

John Latham: Spray Paintings

In 1954 my father, John Latham, discovered that he could use a spray gun as a medium for painting. From that moment on, aside from using a brush to paint the pages of books, I don't think he ever returned to using oils or applying paint in conventional ways. In his first phase of spray paintings from 1954 to '57 (well documented in John A. Walker's (2008) catalogue essay for 'The Spray Gun and the Cosmos'), he developed an idiom that he felt better suited to expressing the emergence of human figures than to the production of pure abstraction. It came to an end when he decided he had exhausted its potential, and that Francis Bacon had mined the vein of painterly figuration in a way that could not be surpassed.

The next period, from 1958 to '63, saw him produce some of his best-known work using assemblage and books. His only painting during this time is *Full Stop* (1961). This image makes reference to a linguistic mark and has connotations of the sun with its solar flares, but otherwise reflects this turn towards abstraction and away from depicting appearances.

When he felt it was time to explore two-dimensional painting again in 1963, two of his first works, *Painting Out of a Book* and *Painting Not Out of a Book*, clearly retained a connection with books and with appearances – the pattern left when an open book stuck on canvas is removed. And later paintings such as *Winter Landfall* and *Red, Green, and Yellow* (1965) intentionally play with the shapes of book covers.

However, most of the paintings of this period involved experimenting with pure form – shapes and colours – without any conscious allusions to appearances. Nevertheless, John took an intriguing form often to be a sign of a referent. He allowed himself to be guided by intuition in constructing work that he found formally compelling and then asked himself what the various elements were doing. When some artistic gesture of his seemed right, he interpreted this as not just some positive evaluation of formal features, but as a sign that through intuition he might be tapping into genuine nonevaluative information. Sometimes it would seem to him that a specific meaning could be discerned through intuition. He referred to this as “reading form”.

Much of what is happening in the world is not apparent to the ordinary senses. (Think, for example, of electromagnetic radiation that falls outside the range of visual perception.) John saw the world as a complex structure composed of events, and he regarded objects in space as derivative and nonfundamental. He took intuition to be a faculty that is not entirely dependent on perception, memory, testimony and reasoning, but is capable of gaining direct access to events whose presence is not revealed through spatial relations.

An instance of this arose when, reflecting on the striped, vertical coloured bands in his paintings, John was reminded of spectrographic analyses of light from distant sources. It occurred to him that his coloured bands represented different time-based components of a person. Many events, such as life-cycles, rotations of the earth, and orbits of the sun, are periodic, and the periodic time of such an event he referred to as its “time-base”. A person, according to John, is a complex event made up of various events of differing time-bases. His phrase “Centre of Gravititas” was invented to refer to the weighted average time-base of events making up the person, analogous to the centre of gravity, of (say) the person's body.

A wall in the living room of our Portland Road house typically displayed one of his largest works – *Great Uncle's Estate*, *Orthodox*, *Four Phases of the Sun*, or one of these striped paintings, mounted and stretched. They were the maximum

size that could fit on that wall. Most of the paintings were stored rolled up, and John decided that some could be presented as roller blinds, like the spring-loaded blinds one could buy for window coverings. We had several such paintings as blinds instead of curtains on our windows. John also introduced motorised roller paintings operated with a nearby switch – up, down, or at rest.

The presence of a temporal component in pulling or mechanically winding the blind down and up led John to see a further reference to the difference between events occurring in passing time and what is atemporal or, as he often put it, “all there all the time”. In particular, what was visible on the cylinder changed with passing time, in contrast with what could be seen when the canvas was fully unrolled.

These blinds could also be displayed with the reverse side of the painting visible when the canvas was fully unrolled. This appealed to John as the paint that had seeped through to the unpainted side offered a mysterious hint of what was on the painted side, and provided a greater contrast with the painted component that was visible on the rotating cylinder.

This series of discoveries reached its culmination in John’s *Time-Base Roller* (1976) in which he combined all of these elements. He used the horizontal dimension to represent a spectrum of time-bases from the smallest to the very large. And he used the moving canvas visible on the motorised cylinder to represent passing time and contrast it with the entire unrolled canvas, representing the atemporal.

There are several other series of works in which John used the spray gun or spray can. In the *One-Second Drawings* (1967–70), his reading of form was to take each minimal mark resulting from a burst of the spray gun as referring to a “Least Event”. Seeing such a reference in the work is just one way of looking at it. John invented a code of five different ways of attending to a work, which he used in assigning what he called a time-signature to each *One-Second Drawing*.

Another experiment involved a canvas sprayed with black paint, but twisted instead of rolled up in the usual way. The first of these was the *Long Painting* shown at the Lisson Gallery in 1992. Developments of this idea with smaller twisted canvases in frames appear as his *Canvas Events* (1994).

His *Cosmic Blood* series (1994) of paintings and sculpture sprayed with red paint revisits the shapes of *Niddrie Woman*, the process sculpture he “found” in some shale bins while on an APG Placement in the Scottish Office in 1975–76. Red paint was used again in constructing a second *Long Painting* to pass through two walls at the Mattress Factory in Pittsburgh, in 1996, where the photographs at the end of this publication were taken.