

Critical Text for catalogue: *'Toward The Light'*
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The Alchemy of the Surface: The Paintings of [Pip Dickens](#) by Roy Exley

'The omnipresence of chance: the unpredictable, unavoidable and uncontrollable contingencies always around us and within us, offer variables of which we may be hardly if at all conscious but which nevertheless affect the outcome of everything we do.'

David Batchelor [1]

Painting, as an art form has certain things in common with the transformative science of alchemy, they share an esoteric aura, there are certain secrets, tricks and illusionary effects that they each accumulate through the sequential experiences of experimentation and discovery, they generate intrigue and wonder in equal measure in the viewer or the audience, they both invite us to question our jaded perception of the world. Alchemy has been denounced and disowned, painting has repeatedly been declared dead, however, they still both fascinate, as they empower and seduce our urge to imagine. The realms of possibility have always been more engaging and attractive than the archives of certainty, fact and fiction have always had a complicated relationship within which, nevertheless, divorce is unthinkable. The realm of the possible has always to be anchored in reality, but things only get exciting and unpredictable when possibility begins to drag that anchor, Dickens paintings, it must be said, both stretch possibilities, and drag the anchors of expectation.

Pip Dickens is an inveterate flirter with the alchemy of paint. In her paintings the hegemony of surface is constantly usurped. If the alchemist was consumed by the desire to convert base metal into gold, then Dickens is consumed by the need to transform a flat two-dimensional surface into a platform from which the access into an ambiguous three-dimensional space can be achieved. Her paintings operate on several levels, however, not just those of dimensionality, but also those of meaning, reference and the aesthetic. The laminae of their complex ontology perform a slow choreography in Dickens' paintings, we are offered various options as to how to perceive them, there is the abstract, there is the topographical and there is the narrative, each offering us an entry into either the reality of the illusion or the illusions of reality. As in Salome's 'Dance of the Seven Veils', as we accept the invitation to enter into her paintings, Dickens reveals to us layer after layer of meaning, leading to an ultimate essence, the perception of which will always be uniquely our own.

If we are to give credence to an artist's vision we are obliged to enter into a suspension of disbelief. We are not witnessing here simply the adroit application of paint to a two dimensional support, we are not even witnessing the pictorial reproduction of some 'thing', but we are being allowed the privilege of entering into a private world, where any 'thingness' is not only unique, but mutable, this is a world that most of us keep hidden, not necessarily because we are secretive, but because we don't possess the means or the skills to express it.

Dickens' '[Katagami](#)' series of paintings and sketches are predicated on the precision of Japanese aesthetic parameters. Katagami stencils have been an integral part of the Japanese textile industry - an essential component in the printing and dyeing of fabrics, particularly

those used in the creation of kimonos - over the past five centuries, their aesthetic is rooted therefore in the expediency of the textile production process, they are the means to an end, namely the creation of patterns for the printing of textiles. Dickens, in her paintings based on this art form, has set free the rather rigid, expedient rhythms, of these stencils and, without diminishing their perennial aesthetic appeal, she has transformed them into something far looser and more poetic, something more intriguing, while both respecting, and empathising with the power of their inheritance, she has loosened and opened up the incipient energies of Katagami stencils without denying the integrity of their sources.

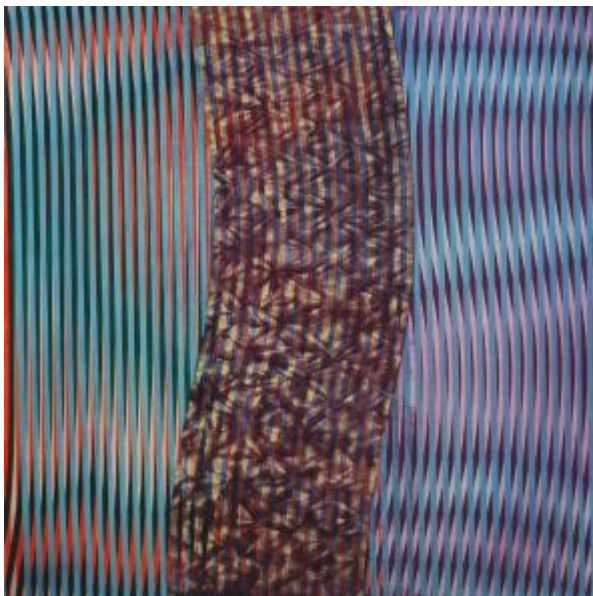


Harvest of the Bees, oil on paper, Pip Dickens , 2009

Dickens demonstrates a genuine sensitivity for the traditional precursors of her work, while making them totally accessible, and relevant to a contemporary western audience. Her painting, 'Harvest of the Bees' exemplifies this approach perfectly, poised precariously between the predictability of pattern and the play of permutation, this work draws us unflinchingly into the ambivalence of abstraction - it is a visual strategy that plays on our need to classify, we are caught short here by the pure serendipity of floating forms, with their seductive surface textures, and the lure of a predicated limbo. The freedom of her brushstrokes contradicts the demands of the pattern that they extemporise upon. Intuition comes into play here as it both transcends and undermines the structure of intention. This is process painting bowing to the kaleidoscopic and its appeal is a mesmeric one, this could be an homage to the American painter Ross Bleckner, a series of anarchic organic diversions from that painter's repetitively monochrome syncopations, or perhaps the flawed, smudged patterns of that other American, Gary Simmons.

The 'Moire' series of striped paintings emerges, so it would seem, to impose one surface upon another to such an extent that we cannot be sure of where each meets the other, so ambivalent are their inter-relationships that complex narrative traces begins to emerge from their interaction. We become transfixed by the inter-weavings of their pictorial connotations. To describe something as esoteric is a cop-out, these paintings that Dickens presents us with are something more insistent than that. They entreat us to make a detour from our daily perambulations, they ask us to question and challenge the ordinary, they present the divergent, without any qualms or traces of self-consciousness, they matter-of-factly challenge the quotidian, trash the taken-for-granted, transform the traditional. Dickens' paintings are more than just interesting - a concept that damns with its faint praise ' they are insistent, incised through intimations of the infinite, inscribed by the playful marks of the indefinite, layered by superimpositions of the supernatural, their message has been won through complex negotiations between the rational and the intuitive, the contingent and the rash. Any beauty here arises not merely from an urge towards perfection, nor any preciousness,

but is simply a resonant spin-off from this process, it excels itself through the denigration of deliberation, through the play of serendipity, the slipperiness of chance. In his work, *The Psychology of the Imagination*, Jean-Paul Sartre wrote, "Beauty is a value applicable only to the imaginary and which means the negation of the world in its essential structure"[2]. It seems that Dickens' paintings corroborate this statement perfectly. We become mesmerised by the dazzling display of her deliciously repetitive marks and lines, repetitions that, skewed by her imagination are, however, predicated upon the variations and evolutions within the pattern - once again the oxymoron strikes. We become grist to the mill of the negotiations between the random and the repetitive, between fantasy, fiction and a rapidly diminishing factual. As aesthetic as they might seem at first glance, Dickens' paintings are underscored by an anarchic yet subtle wilfulness that undermines any tendency towards perfection, they live more as co-ordinates than objects, they guide rather than define, they please rather than predicate, they are soul rather than scientific dictum. Most of all they image, or rather imagine the 'other'. In his book, *The Ground of the Image*, the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy writes, "In the ground of the image there is the imagination and in the ground of the imagination there is the other, the look of the other, that is, the look onto the other and the other as look... The image is first of all other and from the other, altered and altering." [3] The 'other', as conveyed in Dickens' paintings is a compilation of depictions of the other that continually surprises, and continually alters our conception of the other.



Venus Freak, (Moire series), oil on canvas, Pip Dickens, 2006

Pip Dickens allows the paint to lead her negotiations; hers is neither a safari through the indefinite, nor a perambulation through the ordinary, but an adventure that explores the plasticity of paint against the potential intractability of the painted surface. She loves the imponderables of the painting process, thrives on the permutations triggered by mistake and accident, pays homage at the shrine of serendipity and swears by the play of chance.

Just as alchemy carries metaphysical connotations, so do many of Pip Dickens' paintings, and here I refer to the series of paintings from 2008-2010 which include ['KING KONG'](#), ['Miss Havisham I and II'](#), ['Mrs Danvers'](#), ['Madame Bovary'](#) (and the ['Elephant Man/Cloud'](#) drawings), where the paintings surfaces have been transformed into a series of superimposed ethereal layers which offer hints of those 'ectoplasmic' apparitions that accompanied Victorian seances where they gathered in dimly lit parlours to purportedly commune with the spiritual world - here, ghostly, spectral images challenge the insuperability of the physical world. In

these inspired paintings it is as if the paint itself has coerced and cajoled Dickens' brush strokes - just as the ouija board might have guided those trembling hands in Victorian seances - to create these images spontaneously - not simply the spontaneity of 'process painting', but something more significant, something with far more esoteric implications than this. These painted surfaces have, it seems, taken on a life of their own, their picture planes exhibit a depth and complexity that appear to transcend the purely physical, they have achieved an ontology - loosely based on their literary sources - that hovers somewhere between the palpable and the possible, they visit that miscible threshold where fact and fiction, reportage and fantasy, the extant and the imaginary, the physical and the metaphysical, meet.



Miss Havisham II, oil on canvas, Pip Dickens, 2010

The evolution of her works suggest a spirit of adventure on Dickens' part, they are not quite of this world, but their achievement demands an intricate knowledge of this world in terms of its pictorial and aesthetic diversity. She seems driven to explore and to stretch the boundaries of pictorial representation as her painted surfaces oscillate wildly between the figurative and the abstract, however this quality of drivenness eschews violence or ferocity, it is a gentle drivenness whose paradoxical qualities infuse her paintings with a sense of the enigmatic, they court mystery, there is something elusive about them that never lets our eye rest. The viewer's eye is entreated to search for their meaning, a meaning that always seems just beyond our reach or maybe a suggestion of meaning that merely proves to be a decoy. Our inquisitive look restlessly searches for a resolution, seeking out the familiar from the conundrums that Dickens appears to have set. This brings to mind the words of Maurice Merleau-Ponty from his book, *The Visible and The Invisible*, "The look envelops, palpates, espouses the visible things. As though it were in a relationship of pre-established harmony with them, as though it knew them before knowing them, it moves in its own way with its own imperious style and yet the views taken are not desultory - I do not look at a chaos but at things - so that finally one cannot say if it is the look or if it is the things that command" [4].

Although at times we might suspect that Dickens is simply having fun with paint, being

carried away by the process and its possibilities - there is no doubt that their execution is accompanied by a good deal of passion - the results belie any such conclusions and are undeniably more challenging to the eye as our look and the 'thingness' within her paintings intertwine to create an impression that exceeds any outcome of such a prosaic activity as 'simply having fun'. There is indeed often a sense of joy within these works, but that is subtly different to fun.

As we move on through Dickens' oeuvre and come to a painting titled '[Oki-Nami](#)', we feel the 'cosmic' taking over from the metaphysical, we experience, in the ethereal layers of paint, a dilation of the real, the horizon seems to have expanded, and the infinite beckons. Time becomes a mutable commodity here. Time is an aspect of painting infrequently touched upon, but Patrick ffrench in his essay, 'Time in the Pure State', addresses this negligence when he writes, "We must affirm the distinction between the sign of Art and its Original Absolute Time and the sensuous sign with its Time Recovered at the Heart of Lost Time. For Art and Original Time do not depend on memory for their experiencing, nor on the contingent materiality of a sensation". [5] The painting process is both relative and relevant to the passage of time. The alchemy of paint continues to open up a whole tranche of possibilities and parameters, pointing towards a divergent range of ways to go, both spatial and temporal, and artists such as Pip Dickens are helping it on its way, through the synergy of technique and imagination, and a dialogue between the literary and the aesthetic. Pip Dickens, like many committed contemporary painters has an intuitive approach to the painted surface, this, combined with her inherent skill leaves us anticipating and wondering about the directions that her painting will take in the future, as it continues to evolve.



Oki Nami (after Hokusai), oil on canvas, Pip Dickens , 2009

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[3] Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Ground of the Image*, [Trans. By Jeff Fort], Fordham

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Roy Exley is a freelance writer, art critic and curator based in London

