

Ray Malone – Paintings

An essay on the Dimensional Paintings

Michael Whetman

Ray Malone

We could start by imagining ourselves being on one of those peninsulas which jut out into the ocean and are named Finisterra or Finistere—the land's end—the end of the earth, the edge, the rim.

Standing on the edge we are presented with that most familiar of phenomena—the horizon. The horizon is created where there is an apparent meeting place between the sea and the sky.

Strangely enough the horizon is often perceived and depicted as a line, strange because of course there is no line there, it is an edge. An apparent edge between the surface of the sea and the sky, the sky which appears to have mass as it tends to opaque-ness as it recedes. An edge at the limit of our vision. We assume now, as we know that the world is a sphere, that the horizon at sea is not the edge, although there may have been a time when this was not the case, and there was a very real fear of dropping off into oblivion. Perhaps it is this knowing that it is not a literal edge that makes it difficult to perceive it as any other kind of edge. We run out of appropriate terms, and so return to 'horizon'.

The word horizon is describing an ambiguous area which is neither one nor the other; for this not-line, not-edge we have no other term. An apparent meeting place at the limit of our vision.

In a painting a line through the middle of a rectangular plane is often perceived as representing a horizon, dividing the surface into foreground and background, earth and sky.

To prevent the viewer's eye from slipping over the edge into oblivion and chaos traditional paintings used the framing device to create a window. The edge was a problem to be overcome by various devices, the corners being even more problematic.

Large 'field' paintings overcome the awkwardness of the edge by sheer scale: the edges tend to be at the periphery of or vision, the surface is so dominating that the edge is relegated to secondary importance. The surface becomes a strong figure against

the ground of the wall.

With a painting on a smaller scale such as Malone makes, we cannot but deal with the edges; the painting is small enough to be seen as an object as well as a surface. We have the edge of the support and the edge of the painting.

Are these the same? Does the painting continue around the edge, are we to imagine that it is but part of a much larger continuing surface? Or is the edge the absolute limit? Does working right at the edge emphasise the edge to the detriment of the centre? Can the edge be the figure of a figure/ground relationship?

If it is, then does the centre not become a void, by definition of being the ground? We tend to ignore the paradox of the line and the edge in our daily routines; a painting can isolate and re-present this in such a way that we have to, or at least are invited to, deal with the problem.

It is this ambiguity which is disruptive in these paintings: not necessarily the ambiguity of figure/ground, but that of edge/line, surface/void.

In a Malone painting, an edge, creating a figure/ground hierarchy, can become a thin line, a line which is perceived as being above the surface—or is it? If the line is a bit wider (a width perceived only in the context of the particular painting) then it begins to conform to the rules of figure/ground relationships, and by its colour and tone may be subsumed into the ground or float out as a figure.

As there is no frame, and the support is so thin, the contrast with the wall has an overwhelming effect on how we perceive the painted surface. On a large-scale painting the wall is subservient—preferably it has a neutral effect.

We are vertical creatures, and use the horizon (line) to negotiate our world. In our Western culture we also read from left to right, we scan horizontally. We try to make sense of these paintings in these two habitual ways, scanning and taking note of the horizon. In the process of looking at these paintings, we encounter a vocabulary of irregularities, ambiguities and questions. What

was clearly perceived as a line becomes an edge, and likewise an edge becomes a line. What may have been perceived as a horizon is now perceived as being the definite edge of an area of colour.

In the 'wall paintings' the contrast with the white wall itself prevents, or forbids, the eye from wandering away, slipping over the rim, as it were. The active colour in these paintings is right at the edge—almost, but not quite. The centre sometimes perceived as a passive 'void', its colour defined by the edge-work, the active elements are peripheral, so that our eyes are drawn to the edge, but do not flip over the rim: our gaze is contained by the void, drawn into the void, centred, so the paintings remain stable.

Other works contain areas of instability where our reading of the surface is ruptured, or punctuated, by planes and lines which appear to change their identity as they are extended over the surface or meet the edge. These points in the paintings can be considered as junctions, where sudden, abrupt changes of meaning take place.

The horizons of these paintings are at the four points of the compass. We need to scan them vertically and horizontally. They are disorienting.

Is this a way of mapping the world? Malone's projection?

These paintings challenge our assumptions. They are quietly disruptive. In a way they only clarify the world we see—or don't see, for lack of looking. The ill-behaviour of these paintings reflects the hidden relationships of a so-called familiar world. They are curious objects, taken out of the visual clutter of so much stuff around us, attached to the wall, and then, these apparently so-civil surfaces invite us to take a chance and allow our distracted eyes to wonder at what is always in view, but rarely seen.