

Lost in Abstraction: 1, 2, 3

Henry Ward Mark Wright



Henry Ward & Mark Wright

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Curated by Alistair Hicks

19th October to 30th November 2021

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Being lost in absolute abstraction is not like being lost in space; or, more precisely, not like being lost in pictorial space. Rather it is like being lost because there are no reference points, no places where we can take comfort in familiar stories – allegorical, political or even art historical. They are jettisoned in favour of artistic gestures that assert a reality continuous with an object world that we inhabit.

It is good to be lost, like a character in E.M. Forster's *Room with a View* being deprived of their guide book, and thus open to experiences that cannot be anticipated – even unknown unknowns – and so we aspire to a kind of pure consciousness, a child-like perception of things seen for the first time. Such is an abstractionist heaven. On Earth, unfortunately, a fact of human life is that all experience is mediated and, for one reason or another – often despite ourselves – we make value judgments and theory-based observations. We see the here and now through a lens that has been shaped by what we have lived through. Let's face it, artistic abstraction cannot be absolutely abstract, but we admire those who strive to take us with them to places without sign posts.

Henry Ward and Mark Wright are, aesthetically, at the abstract end of the spectrum. We get their references but, most of all, enjoy the here and now – the 'I was here' – quality of their paintings. How refreshing, given the academic, research-based nature of much art work being made these days. In perverse moments I find myself dreaming of a Neo-Formalism, but the exclusive, obscurantist connotations are not to my (preconditioned) taste. Simply, let's have more of this unpretentious, unportentious creativity. Given the privations visited upon us since the advent of the pandemic, it is just what the doctor ordered.

Jonathan Watkins

Henry Ward & Mark Wright

Ein, Zwei, Drei: it is as easy as abstraktes bild

Bild, neuter, 'image, portrait, representation,' from Middle High German bilde, Old High German bilidi, neuter, 'image, figure, parable, prototype'; similarly Old Saxon bilithi; there is no corresponding word in English or Gothic (*bilipi).

Henry Ward and Mark Wright are builders. They are painters, but they are builders of their own abstracted languages. The English public did not exactly embrace abstraction when it arrived in the first part of the last century, but it has now become part of everyone's visual vocabulary. Maybe our initial resistance dates back to the 'dark' ages and the fact that the German word for image, Bild, did not instantly convert into English or Gothic.

With the advantage of hindsight there were reasons to resist the twentieth century modernist vision of abstraction, even though we rightly carry on celebrating it. One basic premise of Modernism is to knock down the building bricks of 'civilisation' and start again. Every attempt at rebuilding must be doomed to failure and, if not rejected by one's peers, will certainly be overturned by the coming

generations. Yet as long as there is life in us, we will carry on building.

The building process in Henry Ward's drawings and paintings is as easy to read as 1, 2, 3. For much of lockdown he could not get to his studio, but he had a shed in the garden. He would take the three strides from his back door and join the rest of the refugees from his house: a bicycle, tins of drying paints, food cans and a table waiting to know whether it is completely redundant or not.

In this dumping ground there was no room to make paintings, so he made drawings with paint. We start this show with a single *Shed Painting* (p15). It does not have a title. It is dated. It is like a leaf in diary, or a series of marks on a prison cell.

The second step is *Ambush* (p16). It is two paintings joined as one, a diptych. The right-hand painting is minding its daily business when a long comes a big welly and boots it. The greenish yellow blob creeps from the left-hand panel into the right. It is an ambush.

Sorry, I have forced the issue. To create the third step, we have three single paintings. The first of these, *Rattle* (2018) (p19) goes right back to the beginning of the story, to a drawing of a rattle that Ward made as a child. No, this is not that precocious offering, but rather a reminder of a recollection of the time when he was literally making things out of play bricks and then knocking them down again. At the time of writing this, the third painting in this curator-made triptych was

still in the process of being made. It is potentially a missing link. The process is ongoing. The second painting, though, is called *Heap* (2021) (p21). It is a pile of his vocabulary. It is as if he is celebrating getting back into the studio. He has escaped from the garden den. There it was as if he was practising the visual equivalent of musical scales. Now he is pushing and pulling them around together, as a wordsmith might do with an alphabet, syllables, words and phrases.



We stumble and miss a step in this show. In order to explain *Medusa* (2021) (p27), we need to go to the series of composite paintings leading up to it. He has taken the shed drawings and pasted them down on a canvas in a grid. Then in finding his composition he has obliterated some of the drawings, pasted or painted over them. The excitement for the viewers is that they can see the way paintings are made, how the different parts of the artists' language are moulded together. This new painting of Ward's is being shown in London

two hundred and one years after the painting it is named after, and its composition is derived from. In 1820, Géricault brought *The Raft of the Medusa* (1818–19) to Piccadilly where he charged some 40,000 people to see the seven-metre-long oil painting in the Egyptian Hall. His share of the takings was 20,000 francs, way more than the sum anyone would have paid for the picture at the time.

I have written about Henry Ward's work before that of Mark Wright; though Ward was a student at Winchester School of Art when Wright was the Painting Fellow, Ward's work helps explain Wright's. Mark Wright is a modernist builder in much the same way as Ward, but the process is not just so easy to see. There are a couple of basic keys to this interpretation of his work.

The most obvious way into Wright's work might be to consider how Mondrian, in his drawings, slowly dissolved the tree into abstract shapes and colour. Yet Wright's work seems a long way from this distillation. He seems closer to the earlier work by Cézanne. When one stands in front of Wright's paintings then moves along to another, the experience seems to echo that of the Provençal master examining Montagne Sainte-Victoire, again and again. Looking at Wright's picture evokes the sensation of walking repeatedly in the country.

The science of Impressionism was not enough for Cézanne. He wanted to achieve more than merely reproduce nature in different lights, making the country emerge on the back of eyes. He declared that he wanted to turn 'Impressionism into

something more solid like the art of the Museums.’ The eye was just part of the way we make and appreciate art. As he said: ‘There are two things in the painter, the eye and the mind; each of them should aid the other.’



Cézanne was born nearly two hundred years ago. We don’t live in the same world anymore. Mark Wright certainly does not frequent that world. He creates paintings in a block of studios perched on the hill above King’s Cross. Despite this, my second reference to another artist is to one who died sixty-five years ago: Jackson Pollock. He was at centre of his pictures. He famously painted them as if he was a bull fighter in an arena.

One of the main differences from looking at a Cézanne to looking at a Wright is the movement and energy. If you are in a calm, contemplative mood one can sit in front of *Mirror* (2021) (p31) and it will reverberate gently with your thoughts and

feelings. Yet in a way Wright’s picture is working much like a Sat-Nav. One’s eye goes down one line, one’s mind may be going down a different one, but the picture keeps on moving us, till we have found that spot inside us that we were looking for.

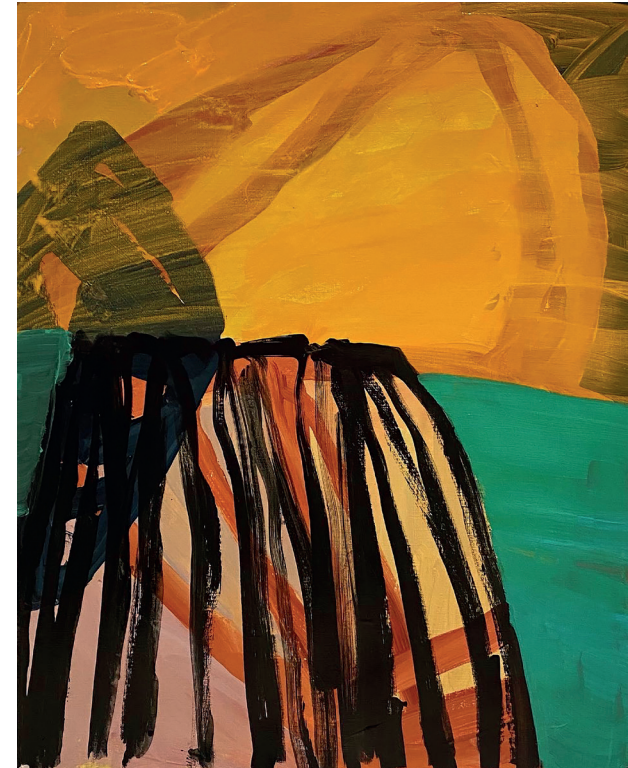
Some of us may see a resting place as peaceful as those of Gainsborough in *Clearing* (2021) (p33); others may see a threshing machine in the neighbouring deep emerald green work on paper, *Frame* (2021) (p41), but Wright is not instructing you what you should see, feel, or think. He reads and listens on podcasts to a great deal of philosophy, while he is making his work, but there is no need to have read any philosophy to appreciate his work.

The big break between the work in this exhibition, of Ward and Wright, and say that of the generation of Krasner, Pollock and Rothko, is that the process of making, though very important to the artists, is not critical to their appreciation, as it was in the mid-twentieth century. Ward leads you into his work by letting you join him in the way he made it, Wright tunes the variations in the mood, temperature, climate through his pictures by materials and media, but in the end, they are relying on one thing, and one thing alone. As you walk into this room, how do you react? They are physical works, but they only come alive when a person interacts with them.

Alistair Hicks

“My process is one of investigation and discovery. Starting a painting is never easy, those first marks are often awkward, but I need to paint on. On until I lose myself in the act, on until I become unaware of exactly what it is that I am doing. That’s when the painting really happens”

Henry Ward



Shed Painting 29 August (2021),
acrylic on paper, 50 x 40cm



Ambush (2021), oil on canvas, 115 x 200cm



Rattle (2018), oil on canvas, 100 x 125cm



Heap (2021), oil on canvas, 100 x 115cm



Clot (2020), oil on canvas, 100 x 120cm



Iron (2021), oil on canvas, 100 x 125cm



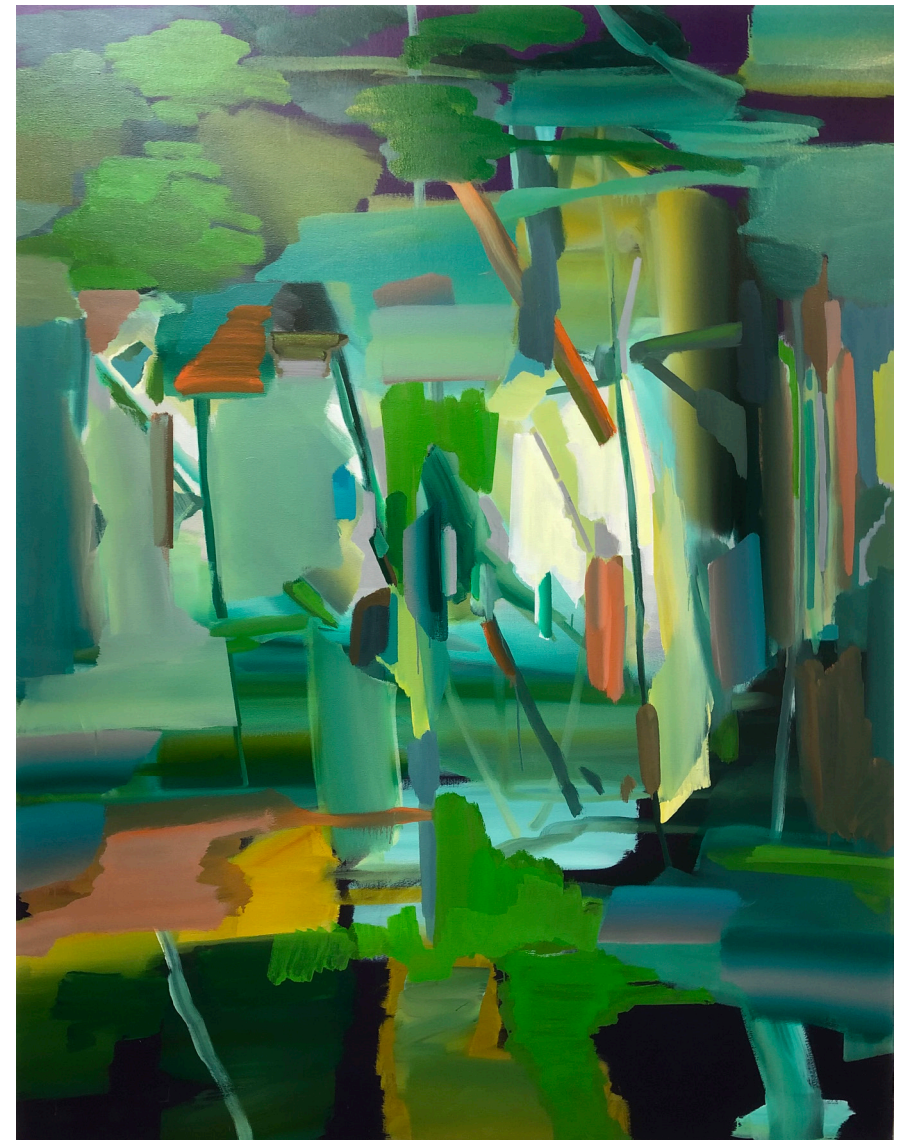
Medusa (2021),
oil and acrylic on paper laid on canvas, 200 x 320cm

“It is the engagement with materiality that defines the unique qualities within painting, along with its capacity to find and reinvent images. Compared to the digital age we inhabit, painting is slow, often time consuming to make, its temporal complexities highlight challenges for both artists and viewers. I believe that in a world where there is a constant quest for speed that can leave us exhausted, the appeal of this ‘slower medium’ continues to grow. Painting has not disappeared.”

Mark Wright



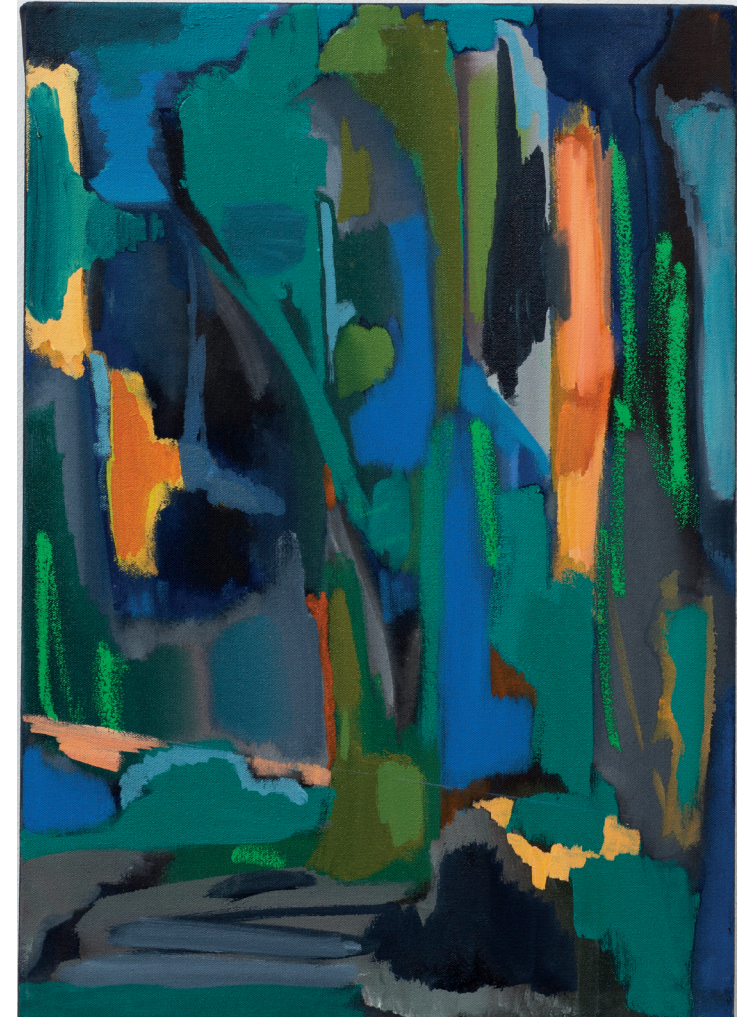
Mirror (2021), oil on canvas, 180 x 160cm



Clearing (2021), oil on canvas, 198 x 153cm



Edgelands (2021), oil and acrylic on canvas,
198 x 153cm



Elevation (2020), oil and acrylic on canvas,
51 x 35.5cm



Fold (2020), oil and acrylic on canvas, 183 x 152.5cm



Frame (2021), oil and acrylic on paper, 113 x 90cm



Phantom (2021), acrylic on paper, 35 x 25cm



Henry Ward

Born 1971 London, UK
Lives and works in London

Henry Ward is an artist, writer, curator and educator. He primarily works as a painter, but also makes drawings and small sculptures. Ward is the Creative Director for Freelands Foundation and was the Head of Education at the Southbank Centre. His other work in education includes roles at Welling School, a visual art specialist collage, and lecturing at art schools across the UK. Ward established the aTURNERTive Prize, an annual award celebrating outstanding student practice.

education

BA Fine Art (Painting) at Winchester School of Art (1990–93)
PGCE Art & Design at Goldsmiths University (1998–99)
PhD at University of Middlesex (2011–13)

solo exhibitions

Baffle, Aleph Contemporary, London 2021
Abracadabra, AMP Gallery, London 2018
Henry Ward, Stark Gallery, London 2004
Henry Ward Paintings & Drawings, North Bank Gallery, London 1996

selected group exhibitions

On Paper, The Litten Tree, Coventry 2021
Oxlade Soup, Terrace Gallery, London 2021. Co-curated with Karl Bielik and Angela Johnson
Your Foot in My Face, Kingsgate Project Space, London 2021. Curated by Dan Howard-Birt
Swimming Backwards, Sid Motion Gallery, London 2021
Studio Confetti, Terrace Gallery, London 2021. Curated by Karl Bielik
Without Borders, Elysium Gallery, Swansea (then touring internationally) 2021
Drawing Room Biennale, The Drawing Room, London 2021
Wells Contemporary 2020, Wells Cathedral, Wells 2020
Hastings Open, Hastings Museum & Art Gallery, Hastings 2020
Way Out, La Grange Gallery, Cernay-Les-Reims, France 2020
Beep Painting Biannual 2020, Elysium Gallery, Swansea 2020
6 Days in December, Thameside Gallery, London 2019
Trinity Buoy Wharf Drawing Prize UK (2019–20)
A Tapered Teardrop, Terrace Gallery, London 2019
Fully Awake 4.6, Edinburgh College of Art, Edinburgh 2019
Paint, PS Mirabel Gallery, Manchester 2019
Trinity Buoy Wharf Drawing Prize UK (2018–19)
This Year's Model Part I, Studio 1.1, London 2018



Mark Wright

Born 1962 Newcastle Upon Tyne, UK
Lives and works in London

Mark Wright is a painter and curator. He was a founding member of Cubitt Gallery and Studios in London, where his practice is currently based. He was the Visiting Fellow in Painting at Winchester School of Art, 1991 and Research Fellow in Fine Art, University for the Creative Arts, Canterbury 2000- 2003. He has exhibited widely throughout the UK and internationally. He has also curated a series of exhibitions focussed upon contemporary painting at & Model, Leeds, Pippy Holdsworth Gallery, London, James Freeman Gallery, London and Galeria Cadaques, Spain. Wright has work in a number of collections including the Wellcome Trust, David Roberts Foundation, Dundee Museums Collection and Deutsche Bank. He has taught at many Art Schools and Universities, most recently Wimbledon College of Art, Loughborough University, University of Brighton and Glasgow School of Art.

education

BA Fine Art Painting Central Saint Martin's College of Art and Design (1982-1985)
MA Painting Royal College of Art (1988-1990)

selected solo exhibitions

The D'Arcy Thompson Museum, University of Dundee, 2013
Seven Seven Gallery, London, 2008
Carter Presents, London, 2008
Metropole Galleries, The Leas, Folkestone, Kent, 2005
Rhodes and Mann Gallery, London, 2000
Jason and Rhodes Gallery, London, 1996
Lannon Gallery, New York, 1994

selected group exhibitions

Fully Awake 4:6, Edinburgh College of Art 2019
Stairway to Heaven: Abstraction Now, Coombs Contemporary: Watson Farley & Williams, London 2019
Towards Night, Towner Art Gallery, Eastbourne 2016
A Sketch of the Universe Art, Science and the influence of D'Arcy Thompson, D'Arcy Thompson Art Collection, Edinburgh City Art Centre, Edinburgh 2016
Variations, Stuart MacKenzie and Mark Wright James Freeman Gallery, London 2016
The Silk, James Freeman Gallery, London 2015
Surface to Air, & Model Gallery, Leeds 2015
Surface Value, James Freeman Gallery 2015
A glimpse of a great vision, The D'Arcy Thompson Museum, University of Dundee 2014
'Detail', Transition Gallery, London and H Project Space, Bangkok, Thailand 2014
Old Master Dialogues, Collyer Bristow Gallery, London. Curated by Day and Gluckman 2013
Summer salon show, Lion and Lamb Gallery, London 2013
Viewfinder, Tim Sheward Projects, Phil Allen, Fiona Banner, Richard Hamilton, Dan Hays, James White and Mark Wright 2013
Dirty Pop, & model gallery, Leeds 2013
Mediated Iconography, Pippy Holdsworth Gallery, London 2012
Minderwertig Gemalde, Galeria Cadaques, Spain 2012
Viewfinder, Carter Presents, London 2012
Restless Nature, Collyer Bristow Gallery, London and Newlyn Art Gallery, Newlyn, Cornwall. Curated by Lucy Day and Eliza Gluckman 2011

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Raft of the Medusa (1819), Théodore Géricault.

Courtesy of the Louvre Museum, Paris.

Montagne Sainte-Victoire With Large Pine (1887),

Paul Cézanne. Courtesy the Courtauld Gallery, London.

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