

## Vertigo of the Edge

### Notes on A Few Works by Nathan Peter

by Lorenzo Benedetti

A key work in Peter's recent production is *Peel* (2012), a piece of canvas painted yellow and spread out above a white rhomboid. The reference is to a theme found in exquisite artistic works from the first half of the seventeenth century in the Low Countries and, in particular, to the still lifes of Pieter Claesz (1596-1660), a Flemish artist who worked in Haarlem. His paintings are characterised by their study of precious glasses and exotic fruits and vegetables. Peter picks out and disengages an element that frequently appears in still lifes of the time: a peeled lemon, which reveals one of the highest and most complicated forms of research into the capacity for mimesis in painting. Claesz was famous for his ability to portray elaborate reflections on glasses and silverware, and he became one of the key figures in virtuoso painting in the age of the Baroque. In his extensive, intricate studies, he restricts his palette to a minimal range of colours.

*Peel* clearly illustrates the dialogue that the artist brings about by combining two elements: the canvas and the rhomboid – two references to different ages. While the yellow canvas is a reference to Claesz's painting, the rhomboid refers to the minimalist culture of the 1960s. Pairing a work by Pieter Claesz with that of Carl Andre might at first sight appear almost a contradiction, but there are numerous elements that form close ties even so many centuries apart. There is the degree of purity that both artists clearly had as one of their prime objectives and both of them create a dimension in which an abstract relationship of time immortalises elements towards an aspect of infinity and eternity. The lemon, which has just been peeled, has been immortalised on that canvas for centuries and this sensation of an eternal present is dominant in minimalist sculpture. The concept of the still life, which is to say the transfiguration of reality in an infinite time, appears in the work of both artists and it is this point of conjunction that is a crucial part of Peter's work.

This pictorial fusion fascinates the artist, who has combined his studies at the academy of fine arts with those of the history of art. This emphasis leads his artistic production towards an environmental analysis of painting, which attempts to examine the spatial elements that transform the painting into an installational condition.

The aspect that he takes from Claesz's painting is the analysis of painting matter. As part of a study-oriented process, this analysis goes into great depth (cutting the lemon) in its division and dissection.

From the still-life studies of the Golden Age of Dutch and Flemish art to that of the new still lifes of modernism, via the study of flags, which was developed in the 1950s and formed a link between Pop and Minimalism. From heraldry to chromatic geometries, the fascinating world of flags is taken up by Peter through their complexity in history and in their intricate, informed dialogue with art. Peter takes them out into the realm of research, examining the space and three-dimensional nature of the painting-object. In the summer exhibition at PSM Gallery, the artist presented a series that creates a direct relationship with French art of the late Renaissance. In *Manifold*, the fold, the intarsia and the embellishment of the materials gather historic reminiscences translated into a dystopian aesthetic.

The support of the painting is dismembered and lacerated by a methodical unravelling of the horizontal threads, which lose their unitary structure and fall, intertwining and creating a new structure – a new form through the transformation of the support into object. In this process, the artists attempts to find analogies with some Baroque forces which appear to seek these formal twists and turns.

In *Linen* (2012), Peter broadens out his research in the realm of art, history and space into a more complex environmental dimension. This is the largest work the artist has made to date and it illustrates aspects of the his studies in all their great complexity. Five large canvases intersect in an amorphous manner, giving rise to a three-dimensional structure, with an interweaving of elements and perspectives that the viewer can almost pass through. As in *Manifold* and *Unravelled Black and Silver*, here too we find a metamorphosis in which heraldic remains and cartouches slide through space, creating an interaction between the tension of the support and the expansion of the sculpture. This division of the support takes us towards minimal units. A disintegration of form and matter leads to a spatial invasion of the traditional elements of painting. The formal analysis carried out by the Swiss art historian Heinrich Wölfflin in the early twentieth century is still of huge interest when studying the reflections in Peter's work. In his *Principles of Art History* of 1915, Wölfflin divides the stylistic developments in the history of art into pairs of contrary precepts. These five elements are extremely interesting for *Linen*:

linear	painterly
plane	recession
closed form	open form
multiplicity	unity
absolute clarity	relative clarity

The Swiss art historian mainly attempts to examine the transition between Renaissance and Baroque and the extremely different spatial conception that constituted the revolutionary change. He studies it through its perspectives in an attempt to find the two-way interaction between tectonic and a-tectonic. In a certain way, Peter's work transforms this transition through a formal and conceptual fusion with, on the one hand, the flat two-dimensionality of the colour and, on the other, the depth of the space that is extracted by abolishing the texture – in other words, the support – which involves three aspects: icon, form and matter.

Peter examines the frontier spaces between the various stylistic ages and those intersections where relationships have remained active over the centuries and can be given relevance again today. In this sense, Peter's work constitutes a key aspect of our age, which aims to give new relevance to the historic dimension. His constant recourse to art-history circumstances of the past takes us back to the theories of Warburg and, in particular, to the concept of the *Nachleben* of culture. The artists, styles and movements of the past quoted in Peter's work are imprisoned by him in an independence of their own, in which everything acquires new form and meaning. This ranges from the clash between a late-Renaissance and Baroque cartouche, passing through the period of Anti-Form and arriving at the formulation of a new perspective.