

JAMIE DALGLISH: HIGH SERIOUSNESS AND THE PLAY OF MORPHOGLYPHS  
Dominique Nahas

In his magisterial new works—*the Pines*, *Dragon Morphoglyph*, *Levitating Morphoglyph*, *Glacier Mark*, *Firebird*, *24 Poles/Two Pauls* and *The All American Pumpkin Patch*—the eye perceives Jamie DalGLISH's signature use of fibrillating striations of layered colors. These applications of pigments and transparent gels are sometimes lightly laced with metallic powders creating diaphanous veils of gossamer tonalities coursing vertically or horizontally through a system of interlocking wood panels, which when abutted together create the artist's infinitely expandable pictorial universes. The eye moves freely through each of these works but the movement, nevertheless, is predetermined through the artist's use of, primarily, thin stripes of space modulated by an internal locus of structured markmaking activity that infers a dynamism, a thrust of visual cacophony whose movement is registered as painterly action in space through the use of acrylic gel in which DalGLISH's pigments are suspended. The gel, acting as a resist, creates the first register of paint and allows for transparency and detail amidst the collisions of hurled paint exploding on the surface of the wood (the materialization of the mark) as well as its scraping away (its dematerialization). The wrist-thrust action of the artist hurling paint away from his body toward the picture-plane (creating authorship and intentionality) is disrupted in two ways. Firstly, through what the artist terms "interruption by the soul" in which chance and gravity are participatory determinants of markmaking. Secondly, by the capacity of conscious arranging and rearranging of the wood panels in vertical or horizontal configurations.

The protean space of Jamie DalGLISH's constructions, his self-styled *morphoglyphs*, is centered, or rather, hinges, around the construction/de-construction of space that demands of the eye an agreement to a double principle of containment and release. The artist's *morphoglyphs* bear within their facticity the doubled insinuation of an endless, dreamlike veiling of overlaid painterly skeins redolent of an endless coming-into-being of morphological forms inscribed within the surface of mutable space. It is within the confines of his slotted coloristic pulsations that the artist has applied his particular type of markmaking (and erasure) since his first 1978 morphoglyph *The Door That Gets the Most Light is Black and White*. What the artist terms the "levitating" aspect of his *morphoglyphs* refers, in part, to their transcendent effects. Such effects are derived from carefully calibrated optical tensions in his works derived from an interplay of the aspect of rhythm, tempo and physical duration as well as density. The overall quality of each of DalGLISH's paintings, their density, is the result of an intractable surface quality creating what DalGLISH has termed a *primordial fix within the imagination*.

To experience the artwork of DalGLISH is to confront a markmaking capacity that oscillates between an emphasis on expressive detail over unified image and painterly activity over material trace and its reverse. This oscillation is abetted by the artist's application of the variable tempo in each work. This is a jumping pulse interrupted by systematized placing of vertical wooden panels containing different intensities of sumptuous painterly marks and colorations. Each panel is animated by a vitalistic *rhythm*. This force is unquestionably the most striking aspect of DalGLISH's work. It rests at the center of his art-making activities. But more: it makes the art and heralds its presence. "Rhythm", according to Henri Maldiney, the French phenomenologist (in

*Regard Espace Parole*, Editions L'Age d'Homme, 1976), "is the essence of Art and it accounts for its existence, enacting style... Rhythm articulates itself within momentous instants, each finding resolution within the other within the flow of mutual re-sourcing. Within each instant, Presence, fettered by impossibility and compelled by being, becomes what it is through fissure and upleap. Exposed to space, rhythm matches up Presence with space, presentness with Time."

How are we to situate the visual syntax within the work of Jamie Dalglish? It is, I believe, a task that requires some care for Dalglish's painterly activity is a complex effort that manages to radiantly capture the energies and interests of the artist himself. It is, first and foremost a daringly synthetic work, arising out of myriad influences. Central to those one might mention the artist's academic grounding in the use of superimpositions, cutting and editing through his pioneering application of video technology. His work, more traditionally, also contains within it the passions and contradictions of late twentieth century painting that attempts to quote, summarize and juxtapose the streams of influence of an age (modern/post-modern) now fading. Ideologically we can situate Jamie Dalglish's work as contiguous with the interstices of Mondrian's gridded exemplars of plastic law of *dynamic equilibrium* and the master's belief in the unification of architecture, sculpture and painting, Barnett Newman's sublime *zips* in infinite space, Gene Davis's focus on the interval within color painting, the chaotic subjectivity of Jackson Pollock's whiplash paintings. In Dalglish's work one can also find metonymic relations with it and the structure of video and film imagery where, as Walter Benjamin has noted in *Illuminations*, the mechanized aspect of their ubiquitous seriality and profusion "...represent[s] the prototype of work of art, the reception of which is consummated by a collectivity in a state of distraction."

However, unusual this combination of vision experienced through contemplation and distraction might be, it is not altogether surprising, considering the artist's experiences in the Vietnam War during submarine duty as an engine-man in his vessel's propulsion compartment. It is under these conditions of groundlessness, weightlessness and compressed space and time that the artist underwent out-of-the body experiences. Also of primary importance was Dalglish's interest in film and video early on in his career. He graduated from RISD in film and video in 1974 and up to 1982 had made numbers of significant contributions to the disciplines of photography, video and performance art. His seminal *Talking Heads* video performance installation, 1974-5, with the then little-known David Byrne is considered a classic of its kind. *Open/Shut...* The Painting-Photography *Continuum*, 1988-9, in which Dalglish placed self-referential cibachromes translations of video images of himself in the process of making his *Palimpsest* series of paintings on linen next to the actual finished works are early examples of deconstructivist art. These examples presages Dalglish's intention of freezing real time, and the process time to explore the principal subject of his current work: the phenomenon of flux and change.

This sense of perpetual motion is felt through the artist's use of transparency and light in his work. The atmosphere which Jamie Dalglish manipulates to propel his levitating morphoglyphs varies from painting to painting. However in some of his works, such as in *The All-American Pumpkin Patch*, he combines the dream-like poignancy of the hazy light Ross Bleckner referred to in his early eighties stripe paintings as the light of "the wavering quality of things around us and the fragility of perception." Dalglish

succeeds in capturing this flickering indeterminacy, a vibrant positioning of systemized irresolution, between place and space-through his painterly passages of often cataclysmic beauty. The result is the unleashing of what Jamie Dalglish has termed “atomized ubiquity” within the cinematic time of his work.

The architectural framework Dalglish uses, his flexible vertical stacking of systematized alignment of quatre-foils of color, emphasizes a flexibility, a mutability, of space. His repeated segments of painterly space, alluding to its interchangeability, are suggestive of the art of mechanical reproduction with its mixing of rhythms and tempos. Within that interchangeable space Dalglish’s use of evanescently dispersed voids amongst his painterly scrapings and erasures allude to a painting that rests between two modes of seeing. The first mode, contemplation, originates from pre-technological times, where the aura of the magical object is apprehended through demystification and re-enchantment. The second mode developed through the insurgence of the technological era in the twentieth century, as Walter Benjamin would have it, resides in the “optical unconscious”/ Here the “tactile eye” apprehends the vibrancy of this technological world through its repeated mechanical imagery, through the habit of peripheral vision, through an illuminating distractedness. Jamie Dalglish’s work, with its cinematic space and dot patterns, references to pixilated video screens, attends to both persuasions; it forms a barrier and a bridge between these two modes of sight, two modes of apprehending the world of time and space in perpetual change in very different, in almost impossibly irreconcilable, ways. Dalglish, in his artist’s notes of November 1996 writes: *I think morphoglyphs provide painting with a surface that seem to say “Art is the art of becoming art.” Creating cinematic time as in frames per second, F.P.S..., or that this surface is a constantly pulsating harmonic proportion, as it were, one large morphoglyph levitating NYC life by showing this phenomena of change as a constant image in my painting, palpitating as in the nature I feel here in NYC.*

The result of such intentionalities is an openness, and an open-endedness in Jamie Dalglish’s work whose primary characteristic of his work’s “atomized ubiquity” is its joyful aliveness saturated by a sense of Heideggerean *unconcealment of aletheia*. Such a state, writes Heidegger in his essay *The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking* “...is...turned in the pure sphere of the circle in which beginning and end are everywhere the same... The meditative man is to experience the untrembling heart of unconcealment... It means unconcealment itself in what is most its own, means the place of stillness which gathers in itself what grants unconcealment to begin with... That is the opening of what is open... in that opening rests possible radiance, that is, the possible presencing of presence itself.”

Dominique Nahas is a curator and critic residing in Manhattan. He is the former Chief Curator of Contemporary Art, Everson Museum, Syracuse and the former Director of the Neuberger Museum, SUNY-Purchase. His numerous curatorial credits include organizing the retrospective exhibitions of artist Les Levin, Nancy Spero and Osvaldo Romberg.