

Asthenia and the Critical: The Work of Ian Charlesworth, 1997 – 2004



Fig 1. Ian Charlesworth, *Some of my friends are ...*, Carbon and resin on Perspex, 2002, 90cm x 130cm

Kira Muratova's *The Asthenic Syndrome* (1989) has been recognized as a key work of glasnost cinema. Its central theme is that the Russian population suffers from asthenia, a debilitating and ultimately political condition that induces dejected passivity in times of stress. The main protagonist Nikolai, a narcoleptic, awakens to life within and around

him in the struggle to write. 'Money, spite and intolerance have the same power over me as over the vilest scum', he proclaims. And before his students he continues:

That's what a Philistine is: indifference. Indifference to society and those around him. Sadly, it penetrates even people who are basically not bad. It's not even indifference, but a basic ability to avoid things, even ignore other people's grief because it inconveniences them. Man must fight this trait continuously and mercilessly. Man should warm his fellow man like the sun.

Nikolai's efforts remain dogged by the weight of sleep at the film's close.

Such a predicament can be seen underpinning the dynamics of modernist painting in this century, or to be more precise, as motivating the question as to what an avant-garde practice could amount to in paint. Greenberg's infamous *Avant-Garde and Kitsch* (1938), for example, defended avant-garde culture in America believing it offered a 'new kind of criticism of society'.¹ Artists, on distilling and refining the medium of their craft, and the critic, on reflecting on the immediate impression left by its plastic values, could hold out against the threat of both stale academicism (Alexandrianism) and 'vicarious experience and faked sensation' (kitsch). More recently, T.J. Clark, in *Farewell to an Idea* (1999), has defined a central feature of modernism as a reaction to an impending sense of closure. His upbeat tone in previous writing for the possibilities of an artistic critical intervention in the wider social sphere is replaced by profound suspicion of the effectiveness of avant-garde rhetoric.² Indeed, Clark finds in the abstract works of Jackson Pollock a certain pathos born from an acceptance that the prevailing order can absorb the best attempts to speak against it. Value in Pollock's work is found in the act of playing out this predicament. Likewise, for Clark, the value of his own work is tied to the matter of finding in history the breath to keep the embers of avant-gardism alive. There is a sense that an art practice of critical value today will be born of, and riddled

with, this problematic. Describing the dilemma in terms of 'can't go on, will go on', Clark sums it up as follows:

Fixing the moment of art's last flowering at some point in the comparatively recent past, and discovering that enough remains from this finale for a work of ironic or melancholy or decadent continuation to seem possible after all.³

Like Nikolai's struggle between stasis and flux, the effort for the avant-garde is read as a struggle to keep moving. Dynamism in each case is tied to a sense of criticality born from a looming petrification.

Taking the point that an art of critical value today will be rooted in this problematic, this essay asserts that the work of Belfast based artist, Ian Charlesworth, achieves this through sensitivity to local circumstance. What will emerge is that any questioning of the present order must be born of self-reflexiveness. Any critique of existing forms of representation and structures of thought, whether by forging a new aesthetic language, reworking an older one, or, reaching to existing aesthetic structures considered unacceptable (vulgarity, primitive, etc.), must be matched by a recognition of the limit of its own rhetoric. Only art with an ability to turn back in upon itself, or to put it another way, with an attendant recognition that art can be inherently dialectical (Theodor Adorno), will it be possible for an art to ride the waves of its reception. For one lesson from modernism is that any possible notoriety arising from the reception of a critical practice will be at once the turning point back into the very same order it hoped to relieve us from. Think of Clark's choice of Cecil Beaton's photographs of fashion models standing before Pollock's *Number 1* and *Autumn Rhythm* for Vogue magazine as a prime example of how existing culture can absorb attempts to speak against its social order. In terms of Charlesworth's art, its inability to settle - this irresolution at the heart of his practice - will be born from the relay between the twin poles of visual seduction and critical reflexiveness in its conscious play with visual language. For this work to have

been hatched from, and engaging with, the fraught cultural and political conditions of Northern Ireland is to give the work added urgency. Now that the cards have been laid on the table, suffice to say that substantial elaboration will be needed to back up this claim.

The work of Ian Charlesworth can best be introduced through its two distinct strands. The first is work consisting of pictorial surfaces marked by a continuous series of black horizontal lines. These lines are made from drawing a lighted candle or burning matches across the surface. For the sake of simplicity, these can be called the *line* works. The second is work developing this mark-making in relation to graffiti found in charged urban spaces around Northern Ireland. More specifically, it replicates UVF markings made from the flame of cigarette lighters that are often found on the whitened ceilings of pub toilet cubicles.



Fig 2. Ian Charlesworth, *Everafter*, Carbon and resin on wood, 2003, 90cm x 130cm



Fig 3. Ian Charlesworth, *End beginning end*, Carbon and resin on wood, 2000, 90cm x 130cm

The *Line Works*

I Do, None None is a typical example of work from the *line* series. First shown in 1998 at the Context Gallery, Derry, the work consists of four large canvases, each eight by six feet, placed regularly on the main wall of the gallery. Each canvas bears the charred remnants from a burning candle drawn laboriously across the surface. The first mark is drawn horizontally across the centre of the primed canvas. Subsequent marks above and below this line are made so that repeating black horizontal lines fill the entire canvas. Its lacquered finish distances the immediacy of the marks. Patches of white primed canvas scintillate amidst the scorched surface; a surface at times blackened further on one trace momentarily merging with another. Deviation between each canvas is a matter of chance happening in the physical movement and tempo of each individual trace.

Other work from this series continues to explore this terrain, considering aspects such as scale, medium and finish. In *Too* (1998), for example, considerable effort has been given to building up the gessoed surface on smaller wooden blocks. Only then will each block be upturned for the candle to be drawn quickly beneath its primed surface. The *End Beginning End* works (2000) use matches rather than candles. This results in a sepia tone to the works (Fig.3). The density, regularity and speed of applying the burning candle or match is also explored. The *Everafter* series (2000) (Fig.2 and 11) is characterised by drawing the candle beneath the primed surface at different speeds: the slower the candle is drawn, the more regular and darker the resulting mark. In *Always* (1999) (Fig.4), the swift application of candle to surface results in a work resembling inky water streaming across the surface.

This work cannot be reduced to formal concerns alone, important though they are. Various themes and points of intrigue surface upon further scrutiny. They seem to play with the whole idea of the expressive subject in modern art with their gestural, abstract marks. Action suggests intent and reasoning, yet one is not so sure quite what the work yields in these terms.

Certainly the mark-making touches on the heroic mode all too often ascribed to key figures in the canon of art. Think of the figure of Charlton Heston as Michelangelo (*The Agony and the Ecstasy*) lying beneath the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, or, of Lee Krasner's film work creating the 'heroic' Pollock amidst the act of creation. Now think of Charlesworth, lying beneath his work, candle in hand, creating a pictorial surface from gestural action. To give the resultant work titles such as *I Do, None, None* – an obvious play on the Crystal's pop classic (*I do run, run*) – is to rob any action from heroic intent. Action is rendered harrowingly glib.

The gestural act also points to the idea of the body speaking. Recent criticism has questioned the whole idea the expressive subject in art.⁴ The idea of pure

communication through the individual's expressive mark - an act unsullied by culture and linguistic convention - has largely been discredited. The gestural mark, in and of itself, will have no precise meaning although its indexical nature will posit the body in a reading of it. Only the context in which the gestural mark is made can fill the asemantic trace with relevance. This shift in art critical thought can be related to an increasing significance being placed on the aleatory mark in modern art practice. Art criticism has often made a virtue of the aleatory mark for how it signifies chance over intent. The aleatory or arbitrary mark negates any possible meaning and thus plays a key role in abstract art's courtship with the idea of non-meaning. The aleatory mark has subsequently stood as an emphatic hold out against impositions of meaning. This is a chief characteristic of modernism in its refusal to submit to prevailing ideology. The idea, of course, was for the artwork to be open-ended and so laid bare continually to critical elaboration.

For Charlesworth's work to posit the labouring body through the gestural trace is to connect with these debates around the expressive subject. Each work is as much a result of chance as it is of physical intent. The markings in *End Beginning End*, for example, have to follow the deviations of the preceding line to the effect that various sweeps and swirls are introduced in the upper and lower sections of the gessoed boards. However, the viewer is more pressed with regard to the significance or relevance of the marks. One effect of this is that the viewer is forced to reconsider the aesthetic convention of the expressive mark. For the titles of each set of works rid action of grand intent. *I Do, None, None*: where once the negatory mark could be read as a refusal of stasis, it now sinks into a mire of self-referentiality. *Always, Everafter* and *Something Forever*: here, the significance of the action of the body in time as it is posited ethereally on canvas is reduced to sentiments best kept within a packet of Lovehearts. This undercutting suggests a surrender of artistic identity and intent. This is strengthened by the fact that there is no actual physical contact with the surface in the act of marking it. Clearly, the idea of the centred subject and its expressive mark is under attack. It is also clear, that

the romantic retreat from individual identity by surrendering the mind to the infinite is also in for comic treatment. All that remains in their wake is the idea of the subject forever in the process of its making. It suggests what Gaston Bachelard has described as the dialectic of being and non-being in duration. Bachelard puts it like this:

It is at this point that we shall see the interest of taking the principle of negation back to its source in temporal reality itself. We shall see that there is a fundamental heterogeneity at the very heart of lived, active, creative duration, and that in order to know or use time well, we must activate the rhythm of creation and destruction, of work and repose.⁵

Such a reading can be accepted only in as much as it is also recognised how endless deferral operates within the work. The predominant signifier - in this case the trace of the physical act – promises meaning but it never delivers. It may stage the dialectic between work and repose, between positing and voiding identity, but only in as much as this is inferred through its contextual setting. In this case, the humorous titles grounding the act undercut the standard attributions of meaning and value that have accrued around the gestural act. Attention subsequently focuses on the why of the making. By these means, attention returns continually to the physical process of production and its fraught courtship with significance.

It would appear from this that the work sits comfortably in the wake of conceptual debate. A la LeWitt, the work is premeditated and toys with purpose. The self-reflexive tones return the viewer to the factual conditions of its making. The work is accepting of the confines of frame and surface whilst acutely aware of the discursive and institutional limits within which the work is caught. However, aspects of the work push a reading into a more challenging terrain. The line series may be consumed aesthetically. Quite simply, the works have beautiful, seductive surfaces. Close inspection of the surface reveals a blurred, unfocused quality to the marks. The marks are intangible, suspended as they

are between material support and a layer of lacquer. The draw of the eye to the surface is then diverted to follow the swirls and deviations within each smoke trail. It is drawn to the slivers of white surfacing between two lines momentarily separated. The sheer density, blackness and scale of the works intrigue. One is puzzled by the subtle trickery where a charred trace transforms itself into a line of watery ink. The weight and thickness of the wooden blocks also help to convince the viewer that they are dealing with something of significance.

The seductive properties of the work could be read as a threat to critical engagement – as if the noise of irresolution will simply fade to utter calm. Certainly, within conceptual debate, there was a keen awareness of the fact that artwork, even when divested of techniques, conventions and the means of distribution vulnerable to the traditional criteria of aesthetic judgement, was still prone to aesthetic appraisal and institutional ratification. In the light of this apparent closure, it appears that the *line* works are curiously hinged between reflexiveness and beauty. This is the chief pleasure of the work. The basic circuit set up is a relay between the various features playing up to the historical weight of their aesthetic conventions and the simple wonder of how smoke trails can be so engaging. Each pole leads to its opposite. Hence, it can be found that part of the seductive charm of the *line* works lies in the fact that they mimic the equally seductive surface properties of contemporary photographic practice. This is a point not often raised as an explanation for photography's ascent as the new spectacular form in the contemporary gallery space. Likewise, the choice to use light boxes in some of the later works also connects with the medium of modern advertising (and the ironic, if not futile, attempts to subvert it in the gallery space). In this sense, the *line* works engage critically with a culture of material seduction.

But the grounds of this critical positioning are fraught. The work is at once complicit with and distanced from the discursive and institutional structures dominating the contemporary art scene. The dual demand for spectacle and significance is met with a

slick physical presence formed safely within the traditional confines of painting (primed surfaces, landscape and portrait formats, gestural marks, *métier*, etc.) and contemporary fine art photography (high finish, mode of presentation, etc.). Yet, enough remains within the work to rally against complacent acceptance. The work's strict adherence to the factual conditions of applying matter to a surface posits the labouring body as the subject under scrutiny. Interpretation, in this instance, is a question of authorship in as much as this is signified throughout the working process. The course of the trace is doleful, torpid. The titling frustrates ideas of criticality underpinning its negatory tones. Ghosted by the historical demands of the avant-garde, the work is as much asthenic as it is a predicament. And if the more vigorous strands of Conceptual practice sought to disentangle a sense of criticality from a complacent acceptance of their activities, the question is no more pertinent for this body of work. For it is highly problematic, less in its engagement with beauty than in its severe doubt of purpose. It is all the more compelling for this, for it is to return continually to the why of making.



Fig 4. Ian Charlesworth, *Always*, Carbon and resin on wood, 1999, 30cm x 60cm

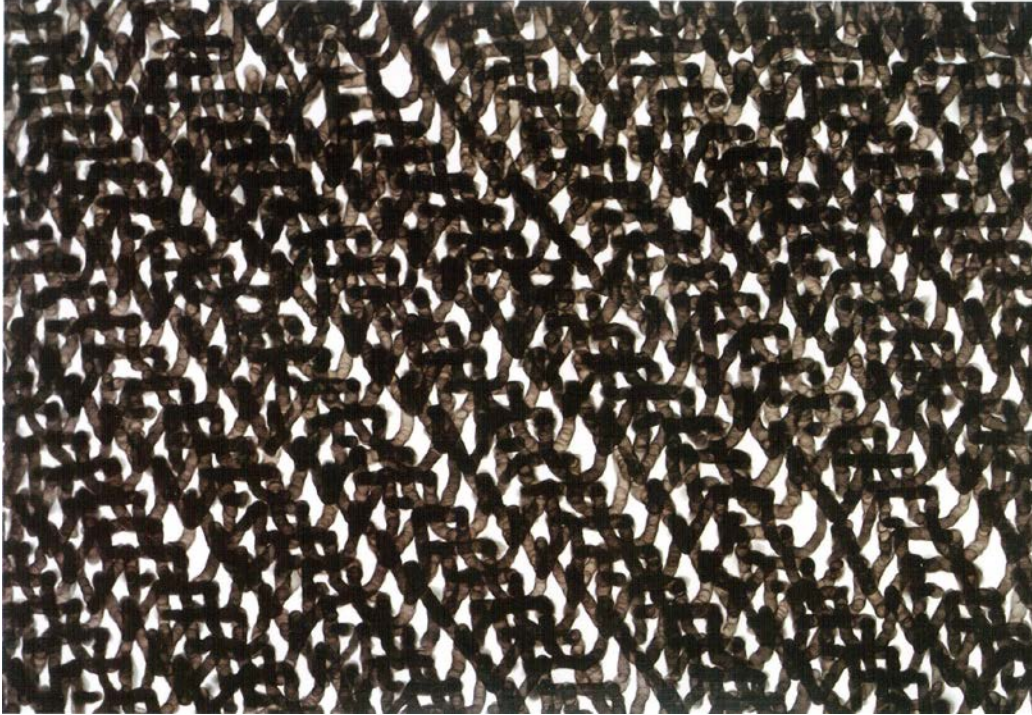


Fig 5. Ian Charlesworth, *Some of my friends are ...*, Carbon and resin on wood, 2004, 90cm x 130cm

The UVF Work

“... terror is the only meaningful act ... Only the lethal believer, the person who kills and dies for faith. Everything else is absorbed. The artist is absorbed, the madman in the street is absorbed and processed and incorporated ... The culture hasn't figured out how to assimilate him. It's confusing when they kill the innocent. But this is precisely the language of being noticed, the only language the west understands.”

The novel is Don DeLillo's *Mao II*⁶. The speaker is George, an intermediary for a Lebanese terror group. He is speaking to Bill Gray, a successful novelist who emerges from reclusion to deal with a hostage crisis. The confrontation is one between faith and doubt. This is clear in their final exchange:

“[George] We need a model that transcends all the bitter history. Something enormous and commanding. A figure of absolute being. This is crucial, Bill. In societies struggling to remake themselves, total politics, total authority, total being.” ...

... “[Bill] Even if I could see the need for absolute authority, my work would draw me away. The experience of my own consciousness tells me how autocracy fails, how control wrecks the spirit, how my characters deny my efforts to own them completely, how I need internal dissent, self-argument, how the world squashes me the minute I think it’s mine ... Ambiguities, contradictions, whispers, hints. And this is what you want to destroy.”⁷

The grounds of this dispute are familiar to readers of Adorno: first, in the need to speak beyond the confines of existing cultural boundaries, and second, for the divergent reactions towards this. On the one hand there is a totalitarian impulse in a reasoning bent on imposing a new social order. On the other is a resistance to this by acknowledging what it represses – the sensuous, ambivalence and self-reflexiveness. In terms of art, the latter stance holds to the autonomy of the work of art in so much as impositions of meaning cannot exhaust the capacity for the object of contemplation to negate them. In short, the dynamic is between a close-minded assertion of ‘truth’ and immanent elaboration. Adorno clearly favours the latter.

Artists and writers in recent history have maintained a fascination with this dynamic between assertion and doubt, absolute identification and self-reflexiveness. DeLillo’s characters can find their counterpart in the meeting of the citizen and Leopold Bloom in the Cyclops episode of Joyce’s *Ulysses*. Just as Odysseus confronts and escapes from the giant Cyclops in the land of ‘arrogant lawless beings’⁸, Bloom also encounters the monocular bigotry and rabid nationalism of the citizen before escaping from the Dublin

drinking den. The encounter has been read as a clash of two forms of authority. Jeri Johnson for example, states:

Ulysses repeatedly reminds us that certitude aligns itself with bigotry, racial hatred, blind nationalism, egotism, violence. ('Cyclops' distils this alliance.) Joyce's alternative authority is one which recognizes the inevitability of error, exercises a healthy scepticism, and yet happily embraces the new world occasioned by the fall, the lapses.⁹

Such oppositions would appear to be a regular feature of modern culture.



Fig 6. Richard Hamilton, *The citizen*,
Oil paint on two canvases, 1981-1983, 207cm x 210cm

However, the ethical contours of this dynamic are not as straightforward as one might initially presume. Specific work of the artist Richard Hamilton can be seen as an example of examining further the complexity of this dynamic. In fact, Hamilton has updated Joyce's citizen by connecting the figure to IRA prisoners on blanket protest in Long Kesh in the late 70s/early 80s. His resulting work, *The citizen* (1983) (Fig.6), explores the grounds of this dynamic by emulating the gestural shit smears of the protesting prisoners on canvas. Hamilton's comments, when asked 'if there is a hint of mockery at direct, spontaneous self-expression' in *The citizen*, are relevant in this respect:

I think it's a relevant point. I always had a hankering to work more fluently. I felt that as a young man I was very fluent and easy. I could draw anything, I had no inhibitions at all. I kind of lost it, or threw it away, or decided it was better to avoid it. There are occasions when I think, 'Wouldn't it be nice to make some gestural mark' ... It's all to do with defiance, I think [marking the cell wall with shit]. Defiance of authority. I didn't try and put myself in those conditions but I thought about what the conditions would be in which a person would do this...¹⁰

What this reveals is the lure of purity found, in Hamilton's case, in the direct gestural act of defiance. Hamilton's emulation can be seen as a form of primitivism – the idea of finding that which lies beyond civility which holds the potential to renew the culture imposing its ideas of civility and barbarity in the first place. Picasso's use of African masks and Gauguin's retreat to Tahiti in order to discover a way of life untouched by the excesses of modernity are familiar examples of this in the visual arts. It is evident there is a colonial dimension to the primitivist impulse.

The modern roots of this dynamic can be found in the writings of Rousseau. For when Rousseau pitched nature in opposition to culture, he set all that is authentic, pure and original against all that is inauthentic, sullied and degenerate. By outlining a natural state of grace and extolling the virtues of the noble savage, Rousseau could set the foundations of his political critique of modernity. His ideal resolution lay in the passage from 'natural man' to the citizen. The 'very being' of the citizen, for Rousseau, lies in his relation to the polis, where he 'understands his good to be identical with the common good'.¹¹ This is quite different from natural man: 'Natural man is entirely for himself. He is numerical entity, the absolute whole which is relative only to itself or its kind'.¹² It is Rousseau's contention that only by leaving the state of nature and becoming a citizen can man realize his true nature as man.¹³ Accordingly, it is by giving up natural rights for civil rights that man is able to experience their fullest freedom. This is, of course, predicated on the idealistic assertion that self-interest is co-terminus with the interests

of the social body. In terms of Northern Ireland, where the social and political conditions are fractured along the lines of class as well as ethnic and national allegiance, it can be seen that the demand for rights (however defined) is at the very heart of cultural politics in the North.

Nonetheless, there is a sense of the complexity of the dynamic mapped out. On the one hand, there are the divisions of doubt and conviction being played out in terms of civility and barbarity in DeLillo and Joyce. On the other, there is the lure of absolute defiance in the mark of the citizen. For Hamilton, the connotations of freedom and expression it contains clashes with the traditional contours of civility and barbarity in the British cultural imagination – hence the primitivist allure in repeating the actions as art. In this sense, a reading of Hamilton’s work can expose the ethical contours of political violence that underpin nationalist and imperial agendas. The complexity emerges when it is recognized that political violence can be seen in terms of violence sanctioned by the state (i.e. within the boundaries of civility) and unsanctioned violence (barbarity), brutal as both have been.



Fig 7. Ian Charlesworth, *Some of my friends are ...*, Carbon and resin on wood, 2004, 90cm x 130cm

It is in this context that Charlesworth's *UVF work* is best understood. These pieces, as stated earlier, take as their starting point UVF graffiti often found burned onto the ceilings of pub toilet cubicles with cheap cigarette lighters. Charlesworth replicates the technique, charring various gessoed surfaces (wooden boards, stretched canvases and rectangular slabs of perspex) before sealing them with an acrylic resin. One piece is limited to a singular UVF scrawl filling much of the surface while others continue to build one scrawl upon the previous. The result is a perpetual layering of text upon text to the point where the initial act of mimesis threatens to vanish beyond recall (see Figs.8-10). As a consequence of this, the initial threat posed by the charged nature of the UVF scrawl rescinds to offer the viewer quite a different experience set in the realm of the aesthetic. This is buttressed by the fact that the marks have been transposed to a context quite different from that of a vandalized pub toilet. There is little sense from these works of the pleasures of a beer-laden piss being ghosted by the latent presence of a hood¹⁴.

I joke, but there is a scatological element to this work. In truth, it is not that there is little sense of the aforementioned presence, it is that there is enough of it lingering to gently underscore those factors working on a higher pitch. The journey of the marks from the pub toilet to the exhibition space is one where the marks have been sanitized. This works on a number of levels. Firstly, in terms of each work, the attention given to whiteness and finish is significant. The sharp definition of each mark against the white surface is explored not only with the time and effort given to developing pristine clarity by building up the gessoed surface but in the choice in later works to switch to perspex with its clinical industrial sheen. It has been said that cleanliness is an index of civilization, and in modern industrial societies, whiteness is its visual short hand. This idea can be extended to cover the walls of the gallery. Secondly, precision is demanded of the exhibited work. Careful attention is given to the placement of the work in the gallery space. Consideration of aspects such as the level of viewing, the spatial relationships of the works to each other, and, the visual interference in any gallery

space are crucial to generating an air of professionalism. This idea of professionalism is, in turn, crucial to attracting appropriate attention. This is the whispered language of the gallery space. Recent visits to exhibition spaces in the company of local artists have surprised me in that they have been preoccupied with the technical finish of works almost to the detriment of critical engagement with the ideas and issues contained therein. The blemish appears more of a threat to value than conceptual clumsiness. By drawing the UVF scrawl into this context, a tension is set up between its scatological origins and its sanitized destination. After all, the aim of mimesis is to hold as much as possible of that transcribed. By doing so under these conditions, the journey of the mark is made apparent and called into question. Moreover, it had been said earlier that the *line* work engages with the culture of material seduction, and this appears no less true for the *UVF* work. It is not simply the mark that is called into question but the confines in which it appears *as art*.

But what is it that these marks present to the viewer in their artful form? Is it recovering a threateningly raw expression of identity as the grounds of artistic vitality or breaking them down to highlight the contradictions and absurdities contained therein? If it is the former, the work replicates a familiar primitivist endeavour. Should it be the latter, there is the suggestion of a class-ridden critique played out on the grounds of sophistication. Either way, the boundaries of barbarity and civility are established on grounds that favour only the artist and the limited audience for which it is aimed. If this is the case, it falls in line with an objectionable feature of modern culture concerned with the matter of politics in the North. For it subtly undercuts the voice of the political subject on grounds that do not readily engage with the actual circumstances that give rise to the actions in the first place.

It is clear that the *UVF* work treads an ethical minefield. However, as I will argue, this work confronts its trouble spots by unearthing a set of problems common to both the actions of the hood and artist. In other words, what these marks *do* achieve in their

artful form is to highlight the shared terrain between the immediacy of the action in the toilet cubicle and the self-reflective stance involved in its conscious mimicry. This concerns the limits of language and action in charting experience.

The case can be made by firstly contrasting the act of marking the toilet ceiling to themes developed in the *line* work. This work questions the gestural act as a solid mark of identity by positing an endless deferral of identity through the use of deadpan tactics. The hood's act stands in dramatic contrast to this. Far from the action of a self-questioning subject, it is the immediacy of social allegiance as the mark of individual identity that is striking. For a closer examination reveals an underlying complexity that muddies the simple transition from individual to social identity contained within the mark. Moreover, it is a complexity that can not be readily articulated through the gestural act itself.

Consider, for example, how the act is performed in the confines of the men's toilets. Here, ideas of masculinity are policed heavily to the extent that silence and conformity to routine are more often the rule. The act breaks the regime momentarily but in aggressive terms that would appear only to heighten any tension therein. In this context, the UVF mark is as much coloured by the demands of machismo as by political aspiration. Indeed, to consider the history and present status of UVF is to access another level of complexity underpinning the spontaneous act of identification. For it is to ask what precisely is the individual identifying with. Founded by the Ulster Unionist Council in 1913 as a military force to support political opposition to Home Rule, their presence was instrumental to the eventual foundation of Northern Ireland as a political entity. Their more recent history involves participation in the Ulster Worker's Council's strike to help bring down Sunningdale, ongoing sectarian killings during the Troubles, an eventual proscription by the British state and their current predicament amidst Loyalist feuds, sectarian riots, Agreement politics and the Stephen's Inquiry. The point is there has been enough shifts of position in relation to the history and present circumstances of

Northern Ireland to render the nature of identification more complex than might initially have been presumed.

The mark then is, in one sense, a defiant individual act in a toilet cubicle and an act of conformity in its suppression of individual difference. In another sense, it is to connect with loyalist action with regard to the fate of the working class areas from which they stem and the wider geographical locale. In other words, the act is inherently equivocal, containing within it many irresolvable tensions and contradictions that are denied by the immediacy of the act. It is in this sexual and political sump that the marking of the toilet cubicle should be read.

In this way, the UVF mark presents the inability to chart clearly the relay between individual and social identity despite being thoroughly infused with its dynamic. Fig.9, from the *I know who you are ...* series, touches on this. The threatening connotations of the title, taken from paramilitary parlance, are here twisted to rebound back upon the mark of the hood. Knowingness is thus posited as a feature of the mimetic act. Figs.8 and 10, from the same series, build on this, layering up the mark through repetition. Gradually, the UVF mark sublimates into an abstract field through gestural rhythm. The experience of viewing the work is at once one of tracing the dissolution of the mark into the scorched thicket of line while recovering fragments of the singular act. The spatial ambiguities formed by the overlaying of marks and the density of each charred remain against the luminous surface are also a point of perceptual intrigue. The eye fails to settle, continually darting amidst this ephemeral if not ghostly terrain. The viewer is denied a visual locus and point of control with which to survey the scene. If knowingness is a feature of the initial mimetic act, incognizance is a feature of its repetition. And so the artist's repeated action (and the subsequent placement of the work) draws the mark into the visual traditions of modern art. In particular, it draws the mark into the language of abstraction and its accompanying courtship with ideas of non-meaning and aesthetic autonomy. This is ground the *Line* work has stalked.



Fig. 8 Ian Charlesworth, *I know who you are*, Carbon and resin on wood, 2003, 20cm x 25cm

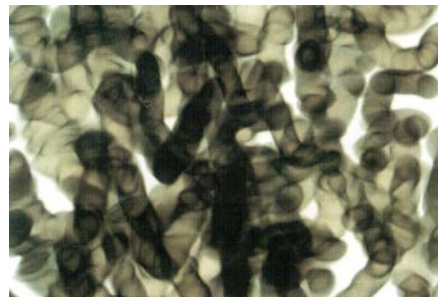


Fig 9. Ian Charlesworth, *I know who you are*, Carbon and resin on wood, 2003, 20cm x 25cm (right)

Fig 10. Ian Charlesworth, *I know who you are*, Carbon and resin on wood, 2003, 20cm x 25cm (left)

If there was a concern that this work contrasted the sophisticated conventions of visual art discourse against the unreflective daubs of a hood, it is clear that the recent traditions of art are also presented in terms of inarticulacy. If there was also a concern

that the work merely renewed a familiar primitivist impulse by treating the gestural act, as Hamilton had done, as a de-skilled address of authenticity and political defiance, it is clear that Charlesworth avoids this by undercutting any idealized coincidence of action and political intent. To do so on grounds where the difference between the artist and the hood as expressive subjects threatens to collapse is to offer an opportunity to see how our notions of barbarity and civility are constructed in the first place. The *UVF* work does not re-establish divisions of barbarity and civility that all too often have clouded analysis of the conditions of alienation in Northern Ireland. Neither does it equate the artist and the hood in terms of 'good' citizenship (!) but instead calls attention to the more familiar tactic of denying a rationale to the hood's actions whilst retaining the ethical high ground.

It has been argued that the *Line* work is hinged between asthenia and the critical as an artistic predicament in how to act. It appears that the *UVF* work now extends this beyond the confines of visual art debate to contrast with social and political realities where questions of identity and purpose can have much more chilling effects. We are returned to DeLillo's dilemma: of how to act in a purposeful and ethical manner through art when it demands that we should build our hopes on foundations of doubt. But in an age where the demand for spectacle, with its matching flow of capital, more often than not determines the kind of art produced and promoted; in an age where art's marketing strategies thrive on a defined sense of purpose, meaning and value, yet appear reluctant to challenge the very contours within which they operate; in an age where demands for art's relevance are increasingly filtered through populist demands for accessibility; what hope lies for the complexities of doubt? Certainly with this work, there is the sense that the visual allure of art can once again make us shudder and wonder why.



Ian Charlesworth, *Everafter* (detail), Carbon and resin on wood, 2000, 130cm x 180cm



Ian Charlesworth, *Everafter* (detail), Carbon and resin on wood, 2003, 130cm x 180cm

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¹ Clement Greenberg, 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch', *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism. Volume 1: Perceptions and Judgements, 1939-1944*, Edited by John O'Brien, Chicago. University of Chicago Press, 1986, pp.5-22.

² Compare, for example, the following two quotes from Clark:

"A bourgeois artist [Courbet] is shown to fail to make his art 'revolutionary', but his failure is in its way exemplary and at least serious: it provides us with a touchstone for other such attempts or claims, and in particular it suggests the way in which a struggle against the dominant discursive conventions in a culture is bound up with attempts to break or circumvent the social forms in which those conventions are embedded. That effort in turn seems to me necessarily to involve some kind of action against the place of art itself, as a special social practice in bourgeois society."

(T. J. Clark, *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1973, p.7.)

"This (to paraphrase Greenberg) is what makes modernism great: not the solutions it offers, needless to say, but its picture of a culture where solution were still the order of the day. There would have been no such picture, has been my argument, without the attendant claims to truth – that it, to annihilation and totality. These claims are the subject of abstract art: they give it its fierceness and sensuousness, and make it turn on its own disappointment."

(T. J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes in the History of Modernism*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999, p.369.)

If his writing on Courbet displays a certain upbeat tone in the sense that such a critical intervention might well be possible (certainly, the cultural and political upheavals in Europe and America in the late 60s would have inspired some degree of confidence), his recent writings have been dogged by a profound suspicion of the effectiveness of avant-garde rhetoric.

³ T.J. Clark, 'In Defense of Abstract Expressionism', *October*, no.69, Summer 1994, p.23.

⁴ See, for example, Norman Bryson, *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze*, London: Macmillan Press, 1983, or, Terry Atkinson, 'Phantoms of the Studio', *Oxford Art Journal*, vol.13, no.1, 1990, pp.49-62.

⁵ Gaston Bachelard, *The Dialectic of Duration* (1950), Manchester: Clinamen Press, 2000, p.29.

⁶ Don DeLillo, *Mao II*, London: Vintage, 1992, p.157.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.158-159.

⁸ 'Thence we sailed on with downcast hearts. We came to the land of the Cyclops race, arrogant lawless beings who leave their livelihood to the deathless gods and never use their own hands to sow or plough; yet with no sowing and no ploughing, the crops all grow for them - wheat and barley and grapes that yield wine from ample clusters, swelled by the showers of Zeus', from Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Walter Shewring, (Oxford: Oxford University Press) 1980, p.101.

⁹ See Jeri Johnson, 'Explanatory Notes, to James Joyce's *Ulysses (The 1922 Text)*, edited with an introduction by Jeri Johnston, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980, p.885.

¹⁰ 'Hamilton's Progress: Richard Hamilton Interviewed by Bill Hare and Andrew Patrizio, Fruitmarket Gallery, 18th March 1988', *Alba*, No.9, April 1988, p.42.

¹¹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile or On Education*, Introduction and translation by Allan Bloom, London: Penguin, 1979, p.5.

¹² *Ibid.*, p.39.

¹³ "Good social institutions are those that know how to denature man, to take his absolute existence from him in order to give him a relative one and transport the *I* into the common unity, with the result that each individual believes himself no longer one but a part of the unity and no longer feels except within the whole ... This is the citizen", Rousseau, *Ibid.*, p.40.

¹⁴ 'Hood' is a colloquial term used to describe a young male from working class areas of Northern Ireland often caught up in petty crime and substance abuse. They will sometimes, but not always, be alienated from the paramilitaries, but they nonetheless can identify with them. This is particularly so in those Loyalist areas witnessing the more brutal aspects of social breakdown.