

Michael Duncan

New Worlds of Colour

Richard Hennessy takes abstraction into outer space



Richard Hennessy. Photo: Evelyn JJofer

What's happened to abstraction? The new work hyped in LA, London, Germany and New York seems like remnants of the glory days: a handful of hamfisted doodads or squiggles; a pile of blobs on raw canvas; a blown-up simulation of a brush-stroke. Paintings are pumped up by bogus theories, manically cobbled together, justified by slacker anomie and postmodern jitters. Help!

Perhaps to blame is the fact that, when everything imaginable in the art world is fair game, formal taboos still limit abstraction. Banished by Clement Greenberg, perspectival space and anything that broaches the decorative continue to be considered outré or beyond the pale. Even painters as decorator-friendly as Lari Pittman, Gary Hume and Matthew Ritchie maintain conventionally flat picture planes. But in an art world that now welcomes theatricality and narrative, why should artists deny themselves the traditional tools to convey illusionistic pleasure and visual delight?

Like a colour-mad monk turned off by abstraction's New Dark Age, painter Richard

Hennessy is sequestered in his Manhattan studio just below 96th Street, making rich, complex paintings that thrust vibrant colour-forms into other-worldly illusionistic space. Although absent from the gallery scene since the mid-80s, he has for the past 25 years developed a painterly vocabulary schooled on classical compositions, employing a full range of brushwork, surface variation and, most masterfully, exquisite colour.

Hennessy makes the radical presumption that abstract compositions can be as rigorous, intricate and full of incident as those of the old masters. In his works it is as if the stately theatricality of Poussin had been toyed with by a Cubist, embellished with the *zaftig* swirls of the Baroque, and thrust into the deep space of a Rococo ceiling painting. While quintessentially 'painterly' – with virtuosic brushwork and meticulous construction – his paintings zing with 3-D effects, casting viewers into the colour-zone vortex. As a manipulator of space, Hennessy has no rivals. When compared, Frank Stella's reliefs seem garish *mélanges*, Elizabeth Murray's

shaped canvases seem clutzy and mundane, David Hockney's abstract paintings seem dull and obvious. There are no dead passages in Hennessy's paintings; they throb with wildly reticulated life, pulsing with a love for motion, line and colour.

Hennessy's earliest works were sharp-edged geometric pattern paintings that used abrupt colour shifts to interrupt their structures. With increasing sophistication, he has continued to use colour contrasts to dramatise, dispel, or spice up geometric or architectural constructs. The candy-coloured, plaid black-hole of *Abyssness* (1990), for example, uses stream-like washes of bright yellow and a transparent blur of red to point attention into the work's central vortex. Smaller, rogue, spiralling lines whirl into the O-ring shape, sucking in the viewer's gaze.

Liberated from depictive verisimilitude, Hennessy distils to essences the formal elements of traditional landscapes, still lifes and history paintings. Using a variety of busy effects, he tweaks these traditional, perspectival modes of organising space with the revolutionary spatial breakthroughs of his modernist idols, Matisse, Picasso and de Kooning. His control of painterly gambits such as translucent veils, colour after-effects, and variegated brushwork add a kind of all-over interest and drama. Foreshortening of shapes and strokes as well as variation in the size of forms gives the paintings rich, abundant contours. Mitigating puissance with lyricism, the results are dynamic, layered compositions that aim not 'for comprehension but for comprehensiveness' – to borrow Hennessy's own phrase praising the complexity of de Kooning and Dubuffet.

The notion of 'comprehensiveness' seems essential to Hennessy's enterprise, as he packs visual information into configurations that at first jar contemporary eyes stupefied by one-hit wonders and evanescent visual bytes. In *Setting the Stage* (1993), for example, magenta and lemon-yellow circles and stripes serve as theatrical devices to animate a deep red, orb-like platform embellished with aqueous forms. Diaphanous oval veils focus attention within the stage-set like spotlights, as if preparing for the grand entrance of a major star.

In Hennessy's visual theatre, 'space' is a primary actor in a leading role – a coloratura diva, mouth open. Like a singer's warm-up exercise, the small painting *Twist and Tuck* (1994), for example, flaunts its spatial illusion, tricking the viewer into believing that the thick scarf-form that twirls in on itself



top: Richard Hennessy, *Abyss*, 1990, oil on canvas, 124.5 x 157.5 cm

bottom: Richard Hennessy, *Lens*, 1991, oil on board, 50.8 x 40.6 cm

Moebius strip-like is a single brush-stroke – despite its variegated colours and densely painted passages.

Punning with the notion of ‘outer space’, many of Hennessy’s paintings cop imagery from the realm of science fiction. Clashing asteroids, sprawling space stations, sunbursts and blossoming nebulae are truly cosmic abstractions, suggesting imaginary astronomical realms that are wild alternatives to the quotidian. In *Advancing Warm Front* (1993), Hennessy seemingly choreographs weather systems, displaying dancing white, green and red vectors along a gridded yellow sphere. The clusters of squiggles and fingers hugging the edge of the midnight blue orb in *Crown of Desire* (1992) are like multicoloured kites and satellites drawn in by gravitational pull. In *Lens* (1991), sunbursts radiate out of a black hole that crowds out giant wheel-like projectiles and a hovering pink and red blimp.

Toying with perspectival space, these moving or shifting spheres and masses at the same time play off ordinary configurations of objects, serving as what might be thought of as ‘unstilled lives’. Hennessy’s compositions sidestep the iconic, emphasising bodies caught in flux. Painting is a kind of activator, taking the eye on a visual trip.

Nature, too, is a kind of launching pad for Hennessy. With its ochres and grey-tinged yellows, *Autumn Gold* (1997) presents thick

wormlike brush-strokes that emulate the windswept trajectories of fallen leaves. Other intense colour studies seem inspired by landscapes and seascapes. *Cresting* (1991) employs layered wavelike embellishments, thrust along by multicoloured, surfing egg shapes.

Hennessy has celebrated Matisse’s ability to sculpt in colour. His large-scale tribute to the artist, *The Rumanian Blouse Hurrah* (1993), transforms Matisse’s well-known painting of a full-sleeved female torso into a blue, pulsing, multi-layered heart. Matisse’s masterful toying with scale in textile patterning inspires the unleashing of decorative swirls, crosshatches and dots that animate so many of Hennessy’s works. Matissean good-humour mitigates the Rococo explosiveness of Hennessy’s paintings; they, too, seem products of a domesticised sensibility with a penchant for decorative effects.

But the gratification of visual pleasure does not obviate the ambition or seriousness of the work. Hennessy scorns what he calls the ‘petty, suffocating notions of personality’ that our culture encourages, advocating instead that an artist struggle ‘to not be himself: to lose himself in his art, in possibility, in the infinite’. Performing a kind of miracle of the imagination, Hennessy ventures into uncharted realms, making abstraction – of all things – seem shockingly fresh, unexplored terrain. □