

EXHIBITIONS



72. *Julia Jackson*, by Julia Margaret Cameron. 1867. Albumen print from wet collodion glass negative, 31 by 26 cm. (Victoria and Albert Museum, London).

exhibitions seen in London. But, as it is probably the finest of all the Cameron albums known to survive, it contains many superb images, including the only known print of what has become the most popular and widely recognised of all her photographs, *Lago, study from an Italian* (1867).

Influence and Intimacy is, like the Victoria and Albert Museum exhibition, a little light on Cameron's most famous and admired portraits. This can be attributed to the fact that the Herschel Album is biased towards her early, particularly her religious, work. For that reason, although the album was originally purchased for the National Portrait Gallery, London, by public subscription in 1975, the Gallery's Trustees agreed to pass the album on to the Bradford Museum upon its founding eight years later. Nevertheless, it contains no less than seven portraits of Alfred, Lord Tennyson, as well as other Victorian heroes such as Henry Taylor (one of Tennyson's rivals for the post of Poet Laureate), William Carlyle, the artists Watts and Holman Hunt and, of course, Herschel himself.

Not all the prints seen here come from the Herschel Album. Near the end of the exhibition are eight of the images made during the last four years of Cameron's life in Ceylon, now Sri Lanka. Although these were also in the last Cameron exhibition in London, they are perennially fascinating, and give the lie to those who accuse her of looking down on her servants and plantation workers in Ceylon (or in the Isle of Wight).

Although this exhibition is not hung so as to tell a narrative as revealingly as that at the Victoria and Albert Museum, it has some fascinating extras. One is the only surviving piece of Cameron's equipment, her first camera lens. Its fixed *f*₆ aperture helps to explain why her photographs are rarely totally in focus. There is also the manuscript of her unfinished biography, *Annals of My Glass House*, and important letters between her and Herschel. The letter (dated 31st December 1864) displayed at the beginning of the exhibition is particularly insightful, providing a clear expression of her artistic credo.

While all these objects have been exhibited on more than one occasion, the recently acquired daguerreotype portrait of Cameron with her daughter, Julia, probably taken by a commercial studio in Calcutta in early 1845, is a real first. It is a pity that the caption wrongly claims it to be the earliest 'image' of her in existence, as a drawing by James Prinsep shows her about a decade earlier.⁴ But the daguerreotype is certainly the first known photographic image of Cameron, and a valuable addition to our records of a great artist.

And a great artist she was. Hilton Kramer, chief art critic of *The New York Times* for seventeen years, once called her 'one of the finest portraitists of the nineteenth century – in any medium'. Anyone who visits these two exhibitions will surely only agree – and this reviewer can only profoundly hope that many of those visitors will also recognise that her artistry is by no means only seen in portraits.

¹ The exhibition was previously shown at the **Multi-media Art Museum, Moscow** (18th November 2014 to 1st February 2015), the **Museum of Fine Arts, Ghent** (14th March to 14th June 2015) and the **Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney** (13th August to 25th October 2015). After its London showing it travels to **Fundación MAPFRE, Madrid** (15th March to 15th May) and the **Mitsubishi Ichigokan Museum, Tokyo** (2nd July to 19th September).

² Catalogue: *Julia Margaret Cameron: Photographs to electrify you with delight and startle the world*. By Marta Weiss. 186 pp. incl. 137 col. ill. (MACK, London, 2015), £25. ISBN 978-1-910164-29-7.

³ According to the British Museum acquisitions register, they were presented on Thursday 12th January 1865, mounted in one large frame and described as 'Being the Fruits of the Spirit. Illustrated from Life'. All nine were transferred to the Victoria and Albert Museum in 2000, and are shown (in separate frames) in the current exhibition.

⁴ The portrait is reproduced in C. Ford: *Julia Margaret Cameron: 19th Century Photographer of Genius*, London 2003. The portrait carries her maiden name, 'Pattle'. She married Charles Hay Cameron in 1838. James Prinsep died in 1840.

Recent exhibitions

London

by JAMES LAWRENCE

FOR VIEWERS WHO regard an encounter with a work of art primarily as an insight into a singular creative episode, exhibitions at museums can be unsatisfying. Dense crowds are a problem, especially when distracted by hand-held devices. A greater problem, however, lies in the curatorial habit of directing viewers' attention before they have a chance to formulate their own responses. The worst versions of this – condescending interpretive texts and pedagogical gimmicks – may be in retreat. Nonetheless, within the ecology of the art world, museum shows are painstakingly cultivated specimens that exemplify artistic and intellectual lineage. They may contribute significantly to the general understanding of art; but they leave scant room for instances of doubt and dissent to announce themselves as more than bumps in the road to some greater achievement. Such delicate and fleeting qualities are best presented in shows that are tightly focused and not rehearsed to exhaustion.

The exhibition *Early Mondrian: Paintings 1900–1905*, at **David Zwirner, London** (closed 23rd January), exemplified the virtue of swiftness of execution on a restricted canvas.¹ Twelve small paintings, hung in a single room, elucidated the uncertainties of an artist whose direction was far from clear. Only the generous amount of hindsight that we now possess allows us to discern – or impose – hints of what was to come from Mondrian. The broad strokes and perspectival elision in these paintings have considerable rudimentary charm that simultaneously suggests incipient greatness or a potential lifetime of pleasant adequacy. A farmhouse behind a fence



73. *Irrigation ditch with mature willow*, by Piet Mondrian. c.1900. Oil on board, 25 by 30 cm. (Private collection; exh. David Zwirner, London).

(c.1904) obediently follows a tripartite horizontal division of pictorial space, only to deliver an incongruous burst of colour at the roofline of the house. That combination of depleted convention and innovative jolt would, in a chronological survey, signify a pivotal moment. In a room full of roughly contemporaneous work from an artist's novitiate, however, we can seldom identify a clear path to the mature style. This exhibition allowed us to see Mondrian without seeing the legendary master he became.

Several paintings are scenes of an irrigation ditch, in an area of polders south of Amsterdam that had long attracted landscape painters. Mondrian's debt to the austere realism of The Hague School is clear not only in his tightly cropped compositions, but also in his preference for loose tonal modelling over precisely drawn contours. Tempting though it is to see these marks as prototypical abstract components, it is perhaps more relevant to consider how these paintings reflect prevailing tastes – and, crucially, the gradual acceptance by Dutch artists of recent achievements in French painting. What we see has less to do with Mondrian's eventual career than with the messiness of creative milieux, and the ways in which shifting preoccupations and prohibitions enhance creative fecundity. The results, more often than not, are spirited mongrels rather than lovingly nurtured hybrids. If there are hints of Mondrian's sense of intrinsic spirituality in the irrepressibly slapdash *Irrigation ditch with mature willow* (Fig.73), they flow from several sources including the religious undertones of Dutch landscape painting and Symbolist attitudes to sensation and energy. One quality that stands out as an antecedent for radical abstraction is the obvious talent that Mondrian had for lowering resolution without eliminating information. Although this is consistent with the dominant view that Mondrian's formal journey was one of excision and eradication, it also suggests that his early work deserves to be considered as more

than simply Mondrian's apprenticeship to his own future. These modest scenes contain the primordial soup of abstract painting.

The preconditions for abstract painting also echoed throughout *Gerhard Richter: Colour Charts*, at **Dominique Lévy Gallery, London** (closed 16th January).² In 1966 Richter began to emulate and enlarge the arrays of

colour that he found on sample cards for house paint. The pragmatic nature of those samples suggested not only a riposte to the dogmatic formulations of colour theorists such as Josef Albers, but also a way to free colour in painting from its expressive connotations. The recent show brought together the earliest Colour Charts for the first time since they appeared at Galerie Friedrich & Dahlem, Munich, in October 1966. They may have been influenced by Blinky Palermo's *Stoffbilder*, or 'cloth pictures' (1966–72), which also used bold colours in defiance of the prevailing fashion for desiccated conceptual austerity. Richter's Colour Charts marked a drastic shift away from his Photo Paintings, the blurry monochrome enlargements of amateur snapshots on which Richter had hitherto been concentrating. His prototypical foray into arrays of colour is recorded in six red squares on the verso of a small Photo Painting, *Sänger* (*Singer*) (1965–66): humble and concealed origins that scarcely hint at the profusion that would eventually follow.

Richter's handling of paint in the early Colour Charts was far from pristine. The earliest fully realised example, *192 Farben* (*192 colours*) (Fig.74), has all the subtle irregularities of painstaking execution by hand. A drip of blue enamel in a field of taupe betrays the handmade nature of *Farbtafel* (*Colour chart*) (1966). This kind of tactile abstraction points in numerous directions, including Mondrian's



74. *192 Farben* (*192 colours*), by Gerhard Richter. 1966. Canvas, 200 by 150 cm. (Elisabeth and Gerhard Soht Collection, on loan to the Hamburger Kunsthalle; exh. Dominique Lévy Gallery, London).

75. *Tell Shimshara*, by Frank Stella. 2002. Sand-cast aluminium, 137.2 by 152.4 by 58.4 cm. (Courtesy Bernard Jacobson Gallery; exh. Bernard Jacobson Gallery, London. Photograph by Martyn Payne).



post-1920 paintings or Malevich's Suprematist compositions, with their humanising irregularities; or to the American 'deadpan' idioms that waxed as Abstract Expressionism waned, and which wavered between wit and mystery. As a means of weaving together the strands of Pop materialism and conceptual seriousness, avant-garde traditions and 1960s cool, the Colour Charts were invaluable. As the years progressed, Richter added rules, permutations and shifts in scale and size. The early examples, however, have none of the bombast or institutional heft that rob later Colour Charts of any sense of risk. In 1966 Richter was asking significant questions about the validity of painting in an era of technological gloss. In the recent show it was possible, at least for a brief time, to consider those questions as though the answer might still be in doubt.

Richter's credentials as a master practitioner are thoroughly secure, not least because

they rest in large measure on a substantial body of approving critical examination. Frank Stella's reputation is less clear-cut. His early work is canonical, his later work polarising. This might change with the current retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (to 7th February). Stella remains a puckish, intrepid artist with an acute sense of the precarious relationships among media. A concise exhibition of works from several of his later series at **Bernard Jacobson Gallery, London** (closed 21st November 2015) included the colossal mixed-media painting *Die Marquise von O* (1999), which takes its title from Heinrich von Kleist's novella – published in 1808 – about a virtuous widow, her otherwise virtuous rapist and the pregnancy that results. The supercharged lateral flow of forms and motifs in Stella's heptptych approaches surfeit, with occasional moments of clarity – a geometric form here, a

reversed chunk of text there – punctuating the overall sense of visual panic. The painting can be approached calmly or not at all. A couple of sculptures inspired by archaeological sites in Anatolia, *Tell Shimshara* (Fig.75) and *Gıyan V* (2002), have the materials and texture of industrial ruins – and, more tellingly, the tactile fearlessness of children playing in a scrapheap. Along with the obvious skill with which Stella marshals the ingredients of these constructions, there is an irrepressible love of form and matter that transcends the high-cultural allusions and complexities of Baroque space with which he ostensibly grapples. His avidity leaves little room for astringent critical theorising, and is all the more refreshing for that.

The newest London branch of **Gagosian Gallery** opened in **Grosvenor Hill** in Mayfair with an exhibition of works by Cy Twombly (closed 12th December 2015).³ The building has been extensively covered in the press and is thoroughly successful, with ample space, considerable warmth and a lighting system that emulates shifts in daylight levels outside. The installation of the Twombly show was spare and lucid in this environment, which particularly suited a group of sixteen drawings made at Bolsena, Italy, in the summer of 1969. Their cryptic marks – scribbles that both construct and efface, mathematical notations without context – offer teasing suggestions of legibility. Although there are possibly allusions to the Apollo XI mission in these drawings, they follow no clear pathways.

Two canvases, never previously exhibited, from the Bacchus series (2006–08; Fig.76) gave Twombly's sumptuously looping scribbles an unusually dense grandeur along with a poignant hint of senescence. Two untitled diptychs from 2007 – hung, like the Bacchus paintings, as an opposing pair – offered knots of purple scribble and lines of blue scrawl that struck a similarly final chord. Although these late paintings have remarkable power in their own right, their authority also heightens the sense of fragility that kept Twombly's work on a human scale. As with the four absorbing bronze sculptures on display, or the twenty-two photographs in a companion exhibition at Gagosian's nearby Davies Street gallery (closed 12th December 2015), there is often a talismanic quality to Twombly's paintings and drawings that makes them mysteriously suggestive but ultimately private. Sometimes, art shouts. Sometimes it whispers. It takes genuine curatorial sensitivity, and some humility, to let it speak as it should.



76. Installation view of Cy Twombly at Gagosian Gallery, London, showing (left to right) *Bacchus* (2006–08), *Untitled* (2001–02) and *Untitled* (2007). (All works © Cy Twombly Foundation. Image courtesy Gagosian Gallery. Photograph by Mike Bruce).

¹ Catalogue: *Early Mondrian: Painting 1900–1905*. Essays by Hans Janssen and Richard Shiff, with a preface by Karsten Schubert. 112 pp. incl. over 20 col. ills. (Ridinghouse, London, 2016), £17.95. ISBN 978-1-909932-19-7.

² Catalogue: *Gerhard Richter: Colour Charts*. Essays by Dietmar Elger, Hubertus Butin and Jaleh Mansoor. 140 pp. incl. 75 col. + 12 b. & w. ills. (Dominique Lévy, London, 2015), £50. ISBN 1-944379-01-0.

³ A three-volume catalogue with an essay by Briony Fer is forthcoming.