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WINSTON ROETH



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DRY LIQUID EDGE OF EXPERIENCE

Have you ever seen an inch worm crawl up a leaf or twig, and then clinging to the very end, revolve in the air, feeling for something to reach...? That's like me. I am trying to find something out there beyond the place on which I have a footing.

— Albert Pinkham Ryder

There is a magical aspect to contemporary experience, one produced not in the natural world but from technology. I'd like to suggest we could use the philosophical term immanence to explain it. Traditionally, immanence would be opposed to the term transcendence, to distinguish between divine power existing in the material world rather than externally and remotely. Thoreau, for example, thought that a divine force could be found in the things that surround us, rather than through official religion. We live in a different time, both more secular and technologically advanced. An immanence of the man-made world would be formed out of the fact that—from information sent via satellite to the architecture of skyscrapers—we experience things in the world as if they are as real and powerful as nature. We don't see how they are made, and our experience of them is instantaneous.

This state of affairs is usually reflected in artistic practice by the use of cutting-edge technology or readymade materials or objects. In painting, an artist might use a roller or spray paint, or copy a pre-made image. It is rare, however, to find a painting that is made by hand and which presents an image that appears to be already made. But this is what you find in Winston Roeth's painting—an experience of colour and light in the shape of an abstract painting that presents itself to the viewer instantaneously, as if unmediated. What is paradoxical but important about Roeth's work is that, in a time when such immanent experiences are produced out of advanced technology, his paintings are made by hand. Nevertheless, when describing his process Roeth says he is "painting himself out of the painting." "That's not me there on the wall," he told me. What he does, rather, is make the paintings "come into clarity themselves." Via a repertoire of limited formats and the long development of a consistent if responsive technique, he produces individuated, "all-at-once" experiences that make us feel connected to our bodily and perceptual activities, to time and to memories. His paintings have an instantaneous quality but are nevertheless produced over time.

Technê

Roeth is a painter, but his material practice is quite specific and not automatically explained by such a generic term. Similar to advanced technology, his paintings do not reveal their process easily. To get a sense of it, we can start by describing Roeth's paint, which is wet. This distinguishes it from oil paint, which is solid and has to be laid down with an instrument, or thinned first to make it more workable. Roeth starts with his paint liquid. Laying it down in long strokes on the surface of the panels he works on, he paints it dry. He doesn't have to push; it's more like drawing out evenly the paint held in the brush. The brush itself is important, because of how it touches the surface of the painting. He uses large bristle brushes, more like house painting brushes than the ones you see at the art supply store. The other thing to know is that the paint is thin. Roeth's paintings are made up of layers of thin, wet paint that he paints dry. And as he adds layers to a painting, the resistance of the materials lessens and the speed of the painting increases.

The liquid aspect of Roeth's technique might explain the speed in which we read them as immediate experiences. But there's another sense in which his work is dry, and this is where we begin to see the importance of Roeth's materials as real and manifestly physical. His paint starts off as pigment, which is how he buys it, rather than as pre-mixed paint. Roeth explains that his process is about distributing the particles of the pigment as the paint dries out. The pigments are both beginning and end, the material that is made wet and then dry again, combined with other pigments to form a new colour that is still essentially the physical pigments. This is also how Roeth produces the experience of light in his paintings; light is not a metaphor—the actual pigment particles either reflect or refract light, capturing and condensing it in the painting itself.

I glossed the term *technê* to suggest there is a technology in Roeth's work, but that it represents a certain kind of knowledge found in doing. Nowadays, we make a distinction between "theory" and "practice"—as if one has to do with ideas and the other with mere things—but we can return to an ancient understanding of practice where knowledge (*epistêmê*) was seen to be embedded there. Not until Plato was the difference made between taught knowledge and that gained by training. Today what you learn by doing is seen as a subset of knowledge in general. But by developing a totally unique

way of painting, Roeth's practice contains that older connection between technê and epistêmê. His paintings embody a special kind of knowing that comes from innovating a particular way of making something. In his work, there is no substitute for actually doing it, and no one else could do it.

This matters not only because it troubles the general way we separate thinking and doing, but because of a forty year-old critique of the medium that has directed artistic practice away from involvement with any technê. It is almost a truism to say that most artists work now with "dry" media, whether via conceptual strategies, with readymade materials or digital media (which seems the driest of all). Indeed, the beginning of Roeth's career marked a time when many artists gave up painting and sculpture for conceptual art, which was both to foreground epistêmê-type experience over the made object and to operate in the realm of the readymade. Yet as we see, by painting, Roeth has not quite retrenched in the way one might imagine. He makes no fetish out of process, nor does he attach symbolic meaning to materials as more or less real, as indicated by his use of both earth and synthetic pigments as well as different supports ranging from wood to MDF to the metal and fibreglass honeycomb panels normally used in the aerospace industry. What we see instead is an expertise in a particular form of expression, unique to him and put into practice.

Painting in an "Expanded Field"

It's worth revisiting an early moment in Roeth's career, when he studied for a year at the Royal College of Art in the late 1960s. He says the school "let him loose," and he enjoyed being in London and the use of the studio he shared with the artist John Blake. The one work documented from Roeth's sojourn in London—a large painting installed in an interior courtyard of the Royal College entitled *Slow Curve*—shows him putting pressure on conventional ideas about painting. We see in this work something that is important now: a desire to produce an experience rather than a picture.

The object of *Slow Curve*, Roeth says, was to make a single-coloured work that escaped the rules of composition. It was only laid out for one day, and it found its home outside on the ground because it was too big to fit on any wall. Laying the lightweight polystyrene tiles horizontally meant they didn't need to be fixed down. The grid was another informality, as was the slightly bending rectangle that conformed to the given space. The tiles themselves were the type that might be put on a ceiling to dampen sound; Roeth liked that they were low-tech and inexpensive, handy too, because they were already cut into one-foot squares. In painting the tiles, he just aimed to fill in the square; no decisions needed to be made after the colour (orange) and brush size (small) were chosen. But then, painting square after square freed his thinking. Roeth explains that the painting was a "trigger" that produced a kind of "drift." There were variables of a certain type—the brush and paint interacted with the surface of the tile, and he painted each square differently, but their outcome didn't need to be determined; it was found through the process.

Roeth recalls that at the time he was interested in the automatic processes of the Surrealists, such as decalcomania or staring at clouds, where you might find unexpected shapes in abstract forms. But his emphasis on anti-composition also resonates with important strategies of 1960s art. The sheer number of tiles Roeth painted (1,200) recalls Bruce Nauman's studio activities where he repeated an action over the length of a roll of film or video tape, or Sol LeWitt's interest in the cube as a basic unit to repeat.¹ Roeth also mentions Andy Warhol's multiplication as a touchstone. With *Slow Curve*—how it was made and perhaps also with how one might have seen it—there is sameness and difference, control and excess, system and non-system, boredom and interest. *Slow Curve* is also important for the way it conformed to its location, was of overwhelming scale, and existed only temporarily. As with other art being explored in the late 1960s it reflected a desire to move works of art out of studios and galleries and into "real" spaces, making them both contingent and contextual. *Slow Curve* was made to be destroyed, which makes it quite different from Roeth's current work. But the process invested in making it very much recalls the way he works now—painting that begins with a format already in place, and therefore could be seen as non-compositional (paradoxically, given geometric painting's association with composition). Roeth's current process similarly triggers a drift, a free-thinking, and this special knowledge embedded in practice. He lays down a "footprint," but after that the painting begins to surface through the process. You can also see evidence of *Slow Curve*'s contextual concerns in a handful of instances along the length of Roeth's career when he has made site-specific work, environments, sculptures and set designs. This aspect of his practice suggests that he is exploring an internally complex version of painting, even as it appears so reduced. Again, it is geared towards producing an experience in the world rather than one disconnected from it.

Grids

There is one more issue to explore here which is a particular focus of these two exhibitions, Roeth's grid paintings. They are only one of a few different types of paintings he makes, but there has been little discussion of them on their own. Roeth's use of the grid dates back to 1990-91, with a painting entitled *Divider* that had one vertical and one horizontal line. He describes the grid as a given, as a flower is for a flower painter. The emphasis is important. He doesn't claim to discover the grid, it's already there. He also remarks that no matter how a grid measured out, it retains its identity as a grid. But even so simple a device immediately structures the field of the painting. It organises space, indeed creates an apparent space in the painting that you can enter. Depending on the density of lines, how they sit within the rectangle, their colour in relation to the background, their surface quality, and moreover how they overlap, each grid painting creates a different experience.

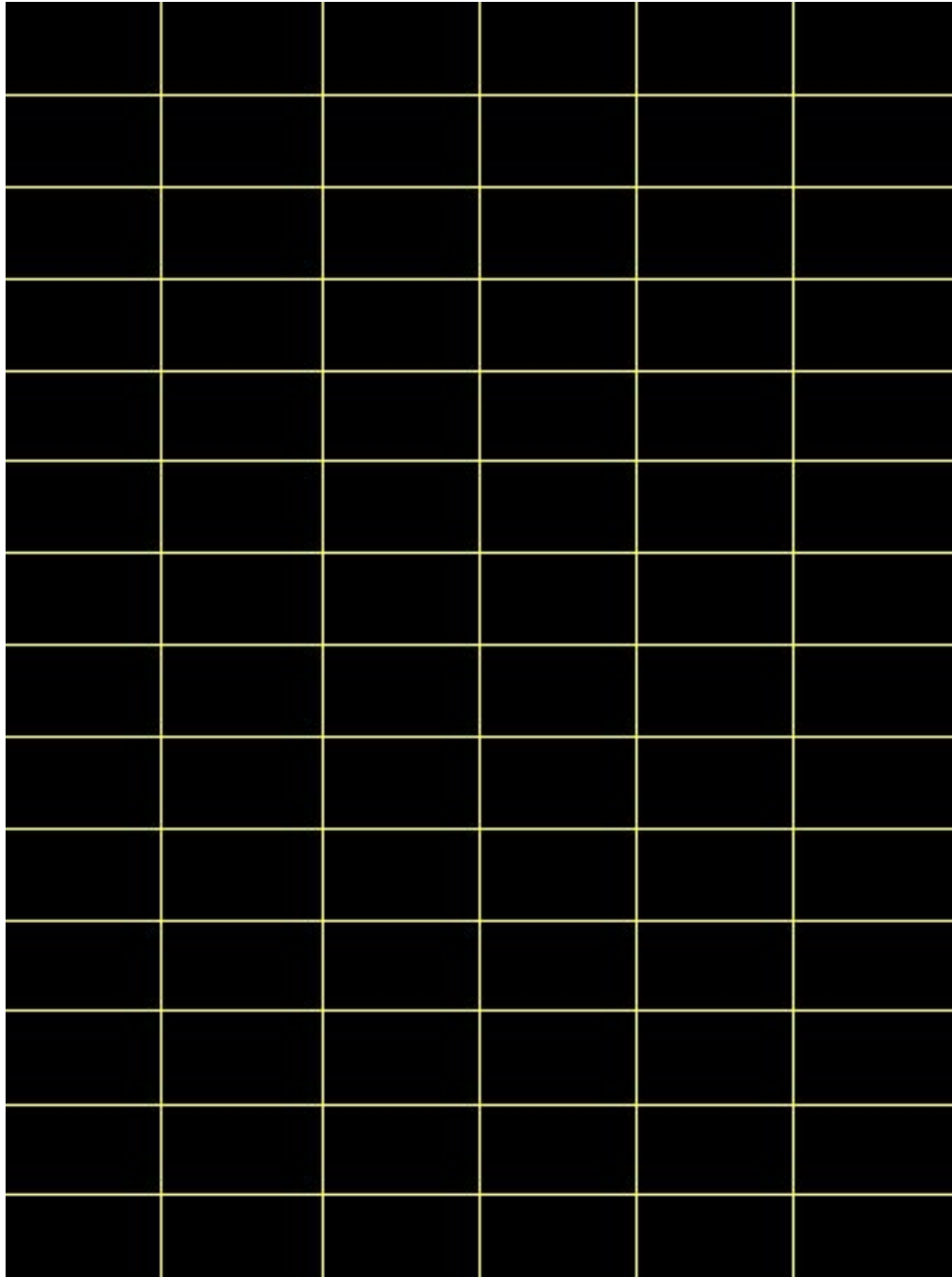
The grid itself was the subject of a 1978 essay by the venerable art historian, Rosalind Krauss, in which she famously described it as a trap that artists get stuck in. Krauss saw the grid as an entirely modern ambition, indeed cites its invention in the twentieth century as no accident. The grid, she tells us, in the hands of Mondrian, Malevich, de Stijl and cubism, negates history and places us in the realm of the present—which is, of course, what modern art meant to do. Krauss also considered it mostly negatively, as a "fortress," an "aesthetic decree," and "resistant to change."² In some respects, these characterisations resonate with Roeth's work, which does aim to place the viewer in the present, and he uses the given form of the grid to do so, as a non-narrative, non-compositional device. But Roeth's explanation of his work's identity being found rather than fixed, as well as his individuated process of achieving a work, suggests something quite different from an "aesthetic decree." He is an entirely different kind of artist from the one Krauss appears to have in mind. It goes without saying that her agenda doesn't necessarily accommodate individual artists, and that it is entirely predictable that Roeth's work might, in practice, challenge it, although his use of the grid was never aimed at doing so. Krauss' position doesn't account for how genuine exploration happens. Roeth continues to use the grid because he's not finished with it—it's still wide open, as a visual image. He's not done with it and it's not done with him.

One observation Krauss makes in the essay is helpful for explaining Roeth's use of the grid, and that is how there can surprising differences from the experience of one to the next. Sometimes the effect of the grid is fast, sliding you right off the surface of a painting. In this instance, the grid, if measured out irregularly, functions as if it's a fragment of a much larger one, stretching infinitely in all directions. But in others, such as the recent *Transformer*, the intersecting lines, lighter and darker, create new patterns within the eye that move you dynamically around the painting. There is a similar effect in *Orange Grid (Untitled)*, where the density of the lines focuses you on the inside of the painting, and you feel—despite it being only a grid, just like any other grid—like the painting is holding you there. Some



SLOW CURVE, 1968 - 69
PAINT ON ACOUSTIC TILE
4.26 x 26.21 m
14 x 86 ft

Location: Royal College of Art, London (Destroyed)



ACCELERATOR, 1999
TEMPERA ON HONEYCOMB PANEL
198.1 x 147.3 cm
78 x 58 in
PRIVATE COLLECTION GERMANY

of the grids seem to reach out to you, across a room, almost pulling you towards them. Krauss calls the first experience centrifugal and the second centripetal. She suggests that many artists (Mondrian, Albers, Kelly, LeWitt) use the grid in both these ways. But for Krauss, the discussion leads almost inevitably to the one that haunts the history of abstract painting: whether abstraction is of the world or a negation of it. It seems that it would be better to forego such a polarisation and to see the grid as a matter of practice. As Roeth notes, there's a process and you follow it. The painting finds itself, and thus takes in the world, if we have to term it thus.

We can return here to Roeth's work generally, which I've suggested is aimed at presenting an already-made experience out of a process imbued with time. Roeth's work includes three forms: grids, and what he calls "landscapes" and "containment paintings." We see even in the internal heterodoxy of mathematic, historical and descriptive titles something resistant to any theory that would predict one's experience of them. Indeed, Roeth has formed a practice out of following the painting's "urge"—an inherent power and identity that he finds through his process. A finished painting—its immanence—is not just the accumulation of layers of paint or the sum total of his method. The format is laid down, but the painting emerges through the process of building layers of paint. Sometimes it gets lost, and he has to find it; in all cases it changes a lot from beginning to end. Similar to the way Ryder described his work in the quotation this essay began with, Roeth is always trying to exceed his discipline, to get to that place just out of reach. At that edge he explores new territory, and it is mercurial, changing, moving. In this way his work is always evolving. He likes to say that he's making it up as we all go along, hurtling through time and space.

Alison Green

Quotes by the artist are based on a studio visit made by the author and subsequent telephone conversations, February - March 2006.

¹ An excellent recent book that opens up the "serial attitude" of the 1960s is Briony Fer, *The Infinite Line: Remaking Art After Modernism* (Yale University Press, 2004).

² Rosalind Krauss, "Grids" in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (MIT Press, 1985), pp. 9-10.