

## The Chancy Element

Chuck Elliott interviewed by Matthew Collings

**MC** I can see the images are computer generated. I respond to the intricacy, rhythms, playfulness, but I've no idea what technical processes are involved. I see very beautiful visual relationships, and I imagine from their intensity that creating them involves a high degree of labour, as with any artistic process, and in fact it's basically drawing...?

**CE** Yes, every part of the image is hand drawn. You know those animated 3D films, and you look at the credits at the end, a list of the names of five thousand people who spent four years drawing everything, and you think, Oh God, look at the sheer volume of work. I think my process has a similarity to that, years of drawing form, shape, geometry and so forth. But you could argue about whether what I do is really drawing or not. Both my brothers are artists. And we have a lively debate all the time. One of them tells me that drawing is always "pencil on paper."

**MC** I suppose he's talking about many things that might go into the notion of drawing, including mythology and history, and so on, a cultural idea and not simply the technical thing. Whereas when you say you're "drawing" you're describing what you do for hours and hours, carefully building, refining, repeating, altering and adjusting, which is certainly what drawing usually meant for the majority of artists in the past. I think if your brother is being philosophical without realising it, then you're a bit philosophical too in your designs. You come up with variations on an idea of symmetry, and the effect of all that serious consideration, those critical revisions, is that every shape has its own particularity but is also contributing to an overall dynamic balance – you're testing out symmetry's appeal. I feel the pleasure I'm getting from the work is connected to life, to nature, how the mind organises reality.

**CE** They're experiments, yes, and it's different for every image. I'm fascinated by what I see in geometric and abstract painting, take Mondrian's for instance. Maybe he concentrates on a sort of minutiae of changes that will make every new painting a different experiment to the previous one, so each catches your interest in a subtly different way. A kind of logical progression, a journey.

**MC** Whatever else he's doing with his notions about an ideal immaterial higher plane of existence versus the mere illusion of reality that we actually live by, when you look at enough of his paintings you have to conclude that the medium of paint means a lot to him. In your case you might digitally generate a highlight down the side of a form. It's done on a computer screen. You're not actually up to your elbows in Titanium White. It's a virtual equivalent. But somehow you're in that same place where a painter or a sculptor gets ideas from the materials they work with.

**CE** Yes, a highlight can be placed anywhere, and the placing makes a difference to whether the colours are enriched or killed.

**MC** In a painting by Rubens you just believe that's where the light should be on the side of the face, or on the robes, or whatever. But it's really a constructed effect. He could have put that highlight anywhere and made it any shape or any shade. But the whole of the rest of the painting, its shape, colour, tonality, the nature of the lines, the placement of elements, they're all enhanced by that highlight – which seems so spontaneous – being exactly the way it is.

**CE** These are decisions, yes. I look for a line that has something fabulous about it as a line and at the same time works as highlight and as colour, plus I'm thinking about the way all these aspects relate to everything else in the image.

**MC** What's your main reason not to be a painter using paint, since the concerns are so similar ultimately? Why do you create prints? Why not splash paint around?

**CE** A kind of northern European puritanical uptightness. I feel I wouldn't have control over the medium to the same degree. I might do, I suppose – I'm often amazed by the sophistication of paintings from the 1950s. But I like the control I get with the digital medium. For me it means energy, more experimentation, more rigour.

**MC** People assume that the ideal of abstract art in the 1950s is "freedom."

**CE** My work isn't about that kind of ideal of freedom. But I do think the artistic process generally, and in my case it's no different, is largely about an exploration of freedom. The freedom that's real for me is the freedom to create the work I want to, each day. To create a studio that is conducive for learning, experimentation and philosophy. To become unconstrained by having to turn up in a workplace and participate in the usual kinds of production. With this work I do you're looking at a series of events of my own free choosing – this is what I decided to make. In the end though, you're working within rules that you set yourself, and of course the constraints of finance and space. I want my prints to appear to be casually free, and very liquid and loose, but they have to have a power behind them, a muscularity, and that's what I'm working on over the weeks or sometimes months that it takes me to generate each image. I want the labour to be known as well, I want whoever buys the work to feel there's been some labour there.

**MC** So there's control plus an old fashioned work ethic?

**CE** Yes.

**MC** They're very musical. The pleasure I get from them is all about rhythm, about repetition and variation. With music, the idea might be that there is a fantastic outpouring of emotion that overwhelms the listener, and in that moment the question of the construction of the emotion isn't the urgent thing. But in reality that emotion is a produced thing, and it comes out of a bit-by-bit creative process. Every note has been laboured at. The music didn't just well up by magic or luck.

**CE** That's certainly right. The prints are constructed. You've been talking about analogues with abstract painting and with music, but when I'm working I'm thinking about constructions in 3D, about constructing sculptural forms, and that's how I see the prints finally, as constructed forms. They're not solid or static but they are sculptural. I'm working on the screen with a virtual version of three-dimensional form, physically building three-dimensional solids, prior to working on the colours and the balance of light and dark.

**MC** I tend to see any work in terms of abstract values, regardless of whether it has an image or not. But I suppose you have your own ideas about the place of imagery, and the relationship between a recognizable image, or sign, and the internal visual mechanisms of the work?

**CE** I don't think of my work as abstract particularly. It's figured with numbers and forms that give it a very real substance. I'm certainly interested in abstract art, and my appreciation of it

does inform what I do. Maybe I play by a set of rules that is similar if not the same as abstract painting. In the final part of the process colours are changed and elements are edited and moved. But the majority of the creative process is in the previous stages, where there are malleable sculptural forms that can be rotated, cut, twisted and reformed until all the elements somehow coalesce. I like the idea that the image might appear very rapid and spontaneous but everything you see has been built, sculpted and endlessly reconsidered. I'm also interested in the element of beauty. It's not overt, and it's not specifically what I'm building towards. But perhaps when geometry, form and colour are all successfully handled, then beauty manifests itself, not as a designed in element, but as a serendipitous by product of the creative process.

**MC** For all the complex tangle of values and ideals that went on in the 1950s in Jackson Pollock's head, reflecting the little cultural milieu in which he worked, what has happened in culture in a broader sense, since that time, is that a myth has evolved that joins up freedom in art with an extreme lifestyle, full of romantic danger.

**CE** Yes. There are a multitude of figures like Pollock, where the life invades how you think of the work. But ultimately, when it leaves the studio, the art has to stand on its own, without the crutch of a supporting text or prior knowledge. It has to have an internal logic, an ability to convey a dynamic presence on the wall and be able to project into the space.

**MC** And yet these myths are inevitable and necessary. People get excited about madness and art, and feel a bit bored and distanced when they hear about control. It's a question of how the attractive and exotic are made up at different times. In your case you can do something that seems way beyond normal capabilities, these complex light filled structures made by a kind of technology that is both known and unknown. We all know about computers but not necessarily at this finessed level.

**CE** I've been doing it for well over twenty years, which is a long time for digital art.

**MC** And there's a feeling of modernity, because we know this is a technology that architects and advertisers use. They've been doing it since the mid-1980s, when you yourself first saw someone demonstrating the Quantel system. They often use the technology to hide things and remove things, and you use it to expose things, to bring out form. When I look at a work like "Torsion" I see a repeated stylised ear of corn shape or wheat shape. How would you describe that image?

**CE** Certainly a use of natural forms, yes, and an ongoing study of studio and stained glass imagery, as well as certain anthropomorphized forms, taken from life, and reused in the fluid geometries and curved surfaces that make up the image. The scale is important too, as it is intended to envelop the viewer in a really immersive colour field.

**MC** Relatively timeless images, then, plus a very insistent modernity because of the technology, and then again old-fashioned pleasure in intricacy and detail – and curious colour, kind of artificial and earthy at the same time. Initially you see these high transparent reds and icy blues, then when you go in you see the colours of earth and nature.

**CE** I individually drew and coloured each unit first and then I overlaid coloured varnishes to mute some areas and allow others to be full strength, to really sing. This is the kind of thing that I meant when I said that each work is always experimental, but in different ways.

**MC** By "overlay" you mean a procedure you do on the computer, it's not an instruction you give to the printer?

**CE** No, not the printer, all the work happens on screen. The printing is hi-tech, but straightforward. But with the work on screen there are various stages: the initial marks, then a sculptural stage, and then a laying on of colours. And then – not on all the pieces but on some of them – there will be an overlay of other colours that influences what comes through, a kind of glazing process. When it comes to the printing, there is no handcraft or inking up as per a traditional print. The work is really all over by then. The print process is a mechanical transition of the work from my screen to the world, a way of showing what I have made, no more than that. From a creative point of view it may also be a good thing to have some fixed parameters to work within, to force a certain level of decision-making, and deliver real things that actually exist. I like the idea of living with a painting or work of art over many years, so on balance, at this moment at least, I'm happy to produce pieces that are capable of being owned and displayed in a conventional way.

**MC** How would you describe the surfaces you're working with at the moment?

**CE** The Diasec surface resembles car paint, lacquer or nail varnish, it's a machine made high gloss surface that is very alluring and draws you in, as well as giving a very immediate view of the work, no flaws or drips to distract from the line making. Here you just get the pure visual hit of the colour and the form, no distraction at all really, and the reflections add life and motion with mobile light and shadow reflections. This helps the work come alive really. I'm interested in trying other surfaces in the future, perhaps I'll reintroduce the overtly hand finished, although the lure of the machine remains strong I think.

**MC** Do the images all have simple beginnings?

**CE** Yes, very much, it might be a cross shape, like a pencil making a cross on a piece of paper. And then that shape will be elaborated.

**MC** So it's like Islamic decoration, this simple shape or set of lines that a very complex and intricate enormous pattern in a mosque will tend to boil down to?

**CE** Yes, the original shape gets repeated and the repetitions have a certain variation, and the effect will get far away from the beginning point, but the beginning is always present, you can always find it or work it out somehow. It's important that the basic form is still in there, as with any art I think.

**MC** And where we see effects of radiating light, and diffused edges contrasted by sharper edges, and so on, originally there was just a bare, simple line, as basic as a pencil mark?

**CE** Yes all the glows, and so on, are elaborations and variations, and they all have to coordinate with everything else that's happening, and each one is individually constructed. I might repeat a line so it has certain elements that appear to be flying off, and then I'll follow up those elements, and elaborate them, each with their own treatment, which might be transparent or solid, or blurred or sharp, or variations on solid and transparent and blurred and sharp. And then those elaborations will have to resolve visually with the line I was repeating in the first place. That's what the labour is about largely. And there are a lot of discarded versions, a lot of experimental stages.

**MC** You set something off that's a bit impulsive, and then there's a time of thought, and then you follow up those impulses, and elaborate them, and you're maybe looking for a pulse that flows through everything, and that pulse has a meaning of its own. Simplicity at the beginning point and then a build up of complexity as you're responding to things that are actually there. I imagine they take a little time to see? To some extent you're idealising what's there, but you're also looking carefully. People who aren't painters assume the artist thinks of something marvellous and then somehow carries it out, and they don't think about that making stage because they can't relate to it. They don't know it. They like the fantasy of inspiration, the gift of art, as if an angel gives you the whole idea all at once. They don't realise how much the process of making and correcting and remaking actually determines what is made in the end.

**CE** Yes, there's a very chancy element in there, from which some kind of substantial meaning is developed.

