

'The Far Side of Reason'

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In Joseph Wright of Derby's painting *An Experiment on a bird in the Air Pump* (1768), a travelling scientist demonstrates a vacuum pump on a cockatoo by candlelight. Painted during the 'Enlightenment' period, it demonstrates the certainty of science before various witnesses, from children to a philosopher, crowded around the dramatically lit scene, each displaying a different human reaction. Something of the metaphoric content and excitement of this painting resonates in Troika's *Path of Least Resistance* (2013) series. I imagine Conny Freyer, Eva Rucki, and Sebastien Noel in a taped off area of their studio, watching as a fifty thousand volt electrical charge shoots through a piece of carefully treated wet paper following the 'path of least resistance', the determined 'lightning' burning tributaries and pathways to produce beautiful and delicate artworks.¹ As with Wright of Derby's painting, there is the scientific certainty of the paper's destruction on contact with the charge, yet the path the electrical current takes is not predictable. 'I regard the risk taken in making the *Light Drawings* as a certain reverence for what is intrinsically uncontrollable', remarks Sebastien Noel. This synthesis of intellectual enquiry, experimentation, curiosity, unpredictability and defiant playfulness defines Troika's practice. Troika challenges our view of reality, presenting us with questions about our perception, knowledge and understanding of the world, which is something art has always been tasked to do. Underlying Troika's work is the voice of reason, but logic is presented in the most impractical, joyous, playful and sometimes dangerous of ways, the realisation of intuitive scientific truths conjured up through patterns and processes that are specific to each query. The results are simultaneously rich, subtle and intelligent.

Underpinned with the compelling notions of reductive science and emergence theory, Troika's work operates in the realms of optics, mechanics, scientific enquiry and art history. Independent of their set of experimental tools, they have invented a new vocabulary for their research, focusing on the exploration of the un-known, the nature of things and nature itself. The process traverses a multi-dimensional landscape that exists to play with our understanding, our hearts and our minds. Troika's luscious work is both rational and irrational, living in the parallel universe that exists between the scientist and the artist, its duality and the conversations it provokes delivering a plethora of interpretations far beyond straightforward scientific inference. At its heart lies a search for a position beyond dualism, for the existence, perhaps, of a pantheistic *Weltanschauung*.

Delta (2013) consists of a huge sheet of paper where the burnt and charred pathway assumes the distinct patterning of a river delta. As Noel suggests, the multi-layering of the work provokes a 'kind of enquiry into our relationship with technology and science', the tracery and vulnerability of the edges where it meets the void are reflections of our desire as human beings to 'physically master' nature. He points out that the 'enlightenment' period gave us so much knowledge of the world surrounding us, but also gave us an 'über rationale approach'.

The quest for the 'theory of everything'², is obviously efficient, but it does not take into account everything that confronts the observer: 'the sublime, the unpredictability of nature, the way things are not entirely perceptible and understandable by human kind'.³

The Path of Least Resistance series speaks of all these things whilst simultaneously evoking rivers, tributaries, oxbow lakes, blood vessels, veins, capillaries, and plant roots, which share a similar distinctive configuration. The thicker the paper the more the current 'eats its way round' searching for the wettest area, sometimes 'jumping' off course. Troika have always had a fascination with natural phenomena.

¹ *The thick absorbent paper is treated with a fire retardent to prevent it bursting into flames.*

² *The 'Theory of Everything' is the acknowledged theory of theoretical physics. It is the linking together of all known physical phenomena and predicts the outcome of any experiment that could be carried out in principle.*

³ *Jean Wainwright in conversation in with Troika (Sebastien Noel) March 2013*

Their interest in lightning strikes lay both with the 'terrible' beauty that they perceived as a 'flat powerful force' and a curiosity about what lightning actually is, and the three-dimensional shape that it took as it moved and unfolded through the air, following the path of least resistance. I am reminded of Walter de Maria's *The Lighting Field* (1977), with its four hundred polished stainless steel poles, and Hiroshi Sugimoto's *Lightning Fields* (2008), with images created from electrical charges on photographic dry plates. While de Maria's 'lightning rods' attract the spectacular natural force and the Sugimoto's photographic paper remains untouched by the electrical charge, Troika literally 'play with fire', their art transformed and created by the forceful moment of contact.

Troika's love of interrogating their work, led to their series *Path of Most Resistance* (2013), where they chose to 'create a circle against the natural flow of nature forcing it to behave according to [their] will'. The choice of the circle, is a loaded one, as not only is it one of the fundamental figures of abstraction but it was also extremely difficult for Troika to achieve. Reminiscent of Joan Miró and his *Burnt Canvases (Toiles Brûlées)* (1973), where the canvas was lacerated and partially destroyed by fire over a number of sessions, the physical making of the work was fraught with danger and passion. Like Troika, Miró saw fire as productive, declaring that he loved to work with it because it 'destroys less than it transforms, it acts on what it burns with an inventive force which possesses magic'.

Falling Light (2010) synthesises the natural and the artificial world. Rain drops are created using mechanisms with lights and lenses. The orchestrated concentric circles of coloured light overlap, 'pool', or fall gently to the ground, reflecting the transitory beauty of nature. This is art where the visceral and conceptual combine, it tempts participation, inciting us to jump from 'puddle to puddle' and to anticipate and follow the shifting movement of the 'rainfall'. In *Falling Light*, as in all of Troika's work, we are reminded of the magical and repetitive patterns of science and nature, the dropping of a stone in water, rain falling on a pool, the way that light can spread and ripple.

Squaring the Circle (2013) has evolved from philosophical and empirical debates. Gestalt theory and Edwin Abbott's satirical novel *Flatland* (1884), where the inhabitants of a two-dimensional world cannot recognise or perceive a three-dimensional object, leave, as Troika suggest, conceptual imprints on the shape of the sculpture. Constructed from steel and wrapped in a dense black flock flannel that absorbs light, *Squaring the Circle* is both beautiful in its simplicity and intriguing in its complexity. Confronted with the sculpture, viewers have their visual sensibilities challenged: they see a black circular sculpture, but in the huge mirror opposite their 'impossible reflection' reveals them viewing a black square. I find myself in *Alice in Wonderland* territory, who, in response to the caterpillar's question 'Who are you?' answers 'I -- I hardly know, sir, just at present -- at least I know who I WAS when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then.' The experience of seeing and knowing lies at the heart of the work, for both the shape of the square and the circle are contained in one object. The duplication of the circle in the mirror is simply not possible and becomes optically magical. Also residing in this work, for Troika, there is the Indian fable of the Blind Men and the Elephant who, because they have only been given a part of the animal to touch, cannot agree or imagine what an elephant actually is.

The *Small Bang* series (2013) links conceptually to *Squaring the Circle*, but here Troika's material is black ink. A circle or dot of ink is applied to chromatography paper and while adding water drops into the centre of the circle the dye is separated and spreads with myriad colours. Light and darkness, life and death, this is art that develops and changes before the eyes. Again there is the wonder of something emerging that you had not imagined was there. The artworks, when seen by the viewer on the wall, are therefore not what they seem: for they are both the various colours that make up the absolute black ink and the separated colours of its intrinsic makeup. The title *Small Bang* also suggests the fundamental origins of the *Big Bang* of the universe, and the fact that all matter was created from darkness. Yet as with all Troika's work, it is not necessary to know exactly what we are looking at, the power of Troika's aesthetic draws us in and captivates us.

The *Hierophany* series (2013) also operates on a number of different levels, conceptual, scientific and playful. The framed sculptural drawings, constructed from tens of thousands of black and white dice, are investigations using logic and algorithms, scientific systems and cellular automata. With their palette of dice, each one placed in an order pre-determined by a set of rules, unpredictable patterns emerge. In *Hierophany*, Freyer suggests, 'the complexity emerges from a very simple rule. Why, if you keep repeating the same rule does the result become irregular? The only way to reveal this is by making the work'. But

once again we are led on a journey that illuminates two commonly antithetical notions, meditation and being a computer. The making of the work, which takes a very long time, is both 'very playful - there is a childlike action of kids playing with blocks' - coupled with the contemplative state of obeying the rules like a Mandala. 'Usually you would not associate meditation with being a computer but with *Hierophany* you are a synthesis of both, you are in a historical sense a human computer'.

The completed sculpture drawings, with their variety of dramatic patterns, harbour within them the dynamics of their gestation and construction. In contrast to the solidity and physical assembling of *Hierophany*, the ethereal beauty of the *Soot Drawings* (2013) is partly due to the striking fragility of their materiality. Soot particles generated from cheap paraffin candles that are passed over objects that have been placed on white paper. In the *Soot Drawing* series the dense black particles deposited on the paper trace the pattern of the air flow in gradations from dark to light. The layering of the surface is three-dimensional in its density, but as Noel points out 'they can be carried away on your breath'. Different from black pigment or charcoal, the particles are much smaller, so 'even though you are painting with the most absolute black you get the whole spectrum'. Just as Moholy-Nagy at the Bauhaus was working with light to capture its plasticity with his photograms, so Troika are using soot combustion and convection to produce their 'definitive mark'. Rucki suggests that 'with these works, in a time where everything is in constant flux, where computers allow us to retrace and erase our steps, there is no possibility of erasing, you really do need to consider if you should take another step - "Is this really it?" - as you can't go back on your action'.

While the *Soot Drawings* and the *Small Bang* were concerned with the qualities of darkness *Suspension of Disbelief* (2013) is about light: We are enticed by the beauty of the installation with its arch formed by light hitting a pair of lenses. Yet the work is an enigma. There is something intangible about the work, in the simplicity of its form, that makes you want to explore and understand the way that the arches have been made but that also returns us to the realms of the miraculous. Straddling the two worlds of science and 'belief, we want logic and reason to provide explanations, yet 'believe' the evidence before our eyes. *Suspension of Disbelief* is as much about intuitive belief as it is about agnostic reason. It is looking at a synthesis of both. The sculpture, while tempting us visually, challenges our judgment concerning the impossibility of bending light and invites us to explore the intimate arena of the unexplainable. We are being seduced by the sculpture's seeming simplicity, metaphorically 'blinded by the light'.

The ability of Troika to work as one 'artist' in harmony, with a shared sensibility, whilst still retaining their individual vision, is a careful balance. For the ten years since they graduated from the Royal College of Art they have worked together to provoke and expand their vernacular, vocabulary and practice. There is a tremendous amount of passion in the ideas, the commitment and the making. In Alfred H Barr's words, writing in 1959, their 'whole personality is recklessly committed' to their work they 'grasp the authentic being, by action, decision, a leap of faith'.⁴ This is work that examines what an 'absolute' image might be, what is considered 'truth'. Ultimately the *Far side of Reason* seduces us with its beauty: 'We are all motivated by curiosity about what is understood and what is yet to be determined, and we [Troika] are trying to seek out the inexplicable, to open up in our work a debate that there is more than one truth. We think it is important to escape simplistic dichotomies, that the world is not dualistic, that rational is not the opposite of intuitive'. For Troika all these thought processes, all the disciplines of human knowledge, being science, art, or religion, 'are nothing but lenses through which only a facet of reality, or of the sublime, is revealed. No single discipline will on its own attain a full understanding of reality, and only through synthesis between these different approaches could a fuller picture be achieved'. This is why they suggest they reference *Flatland*, or the fable of the Blind Men and the Elephant. Their work is an attempt at a synthesis between a rational and a more subjective approach, 'which inform both the ideas being the work, or the process in which they are developed'. The exhibition title *The Far Side of Reason* does not point to an opposite, but rather to another side, mysterious and unattainable, which is but one with reason itself, like the dark side of the moon.

⁴ Barr, A. H. *The New American Painting* (New York/London: Museum of Modern Art, New York/Tate Gallery, 1959) pp. 9-10 Catalogue of exhibition 24th Feb - 22nd March 1959.