

Mark Gisbourne

## **'THE SHATTERED IMAGE'**

### ACCUMULATION AND FRAGMENTATION IN THE WORK OF LORI HERSBERGER

We find in the work of Lori Hersberger an inner tension created between an impulse towards accumulation and fragmentation that is all but palpable. Therefore, and before we consider matters analytically as regards his diverse and inclusive practices as an artist, we might ask what is the condition of the world (his world), that makes for the sense of a bringing together on the one hand and the pulling apart on the other. For Hersberger possesses that extraordinary ability of being able to bring unity to the disparate installation elements he utilises (namely painting, mirrors, neon(s) and Styrofoam), that which might be called his unified accumulate, but by presenting them in such a way that they still retain references to their individual character. In short he undermines the general premise of part and whole, and the component elements retain the status of what they are even as they gravitate towards becoming something else.

Though Hersberger's settings might often be argued as being a type of installation art, they are in fact re-definitions of the materials used in new and differing relations, retaining references, as said, to their former status, but re-articulated into a new language of expression. In short they should not be read or considered as installation art in a literal sense. For in installation art the identifiable elements are generally sublimated for the purposes of site specificity and total effect.<sup>1</sup> Rather Herberger's works should be seen at the intersection of deconstruction and re-direction, a taking apart and the restructuring of meaning in the light (sometimes literally) of the juxtapositions generated. And, while the materials Herberger uses might seem to suggest references to minimalism and post-minimalism, particularly in his use of mirrors and neon(s), the works are also antithetical by not seeking the systemic (minimal), or disequilibria (post-minimal), that characterise and parallel the structural and post-structural arguments of those earlier artistic tendencies.<sup>2</sup>

Lori Hersberger has redefined himself as being a painter, though he trained initially in time-based media and video arts. But as a painter he remains uncomfortable with the frozen static of a wall or surface as simply a place of presentation, and the notion of time, or, at least, time as duration, is always implied by the way his works engage dialectically with their environmental setting. Therefore the wall (or floor) is but a mere point of departure both optically and literally, a place to begin and nothing more. The wall as surface becomes the point and initiation of a dialogue in a state of continual flux. That is, firstly within the physical room in which his paintings are placed, and secondly with the abstract but ambient potential of the space they have come to occupy. The negotiation and condition of a visual flux, alongside the tension that is set up between elements, is what in turn gives the work its meaning and import. Whereas an installation is a complete and contained presentation of contents, Hersberger's experience of room, space, and practices, is always in the state of the discontinuous. The component elements deliver something that reaches beyond themselves, and it is in his aspiration to the *au-delà* that his art resides.

If one considers one of his earlier paintings such as *Time Was An Idiot* (2000), and its title is a satire of the temporal diachronic, we discover immediately an allusion to time and space as an undefined duration, something that moves us away from the idea of a fixed and static

object on a wall. And, it also introduces Herberger's use of acrylic and fluo (florescent paint), which also undermines the idea of using optically static painting materials, thus referring to the sense of flux already intimated. The use of flux and flow as a simile is also made present as a cloud-like form hovers above a lower painted area that inclines us towards a feeling for landscape. Both elements have drips or seeping aspects that are running like rivulets down the surface of the canvas. Though this painting is relatively small in scale, the work in the most simple of ways opens up a feeling for an optical motility that is implicit to nearly all of Hersberger's works.

With the larger scale *Acrylic Road* (2002), in reality two joined canvases, the artist has created a sense of lateral motility in distinction to the vertical in *Time Was An Idiot*. However, one is undoubtedly reminded, at least at a superficial level, of the vertical and horizontal works of Jackson Pollock such as *Summertime 9A* (1948). But there any real distinction ends, for Pollock's paintings are about what are now traditional aspects of field and performance, with analogies that are invariably musical, while those of Herberger are about contemporary ideas of continuous and the discontinuous fragmentation of surface and space.<sup>3</sup> And, Hersberger has far less concern with notions of the all over of a paint application, and there is always a clear sense of a top and a bottom to his paintings. The flowing drip asserts the direction stressing aspects of gravity, a gravity that has nonetheless to exist in a set of ongoing spatial relations. And, if in this respect we might want to make comparison of the gravitational drips to the paintings of Morris Louis, we again, like Pollock, have to quickly reject it.<sup>4</sup> For the post-war American Schools were concerned with Greenberg-ian autonomy, the surface as an autonomous space in which to enact a painting, and Herberger has no interest in the autonomy of 'pure painting' whatsoever. Rather he is concerned with the potential 'becoming' of a painting within an installed environment, not with what a painting substantiates but what it is able to generate. That is to say, with how the painted elements of his ensembles open things out, and not with how things become fixed and battened down as self-contained painting as the end in itself.

Thus to begin simply with two paintings is to do just that, namely begin, and not to understand that in Herberger's mind they form a point of developmental departure. These two examples should be seen as generative aspects, a key as it were to a more complex use and extension of painting, a point of engagement within the other strategies that the artist uses. And, this is very evident in a series of works where he used acrylic mirrors not merely (though also) for the purposes of reflection. They incorporate potentially the viewer-viewed within the painted mirrors, but also they encompass the room and space in which the painted mirror surfaces operate. In works like *Corpses of the Foreign Wars* and *Today/Tomorrow* (2002) we confront therefore an optical synthesis, which is not only synthetic in the material means used by the artist (acrylic fluo, mirrors, and frame), but at the same time a synthesis of the different elements that forms the interactive ensemble between the viewer, space, and room in which they are installed. To understand the philosophical implications of this approach towards a synthesis, we first must understand that the painted image is itself the representation as thesis, and the reflection of that which is not present in the image is an antithesis – hence the painting is moveable and the viewer comes and goes – but what is realised is a particular site-specific and provisional synthesis bringing together what amounts to a time-based event, or, an experience realised only in the viewer's processes of interaction with the work.

This is the reason why I speak of the deconstructive and reconstructive relational aspects in Hersberger's work, for he displaces and puts aside the old cliché or metaphor of painting as an imagined mirror determining the representational reflection of the world. What we have here is a doubled sense of representation, fixity through the painted elements on the mirror, and flux through the variable contents of what is represented, or, at least, arguably

presented as reflections. His mirror paintings deconstruct the stable conventions of a painting as a representation, and yet continually reconstruct themselves through what is reflected in them. Hence these surfaces as mirrors, whether placed in a grid-like arrangement as in a later work such as *Circus of the Mind* (2004), or the larger scale single mirror works like *Today Tomorrow* (2002), pose complex questions about the status of image as speculum and representation. What is the status of an image and its reflection, bearing in mind that all images as the outcome of the human imaginary are a deferred experience in every instance. Or, as Blanchot puts it, “the image needs the neutrality and the fading of the world; it wants everything to return to the indifferent deep where nothing is affirmed...” Which is to say in the image made, and in the reflective potential of a mirror in which it is embraced, that it points towards our mediation between the world and what we are capable of imagining.<sup>5</sup> And, an abstract painting is always possessed of a certain sense of apparent content that seems arbitrary, solely shaped by the determinism of the painter, and foisted onto the viewer in a manner that sometimes creates anxiety and vexation. It is Hersberger’s deliberate use of expressive gesture and exaggerated colour, the mirror merely heightening the experience, that not only challenges viewer-expectation, but also what constitutes the actual status of image-making itself.

While mirrors have a long history of association with painting, one might think of Van Eyck’s ‘Arnolfini Marriage’,<sup>6</sup> or, Parmigianino’s portrait as a mirror.<sup>7</sup> Or, even Velasquez’s ‘Las Meninas’, often argued to be a painting that is a mirror reflection,<sup>8</sup> it was not until the twentieth century mirrors become physically incorporated as a surface for painting in their own right.<sup>9</sup> In this respect one cannot ignore the works of the Arte Povera artist Pistoletto, though it is quite clear that Pistoletto artist is much more concerned with the figurative, or, textual issues of the implied speculum, and in consequence the real as prescribed by definable intellectual boundaries, while Herberger’s works are less concerned with limits than with limitlessness.<sup>10</sup> The abstract paint fluo brush marks (sometimes an airbrush is used) that are placed on the mirror by Herberger, or, on a wall or canvas, to be reflected in a mirror, are not about figurative definition so much, but rather about open-ended re-definitions as to what is a painting; the artist’s use of bright florescent colours merely exaggerating and undermining any propensity that might confuse them with a visual debate as to what is the reflected image and what constitutes the real. Hence there is never an attempt at any sort of conventional illusionism in Lori Herberger’s works, since nothing is fixed and the reflection (which is an illusion) is in a constant state of presence and absence. Humorously, it might be said that the artist subverts and plagiarises the old magician-cum-funhouse illusionist’s adage, which claims ‘they do it with mirrors’.

Also in many other respects the mirror related works of Herberger are about the unrepeatable, and this is why in a work like the installation *Spin My Wheel* (2003) at Zurich Kunsthhaus, where the mirrors were either wall partitions or shattered on the floor, what we confronted in essence was the positions of both reflection and fragmentation. Mirrors were placed on the floor and then shattered at certain points chosen by the artist, the outcome of which is in large measure unpredictable since it operates through the mechanism of controlled chance – controlled by the determinism of the placing of mirror and then striking it – but chance in not knowing precisely how the mirror will shatter. The artist prefers to call these shattered mirror events corpses, but why does this matter? Because the issues of fragmentation and the part-image are of great concern in contemporary painting, and there remains the question as what is the status of the corpse-like condition of painting today as expressed by a sedentary image.<sup>11</sup> And, the effect is just as potent when the mirror is simply placed on the floor in front of the painting, as in his *Snow Blind* (2002), shown at the Badischer Kunstverein, for one is left with an uncertainty of what to look at, the painting or its mirror reflection at your feet. Or, even the large almost cosmological painting called *Take Me Where You Want* (2003), where the sporadic or peripheral fragmentation of the

mirror in front of it, also carries elements of the fluo paint as if materially and mysteriously carried from the painting onto the shattered fragments of mirror glass.

In this sense the paintings of Lori Hersberger have less to do with image as representation, grasping and fixing what is ungraspable, and with that which in most circumstances turns out to be a case of image misrepresentation. A misrepresenting as either an approximate of translated image content, or relying upon some exterior symbolic association to create and ground the meaning of the work. The mastery of the fragmented speculum through the use of mirrors, therefore adds a dynamic that can only be fully completed by viewer's actual participation in the sensory experience, and this is what I intended when speaking earlier of paintings without boundaries. And, if we add to this the further dynamic of using neon and Styrofoam in combination with the acrylic mirrors and paintings, we find a unique vocabulary of materials emerging in Herberger's practice as an artist. What they share, as with other materials he uses, is a sense of synthetic fabrication. In this respect there is no attempt to deny artifice on the part of this painter. He seems to be saying that increasingly the world is for the most part an artificial reality.

Though I am aware that such a statement may be taking matters too far, what I am supposing is that the artist's love of these materials is generated by the fact that they are subject to synthetic forms of industrial production. The Styrofoam elements in his *Untitled* (2005), resting on and adjacent to the shattered mirrors in a Düsseldorf installation, indicates a minimal means of mass-produced juxtaposition, but one moreover (as is common with many of his works) that points to, or suggests, the stark and somewhat frangible nature of the materials the artist uses. It is clear in many instances and aspects that Herberger's work deals with the inherent quality of the mass-produced and ephemeral, and with the daily outcome where their uses are applied. Styrofoam is after all in its familiar and different forms used as a packing material. It suggests both density and porosity, or conversely volume and mass but is inherently light in weight.

At the same time the artist's use of neon touches often upon ephemeral moments or events, as in *White Riders* (2002), which appear like a fragments taken from occasioned flashes of lightning. There is certainly no sense of structural utility, as one would expect from Flavin or Sonnier,<sup>12</sup> or any of the ironic and parody-like usage common to Nauman's use of neon.<sup>13</sup> Though it might be argued that his work *Russian Roulette* (2004), no doubt a pun on Malevich's use of the rectangle and square, suggests a structural allusion, it is quickly undermined by the shattered mirror glass and the asymmetrical blocks of Styrofoam blocks placed in front of it. For structure suggests stasis and the works of Hersberger are anything but static. To the eyes of this reader at least, the artist's use of neon is closer to drawing, or the brush marks he makes with florescent paint, a luminous dimension adding heightened elements of glow to fluo; a paint medium that in other countries is also sometimes called simply day-glow. However, it would be wrong to consider in any real sense Herberger as a light artist (a user of autonomous ambient lighting), for this is something that would in turn challenge the complex relational content found in his work.

To return to his painting and to speak of a determined use of iconography would be equally specious, whether applied with a brush or airbrush the iridescent qualities of the paint through their blotches and splashes suggest the cosmological imagery of science fiction for the most part, as in his painting called *Galaxy of Frustration* (2001). Indeed, several of the earlier paintings have hints of biomorphic or imagined landscapes as in *Vicious* (2002), with its brown-to-red suggestion of a horizon and intimation or allusion of fenced in containment. But then added to this are the more complicated use of graffiti-like marks and gestures, and at times the elegant flourish of the artist's calligraphic *parafe*. Herberger's use of paint is in large measure assimilative, in that it harkens back to the great

post-war period of painterly freedom, but does so in the full knowledge of what lies in between. Perhaps, this is what is meant by the wordplay of some of the titles he uses, as in paintings like *Feels Like Starting Again* (2004), or *Day-Glow Blues Conspiracy* (2001). Two issues were contested at the beginning of this essay, the first being that Herberger is not an installation artist in the conventional sense, and secondly that there is a paradoxical concern with time in his art. In the first this attitude was largely shaped by the work that brought him to prominence, namely his *Archaic Suite* (1998), a layered installation of a hundred or so rugs and carpets, first shown at Berlin in 1998, and at the Venice Biennale the following year. What was unique to the work is that in both instances it was an open-air setting that was used for the installation. Much was made at the time as to personal biography, in what Harald Szeemann called a sort of post-modern subjectivity, and “where the auto-poetic self is constructed.”<sup>14</sup> However, what was quickly lost in this analysis is the fact that what most attracted Hersberger, was that the rugs and carpets were mass-produced, and that the primary attraction for the artist was the paradox of using an arbitrary diversity presented as simulacra, the strange fictionalisation of origins in the modern world of mass production. Contained within a single typology (namely rugs and carpets) what was lost in the evaluation was the idea of the painterly concerns found in the startling colour juxtapositions of the rugs and carpets, and that there was an obvious building up of relations through a garish and arbitrary accumulation, something that needs to be projected forward into his subsequent commitment as a painter. His first neon or fluo painted works began at this time, and the arbitrary use of colour in his painting owes little or nothing to the theories and conventions of colour harmony.

As to a general contribution from Lori Hersberger’s early background in a rock-band and his training in the field of media and video arts, it has now been left long behind him and any reference to it is largely tangential. Indeed, his current time-based concerns have for the most part moved away from the rhapsodic to the phenomenological, from those of syncopated time to experiences within spatial duration. In oil on canvas paintings like *Caught in Bloom* (2002), and *The Brilliant Way* (2001) we find definitive examples of spatial atmospherics at work. There is an optical elasticity where nothing is fixed so much as positioned in a painting like *Caught in Bloom*, the narrow vertical lozenges, complimented with drips and blotches and airbrush passages, operating like sensation-directed puncta to create a sense of a hallucinogenic landscape. But just as this painting might suggest an imagined genre reference, in a work like *The Brilliant Way* the sense is that of a stellar void with its black ground punctuated by cosmological nebulae, and occasional spots of iridescent or garish fluo. Space in these paintings thus becomes phenomenological and imaginary, something that has to be sensed as well as projected.

In returning to the Perspex/acrylic mirrors, as distinct from the works on canvas, an even greater optical elasticity might be said to operate. For a work like *Capricious Mirror* (200?), is aptly named, presenting not just the question of reflection and made image already discussed, so much as a visual transparency, as the fluo paint does not totally obscure the existing mirror reflection beneath. The median point between the image and its reflection is always transparent, or, at least, to the extent that it is the space occupied by the viewer. And, the viewer is always intended as a concomitant part of Hersberger’s paintings, just as he/she is central to anything that is seen in the world. The seen world is translated as the viewer turns the image of a thing into the imagined, and this is the means by which the materials used by the artist become the basis of a subjective imaginary world that he is able to generate. What this poses for us as viewers of Hersberger’s paintings is a whole series of accumulated forms of representation, that in turn become the grounds for pluriform sensations, and it is by this means that he extends painting beyond that of the static painted image presented on a wall.

I began this essay by speaking about accumulation and fragmentation, and that by extending the painting practices into the space and room of installation, the artist was developing a set of means to re-define both his materials and artistic practice. The process is not one that can lead to a literal form of total installation art, because it is the product of an engendered synthesis, of which we are constantly made aware. His daily battle as a painter-practitioner is to achieve just that, a sense in which the materials retain their status as medium (largely industrially or mass-produced), but at the same time generate a new and unique set of relations that allows them to express a plurality of alternative meanings. And, those meanings are allowed deliberately to stay open by the artist, which is to say they do not pose as a pre-determined installation-based orchestration indicating what must be experienced. As indicated and with all exhibited artistic practices today, it remains for the viewer to complete the work. Hence, this essay is called 'the shattered image', precisely because Lori Hersberger 'shatters' many of the earlier understandings on what constitutes painting. Perhaps, like Humpty-Dumpty, we as viewers are left, or given the responsibility, to try and put things back together again. In doing this we have to rethink the boundaries once considered to be the limits of painting.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of the general parameters of 'Installation Art', see, Nicolas D'Oliviera, *Installation Art*, London, Thames & Hudson, 1996; also, Jonathan Cray (forward), Nicolas D'Oliviera, Nicola Oxley, Michael Petry (texts), *Installation Art in the new Millenium, The Empire of the Senses*, London. Thames & Hudson, 2004; and Erika Suderberg, *Space, Site and Intervention*, London and New York, Minnesota University Press, 2000.

<sup>2</sup> James Meyer, *Minimalism, (Themes and Movements)*, London, Phaidon, 2001; and for Post-Minimalism, see, Lisa Anderson, *Minimalism and Post-Minimalism: Drawing Distinctions*, ex. cat., Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College of Art, New Hampshire, 1990.

<sup>3</sup> Kirk Varnadoe (ed.), *Jackson Pollock*, ex. cat., Museum of Modern Art, New York, and Tate Gallery, London, 1999, illustrated p. 250

<sup>4</sup> John Elderfield (ed.), *Morris Louis*, ex. cat., Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1987.

<sup>5</sup> Maurice Blanchot, 'The Two Versions of the Imaginary', in, *The Space of Literature*, Eng. trans., Ann Smock, Lincoln and London, University of Nebraska Press [1982], 1989, pp. 254-263 (p. 254)

<sup>6</sup> Elisabeth Dahnens, *Van Eyck*, London, Alpine Fine Arts, 1986, illustration in detail on pp. 200-201

<sup>7</sup> For issues of the mirror in Parmigianino, see, C. Gould, *Parmigianino: His Life and Works*, New York and London, Abbeville Press, 1995; also, David Erkserdjian, *Parmigianino*, London and Newhaven, Yale University Press, 2005, and, David Franklin, *The Art of Parmigianino*, London and Newhaven, Yale University Press, 2004.

<sup>8</sup> For Velasquez, see, Michel Foucault, 'Las Meninas', in, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, London, Tavistock Publications [1970], 1974, pp. 3-16 (Fr. *Le Mots et les choses*, Paris, Éditions Gallimard, 1966)

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<sup>9</sup> The use of fragments of mirrors is common enough in Dada, Surrealism, and Post-war bricolage, to not warrant references here. What is unique about Herberger's approach is that entire mirror remains entirely present if only at times in a fragmentary state.

<sup>10</sup> For examples of Pistoletto's use of mirrors, see, Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, *Arte Povera (Themes and Movements)*, London, Phaidon, London, pp. 154-161; also, Michelangelo Pistoletto, London, Actar, 2000.

<sup>11</sup> See, Yve-Alain Bois, 'Painting: The Task of Mourning', in, *Painting as Model*, Cambridge, Mass., and London, MIT Press, 1993, pp. 229-244

<sup>12</sup> Michael Govan and Tiffany Bell (eds.), *Dan Flavin: A Retrospective*, ex. cat., Dia Art Foundation, and National Gallery of Art, Washington, Yale University Press, 2005, and for Sonnier, Konrad Bitterli (et al), Keith Sonnier, Hatje Cantz, 2003, and Keith Sonnier: *Public Commissions 1990-1999*, Hatje Cantz, 2000.

<sup>13</sup> See, Bruce Nauman, ex. cat., Hayward Gallery, London, 1998. In this context Nauman himself draws out a particular analogies with Samuel Beckett's sense of the absurd.

<sup>14</sup> Harald Szeemann, 'Lori Hersberger', ex. cat., *Aperto*, Venice Biennale, 1999 [pp. 224-227], p. 224