

THE PURE ABSTRACTIONS OF JAMIE DALGLISH
Frederick Ted Castle

The art of Jamie Dalglish is timeless and sublime. It arises from the soul and speaks to the soul. As a result, it is a beautiful in the extreme. It is completely abstract and self-referential but it is not self-worshipping or self-promoting or self-defeating. It is itself-sui generic. As its own genre, it has many forms all of them basically the same but elaborated in ways that one couldn't anticipate. Every work is a new world, even if it includes elements of old worlds and of worlds to come.

Dalglish - the name is Scottish- is one of the few practitioners of what Piet Mondrian, the great Dutch modern master who died in New York in 1944, defined in his essays as "pure plastic art." Dalglish is unaware that he is a disciple of Mondrian although he has always liked his work, the famous rectilinear panels of pure colour (yellow, blue and red) and non-colour (black, white and gray) of which the Museum of Modern Art has a fine collection. The wonderful thing is that the paintings of Jamie Dalglish are *not* the same as the paintings of Piet Mondrian in any way, yet they are as purely art in every way.

Perhaps I can extract a few thoughts from the remarks about his art by Jamie Dalglish:

I began to throw paint and scrape it off after an illumination I had while painting with acrylic on a series of six foot by six foot square canvases. The series of images yielded the first overall Morphoglyph surface in my painting, *The Door That Gets The Most Light Is Black And White*, done in 1978. Not until 1993 did I originate the word "Morphoglyph" which combines the word *morph*, growing or changing forms (from Morpheus, the son of the god of sleep, the form of dreams) with the word *glyph*, an incision or cryptograph – secret writing, the language of the soul. I think Morphoglyphs provide abstract painting with a surface that seems to say, "art is the Art of becoming Art."¹

I like his remarks because he speaks directly about his work in all of them – his work has no purpose beyond itself, and his remarks simply comments on it. Like Mondrian, Dalglish proceeds directly from the soul to the surface, he doesn't plan or design his work, he executes it usually working quickly and usually adding to the surface a little later of much later.

Since sometime in 1990, Dalglish ceased painting on stretched canvas and now paints on panels of three-quarter inch birch or walnut veneer plywood which restoration experts classify as "archival" meaning that they will last a long time. In 1990, and for many years previously, Dalglish's studio was on Bond Street north of Houston near the Bowery. Right across the street was the Bowery Building Supply Co. which caters to many fine woodworking shops. He spied on some beautifully smooth remnants of fine

plywood in the yard and had the thought of painting on them, which turned out to be perfect for Morphoglyphs. Dalglish invented a system in which he could use any number of panels of practically any size in combination, hanging them by means of strips of plywood attached to the wall cut at a 45° angle to match a corresponding strip on back of the painting. By means of these “cleats”, the panels are always straight and they can even be attached to a very uneven wall such as the one in his present studio in which nothing is straight except the paintings. This system makes possible very large works, because each of the panels can be worked on individually or they can be worked on in groups, or all together. It also makes the paintings manageable and Dalglish can change the positions or the panels as he is working. It is a genius solution that also gives his work a distinctive look because it is modular, not only because it is on hard wood. Very occasionally he has placed panels of not quite the same size together and, infrequently, panels that are quite different in size, but the effect is always impressive not because of the panels themselves, but because of the juxtapositions he chooses.

Years ago, the abstract painter Leon Polk Smith, who died in 1996 at the age of 90, told me he realized in the course of his work that it was possible to place any colour next to any other colour if he was working with the correct shape. Smith, who had been highly influenced by Mondrian in the 1940's went on to exploit the possibilities of curved lines which Mondrian eschewed categorically. I don't know what Mondrian would make of Dalglish, but I think he would respect his insistence on a certain completely abstract way of working, the “Morphoglyphs”, which parallels his own insistence on “Pure Plastic Art”. Mondrian was not a great writer, but throughout his life he wrote essays promulgating what he called “The New Art-The New Life”. Here is a paragraph from his essay by that name of 1931:

Among the diverse tendencies of the new art, two seem to oppose each other by the difference character of their rhythm: the tendency expressed through rhythm established by curved or concentric lines, and the tendency that manifests rhythm through straight lines in rectangular opposition. The first produced undulating rhythm, the second, rhythm through cadence. Although concentric curves cannot express contrary oppositions in an exact way, the two tendencies are opposed only through the different means they employ. The tendency using curves establishes neutral forms that lead to the same contrary opposition that the other tendency expresses in an exact way. The two tendencies therefore basically manifest the same intention: *the search for equivalent contrary opposition.*²

Mondrian was rarely that forgiving-he was probably tacitly apologizing to some artist he had offended, maybe Leger. Yet his insistence on the rhythm of opposition is very characteristic and indeed goes succinctly to the heart of the matter in modern art.

Mondrian even used a term “morphoplastic art” in 1929. He seems to indicate that this is only slightly inferior to “pure plastic art”-

Pure abstract art becomes completely emancipated, free of naturalistic appearances. It is no longer natural harmony but creates equivalent relationships. The realization of equivalent relationships is of the highest importance for life. Only in this way can social and economic freedom, peace and happiness can be achieved.³

Jamie Dalglish likewise sees in his work, not “technique” or “strategy” but a way of life and art that is all-encompassing. He uses the word *access* a lot; it is his view that his works allow the participant to access directly experiences that are otherwise unknowable. I have spent many hours in front of many paintings of his and I always find it satisfying experience and I always love to go to his studio and look at his art some more, usually a new work, occasionally an old one. In his three studios that I have known, it is only possible to see one work at a time and I think that is wonderful. I have also seen several exhibitions of his work in which it was possible to see several works together and this way too was excellent, but I love sitting and looking at one work for a long time, and any gallery that shows his work should provide a seat. I am not alone in believing that when one looks into another person’s eyes, there occurs an instantaneous exchange of “information” which we know but which we cannot decode—a personal cryptograph of morphoglyph, if you will. The experience of Dalglish’s paintings is something like that—the conversation of two souls.

New York, September, 1997

1. Quotes from the unpublished “Narrative Statement” by Jamie Dalglish, November 1996.
2. Quoted from “The New Art-The New Life: The Culture of Pure Relationships” by Piet Mondrian (1931) published in *The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian* edited and translated by Harry Holtzman and Martin S. James, Da Capo Press, New York, 1993 (originally published by Macmillan, Boston 1986) p. 253
3. In the same book, from the essay “Pure Abstract Art” (1929), p. 224. This essay also includes the only occurrences of the term “morphoplastic” in Mondrian’s oeuvre that I have seen.

Frederick Ted Castle is a writer who has lived in New York since 1960. Two of his literary works, *Anticipation and Gilbert Green* are published by McPherson & Co. and available from bookstores. Since 1966 he has been writing essays on modern art published in magazines, catalogues and books. He is also an epic poet.