

Artwork of the Month August 2021

John Golding (1929-2012) had multiple careers, as an artist, art historian, curator, and educator, in each of which he excelled. Given his expertise on the history of 20th-century art, it is tempting to draw inferences from his art historical writing to his own artistic practice. Professor Michael White, from the History of Art Department at the University of York, considers the benefits and risks of this approach in respect to his painting H. 19 (Canticle) in York Art Gallery.

John Golding, *H. 19 (Canticle)*, 1983-4



John Golding (1929-2012), *H. 19 (Canticle)*, 1983-1984, 152.5 x 213.5 cm, acrylic on canvas, York Art Gallery, YORAG 1406. Photo credit: York Museums Trust

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H. 19 (Canticle) is representative of the looser approach to painting that John Golding adopted in the 1980s and then continued for the rest of his career. Similar works can be found in other public collections, including Tate, with the largest number at the Yale Center for British Art in New Haven. The majority are in the care of the John Golding Artistic Trust, which manages his estate, and I am very grateful to Dr Jenna Lundin Aral of the Trust for her help in preparing this text. I have also benefitted greatly from conversations with Professor Christopher Green of the Courtauld Institute of Art and Marina Vaizey, a close friend of the artist who acquired *H. 19 (Canticle)* for the Contemporary Art Society, from whence it came to York Art Gallery in 1986.

Golding began his artistic journey in earnest in the 1950s, exhibiting for the first time in 1958 in Mexico, the country where he had spent his early years. He had at this point just completed a PhD at the Courtauld Institute of Art, and his thesis was published shortly afterwards as *Cubism: A History and Analysis, 1907-1914*, a book that remains a foundational text in the study of the subject.¹ While his artistic ambition was strong, the rapid acclaim he received as a scholar drew him into academic life. Having initially turned it down, Golding took up a lectureship at the Courtauld, and, for the next two decades, his progress as an artist was balanced with teaching the history of modern art. In 1981, he was offered the position of Senior Tutor in the painting school of the Royal College of Art, a move that allowed him to devote himself more fully to the making of art than its history; the rich, heavily worked surface of *H. 19 (Canticle)* is evidence of the additional time Golding was able to invest in his artistic practice from that point.

Golding did not abandon his scholarly identity, though, and continued to publish major works of art history and to curate ground-breaking exhibitions. In 1997, he was invited to give the prestigious A.W. Mellon Lectures at the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C., choosing the history of abstract art as their subject. In the preface to the published version of these lectures, Golding made several fascinating claims and observations, some of which provide us with insight into his own career and practice.²

The first of these is the claim that the absence to date of a definitive study of abstract art was because 'its manifestations are too diverse, its ramifications too complex.'³ The notion of diversity in abstract art was expressed in the publication's title, *Paths to the Absolute*, suggesting

multiple routes, in contrast to much writing on abstract art, which has frequently tried to assimilate it to a single theory. Golding also made the useful but much overlooked point that, despite its commonality later in the twentieth century, most artists who made abstract art arrived at it rather than picked it up from the outset.⁴ He added to that a reflection on the ages of the artists on whom his lectures dwelt the most, the canonical figures in the history of abstract art such as Mondrian, Kandinsky, and Rothko, noting how they tended to achieve artistic maturity later in life.⁵ Finally, in the face of criticisms of abstract art for its obscurity, Golding stated that it was not only 'heavily imbued with meaning,' it also had content, and that 'to make this content palpable, new formal pictorial innovations must be found to express it.'⁶

Golding never wrote about his own practice. He was interviewed on a few occasions, once by Richard Wollheim, one of the most important philosophers of art of his generation.⁷ Even in this format, though, Golding's comments on his own paintings remain elusive and unlike the penetratingly clear analysis he brought to the work of others. It is therefore tempting to read some of the latter back onto his own career. As he commented on other artists, abstraction was not the visual language he had first adopted. Indeed, the human figure was the central concern of his paintings until the mid-1960s. Prior to the 1980s (and works such as *H. 19 (Canticle)*), Golding had painted in three distinctive ways. At the outset, he worked in a darkly expressive manner influenced by Mexican artists to whose works he had been exposed at an early age. This changed abruptly to his use of a very flat, hard-edged geometric approach, which then gave way in the 1970s to his application of large bands or blocks of more deeply layered, interpenetrating colour. We could therefore interpret his comments about the artistic maturity of others as indicative of his awareness that his own coming of age as an artist had been delayed to his 50s.

More difficult to pin down, however, are Golding's thoughts about the diversity of abstract art and its content. *Paths to the Absolute* contains many comments concerning the influences on and the influence of the artists he discusses, but he was careful to avoid a strictly linear narrative that made the history of abstract art into a baton race. Likewise, Golding's paintings from the 1980s onwards are not easy to fit into a chronology of modern art. Many aspects of them reach back in time: he spoke freely about the artists he admired, from the Renaissance onward. However, they have no obvious direct precedents, nor are they easily

accommodated within a 'ism'. Golding was represented by the Rowan Gallery, along with many leading artists of the day who were painting abstractly, such as Bridget Riley and Sean Scully.⁸ If these artists shared anything, it is that they had to shake off their associations with trends such as Op Art and Minimalism to find their lasting artistic voices. *H. 19 (Canticle)* was made at a moment when many artists reengaged with representation, but did so through forms of appropriated imagery or photography. It is useful in that regard to consider Golding's use of the term 'pictorial' to identify the innovations with which he credits abstract art, as it is not immediately obvious how we can view *H. 19 (Canticle)* as a *picture* rather than as a painting.

A consistent feature of Golding's practice throughout is his use of very rudimentary titles, which from the outset were often single words. That tendency continued when his painting became abstract, with a small number of works going under the epithet 'Untitled.' In the 1970s, he moved to a titling system using a letter and number combination, although its underlying logic is not entirely clear. As is the case here, often the paintings titled in this way also have subtitles, which range from references to colour, mythology, place, art history, or a visual effect. Given their brevity and diversity, they seem to be a jumping off point rather than indicative of the sole meaning of the paintings to which they are attached. Golding confessed to Wollheim that he often gave a painting a title only so that he could quickly identify it once it had left the studio.⁹ A canticle is a hymn or a psalm. It might put us in mind of a sacred space and the rhythmic sound of the human voice in song. We are a very long way from *H. 19 (Canticle)* being anything like a picture of someone singing, though.

H. 19 (Canticle) is a large painting in a horizontal format. It is a bit shorter than the height of an average person and a bit wider than a person's reach. Its surface is broken up by a series of irregular vertical strips of different colours that traverse it top to bottom. They lean slightly leftwards and bunch together on the right-hand side of the painting, at which point we find most visual incident; a group of strips seems to disappear briefly behind a gauzy patch of blue paint halfway up, while just to the right of them, a very short strip, angled at more of a horizontal, crosses over in a more distinctly overlapping way than elsewhere on the canvas. Indeed, like an arrow or a dart, this little strip carries an amount of visual force that belies its size; it even seems to cast a faint shadow. It is in moments like this that we can begin to sense what Golding meant by 'pictorial innovations.' While *H. 19 (Canticle)* has a very material presence,

established by its rough painted surface and the unframed objecthood of the canvas, we see the marks on it in space. For example, to perceive the lonely strip on the left-hand side of the painting as continuous, as I am tempted to do, is to see it change colour from off-white at its top to blue at the bottom, as if it turns and folds in space, and in the process reflects light.

In his interview with Wollheim, Golding referred to the strips we have been considering and which feature in so many of his paintings of this time as 'flares.'¹⁰ This captures some of their sense of energy and light I have been trying to describe. He also spoke of getting 'more light' into his paintings and of 'folding it [light] in,' which are complex ideas to comprehend.¹¹ Interplaying dark and light areas to create a sense of space in a picture is commonplace in painting. These effects frequently accompany geometric perspectival projections, although they can be powerful in on their own in bringing things closer to or pushing them further away from the viewer. The range of tones in *H. 19 (Canticle)* is not large, however. Its spatial effects are not produced by contrasting light and dark but by the subtle modulation of colours. Again, Golding's comments on other artists are as instructive to our understanding of what is going on here. For example, in *Paths to the Absolute*, he compared two paintings by Rothko that feature the same colours, red and green, in equivalent sized blocks but in reversed positions, above and below.¹² Golding quickly demonstrated how our perception of them is altered by where we see them on the canvas, and therefore how colour space behaves pictorially and in relation to the bodily orientation of the viewer, the red gaining presence when higher positioned.

Intriguingly, Golding presaged his analysis of Rothko with a comment on colours more relevant to *H. 19 (Canticle)*:

There are many theories but no rules about colour. So-called 'hot' colours can be used in such a way that they look cool or even icy. Blues we tend to think of as spacious and restful, yet Matisse used to add small amounts of black to them to 'cool' them down.¹³

In reference to our painting, this statement draws attention to a few of its peculiarities. Yellow is rarely used by artists as a background colour. It is one of the 'hot' colours Golding mentions, all too sharp and prone to leap forward. Blue, meanwhile, readily recedes and is used exactly so in what is termed aerial or atmospheric perspective. But what we experience in *H. 19 (Canticle)* is those same colours used contrary to received wisdom; it

is blue here that conveys brightness. It 'flares' in front of a yellow that has been worked over and over to increase its sense of depth and recession. Such effects, which resist the normal associations we make of those colours, would perhaps not work so well were it not for the verticality of the strips and the shape of the canvas that have us look constantly left to right and back again, concertinaing space in and out, and discouraging our gaze from wandering so much up and down.

Such innovations in colour use are the product of many hours of painterly practice. They come through close observation, rather than, as Golding himself notes, acquired theory. In conclusion, therefore, we need to respect the primacy of Golding's artistic research over his academic scholarship when it comes to assessing the overall impact of a painting such as *H. 19 (Canticle)*. There can be few artists who have been as knowledgeable of the genre in which they work. Golding's achievement, however, is to have created paintings that are so much more than a catalogue of elements observed in the works of other artists. The most important thing we can take from his scholarship when thinking about his own practice is, in fact, his respect for the personal creativity of others and willingness to trace the confrontations of artists with the most elementary problems of their craft. In the case of painting, as we have here, this would be how to apply pigment to canvas to bring it to life.

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¹ John Golding, *Cubism: A History and Analysis, 1907-1914*, Faber & Faber, London, 1959.

² John Golding, *Paths to the Absolute: Mondrian, Malevich, Kandinsky, Pollock, Newman, Rothko, Still*, Thames & Hudson, London, 2000.

³ John Golding, *Paths to the Absolute*, p.7.

⁴ John Golding, *Paths to the Absolute*, p.8.

⁵ John Golding, *Paths to the Absolute*, p.8.

⁶ John Golding, *Paths to the Absolute*, p.8.

⁷ 'From Mexico to Venice: A Dialogue between Richard Wollheim and John Golding,' in Yale Center for British Art, *John Golding*, 1989, pp.4-22.

⁸ By the time *H. 19 (Canticle)* was painted, the Rowan Gallery, which had been established in 1962, had gone into partnership with Annelly Juda Fine Art and was trading as Juda Rowan.

⁹ 'From Mexico to Venice: A Dialogue between Richard Wollheim and John Golding,' p.22.

¹⁰ 'From Mexico to Venice: A Dialogue between Richard Wollheim and John Golding,' p.14.

¹¹ 'From Mexico to Venice: A Dialogue between Richard Wollheim and John Golding,' p.15.

¹² John Golding, *Paths to the Absolute*, p.220.

¹³ John Golding, *Paths to the Absolute*, p.220.