

PIP DICKENS

Toward the Light

## The Alchemy of the Surface: The Paintings of Pip Dickens



*Angels on the Head of a Pin*, oil on canvas, 61.5 cm x 45 cm, 2010

“I’ve heard it said,  
Painting is dead.  
Too much mouth  
Not enough eyes.”

Brice Marden, 1991

*'The omnipresence of chance: the unpredictable, unavoidable and uncontrollable contingencies always around us and within us, offer variables of which we may be hardly if at all conscious but which nevertheless affect the outcome of everything we do.'*

David Batchelor [1]

Painting, as an art form has certain things in common with the transformative science of alchemy, they share an esoteric aura, there are certain secrets, tricks and illusionary effects that they each accumulate through the sequential experiences of experimentation and discovery, they generate intrigue and wonder in equal measure in the viewer or the audience, they both invite us to question our jaded perception of the world. Alchemy has been denounced and disowned, painting has repeatedly been declared dead, however, they still both fascinate, as they empower and seduce our urge to imagine. The realms of possibility have always been more engaging and attractive than the archives of certainty, fact and fiction have always had a complicated relationship within which, nevertheless, divorce is unthinkable. The realm of the possible has always to be anchored in reality, but things only get exciting and unpredictable when possibility begins to drag that anchor, Dickens paintings, it must be said, both stretch possibilities, and drag the anchors of expectation.

Pip Dickens is an inveterate flirter with the alchemy of paint. In her paintings the hegemony of surface is constantly usurped. If the alchemist was consumed by the desire to convert base metal into gold, then Dickens is consumed by the need to transform a flat two-dimensional surface into a platform from which the access into an ambiguous three-dimensional space can be achieved. Her paintings operate on several levels, however, not just those of dimensionality, but also those

of meaning, reference and the aesthetic. The laminae of their complex ontology perform a slow choreography in Dickens' paintings, we are offered various options as to how to perceive them, there is the abstract, there is the topographical and there is the narrative, each offering us an entry into either the reality of the illusion or the illusions of reality. As in Salome's 'Dance of the Seven Veils', as we accept the invitation to enter into her paintings, Dickens reveals to us layer after layer of meaning, leading to an ultimate essence, the perception of which will always be uniquely our own.

If we are to give credence to an artist's vision we are obliged to enter into a suspension of disbelief. We are not witnessing here simply the adroit application of paint to a two dimensional support, we are not even witnessing the pictorial reproduction of some 'thing', but we are being allowed the privilege of entering into a private world, where any 'thingness' is not only unique, but mutable, this is a world that most of us keep hidden, not necessarily because we are secretive, but because we don't possess the means or the skills to express it.

Dickens' 'Katagami' series of paintings and sketches are predicated on the precision of Japanese aesthetic parameters. Katagami stencils have been an integral part of the Japanese textile industry – an essential component in the printing and dyeing of fabrics, particularly those used in the creation of kimonos – over the past five centuries, their aesthetic is rooted therefore in the expediency of the textile production process, they are the means to an end, namely the creation of patterns for the printing of textiles. Dickens, in her paintings based on this art form, has set free the rather rigid, expedient rhythms, of these stencils and, without diminishing



*'Katagami no. 6'*, oil on paper

their perennial aesthetic appeal, she has transformed them into something far looser and more poetic, something more intriguing, while both respecting, and empathising with the power of their inheritance, she has loosened and opened up the incipient energies of Katagami stencils without denying the integrity of their sources. Dickens demonstrates a genuine sensitivity for the traditional precursors of her work, while making them totally accessible, and relevant to a contemporary western audience. Her painting, 'Harvest of the Bees' exemplifies this approach perfectly, poised precariously between the predictability of pattern and the play of permutation, this work draws us unflinchingly into the ambivalence of abstraction it is a visual strategy that plays on our need to classify, we are caught short here by the pure serendipity of floating forms, with their seductive surface textures, and the lure of a predicated limbo. The freedom of her brushstrokes contradicts the demands of the pattern that they extemporise upon. Intuition comes into play here as it both transcends and undermines the structure of intention. This is process painting bowing to the kaleidoscopic and its appeal is a mesmeric one, this could be an homage to the American painter Ross Bleckner, a series of anarchic organic diversions from that painter's repetitively monochrome syncopations, or perhaps the flawed, smudged patterns of that other American, Gary Simmons.

The 'Moiré' series of striped paintings emerges, so it would seem, to impose one surface upon another to such an extent that we cannot be sure of where each meets the other, so ambivalent are their inter-relationships that complex narrative traces begins to emerge from their interaction. We become transfixed by the inter-weavings of their pictorial connotations. To describe something as esoteric is a cop-out, these



'Harvest of the Bees', oil on paper

paintings that Dickens presents us with are something more insistent than that. They entreat us to make a detour from our daily perambulations, they ask us to question and challenge the ordinary, they present the divergent, without any qualms or traces of self-consciousness, they matter-of-factly challenge the quotidian, trash the taken-for-granted, transform the traditional. Dickens' paintings are more than just interesting a concept that damns with its faint praise they are insistent, incised through intimations of the infinite, inscribed by the playful marks of the indefinite, layered by superimpositions of the supernatural, their message has been won through complex negotiations between the rational and the intuitive, the contingent and the rash. Any beauty here arises not merely from an urge towards perfection, nor any preciousness, but is simply a resonant spin-off from this process, it excels itself through the denigration of deliberation, through the play of serendipity, the slipperiness of chance. In his work, *The Psychology of the Imagination*, Jean-Paul Sartre wrote, "Beauty is a value applicable only to the imaginary and which means the negation of the world in its essential structure"[2]. It seems that Dickens' paintings corroborate this statement perfectly. We become mesmerised by the dazzling display of her deliciously repetitive marks and lines, repetitions that, skewed by her imagination are, however, predicated upon the variations and evolutions within the pattern once again the oxymoron strikes. We become grist to the mill of the negotiations between the random and the repetitive, between fantasy, fiction and a rapidly diminishing factual. As aesthetic as they might seem at first glance, Dickens' paintings are underscored by an anarchic yet subtle wilfulness that undermines any tendency towards perfection, they live more as co-ordinates than objects, they guide rather than define, they please rather than predicate, they are soul rather



'Venus Freak', oil on canvas

than scientific dictum. Most of all they image, or rather imagine the 'other'. In his book, *The Ground of the Image*, the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy writes, "In the ground of the image there is the imagination and in the ground of the imagination there is the other, the look of the other, that is, the look onto the other and the other as look... The image is first of all other and from the other, altered and altering." [3] The 'other', as conveyed in Dickens' paintings is a compilation of depictions of the other that continually surprises, and continually alters our conception of the other.

Pip Dickens allows the paint to lead her negotiations; hers is neither a safari through the indefinite, nor a perambulation through the ordinary, but an adventure that explores the plasticity of paint against the potential intractability of the painted surface. She loves the imponderables of the painting process, thrives on the permutations triggered by mistake and accident, pays homage at the shrine of serendipity and swears by the play of chance.

Just as alchemy carries metaphysical connotations, so do many of Pip Dickens' paintings, and here I refer to the series of paintings from 2008-2010 which include 'KING KONG', 'Miss Havisham I and II', 'Mrs Danvers', 'Madame Bovary' (and the 'Elephant Man/Cloud' drawings), where the paintings surfaces have been transformed into a series of superimposed ethereal layers which offer hints of those 'ectoplasmic' apparitions that accompanied Victorian séances where they gathered in dimly lit parlours to purportedly commune with the spiritual world here, ghostly, spectral images challenge the insuperability of the physical world. In these inspired paintings it is as if the paint itself has coerced and cajoled Dickens' brush strokes - just as the ouija board might have guided those

trembling hands in Victorian séances - to create these images spontaneously not simply the spontaneity of 'process painting', but something more significant, something with far more esoteric implications than this. These painted surfaces have, it seems, taken on a life of their own, their picture planes exhibit a depth and complexity that appear to transcend the purely physical, they have achieved an ontology - loosely based on their literary sources - that hovers somewhere between the palpable and the possible, they visit that miscible threshold where fact and fiction, reportage and fantasy, the extant and the imaginary, the physical and the metaphysical, meet.

The evolution of her works suggest a spirit of adventure on Dickens' part, they are not quite of this world, but their achievement demands an intricate knowledge of this world in terms of its pictorial and aesthetic diversity. She seems driven to explore and to stretch the boundaries of pictorial representation as her painted surfaces oscillate wildly between the figurative and the abstract, however this quality of drivenness eschews violence or ferocity, it is a gentle drivenness whose paradoxical qualities infuse her paintings with a sense of the enigmatic, they court mystery, there is something elusive about them that never lets our eye rest. The viewer's eye is entreated to search for their meaning, a meaning that always seems just beyond our reach or maybe a suggestion of meaning that merely proves to be a decoy. Our inquisitive look restlessly searches for a resolution, seeking out the familiar from the conundrums that Dickens appears to have set. This brings to mind the words of Maurice Merleau-Ponty from his book, *The Visible and The Invisible*, "The look envelops, palpates, espouses the visible things. As though it were in a relationship of pre-established harmony with them, as though it knew them before knowing



'Elephant Man/Cloud Drawings' A series of nine charcoal drawings on Arches paper, pinned into bespoke entomological drawer (waxed sapelewood/laminate glass)

style and yet the views taken are not desultory I do not look at a chaos but at things so that finally one cannot say if it is the look or if it is the things that command [4].

Although at times we might suspect that Dickens is simply having fun with paint, being carried away by the process and its possibilities – there is no doubt that their execution is accompanied by a good deal of passion – the results belie any such conclusions and are undeniably more challenging to the eye as our look and the 'thingness' within her paintings intertwine to create an impression that exceeds any outcome of such a prosaic activity as 'simply having fun'. There is indeed often a sense of joy within these works, but that is subtly different to fun.

As we move on through Dickens' oeuvre and come to a painting titled 'Oki-Nami', we feel the 'cosmic' taking over from the metaphysical, we experience, in the ethereal layers of paint, a dilation of the real, the horizon seems to have expanded, and the infinite beckons. Time becomes a mutable commodity here. Time is an aspect of painting infrequently touched upon, but Patrick French in his essay, 'Time in the Pure State', addresses this negligence when he writes, "We must affirm the distinction between the sign of Art and its Original Absolute Time and the sensuous sign with its Time Recovered at the Heart of Lost Time. For Art and Original Time do not depend on memory for their experiencing, nor on the contingent materiality of a sensation". [5] The painting process is both relative and relevant to the passage of time. The alchemy of paint continues to open up a whole tranche of possibilities and parameters, pointing towards a divergent range of ways to go, both spatial and temporal, and artists such

as Pip Dickens are helping it on its way, through the synergy of technique and imagination, and a dialogue between the literary and the aesthetic. Pip Dickens, like many committed contemporary painters has an intuitive approach to the painted surface, this, combined with her inherent skill leaves us anticipating and wondering about the directions that her painting will take in the future, as it continues to evolve.

### ROY EXLEY

Roy Exley is a freelance writer, art critic and curator based in London.

### References

- [1] David Batchelor, 'In bed with the monochrome', in *From an Aesthetic Point of View*, edited by Peter Osborne, Serpent's Tail, London, 2000. Page 161.
- [2] Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Psychology of the Imagination*, Routledge, London, 1995. Page 225.
- [3] Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Ground of the Image*, [Trans. By Jeff Fort], Fordham University Press, New York, 2005. Page 97.
- [4] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and The Invisible*, [Trans. By Alphonso Lingis], Northwestern University Press, Evanston Ill., 1968. Page 133.
- [5] Patrick French, 'Time in the Pure State' in *Time and the Image*, Edited by Carolyn Bailey Gill, Manchester University Press, 2000. Page 165.



'Kan No Uchi (The Cold Time)', 2009-2010, oil on canvas, 152.5 cm x 152.5 cm



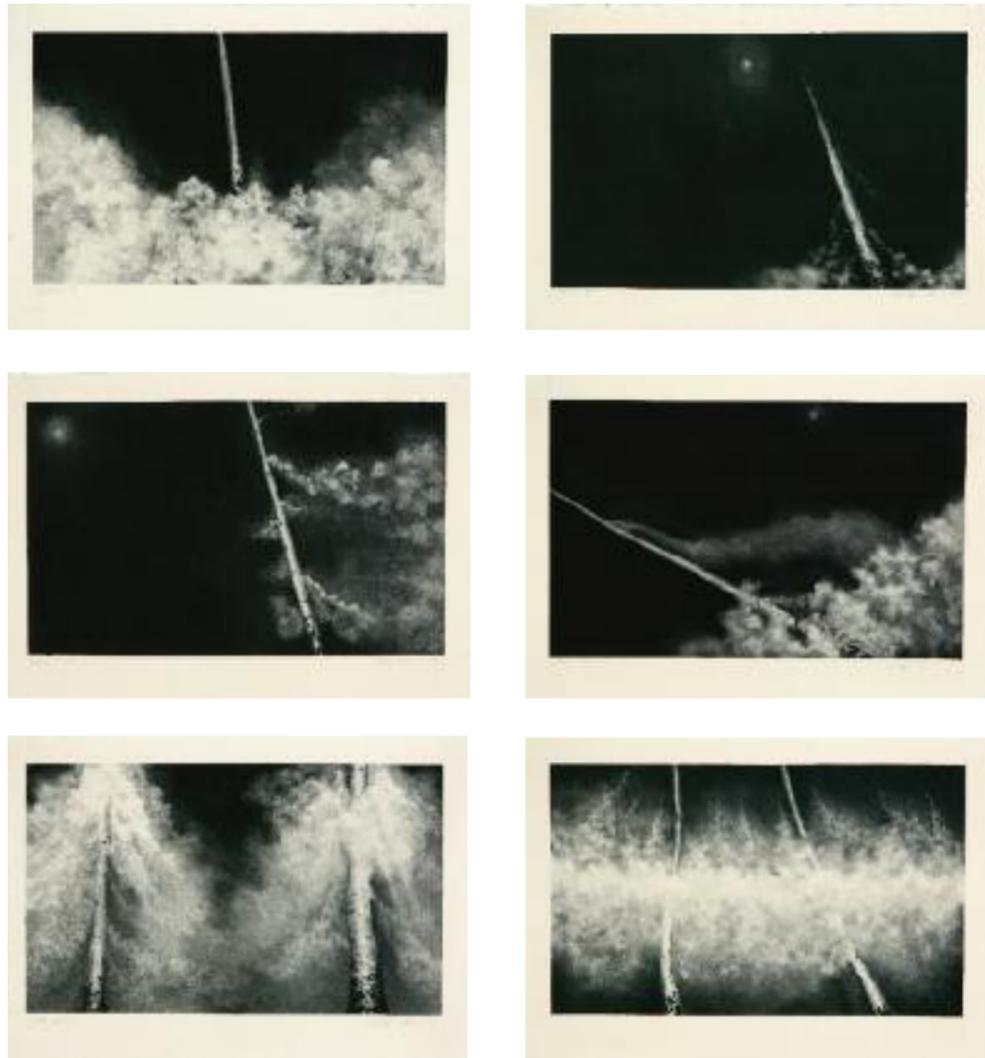
'Oki Nami (after Hokusai)', oil on canvas



*'Miss Havisham I', 2007, oil on canvas, 77 cm x 85 cm*



*'Miss Havisham II', 2007-9, oil on canvas, 152.5 cm x 152.5 cm*



'SPACE RACE' Drawings: (Top to bottom, left to right) Launch I and II, Crash and Burn I and II, Fall Out I and II, 2009-2010, charcoal on paper, 55.5 cm width x 23.3 cm approx unframed



'KING KONG', 2009-10, oil on canvas, 152.5 cm x 152.5 cm



'Hikari To Kage (Light and Shadow)', 2009, oil on canvas, 152.5 cm x 152.5 cm



'Oki Nami (after Hokusai)', 2009-10, oil on canvas, 122 cm x 122 cm



*'Auspicious Ribbon'* 2010, oil on panel, 91.4 cm x 106.6 cm

## PIP DICKENS

Born in Nottinghamshire, Pip Dickens now lives in Yorkshire. She has been a visiting and part-time lecturer on numerous Fine Art Degree courses. She is currently dedicated full time to her painting practice.

### Education

1998-2000 Slade School of Fine Art, University College London, London - Master of Fine Art: Painting  
 1993-1996 Leeds Metropolitan University - BA (Hons) Fine Art: Painting

### Solo Exhibitions

2010 'Towards The Light - Pip Dickens', Cartwright Hall Art Gallery, Bradford (Touring Exhibition)  
 2001 'Pip Dickens', Cassian de Vere Cole Fine Art, London  
 2000 'Pip Dickens', Cassian de Vere Cole Fine Art, London  
 1998 'Pip Dickens', Yorkshire Television, Leeds

### Two-person Exhibitions

2002 'Oil & Stone', sculpture of Deveren Bowman and paintings of Pip Dickens, East 73rd Gallery, London

### Selected Group Exhibitions\*

2009 'A Feast for the Eyes', Gallery II, University of Bradford  
 2009 'Art Auction for the Medical Foundation For the Care of Victims of Torture', Royal Institute of Great Britain, London  
 2009 'Mill', Monika Bobinska Gallery, London  
 2007 Alan Kluckow Fine Art, Berkshire  
 2007 Stephanie Hoppen Gallery, London, curated by Alan Kluckow  
 2006 'Nocturnal', Sarah Myerscough Fine Art, London  
 2004 'Double Take', The Business Arts Council, San Francisco, USA  
 2004 'Edna', Retrospective of past winners of the Edna Lumb Art Travel Award, Leeds Metropolitan University Gallery  
 2004 'In The Mix', Tangent Contemporary Art at The Marina, San Francisco, USA

2003 'Starting A Collection', Art First, London  
 2003 'Illusion', Sarah Myerscough Fine Art, London  
 2002 'Sharon Ben-Tal, Pip Dickens & Laurel Hunter', Tangent Contemporary Art, San Francisco, USA  
 2002 'Beneath The Surface III', Sarah Myerscough Fine Art, London  
 2002 'Beautiful & Unique', Beatrice Royal Gallery, Eastleigh, Hampshire  
 2000 'Bittersweet', Danielle Arnaud Contemporary Art, London  
 1999 'Grrr!', The Paper Bag Factory, London  
 1998 'Edna Lumb Art Travel Award Retrospective', Dean Clough Gallery, Halifax

### Public Art Works

2006 Design for integral external public artwork, Piccadilly: Make architects

### Awards

2010 Leverhulme Trust - Artist in Residence Award at the University of Huddersfield, Department of Music  
 2010 Artist in Residence, Cartwright Hall Art Gallery, Bradford  
 2009 Arts Council of England Grant  
 2009 Celeste Painting Prize - shortlisted  
 2008 Jerwood Contemporary Painters 09 - nominated  
 2001 AXIS Sponsored Stand Award at FRESH ART FAIR, London  
 1990 Jeremy Cubitt Prize (Slade School of Fine Art)  
 1997 NatWest Art Prize - Shortlisted  
 1995 Edna Lumb Art Travel Award - Research in Iceland

### Collections

Doyle Caygill Capital SA, Geneva, Switzerland  
 The Arch, London  
 Sovereign Capital, London, UK  
 private collections UK and Overseas

**\* for a complete cv and biography please refer to: [www.pip-dickens.com](http://www.pip-dickens.com)**

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*'The Beginning of the End of the Age of Reason',*  
2010, oil on panel, 106.6cm x 91.4 cm

Published on the occasion of the exhibition:

**PIP DICKENS *Toward the Light***  
14th August - 7th November 2010

A solo exhibition of paintings and drawing by Pip Dickens including sound compositions based on her works by Monty Adkins composer, performer, and lecturer of experimental electronic music and audio art.

A touring exhibition.

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