

Mayfair Art Weekend

Interview: Robert Holyhead: Finding Space

January 2020

## ROBERT HOLYHEAD: FINDING SPACE



Installation view, Robert Holyhead, No movement, no colour, 2019 at Galerie Max Hetzler, London.  
Photo: Andrew Smart, AC Cooper Ltd. © Robert Holyhead. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Max Hetzler, Berlin  
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**Mayfair Art Weekend is delighted to present an interview with Robert Holyhead on the occasion of his solo exhibition, *No movement, no colour*, at Galerie Max Hetzler.**

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*For someone who is seeing your work for the first time at Galerie Max Hetzler, could you introduce your background in art and the way in which your work has developed to reach this point.*

I grew up in the suburbs of Birmingham, which was a cultural desert at the time and I felt a huge amount of dissatisfaction living in a very small town, with nothing going on. As a child I was never taken to museums, I wasn't reading about art then, I would just draw and paint. Art as a more serious endeavour started when I was 16 or 17. It was an activity that held a certain type of seriousness for me, yet I didn't know what that seriousness signified.

I started working at A-level and Foundation as a potter and the sensibilities of ceramics took me not toward sculpture but to the surface, to the glazing and from there to painting. For my Fine Art degree at Manchester School of Art (MMU), I had to choose between the conventional options of painting, sculpture and printmaking, and engaged with painting from the beginning. In 1996 I moved to London to study an MA in Painting at Chelsea College of Art and Design [now Chelsea College of Arts]. Then, for about five years, I worked in the studio without exhibiting or studio visits. I felt the need to figure things out until my work was ready to actively contribute to current debates

surrounding painting at that time and to understand the context for their reception outside the studio.

In 2005 I was awarded a five-year ACME Fire Station live/work residency and during that time, I met and started working with Karsten Schubert and presented three solo exhibitions at his Golden Square space in 2009, 2010 and 2012. Significant group shows over those years at the Whitechapel Gallery in 2009 and at Tate Britain in 2012 gave the work further context. The major benefit of working with Karsten Schubert was that I valued his counsel and guidance. His ongoing work as a scholar, writer and curator allowed my work to follow its own path. He encouraged you to take risks in the studio – the same is true of Max Hetzler. The gallery's openness to showing the new large-scale works at their Dover Street space follows the same spirit of engagement, an ongoing investigation for the artist.



Installation view *Robert Holyhead, No movement, no colour*, 2019.

*How important is your working environment?*

How the studio is organised, and what is present there says as much about how the work is generated as the work itself. The studio has been described as 'forensic' in its organisation, which is close to my own

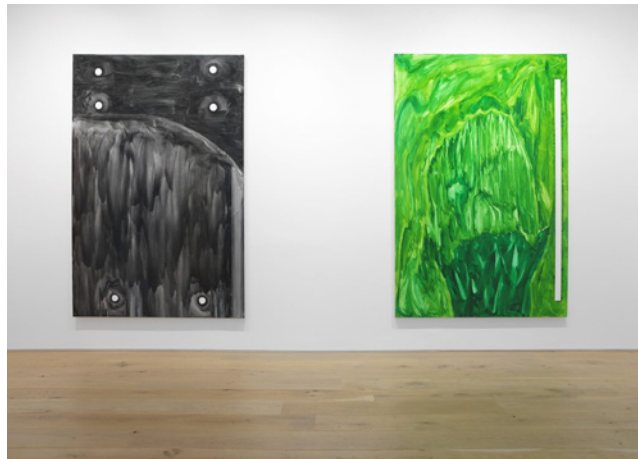
perception as the studio being a carefully oiled 'machine' for production. The studio is set-up to enable the work; I pay particular attention to the situation of making and see it as crucial not just to the identity of the process but also the resultant object. The space of the studio must relate to light and clarity found in the work. On a very practical level I want to create easy accessibility to a particular brush or medium to allow for an unbroken fluidity during the painting process – having things in the right place is central to this.

*What is the average day like for Robert Holyhead the artist.*

The use of the studio is divided throughout the year, the space functions as a drawing studio and a painting studio at different times and each activity is apportioned specific blocks of time. After I have spent a couple of months preparing canvases and the oil ground surfaces have fully dried and cured, I usually spend 4–6 months solely concentrating on the watercolour drawings, making between four to six each day. After this period, I'll have identified a specific set of ideas in relation to what has interested me in the drawings and this triggers the switch from a drawing studio to a painting studio. I then work solely on the oil paintings at a rate of one per week including pre-painting preparation, making the painting and clean up with a day or so of rest in between.

I execute the paintings within a small timeframe, usually just a single day. This set-up is related to the watercolours and wanting to keep a lightness and fluidity to the work. But it's also pragmatic, because you can only work the paint for so long before it dries. I want to experience the start, the middle and the end all in one single painting session. Typically, I will paint from 10am up to about 2am. It gets pretty tiring but I want to walk away from the painting knowing that it has reached the limit of its possibility, and I've reached the limit of my time with it. It's a reaction against paintings

I've made in the past that were over-laboured, which is something I really want to avoid. It's about keeping the painting fresh and alive and not going back and tinkering with it. The doubts should be a part of the day, not the next day.



Installation view *Robert Holyhead, No movement, no colour*, 2019.

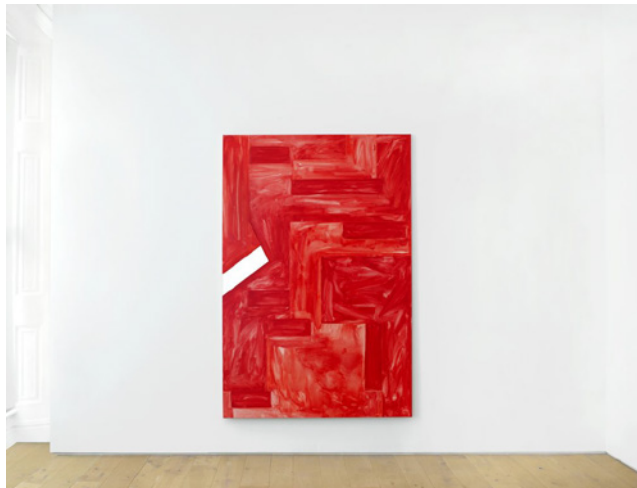
*You evade the categorisation of “abstract” and have described that you are “trying to make a painting... not trying to arrive at a conclusion”. What emotional response do the works trigger for you as you go through this exhibition at Galerie Max Hetzler?*

The paintings are made quickly, which enables, ‘an equalling out of forms’ where contrasting elements within the individual paintings are held in equilibrium and sustain each other. This way of working creates a fragile balance and continuity between each element, between geometric form and painterly gesture, and between colour and white ground. The white forms can be read simultaneously as solid white ground and as light, weightless forms within the translucent field – there is an active geometry found within the individual paintings and this can be observed in the group on show at 41 Dover Street.

The paintings grapple with how to actively paint in the present moment rather than

making pre-conceived 'descriptions' or 'critiques' of abstract paintings. Even though they are planned and precise, the necessity to execute the works quickly while the oil paint is still fluid is a way of trying to open up a space and time where decisions must be resolved in the moment and the process of painting.

The paintings speak of spaces in collapse, thinned washes of colour and blocked areas, both speak of a kind of muting or covering which when presented together bring about a remarkable tension, which opens up space. The colours and forms act as a vehicle to find a space for oneself. The intention is for the works to exert themselves upon the space beyond them – to connect to the external world rather than circulate in their own internal workings.



Installation view *Robert Holyhead, No movement, no colour*, 2019.

*You work with both watercolour and oil paints. Could you describe how your technical process differs working with one medium to another.*

Over the last ten years, I have been consistently developing and refining two basic processes: groups of watercolour drawings on heavy 425gsm paper and paintings in oil on canvas.

The watercolour drawings are not preliminary

sketches for the paintings – there is no direct correlation between one drawing and one painting. Instead, the watercolours act more as test sites or rehearsals, where the medium enables a multiplicity of ideas to be enacted. The drawings are constructive and additive; marks are made by brushing watercolour onto paper which resists re-editing. The drawings also occupy a broader terrain than the paintings, circling around them, influencing or directing them, but from afar so to speak.

In contrast, the paintings are specifically contained in groups or sets, and unlike the implied 'infinite' production of form in the works on paper, in the oil paintings the limits of a group – their form, scale, and colour – are staked out as they progress, but consciously regulated, as in the seven paintings currently on view at Galerie Max Hetzler.

*This is your first exhibition with Galerie Max Hetzler in London. How does showing your work in Mayfair compare to other locations around the world?*

The opportunity to present new work in London after exhibiting in Berlin (2014) and Paris (2016) was really important in terms of my professional and personal relationship to the city – the place I live and work. The show *No movement, no colour* also marks the first anniversary of the opening of Galerie Max Hetzler in London in November 2018 and is their first primary work presentation of their London based artists and for me it has given the work a platform to reconnect to an existing audience who know my roots or earlier work, and to generate visibility of the work for a new audience – the objective is to build new relationships that will lead to future projects – Mayfair is a fantastic location for footfall – the high level of shows in that area attracts both local and international eyes for the work.

*Who or what influences your work?*

I prefer to concentrate on the how individual artworks relate to my own goals in the studio and the function of the work beyond – particular ideas, artworks or texts resonate at particular moments and this is in constant flux. The role other artworks play in my own development is specific – the artists I was curious about as student in the 1990s like Jonathan Lasker, Ross Bleckner, Robert Ryman, Bernard Frize, Gary Stephan positioned painting relevant for that stage of my work. There are of course artists that hold my attention each and every time I see them, Palermo, Imi Knoebel, Prunella Clough and others that I find are now starting to connect like Jutta Koether. Historical works have a place – when I am in Berlin I always make time to visit the Gemäldegalerie for artists such as Lucas Cranach the Elder. Though I engage outside of painting more so these days with artists such as Hans Josephsohn and Andrew Lord, and currently I am looking again at Lee Ufan and exploring his philosophical writings.



Robert Holyhead (2019)

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*Robert Holyhead: No movement, no colour* is at Galerie Max Hetzler, London from 21 November 2019 – 11 January 2020.

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