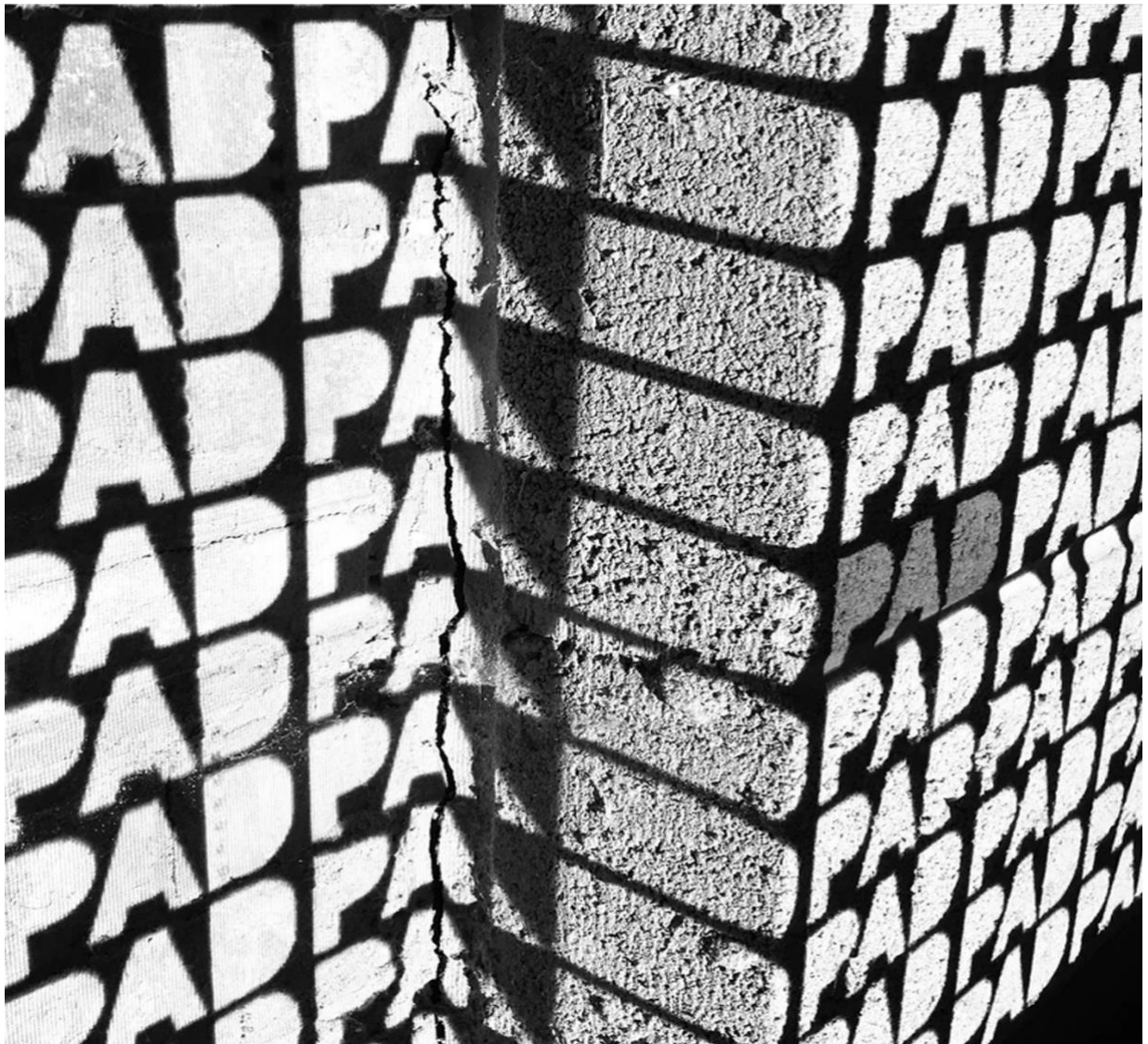


# *Engrams: Abstract Art and Emotional Memory*

Nichola Stott, MA Arts Practice



## **Recommended Citation**

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## Engrams: Abstract Art and Emotional Memory

Abstract, like so many other words, is too often used as an idiosyncratic suggestion rather than a concept which defines particular values. To understand abstract art is in reality, no more a problem than any and all art. *American Abstract Artists: Editorial Statement 1938* (Harrison & Wood, 2003)

Since the emergence of abstract art in the early twentieth century, there has been a preoccupation in the observer to understand or decode the subjects meaning. In and of itself, this presupposes that the subject represents an object, as in realism. Decoding the subject as an object becomes a tautological impossibility with abstract expressionism if we understand expression is not an attempt at representation.

Expression for the artist, particularly abstract expressionists, is entirely subjective and can mean different things to different artists. This essay will examine a personal view of recollection and communication through abstract painting and the interplay between the senses, memory, and emotion. This article will discuss how sensory stimuli combine to create a total-emotional remembered experience.

First, we must consider and understand how the brain parses and encodes sensory stimuli. When we think about memories of visual references (for example, looking at old family photographs), writing in *The Guardian*, Dr Daniel Glaser (then Director of Science Gallery) writes of the power of images, and the evocation of buried memories, that '*Neuroscientists have known for many years that humans have an extraordinary ability to encode pictures...because our brains are so efficient at storing the "essence" of a picture.*' (Glaser, 2016).

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Whilst pre-dating modern neuroscience, this duality of input/output and subject versus object preoccupies Roland Barthes throughout his work and is intuitively explored throughout *Camera Lucida* (Barthes, 1980). On contemplating the duality of the nature of a photograph in that a single instance is reproduced ad-infinitum yet can only ever be captured once, Barthes states, '*We might say that Photography is unclassifiable... What the Photograph reproduces to infinity has occurred only once: the Photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially.*' Barthes, (1980 p.4). Interesting in this notion is that this is the opposite of human experience, as many humans may perceive the same instance of an image. Still, each human perception is different and will continue to differ as time progresses.

In contextualising the process and outcome of abstract expression as the opposite emotional impression of storing an image as a memorial, an abstract expression may feel as representative as a photograph that was never taken '*mechanically*' in Barthes's (1980) vernacular but witnessed and stored in the brain. It is this expression itself that tells of the narrative experience.

### **Transcending Memory for Meaning**

In considering an abstract impression of a "photograph" remembered, one must also consider the fallibility of memory over time; however, time is not as linear as we may perceive, thus affording the artist greater freedom of expression. In his work, *The Order of Time*, theoretical physicist Carlo Rovelli writes beautifully of human perception of physical and theoretical concepts such as the passage of time, '*The sun seems to revolve in the sky when it is really we who are spinning. Neither is the structure of time what it seems to be: it is different from this uniform, universal flowing... time works quite differently from the way it seems to.*' (Rovelli, 2018, p2).

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The human experience of time and memory has echoes in space and our position within the universe. Rovelli posits on memory that *'what causes events to happen in the world, what writes its history, is the irresistible mixing of all things going from the few ordered configurations to the countless disordered ones.'* (Rovelli, 2018 p144).

Alongside this, rather poetical and metaphysical examination of memory offered by Rovelli, if we return to the work of Dr Daniel Glaser to understand more about the human personal processing of a visual stimulus and how we store in the human brain, Glaser explains in an interview with this author, the theoretical concept of what neuroscience calls **an engram**. 'Your brain doesn't work like a computer vision system... it's a very abstract representation of the thing you've seen. And you encode that in your memory, and that encoding is always multisensory and mood and everything. What it encodes into, it's called the engram.' (Glaser, 2022 [*transcription*]). Considered alongside Rovelli, these more fluid and abstract theories on time and memory offer the artist far more freedom in creating what may be regarded as an expression of an experience.

Many abstract artists of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, particularly those part of the colour field movement, such as Mark Rothko, Helen Frankenthaler, and Jackson Pollock, could be typically described as abandoning representation for communicating an experience. Still, Howard Hodgkin's perhaps more than any other, typifies the notion of emotional labour in the production of each of his pieces. With Hodgkin, the response or output is far less representative and far more the totality of the artist's emotional experience of what he absorbed from the subject.

In his book on the British painter, Howard Hodgkin, Andrew Graham-Dixon (1994) looks deeper into the interpretation of Hodgkin, both self-professed and in critical response, stating, *'There is no substitute for looking at the art itself, which invariably refutes or complicates their remarks about it. Artists' statements hold out the false promise of a dangled bunch of keys, ... What counts is the quality, the radiance and*

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*the urgency of what it is that can never quite be explained or accounted for.'*

(Graham-Dixon, 1994, P.7)

Graham-Dixon covers themes and preoccupations within Hodgkin's work not just thematically but also as a driving force, acknowledging that both memory and emotion are very prominent. Terming this '*an obsession with remembrance*'. (ibid. P13.) In his later career and in later works the artists' conviction in the subject as the total experience of the object becomes even stronger. According to Graham-Dixon '*To look at a much later painting like On the Riviera (1987-88) is to see the same conception of what a memory is - something illogical, subject to the vagaries of feeling and attention - pushed as it so often is in Hodgkin's mature art to the extremes of near illegibility.*' (ibid. P14.)



**Figure 1: Howard Hodgkin, On the Riviera, 1987 - 1988 (Oil on wood)**

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It is clear that Howard Hodgkin's work is heavily influenced by his emotions and memories, and this is evident in the highly personal and expressive nature of his pieces. His paintings are not simply representations of a subject, but rather, they are the culmination of his emotional experience of that subject.

Hodgkin's work is also characterized by an obsession with remembrance and the act of remembering. This is evident in the way he layers and builds up his paintings, creating a sense of depth and complexity that reflects the layered nature of memories. In his later works, this obsession with remembrance becomes even more pronounced, with his paintings becoming increasingly abstract and difficult to read. This, according to Graham-Dixon, is a reflection of the paintings' '*truth to their own individual subjects*,' (ibid. P122.)

In conclusion, Howard Hodgkin's work is a powerful reflection of the personal and emotional nature of memories and the act of remembering. His paintings are not simply representations of a subject, but rather, they are the culmination of his emotional experience of that subject, and this is what makes his work so powerful and unique.

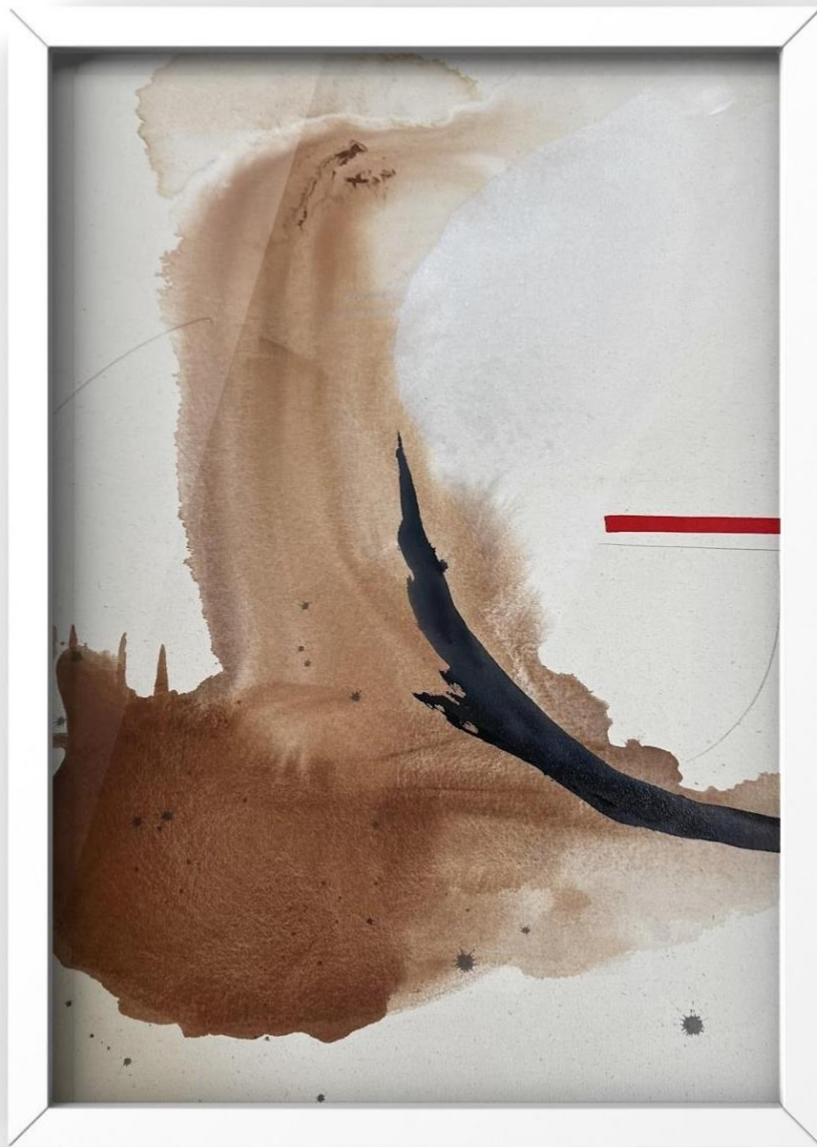
### **Remembered Experience as Engrams in Abstract Painting**

Referring now explicitly to my practice:

Engram 1: Strike, is then the abstract expressionist output of the total remembered experience of an event, visual and emotional, occurring in early childhood, for which no other record exists. Specifically, my journey through the pit villages between Teesside and Murton Colliery during the 1984-1985 miners' strike. The piece aims to capture the visual stimulus (the lone white house, spray painted with the word "SCAB" [sic]) across the entire front of the house, combined with the feeling of fear in the car as we journeyed through the deserted village, metaphorically carved in half by the seams of coal beneath it, that tore it apart.

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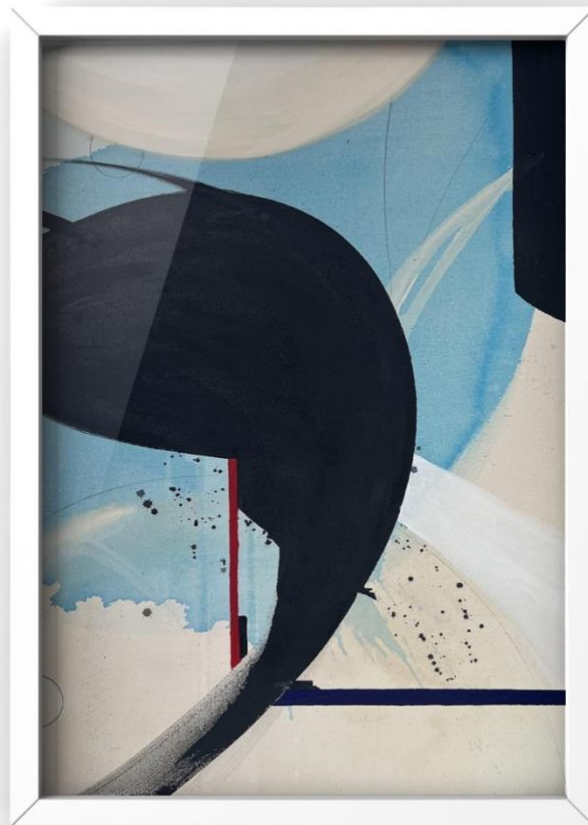


**Figure 2 – Nichola Stott, Engram 1: Strike, 2022 (Acrylic) The Northern School of Art**

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Engram 2: Challenger, is then the abstract expressionist output of the total memory of watching the launch of the Space Shuttle Challenger in 1986; precisely the moment of the explosion, frozen in time and the perception of panic, shock, and fear in the voices of the adult commentators who had no script for what was now occurring on the television screen.



**Figure 3: Nichola Stott - Engram 2: Challenger, 2023 (Acrylic) The Northern School of Art**

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In this visual memory, which felt to be frozen in time for many minutes, there was a very real sense of aftermath, calling to mind something rather unsettling and chilling in the juxtaposition of a bright and colourful beautiful sky in the mind of a child not fully comprehending the seriousness of the situation.

Since abstract expressionism is the expression of emotion through action, the concept of an engram feels intuitively right when painting a personal experience, particularly when considering the fallibility of memory and the conjunction of sensory experience.

### **Figure List:**

Figure 1: Hodgkin H, (1987) *On the Riviera* [online image] Available from: <https://howard-hodgkin.com/artwork/on-the-riviera> [Accessed 20 December 2022]

Figure 2: Stott N, (2022) *Engram 1: Strike*, [acrylic] The Northern School of Art, Hartlepool, UK.

Figure 3: Stott N, (2023) *Engram 2: Challenger*, acrylic] The Northern School of Art, Hartlepool, UK.

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[https://us06web.zoom.us/rec/share/FtswiVvUUUGAk9C4nb36qqjSmGiMcZcqOcolcq3YoGrcC1t8LLBuLEFJ\\_t4DXLY2.oNOv02cz3s-xPVED](https://us06web.zoom.us/rec/share/FtswiVvUUUGAk9C4nb36qqjSmGiMcZcqOcolcq3YoGrcC1t8LLBuLEFJ_t4DXLY2.oNOv02cz3s-xPVED) Passcode: 7r\*7\$K%C

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