

Susan Gunn: The Beauty of Imperfection

Broken glass. It's just like glitter, isn't it?

Pete Doherty

Between 1915 and 1923 Marcel Duchamp created *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* which is also often referred to as *The Large Glass*. It is a work of art comprised of two large glass panes, one positioned above the other. In notes Duchamp produced on his work, he described it as the depiction of an erotic encounter between a “Bride” in the upper panel and her nine “Bachelors” gathered below in the lower panel. Neither painting nor sculpture, *The Large Glass* was composed using materials such as lead foil, fuse wire, and dust, combining elements of chance, carefully considered perspective and a delicate craftsmanship in its construction.

The Large Glass was shattered in transit following its only public exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum in 1926. Duchamp repaired his work, gluing the shards of glass back together again and it now forms part of the permanent collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. The accidental element incurred in its breakage has become part of the fabric of the work as we now see and appreciate it, in much the same way we might feel comfortable with the surface cracks in old oil paintings which are known as craquelure.

Like all things formed in nature, cracks never travel in straight lines; they cannot be controlled by human hand or forced into a particular direction or pattern. Just like our fingerprints, they are unique and beyond duplication. Even when we apply the same conditions and forces to bear upon identical objects, cracks never repeat, revealing their structure to be outside ourselves, existing in a condition of fragility. We can never return cracks to their perfect unbroken state, only hold them in place and secure them, as Duchamp did when he sandwiched his repaired *Large Glass* between two further glass panels.

The special nature of cracks and the pathways they take is central to Susan Gunn’s work as a painter. Her often large scale, monochromatic canvases, such as *Divided ground: Red, Dark Matter I* and *Sacro Terra Grande*, present the viewer with a delicately fractured surface of uniformly coloured gesso contained within a series of straight edges which are carefully defined by human hand. She describes the end result of her work as being “like a mirror of life” where “things happen which are beyond our control”, yet which, in the presence of Gunn’s work, we realise we seek to contain. In this way, her canvases present the viewer with a metaphorical meditation on the fragility of life, beautiful in all its flawed and imperfect manifestations. Somehow they appear to represent an innate desire to protect.

Gunn’s working process begins with the building up of layers of gesso mixed with pure pigment over the surface of a canvas. Gesso is a traditional medium employed as a ground by Italian renaissance

artists and is usually comprised of chalk mixed with glue formed from the skins of rabbits or calves. Typically it is employed as a primer to coat solid surfaces such as wooden painting panels, carved furniture and picture frames over which oil paint and gilding can be applied. Painting panels were initially prepared by Italian craftsmen with a base layer of gesso grosso (rough gesso) which was comprised of a coarse plaster, over which a series of thin layers of gesso sottile (finishing gesso) were then applied. These were prepared with a fine plaster slaked in water to produce an opaque, white, reflective surface. The absorbent quality of gesso makes it suitable for painting on in all media, as well as providing an ideal surface for the application of gold leaf.

Gesso, which is typically applied in 10 or more fine layers, has a brittle consistency susceptible to cracking, and it is this property Gunn manipulates in an attempt to alter and control the way cracks appear within the fabric of her paintings. Speeding up or slowing down the drying time of gesso contributes to the way the fractures form, while heating up the surface creates more cracks and cooling it down produces less. Correspondingly, when more layers of gesso are applied to the surface the fissures appear more pronounced. The cracks created by Gunn in the composition of the gesso form clean breaks in the medium, just like shattered shards of glass, which extend through to the canvas, unlike the craquelure we see in old paintings which rests wholly on the surface.

Once the gesso on Gunn's paintings has dried the surface is initially rough. Gunn smooths this by polishing it with wax and oil, while also applying water to the gesso which treats it as a kind of watercolour paint, allowing the pigment to seep through to the canvas surface and stain it. This renders the white of the canvas imperceptible to the viewer.

In the mid 1950's the Italian artist Lucio Fontana initiated a series of monochromatic 'slash paintings' which consisted of a sequence of gashes he made through his canvases. Fontana lined the reverse of these paintings with black gauze in order to create the appearance of a profound darkness which appeared behind the open cuts, creating a mysterious sense of illusion and depth. In 1952 Fontana also began a 'Stones' series which fused the sculptural with painting by encrusting the surfaces of his canvases with a heavy impasto paint and coloured glass.

Yet where Fontana employed a wide range of contemporary colours to create paintings which he labeled as "an art for the Space Age", Gunn limits herself to a small handful of around four or five pure pigments which have their origins in the depths of human history. These are comprised primarily of lamp black, white, carmine, orange and ivory with some canvases making use of gold leaf which is applied to the finished surface. This choice of colour is an important consideration for Gunn who favours ancient working materials and techniques. For example, Lamp Black, which is one of the oldest colours in use today, was commonly used as a pigment in Egyptian tomb painting and was made using the carbon residual from the oil burnt in lamps, which is where its name originates. Carmine, on the other hand, which is also known as crimson, was made by extracting the dye from the kermes insect. An alternative source was discovered by the Spanish in Mexico where the Aztec and Mayan people were found to be using carminic acid from the cochineal beetle to dye fabrics a rich

red. A tiny insect, it took the Aztecs around 70,000 cochineal beetles to create a pound of crimson pigment.

Interestingly, whilst Gunn's paintings may bring to mind mediaeval stained glass windows without pictures or sacred doorways leading to the realm of the unknown, she does not describe herself as an abstract painter, stating that "my works are not abstracted versions of things we find in the World".ⁱ This belief is one sympathetic to a conviction Mark Rothko held, who insisted he was not an abstractionist, feeling such a description was inaccurate to his core interest "in expressing basic human emotions - tragedy, ecstasy, doom, and so on. And the fact that a lot of people break down and cry when confronted with my pictures shows that I can communicate those basic human emotions . . . The people who weep before my pictures are having the same religious experience I had when I painted them."ⁱⁱ

Rothko's paintings became increasingly sombre as he grew older and appear to be representative of a deepening despair he felt in his personal life. We perhaps sense this most clearly in his 'Seagram' series which were produced using a method of applying thin layers of binder mixed with maroon and black pigment directly onto untreated canvases, painting thin layers to create a subtle fusion of overlapping colors and shapes. In many senses the adapted traditional working techniques employed by artists such as Rothko and Gunn underpin a traditional understanding of the role painting plays within society at large, which is not, as they see it, to create a wholly intellectual response to the evolving conversations artists have between themselves within the confines of art galleries, but to speak more broadly of the human emotions and traumas which define the way we all experience the World and which we can only attempt to rationalize after the event.

On 25th February, 1970, a consignment of Rothko's 'Seagram' paintings arrived in London for permanent display at the Tate Gallery. On that same day, Oliver Steindecker, Rothko's assistant, found the artist lying dead in his kitchen. He had sliced his arms with a razor which was found lying at his side. For many, this act transformed the meaning of his work, saturating his paintings with a profound gravity.

Whereas tragedy came at the end of Rothko's life, for Gunn it struck in her mid-twenties and may be central to our understanding of how she approaches painting. Gunn worked initially as a wedding dress designer on leaving school until the birth of her first daughter Francesca, who was diagnosed with Leukaemia just after her first birthday. Francesca lived for a further 18 months, during which time she underwent intensive chemotherapy. While in hospital with her daughter, Gunn drew portraits of her child "because it didn't seem right somehow to take photographs of her in there"ⁱⁱⁱ. Following her daughter's death and the birth of two subsequent children, Gunn enrolled at art school at the relatively late age of 35. She said that "As I developed my practice I had a strong feeling that I didn't want to share the images in my head with anyone else."^{iv} Feeling instead that "I wanted to go beyond what could be immediately defined, though for me the cracked and marbled surface of the gesso was and is very much like a memorial slab."^v The painted surface in this sense appears to represent Gunn's

weekly ritual of cleaning her daughter's gravestone, where in the polishing she declared an attempt to try to impart dignity to the memory of her lost daughter.

Tragedy is the birthplace of the sacred, underpinning many of our prayers and rituals. The loss of those we love reminds us of how precious life is. In representing this in art, Gunn offers a series of universal images which depict the fragile and lost in all of us, highlighting our consistent inability to pay close attention to that which is most important. In doing so, she creates a metaphor for our broken nature, which clearly defines the beauty of our imperfect humanity.

Robert Priseman, 2013

ⁱ From a conversation between Susan Gunn and Robert Priseman on the 6th November 2012

ⁱⁱ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mark_Rothko

ⁱⁱⁱ http://www.edp24.co.uk/what-s-on/susan_gunn_exhibition_at_norwich_castle_1_711836

^{iv} From a conversation between Susan Gunn and Robert Priseman on the 23rd August 2013

^v http://www.edp24.co.uk/what-s-on/susan_gunn_exhibition_at_norwich_castle_1_711836