Dunne, Aiden. "Etching colour into the darkness," *The Irish Times,* September 17, 2012.

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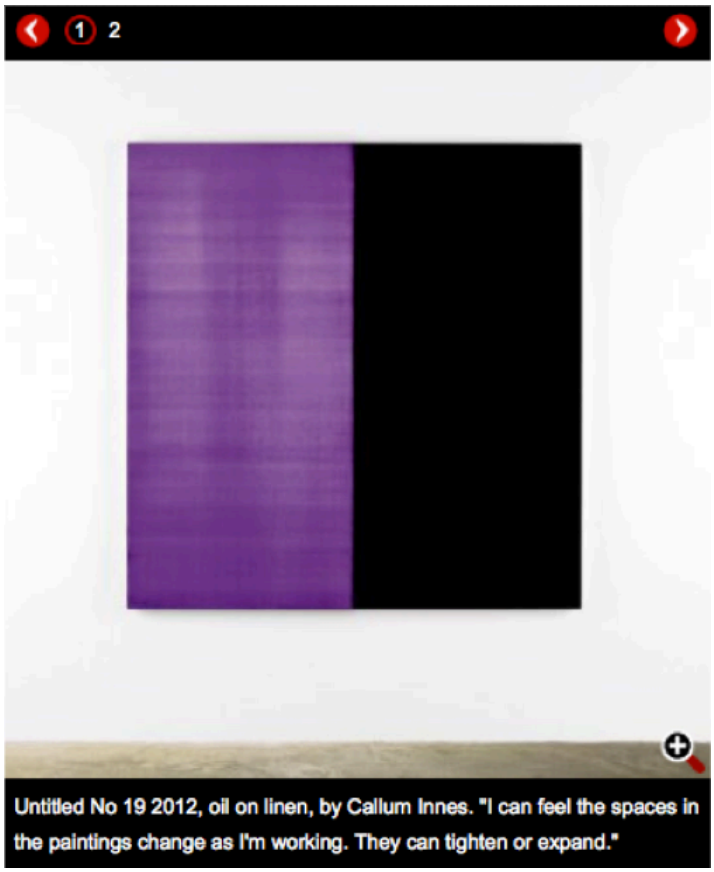
Etching colour into the darkness



Untitled No 19 2012, oil on linen, by Callum Innes. "I can feel the spaces in the paintings change as I'm working. They can tighten or expand."

Scottish artist Callum Innes is part of the YBA generation but, unlike many of them, he is an abstract painter. He starts with a black canvas and takes the work on a journey into the light

BORN IN EDINBURGH, in 1962, Callum Innes is notable as an artist for a number of reasons apart from the consistent rigour and quality of his work. One is that, although he is of the YBA generation and has achieved significant professional success, he is that relative rarity among them: an abstract painter. Another is that he is still based in Edinburgh, when a logical career trajectory would have seen him long settled in London, the art capital.

Not that he is a fanatical Scottish separatist. On the contrary, his Edinburgh is the Edinburgh of the Scottish Enlightenment, when the city was at its most open, receptive and intellectually creative. And he is ruefully pragmatic: “I like the idea of talking about moving away, and then never actually moving.”

The city works for him. “It’s that combination of identity and anonymity. And I travel a lot. At home I need space and quiet to get on with what I’m doing, and I have that.”

Five years ago he moved into a new, much larger studio. “It’s funny how moving studio can produce changes in your work.” He began to produce watercolours, for one thing: “Simply because I can have a separate area where I can do watercolour without, you know, getting oily hands all over everything.” That’s been productive, leading to a rich body of work and a fruitful collaboration with writer Colm Tóibín, published in book form as Water|Colour.

Innes begins from a point at the very heart of the classical tradition of abstract painting, and he remains true to that tradition, especially its conjectural nature: the urge to continually explore and test what a painting is or might be. In this respect, he’s been called an “unpainter”, who takes what might normally be considered as a complete, finished work and meticulously unpicks it. He’s happy enough with the term, seeing it as a reasonable description of his working process.

“The surface starts off as black,” he says. That is, he builds up a painting to a point of complete blackness. The uniform blackness can be seen as a kind of impassive, self-contained perfection. The iconic example is Russian artist Kasimir Malevich’s 1915 painting Black Square, which is exactly that. But then Innes starts to undo the surface before it is dry, etching into the layers of pigment with turpentine.

Once he begins a painting, he is locked into its schedule. “In a sense I spend a lot of time waiting, waiting for each stage to reach the right level of dryness. Too soon and you lose everything, too late and you can’t do anything at all. I’ve learned how to judge it pretty accurately, that window of opportunity.”

Take a look at his recent paintings in his exhibition Unforeseen at the Kerlin Gallery and you’ll see it’s never just a question of making something and then erasing it. He works precisely and in a structured way.

“A vertical division has been a constant for me. Everything follows that line.” The line typically bisects a canvas. On one side, a deep, resonant black, on the other an underlying layer of colour revealed as the black pigment is dissolved, or perhaps the faint residue of a colour scarcely visible in the gesso ground of the canvas. “It’s as if the turpentine bites the colour into the gesso,” he says, so its traces remain.

No matter how precise Innes is, he’s working with a fluid solution and gravity, and the dividing line usually has a certain give, an uncertainty to it, as liquid washes repeatedly down along it. There are further variations in the way the paint dissolves around the edges of the canvas. It all produces a curiously charged quality in the spaces. “I can feel the spaces in the paintings change as I’m working. They can tighten or expand, as though the space is pressing against the edges or pulling away from them.”

It’s as if the work is a living thing which, in a sense, it is, during its making. He continually has to catch and progress it as it forms. It may dissolve into an amorphous mess or, equally, if it dries out too much he loses it. The trick is to maintain an edgy vitality. He recoils from the idea of simply creating the illusion of an effect, of painting wet on dry.
“Then it would become mannered, I’d hate it, it wouldn’t be alive any more.” It has to be a sequence of incremental, interlinked steps, each simultaneously fine-tuned and bold. And, as his show’s title suggests, always to some extent unforeseen. “I’m still surprised sometimes by what happens with colour. Once you start to dissolve something you’re never quite sure where you’re going to go.”

Light, or relative luminosity, is also important for the way the paintings work. He became especially aware of this when he began watercolours. “It was like creating light. I’d use two complementary colours and dissolve one into another.” The results are like luminous clouds infused with hints of colour.

Although they are starkly simple in appearance, Innes’s paintings demand a bit of space, and there are relatively few works in the gallery – just half a dozen in the main space upstairs. “It’s important to me that they work architecturally. I didn’t feel the need to fill the gallery with paintings.”

They also benefit from a bit of time, just as they are partly about time, about catching and fixing a process while retaining a history of that process. Innes sees them as products of our time rather than autonomous aesthetic objects. They respond to their context. “There’s no way to avoid that. If you look at younger artists now, they’re doing great things. Artists make interesting work in interesting times.”

Unforeseen is at the Kerlin Gallery, Dublin, until October 13th