

# ethan cook: lobstee

(rod barton gallery, london)

Cook's exhibition consists of a single 'woven' painting that occupies most of the right-hand wall, and a floor-based sculpture that sits opposite. The painting (*Untitled 2013*) comprises a 229 x 305 cm length of cotton canvas, into which Cook has stitched pieces of his own hand woven canvas to form a simple geometric composition – the difference in surface texture and slight shift in colour between the different pieces forms two faint rectangles. The sculpture, meanwhile, (*100 Planks (Tongue and Groove)*) is formed entirely of interlocking wooden planks that are connected via visible tongue and groove joints, in a uniform stack that is clearly reminiscent of Carl Andre's work with bricks.

## Interweaving elements

On entering the gallery, one recognises an immediate dialogue between the two objects, principally signalled by various formal parities – the themes are horizontality, natural colour and understatement – but the whole piece is as tightly woven as Cook's canvas, setting up a series of mutually dependent relationships between both the individual works themselves, and each fundamental element of their construction.

The painting features two stacked horizontal bars of muted tone (a larger, fleshy rectangle at the top, hovering above a slightly shorter, off-white one) and, since both shapes are formed only by unpainted pieces of Cook's hand woven canvas, the act of 'painting' actually becomes the act of weaving cotton threads together and sewing them into a prefabricated canvas. Consequently, the two faint shapes subtly emerge from a raw canvas ground in a manner akin to the stains of Colour Field painting, but Cook only utilises materials in their 'raw' form and applies no pigment.

Similarly, the sculpture's unstained wooden slats – again, stacked and horizontal – ascend from the raw wooden ground of the gallery floor, such that we are reminded of the subtle relationship between figure and ground in the painting. At the same time, the warp and weft of Cook's hand woven canvas – being essentially the only visual disruption of the comparably smooth ground – is a visual analogue to the sculpture's co-dependent planks. Both works also utilise an explicit technique in order to reveal the means of their construction to the viewer and, thus, the formal mirroring between the two objects works to both create a visual theme and, at the same time, bring to light some crucial aspects of Cook's thinking.

## Minimalist themes and the 'limits' of painting

The whole thing is, inescapably, Minimalist – with a capital M, composed of Andre's bricks and Robert Ryman's white bars or skin-toned squares. Cook, of course, consciously appropriates these tropes and thereby engages with the classic problems of formal economy, reduction, labour and the qualities of materials that plagued Donald Judd, Andre and their kin.

As Ryman investigated the quality of the isolated brushstroke, so Cook deals with the fundamentals of the

support, breaking the canvas down into its constituent threads and recasting them as materials to be employed in the production of art, not merely industry. It may be a bit of a stretch to see the woven canvas pieces as examples of the classic abstract grid, but, due to the subtlety of the surface differentiation, we are impelled to oscillate between a distant appreciation of the entire composition and a close inspection of the material's texture – as such, the focus of our gaze is, in part at least, the close mesh that shifts and contracts across the picture plane.

In addition, Cook's inclusion of both an archetypal minimalist sculpture and a formally minimal painting draws our attention to Judd's preoccupation with those 'specific objects' that are neither painting nor sculpture at all. The interest in the limits of materials and media surfaces in Judd's classic essay:

'Oil and canvas are familiar and, like the rectangular plane, have a certain quality and have limits. The quality is especially identified with art.'<sup>[1]</sup>

This resonates with Cook's decision to do away with paint itself and manipulate a canonically 'artistic' material like canvas – it does have a certain quality, and a certain caché, which is why the painting's textured surface presents a surprising visual excitement in spite of its superficial austerity, but also an awkward and immediate sense of *belonging*. We are drawn into the canvas's web, and left to recognise that it is as much a part of that comforting recognition of 'art' as the quality of oils: plenty of painters have revelled in the particular texture of paint, in its mixture of fluidity and resistance, but Cook can be seen as doing the same thing with the 'particular texture' of canvas. And why should that be secondary?

I suppose the question should be raised here about Cook's use of the word 'painting' in referring to what could be considered a work of textile design. Cook ably reminds us that painting was never really about paint (remember Rauschenberg?), but a particular set of artistic concerns. We could just as easily call it a tapestry or a drawing, but Cook's use of canvas is clearly significant as a nod to the sort of 'identification' that Judd recognises.

The sculpture is difficult in this regard; is *wood* as resonant as canvas? I'd say not. And can sculpture be conceived in such reductive terms? I suppose Cook's piece is an extruded whole, composed of individual elements – which satisfies some tentative definition of sculpture, but this all feels a little tired and underdeveloped in comparison to the deft use of bespoke canvas on the opposite wall. Of course, both pieces aren't simply 'about' reduction and the limits of materials, and just how well each piece does achieve a transcendence of these inescapably foregrounded themes, has a lot to do with the unequal persuasiveness of their proposals.

## **Saroyan and self-identity**

It helps to look at Cook's invocation of the minimalist poetry of Aram Saroyan, whose one-word poem *lobstee* lends its title to the exhibition. Saroyan's bread-and-butter is the deconstruction and reconstruction of words, focusing our attention on the alphabet as a set of combinatorial tools to be employed in unconventional word-building. His famous one-word poem *lightht* perfectly demonstrates his aim to disrupt meaning through subtle manipulations of letters, and instil an elusive poetry into a now quasi-meaningful word. The poem is not only minimalist in its isolation and modification of simple elements, but also in its intention to embody a sensation, rather than merely signal it.

Reflecting on Saroyan's uncanny ability to trigger subtly stirring sensations through a simple manipulation of small components, points to the complex balance at play in this sort of minimalist endeavour: that of reducing

the object *just enough* to both retain its poetic shimmer, its visual resonance, and also connect it to a framing idea without gratuity.

It becomes of crucial importance, then, as to whether the visual outcome of Cook's formal minimalism is simply a product of his apparent (ideological?) desire to use unadulterated materials. Cook is in danger, for example, of bastardising the canvas material by trying to make it do the job of paint, all to make an observation about its overlooked potential as a material and to go further in reducing the fundamentals of painting than others before him.

I think that the extent to which Cook avoids these charges must hang, to a great extent, on the success of the works as visual/spatial entities [2]. It seems clear to me that it's a story of two different works – the sculpture comes across as subordinate to the painting in a conceptual sense, and inferior in a formal one [3]. There is an asymmetry in the 'woven' structure of both pieces since the painting derives this quality from the inherent properties of canvas, while the sculpture secondarily derives its form from the painting. The painting dialogues with its own history and materiality, while the sculpture simply reiterates that conversation to us.

Equally, the painting captures some of the beauty of Saroyan's humbly invigorating wordplay, while the sculpture falls short in its lack of presence – when I saw reproductions of the painting before visiting the gallery, I worried that its constructed surface would be too perfect and shallow to invite intrigue. This preconception was definitely shattered in person; the painting is tender – with a fragility in its nakedness; a subtlety in that slight shift between coarse and smooth canvas; a pleasantness in its enveloping, fleshy colour; an elegance in the flawed balance of its two figures; and a literal tension in the tremulous lines that are formed by the seams.

There are small pulls in the sewn surface that belie first impressions and, since the canvas is stretched taut and fixed by an artist's frame, the individual pieces appear gently warped and pulled in all directions. It achieves the sort of effect that feels both artful and true to the material in the way that a well-executed brushstroke or pour might, rescuing Cook from the charge of a material deception and an arbitrariness in his use of canvas [4].

The sculpture, on the other hand, feels a little lifeless in comparison – its success is largely dependent on its role as an illumination of the complex mechanics at work in the painting, acting as a foil for its persuasive logic; which is fine, I suppose – if you're not a fan of sculpture.

Nevertheless, what is really successful about Cook's overall approach is that his understated visual ideas not only bear an isomorphic relationship to the sort of minimalist concerns raised above, but (in the painting at least) they emerge directly from their physical articulation in a wholly essential fashion. A central motif that runs through the exhibition is the idea of mutual dependence and necessity [5] – it would seem only right, then, that if the formal surface of the painting and the physical fact of the sculpture gesture beyond themselves, then it is only to the method and matter of their construction. And if they inspire any sensation or thought in the viewer, then it is not through allusion or invocation, but through a formal immediacy and an explicitness of purpose.

Consequently, the question is raised as to whether this reflexivity simply creates a closed circle of uncertain value, or an oblique, but real, connection to some galvanising truth.

## **Saroyan and language**

This is one of the biggest questions an (abstract) artwork has to answer to, and I don't think any individual work is really the place to locate such value. Rather, it's what the particular work lends to this ongoing endeavour that

is open to investigation, seen in relation to its Minimalist forebears and the task of concretising the abstract – to paraphrase Liam Gillick [6]. In other words, how does Cook – on the evidence of these artworks – apparently conceive of the *job* of Minimalism?

By way of illumination: in bringing Saroyan's work into play, Cook sets up a complex relationship between his art and language, calling to mind Andre's insistence that art is not linguistic and shouldn't be 'read' as having an external meaning. Although 'linguistic', Saroyan's work tallies with this view since he points to the fact that letters, partial words and even partial letters have multiple properties – phonetic, syntactic, semantic, *visual* – and the place of normatively established 'meaning' becomes ambiguous, smudged across all of them.

Cook appeals to this view by investigating those raw properties of canvas and wood that jostle for position in our attempts at 'interpretation', but the exercise can be in danger of appealing to an essentialism that hints at notions of purity and perfection in a formal and material austerity. In both the realms of language and art, we have precedents of such enterprises meeting abject failure – Wittgenstein attempted to 'perfect' language in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, but found the very nature of communicative or meaningful language to be too metaphysically slippery for the task.

I somewhat doubt that art, aesthetics, the ontological nature of painting, or whatever we want to call it, is any more amenable to the task, and if Cook's (or Minimalism's) aim was to present an image of order and *absolute* necessity in these stripped-back, reduced, woven and integrated objects, then the whole project would surely be doomed. On the contrary, Cook leaves us some wiggle room in the subtle flaws of his execution, the softly stirring quality of his muted colour and the fragile tenor of the sewed lines – in the sense that we might not be solely attempting to find beauty and meaning in perfect systems but in the quivering bits of humanity that seep out of flawed attempts to distil and organise the irreducible.

This is, in essence, what Minimalism is all about.

## Notes

[1] Judd, D., 'Specific Objects', 1964

[2] Do they go to *work*, or are they stand-ins for an exercise in theory as Kosuth's art so often was?

[3] This may well reflect Cook's own thinking since the sculpture is 'site-specific', being related to the gallery floor, and, therefore, in a very real sense an afterthought.

[4] The converse would be, say, Jeff Koons' balloon animals fashioned in metal or Gavin Turk's bronze casts of familiar objects; they're ostensibly 'about' materials and object-hood but end up telling us nothing about either. It's a simple deception; an instance of illusion or banal representation – which Cook's piece might have been, had it not been as well executed and sensitive to the canvas material.

[5] The reliance of each cotton thread or plank on those it weaves into; the employment of only essential materials; and the strict dependence of Saroyan's poetic punch on the immanent properties of the tools he employs.

[6] Gillick, L. 'Abstract', 2011 in *Abstraction*, (Whitechapel Gallery, 2013)