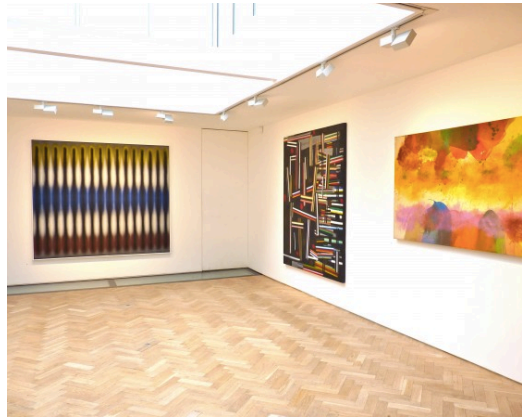


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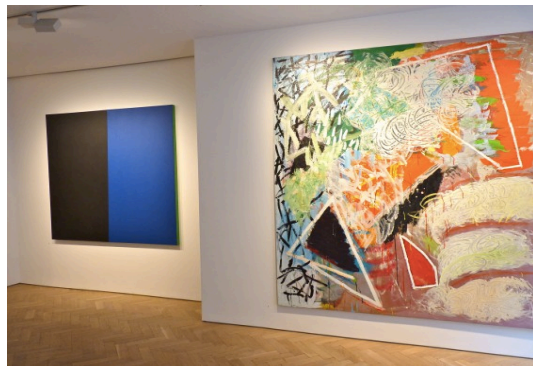
New Possibilities: Abstract Paintings from the Seventies

Written by Nick Moore



This exhibition presented a snapshot of abstract painting in the seventies in all its diversity, with selection of work by 14 artists, born between 1922 and 1950 who are still working today. It did not claim to be a comprehensive survey and 'aims to show some of the eclecticism which emerges as a central feature of seventies abstraction' as the press release puts it. And it did this admirably, with examples from the 'geometric' (Poullain) to the painterly (Morris), from the 'minimal' (Sutton) to the exuberant (Wragg).

The Gallery website showed a tantalising array of five very different approaches to abstract painting and in fact it is the vivacious and animated 'Carnival' by Gary Wragg that greeted us at the door, and I must say that walking in from a dark, cold street, this was an absolute tonic.

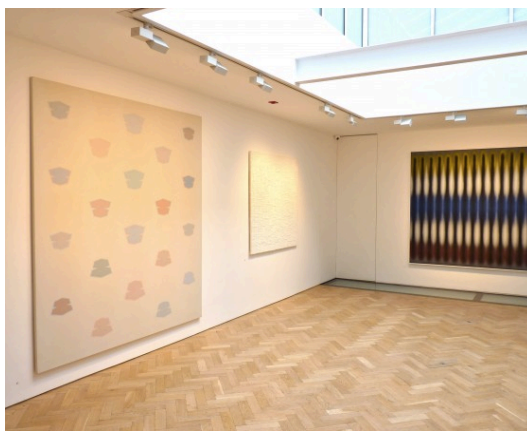


With 'Carnival' one is faced by the sheer energy of mark making and layer upon layer of colours, it was also the largest canvas in the show and the one with the most effervescent personality; on the right side, layers of white over orange over blue over green over red; on the left, white over green over blue with black cross-hatched marks, and floating over this richness in the lower half of the painting are two drawn white wrecked triangles, one filled with a painterly dark red, the other loosely scribbled in with black on the blue background. Three stacked shapes of yellowy white that occupy the lower right hand quarter of the painting have similarly been drawn into with a finger or stick, letting the colour underneath show through. Towards the top of the canvas a larger, looser area of white has also been drawn into in a scribbly fashion and some of this, alongside an area of green over blue over red, is captured in another white triangular drawn shape. All this adds up to a powerful sensual experience, and it gets richer as you take time and let your eyes wander around it and discover surprises and incongruities. It is the epitome of risky painting – a carnival indeed.

The richness of this is matched by Frank Bowling's smaller but intense 'Rush Green', one of a series of poured paintings from this time (others can be seen at Tate Britain until March). Here is a different approach to layering colour – these being poured and dripped, made with gravity rather than the more energetic gestural facture characteristic of Wragg. In 'Rush Green', the energy is more subtle, the interventions more open, there is dare I say it, more order, with the verticality of the painting broken by two clear horizontal rows of flame-like, thick marks;

poured in the opposite direction on top of the original layers these marks divide the canvas into a vertical rhythm of long, short, short, with the upper area having the most consistently poured flume of red and yellow paint with blue on one side and yellow on the other; the colours are the purest here where they began their downward journey. (The vitality and vibrancy of this series shows Davenport's pours to be contrived, self conscious and formulaic, with no felt content, though still concerned with the material qualities of paint.)

Akin to these two paintings is Bert Irvin's 'Glow' in which overlapping patches of colour were poured or flooded from the top and bottom sides of the canvas, some shapes quite clearly delineated while others sometimes merge and mix, leaving a gap in the middle which is then filled with another more amorphous yellow colour; a mist of mauve floats across the lower patches. This small canvas was typical of the method Irvin was using on mural sized paintings until the late seventies when strong diagonal stripes began to dominate his paintings.



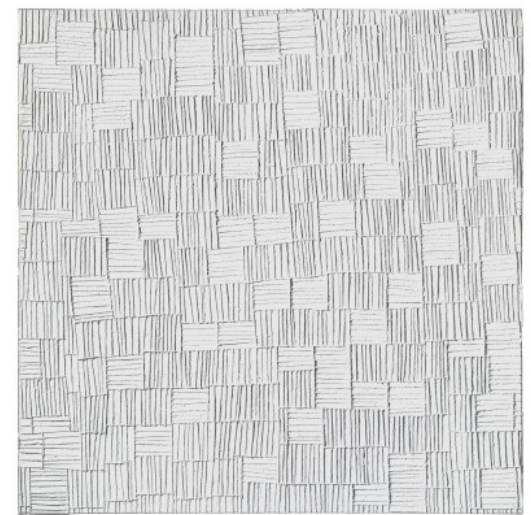
'Purple Heart' by Mali Morris had resonances with Wragg's 'Carnival' with its stacked shapes on the left side of the painting, but then the whole of the right hand side is taken up with the purple heart shape, loosely painted and with a darker energetically painted circle in the centre, a smaller green circle orbiting this and a strong black circle placed in the 'V' at the top. The reds and various blues of the stacked shapes sit on an orange ground which is overpainted in one area with the 'background' of light blue to give it a muddy tone close to that of the purple. In the lower left hand corner is a yellow rectangle, which should jar with its harder edged shape, but in fact serves to emphasise the fluidity of the rest of the painting.

'Funky, Black and Catch Me' by William Henderson is, by contrast, a shouty painting; it demands attention, with the strong mix of a powerful, patchy black ground on which float, hover or rather dance, a series or sequence of multi-coloured stripes; the effect is that of counterpoint and movement, with a dense stack of smaller, slightly angled, horizontal stripes on the left side dominated by the more haphazard, spacious, off-vertical larger stripes on the right. Interestingly this is another canvas in two halves, echoing those mentioned above (excepting the Irvin which is more symmetrical).

Also split in two, but in a very deliberate way, was 'That Swing 4.K.' by Trevor Sutton. This paired canvas, one black, one blue, is divided by a subtly diagonal line so that it does not appear to be a symmetrical, evenly divided surface – although of course it is, but in a more complex way. It is was a very effective tranquil space placed between Wragg's 'Carnival' and the smaller 'Untitled' by Patricia Poullain with its exploded geometry.

The exhibition included diverse work, from the intuitive, playful improvisation of Wragg, Bowling, Morris and Irvin to the very precise and considered work of Jaray, Boyd, and Rayner; with the Op(tical) assault of Cooke and Siele, the former dominating the far end of the gallery and distracting me from the subtleties of

the other work. In between this range are De Moray and Poullain, with a considered painterliness and particular technique; the former with wobbly masking to preserve the strong colour of the variegated bars against the 'background', the latter with careful geometrical edges framing the scumbled paint within the triangles.



The seeming odd one out is 'Basis for Light, series II, no.7' by Jeanne Masoero, a beautiful meditation on the qualities of cast light and shadow with folded and glued paper gridded in a loose irregular architecture, reminiscent of the asymmetric modernist geometry of the piercings in a Corbusier building such as the monastery at La Tourette, (designed in conjunction with the musician Xenakis). It also has resonances for me of the asymmetric patterns of Kuba textiles, where the regularity of the pattern shifts in subtle and musical ways, giving it a quiet vitality.

So, all in all, this exhibition was a very rich feast, and congratulations must be given to the curators, Megan Piper and Sandra Higgins. Reviewing a group exhibition of this kind is like meeting a lot of interesting, diverse characters at a party, and one inevitably spends more time with some than others because of a resonance and some rich common ground; this exhibition was like that for me, with my affinity for the improvisational, looser and more direct use of paint; it felt like meeting some old friends but also acquiring some new acquaintances who have aroused my interest.

New Possibilities: Abstract Paintings from the Seventies was on at the [Piper Gallery](#) from November to December 2012