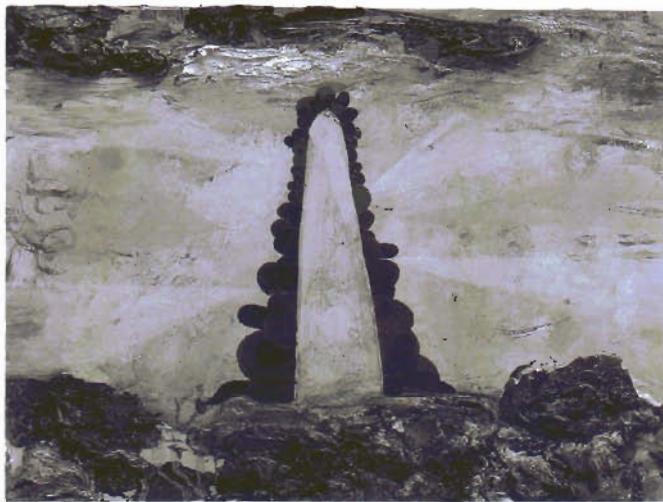


PHILLIP ALLEN
THE APPROACH

There's a shape—long, thin, and tapering to a rounded summit—that extends up the center of one of Phillip Allen's paintings, *Beezerspline (Dark Version)*, 2002. Actually, it's not so much a shape as an area defined by the many overlapping blobs that fringe it. While in *Beezerspline* and *Beezerspline (Extended Version)*, both 2001, the patches are brightly colored, the blobs here are predominantly browns and blacks, a fact that may in part account for this painting's subtitle. As for the title, *The Beezer* was a large-format children's comic first published by the Glasgow-based firm DC Thomson in the mid-'50s. Among other strips, it included "The Numbskulls," about a group of characters who lived inside a body, performing the necessary tasks of eating, seeing, thinking, and so on. One imagines, however, that for Allen the comic book's title—a Scottish word meaning something like "excellent"—is as important as any of the strips contained in the publication. The patterns and shapes he uses undoubtedly betray an interest in cartoon imagery, but this is subsumed within broader concerns. A shorthand take would place him on ground currently occupied by the oh-that-abstract/figurative-battle-is-so-over paintings of Laura Owens or, more decoratively, Pamela Fraser. Closer to home there are affinities with the mix of fine touch and thick impasto in Gillian Carnegie's work, albeit without her intense, cloacal eroticism. But there seems to be a strong desire on Allen's part to set painting into effective play—thus "spline": a part that connects and engages, allowing a machine to do useful work.

Certain gestures reappear from one painting to another. There is, for example, a suggestion of something like radiance, rather as if the stylized, sub-Art Deco sunburst familiar from fanlights above the front doors of '30s suburban houses were rendered into a 3-D comic book drawing. In *Ena*, 2001, this radiance is no more than a subtle modulation in the tone of the background. Elsewhere, as in *Untitled (Fans)*, 2002, the fanned form is colorfully repeated and becomes the subject, though even here the status of image and ground remains ambiguous. For the most part Allen keeps his paint thin, brushing and smudging a surface that could be sky, land, and the space of imagination all at once. Such space, though, always sits above and to some extent behind a heap of paint gobbets stacked up along the bottom edge of the support board as if to point out that however successfully the painterly illusion is sustained, its origins in the jumble of the palette cannot be forgotten. In 33, 2001, the lumps of paint provide rough terrain over which the two reversed numbers of the title appear to be passing. Along the top edge, the smearings thicken up again, bracketing the work's painterly incident between literal margins of the stuff out of



Phillip Allen, *Beezerspline (Dark Version)*, 2002,
oil on board, 12 x 16".

which it has been coaxed. *Leydenjar*, 2002, has bundled forms—whose cross sections resemble speech bubbles in blue, red, and black—that taper off to their vanishing point. Where this endlessly implied but blankly absent speech connects, even metaphorically, with the storage of electrical charge evoked by the title remains amusingly obscure. Here and elsewhere there is more than a little nostalgia in evidence, given the allusions to slightly outdated popular culture and science running through the paintings.

—Michael Archer

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