

## Helios by Gillian Ayres

### A talk by Amanda Phillips, Learning and Access Officer at Leeds Art Gallery

This is the first of a series of short talks made for the exhibition Natural Encounters by staff and volunteers working at Leeds Art Gallery. Different voices share their ideas about one single artwork on display for our online audiences to enjoy as a personal interpretation that can add to their own. I have been asked share the first, which I've titled...

Reading 'Helios' by Gillian Ayres.

Up close this artwork is extraordinary. The paint is so thickly applied that it comes together in wave-top crests, with different colours meeting in mark-making that touches and then falls away. The effect blends colour in the mind's eye, and supports the work of the imagination as it makes meaning. Helios by Gillian Ayres was produced in 1990, and is understood within the naming-systems of the art world as an Abstract painting. Currently it is displayed in the gallery's 'Natural Encounters' exhibition, curated from Leeds' art collections to explore the idea of human relationships with the natural world.

The painting entered into the collection in 1991, not that long after she had painted it. In the gallery's file of correspondence and other material linked to the artwork, is a letter that makes clear two options for purchase were on the table. Reading between the lines, it would seem that a member of the then gallery team had travelled to London in the winter of 1990 to see an exhibition of the artist's new work, at an independent gallery owned by her then dealer. The catalogue of artworks for sale, has been annotated with hand written notes on prices, and one or two with thoughts about the paintings and purchase preferences. A follow up letter shows there had been a conversation with a representative of the dealer confirming prices of two. Whilst it is very much a guess, these could be the options that the dealer, possibly with the artist, wished to be in the collection linked to Leeds City Art Gallery as it was known then, and by inference Leeds the city. Then as now, Leeds' collection was valued as having a particularly 'good' collection of British art. More handwritten notes on this particular letter show that Helios was the preferred choice. It was their writer thought, "richer, more fun".

The process of acquiring an artwork for a collection is not easy. There are 'checks and balances' as is common to say in our time, and necessary applications to funding bodies to support a purchase. In the file there is also a copy of a funding application document. It provides information on the artist, "she was born in London in 1930" is the first sentence that is written outside of some basic detail. Further information describes the art training undertaken by the artist, and there is a section reflecting on the painting and how it might connect with other artworks in the collection. A sentence stands out "(t)he juicy rich

impasto shows Ayres' personal involvement in the creation of this painting which has a vibrant, dazzling presence.”

Writing about art is difficult. Finding words that are equivalent to personal perception or the sensations of spending time up close to an artwork are hard. Some find such writing uncomfortable. Would you use the words juicy, rich, vibrant or dazzling to describe art that you have experienced? And for that matter, what is the impasto? Reading more about this artist and her work, or listening to interviews, is interesting for the way it builds up an idea of how people have tended to make sense of her work as an artist. Whilst Individual artworks or an exhibition are the reason for much of this 'writing', it is the act or action of making the paintings and the related overall affect that emerges as the biggest story told. Tim Hilton, an art critic writing for newspapers and exhibition catalogues, describes Gillian Ayres in 1993 as “daring”, adding “(c)an a less cautious artist be imagined?”. Later he writes, “the bravado of her sumptuous and liquid surfaces, high colour and rushed and whirled pigment is unequalled.” Jan Dalley the Financial Times' art editor talks to the artist in 2015 opening their recorded interview with, “Gillian Ayres is one of the leading British abstract painters of her generation and still vigorously active at 85”, and the conversation with “you've stayed deeply faithful to painting through your career”. The artist in return says she is “obsessed”, and “looking for something, trying to find out something”. This strongly edited interview of only 6 or so minutes in duration, draws particular attention to an “astonishing use of colour” and the artist's explanation “I don't like tone but I like intensity”.

Track 19: Tape 10 Side A, the last one of Gillian Ayres' affable chats with the art historian/writer/curator Mel Gooding for the 'Artist Lives' project, takes us to her work within the Rajasthan School of Art in Jaipur, India in 1990 which was organised by the British Council, and connected to the 7th Indian Triennale. Again the questions probe into her paint colour choices, with the interviewer suggesting that India has helped her “discover” the colour she was already using. The conversation turning to the greens and greys of the countryside where she had lived in Wales, and to the Devon/Cornwall borderlands of her home at the time, helping us see that her use of colour couldn't have been drawn from her everyday surroundings, but emerges from her artist commitment to making and responding to coloured mark-making directly. Talk about her artist working life presents a rapid grouping of words and from it a sense of her commitment and drive. “It's a funny life”, “pretty stupid really”, “lonely, silly” are gathered together and finalised, as she more or less puts it less puts that she feels that she is “not living” if she isn't doing it.

So how does all of this writing and talk about and with Gillian Ayres help us get to grips with the painting 'Helios', and its swathes of thickly applied paint and visible mark making? I would like to argue it brings us to a person, to the artist that is Gillian Ayres, an artist actively and physically involved in an act of making because she wants to, and believes in the value of doing so. It is easy to draw on the habit of thinking about artists as

so creative that they can't do anything else but make art. Gillian Ayres is not this person, she undertook 'work' as anyone else does when they do paid employment. (As an aside, she didn't refer to her working space as the 'Studio' as is typical, but describes it as a workroom). Further to this, her commitment to painting and thinking as work, or painting to think and thinking to paint, is manifest in her skilled and fluid manipulation of marks in paint in response to the other painted marks she has made, and in the production of an overall affect. Aside from art teaching as artist work, Gillian Ayres' life span was dedicated to making art as a job of representing as she says it, "the sensation of perception". This is difficult to make sense of as an idea, but I propose she is referring to her own perception in her painterly decision making and the completed artwork as the sum of a sequence of paint actions and activity.

Helios was made in 1990 in the year she was in India, but probably not made in India itself. It shows us confidence in painting with different tools, including directly with her hands, and alongside this the layering and combining of colour, and organisation of both to produce an overall effect on the person spending time with the final outcome. Spending time with Helios I can see Gillian Ayres interacting bodily with paint, not as a helpless artist pouring out her emotion onto the canvas, but as a woman with determination at work, and someone who believed in what she was doing. There is much that I could write here about how difficult it might have been functioning as an artist within the gendered world of her lifetime, and about expectations of what would have been appropriate, or the challenges that she might have had to face as an artist gendered as 'woman'. It is astonishing how often her work is situated alongside artist contemporaries and the others that influenced her, all of whom all are well-known men. Angela Carter, Shirley Williams and Shirley Conran, as well known women, appear as 'friends' but only within human interest or life stories. Could this be explained by identifying her as the most fully active or successful of the other artists gendered like herself, or that there were no others producing 'Abstract' art during her lifetime? I suspect not, and argue the habit of art history and critique in the past, as now has not eradicated gender bias.

'Helios' is a painting that I have spent much time with during group visits and my work at the gallery. One young person from a school described it as the 'ice cream picture'. This has stayed with me, and I refer to it frequently. For me, it is a testament to its success. Without prior-knowledge of the Greek myth linked to the title or to the knowledge that the artist named her artworks after the event in a more or less arbitrary way, sometimes even asking others to do it for her, the young person in question 'read' the artwork and made sense of its colour and imagined forms as about summer. Whilst Helios in myth-form is named as the Greek god of the sun and the primary narrative explains how night becomes day, it is not depicted by Gillian Ayres. Nonetheless emerging through her energetic wrestling with paint, colour and mark is a link to the sun.