

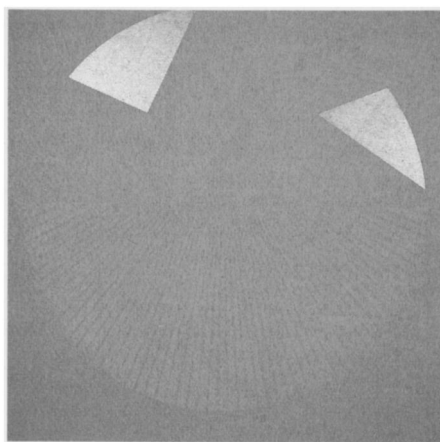
PATRICK SCOTT – RECENT WORK

*'So we are most definitely called upon to test and try ourselves against the utmost, but probably we are also bound to keep silence regarding this utmost, to beware of sharing it . . . in order to find its justification in the work and reveal the law in it, like an inborn drawing that is invisible until it emerges in the transparency of the artistic.'*¹

Thus wrote the poet, Rainer Maria Rilke, to his wife, of his intense emotion on seeing the retrospective exhibition of Cézanne in 1907, shortly after that great painter's death. It seems to me that these words apply also to the work of Patrick Scott, whose exhibition of recent paintings is at the Taylor Galleries, Dublin, in the month of June. Certainly he keeps silent regarding his bouts with the utmost; he is not given to self-analysis: "I never know why I do anything", but he shares with other artists of his time the long consistent testing of an obsessive idea. As Cézanne tested himself against the visible reality of the Mont Sainte Victoire 'to achieve the conviction and substantiality of things, a reality intensified and potentiated to the point of indestructibility by his experience of the object',² as Albers tested himself against the myriad permutations of his pictorial treatment of the square, or as Rothko tested himself against the utmost expression of mystical colour, so Patrick Scott, for the last twenty years, has tested the experience of his own vision all the way to the end, where at this stage no one can follow him; only he can go any further in showing the force of reality inherent in flat planes of gold.

Gold in itself is already an intensification of material reality, more than a symbol of value: an actual measure of value. The perennial dream of the alchemist to transform base metal into gold is not only a metaphor of, but is the reality of, the artist's function. To possess gold is an ever-recurring human longing, like being able to fly, so that for the artist himself to use actual gold as a means in his intensification of reality is a double intensification of his role, not merely transforming base material into the gold of art, but transforming gold itself into the intensity of art and truth. Carrying such a weight of significance, augmented by historical associations from the pre-Celtic and Celtic past, the artist is under serious

Art critic Dorothy Walker discusses the extraordinary depths of inventive simplicity in the painting of Patrick Scott, and the unexpected new influence of China, which he visited last year, apparent in the current exhibition of his recent work at the Taylor Galleries, Dublin, June 1986.



Gold Painting 5/86. 48 x 48 ins.

obligation to resolve these complexities with an eloquent simplicity, in order that the sheer decorative importance of the gold should not overwhelm his pictorial ideas. The strength of Patrick Scott's art lies in the resolution of these crucial balances. A common mistake in public perception of art lies in thinking that simplicity is easy. The mistake applies as much to drama (e.g. *Waiting for Godot*), to poetry (the notion that Seamus Heaney tosses off easy poems or that John Montague's prose-looking verses are not poetry), or to architecture (that Mies van der Rohe's exquisite houses are not composed of the most complex and subtle simplicities).

Patrick Scott's painting over the last twenty-two years, and the gold paintings in particular, has shown truly extraordinary depths of inventive simplicity, without flagging into mere variations on a theme. At each new turn, he has shown us new discoveries, all within his orbit of strict abstraction. Thus he has been able to create unlimited space on a canvas purely by means of gossamer bands of thin white acrylic on unprimed

raw linen, a linear solution, extending into infinity. Or he has been able to suggest the centrality of human thinking which persists in spite of all our scientific knowledge of the non-centrality of the universe, by his blazing gold sun-image with radiating translucent white beams.

In the current exhibition, an unexpected new influence is apparent. In the winter of 1984/85, Patrick Scott made a journey to China, and he is now exhibiting a series of Chinese landscapes. These paintings are a perfect example of his genius in extracting the poetic quick from an extremely complex visual reality – the Chinese mountains and their well-known exuberant forms, so familiar from traditional Chinese painting – and expressing this complexity in his own absolutely personal schematic terms. Thus the mountains are indicated in a purely linear form, with Scott's usual thinned-white acrylic, but this linear treatment fully suggests the encompassing volumes of these unusual volcanic rock formations. The rocks are hollow and, on the inside, are like great lofty cathedrals. It is Scott's achievement to be able to convey this architectural sense of the mountains by Irish traditional linear means, while his gold-leaf 'sun', delimiting the scale of the landscape and of the picture, gives a Japanese gloss to the unmistakably Chinese scene, like a Chinese landscape as seen by a Japanese painter.

My only reservation was about one of the paintings with a light blue infill within the delineations of the mountains. I felt that the extra colour was a distraction which added nothing to the idea of the painting.

These cathedral-mountains also bring to mind the amazing structures of the Marsh Arabs of Iraq, in which large bundles of reeds are bound together in columns to make soaring arched vaults, with windows of woven cane like the seats of cane chairs.

The second theme of the exhibition is still related to landscape but in a less schematic way. The horizon line of earlier paintings in the sixties re-appears, this time with one or two triangular shapes of gold encroaching from the edge. These triangular shapes were first seen in the exquisite screen exhibited in Rosc '80, but are now invading the picture space more decisively. In one



Chinese Landscape 2/86. 24 x 24 ins.



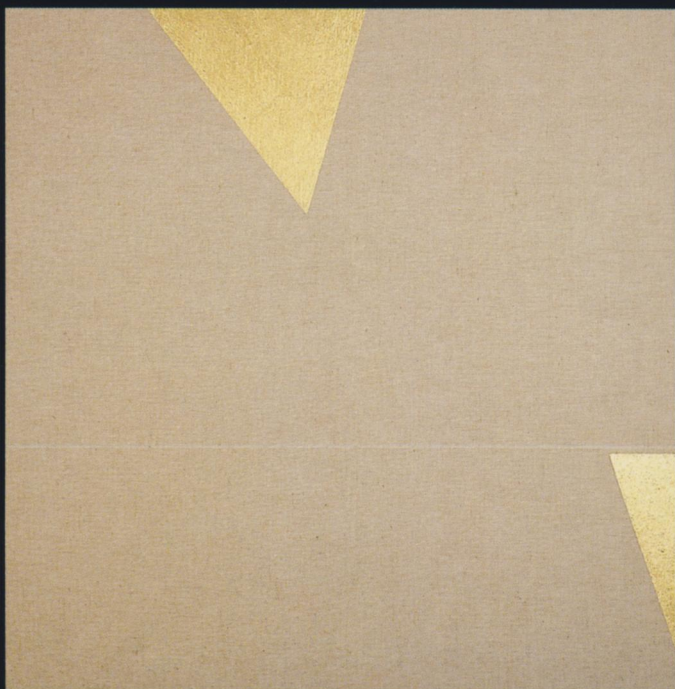
Chinese Landscape 4/86. 36 x 36 ins.



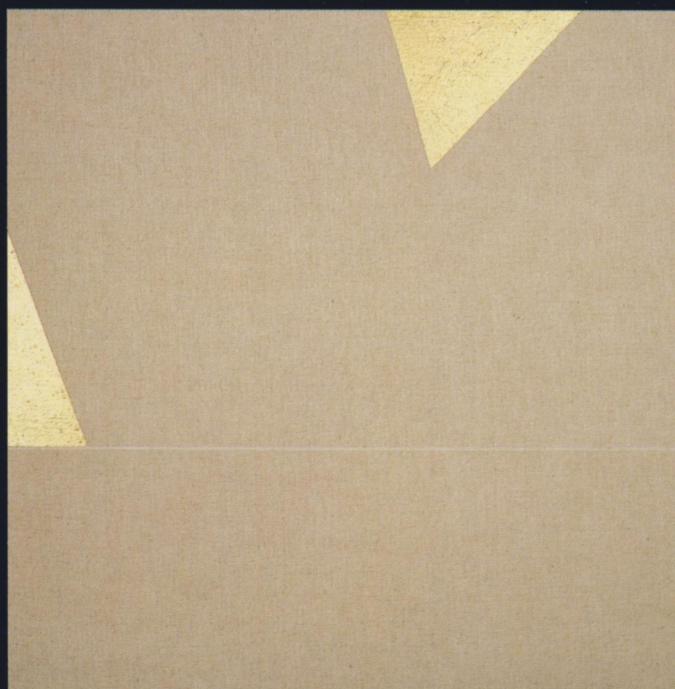
Chinese Landscape 5/86. 24 x 24 ins.



Chinese Landscape 6/86. 48 x 48 ins.



Gold Painting 2/86. 36 x 36 ins.



Gold Painting 3/86. 36 x 36 ins.



Gold Painting 4/86. 48 x 48 ins.



Gold Painting 9/86. 36 x 36 ins.

PATRICK SCOTT – RECENT WORK

instance, overlapping triangles are of two different shades of gold, one yellow gold and one white gold. One or two other paintings employ the two different golds separately.

The circle, which has been an obsessive motif in Scott's painting from the beginning of his career forty years ago, appears again in a more complex context in 'Gold Painting 865', divided by a horizontal line. Radiating white lines converge towards this horizon in a new perspective wherein the vanishing point is some distance beyond where the lines end, that is above the dividing horizon. This induces a curious sensation of distance in the lower half of the painting, while the upper half of the imagined circle remains flat and two-dimensional, its perimeter only indicated by the curve of the gold-leaf segments following its imagined circumference. These paintings are even more exquisite than the Chinese landscapes. While the landscapes offer a reference/hand to the spectator to lead him or her through the structure of artistic experience, to the heart of the abstract matter, the horizon paintings innocently offer no more than an open space, an ingenuous 'disclosure of unprecedented worlds', to quote the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur.

The tenor of Patrick Scott's energy as a painter is a particular one which accounts for the precise quality of the presence of the work. The wave of new Expressionism in the last seven years

has inevitably altered our view of familiar artists, even as it has altered, in some cases, familiar artists' work (as in the pitiful attempts by some artists, like David Hockney, to 'go Expressionist'). Even the late work of Picasso and de Kooning, for example, is being re-evaluated in the light of the young Expressionists.

But there remains an area of painting between the outright heraldic painting of the sixties (as seen in such Irish painters as Micheal Farrell, Robert Ballagh, or Edward McGuire) and Expressionist painting, either abstract or figurative, and that is the kind of painting which, at its peak, is exemplified by Matisse. Matisse was able to fuse flat, heraldic colours (in particular, obviously, in the paper cut-outs) with the intensity of the Expressionists but without their heat, in other words, a cool intensity of pure colour. Matisse was one of the very few figurative painters to achieve this synthesis. William Scott is another, and abstract painters like Ellsworth Kelly, Robert Mangold, or indeed, at his own level, Cecil King, who could activate and render eloquent a flat painted surface without any painterly or expressionist means. Patrick Scott's gold paintings are clearly in the same field, with their minimal application of paint, their stillness, and their spatial pre-occupations, although they come nearer to Matisse in their unashamed aesthetic delight. The gold-leaf brings, literally, a new element

to bear, a metal which, however soft, has an entirely different surface to pigment, and which carries with it the numerous associations mentioned above. It is also, however precious, a natural material, so its conjunction with the natural raw linen canvas is both appropriate and original. In an engaging paradox, the 'burn' of Scott's painting is cool, still, even discreet, and he has no concern to force himself on our attention. He is unconcerned with being original, is not, as Seamus Heaney has said, like 'young poets hurrying into originality.' His persistent quest over the last twenty years for the utmost synthesis of formal, elicited order (to use Thomas Kinsella's phrase) with a contemporary relevance, has vouched for the integrity and conviction of his work. That relevance taps into the very spirit of being, which his paintings invoke, sparking an epiphany of the inner meaning of art.

It will be interesting to see if his re-awakening of interest in the formal qualities of the landscape, inspired by the Chinese mountains, will lead him to look at the Irish landscape with renewed vision.

Dorothy Walker

NOTES

1. Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters on Cézanne*, New York, Fromm International Publishing Corporation, 1985, p. 4.
2. *ibid*, p. 34.