

Paint misbehaving

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Panel games - Ettore Spalletti's Column of Colour, Grey Room and Daydream (left to right). Photo: Gareth Spence

Ettore Spalletti's paintings won't stay still, explain themselves or even sit up straight. Adrian Searle asserts his authority

Squares painted a blue you can almost taste: sometimes a midday sky framed in a window, sometimes early evening violet, or that greenish washed-out ozone colour of thunderstorm weather. Then it goes as artificial as the blue of a backyard swimming pool seen from an aeroplane. Panels of fugitive grey whose exact colour and pitch escape description, and whose tone alters the moment you take a step. Slivers of gold leaf that climb the edge of a painted panel, like light sliding around a door, announcing that someone is about to walk in. Ettore Spalletti's art is full of such expectation and waiting. One's sensations of it are fleeting.

The elements of his work stand apart, touch and collide, much as people on the edge of intimacy do. Looking at his art in a new exhibition at the Henry Moore Institute in Leeds, you can feel like a voyeur of formal relations. But it is the colour that gets you first - the volumes of blue or grey, the handfuls of dusty pigment rubbed into gesso, layer on layer, day after day, built up and sanded down to an indefinable pitch and resonance. His art is all surface, but seems to have none. It is seductive, contemplative and sometimes a bit too precious.

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Spalletti's work seems to be about first one thing, then another. The verticals and horizontals, the flat planes and canted angles make you think of architecture, or rooms. Then it is about the view through the window, or about the daily process of making things, or of living in a particular place with its own light and tempo. Spalletti has always lived and worked in or close to the village of Cappelle sul Tavo, near Pescara, inland from the Italian Adriatic coast. He is often described as a "local" artist, yet little of the local is evident in these near-monochrome, one-colour arrangements of painted panels.

"Local" is often used as a derogatory term, as if it designates some kind of exile to the periphery. For local, read minor, parochial, a place of close horizons and marginal interest. Spalletti used to teach drawing in a nearby school. A local carpenter constructs his panels. He has made a permanent installation in a room of what was his mother's house. He has never moved far. Instead of him going to the world, the world came to him.

In the late 1970s two art dealers established their galleries in Pescara, and Joseph Beuys, Jannis Kounellis and other artists associated with or influenced by arte povera visited, and gave Spalletti encouragement and inspiration. Although something of the poetry of arte povera is evident in Spalletti's work, his work has a rigour, reserve and sense of construction that is closer to American colour painting, to minimal and postminimal art, while his references to architecture (as much as to "pure" geometry) seem to relate him to European sculpture of the 1980s and 90s.

But categories aren't always useful. Looking at his work, I think of first one artist, then another: the early monochromes of Brice Marden, the work of Ellsworth Kelly, or of Blinky Palermo, but none of this will quite do. For all the astringency of Spalletti's art, or its appeals to the universal, his work has great individuality. It is also much more complicated than at first appears.

The frontal, flatly painted planes of colour have things going on both across their surfaces and at their edges. Often they do not appear to be square at all, but skewed rhomboids. Sometimes a flat, square panel touches the wall at only one of its corners, the entire panel being supported on little shelving brackets that hold it out from the wall at an angle, neither parallel to the plane of the wall nor perpendicular to it. The rear of Spalletti's panels is painted the same colour as their frontal plane, and a reflection of this colour changes the tonality and warmth of the shadow that the panel casts on the wall itself.

Peering round the back of a Spalletti, there are sometimes other surprises. One corner of a panel may be wedged out from the wall not by a bracket, but by a white pencil, with a sharpened point at each end. The pencil is a sort of playful visual pun - like a drawn line, the pencil itself separates one thing from another, the panel from the wall, the object from the shadow it casts. There is something a little unhinged about all this.

Apparently, Spalletti reworks these panels at the same time each day, building up the surface, sanding it down again, calculating drying times, remembering the numbers of layers. He works at a pace as measured as a day itself. I imagine the hours of work being as regular as the walk around the piazza, lunch, a coffee with a friend. A matter, then, of ritual more than routine or habit. I guess the story he is telling himself, and which he hopes the works themselves will communicate, is about the condensation and prolongation of time, as well as

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of colour and material. If his art is concerned with form, so too does life depend on a certain formality.

Even one of these panels held out from the wall could be read not as a formal gambit but as a kind of suspension, in time as well as space - as if the panel's position were like a door opening in the breeze. This is also true of the changes that seem to take place when we spend time with Spalletti's art: as the day passes, the works themselves change. There must always be space for contingency.

Being with Spalletti's art is as important as looking at it. For an art whose appeal might be contemplative, Spalletti's work encourages a lot of to-ing and fro-ing and pacing about: the damn things won't stay still. One work, in the largest of the three galleries that Spalletti occupies, is called *Dormiveglia*, or *Daydream*. I take the title as an invitation to let the mind drift, but there's nowhere to sit, except the floor. In any case, what at first appears to be a simple arrangement of large, square, hyacinth-blue panels won't settle down.

The edges of these works have me scratching my head: as is often the case, the right angles of some of the edges of these deep panels have been spoke-shaved at a diagonal, and these sharply angled planes have been gilded. This could be overly fancy, but manages not to be.

As one moves about, squares cease to be squares, and the room takes on a false perspective. The tall painted column that stands nearby appears at one moment as flat as a cut-out, the next, as light hits it from a different angle, as vaporous as a column of smoke. It is a localised phenomenon.

Ettore Spalletti is at the Henry Moore Institute, Leeds, until August 7. Details: 0113-246 7467