid, matte Venetian red could not only become internally lit like stained glass but fully three-dimensional; that the blue could be alive with movement and depth and the red utterly inert and flat; that a shelf could form in the ultramarine where the two colours meet and, even more astonishing, that the face of the shelf would be more apparent and

taller according to your position. Yet that is some of what you see when you stand about two metres from Patrick Heron’s *Mainly ultramarine and venetian: November 1966* (p.61; Fig.2) and wait for the colours to tune up.

Heron cared about words, and that ‘mainly’ in the picture’s title is well chosen. What other colours are there here? Cerulean and black are obvious, and the bright red along the top must be cadmium or something close, but what about that small peninsula of red at the middle-left connected to the main body of Venetian by an isthmus? Somewhere along its length, although it is hard to tell exactly where, it seems to shade into cadmium. Is that an optical effect or did Heron really change colours? When seen in the diffused daylight and electric light of the gallery, the instability of this detail – it seemed

1. Installation view of Patrick Heron at Tate St Ives, 2018.

to oscillate between Venetian and cadmium – suggests that he did not, and that the optical effect of changing colours was caused by the proximity and relative quantity of ultramarine.

Something similar happens at the island of red towards the upper edge. That shape rises out of the blue – its sides, which seem to be carved, appear to be submerged in the ultramarine. Heron achieved this astonishing effect by a precise colour selection and a calculated move from a scribbled to a linear, outlining brushstroke where the ultramarine edges the red. The two, colour and stroke, create the illusion. The black shape to the left of this detail demonstrates that one without the other opens further possibilities. Rendered as they are here, the black and the ultramarine are disjunctive colours in the sense that where they meet there is none of the amazing spatial qualities or visual vivacity encountered at the border of the reds and the ultramarine. Instead of the surface emerging from the deep, here it abuts the blue without being organically related to it. Just as Heron managed all the picture’s other variations of space in colour, evidently, he intended the inversion.

That Heron considered colour relations to be a large part of the grammar of all painting is well known, as is the fact that he spent much of his life as a painter exploring them. Consequently, and a little unfairly, he gained the reputation of a rather narrow ‘formalist’, impatient with or unreceptive to concerns beyond the immediate elements of the painting. In the 1990s that meant Heron was accommodated in the conservative wing of European post-war art, where he occupied the position of a British (then, as now, a euphemism for minor) follower of Bonnard, Braque and Matisse. The association with the masters of what he and others called ‘French painting’ was one that Heron cultivated, while the conservative label was probably not one that would have bothered him, aware as he was of the vicissitudes of fashion. However, the idea that his type of formalism was simply a matter of the relations between the constituent elements of a painting must have rankled





**2. Mainly ultramarine and venetian: November 1966**, by Patrick Heron, 1966. Canvas, 182.9 by 213.4 cm. (Private collection; exh. Turner Contemporary, Margate).

with an artist who once told Martin Gayford that ‘looking at something – anything – is more interesting than doing anything else, ever, as a matter of fact’.<sup>1</sup> What Heron looked at was not the history of that ‘something’, or even its appearance as an object in isolation, but the collective visual energy to which it contributed and of which it was a part. To put it another way, he looked at a perceptual event or ‘happening’ and in so doing experienced ‘the elation of perceiving what is.’<sup>2</sup> That is the gift that he wanted to give to people through his paintings.

At Tate St Ives, where the current exhibition was first shown and where this reviewer saw it (19th May–30th September), Heron’s work was divided into four formal principles of painting: ‘Unity of the Total Work’, ‘The Painting’s Edges’, ‘Explicit Scale’ and ‘Asymmetry and Recomplication’. Each was given a room and each room showed works from across the artist’s long career. The consequent stylistic disunity of the hang was justified by the premise that, for all the variety in Heron’s *œuvre*, these principles are a constant. And in that respect, the exhibition makes a convincing

argument. It is abundantly clear that all along Heron intended his paintings to have that ‘all-over stress, this insistent regular pulse from edge to edge’ that he considered to be ‘general in the best painting at the present time’;<sup>3</sup> that he thought about how he could use the edge of a painting to weight an image, to intensify or relax its rhythms, to reinforce or breach the threshold between the painting and the wall; that he thought of scale in terms of the relative size of the colour elements and in the sense of gradation as a way to create that ‘pulse’; and that he, like many artists, found resolved





asymmetry and variation to be a way of achieving this ‘all-over stress’.

There is then no doubting the loyalty of the curators to Heron; through them we learn to consider the works as he did, or at least appreciate his exploration of some of the principles that guided him. In this respect, theirs is a generous approach and a rare one, but it comes at a price. When a small, quiet landscape or interior of the 1940s hangs next to a high-voltage picture of the late 1960s and 1970s (Fig.1), or when a softly glowing painting of the late 1950s and early 1960s is set against a bright, linear work of the 1980s and 1990s, as happens in each of the four rooms, there is a regrettable visual discord that detracts from the harmony of the works individually and as a whole. That the accompanying publication, which follows the same method,<sup>4</sup>

**3. Sydney garden painting: December 1989: II, by Patrick Heron. 1989. Canvas, 152.4 by 213.4 cm. (Private collection; © Estate of Patrick Heron; exh. Turner Contemporary, Margate).**

does not jar as much demonstrates the difference between an exhibition, which has to attend to the presence of the works, and a book, which is liberated from the that need.

It is difficult to imagine how ‘the elation of perceiving what is’ could be restored to such a show. One conceivable solution would be to return the works to their chronological order and display them as four series, one per room with a dominant principle for each. Such an approach would require the curators to make the difficult decision to omit one of the five groups that are shuffled in the present hang – 1940s and early 1950s figuration; tachiste paintings of the 1950s, including the stripes; the lozenge paintings of the late 1950s and early 1960s; the wobbly-edge paintings of the late 1960s and 1970s; and the late figurative paintings of the 1980s

and 1990s (Fig.3) – and sharpen the selection. If the new gallery at St Ives had been divided into five rooms, as the flexible space allows, that choice could have been avoided with the adoption of a fifth principle, although it would still have needed a slightly tighter selection. In that way the exhibition might have reconciled its twin objectives of being a comprehensive retrospective while also being an interesting thematic show. As with all curators who have been given a new space, it will take those at St Ives several exhibitions before they find out what works visually in theirs.

<sup>1</sup> M. Gayford: ‘Looking is more interesting than doing anything else, ever: An interview with Patrick Heron’, in D. Sylvester, ed.: exh. cat. *Patrick Heron*, London (Tate Gallery) 1998, p.48.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p.47.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in M. McNay: *Patrick Heron*, London 2002, p.16.

<sup>4</sup> Publication: *Patrick Heron*. Edited by Andrew Wilson and Sara Matson. 160 pp. incl. 100 col. ills. (Pavilion, London, 2018), £25. ISBN 978-1-911624-31-8.