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Callum Innes

An interview with painter Callum Innes

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Do these paintings make sense when they're hung side by side?

In the studio, I work on several paintings at the same time. I feed off one onto the next piece. Keeping them together when they're shown is truer, but I admit that when shown individually, they have more power. Apart from the white ones - I can't have any distractions when I'm working on those.

Are the white paintings different from the others?

They came about because I was trying to limit everything I was doing and trying to pare it all down. Just working with white, I felt I could almost work with colour. You could actually start seeing colour, with the way the light goes through the canvas. In these white paintings I strip away the paint between the lines, so that you end up with a ridge connecting to the next one. The whole thing starts at the top and works its way down. Eventually you get into a rhythm so that the actual weight of the paint starts pulling itself.

The titles of the paintings reveal which series each one belongs to.

That's true. One title is *Five Identified Forms*, and another is *Seven Identified Forms*, obviously corresponding to the marks on the canvas. I try to keep the titles almost as bland as I can, so the painting starts reading itself. I'd hate to make an abstract work and call it something narrative; it doesn't make sense to me. It draws the viewer into thinking the way I was thinking about it. I prefer people to bring their own language to the painting.

Why do you want to distance yourself from the work?

Six or seven years ago my work was figurative. I felt that the paintings had so much of myself in them that it was absolutely clear what I was feeling when I made them. I wanted to keep that distance so I could look at the paintings on a reflective plane, and other people could also. For a while there was a need for a lot of artists to keep a distance from their work, but actually I enjoy it when people do realise that there's some of you in it, and that it's not just a process painting. Because then it is just a process painting to me. In my work there is also something emotional, perhaps slightly spiritual going on in the canvases, especially the white ones. I just didn't want them to be completely self-evident.

Is it hasty to compare your work with Ian Davenport's?

Yes. It's very much a surface comparison.

So you don't use chance?

Sometimes chance is involved, but then it's organized chance, because I'm controlling it the whole way. I can direct the way the turpentine drips. I'm actually subtracting the whole time - some lines will take 15 or 20 repetitions of turps. There is a process involved in my painting - the vertical is a process - but I can and do manipulate each line.

Do you worry that the paintings may appear decorative?

When a work has no tension, it could appear so. But as I'm always dealing with tension in my work, the question does not really arise. I don't see any harm in trying to paint something that is beautiful. I don't think it has to be hard or harsh to be a good piece of work.