

patternsthatconnect

British Abstract Painting in the Seventies: Stagnation or New Possibilities?

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In the seventies abstract painting in Britain was in crisis. At least that's how it seemed to some. If during the sixties it had become hegemonic that privileged position was on the wane. Peter Fuller would shortly declare American abstraction to be not much more than a CIA plot, within the discipline of painting figuration was in resurgence, whilst outside it performance art and conceptualism were fast becoming the dominant art forms, leading to the stagnation of abstract painting. The exhibition *New Possibilities, Abstract Painting from the Seventies*, a show of fourteen painters from the period (all still painting today), at the [Piper Gallery](#) counters this viewpoint, demonstrating that instead abstraction in this decade was vibrant and varied.



Installation shot (right. Gary Wragg, *Carnival*, left Trevor Sutton *That Swing.4.K*).
Image by courtesy of The Piper Gallery

In her gallery talk co curator Sandra Higgins introduces [Gary Wragg](#)'s *Carnival* (1977-79) as the show's opening statement, as if it were shouting "this is abstraction!" not a representation of the world, rather a celebration within in it, the gestures and colours resonant of graffiti and the detritus of building sites, brimming with the energy and excitement of the city, simultaneous with its squalor and vulnerability. And if the opening statement is a shout, the next is almost a whisper: [Trevor Sutton](#)'s *That Swing.4.K* (1979), five foot square, bisected by an off vertical line achieved by joining two canvases black to the left and blue to the right, with the green of the painted edge just showing as a narrow line down the (off)

centre. Turning to the *Untitled* (1973) geometric painting on paper by [Patricia Poullain](#), Higgins tells the story of her continuing to paint every day in her summer-house, facing the countryside, whilst making 'pure painting', both "in nature" and "against nature" at the same time.

In [Alice Sielle](#)'s *3D Blue and Gold Segments* (1978), drawing, within a shallow illusionistic space is more prominent. Approaching Op Art, carefully rendered three-dimensional abstract objects (segments) combine together on a grey ground to make an image that is more than the sum of its parts, appearing to generate light as much as reflect it. Sandra Higgins recalls asking her how she managed to paint it with such precision, and receiving the answer "I don't know".

The one painting I came here specifically to see was *Purple Heart* (1979) by [Mali Morris](#). If *Carnival* is a shout and *That Swing.4.K* is a whisper then this is a song.



Mali Morris, *Purple Heart*, 1979, Acrylic on canvas, 167 x 165.5 cm, Image courtesy of Piper Gallery

The purple heart shape of the title takes up nearly half of the canvas, and around it smaller, colour/forms harmonize, mediating, for me, a set of binary oppositions like hard and soft, head and heart, colour and line, form and content, object and image, words and music.

In [Graham Boyd](#)'s *Descender* (1976) the large canvas has undergone a process of masking and spray painting resulting in a series of subtly gradated narrow bands of

rich colour creating an undulating optical space. The earliest painting in the show, [Albert Irvin](#)'s *Glow* (1971) has decorative colours that echo the lines of the support whilst also looking virtually formless, the liquid paint poured, sprayed, splattered and at times approaching the condition of a gas. [William Henderson](#)'s marvelous *Funky Black and Catch Me* (1978) is as much built as painted. Rainbow bands on a black ground multiplying from left to right, until at the right hand third the space is completely filled, and the space itself seems to bend and deepen towards that side. It is an exciting painting, the visual equivalent of jazz (be-bop rather than cool). Looking at the painting with me he explains how he achieved the rainbow stripes by loading a brush with contrasting colours and drawing it across the canvas. Either it worked or it didn't and he would have to do it again. Perfectly situated at the end of the gallery so it can be seen from many distances is [Barrie Cook](#)'s spray painted *Blue, Red and Yellow Grid* (1977). As I journey towards it I am unsure how much of what's happening is optical and how much is physically there.



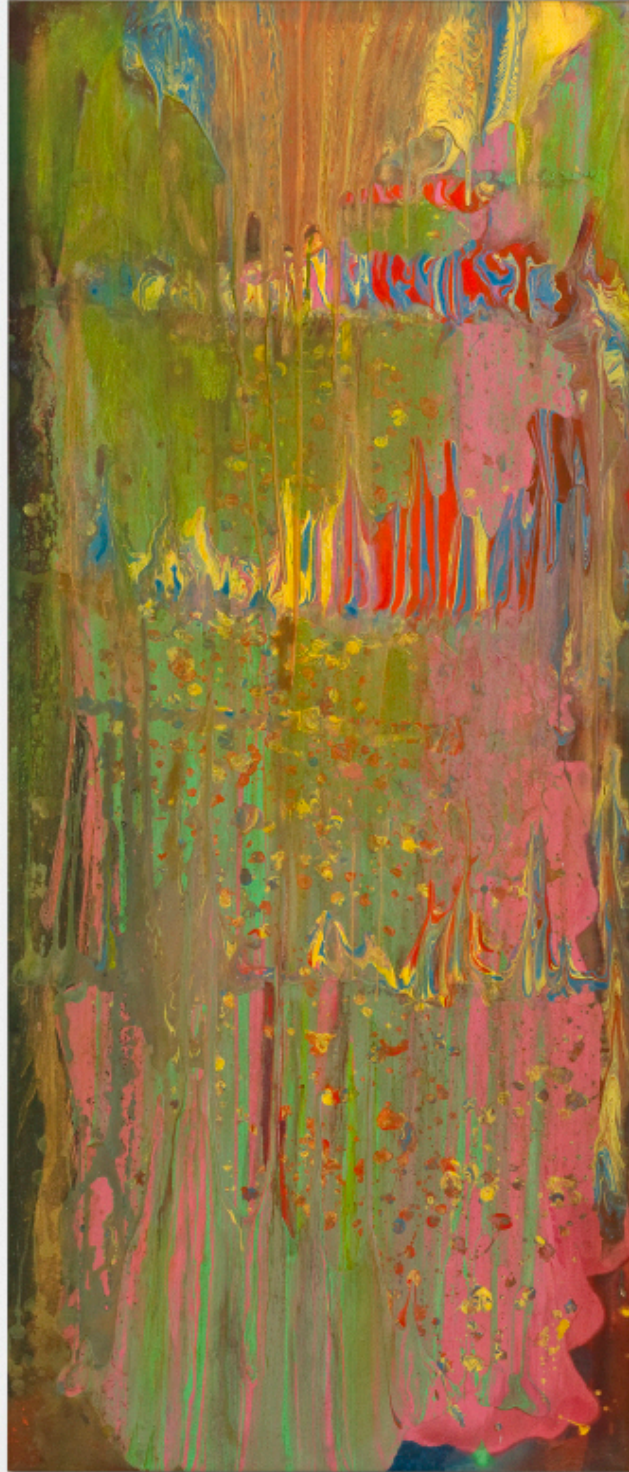
Installation image by courtesy of The Piper Gallery

Black vertical stripes are flanked by blue and violet creating an optical central horizontal light blue line – I think.

There's opticality even in [Jeanne Masoero](#)'s *Basis for Light, Series II, no. 7* (1977) the nearest work in the exhibition to 'systems art'. Comprising built up layers of torn white paper and PVA glue in loosely alternating rectangles of horizontal and vertical lines and resembling ploughed fields seen from the air, the structure is both accentuated and denied by the way the light and shadow is distributed over the uneven surface. Momentarily, I feel sure I see colours on that surface ...and then I'm less sure.

[Tess Jaray](#)'s *Petros* (1979) indices a different kind of uncertainty, the muted colours at times only just distinguishing the repeated architecture based motifs from the ground on which they seem to hover.

Rush Green (1977) by [Frank Bowling](#) is arrived at through the pouring of paint, more gravitational than gestural, the flow of paint looking gentle and slow. The verticality of the image elicits figure associations, and the richness of colour leads me to relate to it as if it were a mummy or possibly even the Turin Shroud.



Frank Bowling, *Rush Green*, 1977, Acrylic on canvas, 167.6 x 71.1 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Hales Gallery

Whilst Bowling achieves an 'all-over' anti-composition, by contrast [C. Morey de Morand](#)'s masking tape rectangles in *There is Always More* (1978) are deliberately placed in four colour groups against a shifting red ground.

Finally, six [Desmond Rayner](#) gouaches offer yet another version of abstract painting: Art Deco inspired geometric patterns that could be mistaken for screen prints if it weren't for the uniqueness of the colour mixes. Interested in invention rather than personal expression he sees the works as entertainment, encouraging us to "relax and enjoy (them) at surface level".



Installation shot, Desmond Rayner Gouaches, Courtesy of The Piper Gallery

Seeing the diversity of these works I find agree with Sam Cornish who, in the catalogue essay, argues that this exhibition shows that the break up of the Modernist consensus and the rise of the expanded field did not result in abstraction stagnating but rather in a period of complex, even frenetic experimentation, of *new possibilities*.

But what of continuing relevance? In the same essay Cornish brings attention to Mali Morris's "materiality and touch", which reminds me of the recent article by David Sweet at [Abstract Critical](#) where, questioning the relevance of "the kind of average lyrical abstraction of the late colour field period" and highlighting the importance of detail in the era of high-definition he partially equates touch with detail. Commenting on a 2012 painting by Morris he describes her intelligent handling of the "resolution that detail brings". And glancing up at my HD TV whilst writing this, I am distracted by a programme about the popular singer Tony Bennett, suggesting that his refusal to update his material was later interpreted by younger audiences as

“cool” leading to his recent return to popularity. Could it be that Patricia Poullain also remains relevant but this time through her persistence, doggedly following her very specific, repetitive, line of enquiry?



Patricia Poullain, *Untitled* 1973, Acrylic on paper, 50 x 50 cm. Courtesy of The Piper Gallery

In suggesting that Morris's work stays relevant by updating itself and Poullain's by staying the same I am no doubt having my cake and eating it, so let me suggest a third way in which these abstract painters may continue to be relevant. Advances in the field of cognitive science made since the seventies could make some of these paintings more contemporary now than they were then. Barrie Cook's work for example has affinity with [experimental findings](#) made recently into how we construct colour, findings that challenge some of what we thought we knew from Sir Isaac Newton, the philosophical implications of which are explored by [Donald D. Hoffman](#) in his book *Visual Intelligence, How We Create What We See*.

Indulging in these closing speculations I find that I am making a claim not only for the vitality of abstract painting in the seventies but also for the new possibilities abstraction may yet have in store.

New Possibilities: Abstract Painting From The Seventies is on at The Piper Gallery, 18 Newman Street, London until 21 December 2012.