

SOFTEDGE IS HARDCORE

In response to Elizabeth McIntosh's paintings

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Be bold. I beg you. Don't hesitate. It's good this way. And it won't get any better if we make each other believe that there is a long story behind every thing we do to explain why we have to do it in this, not that, particular manner. This is how we do it. For now. Not that it couldn't have been different; of course it could. None of this was decided in advance. There was no plan, no scheme, no set of declared intentions. Who needs those anyway? Plans, schemes and good intentions are fictions we invent to pretend that we know what the next day will bring. The next day will bring the next day. That much is certain, dead certain. And that dead certainty is harder to bear than the false certainties that plans, schemes and long stories provide. So what are you going to do on the next day and the day after that? How do you even begin a single new day, when one day has just passed and another is about to follow? You perform a simple act, that is yet a radical leap of faith: you return and pick up where you left off. In your thinking, in your painting, in your life. It is the boldest thing to do: you resume and continue. You repeat some things, you vary others, you modulate a great deal, you gradually change.

Changes grow. Growth is amazing to behold. It occurs around the edges. Edges form a horizon. The horizon of our experience is a plane with sensitive edges. As it unfolds and spreads itself out, one plane will touch—and be touched by—others. When this happens the temperature of its colour will heat up the others or cool them down and its weight will be carried by others or be the basis for others to rest on. Mutuality does not require symmetry. Asymmetry much rather is the milieu in which mutuality grows, as things never quite fall into place but keep shifting, sliding, rearranging themselves in patterns that stay the same only in that they keep differing from themselves, slightly but decisively, over time. To linger, however, asymmetry needs to be re-engendered out of its own peculiar logic of aligning the unalignable, continuously.

This is a portrait of painting. It seeks to picture the spirit in which a particular series of paintings are made. Learning from looking at them, it wants to render the implications tangible that painting in this manner may have for living life and thinking thoughts: an attunement to the experience of asymmetry and a readiness to, out of this experience, still, dare, boldly to continue, modulate.

Yet, even if you dare to continue for years on end, that doesn't mean that things ever get any easier. They don't. And they probably never will. Problems you struggle with on one day will likely present themselves again, if not right away, then soon enough. Facing the reality of your own affects and affiliations, this is what it's going to be. To live with this understanding is tough. So people seek relief in the belief that long stories, resolute decisions or masterpieces can set things straight, for once and for all. As if somebody, some idea, some image, some stroke of genius would present you with an escape hatch through which you could exit into an untouchable place. *As if...*

As if we could control our experiences from the point of view of some superintendend managerial intelligence. *As if* affects and affiliations were assets to be administered at will. *As if* we could live *as if* we lived. Absurd! *As ifs* are buffers. Why not be bold and renounce the false relief they seem to offer? It's the modernist intuition: to renounce all *as ifs* and hope for life to be better without illusions, schemes and stories. *As if* there were some other, some miraculously more real reality we could break through to! What a contradiction in terms! To make it seem *as if* we could abolish all *as ifs*. *As if* the very words on paper and the paints on canvas that we use to conjure up the illusion of that other reality would not constantly belie its very possibility!

It's a blunt paradox, the modernist infatuation with the mirage of the real. But perhaps it should not trouble us any more. Because it may no longer be (if it ever was) necessary to summon the spectre of the *miraculously real* in order to dispel those illusions. Having grown up a little, we might not need this spectre's support. The spirit of the *mundane real* could in fact prove to be a much stronger ally. After all, it is the challenge of facing the profane demands of each single day, one day after another, of painting a painting, layer by layer, or thinking a thought through step by step, that most effectively puts all ploys, good intentions and illusions to the test. To take on that challenge means to confront living, painting, thinking *boldly*.

But what does it mean to face the mundane boldly? In their deflationist manner, the schools of Angloamerican pragmatism have argued that the rock bottom of reality is the world of hard facts, common languages, flat surfaces and basic logical operations. As if the simple matters of life were ever that easy to reckon with! As if the existential problems philosophy has grappled with for centuries could be solved if one only described them in a more literal-minded key! As if the task of structuring the immanent space and time of (a) painting could be solved if one made all the edges in it look a bit harder! As if hard edges were more suited for touching the putative rock bottom of painting than soft ones! Why would anyone assume that literal minds were touched by philosophical questions, or canvasses made of rock?

In fact, in the flow of everyday life, the hardest thing may be to even recognize when you hit an existential obstacle, since its edges may at first feel so soft that the initial impact hardly registers. Tips of icebergs

tend to melt in with their surroundings so as to only be recognizable to someone experienced enough to intuitively grasp the full dimension of their bulk. Being experienced in such matters has little to do with expertise in the operative logic of hard facts. Such a logic only teaches you how things work when they do; when they don't, it leaves you at a loss. And why would we assume that they ever did just work according to plan? As if there was a working order to life! Just as we, strange creatures that we are, don't just "work." We are more beautiful than that, and much more difficult. So if there is to be any "work," any work of art or thinking, that is to testify, to truly testify to how things and us happen to be, it won't be a work that just works according to this or that order. It will be a work that will trip itself up. A work that will fall out of step with itself ever so slightly but still—while boldly facing the profane realities of things—keep the make-up of its structures soft enough to respond to and resonate with the touch of something real, when the real won't work.

How do you do this? Boldly face things, yet softly allow for them to touch you? It's not a matter of singular *decisions*. There is not *one* moment in which you can decide that herewith your life, work and thinking have changed to be miraculously more attuned to the assumed order of things. Decisions—plans, ploys, declared intentions—can only determine what kinds of future experiences you expose yourself to, and what kinds you exclude from your life. Decisions are a means of filtering down the breadth of experiences. They cut off the uncontrollable overtones that life's contingencies produce. Filters may be a necessary means for emotional survival, but they do not respond to the erratic oscillations that the unpredictable joys and pains of mundane life generate. To make those resonate you need to play with the filter, to open and close it while modulating its resonance, so as to let the tone of your tunes slowly sweep across the subfrequencies and overtones that lie outside the realm of what can be controlled, planned or plotted.

So there are decisions. Because maybe there must be. But there are also modulations. And these allow us to respond to the often barely perceptible and unpredictable turns, twists, shifts and sweeps that characterize the motion of life as it continues in its ever-so-slight transformation, day in, day out. Only a language of form that models the modulation of its vocabulary on the immanent dynamics of this continuous motion can in the end actually testify to how things unfold, over time.

So for there to be boldness, there may have to be clear decisions about which concepts, expressions, colours and shapes to use and which to avoid. And for there to be modulation, there has to be a certain ease in their use, an intuitive fluidity in the way vowels are molded and consonants rhythmicized, how colours are lightened up or toned down and lines are drawn individually or repeatedly to create structures. Yet to have that particular kind of boldness—the one that embraces soft edges—determination is not the only quality that counts, just as keeping its flow won't guarantee modulation in its depth and range. To dare to

soften edges to make them undulate to the rhythm of a sweeping motion is truly bold, when the motion of that sweep is edgy enough to dip into mellow patches and then to hit sudden peaks again.

Rendering such a motion cannot be accomplished in a singular gesture. It's not something you can just get right, first take, once and for all. That particular edgy, flowing rhythm, that shape of boldly soft motions, will only gradually emerge when you continue modulating those motions, in time, over time. Because these motions capture time in motion. They *are* time captured in motions, duration inscribed in a practice that is bold enough to let itself be touched by the passing of time. As you return and pick up where you left off, over and over again, the traces of time will be recorded into the immanent memory of your medium. A painting painted on one particular day and continued on another particular day will look different from paintings painted on other days. Just as words written in the morning are different from words written in the evening of the same day. Immersed in the particularities of the days of our lives, it is only through reiteration that we can aspire to gradually extrapolate what it is that we might have meant, felt, desired or wanted to say at any moment in time. So we take a leap of faith, resume, continue, reiterate.

Please look at these thoughts as a portrait. They are an abstraction modelled on the paintings of Elizabeth McIntosh. They seek to mimic, in words, the character, spirit, attitude, humour and philosophy that are inherent to her way of painting: a philosophy of being bold, that is, of boldly going beyond the false belief in plans, ploys and declared intentions to expose painting to the profane reality of hard things with soft edges, ever-undulating shapes and barely controllable resonances. McIntosh's paintings are so philosophical in their very form. She doesn't content herself with treating them as exercises in tastefully resolving individual compositions, but instead continues unfolding the implications of particular structural intuitions by reiterating and modulating these intuitions.

For this is philosophy: a continuous elaboration on structural intuitions of how things come together and fall apart. You can see it happen in McIntosh's paintings, physically, painterly and figuratively; spiritually, if you will. The manner in which she treats the material potentials of painting to evoke space and time is alive with a particular spirit: the structures that organize the space of the canvas and direct the gaze across the image at a particular speed, exciting the gaze's motion or slowing it down, are rendered in a particular manner, with a particular humour. They boldly communicate a desire to structure and rhythmicize, yet—and this is crucial—without ever bluntly asserting the existence of a structure or a rhythm as a given. McIntosh refrains from summoning the spectre of some celestial grammar of painting, a grammar that would miraculously reveal itself if only she painted all her edges hard enough. None of the structural elements in her pictures comport themselves with the air of heaven-sent geometrical authority. Neither do they lay claim to the mind-numbing assertiveness of brute facts. The triangulated fields, triangle waves,

boxy squares or flocks of circles that structure, rhythmicize and traverse her paintings are where they are to do what they do right where they are. But this fact in itself is not simply a fact but a lively motion. The motion of their unfolding follows no pre-established rules but initiates and builds up its own momentum on the canvas, right there in front of you. The forms exist in a state that is neither absolute grace nor mere facticity, but rather a state of motion that carefully opens up the potential of things being either thus or different through the bold embrace of them actually being both thus and different.

Bold enough that they never apologize for being in motion. Yet blunt they are not. Because the patterns waver and undulate as they expand to—in varying degrees, wholly or partially—cover the expanses of the canvas. If there is a boldness to their presence on the canvas caused by the visible absence of any celestial justification for their being thus, there is also a tentativeness to the way they proceed to occupy the space they structured. They do not follow the territorial imperative of imposing rigid grids on the painted fields to forcefully claim these spaces as conquered. Neither are they necessarily peaceful; at times they visibly battle each other or negotiate their coexistence on the canvas in terms that don't seem altogether amicable. There is quite a lot of pushing and shoving going on sometimes. But not always. In other moments you can sense the inherent social intelligence of triangles building the architecture of their conviviality by touching each other on all sides. Their society is founded on mutual touchability.

At any rate, you see the shapes work it out between themselves, as if in real time (though real time here may span many days, weeks or months, as the latent presence of many overpainted layers evinces). Overpainting in McIntosh's work tends to be no slick job. The traces of time passing are neither fully cleaned up nor stylized to seem mysterious. Some colours are allowed to become as smudgy as colours get when they undergo many modulations; others openly delight in their luminescence, as if they had only seconds ago been freshly born into the visible world. These colours are almost brazen in how they take pleasure in their existence. Yet they are never blunt. Just like those waves of triangles, they neither present themselves as emanations of some pure logic, as primary colours would, nor do they merely seek to grab your attention like the blaring colours of tabloid front pages. The sole principle of their boldness is the pleasure of being thus: bright orange, smudgily purple or tentatively greenish.

This testifies to a particular attitude towards the power to create. In McIntosh's paintings this power of creation is never simply interpreted as a power to decide upon the shape, placement and order of things. It is always also—in fact, in the paintings' boldest moments it tends to be—realized in the act of letting things be the way they turned out to be. It takes some courage to handle things that way: to not force them into being and make it seem as if some authoritative rationale of ostentatiously rigorous decisions demanded that force. Through handling structure and rhythm thus, McIntosh renounces the lie that there are higher

ends justifying painterly means. Yet this renunciation only prepares the ground for an engagement with the possibilities of painting as a form of structural thinking that is made more audacious, more bold if you will, because it proceeds without the safety net of a rigid grid suggesting indubitable law and order. Structural thinking in McIntosh's work truly is a philosophical elaboration of structural intuitions, exposing what structures of thinking are and can be: not laws, but intuitions.

For this is the lie that propelled so much bluntly assertive work during and, even more so, after modernism (fetishizing its presumed achievements in retrospect): the lie that there was a law to how to do things and that strong work was needed to lay it down. A boy's dream of imitating the voice of the father speaking the law! What a mistake to confuse this pathetic stance with a dedication to artistic rigour! Being rigorous, being modernist, being bold—it is now becoming clear—has little to do with such male adolescent posturing. It is becoming clear precisely because artists like McIntosh are formulating a different philosophy of what being rigorous, being modernist, being bold can mean and what it, for starters, may have always meant. Why was it necessary to write manifestoes, if not because the intuitions that most modernists were seeking to advance seemed both too tentative in the early stages of their development and too bold in their concentrated form?

The turn towards abstraction in painting is an exemplary case in point. What is abstract painting in its early stages but a series of tentative experiments in visual boldness? Not knowing how to fill a canvas after they had abolished the pretext of pictorial representation, early abstract painters tentatively tried out various bold gestures, claiming basic organic or geometric shapes as possible subjects. It is precisely the initial challenge, joy, absurdity and potential gonzo humour (think Klee) of these ungrounded experiments in abstraction that McIntosh brings back by daring to tentatively be boldly abstract. The decisive difference, however, is that she does so unapologetically, without pretending to lay down laws, recognizing instead the full potential of abstraction in its principle of ungroundedness.

With no celestial laws to ground it, the basis for abstraction that McIntosh proposes in her work is the practice of its continuation, elaboration and modulation in the face of the challenges that abstraction encounters as a mundane material practice. Her works raise no false hopes of a final escape or ultimate solution. Instead, she boldly confronts the fact that, no matter how often you try, fail or succeed, the basic crux of convincingly structuring a canvas with abstract forms will never resolve itself easily. The struggle of taking on this task is tangible in the irony of attempting it anyway, and doing so boldly. Yet part and parcel of these bold attempts is the philosophical humour inherent to the way in which McIntosh allows things to find a different rhythm of coming together and falling apart when they don't just work out according to plan. To try to make things work yet also allow for them to not work is a form of being bold in

being tentative, and tentative in being bold. It is a different philosophy of abstraction, of what it might have been, what it now is and what it can still be. That formulating this philosophy is a matter, not of momentary decisions, but of continuous elaboration and modulation is an understanding that McIntosh casually but insistently advances. Could you imagine her work ending in one final picture? No. Would you want it to? Certainly not. Because there is more, there is always, again and again, a little more than one had ever thought before. The joy of following McIntosh's work thus lies, among many other things, in realizing that there can be more, and that therefore whatever is seen and thought at a given moment in time, in and through the work, is to be continued...