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The stuff of life – notes on John Blackburn

I would like my pictures to look as if a human being had passed between them, like a snail, leaving a trail of the human presence and memory trace of past events, as the snail leaves its slime.

Francis Bacon ⁽¹⁾

John Blackburn is an artist who relates strongly to the raw experience of human life, and although ostensibly abstract, his paintings are rooted firmly in the tangible, in life as it is lived on a day-to-day basis. All art is autobiographical to a degree, and in Blackburn there is the constant sense of a man in reiterative confirmation of his own existence, but also of a man with a deep sense of empathy in a wider sense:

‘You know, life is horribly brutal. I’m an upbeat sort of guy, but you cannot really escape from certain facts, and it’s not always man’s inhumanity to man that is the terrible thing: sometimes life itself, just the mere fact of being alive, you are faced with a natural brutality... For me, painting has got to have a connection with the physical.’

This connection is apparent in the ways Blackburn utilises the found within his work, for as he describes:

‘Very early on, partly through necessity, but partly through thought, I felt that I wanted to start, not from a position of virginity, but from a position of something having been used before: having another life, another existence; not spiritual, but physical; a physical, material existence. And so therefore I wouldn’t paint on a virgin canvas – partly because I never had the money to buy them – but more essentially because it didn’t fit in with my philosophy. I wanted second-hand sheets, that had been slept in, people made love in them, people been ill in them... and part of my working method of using stuff that has been used before helps me to get started – so it has a double purpose – it gives the picture a life before the picture is started.’

This particular use of materials links Blackburn to the *arte povera* artists Alberto Burri and Antoni Tàpies, who also assimilated found material within their work for its power of directly-related association to their own experience in times of conflict. Burri famously used sacking and bandage-like materials in allusion to his war-time work as a doctor; whilst for Tàpies, items of clothing or domestic objects spoke of life under siege whilst a child during the Spanish civil war. In both of these artists such detritus forms part of an essentially abstract language, which like that of Blackburn is forged out of the real. There are examples of this approach within paintings in the present exhibition; in a scallop-edged cloth, partially-submerged under layers of paint, abutted by sections of lead sheeting affixed with old nails; in various bits of rusted metal implements, and in the integration of grit, iron filings, varnish, resin – ‘I use anything and everything’ says Blackburn – and each scraped, mottled or coagulated element evokes both past and present life, accumulating additional meanings via its co-option within new relationships of material and form.

In the collection of Kettle’s Yard in Cambridge there are a group of early Sixties works by Blackburn, purchased by its founder, the influential collector J.S. Ede (1895-1990). Visitors to Kettle’s Yard are struck not only by the quality of the art, but also by the remarkable environment Ede created at his former home, its sensibility informed by the truth-to-materials ethos of twentieth-century European modernism. Ede collected on a grand scale, and Blackburn’s paintings share space with sculpture by Brancusi and Gaudier-Brzeska, ceramics by Lucie Rie, and pictures by St. Ives artists including Ben Nicholson, Christopher Wood and Alfred Wallis. There are also works by William Scott

and Roger Hilton, the artists Blackburn is closest to stylistically, with whom he shares undeniable similarities of form, surface, and colour. These comparisons notwithstanding however, when one begins to examine Blackburn's intentions it becomes evident that he is an entirely different artist in both temperament and meaning. For, whilst greatly admiring what he describes as 'a great purity' in Scott, he is keen to make clear: 'I do not claim it to be necessarily a higher force – but my inspiration comes from the brutality of being alive. I can't escape that.' He goes on to cite Francis Bacon as a crucial influence; as an artist who is important to him on a philosophical level: 'If you walk into a Bacon show, you know what the hell you're going to get, you're going to get hit straight away between the eyes, with much that is unpleasant about being alive. Now I wouldn't put that on a pedestal necessarily, but I would say that a lot of what my work is about is the human condition.'

Blackburn's paintings are of course very different to those of Bacon, yet in both artists there is a fascination with the ambiguous relationship between violence and beauty, between what is expressed and the means of its articulation. There is, for instance, a compelling beauty in many of Bacon's portraits, in the delectability of paint-as-flesh reconfigured as a series of open wounds. Whilst such life *in extremis* is much less obvious in Blackburn, he has recently described his *modus operandi* within a discussion about a specific painting in progress: 'What I wanted to do, although it is purely abstract, somewhere deep in the back of my mind, with all of my work there is a human element in it. Hard to describe: but I really wanted that to have a visual, literal reference. For me, and probably only me – and that's really in a way at this stage all that counts – I wanted that [indicating a particular textural paint surface and colour] to look a little bit like a stroke victim.' The skin of paint serves therefore as a metaphor for the human body, and certainly in this particular case, of the body under duress. The approach is both existential and humanistic: and it is this defining characteristic in Blackburn's art that forms a crucial distinction; for despite the aforementioned similarities of style, it remains that Scott and Hilton's depictions of the body – unlike Blackburn's – are centred predominantly on the objectified female. In Scott there is a constant metaphoric play between figure/landscape/still life in which the body appears subservient, no more important than a table-top or a harbour; in Hilton, even at his most abstract, there is an underlying objectification of women which is sometimes troublingly misogynistic. Yet in Blackburn a circle may relate to a female breast – as it so often does in Hilton – but also to the sun or to the cycle of life. The artist is keen that readings remain open, in an approach that is determinedly pluralistic and all-embracing; for, whilst Blackburn is impelled to consider what he describes as the 'bestiality' within the darker reaches of human nature, his work remains essentially affirmative.

Within Blackburn's development as a painter there have been a series of shifts in and out of abstraction, initially and most notably in the series of paintings he made between 1976-79, generically entitled *The Hostage Series*. They were inspired by the French artist Jean Fautrier (1898-1964), and particularly by the work made by Fautrier whilst in hiding in a former dovecot at a mental clinic near Paris during the Second World War, where he heard the cries of people tortured and executed by German occupiers in the densely-wooded grounds. This body of paintings, the *Otages* (Hostages), in which heavily-impasted paint represents the body ravaged and murdered, are in effect Blackburn's lodestar. Inspired by Fautrier, and in reaction to the ongoing brutalities of the twentieth century, Blackburn produced several series of small-scale paintings based on the human head: *Single Hostages* (1976); *Double Hostages* (1977); and *Masked Hostages* (1978-79). Some of the paintings from the first two of these series are included here, all of them tenderly eloquent in their simplicity.

J.S. Ede first saw Blackburn's work at the artist's 1961 exhibition at the Woodstock Gallery in London, and went on not only to buy his paintings but also to champion him amongst his friends and acquaintances, a form of altruism which ensured that many of Blackburn's works entered private collections. It was in one such collection that the art consultant Christopher Penn saw a group of these Sixties paintings early in 2002. Blackburn was unknown to Penn at that point, and those he first asked about him did not know if the painter was still alive, let alone where he might live. Intent to find out, Penn eventually tracked him down at his home in Canterbury where he was shown a trove of work produced over nearly five decades: for, although Blackburn had fallen beneath the art world radar, he had continued to work, often at night. Personal circumstances had prevailed so that the needs of a young family predominated – Blackburn has three children – and in order to make a living he worked as a graphic designer, later on setting up a manufacturing business with his wife Maude. Another factor disruptive to his painting career was his daughter's diagnosis with kidney disease in the mid-Sixties, resulting in a ten-year period of trauma for the family, in which she had two kidney transplants, of which one organ was donated by Blackburn himself.

Upon finding Blackburn, Christopher Penn, like Ede half a century before him, began to promote the artist, helping him to mount a retrospective exhibition at the Metropole Galleries, Folkestone, in June/July 2006. Soon afterwards, the artist was taken up by the London gallery Osborne Samuel, with whom he subsequently held two highly successful one-person shows in 2007 and 2009. In both 2009 and 2010 he worked and exhibited in New Zealand, where his work was shown to acclaim at the Artis Gallery in Parnell, Auckland.

Since his twenty-first-century resurgence, Blackburn has made a partial return to the more formalised vocabulary and construction of his Sixties work, reworking some older paintings, and making new ones in which the shapes and spaces are given a more expansive range, both in material density and in line and colour. Everywhere in Blackburn's work there are marvellous contrasts of application, his serendipitous use of materials resulting in a great variety of surface. Amongst many examples here is *Two Yellows*, in which texturally diverse paint, some matt, some gloss, is variously applied not only by brush, but also sprayed or poured on; all with a concentrated delicacy. Many of Blackburn's most powerful paintings use comparatively few elements. *Untitled (Grey/White/Black)* is made up of just three interlocking shapes to create a strong figure-ground dynamic in which, both imposed upon at left by a monumental grey L-shape, and book-ended at right by a reversed black L, the ground asserts itself nonetheless as an anthropomorphic sculptural presence, smeared and mottled in whites and rusty seepages.

Now in his late-seventies, Blackburn continues to paint almost every day, with undiminished intensity. Always sensitive to his materials and their application, he draws on immense energy whilst painting; his recent large-scale black and white *Triptych (Winter I)*, in which formality gives way – exhilaratingly – to gesture, is a case in point. Painted wet-on-wet – a process the artist describes as 'like cage-fighting' – the work has something of the beauty-in-decay of that other master of the triptych, Cy Twombly. In this extraordinary painting, every reiterative mark is an affirmation. The corralled brushstrokes migrate across the surface, imploding in the central panel under their own weight as they make their itinerant passage. The work is imbued with an expansive lyricism, though remains more earthy than ethereal; for Blackburn works not as the

American Twombly does in a Roman palazzo, but in a cluttered studio on an industrial unit in Kent.

Blackburn's work combines instinct and intuition with great consideration and deep reserves of feeling. One might describe his artistic project as forming part of that classic one, the creation of order out of chaos; something redemptive out of the stuff of everyday life, in all its varieties of love and anguish.

This Lemon Street Gallery show is John Blackburn's first in Cornwall, and will doubtless serve to further enhance his late-flowering reputation.

Ian Massey

⁽¹⁾ The Francis Bacon quote is from *The New Decade*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1955, p63.

All quotes by John Blackburn are from conversations with the author, 2009 –10.

Ian Massey is a writer, artist and lecturer, and the author of *Patrick Procktor: Art and Life* (Unicorn Press)