frieze

EXHIBITION REVIEW: MARK FRANCIS

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Liberation, 1994, Oil on canvas, 84 x 72 inches.
Photo courtesy of the artist.

Mark Francis' beautiful abstractions make precise allusions: the repeated shapes and markings which cover the canvases are suggestive of biological forms. These new paintings, all made in 1994, are monochromatic and carefully built up through thin layers of white, grey and black paint. Bereft of signs of any personal touch, these are polished - even slick - paintings. This quality, together with the paintings' lack of colour and the blurring and diffusion in some of the works, lends them certain affinities with photographs - it comes as no surprise to discover that their origins lie in microbiological photography: medical pictures of bacteria, cells and chromosomes.

Looking at the paintings in this light, Francis could be located within a Romantic tradition. His imagery of repeatedly biological matter, for example, invites comparison with the Romanticist visions of such English artists as Adam Füss and Gary Fabian Miller. Füss makes photographs of things such as the ripples formed by droplets in water, while Miller's camera-less photography involves passing light through the leaves of plants to let them make their own remarkable colour images on photographic paper. But while nature's perfect symmetry might be part of the beauty of a picture by Füss or Miller, Francis' pictures are different. His black, cell-like forms are either clustered or scattered across the canvases with no evident order and no clear pattern emerging. Continuing this particular reading, it could be argued that his monochrome paintings involve not only a chaotic, but an increasingly dark and ominous vision of nature. The earlier paintings, in which sperm and ova appeared, seemed to be musing on human origins. In contrast, thoughts of disease and viruses are triggered by some of the latest paintings; particularly works such as *Growth*, whose crowded mass of black cells can be seen as a kind of malignant cluster of lethal bacteria.

Yet this is too straightforward. The portrayal of his latest paintings as reflecting a dystopian vision involves a particular figurative reduction of his pictures. The desire to interpret, to give significant and portentous meaning to the paintings, detracts from the ambiguous - even conflicting - engagements they set up with the viewer. There is a buzzing animation to the latest paintings - moving from one picture to another, the tempo of each canvas varies. While one teems with, literally, thousands of black discs, another is more sparse. In these less cluttered paintings, each tiny black spot leaves a distinctive but diffuse trail behind it, suggesting movement and defining a path across the canvas. The illusion of movement is subtle: these paintings pulse rather than dazzle. Most of the titles - *Dispersal* or *Propel* for example - evoke ideas of motion, energy and life; qualities effected by the all-over painting. One picture in particular, *Liberation*, has an almost aquatic feel, as its magnified sperm-like forms swim across the surface.

The paintings are well crafted and their technical bravura comes to seem part of their allure and fascination. In some works, the black discs appear to float on the canvas as if on a watery surface: a spatial effect aided by the fact that they are painted in matt black on top of glazed white and grey surfaces. A subtle play of reflections is set up which gives an effect distinct from the photographs that provided their source material: with photographic prints, the surface remains either uniformly matt or glossy. In some paintings Francis has given a grey penumbra to each of the black spots, based, presumably, upon the shadows in the original medical photographs. The effect is to give the black spots form, creating the illusion that they come forward in space, like so many tiny objects, rather than floating biological matter. Some paintings appear to have been based on photographs of chromosomes. One of these looks as if it has been smudged all over and the surface reduced to a lustreless grey. This is a picture that feels as if it has been deliberately fogged, toned down, as if to limit and subdue its allure.

Francis's paintings work best when they do not so readily give themselves up to simple identification; when the elements of the pictures avoid immediate recognition and there is a sense of a tension between abstraction and figuration. This is especially the case in the paintings which make a form of calligraphy from the wriggling motion of chromosomes and in the canvases where the black discs are not so easily suggestive of cells or bacteria. In front of such paintings, as one's thoughts move away from their photographic and figurative origins, their compelling power as abstract paintings is revealed.