Rawness and Rupture: Damien Flood

In 1992 the producer and musician Steve Albini wrote to Nirvana with a proposal about how they should record the follow-up to *Nevermind*, their world-conquering over-ground breakthrough — and so an album that put the band's core politics and aesthetics to the test. How could they stay true to themselves while progressing? How could they avoid the seeming inevitability of a big-money sellout? Point one on Albini's list of production imperatives was "to bang a record out in a couple of days, with high quality but minimal production and no interference from the front office bulletheads."[1] Right away, demanding and potentially liberating principles were defined: *urgency*, *intensity*, *independence*. Albini articulated his recording philosophy in terms that were categorically punk: driven by a desire for music to maintain the possibility of expressing "originality, personality and enthusiasm," as against an indulgently drawn-out, finicky and perfectionist process. He stated his own insistent, ongoing preferences, but also spoke of the need for adaptability — for openness to alternative directions, a capacity to meet the specific needs of a recording situation in new ways:

> I love the sound of a boomy drum kit (say a Gretsch or Camco) wide open in a big room, especially with a Bonhammy doubled-headed bass drum and a really painful snare drum. I also love the puke-inducing low end that comes off an old Fender Bassman or Ampeg guitar amp and the totally blown sound of an SVT with broken-in tubes. I also know that those sounds are inappropriate for some songs, and trying to force them is a waste of time.

Reading this, *I* love the rock-nerd delight in the sources and effects of particular sounds — the gear-fetishist, insider knowledge of a focused listener and combative creator who keeps pushing instruments and recording situations to be more fundamental, more open, more powerful, more unusual (while also being less and less and less of everything he deems superficial and inessential). I also love the collaged linguistic juxtapositions of these descriptions, the sense of strange, distinct things coming together in potent but pared-back combinations. Notice too, incidentally, that profound feel for architecture and anatomy in Albini's sonic commitments: that 'big room', the 'painful' or 'puke-inducing' impact. His picture is one of an expertly modeled combination of choice technical details and aural associations (boomy, doubled-headed, low end, totally-blown, broken-in…).

There's undoubtedly a degree of ridiculous rockist posturing in Albini's prose: the authentic, no-bullshit, real-deal approach can be, of course, as much of a cultivated pose as any more obviously contrived approach to music or art or anything else. But at a recent Dublin gig by Shellac, Abini's band of recent years, the integrity and authority of his main principles were re-asserted, just as a sense of what they mean was richly augmented. The show (a good chunk of which was centred on tracks from the band's 2014 record *Dude Incredible*) was an assertive argument for bare-bones playing and composition: three middle-aged guys; drums; guitars; little else. But this was not, entirely, a back-to-basics approach: Shellac's songs are expansive and surreal, sophisticated and nuanced in their formal complexity. Riff-passages can launch at great speed, then purposefully lurch and stumble, before frustrated slow-down gives way again to athletic sprints and terrifying spurts of commanding, assaulting noise. All the while, there will be winding, unpredictable musical threads, obscure narrative suggestions, harshly cut-up lyrical lines. There are numerous finessing details and cannily referential nods to other musical forms. Shellac's music is an *attack*; but it is also a *mosaic*. It is as much a matter of careful assembly and disassembly as it is an energetic onslaught. At the end of that

Dublin gig, notably, there was no uplifting, concluding encore, no conclusive final statement; rather, Albini and his fellow band members slowed down one by one, taking turns to methodically unplug and put away their instruments before stepping down into the crowd, giving up any elevated status.

There isn't a point-by-point match between the underlying principles of Albini's working methods and those that underpin the painting practice of Damien Flood. Thinking about the aggressive-deconstructive-minimalist aspects of the former's work in relation to *painting* might easily take us in expected directions: towards the kind of radically intense and spare unpicking of painting created, or inspired by, Michael Krebber, for instance. But in looking at Flood's paintings of recent years, I can't help coming back to these types of references: to aesthetic forms like those advanced on Albini records, forms that are undeniably forceful and yet formally intricate, raw and yet rigorously organized, systematic and yet entirely surprising in their technical and tonal range. Looking at Flood's paintings, I think of terms like *urgency*, *intensity*, *independence* — his is a way of doing things which has roots in recognizable traditions and tendencies of contemporary painting, but which is stoically and stubbornly committed to its own (adaptable) techniques and interests.

Think of the way Flood's canvases are fundamentally, visibly, *canvases*: his work not only begins from the rawness of raw material, but leads there too. His regular use of unprimed canvas, like the unvarnished immediacy of a live recording, seems to arise from a recognition and anxious celebration of the gritty actuality of artistic creation, and of lived experience more generally. (The physicality limitations of life surely constitute an unavoidable background theme.) More ornate and refined effects stand out starkly and strangely in relation to this exposed surface. Add to this, then, the way in which visual contents co-exist and cohere in Flood's works. Often (though not always) the elements of a composition are positioned in aligned relation to each other, with only minimal, strategic overlaps. These are skeletal, bare-bones arrangements. Details seem to be added in hard and soft sequences, or they have both hard and soft qualities — firm, solid lines that slowly weaken and bend; curving shapes that are irregular but defined with strict edges. Some areas of pictorial definition seem brutish, monstrous, mountainous; others are rational, elegant, simple. And then, here and there, we encounter the organic: cut-up body parts, flowering blooms, undefinable mushrooming growths. Each of these is surgically exploratory but appears to have no explicit, exact communicative intent.

These paintings are full of warping, winding, detached and sometimes disturbing forms — they don't set out to shock, it seems, but their variously spacey and congested configurations can have purposefully painful effects. Flood's paintings are pleasurable and troubling, rich and raw — allowing for varying degrees of delight and disturbance, in quick succession. What they show might have familiar components, but they do not appear to us as recognizable and stable representations. Writing about the artist Cathy Wilkes, Simon O'Sullivan has made the case (based on the writings of Gilles Deleuze) for art as an occasion of re-ordering and re-understanding our subjective experience, and this requires a break in habitual processes of recognition:

> With an object of recognition we are reconfirmed and reaffirmed as that which we always already understood ourselves – and our world – to be. In such a place no real thought takes place. An object of an encounter ruptures this self-confirming mechanism. It operates as a cut that itself functions as a 'mutant centre of subjectivation', a singular point around which a different kind of subjectivity might constellate.[2]

Flood's paintings — in some ways like Albini's attitudes and effects — are questing experiments in achieving such transformative, destabilizing *encounters*. There is 'rupture'; there are 'cuts' and there is a necessary commitment to 'mutation'. These paintings are the vigorous outcomes of urgent, intense imaginative processes, and the products of a insistently independent artistic spirit.

— *Declan Long*

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[1] Albini's letter to Nirvana is available online at any number of music sites including: https://consequenceofsound.net/2013/09/read-steve-albinis-proposal-to-produce-nirvanas-in-utero/

[2] Simon O'Sullivan, 'Ten Concepts Following Cathy Wilkes' Practice'*, Afterall*, no.12, p.66.