

CODAE TO LOST IN SPACE

Leoni Schmidt

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Some ideas entertained with and alongside Alexandra Kennedy's exhibition at the Blue Oyster Art Project Space entitled *Lost in Space* are proposed through four codae to her suite of twelve paintings presented as four sets of three units each. These ideas pertain to the suite as a whole, while also picking up on particularities of some of the units.

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score & note

A process of editing has led to the choice of the suite and the four sets contained therein. Similarities in size, format, horizontal alignment, colour and surface treatment group the pieces together. Still, they do not read as a series as this would entail sequence and progression.² Here, the units within their sets refuse these characteristics of the series as each seems to be a fragment split off from a larger entity which we never encounter. The experience is somewhat like reading a part of a musical score through identifying the notes written there, without being privy to the whole composition. A tune starts to form but one cannot complete it. Its incompleteness begins to haunt one, but no manner of further looking can solve the conundrum.³ The reason may be that the full score exists elsewhere, while we see only some of its bars and notes. This is especially evident in the unit entitled *Somewhere near Deneb* (a star in our constellation).

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map & tilt

Kennedy works from a constellation map. Her suite has a genealogy that stretches back to the early twentieth-century ideas of Nikolai Fiodorov concerning cosmic space as the arena and anti-gravity – or the overcoming of gravity – as the project for artistic activity.⁴ Some years later Kuzma Petrov-Vodkin posited his notions concerning 'planetary feeling' and 'tilted space'⁵ as ways of overcoming the Euclidean perspective which would place things frontally, up and down, hierarchically: "having lost gravitational pull [objects] appear ready to break loose from the earth's sphere."⁶ Kennedy's aim is not to give them new anchorage through a representation of the constellation map, but rather to explore small unstable intersections and alignments within the interstices of the map. She finds an oblique directional connection between, for example, the constellations of *Delphinus and Aquila* and the resultant image reads like a diagonal disruption of Euclidean space. Her way of working with space here is not one of copying space but one of "opening up space through information."⁷ And, the information provided functions on four levels: *data* (constellation relationships); *agency* (disruption of Euclidean space); *genealogy* (connection to the history of ideas about warped and shaped space)⁸; and *discipline* (material manifestation of the above through painting). It is argued below that the relationships between fractal and splinter; and between black and silver support the discipline-specific information provided through Kennedy's paintings.

fractal & splinter

Benoît Mandelbrot defined a fractal as a largely isotropic “rough or fragmented geometric shape that can be subdivided in parts, each of which is (at least approximately) a reduced-size copy of the whole.”⁹ The notion of the fractal seems to have inspired many artists to explore self-same patterns, an example being painter Simon Ingram in New Zealand, who discusses his work in terms of internal logic and self-generation.¹⁰ Related ideas concerning ‘meta-patterns’¹¹ have led to understandings of recurrence in pattern-formation, while sometimes manifesting in work characterised by a homogeneity which admits little formal tension. Like Ingram but also very differently, Kennedy avoids the regularity of the fractal. She does this through exploring the oblique relationships in space mentioned above and by deploying a splintering of shape which seems random, unpredictable and anisotropic. This last characteristic entails the opposite of homogeneity in all directions as it is a property of being directionally dependent and can be defined as a difference in a physical property for material when measured along different axes.¹² In a unit entitled *Black Hole (I)*, Kennedy’s splintering of shape is especially obvious.

black & silver

Offset by subtle variations of rose and blue-grey, it is the black and silver that speak eloquently in Kennedy’s suite. They refer to how one sees images of and in outer space through a powerful telescope. The dense black of shape (and of field in some units) also retains an enigma of form as it is impenetrable, whether read as (rorschach) blot, (black) hole, void, or space. But, again, the black also brings the genealogy of an almost impenetrable field of colour – including black and white¹³ – within contemporary art into the reading of Kennedy’s work. The viewer remembers Kasimir Malevich’s black squares; Mark Rothko’s sublime black and grey canvases; and Yves Klein’s invitation: “Come with me into the void!” alongside his creation of dark blue monochromatic fields.

With Donald Judd one could say that colour and space occur together.¹⁴ Jane Alison writes about “the space that colour opens up, the space between the aesthetic and the conceptual, the material and the immaterial, simplification and mystification...As the phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty pointed out, to perceive colour entirely I must ‘abandon myself to it and plunge into this mystery.’”¹⁵ The small size and density of Kennedy’s black shapes and fields pull the viewer closer for this plunge. And, coming closer and closer one becomes aware of the silver aspect of the units. There is a line drawing in silver to indicate direction and connection in one work; and the silvery, reflective sheen of surface buffed to a fine polish in others. Again, the genealogy of a material¹⁶ (in this case) becomes part of the reading of the suite: silver as a transitional metal with an alchemical history; silver as a catalyst for chemical reactions; silver as – in this case, a painterly – reference to photographic processes; silver as complicit in the history of the ‘black mirror’ in art; silver’s role in what Gerhard Richter has called “‘a kind of cross between a monochrome painting and a mirror’.”¹⁷

In *The Undiscovered Country* (2004)¹⁸ Russell Ferguson considers painting after the so-called ‘death of painting’ – as signalled by the birth of photography – and concludes that it is alive and well today through maintaining the particular pleasures that only painting can provide and making accessible ways of seeing only possible through painting. Kennedy’s work plays between these pleasures and possibilities; and attests to a modest and incremental exploration of painting’s reinvention and vibrancy through a coherent exploration of contemporary ideas about spatiality and materiality. Her suite makes no bold claims for the discipline of painting, but rather shares with the viewer the slow discovery of moments of aesthetic-conceptual surprise through exploration with the tools of her trade: size, format, directional alignment, measurement, density, colour, surface, shape, field, space, and their relationships as notes marked across a partial score.

- 1 Codae: Passages of "more or less independent character introduced after the completion of the essential parts of a movement..." *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary* (London: Oxford, 1996), 456.
- 2 Series: "A number of magnitudes, degrees of some attribute, or the like, viewed as capable of being enumerated in a progressive order...order of succession, sequence." (Ibid: 2737)
- 3 *Conundrum*: "...puzzling question or problem...enigmatical statement...a thing that one is puzzled to name..." (Ibid: 543)
- 4 Nikolai Fiodorov, *The Philosophy of the Common Cause* (trans. Moscow: Verny, 1906) Vol. I: 350.
- 5 Kuzma Sergejevic Petrov-Vodkin, *Euclidian Space* (trans. Leningrad: Samarkandia, 1930), 581.
- 6 Yevgeny Kovtun, *The Russian Avant-Garde in the 1920s and 1930s* (Bournemouth: Parkstone & St. Petersburg: Aurora, 1996), 113.
- 7 Janet Abrams & Peter Hall (eds), *Else/Where: Mapping: New Cartographies of Networks and Territories* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 28.
- 8 See Isaac Asimov, "Plane Truth" in Howard K Congdon (ed.), *Philosophies of Space and Time* (New York & Oxford: University Press of America, 2003), 207-18, in which the author traces the history of the development of non-Euclidean space in order to assist us towards contemporary understandings of the universe.
- 9 Benoît Mandelbrot, *The Fractal Geometry of Nature* (Gordonsville USA: W H Freeman, 1982), 7.
- 10 Simon Ingram, "Machinic Practice in Painting", *Junctures: The Journal for Thematic Dialogue*, # 2: System 2004: 33-44.
- 11 See Tyler Volk, *Meta-Patterns: Across Space, Time and Mind* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).
- 12 See the "Oilfield Glossary" for 'anisotropy' at www.glossary.oilfield as last visited on 15 April 2007.
- 13 Jane Alison writes: "The question of whether black and white can be truly considered colours has perplexed thinkers for centuries. For Newton they certainly were not, but for Goethe they emphatically were. I take them to be true colours, believing that for their wider cultural and psychological significance alone it would be perverse to exclude them from a study of chroma." See Jane Alison (ed.), *Colour after Klein: Re-thinking Colour in Modern and Contemporary Art* (London: Barbican & Black Dog, 2005), 10.
- 14 See Donald Judd, "Some Aspects of Colour in General and Red and Black in Particular" in Jane Alison (ed.), 171 (see endnote 13).
- 15 See Alison (endnote 13) with reference to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge, 1945/2003), 249.
- 16 See "A History of Silver: A Brief Esoteric Overview of Silver Use" at www.silvermedicine.org as last visited on 15 April 2007.
- 17 Quoted in Arnaud Maillet, *The Claude Glass: Use and Meaning of the Black Mirror in Western Art*, trans. Jeff Fort (Cambridge Mass.: MIT: Zone Books, 2004), 188.
- 18 Russell Ferguson, 2004. *The Undiscovered Country* (Los Angeles: University of California, Hammer Museum).

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