

## **Anthony Frost: New Paintings**

### **Mel Gooding**

‘Everyone knows that yellow, orange and red suggest ideas of joy and plenty.’  
(Delacroix, quoted by Kandinsky)

Anthony Frost has always had a passion for strong chromatic colour: primary, unmixed, it is often discordant in its relation to its neighbours, major not minor in its key, visually forte if not fortissimo. It communicates verve, excitement, an engagement with the world that is direct, not without nuance but without reserve. Close in on any small area of a Frost painting and you will find in microcosm the vibrant contrast and clash that characterises the image as a whole, and the immediate vitality of his painting, what might be described as its particular zing, its distinctively complicated chime and clamour, is created not only by the bold placement of colour against colour, but also by the aggregation of many smaller incidents of such complementary contrasts.

It is as if each painting must declare without ambiguity or reserve its *raison d’être*, which is to shock the eye into surprise that such a brilliant and turbulent object exists, occupies real space, has taken its place among all the other objects in the world – paintings in particular – that enliven our vision. Frost’s work, that is to say, is of a kind among whose primary purposes is to give pleasure, rather in the way that other vivid objects, natural, industrial, and cultural might do so, incidental to their own purposes in real life. Paintings, of course – unlike sea anemones, say, or flowers, boats, buoys, cranes, road signs, flags, etc – exist only to be looked at, having no other purposes beyond the provocation of thought and feeling, whether complex or simple, in the spectator.

Frost’s delight in strong colour and abstract forms, and his penchant for robust support materials, sacking and sail-cloth and the like, are perhaps not surprising. He was brought up, after all, in a household in which painting was the very stuff of life, in which, indeed, it seemed at times nothing less than a matter of life and death. His father, Terry Frost, was the least precious of painters, not averse to introducing collage, stitched thread and other materials into his paintings as it suited him. He was an artist passionately committed to things seen and experienced in the everyday world of objects, light, colour, movement and sound, and whose inclusive art wittily transformed them into the shapes, rhythms and colours of a musical abstraction.

It was a powerful example for a young painter, one that might have been inhibiting and intimidating for some, but which Anthony Frost clearly embraced with a vigorous insouciance and the determination to create an artistic *modus operandi* entirely his own. When it came to what his father had done, he would, as the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins put it, ‘admire and do otherwise’. What he has inherited, without doubt, is the compulsion to combine and transform things found in the material world into an abstraction which endows them with a new life of their own, a life in the painting itself.

Direct reference to the visible world and the poetic adaptation of its object-shapes and colours, so pervasive a feature of his father's work, is, however, virtually absent from his imagery, which has been consistently purely non-figurative and arbitrary in its forms and colours. In his work there is, moreover, a complete absence of what has been described as film colour, with its qualities of transparency and translucence. Frost's colour world is dense and opaque, his colour is artificial, pigment-saturated; it is entirely without marine or aerial atmospherics. Unlike his father, Frost is not concerned to imitate or suggest natural light (which is the natural manifest of film colour: visible as aerial blue when we look at the sky) but, rather, to create colour-light on the surface of the painting itself. 'In nature,' wrote Hans Hofmann, 'light creates the sensation of colour; in a picture, colour creates light.'

In Frost's paintings it is a chromatic radiance complicated by textural variegation, its colour-planes compromised by interruption and corrugation, with actual shadows thrown by relief, and vitalised by contrasts and variations – though rarely of intensities – of hue. It is this latter tendency – to the concatenation of equal value hues – which produces the characteristic chordal 'chime' of his paintings of which I spoke earlier. It is as if each painting were an assertive affirmation of David Katz's pregnant observation that in surface colour '[we] have a phenomenon of visual resistance which in a way contributes to the structure of the perceptible world as something existing in actuality.' Colour in Frost's paintings is unmistakably objective and actual, 'visually resistant' in precisely the sense suggested by Katz.

Frost, I would say, is interested in pictorial space only in its planar manifestation: his paintings do not represent natural space inhabited by its multitudinous objects, but present themselves as objects in natural space. The colour in his paintings is the colour of itself; the object-image is the combination of these self-declarative paint-colours given an increased 'actuality' by exaggerated textures and physical relief. Space in the paintings is lateral and vertical, it is the actual space – the across and up-and-down – of the canvas plane itself; incidents in this space are not fictional, they are robustly physical, insistently textural, intriguingly tangible.

The spatial dynamics of these paintings are, then, necessarily those of the physical surface and the improvisatory orchestration thereon of colour shapes, patches, strokes, streaks, dabbles, flecks, splashes. Chance events and accidents are welcomed, bringing unexpected and surprising relations, accents and emphases. With regard to the larger formal elements, the colour shapes and their disposition across the canvas, Frost has enlarged his scope in these recent paintings, moving away from the diagonal dynamic of the chevron that characterised his painting for some years, and exploiting now an unpredictable diversity of formal device.

Notwithstanding this formal development, it is in the aspect of surface texture that Frost has continued to be at his most innovative as a painter, incorporating an increasingly resourceful variety of materials to complicate the picture surface. On the reverse of each canvas there is a scrupulous inventory of support materials, which may include net sacking, hessian scrim, sail cloth, tuile, ripstop sacking, plastic netting, rope, onion sack, rubber and any other material that the artist may come across on his walk to the studio, or are found for him by friends. It is necessary to distinguish Frost's use of these materials from that of abstract collage, in which the character and colour of the original – it might be a scrap of wallpaper or newspaper, or a piece of coloured card – is maintained in its own right, incorporated to bring a strangeness, a colour accent, a contrast of texture or whatever to the completed image.

n Frost's paintings, on the contrary, diverse materials are subsumed into the colour play; painted sometimes so thickly that their own characteristic textures are almost lost, they are subordinated to the image as a whole. They may retain bits of stitching, or such elements as sailcloth metal eyelets; they may be folded, ridged, ruckled and crumpled, their edges torn roughly the better to create surface incident. Their essential purpose is to provide a physical base for paint shapes, to carry and project colour in unpredictable ways, and for their weave and texture to create nuances of light and shade. Incorporated and activated, they are in fact aspects of the support, and they are described as such in Frost's verso screeds.

The paint itself – colour straight from the can – provides Frost with further opportunities to enliven the surface. Sometimes mixed with clear acrylic gel, sometimes with the addition of pumice powder or garnet, sometimes pure pigmented acrylic, it may be matt or viscous or glossy. In his own improvisatory way, Frost sets out to exploit any or all of these qualities of visual texture, and of their colour-light implications, to achieve the constant buzz of contrast and change that is the essence of his painterly aesthetic. (In referring to Frost's 'improvisatory' mode, I have in mind Kandinsky's definition of 'Improvisation': 'a largely unconscious, spontaneous expression of inner character...') Frost likes to compare this visual vibrancy to the surface noise on a vinyl record, the analogue technology of which presents you with the thing itself, a material reality, not something virtually created by digital means.

Frost's titles, fanciful and oddly poetic, are invented after the making of the painting: since he is not painting anything but the painting itself, there being no referential or allusive intent, then it is only when the painting as object exists in the world that it can be given a name. Usually these titles are taken or adapted from phrases heard, album or song titles, or phrases from lyrics, and like the other found materials that together constitute the physical work, Frost often carefully identifies their sources on the reverse. I ponder this, and conclude that it is because the artist regards these titles as part of the work, important insofar as their abstractness relates to that of the painting they identify. They suggest that its meaning and affect are likewise to be summoned from within the spectator's experience, found in sensation, memory and reflection, in association and affection. The irreducible objective presence of the painting – the active conglomeration and sum of its colour and texture constituents – invites complications of response inevitable to an encounter with a brilliant and unprecedented artefact, especially one in which the most ordinary stuff, combined by brilliant colour, is sea-changed into something rich and strange.

***Mel Gooding, 2009***

Notes: Kandinsky quotes Delacroix in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art: 'The Language of Form and Colour'* (Dover, New York, 1977); David Katz's *The World of Colour* (Kegan Paul, London, 1935) is extensively quoted by Adrian Stokes in *Colour and Form* (Faber & Faber, London, 1937); Hans Hofmann is quoted from *Search from the Real and Other Essays*, excerpted in *Theories of Modern Art* (ed. Herschel B. Chipp, University of California Press, 1968). Kandinsky's definition of 'Improvisation' is from *Concerning the Spiritual in Art: 'Conclusion'*.

