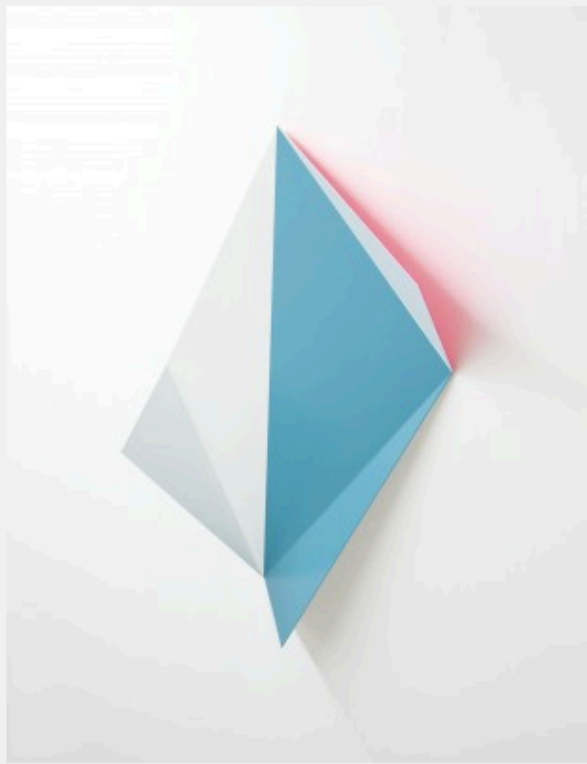


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## The Edge of Painting

Written by Luke Elwes



Rana Begum, No.441 - Fold (2013) 55 x 72 x 22 cm

*'Painting has died a thousand deaths in the last century. But it rises from the grave as many times. Doesn't it?' (Tess Jaray)*

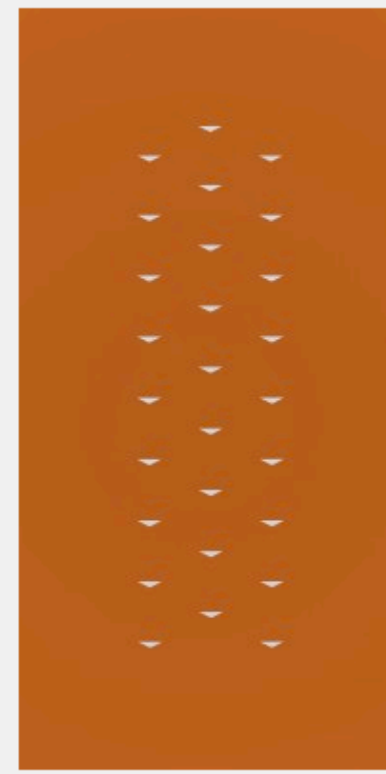
Two quite different perspectives on this question – one by a committee of writers and curators, the other by an artist – are offered by 'Painting Now' and 'The Edge of Painting', currently both showing in London.

The exhibition at Tate Britain and its accompanying text read like a research paper on an endangered species, a clinical exercise in which the work of five disparate painters is put under the microscope to see what clues it might yield to its continued and – in Darwinian terms – surprising existence in 'what has come to be understood as a post-medium age'. Without saying *who* exactly has arrived at this understanding the committee goes on to report that what painting lacks is adequate textual underpinning, since 'writing about painting is notably under-articulated at the moment'.



Tomma Abts, Zebe, 2010 © Tomma Abts

Yet all they really manage to adduce is that what the five have in common (apart from being born between 1967 and 1977) is 'a deliberate and measured approach to the construction of the image'. Drawing on Tomma Abts' statement that 'for me painting is a concrete experience that is anchored in the material I am handling', they conclude, in a way that is hard to dispute, that 'her paintings are "things in the world" as wrought objects and yet they also deliver illusions of fictive space'. But simply offering 'different explorations of the physicality of paint itself' as a form of resistance to 'rootless postmodern hybridity' is hardly likely to embolden painters or give these and others of their generation much cause for optimism.



Tess Jaray, Migration Wide Orange (2013) 65 x 130 cm

In contrast Tess Jaray uses her long experience as practitioner and teacher to ask not what painting is but what it can do. In a show curated for the Piper Gallery she turns the Tate's assumption on its head by saying painting needs not words (or a rear-guard action) but a more imaginative and playful approach to the medium itself. The artists she has chosen – almost all of whom either trained or taught at the Slade – reflect her sense that rather than being adrift in a post-medium age, 'now it seems, all art aspires to the condition of painting'. Here the medium need no longer be the message: indeed it is the medium – paint itself – which stands to limit painting's progress. 'The Edge of Painting' (a title borrowed from a new and unusually abstract photomontage in the show by John Stezaker) indicates a practice that is most dynamic at its margins; if it still holds to the idea of a 'painting' as a unique artefact which engenders the illusion of space it departs radically from the assumption that paint is the necessary means of achieving this.



Onya McCausland, Support (2013) 175 x 120 x 18 cm

Jaray asks if the colour and materials variously employed here to generate patterns, shapes and movement in space still belong the language of painting: after all, 'what does it mean to class something as a painting?'. For example, can't Sophie Michael's cine projection of a rotating field of coloured cards on a wall ('Carousel', 2009) be viewed as a dynamic painting rather than video art? Or Onya McCausland's delicate interplay of white matter and dark shadow across object and wall surface in 'Support' (2013) be a painting in chalk and calcium silicate rather than an installation piece? Or Rana Begum's directional planes of colour modulated by the fall of light on folded steel ('No. 441- Fold', 2013) be approached as painting rather than wall mounted sculpture? And further out on the conceptual (or cutting) edge, when Martin Creed investigates the optical play of pattern and colour using no more than cropped lengths of masking tape and coloured ink is he not still 'painting'?

Jaray's own piece 'Migration, Wide. Orange' (2013) is similar in its concern for the subtle process of order & disruption to Tomma Abts painting 'Zebe' (2010) in the Tate and shares in its geometry the same 'deliberate and measured approach'. So too does the delicate mosaic-like patina of Giulia Ricci's laser engraving, with its indented surfaces and rhythmic colour spacing. For Jaray these are not isolated acts of 'post-medium' resistance but, taken together, suggest the slippery nature of the medium's perceived boundaries. Perhaps the best example she gives us of how 'painting' continues to adapt and mutate as a practice is 'Silvery' (2013) by Nike Savvas, in which suspended strands of polished aluminium, tinted at irregular intervals along its length in blue & yellow, generate a brilliant curtain of light that shimmers and sways to the transitory presence of the viewer and reflects back the myriad colours it captures in that moment. While over at the Tate 'the wide discourse around painting is fragmented' here by contrast it appears fluid and permeable.