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John Carter: A Higher Form of Play

For the phenomenon of music is nothing other than a phenomenon of speculation. There is nothing in this expression that should frighten you. It simply presupposes that the basis of musical creation is a preliminary feeling out, a will moving first in an abstract realm with the object of giving shape to something concrete.

Stravinsky

In an earlier essay on John Carter I drew a distinction between the *object* and the *image* in his work: 'what is actually seen ... (an image exactly conterminous with the object that carries it) ... is what disconcerts; the *object* we know to be regular, determined by rule, obedient to the rules of symmetry and interval: the contradiction between what is seen by the eye and that which is known by the mind provides the dynamic of the encounter.' The recent work prompts me to explore the implications of this distinction further, for Carter is consistently resourceful and inventive, and each successive phase of his patient and persistent research reflects the creative play of a restless mind over fundamental problems of perception and cognition.

This is in no way to suggest that the impulse behind his endeavour is purely epistemological, or even primarily that: Carter is of course an imaginative artist, a maker of objects that provoke thought by first engaging our senses, inducing us to speculation through visual pleasure and surprise. That process of speculation may lead in many directions, and end in reverie, for Carter's work, though never referential, is always subtly evocative. But we must begin with the object itself, whose three-dimensional sculpturality brings it into actual space, asserting itself and occupying our immediate perceptual world as a *thing*, at once beautiful and strange.

These objects conform always to a systematic ordering of theoretic relations, the mathematical or geometrical givens that have generated them in the first place. (In Carter's case, these are invariably simple, albeit ingenious.) Colour on the surface of the objects either pieces out in two dimensions the sectioned segments of the same geometric ordering from which the shapes of the objects themselves have been derived, or serves to emphasise the systematic disposition of the volumes. If their beauty is partly of the kind that derives from balance and proportion, their strangeness to the eye has precisely to do with their character as fragments of an implied whole, abstractions from an order that we cannot see but in the mind's eye. Every line and edge in these pieces implies its own extension to a formal completion of relations beyond the work itself, as in music a single chord may imply the total harmony of which it is a component.

Carter's abstraction is of the most purely objective kind: each new body of work begins with a simple idea, of a regular and ordered set of relations between lines and volumes, whose variations and truncations may generate an inflnite series of object-images that instantiate and give body to the idea. To put it more simply: Carter's marvellous structures arrive in the world as the concrete realisations of the artist's adventurous and ingenious speculations. They do not begin with things seen but with things thought. Consider what happens, for example, if a parallelogram is rotated upon its centre, and being brought to rest after a turn of so many degrees, that section which remains within the bounds of the original flgure is re-drawn. Imagine also the invisible circle described by its corners, and the square that would exactly contain it, touching it at four points.

Carter's constructions evolve out of such speculative gambits, inviting the spectator in turn to engage in what is in essence a higher form of play, with deep connections back to the aesthetics of harmony and proportion. My example above cannot but remind us of the Vitruvian pentagonal man, inscribed within the squared circle, his proportions commensurate with ideal geometric figures. And behind that image (most famous in Leonardo's version) lies the complex and rich traditions of aesthetic thought that derive form Plato's *Timaeus* ('And it was then that all these kind of things thus established received their shapes from the Ordering One, through the actions of ideas and numbers'), and from neo-Platonic conceptions of the plastic arts as reflecting dynamic *natural* symmetries that correspond in space to the intervals and rhythms in musical time. Indeed, as Umberto Eco has pointed out, the development of an aesthetics of proportion was intimately related to the musical theories of late antiquity and the early Middle Ages, the very period, that is to say, of the invention of *harmony* as 'the clothing of melody'. *Ouattrocento* mathematical perspective and Piero's resonant geometries

constitute one grand historical climax to these traditions which so profoundly connect the objective properties of the perceived world to the invisible mysteries of the spiritual domain.

That crucial elements of the thinking behind certain of the great projects of modernist abstraction, especially in its constructivist and idealist modes, can be seen figured in the beautiful analogies of classical, medieval and Renaissance aesthetics as well as paralleling (and sometimes anticipating) the thrilling theoretics of modern mathematics, physics and biology is an exciting fact. Carter's work can be seen within that great ambit, though the artist disclaims the theoretical programmes and metaphysical ambitions that have often accompanied constructivist abstraction. He proceeds more by way of intuition and primitive experiment than by the effort at grand exemplification; he starts from the sort of curiosity best expressed in the question: 'what would happen if ... ?' But the enquiry begins with a set of known relations and he never cheats on the basic mathematical premise that underlies each investigation. And what happens, so to speak, or *materialises*, to be precise, is an unpremeditated invention, wonderfully different from anything we have encountered before.

Carter has been remarkably faithful to these informing principles since clarifying his approach to the construction of his work in the early 1970s, when, in his own words, his 'interest shifted away from complicated or even romantic constructions, which demanded equally complex or at least multifarious working methods, to more logical and autonomous ways of working ... I began to avoid arbitrariness.' The extraordinary variety of his work since that time, created by procedures that are intellectually rigorous and logically consistent, demonstrates a great and general truth: that the forms and topologies generated by variations of the simplest and purest geometric principles are potentially infinite in their variety, and in their multifariousness and unpredictability they disguise the dynamic orderings that lie behind them, and present us with images that continually surprise.

Notes

Stravinsky's dictum will be found in his Poetics of Music (Harvard 1942 pb 1970), Lesson 2 'The Phenomenon of Music'. The quotation from !lie Timaeus is used as the epigraph to Matila Ghyka's The Geometry of Art and Life (New York 1946), which with Kepes' Language of Vision (Chicago 1944), is one of the classic modern expositions of the relations between the quantities of mathematics and science and the qualdaUve subjectivities of aesthetic experience. Umberto Eco's brilliantly illuminating explorations of medieval aesthetics are now available in English, in Arl and Beauly in /he Middle Ages (Yale 1986) and The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas (Harvard 1988).

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