

COURTNEY J. MARTIN

Modernism's Fantasy: Zander Blom's painting till now

“Wendy, sing the kind of house you would like to have.”¹

Zander Blom tells a funny story from his childhood about how he came into his first studio. By his early teens he had begun to seriously make art, drawing, painting and constructing in a way that moved him from what all kids do for a while to what those who will become object-makers do for the rest of their lives. He needed to find a way to work somewhere all of the time. Usually there is an event, sometimes small and unnoticed by others, that announces this shift. Blom's moment arrived in the form of a trade with his sister. He bartered a pair of skates for her Wendy house [fig. 1]. If one supposes that the skates gave her freedom and speed, they also kept her occupied, distracting her from the transformation of her girlhood domicile into his fully fledged artist studio. That the Wendy house is equally connected to childhood, suburban architecture and temporary housing for the poor in South Africa in no way lessens the mystical autonomy that it provided Blom. Like *Peter Pan's* Wendy for whom a house was built around her, Blom retreated to this space to mature as an artist and expand his process.

Early, middle and late modernism are filled with examples of the artist studio as a transformative space where logic is reconceived by the order of the artist. Gustave Courbet's *The Painter's Studio (L'Atelier du peintre): A Real Allegory of a Seven Year Phase in My Artistic and Moral Life* (1855, Musée d'Orsay, Paris) depicts the studio as a world, one in which all strata of Parisian society (writers, children, mistresses and pets alike) enter to be stripped of their external standing and remade. In Courbet's hand they stand side by side (*égalité*) on equal ground, flanking him and his painting in the centre. If Courbet's centrality idealises the operation of

the 19th-century studio, Andy Warhol's multi-purpose (screen-printing, film-making, recording studio) industrial flop-house, the Factory, also drew others into its orbit. These so-called *superstars* made the atmosphere, charging it with a collective energy that filtered out into Warhol's films, photographs, silkscreens and paintings.² Unlike these earlier examples, Blom's live/work space is a dyadic space that vacillates between chaos and tranquility. It is richly populated by his ongoing work, musical instruments, well-worn books, and para-installations of ephemera, debris and paint [fig. 2]. It is a lush and fantastic space that owes much to these earlier examples, if only because they provide an origin, a beginning in which one can see, quite literally, how the work is made, from the books used as references to painting practice, to the discarded, not-up-to-snuff canvases thrown out and stomped over in the garden, to the dirty-pretty swaths of variously hued paint on every available surface, the residue of Blom cleaning his palette knife.

Perhaps the most striking feature of Blom's studio, and the one that justifies tying it to his paintings, is the floor, or more accurately, the ground. The ground of each of the rooms of Blom's studio space is packed with paper, the pages of auction catalogues regularly sent to him by his gallery. The catalogue pages serve a practical purpose. As the paint drops from knife or brush, or falls loosely from a densely painted linen surface, it lands on the paper, which absorbs it and reduces its spread from the demarcated zone of working and living. As one trounces through the connected spaces, the paper mashes and crumples beneath your feet. It softens your movements into a kind of padding of collectivity, as if by moving around you were helping the process, keeping the wet paint in its place and adding to the accretion of painted dabbed material that seems to be growing up from the floor to reach the canvases on the walls. Like Wendy's special place ("*Let us build a little house round her*"), Blom's studio conjures a fantastic world, one that resonates strongly with the studio of the late Francis Bacon, where the accretions of matter (paint, brushes, cans, paper, canvas and more) mingle in an indistinguishable heap of mass and colour [fig. 3]. There is no ground in the Bacon studio and somehow that lack is replenished by the sheer abundance of everything else that is there ... the matter, the stuff, the colour.

Bacon is an important reference for Blom, perhaps the figure that most informs his approach to the canvas. If his studio treads on that all-troubling



fig. 1 Blom's Wendy house in the backyard of his family home in Pretoria, 2007

confluence of influence (Baxandall front and centre here) *and* emulation, that may be the point. It is a fully self-aware gesture, part homage, satire and play to a not-too-distant moment when painting hosted an internal *paragone* between abstraction and figuration.³ Bacon sat squarely in the middle of that *frisson*, vocalising figuration while painting images that bore little resemblance to hard representation. His figures (garish, grotesque caricatures) were often confined within squared spaces of compositional no-man's land, unmoored by either foreground or background. Blom's hagiographic riff on Bacon's studio plays out this fantasy of a fantasy, useful for the delivery of very real abstract paintings, like *Untitled*, 2011 [I.57, p211], that Blom (figure) pushes out of his studio (ground). In this painting, quick brushstrokes of white, green and red pool in the middle of the black under-painted canvas, the combination of colours suggestive of a smear onto a clean cloth or the signature Baconian distortion.

Similarly, *Untitled*, 2010 [I.7, PLATE 1], crackles with a mess of paint in its centre, a yellow pattern breaking free of a black and white fractal, smudged throughout, the energy moving up and into the foreground an illegible blur reminiscent of the Bacon palette and the structure that locks the chaos into a single space. Think of *Study after Velázquez's Portrait of*



fig. 2 Blom's studio in Brixton, Johannesburg, 2011

Pope Innocent X, 1953, where Innocent X is trapped in hell, clinging to his throne, mutely screaming into the black void beyond the framing device. But Blom removes the figure. This is abstraction, real abstraction. The dirty messy kind that shapes itself into an unexplainable planar logic as your eye moves faster than your body ever could up, down and around the canvas. Blom locks his viewers into what Lawrence Alloway once proposed as abstraction's "drama of creativity".⁴

"I cannot report what is going on in it, or narrate it or depict it, or pronounce it or mimic it, or offer it up to be read or formalised without remainder."⁵

It is funny to bring up modernism in relation to a contemporary artist. Funny like predictable, the kind of thing that makes an equal amount of sense and non-sense in any given context. But Blom is interested in the history of modernism. He is an acute study of its various moves and manoeuvres over time. Whole series of paintings seem to be tests of the modern. A recent group of small-scale black and white paintings, lined in graphite [I.175, PLATE 33; I.171, PLATE 34], surges with multiple modernities – Kazimir Malevich's reduction to white and black, Piet



fig. 3 Francis Bacon's Reece Mews studio, photographed by Perry Ogden
© The Estate of Francis Bacon. All rights reserved. DALRO 2013

Mondrian's grids and Ellsworth Kelly's monochromatic quasi-geometry. Unstretched, their size and the presence of the drawn lines make them seem like studies for larger works, but they are complete and perfect in a manner that also feels resolute – a complete assignment.

Yet, the restraint of the central, irregular black shapes, flanked by angular white shapes, in these paintings contrasts starkly to the materiality of his other paintings. Dense, heavily applied paint and oil seepage have emerged as Blom's Derridean idiom, acts so pure that they only make compositional sense in his process. The two form a binary, one (the oil in the paint) dependent on the other (heavily applied oil paint). And, even more so, contingent upon the unprepared, raw linen canvas that provides its own hue as it takes in colour, weight and oil in equal measure. The colour range is limited to black, white, red, yellow, blue and green, all on top of the linen's husky, earthy grey-scale. But really, the colour is incidental – a fact proven by a number of his canvases that he prepared with primary and secondary colours. It is the collateral effect *and* affect of the dual forms of piled paint masses and the spread shadow created by the oil. The idiomatic formal structure is hard to describe, hard to define. Why use unprepared canvas? Why pile paint so high that it barely clings to the raw linen? Why

encourage the oil to separate from the paint and seep into the canvas? Why? Why? Why? Why not? The confounding difficulty of Blom's process is totally resolved on sight: it is easy to see. It makes complex visual sense, a sort of painting street smarts.

Take, for example, *Untitled*, 2012 [1.230, PLATE 50]. It is a small, squared essay on a quartet of rounded shapes that are not quite spheres, not exactly swipes, just dense deposits of paint. The four are arranged in a simple pattern, black and white stacked over black and black, or put another way, three-quarters black and a quarter white, or the staccato black, white, black, black. Though small, each of these forms has a sculptural quality, one that Alex Potts has described as “non-imagistic”, shapes whose physical presence *appears* to be as important as their form or their image.⁶ This is, of course, an allusion; a way of occupying space in totality, like a small loud man in an otherwise big room. He always wins.

In this case, the four are top and bottom heavy – front-loaded and back-ended. Using a palette knife instead of a brush, Blom must often wait for long periods of time for the thick paint to dry. There is a muscular physicality on the canvas – smooth, packed on and tight, the linen forming a third term tint to the monochromatic blacks and the single white shape. Each one looks as if it might fall through or topple off the canvas, which stands little chance of holding them up, on or in. If these shape-objects occupy definable space bereft of representational context, it is because it would be too easy to read race, music or design into them. They are a gesture, not a regurgitation of Blom's biography: the ratio of whites to blacks in Johannesburg, his home city; his other pursuit; or his training, respectively. There has to be (*should be, must be, will be*) a space among Greenbergian formalism, Kubler's contextualisation or Alloway's insistence on an outer space “beyond the purely visual configuration”, where these shapes are formed.⁷ In other paintings, they are reliefs that conjure up other three-dimensional entities, such as the harmony of Ofilian faecal-like deposits merrily colliding in *Untitled*, 2012 [1.100, PLATE 25], or the biomorphic, vaguely avian central shape in *Untitled*, 2012 [1.109, PLATE 30], that looks to be taking off toward an unseen spot outside the picture plane. Similar organic forms appear in *Untitled*, 2010 [1.29, PLATE 11]. In either case – excrement or animal – Blom's sculptural density leads us toward a figuration that his flat rendering mightily resists.

Like the thickly applied paint, the oil seepage is an over-gesture. A move too far. It is so far on the continuum of painterly certainty that it works. In several of his compositions, Blom applies unagitated oil paint directly onto raw canvas. Were the paint well-mixed and the canvas primed, the oil would stabilise with the pigment, or blend into the painted surface. It would be there but not there, in a manner of speaking. In his process the oil spreads out, creating a shadow of the pigmented mass from which it emerged. It is precisely flat in comparison to the depth of the paint. As it dries, an uncertain duration now exaggerated by this process, the oil shape shifts, shadowing, mimicking and often making forms of its own. For example, in *Untitled*, 2012 [1.109, PLATE 30], that form halos the abstracted figure made by the paint. Whereas areas of oil in *Untitled*, 2010 [1.19, PLATE 9], have sufficiently separated to warrant their own formal analysis distinct from the applied paint.

The oil is literal. It is there on the canvas as an unrepentant trace of the material composition of paint. The oil is in two distinct indexical relationships with the paint that records how it gets to the canvas, and with the linen which shows what it does once it is there. It is a demonstration of what paint can do, how it comes into being and meaning. Blom's use of oil paint is also faintly nostalgic, the painted equivalent of a sepia tint on digital photography. His process reminds us that here, at the dark edge of the digital age, painterly, expressionist abstraction can be experimental, refreshing, weird even. I am struck by the oddness of this gesture that in allowing the oil its own, formal space, he creates a three-tiered material register of depth, paint on top, linen on the bottom, sandwiching the oil in the middle. All are visible on their own terms in a kind of triple partition.

This is all the more remarkable given Blom's engagement with photographic reproductions of art work (Bacon, Bomberg, Koons and Picasso, among others). He is an avid connoisseur of the reproduced image, actively looking at different reproductions of the same object or the same place taken by different photographers at different times. This is an important concept, not as a point of reprimand, but rather of circulation and reproducibility. How things get where and what they look like when they arrive is an expansive concern. In nearly all of the reproductions of his own work, if (*and that is a big if*) the oil is visible, it does not necessarily read as oil. It could be underpainting or shading or, even more impractically, poor digital

quality. In all cases, the oil form resists full legibility when photographed. Is this one of Blom's farces, like the Baconesque studio, to refine a process and craft an object to do away with one of his own vices; to deny reproductive knowledge to his viewers? For an answer, I come up empty; instead I offer T. J. Clark's timeless observations about the nature of all avant-gardes:

... artists can be scientists, and new descriptions of the world be forged under laboratory conditions, putting aside the question of wider intelligibility for the time being.⁸

Put another way, he's playing with the oil and we need to watch and wait for it.

“A work of art transmits a kind of behaviour by the artist, and it also serves, like a relay, as the point of departure for impulses that often attain extraordinary magnitudes in later transmission.”⁹

Blom thinks about how his idiom transmits. There is, for example, an emerging lexicon, a few key words indicative of action, process, material and visibility. The most refined is *pull*. Pulls are the variously sized, stretched dots of paint that appear in a number of paintings. They look and sound like (*pull*) what they are, a single, steady sweep of the palette knife over a dot of paint. The *behaviour*, as Kubler would have it. In *Untitled*, 2011 [1.78, PLATE 28], the pulls are grouped toward the bottom of the canvas, arranged on top of each other and side-by-side in choreographed order. Their indexical oil trace rests above the group, as if the pulls were physically pulled down the canvas. Or, as if the action of pulling caused a vertical group slide of single pulls that then pushed them close to and on top of each other. Compared to the singular pulsating black and white dots of *Untitled*, 2012 [1.243, PLATE 52], the pulls reference the grid not as separation, but as connective unity.

Nowhere is this connectivity more obvious than in *Untitled*, 2012 [1.310, PLATE 56], an image composed of two nearly parallel spaces. On the left, a vertical group of red, yellow, blue and white pulls lowers itself from the top of the canvas to the bottom, encircled by an oil shadow that nearly doubles its size. Opposite to it are a hive of short, straight graphite lines. There is

a loose border between the painted pulls and the linear strokes, the latter disturbing the former in the area of the spread-out oil. The relationship between the two areas is punning: the colours of a Mondrian lifted off the armature grid. If the gridded dots of other paintings read like small pulses vibrating from the canvas, the pulls here elongate and sustain that gesture, turning pulse into impulse. Left exposed, the grid is bare, faint and exposed, while the colours are emotive, pulled toward a formlessness that, if allowed to progress, will render their former high-modernist rigidity unrecognisable. The frame of the canvas hints at this possibility and we are left to wonder what will happen next. The pulls *are* potential.

It is provisional to find closure here. Blom is too young, painting is too old, and to conjecture any sort of finality would be an act filled with trite falsehoods, a confidence man down to his last scam ... *but there is always one more mark to be pulled in.* The pulls are longevity visualised. They extend the mark, the gesture, the fling, the dot of paint past its initial transport as medium onto the canvas. They look and feel like what they will ultimately do, that is, reach beyond the compositional frame out to a future of painterly promise.

- 1 Peter Pan's instruction to the sleeping, wounded Wendy. J. M. Barrie, *Peter Pan* [electronic resource] (Salt Lake City: Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, 2008).
- 2 The revolving denizens of Warhol's Factory/studio have been dubbed Warhol stars or *superstars*, largely for their antics inside and outside of the Factory as well as their appearances in Warhol's films and photographs.
- 3 For the ubiquity of and problem with assuming influence over similarity, see Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).
- 4 Lawrence Alloway, *Systemic Painting* (New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1966): 11.
- 5 Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, translated by Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987): 2.
- 6 Alex Potts, *The Sculptural Imagination: Figurative, Modernist, Minimalist* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001): 178.
- 7 Alloway, *Systemic Painting*: 16.
- 8 T. J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999): 10.
- 9 George Kubler, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1962): 20.