

Navigation. Blackness. By Sara Hartland-Rowe

Navigation is an ancient art that guides the movement of bodies through unknown spaces. The verticality of the human body, the horizontality of the ground under our feet, and the pull of gravity on both of these are the constants of human movement. Paradoxically, the first navigational tool, the constellations set in the night sky, was virtual. A disembodied, weightless, axis-free image was used as the trusted guide for bodily movement. *Zero Dimensions* considers space and movement through painting. With the simplest of means – paint striations in essentially monochrome painting – Daniel Hutchinson engages the viewer in a complex, spatial navigation of theatre and stadium, highlighting the body's relationship to gravity, horizontality and verticality, and virtual space.

In the earliest work in this exhibition (*Act I (Reprise)*), the viewer is situated in a seemingly stable relationship to the painted theatre. Although we seem suspended slightly above the horizon line, we could be standing on a balcony, and thus the scene is continuous with our embodied spatial logic. We seem to be invited into the scene. Yet within this logical space is the continual play of light on the surface of the painting. These shifts might be caused by one's own movement in front of the work, or of movement within the gallery, or even changes in light outside. And this flickering over the surface, as light catches and then passes over the ridged painting, implies a vivid life within the painting itself to which we are not privy and which we cannot hold. The stability of stage and perspective, of vantage-point, even of uniform black paint, is perpetually undermined by the ephemeral and indeterminate movement over – seemingly within – the painting.

A slightly later painting (*Act 2 (Reprise)*) increases this sense of an unknowable space with a wonderfully simple *coup-de-theatre* that acts as both visual and verbal pun. Again through the straight-forward use of directional brush-mark, Hutchinson marks out a polygon above the stage. This implies what in the theatre is called a baffle, a hidden panel used to adjust sound. If one reads this as a perspectival rectangle the spatial order of the painting remains constant and knowable. However, if it is read as a trapezoid, it undermines any continuous plane between viewer and the space of the painting, and becomes instead an opening into another, non-linear space, an intrusion into the otherwise perspectivally constant field. Now the paintings are alive with the movement of both light and space. It is a life existing inside the clean edge of the painting, elusive, ephemeral and unfixed.

Recent paintings build on a sense of spatial bafflement. In *Chichester*, we are thrown into a precipitous space. The stability of ground plane felt in earlier paintings now drops away. If we are on a balcony, it is one that stands high above the stage, looking into a Piranesi-like complex of stairs, platforms and columns. In a painting such as *Stratford Triptych*, the width of the painting means that just as one cannot finally define horizon or ground plane, nor can one fix what is visible – forms shift from light and seen, to soot black and lost. In the darkness of the painting, light catches on form to give a sense of up and down, near and far. But as the viewer moves, or the light in the gallery changes, these knowable fields disappear; the viewer must relocate the ground plane, the horizon, the vertical and the horizontal. Navigation. The body finding its way to unknown spaces.

Through all this is the dense blackness of the paintings. Black against white gallery walls, soot black, liquorice black. Black so deep that it stops being colour and surface, and turns into space.

In a painting such as *Seats*, the paint striations give a range of deep greys that describe ranks of seats set oblique to the viewer. The dark painting underlines a sense of invisibility. Looking at the seats, we cannot see the stage to know what is happening there. Equally, the empty seats don't face us, but look past us, at an angle from us. As one moves past the painting, rows of seats like tombstones are lit and then fade again into the shadows. We remain invisible outsiders, hushed by darkness.

This painting, like the others that precede it, is made by working onto the panel with directional brush-marks. For the most recent paintings in the show, Hutchinson has started to work onto other surfaces, paper and mylar, from which shapes are then cut and pasted to the panel. The blacks he is able to achieve with this process are astonishingly deep. *Stadium II*, made with a deep purple-black on mylar offers planes of the painting that seem to fall away into endless space. Light now moves through the painting like liquid, pouring into one area so that it blooms into sight, draining silently from another such that what was once readable as a painted surface disappears into what seems to be a bottomless void.

Hutchinson began the recent paintings with a computer program called 'Sketch-Up'. This program is of use to architects and planners, allowing them to quickly draw three-dimensional rectilinear forms with accurate perspective. Hutchinson uses it to create his complex, multi-storied and stair-cased spaces. But though the program begins with finding a horizon line, and fixing the vanishing point, it is a digital program. It alludes to embodied space; it is itself virtual. It is virtual space's detachment from gravity that we experience in the latest work. *Stadium II* is closer to El Lisstizky than Piranesi. Verticality, horizontality and especially gravity are now suspended. Navigation is movement through virtual space. And the black of these beautiful paintings is the endless black of the night sky.