

Institutional memories, speculative fictions, and coded (mis)understandings: Emma Bolland's constellations

Words by Derek Horton

Photography by James Clarkson

"...you do not need to know the construction of the code to understand its meaning—you do not need to understand its meaning in order to know the construction of the code—you do not need to understand the instructions in order to follow the instructions..."¹

Emma Bolland

However formally abstract a work of art may seem, it remains embedded within and reflective of its wider social and political context – abandoning mimesis and shunning 'the burden of representation' is essentially a political stance. Emma Bolland's concerns with science-fiction, speculative thinking, and coded (mis)understandings are evident in their work, as is the significant influence of its cultural and art historical lineage from early 20th century Modernism, perhaps especially that of Suprematism and the context of its social and political histories. As Briony Fer has written, "rather than a retreat from life, the first generation of abstract artists believed art could transform life and become an integral part of it. They thought it was about space and spatiality, and new realities; about a new kind of world and new ways of being a subject in the world."² In the early 21st century, Bolland is necessarily working in a very different historical context and



political climate, but early-Modernism's assertion of the social values and radical potentials inherent in abstraction, rather than the formalised detachment from meaning and human reality that it later came to represent, is crucial to their approach to abstract art making.

With the Stalinist betrayal of revolutionary communism, and the later circumstances of the Cold War, and a subsequent increasingly globalised capitalist economy, abstraction was, (for many, irredeemably) stripped of its political ideals and reduced to its formalist qualities, in order to make it palatable to a market-dominated art world. Modernist pioneers have become merely sources for appropriation rather than models of aspiration, syphoning off their original utopian vision to leave only the sad ghost of an idea and an empty visual style. In this context, where the cultural and historical circumstances that gave rise to the Modernist ideological understandings of Suprematist geometric abstraction no longer apply, is it possible to rehabilitate their human values and revolutionary fervour, or retain the utopian moment that they once represented? This question is one which, in a quietly unassuming but simultaneously passionate and determined way, Bolland is seeking to engage with, invoking perhaps what Susan Buck-Morss described as a nostalgia for the belief that a utopia is possible at all.³ Likewise, Esther Leslie has suggested that there might be "hope for the future in past potentials that didn't materialise", and that "their presence demonstrates that if these unfulfilled potentials are recognised, a sense of the potential inherent in our own historical moment might be uncovered [...] because a return to the past will determine for us what has been lost, what has been betrayed, and also what is yet possible."⁴ Viewed in this way, Bolland's work treats both its early-Modernist influences and its concern with individual memory as speculative and forward-looking rather than as a retrieval of the past.

Every viewer, bringing their own perspectives, will see in the work different things, but my first impressions were of constellations of circular forms, some elongated by the angle of view into ellipses – discs, planets, moons? pills, portholes, tabletops, targets? eyes, spotlights, lenses? – sometimes



delineated, always apparently in front of, and seemingly somehow separate from and more solid than the surfaces onto which they are painted, so that they appear almost as geometric shapes freely floating in space. The colours – pale, muted, matt, washed out, blues, greens, lilacs – are suggestive of hospital wards, waiting rooms, classrooms, or clinics, and reminiscent of many kinds of institutional interiors.

The colour palette of clinical spaces and the suggestion of institutional architectures is an implicit but not necessarily obvious reading of this work. In its formal structure there is no immediately apparent or decipherable narrative, but it is nonetheless underpinned by Bolland's emotional and psychological responses to their autobiographical memories and experiences of such places. Undisclosed and not explicitly visible, these influence the formal aspects of the work, taking it away from any sense of pure formalism or absolute abstraction. They might be intuited by some viewers, or suggested tangentially through the artist's statements and writings, or they may go entirely unnoticed, but within the formalist structures of the artist's schematic strategy and their intuitively improvisational approach to the work's materiality, there exists an underlying narrative. Deeply personal and drawing on their own sense of place, emotional resonances, and memories, even though unclear or perhaps deliberately obscured, this concealed narrative lends the work a psychological intensity, but is a narrative that is not reductive, and not essential to an appreciation of the work and its visual qualities.

Bolland's working method involves a carefully considered and constructed but incomplete and contingent articulation of visual decision-making that continually evolves and shifts. It is improvisational and intuitive, but within both externally determined and self-imposed constraints. Encountering this work involves a spatial as well as a visual experience. Whether moving through and around its makeshift structures, or taking in its shifting constellations of shape and colour from a static viewpoint, one is aware of an oscillation between a formal geometric rigour and an almost random sense of fluidity, generating infinite possibilities for the grouping and



regrouping of its formal elements. This indeterminate space is created through material transformations that retain a human scale, embracing the limitations of the body that makes them, but also pushing it to the full extent of those limits. One can sense the physical precarity involved in the single-handed making, moving and assembling of the larger components of the installation, and the bending and stretching to extend the lines and textures of the floor-to ceiling wall drawing, lending the work a tangible authenticity and relatability.

Something similar applies to the mostly mundane, everyday materials with which the work is made. The supports for the paintings are mostly box-like structures made from cardboard, simply held together with short lengths of masking tape, left deliberately on view to create visual glitches that contrast with the smooth and carefully painted surface of the coloured discs, alluding perhaps to the instability of images and slippages between frameworks of understanding.

These humble, even abject, cardboard supports are at odds with the pigments applied to them, which are made from marble dust and precious minerals, creating objects of an alluring material complexity. The presence of these mineral pigments also serves to reinforce the work's relation to architecture (ground marble and stone), value (amethyst and other precious materials), and transience (through the impermanence and instability of the construction). These aspects are further echoed by a large wall drawing made with chalk and pastels, by definition temporary and fugitive.

Instability, impermanence, slippage, transformation... It is significant that Emma Bolland is a writer as well as a visual artist, and these concepts are as pertinent to the concerns and the formal structure of their writing as they are to their art-making. Much of their writing has been concerned with acts of translation (between languages but also between modes of writing – narration, theory, poetry, and screenwriting, for example), and there are further parallels in the methods of assemblage that are mirrored between both aspects of their creative practice. Their strategy involves beginning





with individual elements, rather than a vision of the finished whole, elements that make sense of each other through combination, assembled gradually into an eventually coherent form. There is a kind of call-and-response between writing and the visual, between ideas and material forms, resulting in an open and generous practice that offers a model for thinking expansively about how the act of writing is intimately intertwined with the process of making physical objects. Bolland's profound interest in film and cinematic spaces of making ("from the other side of the lens", as they have described it) could be seen as a model for this process of assemblage that acts as a bridge that connects their writing and their art making.

Their most recent book, *Instructions from Light*, reminds us from its earliest pages that when we watch a film that unfolds as a sequential narrative, it has not been made in that way. Almost always, for practical and pragmatic reasons, individual scenes are shot out of sequence and assembled later in the editing process into the narrative storyline that enables us to experience the film as a coherent whole.

"...we experience the world twice in everything we do: once with the senses and again with language ... we are stranded, stranded in the gap between words and things, always switching from linguistic to material modes and back again, without ever finding a happy medium, doomed to live in the interstice between what is said and what is done, between the world of physical things and the words we use to denote them..."⁵

Sean Ashton

Rather than being 'stranded in the gap', Emma Bolland relishes it as a productive and creative space.



1 Emma Bolland, *Instructions from Light*: London, JOAN Publishing, 2023 (p.107).

2 Briony Fer, 'Abstraction at War with Itself', in Iwona Blazwick and Magnus Af Petersens (eds.), *Adventures of the Black Square: Abstract Art and Society 1915–2015*: London, Prestel and Whitechapel Gallery, 2015 (pp.225–6),

3 Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*: Cambridge, Massachusetts, MIT Press, 1989. She describes Benjamin's Arcades Project as evoking "a nostalgia, not for the phantasmagoric forms of an industrial utopia, but for the belief that a utopia is possible at all".

4 Esther Leslie, *Walter Benjamin: Overpowering Conformism*: London, Pluto Press, 2000 (pp.79,80).

5 Sean Ashton, *Massive Massive Oil Slick*: London, Ma Bibliothèque, 2025 (pp.20–21).



