28 Mar – 10 Apr 2012
Timeout Hong Kong
'Unpainting colours' by Edmund Lee

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Master colourist Innes surveys the setting of his Hong Kong exhibition

CALVIN SIT

Unpainting colours

Renowned Scottish abstract painter **Callum Innes** talks to **Edmund Lee** about his idiosyncratic creative process

"Take up fishing. Have a hobby," says Callum Innes jokingly when asked about his plans for the future. And he should. Since he started off briefly with figurative paintings (and found them to be 'wrong'), the Scottish artist has been hard at work – and has firmly established himself as a prominent abstract painter of minimalist geometric works, which are created through a repetitive cycle of painting and 'unpainting' (the word art critics use to describe his signature process of wiping off part of the painted canvas with turpentine). "I see it as the making of a painting. I don't see it as 'unpainting'," Innes remarks. "Each of my paintings is a snapshot of a process." *Time Out* talked to him during his brief visit to Hong Kong in mid-March…

Can you tell us about your work at this exhibition?
The paintings here all started out as solid black paintings, and then I took a portion [of paint] off them. It's about space, it's about structure, and it's about the void. [It's about] how you can create a space with something very simple. They all pertain to be geometric. But they're not measured: I made a line through them by dividing by hand. Nothing is quite 'right' in this routine of fragility, hopefully. There's no narrative in my work, but… today, walking around Hong Kong, I see things – like some orange and black stripes I saw going up the escalator. [The image] sits in my head, and that's where structure comes from.

Has architecture always been part of your inspiration?
[It is about] spaces, how you work with space, and how you kind of evolve a space. I did some teaching in Edinburgh with architecture students, and we talked about space and how you react to space. But it's more [about] how the body physically reacts to space. So for me, a painting… you know, you don't look at [a] painting and stand straight in the middle – you move around the object.

When you create each of your paintings, do you have a particular idea or object in your mind?
There's a series of violet paintings I started years ago, and it's best to explain [this]. I had an uncle when I was young, and everything in his house was violet. He had a violet carpet, violet… it's hideous. It was awful. And in a bizarre way the colour stuck with me, and I had to make use of that colour. In that sense it's very simplistic, but that's how things structure in my head. And as I said, today I'm going up the escalator and looking at orange stripes and working on a painting from it. It's like a dictionary of images and thoughts – but mainly thoughts.

> **There's a painting in my studio that I return to every two years and paint it again and again**

Since your work consists of the repetitive process of painting and 'unpainting', how do you decide when it's time to stop?
I could do it indefinitely… but you can't take it too far. [I decide with] partly intuition, partly craft. You know, constantly, people will talk about my work [in relation to] spirituality and beauty. And I like beauty, but beauty is different to everyone. I constantly try and make something that's very difficult to look at. It's partly knowing when to stop and it's partly through [learning] historically that if you go too far with it… and physically, how much more you can do with it? There's a painting in my studio that I return to every two years and paint it again and again; that has been painted four or five times. So, it's a certain amount of repetition, and then there's a moment when you take it too far. But it's tempting to go back [and paint more].

Do you think living and working in Edinburgh has an influence on your work?
The great thing for me working in Edinburgh is that I do a lot of travelling after work – I try and keep it down. [The city] affords me anonymity to get on with the work, to develop the painting without people watching, and I kind of need that space. It's a nice place to live because I have the countryside 10 minutes away. I can go to the mountain in half an hour or I can be down at the beach.

Do you need tranquillity to create this type of work?
I personally need tranquillity. I need peace of mind, but I also need time without interruption. Years ago, I thought about [setting up] a studio in London – my gallery's saying 'you should be in London' or 'you should be in New York'. I love going to London and New York, but I think the constant interruption in the studio [would] make it quite difficult: you get a lot of people travelling through who are genuinely interested in seeing [your] work, it's quite difficult to say: "No, you can't come to the studio." The good thing about Edinburgh is that, when somebody is coming up to Edinburgh to see the work, I know they're very serious, I know they want to spend time.

Callum Innes's solo exhibition is at Edouard Malingue Gallery until **Apr 21**.

timeout.com.hk/art

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South China Morning Post
'Paint relief' by Fionnuala McHugh

Paint relief

Scottish artist Callum Innes at the Edouard Malingue Gallery in Central. Photo: Jonathan Wong

Callum Innes explains how he tries to capture a sense of human fragility with his abstract blocks of colour. **Fionnuala McHugh** meets the self-deprecating artist

Photographs don't do justice to Callum Innes' paintings. You look at website reproductions of those blocks of colour, those apparently blank spaces; you read the glowing critical appraisals – "pure walls of shifting light and colour", "haikus on the theme of colour", "pared-down glimmers of colour" – and you wonder, not for the first time, if the British contemporary art world is having a little joke at the expense of the rest of us.

It's true Innes is British – well, Scottish. It's true he's contemporary (he was born in 1962). But he's about as removed from the hoopla of Britart as Maria Callas is from Lady Gaga. He applies watercolours to paper and oil to canvas; these days, that sort of traditional approach is a novelty. To spend time with the end result, in a quiet space in the heart of this city, is an unexpected pleasure.

Innes, on his first visit to Hong Kong, is wry, self-deprecating, passionate and slightly jetlagged. One of his bugbears, he says, is people going to exhibitions and being fed information about the work but not actually looking at it.

"The beautiful experience – I'm not talking about my work – is going in and discovering it," he says. So the show has no name, and all 15 works are listed as *Untitled*.

Nevertheless, it's probably useful to point out that what you see is more complicated than it first appears. Innes' works are as much about subtraction as addition: he starts off by painting a canvas in one colour, then removing some of the initial coat in a particular area with turpentine. Then he does it again. And again. And again. He calls the process "unpainting".

You have to look at the raw, layered edges of these calm works to guess at the tension and commitment that went into their creation. Only then will you realise that a canvas initially painted entirely black – in the case of *Untitled No 82* – has ended up as two blocks of red and white. His work combines the visual with the physical; if you examine the orange pastel at the entrance to the show you'll see the shape of his hand as it crushed the colour onto the handmade paper. As Edouard Malingue, whose Central gallery is putting on the artist's first show in Asia, remarks: "It sounds strange to say but you have the impression his work is almost sculpture."

Innes wasn't always an abstract painter. He'd studied at Gray's School of Art in Aberdeen and then at Edinburgh College of Art before becoming a figurative artist. "The work was full of mythologies and fantasies, the things that go through your head at 21," he says ruefully. "They were falsehoods."

That's an almost quaintly Biblical word but Innes – who, when he ascribes his work ethic to "a good Calvinist background" sounds as if he's only half-joking – believes in a moral obligation to be artistically honest. In 1987, when he was 25, he was awarded a Scottish Arts Council residency in Amsterdam. It introduced him to European art but, vitally, it also removed him from the influence of his peers. "There's nothing worse than your contemporaries looking over your shoulder and saying, 'Your work's changing!'"

> After two weeks on holiday, I need to get back there. I need to work. My wife would say I become a pain
>
> CALLUM INNES

It was. He still remembers the disappointment of the gallery in Edinburgh who'd commissioned one kind of painter and found itself with another. "It's not easy being a young artist but as soon as you start exhibiting, you've got to push it forward." He did. In 1995, he was shortlisted for the Turner Prize, in 1998 he won the NatWest Prize and in 2002, the Jerwood Prize for Painting. One of the judges, Charles Saumarez Smith, then director of London's National Portrait Gallery said of him, "His work has a form of classical authority to it".

He's now highly respected; his work is in eminent museums (the Guggenheim in New York, Tate Britain, the Centre Pompidou in Paris); and he has – judging by the Tate's film of him working in it – a spacious, glass-ceilinged studio in Edinburgh where he can shift between watercolours and oils, as they dry between applications, and from which he doesn't like to be lengthily absent. "After two weeks on holiday, I need to get back there. I need to work. My wife would suggest I become a pain."

But he's still pushing himself. He refers, constantly, to developing the language of his work; the words pour out of him as he tries to express the inexpressible abstract. "Am I talking too much?" he suddenly asks at one point. "I can haver on. [Haver: to talk nonsense, babble. Scots.] You always worry – is the work moving? You worry about that day to day … in the process of doing the book at least I could see it was."

The book, *water/colour*, was a collaboration last year with Colm Toibin. The Irish author, already the owner of an Innes watercolour, was introduced to the artist by New York gallery owner Sean Kelly, who's represented him since 1996. Initially, the idea was that Toibin would write an academic appreciation but he wrote a short story (based on the death of his father when he was a child); Innes (whose mother died when he was about seven) painted 101 watercolours to accompany the text. Even compressed within a book, Toibin's words and Innes' images together are luminescent; the exhibition in New York must have looked extraordinary.

Innes is also a collector – of Donald Judd, Louise Bourgeois, Craigie Horsfield, an Irish artist called Isabel Nolan. In his home, there's just one of his own paintings, a gift to his wife, the mother of his three children. He's generous in his praise of others, more inclined to vulnerability about himself.

"Although the paintings pertain to be geometric and abstract, they're full of fragility," he says, moving around the gallery , touching his gleaming, weighty canvases as if he needs to feel their physical shape in this new space.

Whose fragility? "Human," he replies simply. "Mine."

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Edouard Malingue Gallery, 1/F, 8 Queen's Road Central, until April 21

22 Mar 2012
The Wall Street Journal
'The Unpainter', interview with Alexandra A. Seno
Link: http://blogs.wsj.com/scene/2012/03/22/the-unpainter

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.
WSJ.com

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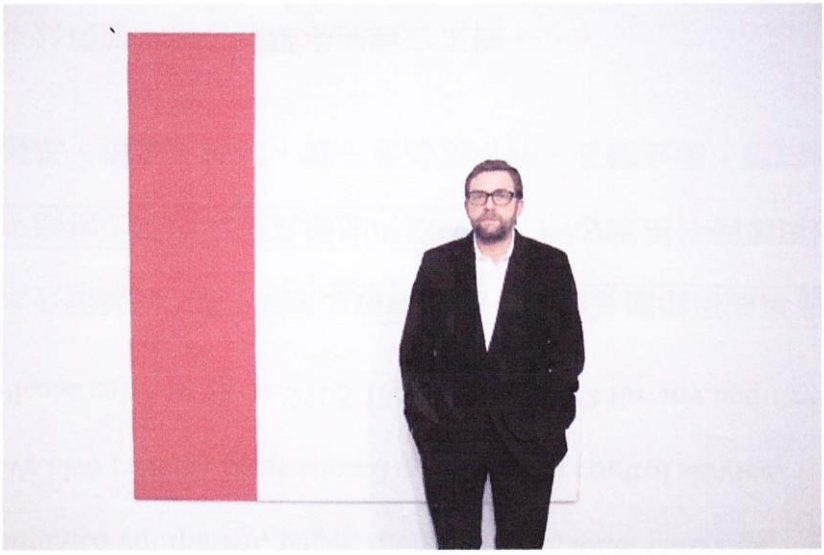
The Unpainter



Edouard Malingue Gallery

Callum Innes says his works 'appear very clean, precise, when in fact they come from chaos.'

Callum Innes is best known for what critics dub "unpainting," and he has collaborated on exhibits with such non-painters as novelist Colm Tóibin. But for an abstract, boundary-crossing artist, his reflections on art can sound almost traditional.

"I like the idea of beauty," he says. "I see nothing wrong with the beautiful, for things to have a rightness about them."

His first solo exhibition in Asia, at Edouard Malingue Gallery in Hong Kong, recently opened. The 1995 Turner Prize finalist shared his thoughts on seeing sound and the biggest problem with art.

Edouard Malingue Gallery

The Innes exhibition at Edouard Malingue is his first solo show in Asia.

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Can we talk about your process? Your work has been called unpainting.

Edouard Malingue Gallery

Mr. Innes makes his paintings by working with the surface, dissolving it, then removing it with turpentine.

I call it painting, but I know people call it unpainting. But yes, I take paint off. I make a painting and work with the surface, then dissolve it, taking it off with turpentine. In many ways I am dissolving an image that is in my head.

I like the idea that to many, these paintings appear very clean, precise, when in fact they come from chaos. The studio is chaotic — there is black everywhere because the paint has come off.

You also work with watercolors. Do you treat that medium differently?

With watercolors, I put a solid color down. I put down opposites: If it's a green, then it's red. If it's a blue, it might be an orange. I put different combinations, then with water, I dissolve them. When I do watercolors, I lay the paper flat, and the paper has a tension and has its own viscosity.

With the [oil] paintings, I'd make a black made of many colors…until I dissolve it. Then the colors separate so that color will be revealed. With watercolor, I'm putting two colors together to make a new color, there is no combination that is the same.

How do explain what you're trying to do as an artist?

The biggest problem with art is people always think they're getting ripped off…I make paintings that deal with space, emotions, the physicality of space and time. My paintings capture a moment in time.

I work in a studio, I read the newspaper every day. The paintings are informed by the headlines that day, the book I was reading the night before, what my children are getting up to, what I've seen. I have a visual dictionary in my head. All that information is coming in.

Do you collect art?

I only collect things that I like. I get great pleasure out of living with them. I mostly collect photography, videos. I like photography because it captures a moment. But I also have works by established artists by Louise Bourgeois, Donald Judd, younger artists like Rachel Adams from Edinburgh.

I only have one painting, by the Berlin-based Japanese artist Ikemura Leiko. It is a small painting of a battleship.

What questions do you struggle with in your work?

I find it challenging to make something complex appear simple. I think things have a sound. You can almost see and hear them.

A sound?

You just hear things, a rightness. I know that makes me sound like a madman. But often in the studio, I see paintings with a sound.

–Edited from an interview with Alexandra A. Seno

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