

Blots, Stains and Smears

Mark Joyce, Iain Nicholls,
William Gharraie
Organised by Phil Allen
at Transition Gallery, London
3 - 24 December 2011

By *Fin Cullum*

Entering Transition gallery's December show I was immediately met with the seasonally alcoholic scent of mulled wine being offered to visitors; strangely reminiscent of the etheric atmosphere of a painting studio. In accordance with their romantic image, at this time of year studios are usually characterised by cold air suffused by an invisible cloud of mineral spirit in turmoil, vapours buffeted by an otherwise functionless collection of limping electric heaters.

This impression of chilly nebulosity is further imprinted by the first painting in line of sight from the door: *Baby Night Light* by William Gharraie, an airy painting strangely offset by its title, evocative of one of those doo-wop records about, what now seem, inappropriate feelings expressed for/by a teenage girl. It's a cluster of forms illuminated by rays of yellow light sliding through mist, the fluffy white ground and everything on it are only half-there and insubstantial, even the light pine frame engenders a synaesthetic lightheadedness at the memory of pine resin smell. Paintings, as objects, are always viewed with lungs as much as with eyes, lungs serve as internal architectural reference spaces and have more than a metaphorical function as organs for



Within Dropping – Iain Nicholls
2011
Oil on canvas

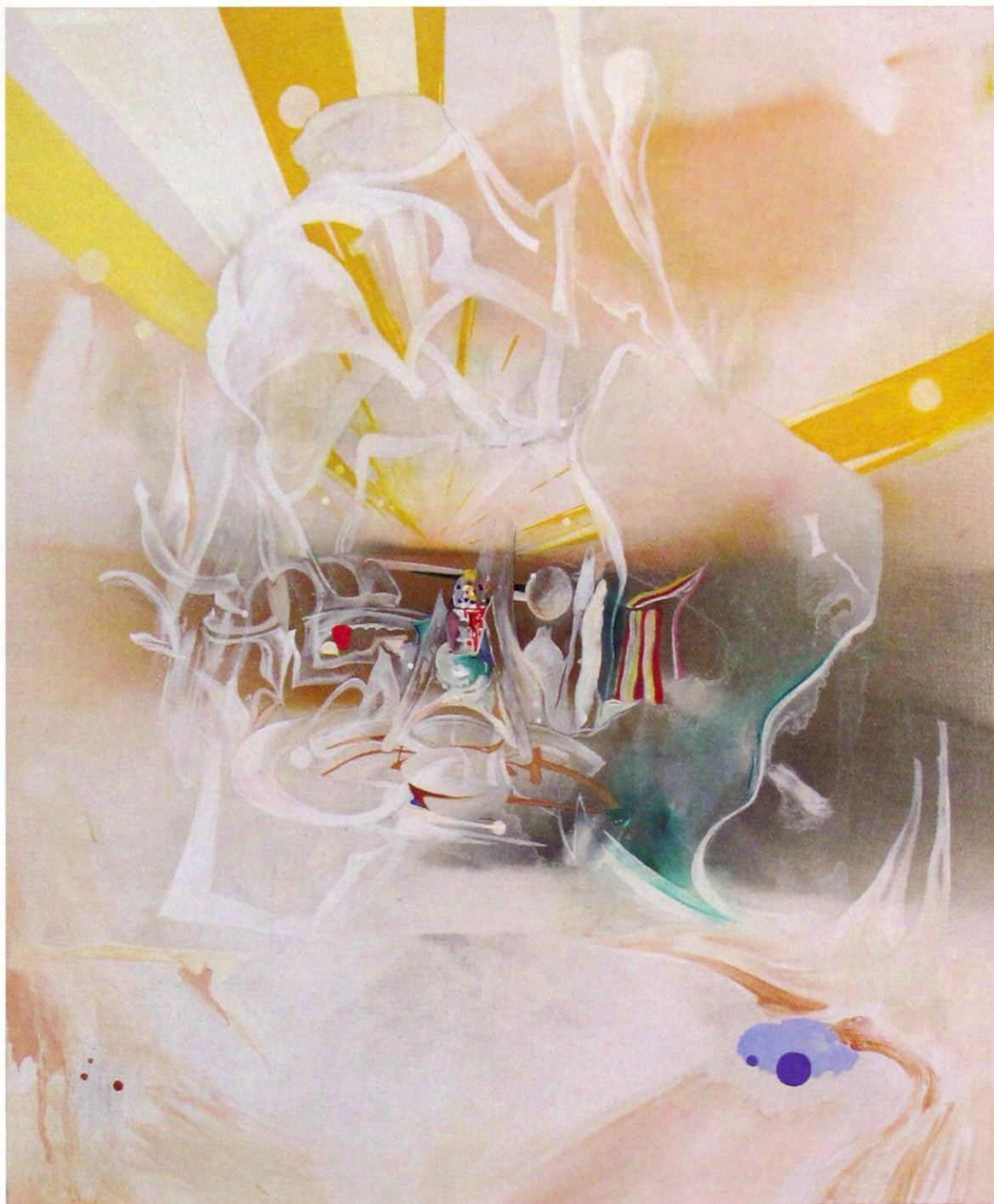
Courtesy of Transition, London and the artist

drawing in the world analysing and assimilating. The miasmatic composition of Gharraie's painting is deeply centred, as are all in the show, and depicts a misty world populated with half solid forms of indistinct substance and function; like soapy glassware glimpsed through suds in a laboratory sink. Gharraie's other two paintings hint at spatial description by placing more distinct forms within the fog, *Untitled* contains a mini-grisaille of a classical bottom robed in the breathy strands of white paint and *Amnesia* is centered on waxy globules running onto a half-concealed surface circled by hi-viz red and white lines.

There is something a little fiddly about some of Gharraie's work - the thin paint can feel anemic, there are no big brushes at work and all the landscaping is

done with bleeds and washes. Solvent's interaction with oils seems to be the method with which the dreamy quality is invoked as a ground to the compositions. The fine dispersal of pigment across canvas by mineral spirit is the ouija board, engineered to contact the 'other' of the paint's own material will, the foreground is then worked and excavated with form and semi-mimetic reference, to vivisect the summoned spirit. As the colour moves in tidal sediments, rather than crude human daubs, it describes gradations too fine for hands to elucidate. The blots, stains and smears of the show's title describe marks in which the painter's will is partially bent to the colour's, rather than dominating it, in such delicate triumphs over medium as brushstrokes, swipes and scumbles.





Above: **Baby Night Light** – William Gharraie
2011
Oil on canvas

Opposite: **Bending the Light II** – Mark Joyce
2011
Oil on canvas

Both courtesy of Transition, London and the artists

In his statement in the press release Iain Nicholls refers directly to the painting as a window and his figuration has an odd relationship to the real world on our side of the glass. The syntax of the painted space almost challenges the real world, defies its specific rules whilst retaining a kind of perspectival logic. *Within Dropping* crowds of forms gather, ranging in scale from bright paint spots, like buyer's stickers clustered at the edge, to larger circles bustling together in crowds on the central highways of the painting. In *Reverse Schiaparelli* graphic symbols of cartoon planets and bonfires are stamped like signage onto the boards alongside tree patterns, birds symbols and chimneys. Transmuted into impasto they all become hasty curses rubbed in oil, frustrated retorts from painted to real space. These crash of symbols, whose references to mundane graphics, are reflexive with the functional smearing of paint on raw board.

Honesty is a thorny issue in painting, it often seems to mean brown. Brown, the colour to which all paint desires to return - the Promised Land. Acknowledging the muddier, loamier qualities of oil paint is not necessarily an honest act but in Nicholls' grimier passages there is sincerity, or rather a frankness that gives the paintings a solid grounded feel that serves better than honesty. Though the colour saturation and the mark making have an almost high street, Tonka-Toy feel to them, you get the sense that the paintings are pursuing the same lofty philosophical ends as the others in the show. Through an abstract but heavily formal painting toolkit, all three artists are making examinations of their sensorium and the world that feeds into it.

Mark Joyce's seven paintings engage with light and its symptom - colour, with a repetitive composition of painted lines diverging from a single point. Their iteration, content and titling inescapably reminiscent of the experimental paradigm. Though streams of colour part company in the seven paintings they do it with neither the abandon of thick saccharine candy cane saturation, nor with the contemplative, smoky, watercolour haze of rainbows in Gharraie's work. Instead, Joyce's paintings sit implacably in a row on a separate white wall, with one oddball second from the right whose inverted composition forms an Atari logo. Despite repetitively happy compositions, bright colours on white ground and sci-fi sequel titles like *Bending Light II*, *The Hunt for the Z Particle IV* and *Arcturus 2*; they're arranged more like irascible members of a scientific review board, sternly gazing out at prostrate neophytes seeking grants. Their iteration also gives away hints at the repetitive nature of picture making, experimenting over and again to create a one 'something' wholly good and then wring some answers from a fixed point of success. A notion of ongoing, frustrated experiment reflects on the sometimes-grumpy work of an artist, trying to wrangle with the world of phenomena with only the heavy-laden vocab of painting to hand. Not that it's an inappropriate tool, just sometimes a surly one: a disobedient homunculus in the alchemist's lab. The breakdown of Joyce's graphic marks over the unstable glue gesso priming explores the resolution of perception. Which analogues in the paintings' thought experiments to the scale at which the cracks in light, split

prismatically, might become apparent. Varying viscosities and translucencies in the overlaying marks play games with frequencies of light, linking the painting's intent to its execution in an ironically performative way.

Painting is a species of Natural Philosophy, like early science it relies on the self-learned knowledge of an individual, one painter's experience is his or her own canon. Newton's poking himself in the eye with bodkins to experiment with refraction is a cousin to the speculative prods and wipes of a painter. When trying to contemplate the ineffable, light phenomena with phenomena.

The fundamental tension of the show is crafted from the seeming polarisation of the paintings along a spectrum of weight: Joyce's minimalist investigations of light's quintessence at one end and Nicholls' grubby, more earthly, semiotic collages at the other with Gharraie's miasmatic figuration serving as intermediary. Still, splitting light into its separate wavelengths, classical allegories wreathed in luminiferous ether, and Iain Nicholls' stodgier incantations share this theme of painting as a reactive tool; investigating the world as it appears on the retina, with whatever comes to hand. A great tradition embraced by painters, theologians and scientists. There is a sense of the alchemical in the curation too, if you mixed all the paintings together and bubbled them through an alembic, amongst the resulting salts and powders, you'd probably get a Phil Allen painting out the other side.

Images courtesy of the artist and Transition Gallery