

THE HOW OF PAINTING

Chris Yetton 2005

In June and December 1962 Ian Stephenson made some prophetic works which had the character of scientific experiments. He called them Small Spray Studies. They are in sets. Each set of studies has a key sheet. The key sheet for 16.6.62 (see page 16) has six images made by the spraying technique in the top half, and a typed key in the lower half, detailing the procedure for making the images. The typed key is in two sections. On the right is the information that the spraying was done on this page from a height of 4cms and that there was an equal amount of each of the three colours. Each colour was sprayed thirty three and a third times (making one hundred sprays in all), each brushload (a toothbrush) was filled and saturated once before the thirty three and a third sprays, no compensation was made for later sprays obliterating earlier ones. There is a long list of the initials of the colours – yellow, red, blue – giving the order of the brushloads of colours for all six images. Below this is the information that all the sprays were made from a fixed position above the centre of the target, each brushload for a constant

time, producing wet-into-wet marks from a fixed height of 4cm in a fixed direction, vertically down to the left and that he used a fixed technique – the toothbrush was manipulated with the thumb of his right hand, each image resulted from one hundred sprays and there were six images made from the different colour permutations. These permutations are listed in the left hand side of the typed key. The numbers below the initials of the colours give the order of the colours for that image. The numbers above the initials give the order for the six images as a whole. These indicate that brushloads of yellow were sprayed first on 1; then on 2; then red was sprayed on 3; then 4; and then as the second colour on 1 and so on.

The written part of the key is like the method of a scientific experiment. There are then six more pages with each image done from double the height – 8cm – but everything else left the same. These show the effect of height on the size of the dots and spread of the images. The images produced are cloud-like with a solid centre in which the third colour predominates. The second and first colours are seen more as a halo around the centre. The enamel paint tends to craze rather than mix when wet colour falls on wet colour. This results in some optical

mixing of colour. A sense of the void increases away from the centre.

The choice of a toothbrush to spray from was an interesting solution to the practical problem of how to make a spray of paint that was not mechanical.

But it clearly also appealed to Ian's dry Northumbrian sense of humour. I imagine he enjoyed writing 'constant technique – right hand thumb manipulation', relishing the absurdity of it while being serious about the result.

In December 1962 he made some more Small Spray Studies (see page 16). He worked with four colours but introduced a new element. At the centre of the target were two cut-out paper squares. At the bottom of the typed key was a new instruction – 'changing orientation, simultaneous rotation of two squares'. After each colour was sprayed on, the left hand square was rotated 90° anti clockwise, while the right hand square was rotated 90° clockwise. This means that there is less overlap in the colours than in the June studies. The image is more colourful but it is also much more mysterious. It seems impossible for the colours to have arrived where they are. In particular, the colour inside each edge of each square does not correspond to the colour outside that edge. The colour is bright and delicate, the image floats in a mysterious and volatile way. The edges of the squares create an experience of

line and plane, but the rectangular plane formed by the two squares does not appear flat – it dissolves into volume and space. There is colour, space, composition, fullness, emptiness, dynamism, paradox and mystery – all resulting from a clear, impersonal scientific method. It must have been a moment of great revelation when he made them. Stephenson had a long-standing love of science—collecting ‘Science News’, a 1950s paperback series that cumulatively formed an overview of contemporary scientific thought. He read ‘Scientific American’ in the 1960s and referred to science as the source for new images and the defining quality of the contemporary world in ‘Cubism and After’, the 1962 BBC film of him at work. The great scientific topics of the 1950s and 60s were atomic physics and astrophysics. “Science has given us so many images, from outer space to the microscopic view”, said Stephenson in the 1962 film. The atomism that triumphed in modern science and that fascinated Ian Stephenson has a long history and a well developed poetics. The idea that the world was made up of whirling atoms moving at random in space was first developed in Ionian Greece between the seventh and fifth centuries BC. Ian made a number of works on paper at different times with a reference to Ionia in the titles as a celebration of that beginning –

Ionic Study, (1963) two sets of Ionic Variations, (1970-71) and again Ionic Variations, (1976). The Ionians Democritus and Leucippus in the fifth-century BC had proposed that the whole world and everything in it was composed of atoms moving at random in a void. This, combined with Heraclitus' view, some fifty years earlier, that everything was in flux and that the world was never the same from one moment to the next, made an extraordinarily beautiful image of the world. This imagery was given a magnificent expression by the Roman poet Lucretius about 60BC in his 'De Rerum Natura' (On the Nature of Things). Lucretius had wonderful images, using the visible world to give an idea of the invisible atomic world. He described little motes of dust swirling in a shaft of sunlight in a dark room and miniscule shells, all similar but each different, that waves gently cast up on the imbibing sand. He even describes the operation of the mind as being formed by exceptionally minute and mobile atoms and comments that nothing in the universe moves more swiftly than thought. (Ilan once said, "I think a more natural way with paint is to allow one's opinion to fluctuate all the time like the alternating currents in the brain."). Ovid's 'Metamorphoses', another encyclopaedic

poem, written fifty years after 'De Rerum Natura', also describes the world in flux; a girl can change into a tree, Narcissus into a flower, Actaeon into a stag.

In the seventeenth-century atomism returns to scientific thought and begins its irresistible rise to pre-eminence. In that century there is also the most wonderful

expression of the flux of the atomic view. An extraordinary writer, Cyrano de Bergerac, one of the fathers of science fiction, writes in 'Journey to the Moon'

(1666), "You marvel that this matter, shuffled pell-mell, at the whim of chance could have made a man... But you must realise that a hundred million times

this matter on the way to human shape, has been stopped to form now a stone, now land, now coral, now a flower, now a comet."

Pure science as opposed to science fiction has an even greater awe and majesty. At

exactly the same time as Cyrano De Bergerac was writing 'Journey

to the Moon', Boyle (in 1662) showed that for any given amount of any gas the volume and pressure are inversely proportional. So if the volume is reduced

to a half, the pressure is doubled. Boyle's Law is a thought of tremendous power and beauty bringing together all the different

possible gases in a simple and lovely relationship. It was also the first step in a long series of thought that led to atomic

theory since the behaviour of gas molecules moving at random is necessary to explain the law further. At the beginning of the nineteenth-century the Italian chemist Avogadro also applied atomic theory to gases and proposed that equal volumes of all gases are made up of an equal number of particles (molecules). Avogadro's hypothesis was scorned for fifty years by other chemists but then another Italian chemist Stanislao Cannizzaro showed that it could be used to determine atomic weights, first of oxygen and then of hydrogen. The time taken to accept Avogadro's hypothesis shows what a radical and exciting thought it was when it was first published and the degree of equality it established in the universe is still astonishing. In 1827 the Scottish botanist Robert Brown noted that grains of pollen suspended in water jiggled erratically. This became known as Brownian Motion. In 1863 it was suggested that this was caused by a slight inequality in the numbers of water molecules striking them from different sides. It took Einstein at the beginning of the twentieth-century to make a theoretical analysis of Brownian Motion and show how one could work out the size of the water molecules from the extent of the movements. Many such linked stories can be made from the

development of atomic theory and each story has its beauty and delight. The beauty of thought is clearly a major driving force in science as it is in art, and we are most struck by those ideas that are simple as well as powerful.

Stephenson's complete immersion in atomism gave him a particular approach to theories of art. In the mid fifties he had a strong interest in Cubo-Futurism.

However his understanding of futurist theory would have been via his atomism. In April 1910, in the Technical Manifesto of Futurist Painting, Marinetti said,

"The sixteen people around you in a rolling motor bus are in turn and at the same time one, ten, four, three; they are motionless and they change places;

they come and go, bound into the street, are suddenly swallowed up by the sunshine, then come back and sit before you, like persistent symbols of Universal

Vibration... Our bodies penetrate the surface upon which we sit and the sofas penetrate our bodies." Stephenson would have

understood the first part as an expression of universal Heraclitian flux and the second part as a consequence of atomic theory whereby the molecules at the edge of solid objects

interpenetrate when the objects touch. At the molecular level there are no hard boundaries.

In 1962 the BBC made a film of Ian painting. It showed him starting a painting by laying it horizontally on the floor and flicking paint drops onto it from a long handled brush held at waist height. He said he did this to surprise himself. Sometimes he stood objects on the canvas so the falling drops stencilled their shape on it. After a short while he put the painting on an easel and continued to put on dots of paint with the paint brush or slugs of paint with a brush or palette knife. Some solid impasto shapes are painted, lines created. He covered parts of the canvas with cut-out shapes which are sometimes removed later. In the same year he made Early Diorama, two square canvases fixed together to make a rectangle. In this he used every technique currently at his disposal – including splashes, although he may have faked parts of these. In these large works painting itself is the subject, and for Ian painting is really always his subject and domain of enquiry. He was intensely interested in technique: “It is the how of painting that results in the what and why of painting.” (‘One Magazine’ No.3, 1974).

This concentration on painting itself as subject as well as object brings to the fore the essential narcissism of painting. Narcissus has long been recognised

as one of the mythical forms of the painter. In the fifteenth-century Alberti wrote in book II of 'On Painting', "The inventor of painting, according to the poets, was Narcissus, who was turned into a flower; for, as painting is the flower of all the arts, so the tale of Narcissus fits our purpose perfectly. What is painting but the act of embracing by means of art the surface of the pool?" I wish to draw attention here to the phrase 'by means of art'. Ian Stephenson lent his whole career to the exploration of the 'means of art'.

In Early Diorama(1962) towards the top of the right hand panel are printed, upside-down, the words VIA LACTEA– The Milky Way (see below). Stephenson puts in his work what he loves. The painting is the face of the beloved and of course, to return to Narcissus, it is also a self-portrait.

"To a man, a girl's visage is of course a visage of his soul", wrote a Russian poet. The Via Lactea is one of the features of the beloved for Stephenson.

Hidden in his Parachrome(1964) are the lips, breast and legs of Bridget Bardot (see page 21). These images of the loved one are so buried in the paintings that they are easily missed.

Ian explored the technique of flicking paint as the sole method for making paintings in his works on paper of the sixties. He flicked the

paint from a long fine paint brush held about 50cm above the paper, laid horizontally on a table. The Small Spray Studies had been done in enamel lacquer but some strange effects happened when wet enamel lacquer fell onto wet enamel lacquer. In all the other studies he used oil paint – preparing the paper in a rather idiosyncratic way, priming it with white polish. He returned to the Northeast in the summer of 1966 to run the foundation course in Fine Art at Newcastle University, and immediately made two very beautiful works on paper, Durham Dawn and Durham Dusk (see page 21), and later marked their importance by giving Dawn to his son Stephen and Dusk to his daughter Stella. In each he used a cut-out square of paper with a square hole in it – making a frame-like shape – and used two identical ones for each painting. With one in place, slightly high in the centre of the painting, he flicked colour on. This cut-out was then removed and the other identical cut-out substituted, but only after it had been sprayed with paint separately away from the painting. The white line at the bottom edge of the cut-out in Durham Dawn gives the clue that under the cut-out is white unpainted paper (see page 56). At first sight one's mind assumes

that the same colour spreads across the cut-out shape and onto the background, but on closer examination it is clear that it does not – at least not always.

Sometimes it does and mostly it doesn't; some paint was flicked on when it was in place and some not. The cloud-like image with its elements of precision and its paradoxes is very beautiful. In these works Stephenson has found a new beauty. But in the summer of 1967, in the quiet of the Newcastle University studios, emptied for the summer vacation, Ian applied the sharpest of Occam's razors

to the means for painting large paintings. He reduced those means to the bare minimum and pure literality. He made a set of twelve large Dioramas. They were made solely by throwing the paint upwards from brushes held just above shoulder level so that the arcs of paint drops curved away in parabolas to fall on the canvas, supported horizontally on two-by-twos on the floor. The fall of those drops of paint removed the idiosyncrasies of personality or virtuosity, the narcissistic elements of art, and channelled the diffuse power of painting so that the canvases would fill with unprecedented aesthetic energy.

It is worth considering the story of Narcissus a little more deeply in relation to this method of painting. The best version of the Narcissus

and Echo story is in Ovid's 'Metamorphoses', the great poem of flux. The story is found in Book III and a hundred or so lines before it is the story of Diana and Actaeon. Ian was very interested in Titian's late painting of the Death of Actaeon in the National Gallery, London. Titian was a painter he looked at a great deal. Ovid put stories that reflect meaning on each other close together. Actaeon and Narcissus are both hunters. Hunting is their great love. In each story both are hot and tired in the heat of midday and weary of hunting. They both, alone, find a quiet pool, surrounded by a wood, with grassy banks where no human being has ever been before. They are clearly two versions of the same figure. Narcissus finds beauty, love and obsession. He is made prisoner for life. Actaeon finds the 'Divine'. He surprises Diana, the goddess of hunting, the divine form of his greatest love, the divine form of himself, bathing. In rage at being seen naked by

PARACHROME, 1964 oil on canvas 213.36x 213.36cm. Right detail

22 a mortal and lacking her bow and arrows – she has put them aside to bathe – Diana flings some drops of water that land on Actaeon's forehead. They cause antlers immediately to sprout from his head. He stumbles away and is torn

to pieces by his own pack of hounds. Titian painted a number of late paintings about the sufferings of an artist. The Flaying of Marsyas (1575-76), shows the agony of a musician who challenged the god of music depicting how an artist feels when pushing his work to the extreme. Actaeon also stands for the artist – he is another version of Narcissus – a hunter after beauty, guided by love of the activity and torn to pieces by it. The Death of Actaeon, (1565-76) in the National Gallery shows Actaeon metamorphosing into the stag – becoming visually one with the forest and with his dogs (see below). Stephenson was very interested in the technique of this painting and its all-over qualities. I want to draw attention to Diana's gesture. She threw the drops of water at Actaeon. This action becomes one of the crucial gestures of twentieth-century art. It is inaugurated, as are so many important aspects of modern art, by Mallarmé in his last and greatest poem UN COUP DE DE'S (A Throw of the Dice) published a year before his death in 1895. The throw of the dice in this poem (which never annuls chance) is in the face of death and from the abyss of shipwreck. The idea of art being a throw, which we are now used to after Pollock and many others, has the implication that there

are desperate
circumstances behind it, and looking back at
the twentieth-century the shipwreck is all too
visible. But the 'throw' in art is to find
something new, something
that can't be found without being prepared to
hazard everything.

Ian Stephenson always insisted that he was
an English artist. "I am an English painter
and do not want to be anything else. I love
this tradition of our Albion

art and really my paintings have more to do
with Constable's 'Snow' than Tobey's 'White
Writing'." ('One Magazine', 1974). So we
might turn to an English

version of the 'throw' in a poem that also
stands at the gate of the twentieth-century.

Thomas Hardy's 'The Darkling Thrush',
written on December 31st 1900,

has one great couplet with our 'throw' in it. It
also contains a self portrait of the poet that
many a modern poet would recognise: "An
aged thrush, frail, gaunt

and small,/In blast-beruffled plume". Then

comes this great couplet: "Had chosen thus
to fling his soul/Upon the growing gloom."

The Hardy poem gives

a more mundane version of the fling than

Mallarme's but it also follows it with the

nature of the fling in art – "carolings/Of such
ecstatic sound" – and the

position of the artist – "some blessed hope of
which he knew/and I was unaware". The

‘fling’, the ‘throw’ in art is to achieve something that the artist cannot get to by skill and craft – something beyond his control and outside his or anyone’s skill, involving chance and hazard.

But the throw that Stephenson adopted for the Dioramas was not ecstatic in the gesture. Each canvas was square and was on blocks two inches high on the floor of the studio. Ian would stand with a pot of paint in one hand, a brush in the other, facing one side of the painting. He would dip the brush and throw the paint from just above shoulder height. There would be three flicks of the brush for one load of paint – a quarter left, straight ahead, a quarter right.

The gesture was like that of a Roman Catholic priest at the beginning of High Mass when he sprinkles the Holy Water on the altar boys saying “Asperges me, Domine, hyssopo et mundabor: lavabis me, et super nivem dealbabor” – at least he did before the demise of the Latin mass. I do not know if Ian made this connection between his gesture and the sprinkling of Holy Water but he would have been delighted with it. He used to say that Roman Catholicism was the only valid form of Christianity because of its ritualistic gestures. He, an agnostic, valued religion for its ritual. I do not give the translation of the Latin

because the more obscure the better for ritual as far as Ian was concerned – the wonder and mystery of ‘hyssopo’, ‘mundabor’ and ‘dealbabor’.

Having made his ritual, gestural throw facing one side of the painting he would walk round the painting to the next side, dip the brush in the paint and

repeat the threefold throw and so on round the painting. Each colour would be thrown for a certain number of complete circuits. The threefold throws –

quarter left, straight on and a quarter right – meant that the paint made arcs on the surface. The painting built up in a series of arcs going in a swirling

movement. The colours were all prepared beforehand – a row of jars of paint functioned as his palette. The colours, though, were all straight from the tube

– the only mixing was with turps to thin them.

The thinness of the colour determined how large the drops of paint were. Ian worked basically in the traditional way from thin to thick, i.e. the small spots are among the last to arrive on the surface. However,

examination of the paintings shows that this is only generally

true – there are late, large thin drops of paint and clearly there were early, small thicker drops later covered up. The decision-making in the painting was

reduced to the specific choice of colours and

their thickness or thinness. Since the paint was thrown equally from all sides of the canvas there is no sense of gravity when they are hung vertically except the implicit understanding that all the circular dots of paint arrive vertically downwards onto the surface under the force of gravity.

Both canvases of a Diorama were made at the same time. They would both be on blocks on the floor of the large studio. When one colour was put on one of them – say for two circuits – the same colour was immediately put on the other canvas in exactly the same way. Ian attempted within the constraints of the chance elements of the method to make each canvas exactly the same. One was a repeat of the other. They were the same by virtue of the actions for each being the same – not by looking at the canvases and adjusting by eye. This was one of the big differences between this method and his method of spraying paint in the early sixties. In the early sixties the spraying of paint was from waist height looking at the surface and responding to what he saw. The 1962 film of him working clearly shows this. The method was visual and not essentially different in that respect from putting dots of paint on directly with the brush.

It was Pollock's method – seen clearly in the

films of him working – responding visually to what was happening. The big change in method of the 1967

Dioramas is that the paint was thrown upwards, initially away from the painting, and Ian did not look at the canvas or respond to what was there, he just

pursued the method. It is much more like John Cage's method for composing music. Cage devised a ritualistic method famously using the Chinese classic

'I Ching'. Cage devised this method in order to take his personality out of his work – to remove the narcissistic element of self-portraiture or self-expression.

The idea was to find a more universal, less personal beauty. Ian did essentially the same thing. They both moved consciously away from being Narcissus and

towards being Actaeon. The object of the hunt is the encounter with the god, with universal laws and the forces of nature.

The method of the 1967 Dioramas is closely related to the method of the 1962 Small Spray Studies. It is quasi-scientific in nature, the visual result is not

dependent on aesthetic decision except in the initial choice of colours. It results from the method, rigorously applied. There is one more element I have

not mentioned that derives from the December Small Spray Studies– in which he rotated the cut-out squares through ninety

degrees after each colour.

The Dioramas are intended to be shown by hanging them side by side initially so they are exactly the same and then rotating one of them through one hundred and eighty degrees. In the Dioramas, correctly hung, the spectator is both conscious of the similarity, but also sees a new figure of eight composition

running through the two canvases together. This new composition is as surprising as the December Small Spray Studies and has the simplicity and beauty of Boyle's Law. They have moved beyond measurement to deal with the incommensurable. They are made with the simplest pure mark – a circular dot of colour. They are indivisible. They have a single activity which is pure aesthetic power. They are full of light like the Vedic celestial ocean which overflows with light.

In the summer of 1969, Stephenson took a further radical step. He made two Quadramas. They were paintings made from four equal sized rectangular canvases. In all three summers, 1967, '68 and '69, he was helped by an assistant, Mike Brick. In '67 and '68 Mike had helped stretch the canvases (they are meticulously and beautifully stretched with copper nails that are precisely placed along the stretchers), sized the canvases with three coats of rabbit skin glue

and primed them with three coats of lead primer. For the Quadramas, so that the sizing was equal for all four canvases, he was instructed to add two drops of boiling water to the size before sizing each of the 2nd, 3rd and 4th canvases to take account of evaporation. The radical step that Stephenson took was that while he made Quadrama IV— doing exactly the same thing to each canvas, with each colour put on with two circuits of each canvas, Mike Brick was painting Quadrama I in exactly the same way. Ian chose the colours for Mike and instructed him (briefly) in the method but left the order of the colours to Mike. This was a further step away from Narcissism and self-expression. Ian gave over the actual throwing of the paint and order of application of the colours to someone else for one of the two Quadramas that are in existence (whether Quadramas II and III exist is unknown). The Quadramas took two months to make, working six to eight hours a day. Mike says the paintings didn't appear to change for days at a time and that Ian only got really interested when obliteration started to happen. "Painting," Ian said, "is making so many memories on the face of flatness." There is a great sense of time in these paintings. The slow accumulation of sidereal

time and the instantaneity of subatomic time. He took a further interesting decision. The Quadramas were made on makeshift stretchers. After they were finished they were taken off the stretchers, transported to London and then stretched on smaller stretchers (by about 20cm). The stretchers are quite thick and this means that the paintings don't end 26 at the limits of the surface as do the Dioramas: they go round the stretchers and are intended to be seen like that, and are therefore a move back to his object-like paintings of the fifties. They became almost solid blocks of whirling atoms and feel quite different from the floating surface of the Dioramas.

The Quadramas are intended to be hung in any orientation and any grouping of the four canvases.

In 1970 he returned to Chelsea School of Art in London to direct the postgraduate painting course. In 1972 he made a series of paintings intended to be seen as a group and titled Sandsend Series from Beyond the World's End. This title, redolent with the romanticism of the English painters he loved – Constable, Turner, Cotman and Palmer – refers to his studio at the Chelsea School of Art annexe at Sands End, beyond the World's End on the King's Road. 'Sendsend' may refer to the beaches of the Thames that

he often saw at low tide as he crossed Albert or Battersea bridge to go to work. 'Sandsend' may also refer to the great six-mile beach at Blyth in Northumberland where he grew up and which as a boy he used to walk along and paint with his father (an amateur artist). The series was made up of four sets of works. The titles of the sets, he said, had numerous references. Chelsea Reach: the stretch of the Thames below Battersea Bridge near where Turner and John Martin had lived (the engraving of John Martin's Plains of Heaven, (1851-3) (see below) was the first picture Ian remembered seeing as a boy); the stretch of his arm making the painting. Manresa: Chelsea School of Art's address; the town in which St Ignatius Loyola wrote The Spiritual Exercises based on visualisation. Flaxman: his old telephone exchange; the linen he painted on; colours he associated with John Flaxman's paintings and with Wedgewood (sic), the original name of the Chelsea Annexe. 'Thames': those artists who had painted it – Turner, Monet, Whistler, Victor Pasmore etc. These flights of fancy were typical of Ian's mind and sense of humour. Each of the four sets comprises a large canvas and two smaller works on paper that he called 'understudies'. These were made at the

same time as the canvas and were not studies for it.

Ian Stephenson's painting has so many intimations of and metaphors for infinity that the issue of the edge, the boundary, is very important. In the Sandsend

Series he explores three different boundary solutions. The canvases have a border, a frame; they are the first of his works to have one as part of the

work since the fifties. The endless optical movement within these paintings is firmly held within this frame. The surface appears denser than the Dioramas.

The space is like a layered plane. The larger of the two Understudies for each canvas has a ruled line, imitating this frame just outside the painted rectangle,

giving a clear sense of containment to the painted surface which must originally have been masked during painting. One can see the odd marks that have

slipped under the masking. The smaller understudies have a collaged painted rectangle in the middle that has been painted away from the

paper it is now stuck to, while that paper was painted with another rectangle, of the same size as the insert, mounted on it. The result is a visual paradox

concerning the edge of the insert which appears to be an impossible result if painted in situ. This also allows Ian to have a

diminishing number of dots outside the insert with a strong sense of the void between these 'atoms' of paint. So in each group of three he has been able to explore very different boundary conditions and different spaces from sidereal (another title for later works on paper) to almost solid.

"Great god of love, great god of details!" exclaimed Pasternak. "I insist on the details in a picture, the details are the painting", said Stephenson. In his mature paintings the details are everything and yet they appear almost nothing. The tiny dots seem so fragile and light, especially as they fly away to the edges of many of the works on paper. The closer you get to the paintings the more precise they appear, the further away the more cloudy. But what visual delight is brought to the canvases by the swarms of colour with their glints of metallic paint! They are informed by the same aesthetic vision as gave us the stories of atomism, quantum theory and the choreography of the photons. Like Ionian flux, Lucretian delicacy and metamorphic fantasy the paintings play between clarity and uncertainty, between instants of time and endless time, between singularity and multiplicity. They reflect the nature of our understanding of the world at its deepest level.