

A half-finished painting

'The right-hand side is finished,' says the painter pointing at a cluster of brush marks on what appears to be an otherwise empty canvas, 'I realised it when this happened.'

'Do you have any thoughts yet about the other half?', asks the gallerist.

'Some kind of object, maybe a curtain, but we will see what it does. It may change this half again.'

The 'other' half awaiting the 'object' is, at the time of the conversation, almost entirely white. Save for a small accent of red in the top left-hand corner, it has been covered with an uneven coat of white oil paint rather than left in its basic white-primed state as if the ground had to be tested in anticipation or else invested with effort before it could be covered again, perhaps, by a painted curtain. Or it may be that the painterly incident which brought a half of the painting to a halt demanded the erasure of all (but that little bit of red) that had preceded it. In any case, more painting activity seems to have taken place here than on the completed portion of the canvas but so far without a conclusion.

The expectant half and the finished one are separated by a black vertical line through the centre of the canvas. Or perhaps, the line connects them: it could belong to either. It was clearly there when the white oil paint was applied and is possibly the residue of something made redundant by the unexpected success of the marks on the right. In fact, it seems that the whole of the left half (excepting, again, the dissonant red corner) may have been painted black before it recovered its former whiteness and the line is a negative image of this recovery. Is it finished? Is it not?

These are facile questions: nothing is finished in a painting finished by half. All the possibilities remain open. 'We will see what it does.' But when?

When is a painting finished?

In a contract with his dealer Ambroise Vollard, Picasso insisted on having the last word on the matter. His paintings were finished when he said so. But Picasso was the kind of impatiently prolific artist who wants to get rid of the painting so that he can continue to paint. Others prefer to think of paintings as if they were sentient beings equipped with feelings, intentions and desires. They follow the painting where it wants to go and they stop when it wants to stop. Yet others talk about an indefinable 'something', a 'this' or an 'it', and conceive of the act of painting as a process which prepares the conditions for 'this' or 'it' to occur. Their paintings are less finished than they are ready to surrender.

Picasso's mastery was in his power to stop painting, to interrupt himself when he saw fit. But his resolutely authorial stance may betray signs of anxiety beneath the show of confidence. He claimed to have been haunted by the ghost of Frenhofer, the 'greatest painter of his day' from Balzac's story 'The Unknown Masterpiece', who after ten years of work reveals to his perplexed admirers a painting which appears to be nothing but a 'dead wall of paint'. Only one detail in the corner of the canvas suggests an unfulfilled promise. Among the mess of lines and chaos of colour there is a single delicately rendered bare foot of a young model, the last remnant of a picture concealed by coats of paint. Frenhofer's masterpiece is a work of faith ruined by the quest for perfection. It is not a painting which failed to stop and went too

far nor is it one whose formlessness is the failure of the creative process. Rather it is *the* perfectly finished painting, so complete, definitive and resolved that the very idea of painting itself, 'the means by which the effect is produced, fades away'. Overcome by the painter's efforts, it has nothing left to show. And while the incomprehensible results of Frenhofer's art undoubtedly incite imagination, it is the artist alone who, unable to separate from the work, perceives the ecstasy of his highlights and shadows in the vague fog of paint.

Where Picasso assumed the sole responsibility, Sigmar Polke wanted none. His 1969 painting *Higher Powers Command: Paint the Upper Right Hand Corner Black!* is merely a dutiful execution of the directive. Besides poking fun, all at once, at the authenticity of Expressionism, austerity of hard-edge abstraction and the anti-aesthetics of conceptual art, the fact that this disarming disclaimer of authorship is the least painterly of all Polke's paintings (even the text of the instruction is painted as if it was mechanically retyped) makes a fair point: the painter's job is simply the application of paint. The painter makes paint marks, not paintings. The variations, shapes, colours and textures, highlights and shadows, introduced by the painter in the progression of the work challenge the paint to declare its own authority. They are the painter's way of gradually distancing himself from the painting, stepping aside and finally breaking the bond between his work and the painting, so that we can see what painting does by itself.

Having been asked at the age of 63 how many paintings he had made in his life, Polke replied, 'One good one and the one I am just working on'. Though the anecdote may be apocryphal, the eloquent message is borne by every painter's experience: the painter never knows if the work is done. The most he can say is that a painting is what happens in the process of painting and what does not stop happening. It is a continuous event, not a definitive thing, a work in progress, not a solution. It is not what is left behind by the painter but the living potential of the neither finished nor unfinished work that counts - not what he has made but what is. (As for the single 'good one' in Polke's reckoning, he may well have meant the unambiguous black corner of 1969, the one that dismissed its author from the start while also being indisputably his own.)

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