

## HOW IS IT MADE?



Mark Francis's studio, summer 2016; image (detail) courtesy of Mark Francis



Mark Francis's studio, summer 2016; image (detail) courtesy of Ailve McCormack

# From the Studio Of...

AILVE MCCORMACK INTERVIEWS MARK FRANCIS IN HIS SOUTH LONDON STUDIO.

**'UNCERTAINTY'** is a nutshell description of the world we live in today, whether referring to the environmental, socioeconomic or political landscapes. It is also a term that fires the imagination of Irish-born artist Mark Francis, who I met at his studio in south London. From the microscopic structure of a fungus, to the infinite space of the universe, Francis creates his work through an impulsive, evolutionary process, the outputs of which question whether order and chaos can happily coexist.

**Ailve McCormack: Your paintings are abstract artworks. What is it that drives you to create them?**

Mark Francis: My works start off with an idea. This idea might be about dark energy, the universe or something on a much smaller scale. Sometimes I get caught up in the process of painting and forget about the idea. It may not be until later on in the process that I think about it again; occasionally, I don't think about the original idea at all because the painting takes over and brings me somewhere else.

**AM: Can you talk me through your process?**

MF: It changes with different paintings. For instance, the one I was working on today has evolved from looking quite like one I had done before, to what might become something really interesting tomorrow. This morning I thought that the lines looked a bit stiff, so I poured another layer of really glossy paint on it. By layering it again, with high-gloss paint over the semi-matt, I have broken up the form underneath. In some ways, the shapes are starting to change again. You can see the shape on top, but the new layer has distorted it and made it something different. That's what I find exciting. When I look at that tomorrow, I'll be looking at the structure of it as one shape rather than two layers. I might be totally disappointed, but I'm excited about seeing what it becomes.

**AM: Tell me about the scientific influence on your work.**

MF: The scientific element of my work has always been strong. I've always had an interest in science. Quite generally though, I would never say that I am an expert in any particular area, but I certainly do have various scientific fascinations.

**AM: You have previously spoken about an interest in mycology (the scientific study of fungi). How does this present itself in your work?**

MF: In the early days, a lot of my imagery came from examining biological forms, like fungi and plants. It was a micro process. Whereas, now, it's more macro – I'm looking out to the universe. There's always going to be elements that reflect what I've done before, but I've tried to restructure them in terms of what they mean to me. There are some paintings in the studio at the moment that echo the mycelial structure, but I'm now thinking more about the wider universe. I like to think of the universe as being made up of an immense grid. That empty space out there – what's in it? Is it infinite? I bring together order and chaos in my work to investigate whether they can reside on the same plane. It's interesting to combine something that's naturally structured and something that's lyrically and rhythmically chaotic on the same canvas.

**AM: The grid is a recurring motif in your work. Can you tell me about it?**

MF: Yes, the grid is a constant; it's always been there. In recent years, I've brought it forward and made it more of a focus. The background grid is made on the wall. The last bit of the black is all done on the floor. Then I tip the painting. I know in advance roughly what's going to happen but sometimes the paint does something unexpected. I like the not knowing, the accidental. I want to make the accidental much more a part of the work. I pour paint from pipettes or basting tubes at the edge of the canvas and aberrations appear in the surface, depending on where I start and stop pushing the paint out. It forms black triangles, which I like because it feels like an evolution of some of my earlier paintings, like the black dots interspersed along the gridded structure. Gravity gives me the straight lines after the pouring. Then I cartwheel the canvas around the studio, creating shapes and lines on the canvas that I imagine are what energy sources might look like – I'm visualising the imaginings of what we can't see.

I find the grid and its association with mathematics fascinating. For me, it's lots of conduits that link A to Z and there are infinite ways of getting there. I imagine plumbing systems, the internet, the mycelial structures of mushrooms, road networks, mapping – they're all connected and all have a form of mathematics behind them.

I enjoy mathematics and find it useful but I'm not hugely knowledgeable about it. I like to have a basic understanding of what inspires my work, but sometimes having too much knowledge can

get in the way of the creative process: it sort of stifles you. Being naive, you can stumble upon things by accident and then make sense of what happens at a later date. For me that's important. My paintings are made up of linear grids in the background and a number of subsequent layers. To start with, the colour is very thin, even transparent, so that the white of the canvas comes through, then there are layers of colour and lines that change from painting to painting.

**AM: Do you make sketches for the paintings?**

MF: I do works on paper and I'm also continually tearing up old paintings and working over them. There is a freedom to pouring the paint, tipping it. I feel relaxed. I don't have to be overly precious. I think the confidence gained from creating the works on paper then translates to the large-scale paintings. There are a number of paintings in the studio, which may not be the best ones, but are important for me because they've sparked progressions into different areas. Certain paintings link key areas in terms of how I've evolved as an artist. They function almost like a sketch book.

**AM: How do you know when a piece is working?**

MF: There are times when I know immediately that a painting is working and there are other times that I'm unsure. In this instance, it's best to leave it for a few days or weeks. Sometimes I can come into the studio and think something is terrible, feel demoralised, go away and do something else and then later in the day the piece has started to settle and I view it differently. I never make a decision straight away, but I generally come to know if something is working or not working. It's a lot of looking; I can spend hours just looking!

**AM: What's your favourite thing about coming into the studio?**

MF: It's my sanctuary. My favourite thing is to come in and look at paintings and see that they have worked. It's not so nice when they don't, but it's all part of the process. Taking a blank canvas and doing something on it; there's nothing better than that.

**Ailve McCormack is an art consultant and producer based in London as well as founder and writer of the ongoing blog 'From the Studio Of...'** Mark Francis is a Northern Irish painter living and working in London. He is included in the following upcoming exhibitions: 'Abstract Painting Now!', Kunsthalle Krems, Austria (2 July – 5 November); 'The Underlying Shape', Galerie Floss & Schultz, Cologne, Germany (7 September – 10 October); 'Painting Black', Foundation Conceptual Art, Soest, Germany (2 December – 4 March 2018).

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