To See or Not to See: Pareidolias and Abstract Painting
Dr Tom Palin

Introduction
This is a presentation about what abstract painting looks like, and about the extent to which looking like can be written into the possibility of how it is that abstract paintings function. It might seem odd that, in a paper about seeing, there are no images, but more on this later. For now, a few words on limitations and intentions: I will not dwell on arguments for or against abstraction as idea, or privilege one form of painting over another (or painter, for that matter), although I will, on occasion, consider types of configuration. I will deal mostly with the possibilities of picturing, and therefore my points don’t, as such, come with strict temporal handles. However, a consideration of British abstract paintings of the 1980s affords an opportunity to think through some ideas. The pluralisation of approaches to painting in the aftermath of debates around the legacies of Minimalism and Conceptual Art; the lavishness of installation practices; the re-emergence of figuration and expressionism; and a renewal of interest in the workings of language serve to delimit the 1980s as a time of considerable importance. I hope here, then, to float a number of thoughts about seeing and recognition above the image and practice of painting, so as to prod at the perceptual margins of abstraction.

So what does abstract painting of the 1980s look like? Well, I’ve decided I’m not going to tell you...by which I mean: that it looks a certain way (bright, big, flat etc) is not to be confused with it looking like something. Nevertheless, there are certainly painterly particularities to consider: to do with scale, surface, method, intention and display. And it is rather difficult to look only, and to avoid forms of contextualisation. There are problems, also, that result from the requirement of circumscription. With regard to the sort of abstract paintings that might exemplify the concerns of the time, is it
reasonable to consider the work of young painters whose practices, by the
tail end of the decade, had not yet matured, or of much older painters with
allegiances to earlier traditions, whose output nevertheless spilled into the
1980s? Might it be more revealing - at least in respect of what it is that
abstract painting can be seen to represent - to look at what happened within
British educational institutions during that time? What was being taught
about abstraction; which discourses were proving dominant; who was
persuading whom? And what of the role of seeing and not seeing?

When I think of British abstract paintings of the 1980s I think of geometry,
hard edges, strong colours and flattened shapes. I think also of brushy
impastos, grand gestures, pouring, scraping and formlessness. I think of the
last of the St Yves painters as providing links between British abstraction of
the 1980s and even earlier British abstraction, and also between British
abstraction and its American and Continental forbears. I think of the work of
the painters who taught me during my time at Liverpool Art School in the
early-mid 1990s. I think of attitudes to subjectivity. I think of boats. Would it
be fair to suggest that abstraction in the 1980s was able to function as
something like a genre of painting—a rich vein that one could choose to
mine, irrespective of one’s situatedness? Countering this idea is the historical
view of abstract painting as bounded; as a series of related events, emergent
activities and patterns of thought whose traits draw from the dual
contingencies of time and place. However abstract painting comported itself
then, what remains now is to be looked at.

So what is Pareidolia?
Pareidolia is the perception of significant patterns within random shapes: it
is a subcategory of apophenia (a term that takes in all forms of unmotivated
connections between things). The word significant is important, and I will
return to it when considering distinctions of type. Examples of pareidolia
would include: faces in the wallpaper (or on Mars) and Jesus in the
tealeaves. The term derives from Greek, and means beside (or instead of)
shape. Pareidolia denotes a manner of response to visual stimuli, where the
particular configuration prompts the subsequent determination of the form as a picture of. Once seen, it is difficult to unsee (picturing has entered by the back door). Most often it is the human face - full face or in profile - that crops up: though animals, landscapes, buildings and objects of one sort or another are also rather common. Leonardo da Vinci wrote in his notebooks of this phenomenon, describing it as, in effect, an inventive method by which artists might overcome something like fifteenth century painter’s block, in the conjuring of a host of productive associations.

Within painting, Max Ernst most famously employed a range of processes that more readily promoted imagery (especially preidolias of the forest kind), daring strange things to appear. In his frottages and grattages of the mid-late 1920s; or in his experiments with decalcomania from the late 1930s; or even with the oscillating, dripping cans of paint that hung from his studio ceiling in the early 1940s, Ernst relished the relinquishing of control. The appeal of finding rather than determining an image served to position the painter as one highly attuned to the possibilities of picturing, yet, at the same time, notably resistant to what he called, ‘fixed memories’.

Almost by definition, Surrealism was conditioned by an idea of the symbolic content of pictures. Yet abstraction, it would seem, appealed to something else. And so, surely, to impose a representational, figurative reading onto an abstract painting would be to misread it? If, by misreading, one means to disregard the intentions of the maker, or to ignore the setting in which a work becomes established as a work, or to import an ill-fitting theoretical framework, then I would have to agree. However, any suspicion of misreading comes complete with a presumption not only that a work can in fact be understood, but also that understanding is, in some sense, a result of reading correctly.

At Liverpool Art School in the early 1990s, reading correctly meant paying attention to a work’s internal dynamics, whilst remaining aware of debates that permitted these dynamics to be spoken of. Abstraction appeared
naturalised as something painters simply did. Figurative painters were given a harder time in tutorials and crits, though, interestingly; there was also a sense that abstraction perhaps had something to do with landscape. Minimalism and a tough conceptualism were still discussed aplenty, and though young British artists occupied the headlines, whatever it was they, in fact, represented, there was scepticism among the staff as to its value. Abstraction acted as a form of defence. The feeling was that it was not only possible, but also rather desirable to make abstract paintings. After all, with very few exceptions, most of the painting tutors in Liverpool did. I noted, also, how figurative painting was deemed good when it aspired to abstract concerns, and abstraction rather less good when it let in picturing.

A key point about pareidolias is that they depend entirely on prior knowledge of (this, that or the other). In following Wittgenstein’s distinction - later explored by W. J. T. Mitchell - between seeing and seeing as, to see as would be to see what one had seen before; in the sense that, to see as requires an approximation between the seen and the likened to. In respect of how it is that pareidolias operate, there appear to be two types to consider. The first, and most dramatic, is the startling awareness of a recognisable face (or object). Aside from those already mentioned, cartoon characters with large ears, eyes, noses or beaks appear often. Such forms cement their identities suddenly.

What I will call type two pareidolia denotes a more general sense of spatiality within the surface of a painting that, in the particularity of its arrangement, approximates to something with which one is familiar. At first sight, this appears to be of another phenomenon. However, keep in mind that to reside within the category of pareidolia requires only that the spectator first take the work to not be a picture of (prior to seeing aspects of it otherwise) and then to be surprised by subsequent encounters. Any indeterminacy of response, I would argue, results from an inability to name or to remember with accuracy the image-aspect of one’s more habitual encounters. To map aggregates of edge, colour, shape, texture, tone and
overlap onto a painting's formal configuration is to draw from one’s repository of visual encounters with the world.

The recognition of a familiar pattern in a painting is thus dependent on a perceptual alignment between what it is that the painting permits and what it is that the spectator is able to bring to the table. To bring more is to have seen more. And what it is that a painting permits becomes expanded as the painting becomes busier. By busier I mean something like: containing a range of elements that might increase the likelihood of seeing a picture. The juxtaposition of discontinuous formal elements; an interruption of predictable pattern making; an irregular play of spatial ambiguities; and the presence of lively brushwork therefore tend to offer up rich pareidolic rewards of the former type.

Sparseness of design, sharpness of edge, the downplaying of difference, and minimal signs of manual interference permit fewer surprises. And yet, in the concession to aerial perspective (and sometimes to linear perspective), or in signs of occlusion - in respect of design or mark - or, most commonly, through a mobilisation of an effect of light and shade - the result of close harmonies or worldly tonal shifts (how it is that light falls upon objects) - the painting concedes ground to picturing. Windows, doorways, steps, horizons, vistas of one sort of another, a sense of seeing past an edge, or into a corner—all would constitute illusionistic readings. Is, then, an anonymous face on Mars any more significant that an unnameable instance of horizon on Earth?

When the Swiss Art Historian Heinrich Wölfflin stated that: ‘not all things are possible at all times’, he pointed out that artistic capital draws from preoccupations that, in respect of the plastic arts, become reflected in the structures of objects of cultural production. Art works don’t choose to deal with the particularities of their time and place; they are, to borrow the words of Hubert Dreyfus, amongst it all from the off.
Although, when considering pareidolia, I am primarily concerned with response rather than cause, it is worth reflecting on the extent to which mechanical reproduction - or the proliferation of images - serves to facilitate the acquisition of a repository of recall.

Seventy years of abstract painting preceded the 1980s. I remind you of this in order that you might also include abstract painting within the category of images with which one is familiar. Once there is some familiarity with the look of abstract paintings - the spectator is able to incorporate them within a conception of what it is possible to see in other abstract paintings. This has nothing to do with influence or intention, only with response, though, as the first responder to the work the painter is included within my conception of spectatorship. It seems paradoxical that a mode of painting that stands opposed to conventional notions of picturing might be reclaimed for picturing - not by reproduction per se, but by the possibility of a picture of a painting turning up in a later painting made by another painter equally intent on downplaying the role of mimesis.

I decided, as I mentioned earlier, not to include images with this presentation, and for the following reason. To pinpoint a decisive instance of pareidolia in a painting would be to miss the point, namely: that pareidolias are not in the painting, as such, but made possible because of an alignment between what it is conceivable to see (as a result of the painting’s particular arrangement) and what one then sees and, prompted by the painting, is able to see again. When thinking about the possibilities of either type of pareidolia it seems more fitting to find one’s own examples, and to scour paintings from the period in question in an attempt to downplay ideological predispositions in favour of an openness to one’s perceptive apparatus. It is important, too, to state that pareidolias are not interpretations. Interpretations require one to begin with a knowable state of affairs, then to translate whatever the initial encounter is into something else. If pareidolias permit room for manoeuvre, it is somewhat marginal. Donald Duck might, at a stretch, become Daffy or even Daisy Duck, but he’ll never become Mickey Mouse.
On Language

The idea of a language of abstract painting, or of abstract painting as language, is useful here. I use the term *language* to denote the means by which the meaning of an abstract painting becomes apparent. Whether or not pictures are actually a language - or are to be designated a subdivision of language - is an aside (I cast doubt on this because verbal and/or written languages appear to be dependant on the possibility of translation, and aside perhaps from digitisation, I can’t find a equivalent to translation that works for pictures). This aside, what can be made of the visuality of abstract paintings, and how might one equip oneself to approach them? How is it that *this* form of abstraction diverges from *that* form, and where do these differences stand in respect of what is seen not to be abstract? Is it possible to ring-fence the limits of perception?

*My concern is centred, for the most part, on spectatorship; in particular, on what it is to look at and, thus, to work with the artefacts of painting. To be with a painting is to take in that which, under some aspect or other, sits in proximity to oneself. And oneself, here, designates something like the spectator only. I hope that you don’t take this as in any sense a critique of subjectivity, and, as a painter, I certainly wouldn’t want to downplay the worth of a painter’s choices. Rather, it is to see those choices as, in the first instance, able to be made at all; and by made I mean *made sense of*. Nor would I wish to offer up a critique of objectivity if, as I understand it, the notion of objectivity supports an idea of painting as *other*—as an external thing with properties. To dwell on the *language* of painting is to consider painting as a game forever played with others.*

In 1924, in *The Artist and Psycho-analysis*, Roger Fry attempted to protect the formal integrity of the artwork in opposition to what he called: ‘wish-
fulfilment’, which he saw only as bolstered by the psychoanalytical method as it was in its then early form. However, to find in a painting what it is that one wishes to find is not the same thing as coming across what it is that one hopes not to come across. To come across pictures within abstract paintings might, to some, be rather unfortunate, but, nevertheless, that abstract paintings permit picturing to take place in the first instance would appear to be meaningful. The logic of picturing conditions much of what we take paintings to be. Dripping, smearing, staining, masking, brushing, layering etc attest to manual activities, and are usually considered in respect of notions of tactility, time, authorship, intentionality, movement or play. Seeing, however, is indicative of language-use.

To Conclude
From its earliest European beginnings, abstract painting had to contend with pictures: for it was the picture that supplied – in its negation – the fulcrum around which abstract painting acquired its sense. Whatever abstract painting once was, or later became, its designation – as abstract – necessitated only that it relinquish the requirement of a proximal, visual alignment with the world of things—a world that the object of painting would come to find itself within. And I use the word find – as in an act of discovery – because the idea of siting pictorial space in opposition to literal space had not been fleshed out within discourse by the time of abstract painting’s emergence. I’m not dealing with the Greenberg - Fried - October debates here – but it is worth remembering that by the beginning of the 1980s, discussions of abstraction had to contend with questions of history, context, concept, endism and objecthood.

Pareidolias are more than a quirk of seeing. Moreover, that it remains possible to ascribe pictures to paintings – to, as it were, force the issue – is useful to a painter. It permits one to more clearly locate the perceptual/conceptual imbrication, and, in so doing, to establish an operational base from which to advance the painting. Seeing Jesus in the tealeaves in not a concept, but choosing to groom his beard or to supress his
image in favour of a something else is. Such decisions evidence ideas: from here one can do, change, hide, extend or subvert. Pareidolias, then, offer reminders of the processes of working back from: not simply from pictures, but from having to follow them unquestioningly. A painting’s meaning cannot be deemed commensurate with what it looks like, but neither can what it looks like be extracted from what it is without abandoning the work to the vagaries of unfounded claim and counterclaim.

Pareidolias are abstract painting’s elephant in the room. Yet I’d like to suggest it is not the pareidolias we see that are most important (though they might be more or less interesting). It is those we do not to see. By this I contend that to not see is to, in short, suspend the effect of picturing in favour of something else...an absence...an idea of autonomy from the artifice of picturing even: a wanted separateness from the world of things. This suspension - be it desired or acquired - could conceivably arise from a willingness to make present that which picturing can all too easily dissolve.

The possibility of a pareidolia in a painting acts as a perceptual brake on the idea of a liberation from likeness. In favour of abstraction, I would argue, paradoxically, that the degree to which the spectator resists the pull of pareidolic possibility serves to foreground one’s awareness of the operability of pictures: if there is no recourse to switch them off, there is, perhaps, the prospect of bringing about the sense of a pause. Pareidolias are pictures that we do not intend to make; yet we succumb to their effects. They emerge, surprise and linger. They operate with or without authorial intention.

There can be pictures without painting, but not, it seems, a painting without a picture.

Thank you.

Dr Tom Palin