

BEAUX ARTS

Patrick Heron
Big Violet with Red & Blue
1965
Oil on canvas
60 x 84 inches (152 x 213 cm)



Provenance

Waddington Galleries, London, where acquired by the Peter Stuyvesant Foundation in 1965.
Private Collection.

Exhibited

London, Waddington Galleries, Four Painters, 1st - 26th June 1965, cat. no.11;

Leeds, City Art Gallery, 1966-1967, temporary loan (details untraced);

London, Tate, Recent British Painting. Peter Stuyvesant Foundation Collection, 15th November -
22nd December 1967, no.33, illustrated;

Oxford, Museum of Modern Art, Patrick Heron, A Retrospective Exhibition of Paintings 1957-66, 21st
May - 15th June 1968, no.39, where lent by the Peter Stuyvesant Foundation as Big Purple with Red
and Blue: March 1965.

Literature

E. William Doty, 'The Colour of Colour', The E. William Doty Lectures in Fine Arts, Third Series, 1978,

The University of Texas, Austin, 1979, p.56, illustrated.

Description

The former Peter Stuyvesant Collection represents a pioneering approach to using art in a factory setting to inspire workers by transforming their surroundings. This was the concept of the Collection's founder, Alexander Orlow (1918 – 2009), whose great innovation was to change the context in which art is appreciated. In 1960 Orlow invited 13 artists from 13 different European countries to create paintings for the production hall in the Turmac Tobacco Company in the Netherlands. The theme he chose was "Joie de Vivre" and he specified that the works were to be large in size with vivid colours and shapes, powerful enough to stand out in the large factory halls. While the initial responses of employees ranged from surprise to disbelief, they soon came to enjoy the enhancement to their workplace and Orlow made the serendipitous discovery that productivity actually increased.

Heron's paintings of the mid 1960s and early 1970s are probably his most instantly recognisable works, the 'wobbly hard-edge' manner he had perfected allowing him to fully experiment with space and colour, the twin concepts that had occupied him since the earliest part of his career.

The paintings he produced in this period are mostly of substantial size and were produced in a very specific way, with the forms drawn in very quickly and spontaneously onto the prepared canvas, often in a matter of seconds, and then each area of pure unmixed colour painted in with small soft brushes. Each colour had to be painted in a single session to ensure that the colours remained uniform, and each is just a single layer of paint with no overlapping. Heron's intention was that the viewer would thus be presented with pure colours in juxtaposition, the forms and their boundaries affecting the perceived spatial relationships.

The scale of these paintings, and thus the visual impact of the meeting points of these large areas of vivid colour, is a key element in their success.

'If I stand only eighteen inches away from a fifteen-foot canvas that is uniformly covered in a single shade of red, say, my vision being entirely monopolised by red I shall cease within a matter of seconds to be fully conscious of that red: the redness of that red will not be restored until a fragment of another colour is allowed to intrude, setting up a reaction. It is in this interaction between differing colours that our full awareness of any of them lies. So the meeting-lines between areas of colour are utterly crucial to our apprehension of the actual hue of those areas: the linear character of these frontiers cannot avoid changing our sensation of the colour in those areas...The line changes the colour of the colours on either side of it.' (Patrick Heron, 'Colour in my Painting', Studio International, December 1969, pp.204-5).

As the artist was to observe, the final brushstroke which covered the last trace of the white ground marked the moment at which all the elements came together in balance and the colours began to function with and against each other. The sheer involvement of painting these pictures is clear from a close inspection of the surface, with their network of fine fluid brushstrokes declaring the joy of painting. This immediacy allows the paintings to carry huge impact and vigour. When seen in the broader context of painting of the period, the vivacity of Heron's art is immediately clear and still looks remarkable at the space of over four decades.