

## Mike Von Joel, 2011

### Anthony Frost: Magnetic Fields

At 59 years old, Anthony Frost is now what the art world terms a 'mid-generation' artist. This has a number of meanings but, generally, it refers to a painter who has an extensive body of readily identifiable work to their name and who is in the process of re-examining themselves – whilst simultaneously being reassessed by the critics. It can be either a liberating and stimulating experience or, perversely, a cause for self doubt and stasis.

In the case of Anthony Frost, an evolved maturity and felicity has engendered a body of fresh and confident work; developing existing, well reprised themes to signal a new departure into more lyrical realms of colour and meaning.

Frost has enjoyed two key advantages in his career as a painter. The first, unavoidable and something he has consciously fire-walled himself against, was being born amidst art world 'royalty' in the guise of the post-war St. Ives collective of Modern British artists. As the son of Terry Frost (later Sir Terry) Anthony's formative years were influenced by a close association with key players like Barbara Hepworth, Patrick Heron, Peter Lanyon, Roger Hilton, Bryan Winter... and the long shadow of Ben Nicholson.

The second, and perhaps strangely more poignant, was participation in, and the benefit of, a unique period in English art school education. With the demise of the old National Diploma in Design (NDD) in 1963, a new 'degree equivalent' Diploma in Art & Design (DipAD) caused a total revolution in the structure and potential of art school teaching. Between 1967 and 1973, Frost enjoyed an extended 3 year Foundation Course at Banbury ('right next to Banbury Cross') and then another 3 years of DipAD studies at Cardiff. It is nearly impossible to find an art student who lived through this extraordinary and unorthodox period in British art tuition (brought abruptly to an end with the advent of the BA degree in 1974) who doesn't praise the spiritual, intellectual and creative freedom it delivered.

Once removed from the all enveloping atmosphere of West Cornwall, Frost was able to configure his own language and the means to express it in paint – and at the same time declare his independence from the elemental forces at work in his childhood environment.

Hitherto, much has been made of Anthony's determination to create a totally abstract work (even the term abstract image would likely indicate a contrary meaning). His comment to writer Mike Venning, quoting American minimalist Donald Judd, that: 'representation is a kind of noise that gets in the way...' is much repeated in reviews of his painting – as is his penchant for listening to cutting edge, new generation music while he works ('...music is almightily important to me, music is the ultimate art form and I always talk about it in interviews – but, of course, they never report me as listening to Radio 4 as well!'). Indeed, he has an encyclopedic knowledge of obscure (to people in their 50s) music and musicians, although his declared favourites are rather more accessible: cult band The Fall – and Captain Beefheart (aka the painter, Don van Vliet).

In fact, it is impossible to discuss Frost's work without touching on the omnipresence of music in his life. He has been quoted as saying he is 'trying to paint sound', although this is innocently misleading. There is absolutely no element of synesthesia in his modus operandi (that is, a neurological aberration whereby musical notes are experienced with a corresponding, fixed colour value). More likely, it refers to Frost's core response to the attitude, energy and restrained aggression in modern music that stimulates his subconscious whilst actively engaged in painting. Nevertheless, his connection with contemporary soundsmiths is real: The Fall have selected Frost's paintings to illustrate their CD covers and he has socialised with the musicians, even the notoriously acerbic Mark E. Smith is a fan.

Likewise, Frost's intricate naming system for his completed paintings – his titles are almost all song titles, or lines from lyrics gleaned from the aforementioned music genres – have come under scrutiny.

Surely a totally abstract work would benefit a connotation-free basic number, or date, identification? 'I want my exhibitions to be like an album – it's important that I have a title to the show – and the pictures themselves become the tracks on that album,' he says, 'but most of the picture titles don't actually conjure up images... although, they might provide subconscious clues'. Nevertheless, the naming of a piece is important to Frost, a process he readily describes as 'exciting' and each painting is carefully annotated with the title and the source of that title – whether his own or derived from musical roots.

Additionally, Frost goes to great lengths to list the physical ingredients that make up the foundation of a given work. Thus the reverse might carry the hand written legend: sacking, scrim, Hessian, sail, netting, cloth, and ripstop (a maritime material). All these found and beach-combed materials are stitched, glued and interwoven to fabricate a surface upon which acrylic pigment, used straight from the can, is spread with vigour.

Despite this use of random materials, Frost has developed certain signatures in his painting and for a period the triangle or 'chevron' shape had a presence in his output (see Mel Gooding: essay for 'The Colour of Sound', Beaux Arts 2009). More recently, Frost has subsumed this material support beneath multiple layers of paint and freed himself up from the accidental (or contrived) contours of the constructed surface, allowing colour and impasto to define the orchestration. Of particular interest to him is the 'edge' where two colours meet, fail to meet – or overlap. Accident and error remain welcome ingredients in the process.

Can a work ever be truly abstract? Frost would like to think so: '...a Malevich, a black square for instance? In my painting there is shape and surface and colour, then speed... rhythm... movement... space – all created by marks, by my putting these materials and paint together'. And Frost is also highly conscious of the dilemma facing many abstract painters whereby an overweening self awareness can quickly reduce a work to being merely decorative. 'There is more than that, because I have put it in. I want to take painting as far as I can and this is why I respond to Mark E. Smith of The Fall who is prepared to go the whole way and f\*\*\* it up to get something good. Preciousness can creep in the minute you begin to put marks down and you have to guard against it...'

This introduces another concern exercising Frost. He has a natural dislike of formality and pretentiousness ('I like the throwaway Picasso quote "...if you haven't got any red – use blue" actually more or less my own philosophy') which is famously a Frost family trait. But he does admit to being wary that this could be interpreted as a lack of serious intent: 'non-precious is certainly not non-caring!' he says vehemently. But he need not fear, the glittering prizes are already accruing. For example, in 2009 Anthony Frost was elected inaugural Master of the Open University at Plymouth College of Art, the first year Plymouth was authorised to confer such academic awards.

The death of his father Terry in 2003, at the age of 87, might be construed, in artistic terms, as a liberation of sorts, for whatever direction Anthony's work now takes it is under his sole control and devoid of bilateral influence, however benign. Yet there is still a marked resistance to readily agreeing with those who find comfort in identifying the Cornish landscape in his work. Rather, he asserts, the painting of British artist John Hoyland might offer more clues to the direction he wants his work to go: 'Hoyland is currently taking paint to places it has never been before. He's willing to destroy his own reputation. It's the Mark E. Smith attitude again, to go beyond to create something new. It's very courageous. My own work is getting tougher, more physical.'

In *Magnetic Fields*, Frost admits that an element of decision making now dominates the expressionist, action painting dynamic of the past (he is a longstanding admirer of Jackson Pollock and de Kooning). He spends much more time in contemplation and the planning of each mark, a process that encompasses the physicality of placing himself in exactly the right position before the canvas and even cutting parts off problematic and unyielding pictures. However, he rarely destroys a painting completely, commanding it to evolve by force of will.

This current sensibility and the hint of new directions can be witnessed in the range of smaller works in *Magnetic Fields*. These compact, contained forces engender a lyrical quality which echoes that of the granite bedrock and boulder landscape of the Penwith Peninsular where Frost now – almost inevitably – lives. The works are more intensely collaged than before and thus the 'edges' have taken on added significance due to the increasing accent on impasto paint application. In earlier years, he consciously and adamantly (sometimes aggressively) refuted all suggestions that he was following the St. Ives tradition of responding to the potency of the natural environment – forms and perspectives that had overpowered Heron and Hepworth. Now, in more reflective mood and in a period of mature introspection, Frost concedes that such influences might well be at work on subliminal levels. And if there was ever such an unlikely thing as a horizon in his pictures, he is facing it with customary enthusiasm, confidence – and a reassuring and familiar brio.

***Mike von Joel***

