

DAN
COOMBS
INTERVIEWS
TIM ALLEN
FOR
TURPS
BANANA

They're paintings that have immediacy, like a Richard Serra sculpture. You can experience the thing-in-itself without any reference to anything else.

TA: What happens, I think, is that you get that instant confrontation, that wham-bam in-your-face thing, but I hope there are other things at play, and if you spend a long time with one of them, those other things start to emerge.

DC: You have to be in a room that's really quite big to see them. There's nothing genteel about them. In a sense, you could say that's been a problem with a lot of British art in the Twentieth Century - that it has been so aimed at a particular market, a home counties gentility, and it's interesting that really massive, large scale abstract painting has never really had much of a market here.

TA: That's because people don't usually have the space to accommodate them. I think when you find a formal vehicle that works for you, then you feel you can repeat to dig a bit deeper; I mean there has to be stuff that's repeated otherwise there would be no continuum, no momentum.

DC: Well, it would be impossible not to repeat. That would be weird.

TA: As I say though, that brings with it a danger that it can freeze up.

DC: I remember Phillip Allen saying about five years ago "*I'm repeating myself, I need to do something different*". I remember saying "*I don't think you should do that, because all the great abstract painters repeated and repeated*".

TA: There's repeating, and then there's repeating, isn't there? I remember going to see a big Robert Ryman show in New York and the first room knocked me

out - it was so beautiful. Then I went into the next room, and the next room and the next room - it just went on and on! Despite the fact I admire him it was damaging when I saw them en masse.

DC: I've always found him an odd artist to define because you can't attach any figurative connotations or categories to his work. I remember when I wrote the article in *Turps Banana* on Tomma Abts, I went to meet her and proposed the idea that her abstract paintings were in fact portraits. In contrast, Brice Marden's loopy paintings are very much figures in landscape - they always have a feeling of bodily relaxation, a certain kind of contained sensuality. With your paintings, I'm thinking about them in terms of the urban.

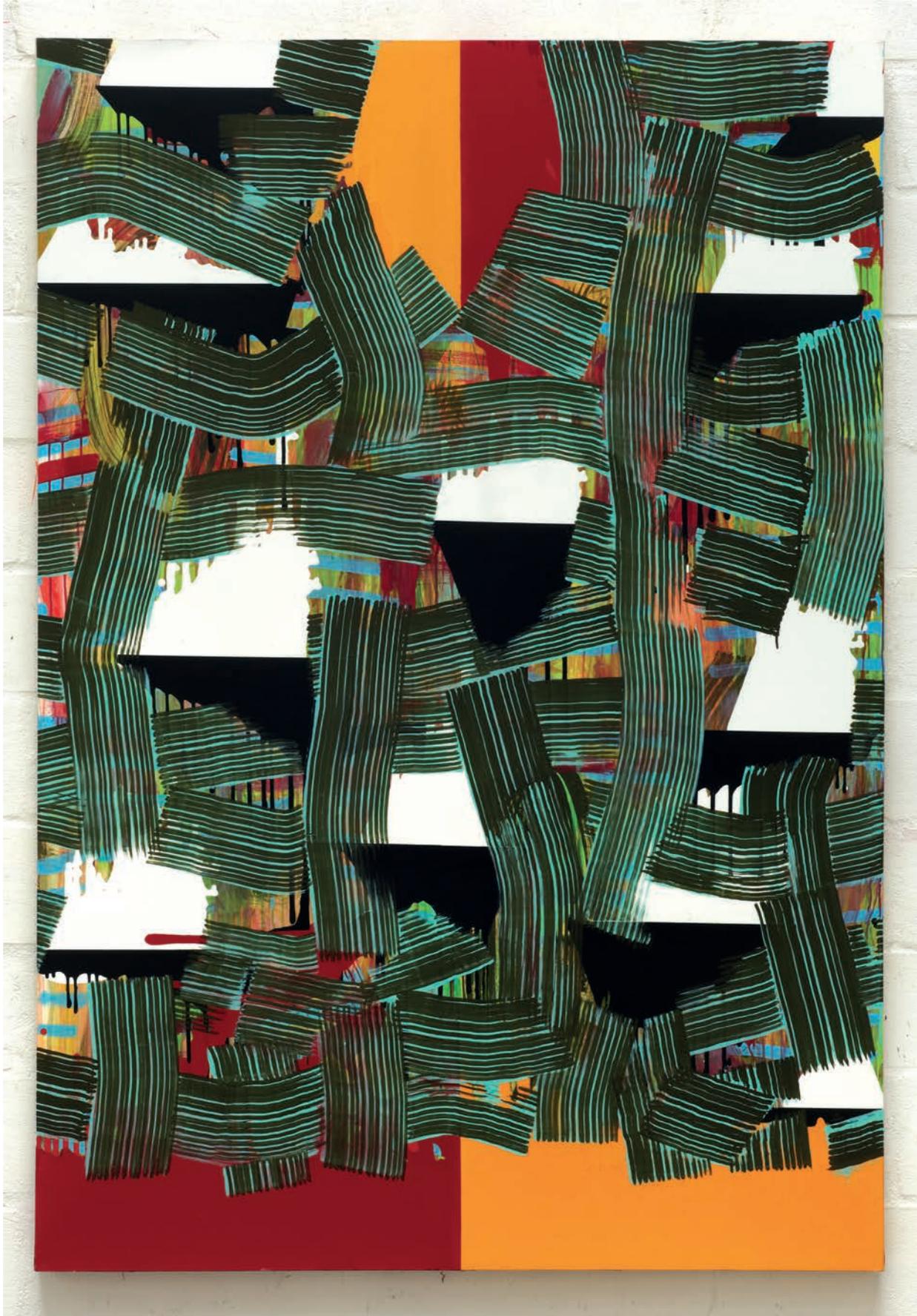
TA: Oh, really? Why?

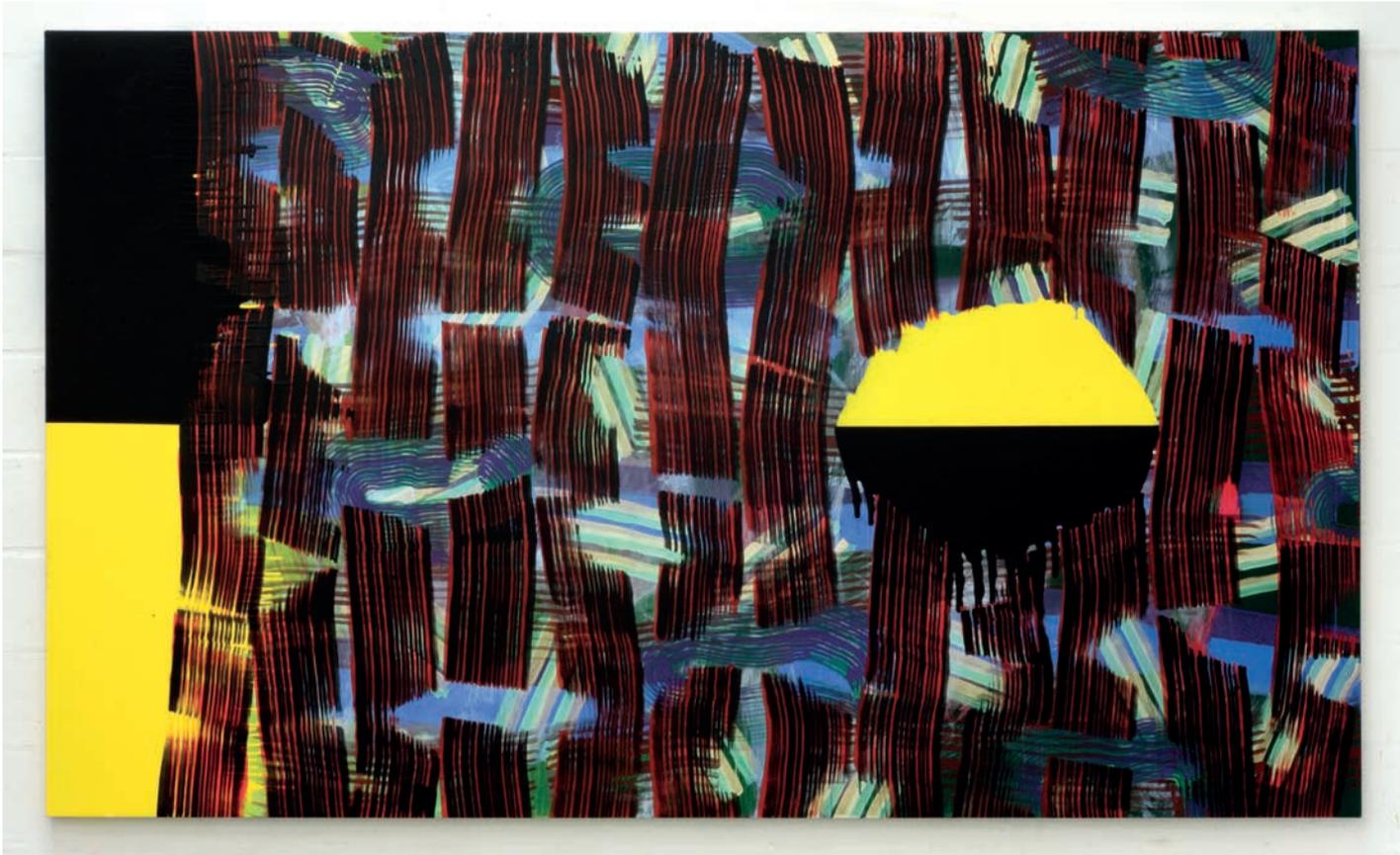
DC: Well, it's partly the speed of the marks. But it's also the way the trajectory is stopped by the solid forms - it's almost like being in a car crash. They're very dynamic, there's tons of energy and they've got a very fast energy. Sean Scully's paintings are much more tranquil than your paintings.

TA: I think that's true at the moment - it hasn't always been that way round! That's exactly the way the relationship between our work was when we were at college. These paintings have gone back to a weird hybrid thing that Sean never worked with.

DC: They seem to be about the self, giving itself up to a force greater than itself. They have a feeling of speed. Is that what they're about?

TA: There isn't a subject - they provide a springboard for people to engage in terms of their imagination. I don't think they're about particular ideas - each person looking at them should make their own response. The ambiguity of them or the sense of shuttling between polarities is about trying to open people up - one person's set of associations is different from another person's. I never dictate the meaning.





Above: **Ya Bas**
2004
Oil on canvas
175 x 220 cm

Previous page: **Badge**
2009
Oil on canvas
175 x 130 cm

Both courtesy of the artist

DC: I remember Clement Greenberg being interviewed about the Monet show at the Royal Academy, and he said when asked how one should look at Monet he suggested trying to look with the eyes of a child. Do you think the best way to look at your work is to try and get rid of associations?

TA: Actually, a lot of me thinks that they're about trying to destroy ideas - to actually arrest the process of ideation so you're left with a direct experience of the here and now. I hope these paintings bring attention to the space you're in and your state of mind.

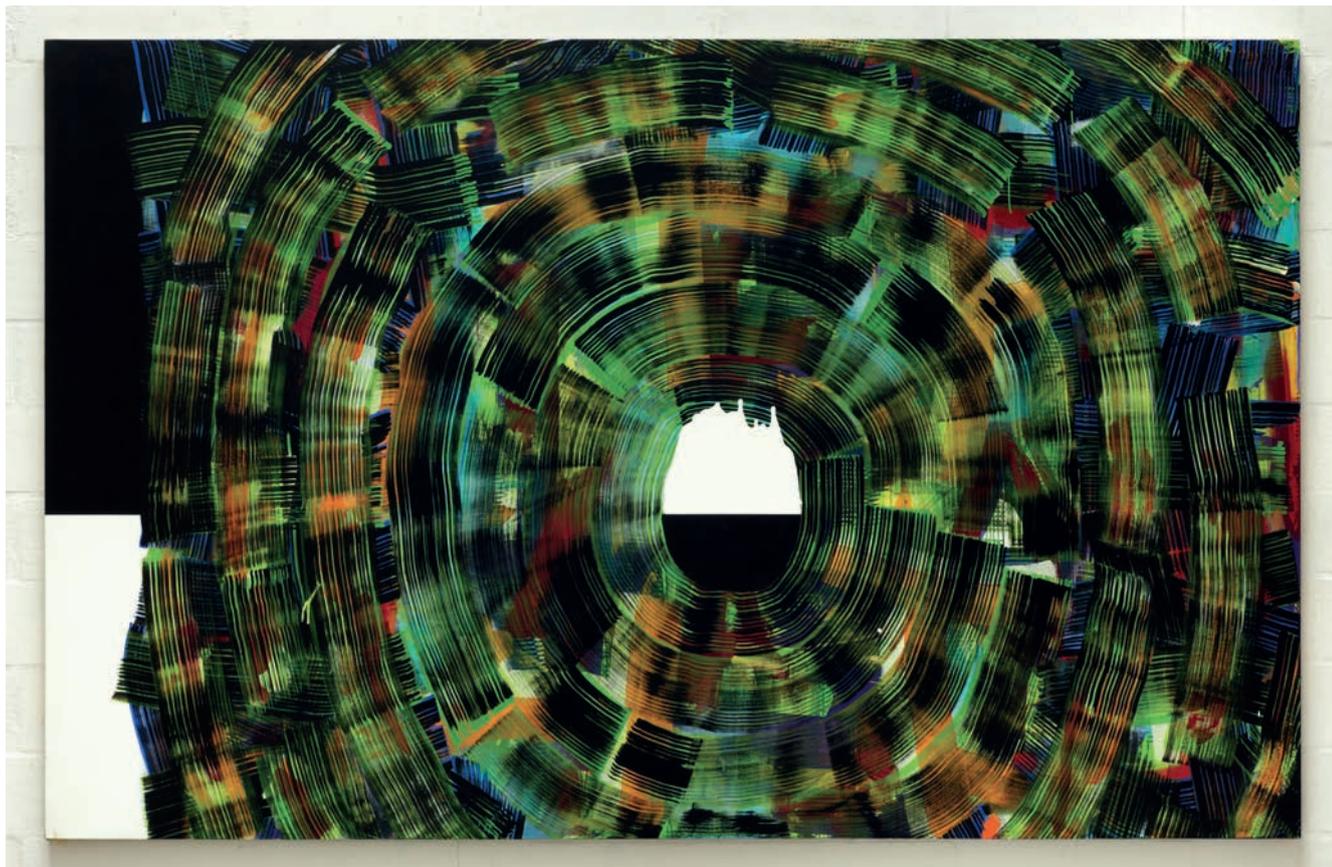
DC: They exist in real space, like Barnett Newman's paintings. Apparently, Barnett Newman always claimed that there was an ideal viewing distance to look at his paintings. Your paintings totally change according to where you are in relation to them. Maybe that's why they have to be so big.

TA: Maybe.

DC: There's the famous quote from Matisse: *'one square metre of blue is bluer than one square centimetre of blue'*. You are obviously completely wrapped up in colour, and colour structures the paintings - it gives them their space, their feel, their atmosphere and their tone. Colour has to operate across a big canvas to really operate.

TA: With the small paintings, you enter into them; it's more of an imaginary occupation. With the big paintings, I think they come out to meet you - they impact outwards. You could be physically inside them, not just mentally. It's like the body-mind problem. Is there a difference between the two?

DC: That's a big question. It's great, the feeling when there isn't a difference, but you don't feel that all the time. It's very liberating when you feel your body and your mind are the same - some people



don't want that though! You seem to be always trying to force the viewer into that kind of state.

TA: Yes.

DC: They're based around sensation. The white in this painting for example, is incredible. What it does, the way I would describe it, is that you're trying to create an aesthetic shock.

TA: That's good, yes, something that could stop your habitual mind.

DC: Your rational mind?

TA: No, it's really about pulling you into the present, the thing to arrest the constant conversation in one's head.

The discursive brain is always rabbiting. Something has to force attention to the present moment. It's a tall order but I'm always aiming at that. It's a lot harder to get to than people realise.

DC: I remember once at the ICA, Carl Andre said exactly that, that he wants everything to exist in the moment, but he

said there have maybe only been two or three times in his life when he's actually felt that. So that's an ideal, but in a sense you do achieve that with that white! White dripping paint, that's one of the most extreme things you can do in a painting isn't it?

TA: Yes, because it's not modified.

DC: It's absolute. However you put it, aesthetic shock or being in the moment, trying to get to a state of non-meaning and pure sensation, the whole tradition of that, of John Cage and how he related it to Zen, that whole line of thought has a particular relevance to music. Cage refused to make a distinction between noise and music because they both functioned in the same way for him, as presence.

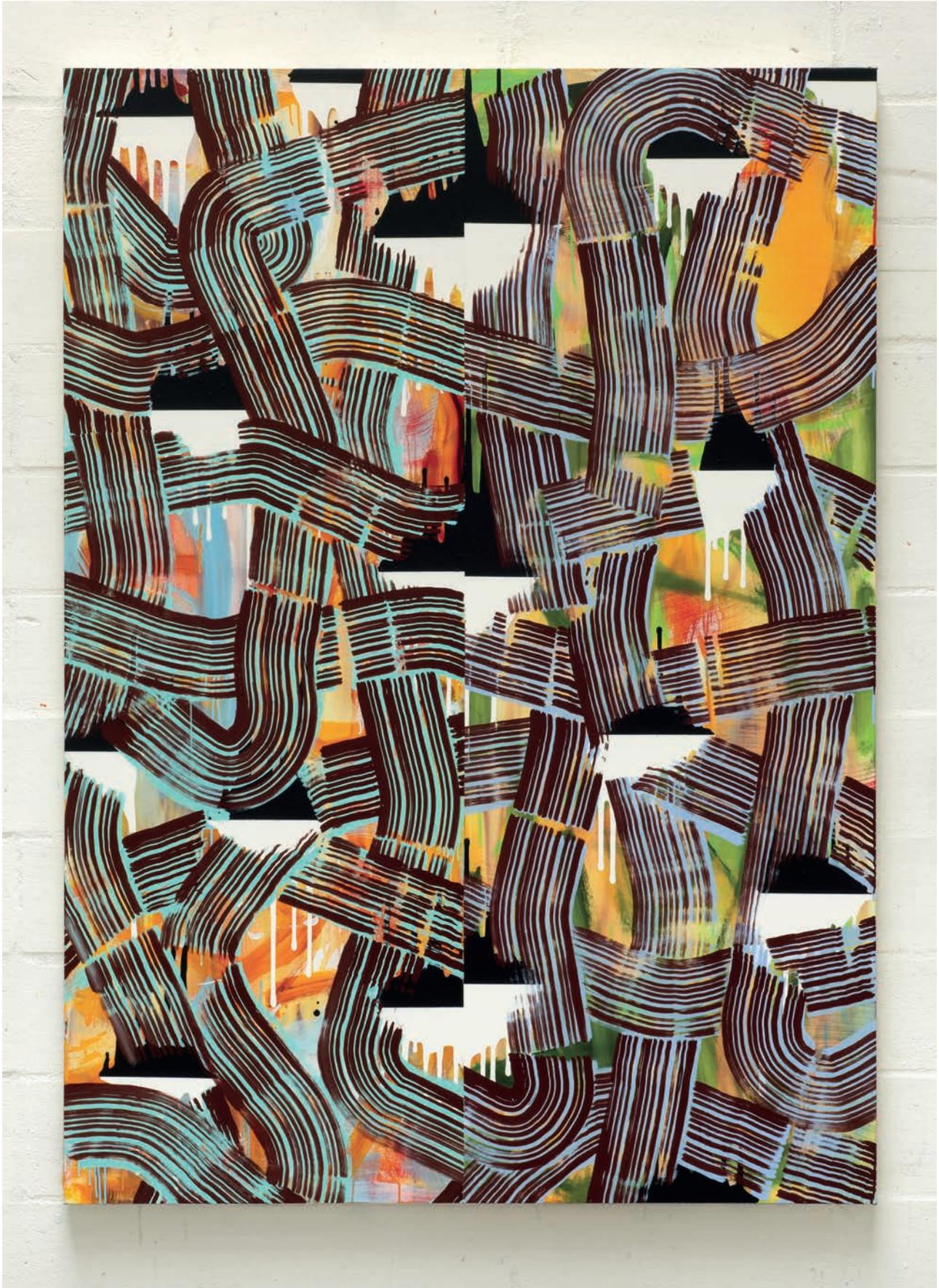
TA: Yes, the dog barking.

DC: But that's a very alien thing to English culture isn't it?

TA: Yes.

One Foot On The Platform
Oil on canvas
2005
160 x 235 cm

Courtesy of the artist



DC: Because English culture is always to do with stories, associations and connections. It's like the E M Forster quote *'only connect'* – a way of seeing the world as a set of intellectual connections, it's very English, unlike the explosion out of that, into states of being.

TA: But there are artists who you might think of as quintessentially English who capture a state of being - think of Constable's oil sketches. There's no story. Or even William Nicholson, in his paintings of the Downs, they're exquisite – their facture pulls them into the present. So there are always those elements, but they tend to be subsumed in English culture, overlaid with Victorian narrative and story telling.

DC: I know there are associations you must key into when you're making the paintings, but in a sense that becomes irrelevant to the finished painting. You might feel forced by the culture, however, to talk about them in a very associative way.

TA: If the paintings are rich enough or complex enough they can be interpreted in many different ways – associations are fine as long as they're in constant flux.

DC: But you can't ultimately get them unless you understand that they're not there to be interpreted, they are there to be experienced.

TA: Yes, I think that's right.

DC: Rather than having a gesture that is one brushstroke, the way each brushstroke is divided up into ten or more separate brushstrokes, what does that do?

TA: You mean the breaking or stopping of the gesture as it meets a solid form?

DC: No, the device of having five or six or ten or more little brushes on a big brush and you get a brushstroke that isn't quite a brushstroke. I've heard many people in art school talk about Roy Lichtenstein's Pop paintings of the giant brushstrokes, also that guy, I think he's Argentinean.....

TA: Fabian Marcaccio?

DC: Yes, who sort of peels the brushstrokes off plastic and sticks them down like a collage, or something like that. There's lots of painting that deliberately makes the gesture totally artificial and synthetic.

TA: I wouldn't have thought it was that exactly, although I would acknowledge that one aspect of it is that at the same time as being a brushstroke it is also a representation of a brushstroke.

DC: The silver paint sometimes heightens that frozen quality.

TA: When I started using wood graining brushes I would paint the strokes in only one layer, which allowed the ground colour to come through. It was transparent at the same time as being opaque, and I liked that contradiction.

DC: To make use of transparency, but without having to get involved in glazing or anything like that?

TA: Yes, exactly. But a more recent aspect of it is that the first mark goes down, and it's then tracked by another colour. So, for example, it's black or navy blue under the silver paint, that was the first brushstroke, but then you track it exactly so it becomes solid and almost sculptural. It gives them a physical body that they don't have when they're just a single stroke. It gives them a 3-D quality, which also freezes them in some way and takes them closer to Lichtenstein's diagram of a brushstroke.

DC: The Lichtenstein paintings are often talked about, and the argument goes that he's undermining the relentless authenticity of the Abstract Expressionists, and in a way, he's demonstrating that behaviour can be mimicked and simulated, and that's as much a part of being as being authentic. I'm trying to think of a good analogy. The emphasis is not on the act itself.

TA: It's on the representation of the act.

DC: Yes. The fact that you do that gives the paintings a sophisticated quality. They're not dependent on sincerity. It's a bit like the difference between Kraftwerk

Opposite: *Slipping/astiding*
2010
Oil on canvas
175 x 130 cm

Courtesy of the artist

and U2. With U2, everybody has to believe that Bono is being completely sincere, and that becomes boring.

TA: Not always.

DC: OK, no, not always, but Kraftwerk are deliberately artificial.

TA: Ironically with Kraftwerk, the things I respond to most, despite the fact they're supposed to be mechanistic, are tracks like City Lights which are in fact incredibly atmospheric and as romantic as U2, even though the form would appear to be opposite. To analyse them both in formal terms, they would appear not to be in the same realm at all, but I think in terms of generating mood or atmosphere they're just the same.

DC: It's just as dramatic.

TA: Yes.

DC: There's an interesting thing I remember from an interview with Richter, because initially with Richter's abstract paintings, and in fact right through, they were criticised for being too cold, too detached, too impersonal. In the interview he starts worrying that maybe he's a bit of a cold fish, you know how you do, and then Robert Storr points out that in fact detachment is necessary in order to make something classical.

TA: Did Richter agree his paintings were classical?

DC: Yes. In your paintings, what the fabricated brushstroke allows you to do is to see the brushstroke from a position of being outside the brushstroke, whereas de Kooning never manages to detach himself fully, so in that sense the brushstroke is always still expressionist.

TA: Yes. But then the problem is that if it's externalised in that way you bring in notions of quotation, the second-hand experience, art about art. It's very problematic for me that, for some people it's what they aim for.

DC: Well, that's what they say they aim for. Aren't they just lowering the bar?

TA: The true genesis of the tracking thing for me comes out of Bridget Riley,

whose work I first saw as a kid. I always liked the optical bounce when you put two colours following a line together. When I drew with felt-tips back in the 60's and early 70's, I used to do a drawing in a colour and then with other colours I would track the drawing which gave it a weird 3D effect, a glow, a psychedelic quality. That's where it came from, not from talking about quotation and cultural referencing.

DC: When you started as a student Clement Greenberg still held a powerful position, and in a sense he was the last figure to think that art, or specifically painting or sculpture, should be judged through notions of quality.

TA: Yes.

DC: Nowadays, art seems to be judged by what appears to be a more superficial method, to do with the attitude that's being expressed. You might go 'I prefer the Rolling Stones to the Beatles because they're sexier', or something like that.

TA: That's what my wife thinks!

DC: Do you think though, that's a loss? If Greenberg were here he'd be pointing at your paintings and saying, "That one works, that one doesn't work, that one..."

TA: "...needs cropping at the edge" – yes.

DC: Assessing things.

TA: But it's a hopelessly subjective point of view.

DC: Is there any objectivity in painting?

TA: Greenberg's perspective became ludicrous, over subjective. You can see how it's necessary to liberate that, to say "Fuck it, I'll put anything into my paintings that I want to".

DC: Like Kippenberger?

TA: Yes. All the stuff like "I'm gonna put a sausage in the left hand corner" is really important because it did liberate artists from the straitjacket of "that's good, that's bad". But after a decade of that, that too becomes ludicrous as well. You don't have to go as far as saying "is this good or bad art?" You can say instead "does this have any effect on

me?” On the other hand, there is a formalist in me that says in order for this to have an impact every formal value has to work to its optimum level. If that’s not about quality, I don’t know what is.

DC: You may have beaten yourself up at times for changing your work, you might have thought, “if I had kept on with that I might have been more successful.”

But you’re following the logic of your art, which is what you have to do, so in a sense, that isn’t such an issue. What is more of an issue is why do you keep doing it? Does it balance you out?

What does painting give you?

TA: I don’t know. I don’t know how to answer that.

DC: Peter Doig said something quite good, which was “painting has to be a trip into the unknown.”

TA: Yes, I like that.

DC: It’s a very unusual thing to do.

TA: Each painting is the creation of an unknown situation, which is actually totally vitalising.

DC: Why is it vitalising?

TA: You’re not working on a predetermined path. You have to make the unknown situation turn into something - you have to be completely there. It demands a lot of energy but it gives you energy at the same time, it gives you insight. It’s hard to define what that insight might be, but it’s the sense of a present moment, an engagement with the present. If you’re really doing it, you’re totally present - doing it now. Something happens, it all comes together.

DC: You’ve known a lot of artists, so you must have known some real fuck ups as well as the successes. What’s the worst mistake you can make as an artist?

TA: Commercial success often results in a predictable product. You become a production line.

DC: It no longer has the unknown quality.

TA: Yes. Every time you make a painting you should try and reinvent yourself.

DC: Should one therefore avoid

commercial success?

TA: No. Of course not -there are no guidelines. But it’s not just therapy. If it was therapy you would just do something and feel good, but it’s not about that, it’s got to be beyond your own ego, a gift to the world. Great art goes beyond its maker.

DC: So the ego is something you have to get beyond?

TA: Definitely. That doesn’t mean to say that the path doesn’t lie through the ego. Most people take that for granted - “I am, I am, I am”. Great art takes you through the eye of the needle.

DC: You’re more sceptical about your own identity than you would be if...

TA: ... I was a banker?

DC: Yes.

TA: Of course, that’s one of the functions of making art; it allows you to question your own pre-formed ideas. The nature of what you’re engaged with is actually beyond understanding. If you do it in a conscious way and try to force enlightenment, then you’re going to get shafted - that would be ego. You’re not trying to replicate life - it is life. It’s a life of it’s own. It’s the real thing. It’s not a depiction of something; it’s something real in the world. It’s a mistake to think I have created this. It’s got its own language. You couch it in language; you make it in language, but what you do hopefully will go beyond language.