

## Correspondence

Martin Holman

Meeting Jane Bustin to look at her paintings is a pleasure. That is not just because it will be a few hours in the company of a friend. It is also because of the things she shows me. They are not all on the wall of her light-filled studio (part of a building in the East End where submarine periscopes were once tested). Some are arranged over, inside and under the expansive work surface beneath a line of windows, not neatly but not carelessly, but get-at-ably.

Among them are photographs of her children; of a female face in a photograph she liked; a drawing by her son; a softly folded bolt of silk; some hessian-covered blocks; a new ruler. There is a beautifully-decorated box that contains old telegrams and messages, an off-licence bill for wedding drinks in the 1930s; ancient messages written with a no-newer stubby pencil. And there is a volume of poems by Mallarmé.

Each is something to look at, to hold. Even to hear? There may be a story in that favourite face, and reading the staccato rhythms of the tersely telegraphed message – the vernacularly utilitarian aphorisms of a lost everyday – supposes a voice, as do the fragments of Mallarmé, notes for poems by an artist practising his art but also mourning his young son. Half a dozen or a dozen lines set out on the modern printed page of the American edition collected by Jane's husband. Things that suppose, imply, aspire to... but are not there yet.

I find myself looking between these items and back and forth to the paintings Jane has organised on the wall. Three distinct works, several different dimensions, a consideration of colours and an assurance of texts. One is removed and another slotted into place – on to the wall and into the convoy of shapes stretched along the surface which I am now prepared to eulogise into an ocean of white paint, one pitted with screw holes (for which marine metaphors fail me).

As one block, or sequence, takes the place of another, a sensation changes. They do not have to be seen in this sequence or that, but I am struck by how a new colour, texture or shape

alters the syntax of what I am looking at. I am being drawn into a very visual experience, the equivalence in word and 'sound' and place and utility I went through at the table top, with light pooling shadows around a block of wood, the feathered edge of the book, the curl on a photograph, and the potential for story, sound and music in what lay on the page.

It is not that Bustin has contrived a special alchemy in her studio, orchestrating every knick and knack into an orbit around her painting. That would be spooky, and there is nothing nightmarish in paintings that, on the contrary (and rare in current practice), deserve the epithet 'exquisite'. It is just that Jane is an example of a 'joined-up' sensibility. She brings into her studio by chance things that to an outsider seem to go together. Meanwhile to her they are interesting things seen, tools in research, and part of what she uses and turns to to assist the decision that can bring another painting to what could be its completion.

The surprise on the first serious encounter with these paintings is the extent to which they are 'connected'. These small, slender, rectilinear, deceptively slight objects (they can be called objects) appear self-contained, severely linear, reticent, intense and maybe even fully detached. There is no imagery and surfaces are inflected as if by light rather than the hand of a maker. The edges are impeccable in their precision, and the blocks over which canvas is stretched, folded, creased and pasted at first appear self-possessed and as unyielding as a house-proud home or something a machine has made. Abstraction still terrifies a British audience as somehow needing a clever reply or as just too continental. Which is why the question in the viewer's mind, heard in the head but not mouthed, is more often likely to be 'why?' rather than 'what?'

When the 'why?' takes hold, however, it reveals this work to be unusually – again for current practice – responsive to the onlooker. Jane is a persistent observer and absorber of the world around her, of the lines in a modern building, the quirky name of a boarded-up hotel, the shade of pinky-grey blush on a front-path flagstone after a shower. Not that she has to reproduce that world, yet the lights and darks, roughs and smooth seem to recycle place, face, time, season, mood. All simultaneously, if needs

be, or idiosyncratically displaced; or it is none of these if the inspiration is immaterial and private to her.

Because these paintings are about communication, the act of imparting, demonstrating; the connecting passage, its presence and absence. They give silent voice to a very natural process that does not take the act of perception for granted, but as a kind of gift which, once handed over, needs careful handling. That box of messages is in the same category. Not that these paintings will ever assume the bluntness of a telegram, but there is an uncanny resemblance between their placing on the wall with the way a telegram is spelled out, with words attentively selected for economy and urgency, and how each would appear, once invisibly transmitted, on printed strips glued to a paper. And how the space after one clipped word was electrified by anticipation of the next.

Nor does Jane assume that perception is straightforward. There is a strain of Saussure's linguistic theory of signs and referents about her relationship with written text. Bustin's 'words' are thoroughly chromatic, being paintings, but also in that sense that aligns them to tones of meaning or melodic progression. 'Tones of meaning', or shades? Narrative is not what Jane conveys, no more than Mallarmé did with poetry transfixed by the tension in the display of words on a page. Bustin is also about the interplay of style and content although a closer comparison with the French symbolist seems to exist in her hard-to-translateness. But these coloured transports are so much about the richness of perception that we have to try.

Mallarmé was an inspiration for music because of the impressions made on composers like Debussy by the striking but isolated phrases he gave form to. They were telegraphic, almost, diligently chosen, and opaque. Bustin deliberates over the intensity of a tone, raised or lowered by accidentals – the tooth of the canvas, the weight of a tiny stroke, the play of light, the durability of pigment. She invigilates the extent of a shadow cast by the underside of a frontal plane that is also coloured (why should it not be?), weighing the balance between two hues and what is to the left and right across an open space, a pause, an interval. There are relationships between colours that go beyond standard associations with one

alone that generate new meanings in a group that are not evident looking at one aspect on its own. It may be a type of visual phonology, one that permits dissonance.

There is an element of call and response. Indeed, the notion of exchange is imbedded in this work and underlies its need to communicate. A chain of consequences links painting to sight to imagining to text and then again into painting through the involvement in the making of these expressions of the writer, Tracy Chevalier, and John Hull, also a writer and a theologian, too. Each made a part, but in a different form, applying a different sense of the original including one from which all recollection of colour had been erased to leave a kind of conceptual blackness. From that seeped an idea of red, green, blue, yellow (like out of blackness itself, in which there are many colours as Bustin has already established in a body of work that culminated with her use of a rare sample of the marvellous Superblack).

These paintings can appear at odds with their own pleasure. Like the arrival of a telegram boy at the door of long-ago households, they are greeted with conflicting emotions of the sheer joy of contact, of the search for meaning beyond grasp, and the possibility of loss. Mallarmé wrote about the 'fury against the formless'; caught between raw emotive power and lyrical assurance, his poetry could seem both restless and passionate. The isolation on the white page made his words vital and coherent. There is awareness of that phrase in Jane; whether she knows it, I cannot say.