

Gary Stephan: *Tape on Paper*

“What you see is what you see”

Frank Stella (1966)¹

What is renewed in each work here, and each time differently, is the enactment of impossible relations that don't appear in what we usually agree to call the real world, and yet these works would convince us otherwise. This causes us to reevaluate: at a primal level of cognition these possibilities surely exist but are out of our conscious reach. We see this with our own eyes: unarguably what you see is what you see. The paradox is as confounding as it is convincing. All this is here within the ongoing tradition of pictorial painting and drawing.

As far as we know, this tradition began as drawing, and concerned the scale and movement of animals presented with extreme simplicity directly onto the static surface of a cave wall. Using repetition, scale and juxtaposition, movement and proximity were effectively communicated with an uncanny realism rather than verisimilitude. Painting and drawing still maintain this possibility though it's rarely so astonishing. Such directness, as here, where nothing more complicated than tape applied to paper is used, we are reminded of the power and possibilities of such brevity— surface facture is declarative—the tape, however prosaic, conjures extraordinary visual facts right before our eyes. Inviting, perturbing, and undermining both expectations and pictorial conventions—this is a different visual space from any other that you have already encountered.

To be able to add to millennia of invention in a medium that is not here extended into, or overloaded with, novel additions seeking to detract or perhaps entertain— just the opposite here, reduced to its bare functioning bones and yet still cognitively and perceptually untamable—is extraordinary. This is not a puzzle that conforms like a riddle solved. As the eye engages the configuration it reforms as constituent parts of the image change given where the eye settles. Actually, settling could be said to be the opposite of what happens as the image remains active, modifying as we look from part to part of the composition as we spend more time looking.

Historically there are intuitions of this that are embedded in paintings that have other ostensible purpose: Manet for instance partially appeased the desire for a depiction whilst also contradicting pictorial conventions by having the actual view not conform to perspective or even the passage of form from one side to the other behind a depicted object. This constitutes a hint at a full-blown address via pictorial contradiction that insists that we look and don't just presume when we regard the world, that we make ourselves aware of imposed conventions.

It is worth describing one of the works here in some detail in an attempt to account for the ways in which, however differently, all the works function with such complexity. In “20” (2019), one continuous line moves left to right from top to bottom. White narrow horizontals of varying widths and lengths are formed from this descending line each time it turns after dropping vertically. Alternately, on each level, one of the vertical lines closes one end of the white rectangle whilst the turn and descent of the continuous line closes the other end. The thickness of the tape changes and so the position on the white rectangle between the lines also changes. As these lines are thicker overall at the top and gradually become thinner toward the bottom, the top part of the work reads forward initially. The tape is not cut to be squared off at every turn of direction, there are overlaps of tape and a line can run slightly longer than the descending line—another visual variety, utilitarian in itself but nuanced in its effect. In other works, white tape is also used, and when it overlaps black it appears gray—at times the black tape beneath is torn and not cut, revealing another kind of edge or drawing. The width of the composition narrows toward the center. The composition is not symmetrical, either side sees the horizontal lines reach different distances from the edge of the sheet, and, as the eye travels horizontally the alternating passage of the descending line refuses anything but change and movement. How can the work “move,” well, we see what we see.

Peter Schjeldahl in 1999² referenced in writing on Stephan’s paintings Marianne Moore’s definition of poetry: “imaginary gardens with real roads in them.” And added, “Stephan’s past mastery of pictorial ambiguity takes on new urgency to the extent that our attention to it is newly searchingly and anxious.” There is also in this, as Schjeldahl goes on to state, real pleasure in visual fiction. Here any dissonance is not accidental or a midway to truth, but part of a disequilibrium natural to our human condition.

So much happens with such apparently reduced means it questions the very habits of what painting is or can be. Reductive here is somewhat inappropriate—is a sonnet reductive? Each element of these works count, there is nowhere to hide or digress, nothing is hidden. The limit of means is productive. A lot has been said about the directness of drawing as opposed to painting. There is no preparatory dimension with a drawing, its often a mystery where it comes from, whether pencil, charcoal or, in this case tape. The materials co-author to a degree, not as in the conceit of automatism, but in the artist’s willingness to respond or reject a material’s own clearly observable qualities. Opposites are present and welcomed in these works: black, white, negative, positive, horizontal, vertical; but not synthesized, they remain discrete and independent interlocutors in a fragmented yet coherent space, a dialectic of unfixed telos. Stephan is a surrealist realist, using the rigorous tools of a, in his hands, still vital modernism.

David Rhodes

¹ Stella's remark is taken as a statement of rejection of Abstract Expressionism and of the turn to minimalism. However, Stephan's use of this remark is not reductive but in fact vertiginous in holding the viewer to the dynamics of perception and cognition.

² Same Body Different Day, catalog essay for a travelling exhibition of Stephan's paintings made between 1988 – 1998.