

# Irrational Exuberance

elva mulchrone

Elva Mulchrone makes abstract paintings. The paintings are composed of a number of layers; grids, dots and lines that seem to refer to statistical drawings or infographics. These motifs appear through the works in her new series, "Irrational Exuberance", fading in and out on the surfaces of the works. Some seem to be right on the surface of the work, others have been painted over, half-obsured, falling into the shallow pictorial space of each work. The motifs float in colour fields. These fields are more intensely painted in places or painted several times over, giving a sense of areas floating on top of each other. The gently layered appearance of these paintings might recall the Abstract Expressionism of Mark Rothko or Barnett Newman, but the motifs speak very much to the here and now.

The choice of motifs in Mulchrone's oeuvre is very specific. All of them belong to the field of the visual representation of data. A recurring motif is imagery associated with graphs, such as the lines that plot the statistically most accurate representation of data points laid out across two axes. There are also the data points themselves. These are rendered as dots or diamonds that are clustered into patterns, sometimes with a graph line going through them. Sometimes there is no line, just dots. In some works the dots change colour, and without the reference point of a line to cluster around and the use of different colours, they become entirely divorced from whatever representational element they might once have had. It is fair to say that the works hover between the representational and the non-representational, or perhaps do something more complex with the possibility of ever being representational.

The visual representation of data has historically been regarded as objective – a visual rendering of the "facts" in a way that makes it easier for complex ideas to be communicated to a wide audience. The signifiers that are presented in data representation are supposed to have a clear and direct relationship with the scenario or idea that is being signified. What then is at stake when this set of imagery is referenced but in a way that divorces those signifiers from any context of what is being signified? The clusters of dots that do not have the background of a graph have shaken off their original representational content. Instead they become parts of something else – the formal language of an abstract painting that make sense primarily (or even exclusively) in relation to the rest of the marks within the particular painting that they appear on. Graphs are rational. Abstract paintings are by and large, less rational, and have been the object of scorn and bewilderment on the part of critics and audiences since the development of modern art at the turn of the twentieth century. An anonymous critic of Kasimir Malevich's 'Movement of Pictorial Masses in the Fourth Dimension' referred to a vision of 'white elephants', the Russian equivalent of pink elephants, setting the tone for a century of derision from mainstream critics and audiences. Abstract painting is irrational, exuberant even.

Paradoxically Mulchrone's working method is up unto a point, both orthodox and rational. Her practice is research-heavy, involving interviews with a number of academics and thinkers – the type of approach that post-graduate academics in many fields accept as standard. The subject matter of the interviews for this series of work includes economics, development, globalization and health outcomes. It is a working method that seems to belong to the social sciences, rather than in the field of making abstract paintings but at some point in her working process Mulchrone departs from the path of orthodox research. She does not present a coherent synthesis of the interviews or a commentary on that research. Indeed there seems no particular message in the works that links to her research and given this gap it would be misconceived to try and draw on the sources of Mulchrone's research to try and somehow explain her works. Instead she seems to present visual fragments of research that have been unhinged from the original referents or what they signified to the academics who are responsible for generating them. Mulchrone seems to use her research to offer a reflection on the process of academic research from a very different and oblique angle.

Representing ideas or information in visual form is not a new phenomenon – maps and charts have been around in the form of cave paintings and stone tablets for millennia. Data visualization gained in pace in the early 19th century through figures such as William Playfair who, for example, made charts that plotted the price of wheat against the cost of labour in Britain. Later in the 19th century Florence Nightingale would use a variation of the pie chart to show Parliament and Queen Victoria that most deaths in the Crimean War were from the result of disease rather than combat. Nightingale's use of infographics is conventional; simplifying a complex idea through a schematic visual to demonstrate the "objective" truth of what is always a particular and subjective interpretation of data. However in recent years, this idea of infographics representing some sort of truth has come under scrutiny, in part because of the proliferation of data visualization disseminated via the internet or social media. It is increasingly evident that data visualization is open to corruption; for example, Donald Trump's presidential campaign was characterized by misleading data visualization with out-of-scale bar charts exaggerating state poll results. Other techniques in the Trump campaign included omitting the baselines of charts so there was no real way of comparing different data being presented and distortion of length comparisons in percentage charts showing how he was polling in comparison to Hillary Clinton. The techniques of Trump's campaign are now common in marketing and corporate presentations and taken in conjunction with the phenomenon of fake news suggests that the era of widespread trust of infographics might be coming to a rapid end.

Yet if infographics cannot be trusted, what exactly is their point? A graph or a chart is now little more than suspect marketing material or propaganda to ram home a partial viewpoint as a cast-iron argument. Mulchrone seems to suggest that the research that she has done is best represented in another way, where infographics are a ghostly presence in what is a very indirect way of communicating with the viewer. If representations of information can never be objective, then perhaps it is more appropriate to watch those representations of information dissolve into that most subjective of visual arena; abstract painting. Mulchrone is not debunking infographics. She has stated that she is particularly interested in the graphs about economic development, governance and health outcomes about very specific social and political issues. However it seems that she is interested in the wider picture that results from considering that data, also stating that she is more interested in the notion of balance – how the factors that these graphs and the research they are based on contribute to a more profound idea than the specific arguments they purport to illustrate. The interest in balance underpins the film work presented with the paintings that shows the artist and Plaza Halaoui, a Togolese performer and choreographer, seemingly mirroring each others movements in a game entitled 'Game on (Agbadja)'. Close viewing shows that the two of the protagonists are in fact very slightly out of step with each other. The game was designed to allow each of the protagonists to respond to the others movement rationally. Yet responding to the dance movements of a partner is always in danger of falling out of perfect synchronicity – instead the balance that two people mirroring movements achieve is often done at a remove to each other. They are in a sense, very slightly always out of time. It is within this gap, this moment out of time, that Mulchrone operates within, a time-lag between argument and interpretation, between the objective and the subjective. It is within that gap that another sort of meaning, and another sort of understanding can arise.

Niru Ratnam, Writer and Commercial Director at ArtReview