Disturbing Simplicity

An essay on the "Untitled (corner)" drawings

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This untitled work by Ray Malone does not demand our attention either by magnitude or by intensity of colour, for each piece is little bigger than an open book and abstemiously monochrome. And yet, just as you hear a relevant word in a noisy room, you can find yourself drawing forward to look at these pieces, attracted by an immediate apprehension of a certain concentration of effort, above all by a rectilinear precision and a suggestion of sharp arti-culation of light and shade. The effect is not unlike that produced when a trusted friend says, "Look!"; one feels a buoyant sense of an open expectation corresponding to the engaged reply, "What?"

In this moment of seeing that precedes looking, the work ma-kes its promise: one must be as careful as the work seems to be and in return the work will reward one's attention. The looking that follows such a contract is – quite literally – expectant, and the expectation concerns, in some ways, the reward of aesthetic understanding.

Literary art and music, in varying degrees, determine the amount of time required for appreciation, and something similar is true for the large, busy canvas. The difficulty for small-scale visual art is that if value is linked to its spectator's attention (for the promised reward was a reward for attention), then it must neither imme-diately gratify the non-aesthetic understanding (like a joke does or like some 'conceptual' art which suicidally reveals the point of looking before the looking begins), nor must it frustrate in such a way that the spectator feels there's nothing to understand.

How does Ray Malone's work cope with this scrutiny? Let me take one frame from this work and discuss a response. I'm loo-king at one of the mirror image pieces, one where the pale grey rectangle is bottom left and the 180-degree rotated black L-shape leaves the makings of dark grey S. The piece is startlingly simple! Black, white, two shades of grey; black and then white framing, preserving a neat regularity of border width – say two

and a half centimetres. The exclamation marks the onset of a settled conviction, but alongside this settled conviction, perpetually unable to overturn it, is a growing weight of evidence for the contrary view. While the white rectangular border –
if that is what it is – seems to contain the whole design, the black L (or corner, or inhibitor . . .) almost overwhelmingly asserts its affinity with the black border – if that is what it is – surrounding the white. "Almost overwhelmingly, because the sense of containment is immediately reasserted: at the lower end, the black L (I must refer somehow!) is cruelly terminated in white, and if at the other end of the black shape, the dark grey makes one momentarily forgetful of containment (for the contrast between black and grey does not startle) one's relief seems like self-deception: in a composition of so few shades one can hardly ignore any contrast. The work is surely simple, but one cannot distinguish inside from outside.;

As one traces the ambiguous borders of this composition, one comes across two related surprises: firstly, a change from dark grey to light on a leftward vertical border created by a thin dark line, and secondly the seeming anomaly of this same dark line as it crosses the dark grey. What could be simpler than a straight line? And it is, of course, simple. It could be the emblem of the settled conviction that the whole design is simple, for the whole work has its origin in the straight line. The black and white "framing" forces this upon us – the straight line as boundary, the boundary as straight line. The position of the dark line repeats this, for it marks off a portion of the design equal in width to the two borders. But the ambiguous darkness of the line – dark against the pale grey, almost imperceptible against the dark grey, and becoming perhaps part of the "black L" signals a complication to what seemed to be the rule of the design – straight line as boundary, boundary as straight line. Now the light is divided from the light and crepuscular dark grey from the dark grey. The latter division creates a pair of matching L-shapes, echoing and partially containing the "black L". Furthermore, the lower "L" nesting in the crook of the "black L" simultaneously supports and defeats the work of the thin dark line for the line wants to stress the two-toned rectangle in the lower centre of the design (which incidentally repeats the proportions of the whole), while the dark grey,

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seeking to blur the line, insists on tonal propriety and stresses the unity of the off-centre light grey rectangle.

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This account is far from exhaustive of one frame, but enough has been said about the strangely peaceful warring in the forms. I should like, now, to mention one other engaging feature of these pieces before finally pointing to further kinds of exploration. The forms, which I have been discussing, are constituted by shades, but these shades are manifestly textured. The origin of this sense of texture is in the two shades of grey - neither of which is, in fact, entirely uniform. A powerful urge to touch arises, particularly, I think, if you notice the similarity between the light grey and lens tissue, for example, or either of the greys and some other kind of fabric. We can see the work is flat, but, in spite of that, might not the different shades be produced by layering? And if they are layered, what lies over what? Is the dark grey the result of the translucent white over black? Does the framed black shape really continue the outer border, only seemingly separated from it by an imposed white rectangular frame?

As we step back from the particularity of any one of this et of works, new questions arise. Are these forms in principle unique, such that mirror-imaging, say, produces a new work? What about a slight variation? One of these pieces (or one part of this singular piece) shows a black rectangle in its top right-hand corner. Isn't this really a new departure? How many more pieces could be produced and would they all look just right as these do? What would be the effect if the work were not so painstakingly neat? How should they – or it – be displayed and how does long absorption in this captivating and liberating monochrome world affect our perception of the world around us, or more specifically, of a room with its simple angles?