# BROKEN SUGGESTIVE: PRUNELLA CLOUGH'S LATER PAINTINGS BY SCOTT MCCRACKEN

**We usually think of editing in terms of film, musical or textual composition but it is also a fundamental part in how paintings are constructed. A selection and an omission, where exclusion is as necessary as inclusion.**

*'Broken suggestive'* is a phrase Prunella Clough wrote down in a notebook in 1958: a note eventually included in the monograph of her work published to accompany a posthumous retrospective exhibition at Tate in 2007. Although it was initially written in the late fifties – as a consideration of the work she was making then – it seems to be apropos of the paintings she's made throughout her life, including the later pictures produced from the 1970s to the 90s. The industrial imagery, and scenes from the 40s and 50s, were stripped back: her paintings depopulated of the labourers, factory workers, and fishermen. One component that did carry over from her earlier work was a proclivity for the industrial. Clough once commented that natural beauty possessed little utilitarian merit. When her paintings shifted away from more recognisable imagery, she persevered in associating as a figurative painter, vehemently rejecting the label of 'abstraction' so often attributed to her work:

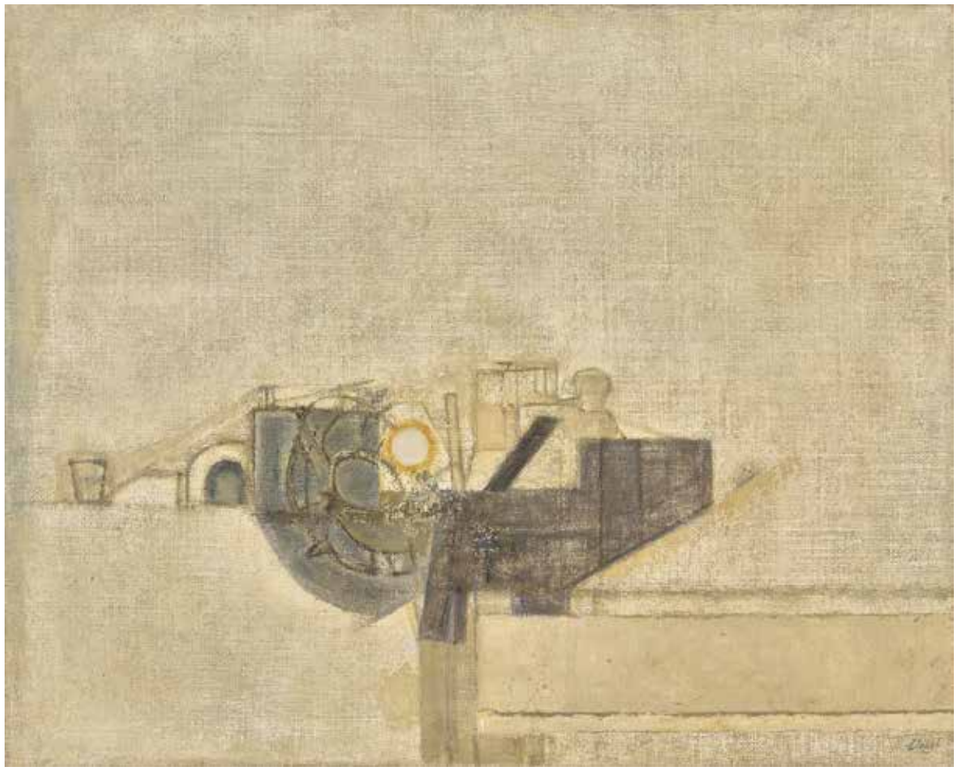
*"Nothing I do is abstract. I can locate all the ingredients of a painting in the richness of the outside of the world, the world or perception... if I take a thing from the real world, detach it and put it in a painting, something takes over that goes further than anything I can logically describe or assess."*

There is an emphasis – an insistence – on shape: shapes that can be geometric, such as diamonds and grids, or shapes that are irregular and biomorphic. Whether organic or inorganic in depiction, these motifs are often situated in pictorial isolation: sitting on a separate plane that establishes a clear distinction between the figure and ground. In some pictures, it is as if these foregrounded shapes are emitting their own unique heat signatures into the pictorial field that encloses them. We may be able to confer a name to a shape (either through identifying its silhouette or perhaps through reading the painting's title), or we may only be able to describe some straightforward attribute, like *"its jagged edge"* or that *"it's composed entirely of orange."* The same shape may be scaled up (or down), as in *Cave* (1990). Or it may be duplicated as in *Swags* (1993). But a shape in Clough's paintings often finds a way of extending beyond its outline; beyond a local colour or a naturalistic rendering. A shape is never just itself: it accrues a new identity – one that is somehow specific yet amorphous – one that cannot be precisely pinned down.

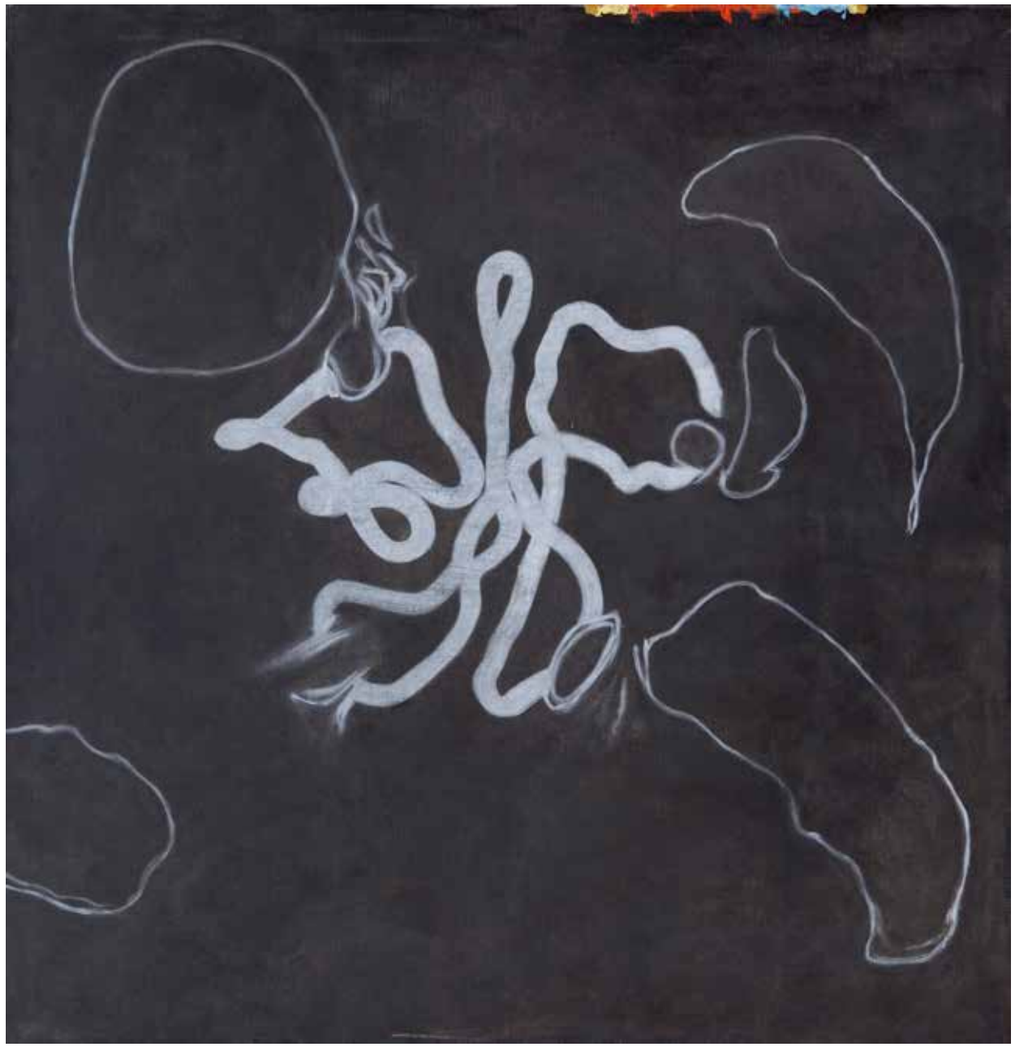
In *Swags*, two bowing forms – the 'swags' – are surrounded by a warmish white/buff ground and discretely held within letterbox sub-frames. They are suspended – floating – but also anchored to the edge of the support. Each one is rendered differently. The top is composed predominantly of black, ochre, and red strokes with touches of cooler green, purple and blue underneath. The shape below is made up of crisp black lines that trace its outline, while demarcating smaller irregular regions of scratchy blue and orange hues. A ripening banana and a toothy grin. A double vision. Or a doubling of vision where one thing can simultaneously become two things. There is a process of extraction at work. But this is followed by a re-introduction – a re-entry – of something that has accelerated

**Swags**
1993
Oil on canvas
111.5 x 116.5 cm

*© Prunella Clough*
*Courtesy of Flowers Gallery*



**River Landscape**
Charcoal and oil on canvas
61x76
©Prunella Clough
Courtesy of Flowers Gallery



**Undone**
1994
Oil on canvas
132 x 137 cm

*© Prunella Clough*
*Courtesy of Flowers Gallery*

off to an unknown destination only to subsequently return to its point of origin.

The ambivalent quality of Clough's paintings neutralises their internal scale. This, in turn, disorientates our viewing position – we swing between seeing the image from the front and from above, and between the microscopic and the macroscopic. We could be engaging with a molecular distance or a cosmic distance, a millimetre or a lightyear. The motifs, with their lack of density or volume, are markers that are situated on invisible horizontal and vertical axes, where they become plotted as makeshift coordinates, to designate not only a location, but a specific moment in time as well.

During a lecture delivered to Royal Academy painting students in 1904, the artist George Clausen remarked that *"painting is a partial statement – a reading or a rendering of nature – rather than an inventory."* This seems an apt description when considering Clough's works. In her pictures, we are always only given this partial statement. It is an 'account' of a singular thing, seen in a particular place at a specific time of day, and experienced in a certain light. A perceptual moment: part documented; part remembered; part invented. Each painting then becomes an entry in a great repository of such incidents. Atomised and itemised. The fragmentary nature of what is being presented to us compounds the notion that to encounter a fragment of something may be more compelling than encountering the thing as a whole.

In *Canopy and Car,* an overhanging scalloped-edge red canopy (identified through the title) enters the painting from the top of the canvas. A crudely silhouetted car, composed of streaky marks and red and white dots, sits on the bottom edge. There is no real outline to it: no tangible perimeter. The two subjects are pushed apart to the periphery of the painting by an expanse of white. One of the key tasks, for any painter, is to find an appropriate visual means to highlight the significant parts of a painting and to de-emphasize the less significant parts. Every part of a painting demands equal consideration, but this is not the same as creating equal significance. Clough frequently divides her paintings into individual *'regions'*. A region could be a shape, or a series of lines, or a surface. These regions have their particular frequencies which can then be tuned to different wavelengths.

It's not simply the shapes themselves that play a key role in these paintings, but the spaces around the shapes – between the shapes – that give the paintings their own type of resonance: a pictorial vibration where the shapes have an almost magnetic relationship to one another, as if at any moment they could lock together or repel off in opposite directions. There is an oscillation in the hierarchy of figure and ground. In some of the paintings the ground appears to swell where the primary shape begins to recede or shrink. In the painting *Samples* (1997), the vertical smears provide an animated ground for a series of smaller, stacked, monochromatic bars. These coloured horizontals are xylophonic: each one hitting a different note; a different visual pitch within an ambience of neutral greys. And it is the grounds, the build up of marks, the zonal patterning, or the hollow void, that gives these paintings not only an atmosphere, but their own temperature – their own climate. There is something distinctly meteorological contained within many of Clough's pictures; they possess their own

Above:
**Black and white photograph of a coal mine or quarry**
1950s
Black and white photograph
62 x 87mm

*Tate Gallery*
*©The estate of Ann Robin-Banks*

Opposite:
**Canopy & Car**
Oil on canvas
46.5 x 37.5 cm

*©Prunella Clough*
*Courtesy of Flowers Gallery*

**Reflection**
1984
Oil on canvas
23 x 25 cm

*©Prunella Clough*
*Courtesy of Flowers Gallery*

type of visibility.

The German painter Karl Hödicke once claimed that *"You have to finish your painting before it vanishes in the fog."* In Clough's paintings, there is a recognition that they have already once vanished into the fog, only to have now reappeared. A suppression followed by a re-emergence. Repeating patterns and forms are suppressed through the making of the picture. Some are relocated and fixed, while others echo within the shallow strata of oil paint. These traces – or workings out – are never merely superficial embellishments; they are part of the identity of the paintings. It is part of how Clough edits. We usually think of editing in terms of film, musical, or textual composition, but it is also a fundamental part of how paintings are constructed: a selection and an omission, where exclusion is as necessary as inclusion.

Some of the paint application could initially be perceived as insensitive, but this is only when the paintings are considered on a superficial level. In this respect, Clough's paintings could be closely linked to the work of American artist Thomas Nozkowski – their paintings related as distant transatlantic cousins. In both of their respective works, there can be an unevenness which, in part, comes from their unwillingness to adopt a single vocabulary. This means that it is difficult to discuss or to write meaningfully about Clough's work. While some words may stick, most glide over and slip off the surface. In that sense, there is an impenetrability to the paintings, so we have to look for a breach – for a chink in their armour – where we can get inside and underneath the surface. In *Wire and Demolition* (1982), a cluster of solid lines tangle together in the upper half of the painting. Swatches of colours – pink, orange, and turquoise – are presented in opposition to the dense network of sprawling lines. Behind, the ground is ridged, scored, mottled. It is a cosmic space.

While Clough's paintings ostensibly seem to adhere to a strategy of reduction – although *'decluttering'* may be a more accurate term – these are not by any means reductive paintings. They are, in fact, additive paintings. They masquerade as reductive paintings because Clough repeatedly simplifies the numerous pictorial relationships that play out in her works. And it is by way of this simplicity that the paintings afford themselves an openness.

They give us a sense of exposure and revelation – something akin to a radiographic image – allowing us to see beneath surface-level appearances, or else a dissection – a cross section – that gives us an unfamiliar view of a hidden or obscured structure. This openness also discloses a common attitude the paintings share: an attitude of *"what if?"* These paintings are not presenting solutions or stabilities. There is always something shifting as we continue to look. These pictures put themselves forward as anti-declarative. They are telling us something, but whatever it is, it cannot be immediately assimilated. Possibly this corresponds to Clough's often quoted mantra of *"saying a small thing edgily."*

The term *'broken suggestive'* could perhaps be rephrased or reframed as *'fractured ambiguity'*. Ambiguity is a favoured strategy amongst a lot of painters today. But ambiguity, by its very definition, cannot be quantified or qualified in terms of value or usefulness. It relies on inexactness. And it can quickly slip towards something altogether more uncertain. Clough's paintings evade such confusion through a procedure of distillation: through eliciting a *'present-ness'*, or a *'present tense-ness'*. It gives them their continued viability. A sustained visibility.

Scott McCracken
**Gamewell**
2020
Acrylic on canvas
60 x 45cm

*Courtesy of the artist*