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Prunella Clough

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About the author(s)

Merlin James is an artist and writer based in Glasgow. He recently staged the exhibition Prunella Clough: Paintings at 42 Carlton Place, Glasgow.

Prunella Clough

by Merlin James • 28.06.2019

Prunella Clough's breakthrough in the 1960s from solid social realism to exploratory, associative abstraction was in part informed by new styles of American painting that were becoming increasingly visible in the United Kingdom. She continued to monitor transatlantic trends over the following decades (she died in 1999), visiting the United States occasionally and attending closely to certain artists such as Myron Stout (1907–87). Her work, however, has scarcely been seen in America and is barely represented in its public collections. One painting in the current exhibition, *Prunella Clough: Blast*, at P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York, has now entered the collection of the Museum of Modern Art, a gift of the painter Amy Sillman. Other American artists have also become aware of Clough in recent years (the late Thomas Nozkowski acknowledged affinities), and the present show is proving revelatory to many for whom it is a first encounter. Highly individual as Clough is, she relates strongly to, and often anticipated, many traits in postmodern painting.

The P.P.O.W. selection opens, however, with four pre-1960 figurative pictures, Cubist-derived in their compacted compositions, with typically subdued, near-monochrome tones and granular surfaces. Such works cemented the artist's reputation in 1960, when assembled at her retrospective at the Whitechapel Gallery, London, and certainly they have merits. *Man with Printing Press* (1953), for example, speaks of the relationship, even symbiosis, of human and machine **FIG. 1**. Hidden in plain view among the anthropomorphic silhouettes of machinery, the figure is tonally incorporated, implanted within the mechanical. Our viewpoint could be that of a fellow operative, one among many at similar work stations, at once united and separated in industry. Repeated elements (spools, belt-drive wheels, mesh guards or vents) become conveyors of both the rhythmic regularity of mass (re)production and the proliferation of machines and machinists across the factory floor.

John Berger was an early supporter of the artist, and a socialist agenda is easily read into her paintings of this period. But the conditions of labour are not obviously indicted, and workers not shown as alienated or dehumanised. There is an artisanal aspect to the kinds of industry Clough depicted (printing, textile manufacture, food production) and it chimes with the patina and materiality of the manually laboured canvases themselves. The single worker seen in many of the pictures could indeed stand for

the artist embedded in her own processes and mechanisms, in the production of artistic meaning and value. As quite often in Clough's factory paintings, the somewhat timeless figure in *Man with Printing Press* could (despite the title) be either female or male. Hardly robotic, s/he has the inwardness of one of Chardin's sitters, building a house of cards, or stirring tea.

Yet, although such qualities and meanings can be validly claimed for Clough's pre-1960s pictures, there is a feeling that she was working proficiently in a language long established, even exhausted, by Cubist and Purist painters. Had she remained with this mode she would now be not much more significant than the sub-Cubist, neo-romantic British painters with whom she was associated in the post-war period, such as Keith Vaughan or 'the Two Roberts' Colquhoun and MacBryde.

At P.P.O.W., *Urban Object* FIG. 2 marks Clough's transition towards greater ambiguity, more frontal, shallow space and greater objecthood of the canvas itself, the materiality of which became more synonymous with its subject. The next painting to confront the visitor is *Wire and Rods* from 1979 FIG. 3, by which time Clough was into whole new aesthetic dimensions and dialectics. Despite thinner paint and more expansive scale, the surface is now more fully literal, unromantically, matter-of-factly artificial, suggesting the use of stencils and rulers. However, this is not pure 'process painting' as, say, her acquaintance Bernard Cohen might practice it. Potentially illusionistic readings, of telegraph wires seen against a cloudy sky or reflected in dirty water, while they do not dilute the essential abstraction, are allowed as associations. Industrial landscape is still clearly referenced – overhead cables, electric fences, level crossings or switching yards. And there is a more conscious, unsentimental acknowledgment of industrial history, even archeology, of things once denoting progress, now abandoned and obsolete. There is metal fatigue, scrap, sulphurous seepage, and the burnt-out buckling of something fused, short-circuited. But within this disillusion and decline is discovered a half-life, or after life, of unexpected beauty. 'Music' and 'poetry' are tempting words to reach for. Clough is maybe too tough to accept them readily, but often in her work, where we might expect the outlook to be jaded, or soured, we are surprised by joy.

The point, then, is not that Clough 'went abstract', to use the 1930s phrase that was still current in the late 1950s for a second wave of converts such as Jack Smith, Victor Pasmore, Derrick Greaves (b.1927), Edward Middleditch (1923–87) and several St. Ives painters. Clough had contact with many of these artists as they followed paths not dissimilar to her own, from neo-romanticism or social realism into less representational more loosely suggestive imagery. But she, almost uniquely, cultivates a versatility and unpredictable eclecticism within which an authorial personality (astute, dedicated, pragmatic) nevertheless emerges.

There are admittedly series, repeated or returned-to motifs, and certain signature procedures and tropes – visors, screens, vents and filters are ubiquitous. We often see through permeable membranes, through meshes, fences and grids. And this extends to the grounds of the paintings themselves, which tend to be complexly layered, transparently veiled, visually porous. One outstanding work, *Red Gate* FIG. 4, even reverses the primed canvas, showing us how the gesso has oozed through the weave.

Although concerns are consistently pursued, each work is a new experiment. The range on show here, albeit far from comprehensive, indicates the artist's breadth. The Lanyonesque *Untitled 2* FIG. 5 suggests multicoloured telecommunication cables accessed through some opened hatch. In *Mesh with Glove 1* (1980) black paint has been mashed through a stencil, to screen off substrata of variegated sweet hues. The outlined worker's glove might signal the 'hand' of the artist, or acknowledge mechanical procedures that combine or compete with it. In *Stone* FIG. 6 the eponymous rock is schematised into four or five *cloisonné* facets, variously 'coloured in'. *Ears* (c.1990), which prompts comparisons as Clough's works often do with those of Raoul De Keyser, gives depth and subtlety to a simple figure/ground ambiguity, through tiny, telling traces of complex layering.

Representational imagery also periodically reappears. In one painting a car is parked like a piece of clip art FIG. 7; in another a (toy?) aeroplane flies over a sea of soaked-in scarlet. Elsewhere, three works are done on tile-effect Formica panels, with ghostly figures – perhaps shadows or reflections – implied in spray paint.

A selection of collages, assemblages and reliefs gives glimpses of further aspects of Clough's activities that, like her extensive printmaking (not represented here), shade seamlessly into her painting practice. There is extensive use (and imitation) of masking, stencilling, frottage, roller effects, offsetting, collage, resist, diffusion and erasure. Brushstrokes as such, and anything one might call 'expressive brushwork', are quite rare. Pouring, pooling, rolling, ragging and dripping are typical, while specific imagery is often given a neutral, illustrational rendering. Overall, the variety – of technique, scale, surface, degree and type of figuration, and thence of mood and attitude – is extraordinary. As much as this set Clough apart from her contemporaries, it also distinguishes her work from the majority of painting currently being shown in New York galleries, where the norm as ever is repetition of a formula (brand recognition and product range).

What also distinguishes her is how, without being merely vague or obfuscatory, her meanings remain tacit. There is mystery without mystification, and no sense either of a key or solution to be discovered. Certainly some of the concerns of the earlier figuration remain, now more fully embodied in the formal makeup

of the paintings. And because that makeup is more complex and open, so are the implied attitudes to and insights about human experience in the postmodern world. The art historian Catherine Spencer has compellingly explored how Clough might be seen to engage, ambivalently and unprescriptively, with the material culture and economy of post-industrial commodity and consumerism.¹ But the individual human presence in the early paintings also surely endures in the later ones, even while figures are hardly ever depicted. The many entities that inhabit the works, recognisable or otherwise, are characterful, and we may relate to them as to a person, or placeholder for one who is absent. The same may be said of the paintings themselves as wholes. Beyond that, the reflexive sophistication of the work is such that the viewer becomes aware of the artist's authorial inherence, the presence of Prunella Clough in the paintings.

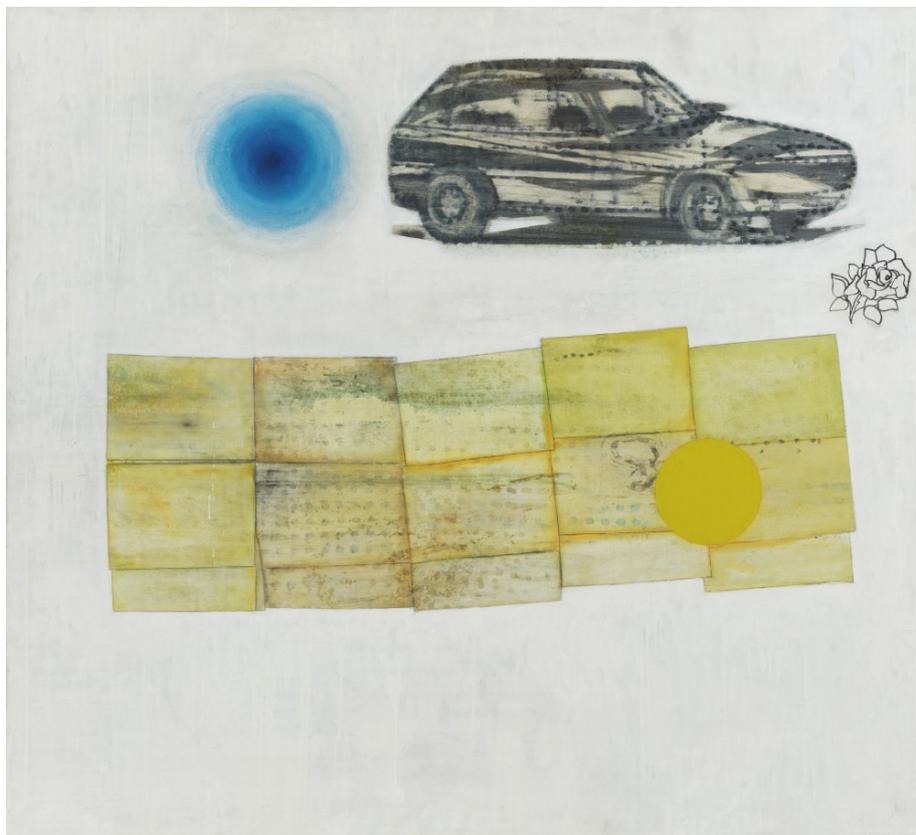


Fig. 7 *Accessories*, by Prunella Clough. 1996. Canvas, 167 by 182 cm. (Courtesy the Estate of *Prunella Clough*; exh. P.P.O.W., New York).

Exhibition details

Prunella Clough: Blast
P.P.O.W., New York
31st May–29th June 2019

Footnotes

- 1** See C. Spencer: 'Abstraction's ecologies: Post-industrialization, waste and the commodity form in Prunella Clough's paintings of the 1980s and 1990s', *British Art Studies* 1, available at <https://dx.doi.org/10.17658/issn.2058-5462/issue-01/cspencer>, accessed 27th June 2019.

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