Bryan Illsley’s Timepieces

Fun and Games was the title of Bryan Illsley’s 2014 show of paintings and ceramic sculptures at Marsden Woo’s old Clerkenwell premises. Not such fun for the artist, to hear him talk of it now. The ceramics were especially difficult to bring off, being subject to repeated structural problems and kiln mishaps. The paintings had a jagged, off-kilter vitality that was evidently achieved at some inner cost. The whole experience left Illsley exhausted.

Not for the first time, he looked for solace and replenishment, not by putting his brushes down and enjoying a holiday, but by a renewal of discipline, a radical cutting back of means to an extreme self-effacing simplicity. These Timepieces are the result. They consist, the majority, both paintings and prints, of rows of short black vertical marks against a white ground, the marks neither uniform nor individualised – just there, as they happened to happen.

The late Ewen Henderson, talking to me, once characterised Illsley as ‘a great maker of marks’, and so he has been; but the Timepieces seem to want to contradict all that. Almost, but not quite. It is as if the artist had deliberately curbed his hand and, rather than making marks, had got them to make themselves. Or, possibly, placed the whole matter in the hands of Time, to whom the works are then attributed.

Minimal as the means are, I don’t think the term Minimalist applies: the process has more to do with meditation than with systematic rigour, and a lot more than ideology or aesthetic stance is at issue. Something like total spiritual renewal is being attempted, or the cyclically driven return of a language to inarticulacy, in which the germ of expressive force is nonetheless already making itself felt.

The less said? Time will tell.

Christopher Reid, 2016

I am abetted in this venture by friends Alison Britton, Robert Marsden and Nao Matsunaga. As an admirer of these artists’ work I most am grateful for their company. Their participation raises the tone and improves the quality and variety of the show.

Many thanks,
Bryan Illsley