



Contemporary British Abstraction

28 February – 11 April 2015
11 am – 3 pm Saturdays
Private view – 5 March,
5.30 pm – 8.30 pm

David Ainley
Ralph Anderson
Dominic Beattie
Chris Baker
Andrew Bick
Katrina Blannin
Claudia Boese
Julian Brown
EC

Ben Cove
Clem Crosby
Pen Dalton
Lisa Denyer
Andrew Graves
Terry Greene
Susan Gunn
Alexis Harding
Sue Kennington

Sarah R Key
Phoebe Mitchell
Matthew Macaulay
Ellie MacGarry
Katrin Mäurich
Sarah McNulty
Mali Morris
Andrew Parkinson
Aimee Parrott

Marion Piper
Clare Price
Geoffrey Rigden
Gwennan Thomas
Trevor Sutton
David Webb
Mary Webb
Gary Wragg

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Vibrant in Faith & Learning



Why Abstraction Now?

Abstraction is no longer new. Abstract painters today are not doing what Malevich did a hundred years ago, things have changed, nor is theirs a stunned response to two world wars, so how is it that, when everything in abstraction has already been done, painters today continue in this tradition? Why abstraction now? The 35 artists in this exhibition might each offer a different answer, or their answers might naturally fall into numerous categories, at times overlapping and at other times contradicting each other.

For some, abstraction continues to be compelling simply because of its content-free status, in the same sense that mathematics or arithmetic is devoid of content. We don't need apples, pears or other objects in order to add, subtract, multiply and divide. These operations are best carried out abstractly, just as in formal semantics or formal logic, removal of content allows concentration on structure and relation. Maths and logic aren't new anymore, but people continue to contribute to them. Furthermore, these disciplines, like abstract art, are in a sense removed from our everyday lives yet at the same time intrinsic to them.

At the opposite extreme, some artists here will argue that the terms abstract and representational are misleading or irrelevant and will claim not to see themselves as abstract painters at all. Any representational painting is always also an abstraction and, non-representation seems impossible, so perhaps the distinction falls away.

For others, form is process that has halted or become 'frozen', so their key focus is the process of painting which itself becomes content or, alternatively, it is discovered as part of the process. There is often an element of 'primitivism' in this approach, as Craig Staff highlighted in his book *Modernist Painting and Materiality*, the paint is paint in the same way that in the writings of D H Lawrence flesh is flesh. Could it also be, that the static materiality of the painting offers a kind of antidote to the digital, screen-based experience that has come to characterise the technological? Painting here is a bit like jazz in that meaning or structure is the result of improvisation. Jazz may no longer be in vogue, but lots of good Jazz music continues to be made, and music that rightly deserves the tag contemporary.

Other abstract artists prefer to emphasise not so much the painters' heroic quest for content as the part that the viewer plays in "reading in" their own meanings, or allowing associations to come to mind, perhaps specifically anticipated by the artist and perhaps not. Meaning is both invented and fluid, that's our everyday lived experience, yet we hardly pay attention to it, as if meaning is readily supplied. Abstract art challenges us to engage in multiple acts of interpretation, and better still, at least potentially, to become aware of those interpretive actions.

Some artists working in this field, employ a methodology that, far from improvisation, is pre-planned, programmed, determined, by a preordained system or sequence. The results of such an approach cannot not relate to the determined-ness of contemporary experience. Without in any way attempting to depict or illustrate life within a technological system, their art is entirely congruent with such a life. Furthermore, that some element of free play is introduced may act as a metaphor exploring the extent to which such play within our everyday systems is possible, or not.

Many years ago Jacques Ellul, author of *The Technological Society*, argued that contemporary art is either an imitation of, or a compensation for, technology, seeing abstraction's loss of the subject and its focus on means as technological phenomena. Much more recently, David Trotter coined the term techno-primitivism for a technologically-mediated primitivism, or that which "draws back from the technological only in order to get a better grasp upon it". The two positions "drawing back from" and "getting a better grasp of" are contradictory or opposing poles, yet here

they are held together. It's the continuum that unites them and allows for overlap. Borrowing Ellul's language it may be possible to both "imitate" and "compensate" for technology at the same time.

If there are perhaps as many answers to the question "why abstraction today?" as there are abstract artists, and their viewpoints may well be contradictory, in this exhibition we seek to hold some of these contradictions together in an attempt to get a better view. And this is a question better answered by viewing than by speculating, so we invite you to take a look at the multiple "answers" on view.

Andy Parkinson