

The image is an abstract painting. The top portion is a dark, almost black, textured area with some horizontal brushstrokes. Below this is a wide, horizontal band of a vibrant pinkish-red color, also with a textured, brush-painted appearance. The overall composition is simple and minimalist, focusing on color and texture.

British Abstract Painting 2001

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momentum

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Cover: Trevor Sutton Black Butterfly 2001 (detail) Oil on board 38 x 38 cms

Rough guide to playful thoughts on abstract art

Matthew Collings

Cruel world

The climate at the moment is fine for sensational art about issues, but less favourable for abstract art, particularly abstract painting. It seems impossible for a modern fashionable audience to find the idea of an aesthetic type of art exciting – it's just too much to ask. This exhibition at Flowers East brings together seventy painters who all do this kind of art.

Modern idea

The temptation is to think of it as a show, with very few exceptions, of outsiders or even rejects – the art the world doesn't want. Where a very few of the inclusions are by artists who've been in exhibitions like *Freeze* or *Sensation*, which have grabbed the attention of a popular audience and entered a contemporary mythology of the sexy, it's clear the work has a modern appeal and modern content.

Important issue

For example, the sheer reflective surface of Ian Davenport's painting in the show, the artificial colour, the impression of a hands-off technique; the impression that the work is almost industrial rather than, say, studio-like; all these have a modern feel. They put the work in what one might call an issue-bracket. The issue is death-of-the-author, which is exciting for the art audience at the moment, because this audience has been trained to think of blankness and emptiness – if these can be deployed in the right way – as exciting.

Good anyway

But I think Davenport's circular shape-painting is good anyway or good despite being correct or timely. If I wanted to say it has a great beauty and effectiveness – and I do in fact very much like it – beyond trendiness then I'd have to ask what on earth that 'beyond' might be. To ask that would be to attempt to separate what is beautiful from what is fashionable. That would be to run into all sorts of difficulties.

Die everyone and don't have any hope

Davenport is famous for a kind of hyper painting, which connects to an 80s idea of the hyper-real or the simulated: a kind of notion of the real where it's quite clear it's unreal. Which was right for a time of no beliefs, except in a cruel bottom-line cynicism where nothing had any value and there could never be any hope. His painting in this show where his characteristic vertical poured rounded-topped shape is compressed into a circle seems even more extremely hyper. So it has a text book correctness in terms of what issues the art world is currently willing to

think about. But at the same time the painting is aesthetic and visual. It might be one of the art world's current text book rules to say that the aesthetic is permitted as long as there is some necrophilia or punk nihilism which can connect the aesthetic to a social dimension – that is, make it seem as if the work isn't just self-indulgent. Make it seem to be part of a comment on modern despair. Why not just let it be indulgent, though? How bad would that be? This might be the other side of saying that frankly you've got to accept that sometimes a work can be fashionable but good anyway.

Mystery of mastery

In fact my impression is that self-mastery is expressed by Davenport's painting as much as self-indulgence. If none of the works in this show particularly refer to the person of the artist – and it's a relief that they don't – what guidelines could there be toward thinking about the art? They would all probably have some element of the fashionable but for the show to be possible at all they can't be only fashionable – since it isn't fashionable art. They've got to be capable of not caring about fashionable ideas.

The authentics

I see the paintings in the show as falling into a few basic categories. I admit they might not be everyone's idea of a category. But one category might be called the authentics. These are painters who improvise, who are mostly past fifty and who clearly show their respect for an old-fashioned European art and US art. They try and think about what they can do now that still fits with that notion of something that was great but which they're far removed from, in terms of time and place. Their paintings often have a look of tablecloths from the 80s.

The hypers

The hypers are younger. Probably some of them went to art schools where the authentics taught in the 80s. But they reject the authentics' idea of authenticity and want to express something about a world that doesn't care about it either. They do a kind of hyper-abstraction where you can believe there's a faint respect for the same painting traditions the authentics like, somewhere in the picture, but a world of doubt too. They don't take it for granted that a rough, open, atmospheric feel is sincere. It could just as well be fake – since it's so much part of nostalgia. Or fake might be good. Their style has an ironic designer look. If there are brush strokes visible at all they seem as if they're fetishized rather than real.

The old authentics

There are only a few of these left surviving. They are artists who remain authentic to a system they set up all those years ago, in about the 1950s.

The systematics

These artists work to a system. The art has a conceptual feel to it. It's not primarily visual. Why have a system? Why not just fudge the painting through until it's finished – since there will always be some kind of system in the end? Why have such a pared-down one? The work of the systematics relies on a notion of integrity. Something is set up – it must be the right thing – and then followed through. You

have to think about the set-up as much as the end result.

The eclectics

The eclectics makes up by far the biggest section of the show. Their art asks you to look at it in terms of all possible categories and read a bit in from all of them. There might be a band of colour meeting another say, and that band might be merely matter or it might be a trope – it might be the edge of a horizon – an ant might be about to appear on it or a sun rise up from it. A lot of the electics' eclectism will be from the geometric. The geometric might be the absolute or it might be interior decorating. It might be a neutral intellectual exercise or it might speak to the human condition and have something to do with Plato. Many of the eclectics are former authentics now trying out a bit of mixing of hyperism with authenticism.

Categories on the whole

Thinking in categories can help you judge what you're looking at. Some of the artists have got works in the show that you want to go on looking at again and again. For me these are mostly authentics and one or two hypers – Alan Gouk, John McLean, Geoff Rigden, Gary Wragg but also Ian Davenport and Jane Harris. I like Marc Vaux as well who uses rulers and dice as part of his working system.

Think up your own ideas

But everyone will find some paintings in the show they want to think about more than others. These individual works might seem to make the whole category suddenly exciting. Or else they'll make you forget about the category and you'll just be drawn into the painting, marvelling at what it's got to offer. But I think the latter is quite rare. On the whole you always come back to some kind of category thought – the marvelousness of what you're looking at reinforces the category in your mind.

Terry Frost

Terry Frost is the main old authentic. No matter how nutty and daft his abstracts can get, there's always something pleasing there. The painting in this show by him combines both extremes so it stands out. At first I thought it looked ghastly, like a tree. But then it had something – a series of balances, experiments with form. It had a fizz to it and it had it despite the slide into greetings card representation.

More on tablecloths

In the late 70s and early 80s there was a fashion in Heals and Habitat for brightly coloured tablecloths – blue, red, green, whatever – a look of jolly primaries basically. It was what art was supposed to be, quoting Delaunay vaguely. This is what the patchy look of some of the authentics' painting evokes: all-over, even, patterned. Patches of rather bright colour, a little bit unintegrated-seeming.

What are they doing?

What are the authentics doing? They think about European painting and US painting. They ask, How can I, as a sincere person, have some kind of take on that? They strive away to have that take – bringing whatever they've naturally got to the

task. With John McLean, it's a wonderful balance, with Alan Gouk it's spontaneous painterliness. With Gary Wragg it's brush strokes – or not strokes so much on their own but smears and marks including marks that are brushy – and an amazing love of paint. With Geoff Rigden it's inspired simplicity but also a weird arbitrariness: why dab this stuff here – why not?

Risky

John McLean isn't doing something with the paint so much – more the shapes and their order and balance. Alan Gouk is, but it's not always lovely. And McLean's paintings aren't always as perfect as the one he's showing here. All the authentics are risky. Gary Wragg is the riskiest of them all.

Alan Gouk

With Alan Gouk, the sculptural weight of his paintings, something that seems to come naturally to him, is the very thing that sometimes tips them over the edge. They lose that sense of play with colour and rhythm and placing that he has as a natural gift – and which is so alive and on form in his painting in this show. But even the lost ones have an energy, which comes from the pure un-mucked-about-with colour, which still peeks through the more slab-like surfaces.

More on opposition of hypers and authentics

The hypers make a version of abstract art where it's ambivalent whether it's really abstract or not. It might be a comment on the social world, the way it's full of unreality, or the way that it's a mediated world so you can never know what reality is. Whereas the authentics often seem to want to be half bucolic the hypers want to be half pop or half modern urban. Authenticity isn't a factor in post modernism so the authentics can't be post modern in any stylistically obvious way. But in fact they are quite post modern in that although they want to be half-landscape a lot of the time, they never try and be particularly heavy-breathing about the mystical or sublime content that US Abstract Expressionism – which also connects to a landscape idea – is often supposed to have. They are much more down to earth. It's a fiery earth often, in terms of colour, like Post Impressionism and Impressionism, but not a mystical one or an existential one. The hypers are never down to earth at all. Obviously they don't believe in anything earthy but they don't believe in anything cosmic either. They believe in advertising and the movies and information technology.

Systematic and authentic

The constructed metal and wood painting here by Mark Vaux has a degree of complexity to it that makes you look again and again, even though it's based on a system and you know that rulers and dice have been used. Chance and order are put into relationship with each other in a systematic way. But it's a system that has surprise elements precisely because of the element of chance. There is a point of comparison with Gary Wragg – which might seem far fetched – but his system too allows in things that might seem like failures. Both of them allow you to think about success and failure in art, to think about the rules.

Matthew Collings, June 2001



Catalogue

Tim Allen

Started hooded, ended dancing 1999
Acrylic on canvas
152.5 x 152.5 cms

Douglas Allsop

Reflective Editor 2001
Computer driven milling on acrylic sheet
on aluminium section
100 x 150 x 2 cms

Sue Arrowsmith

Ruffle 2000
Light blue ink and blue gloss
on medium density fibreboard
76 x 76 cms
Photograph Miki Slingsby
Courtesy Entwistle

Gillian Ayres

Honey Blues 2000
Oil on canvas
122 x 122 cms
Courtesy Gimpel Fils

Chris Baker

Prone I 2001
Acrylic on canvas
143.5 x 148 cms

Basil Beattie

The House of Here and There 2000
Acrylic on canvas
30.5 x 40.5 cms

Tom Benson

Future 2001
Oil on aluminium
90 x 90 cms

Andrew Bick

Second Season 2000/2001
Oil paint, marker pen and wax on wood
118 x 122 x 6 cms
Courtesy Hales Gallery

George Blacklock

KP2 2001
Oil on canvas
184 x 152.5 cms

Sandra Blow

Span 1997
Acrylic on canvas
122 x 122 cms

Allan Boston

Two by Three (black, brown, turquoise) 2000
Acrylic and shoji paper on canvas
150 x 90 x 30 cms

Michael Brick

Untitled 2001
Oil on panel
122 x 122 x 5 cms

Alan Brooks

Not Nothing 2001
Acrylic on canvas
46 x 66 cms
Courtesy Percy Miller Gallery

Jo Bruton

Showtime 2000
Acrylic and glass beads on canvas
210 x 135 cms each panel

Stephen Buckley

La Ronde 1997
Oil on canvas
104 cms diameter

Jane Bustin

Aschenglorie/Ashglory 2000
Oil on wood gesso on wood
14 x 84 cms
Courtesy Eagle Gallery

Simon Callery

Lamella 2000
Oil, oil pastel and pencil on canvas
220 x 135 cms
Museum of Modern & Contemporary Art, Toulouse

John Carter

Vertical Edge (Green) 2001
Acrylic with marble powder on plywood
120 x 144 x 10 cms
Photograph John Riady

Edward Chell

Capability's Dream 2000
Oil on canvas
117 x 97 cms

Bernard Cohen

Pictorial 2001
Acrylic on canvas
101.5 x 127 cms

Nathan Cohen

Shifting Form 2000
Acrylic on panel
138 x 146 x 2.5 cms
Courtesy Annely Juda Fine Art

Melanie Comber

Previous Journey 2001
Oil and pigment on canvas
120 x 120 cms

Clem Crosby

The Visit 1999
Oil on canvas
198 x 173 x 5 cms

Mikey Cuddihy

Don't I Know Myself 1998
Gesso, acrylic, inscribed and painted paper
on canvas
175 x 104 cms

Ian Davenport

Circle Painting: Orange, Yellow, Orange 2001
Household paint on medium density
fibreboard
40 x 39.5 cms
Photograph Prudence Cuming
Courtesy Waddington Galleries

Caroline De Lannoy

Lollipop 2001
Oil on canvas
100 x 100 cms

Jennifer Durrant

Deep Sound 1995
Acrylic on canvas on board
40.5 x 51 cms

Noel Forster

Untitled (Green/Blue/Brown) 2000
Oil on canvas
182 x 153 cms

Terry Frost

Oasis Tree 2000
Acrylic and collage on canvas
207 x 119.5 cms

Michael Ginsborg

Collection 1999-2000
Acrylic and paper on canvas
157.5 x 142 cms
Courtesy Rhodes + Mann

Sheila Girling

Bridge of Gold 2000
Oil on canvas
118 x 140.5 cms

Alan Gouk

Volcan de Tamia II 2001
Oil on canvas
242 x 116 cms

Alexis Harding

Rebound 2000
Oil and gloss on medium density fibreboard
91.5 x 122 cms
Courtesy Andrew Mummery Gallery

Jane Harris

Bloody Mary 2000
Oil on canvas
165 x 153 cms

Derrick Haughton

Untitled No. 6 2000
Acrylic and household paint on
canvas on board
99 x 129.5 cms
Courtesy Houldsworth

Clyde Hopkins
Post War Abutments 2000
Oil on linen
165 x 132 cms

John Hoyland
Night Walk 25.1. 2001
Acrylic on cotton
76 x 61 cms

James Hugonin
Untitled (X) 2000
Oil and wax on board
171 x 152 cms

Paul Huxley
Mutatis Mutandis V 1999
Acrylic on canvas
137 x 137 cms
Courtesy Rhodes + Mann

Albert Irvin
Santa Monica II 2000
Acrylic on canvas
183 x 152.4 cms
Courtesy Gimpel Fils

Vanessa Jackson
Edge Away 2001
Oil on canvas
183 x 152 cms

Tess Jaray
How Strange ... 2001
Oil on linen
142.5 x 115 cms

Zebedee Jones
Untitled 2001
Oil on linen
61 x 61 cms
Courtesy Hester Van Roijen

Peter Joseph
Four Colour Arrangement. 260 July 2000
Acrylic on cotton duck
111 x 171.5 cms
Photograph Dave Morgan
Courtesy Lisson Gallery

Natasha Kidd
Painting Machine III 2000
Aluminium, electric motor, rack and pinion,
microswitches, timers, relays, canvas,
board and perspex
87 x 67 x 30 cms
Courtesy Houldsworth

Michael Kidner (b.1917)
Dust Storm II 2001
Acrylic on board
122 x 110.5 cms

Edwina Leapman
Burnt Orange on Raw Umber 2001
Acrylic on canvas
213 x 132 cms
Courtesy Annely Juda Fine Art

Rosa Lee
Span 2001
Oil on linen
101.5 x 91 cms

John Loker
Going 2001
Oil on canvas
152 x 153 cms

Jason Martin
Ruse 2001
Oil on aluminium
70 x 150 cms
Photograph Dave Morgan
Courtesy Lisson Gallery

Nicholas May
Untitled 2001
Oil on canvas
210 x 140 cms

Shaun McCracken
Rath 2001
Oil on canvas on board
61 x 51 cms

John McLean
Reel 2001
Acrylic on canvas
113.5 x 174 cms

Gina Medcalf
Alitz 1999
Acrylic on canvas
159 x 153 cms

Mali Morris
Mazed World 2000
Acrylic on board
80 x 100 cms

Colin Nicholas
Framed (12G7) 2001
Acrylic on board
30.5 x 30.5 x 3.7 cms
Photograph Peter White

Fred Pollock
Raasay Sound 2000
Acrylic on canvas
203 x 86 cms

Katie Pratt
Xana-blu 2001
Oil on canvas
92 x 122 cms
Courtesy Houldsworth

Geoff Rigden
Black, White, Red 1997
Acrylic on canvas
61 x 66 cms

Carol Robertson
Blues 2001
Oil on canvas
152.5 x 152.5 cms

David Ryan
Distance 2001
Oil and wax on canvas
183 x 152 cms

Dillwyn Smith
Working People 4 1998/9
Acrylic on canvas
315 x 105 cms
Courtesy Purdy Hicks

Jack Smith
Dialogue Fandango II 2000-01
Oil on canvas
102.5 x 102.5 cms

Richard Smith
Untitled 2000
Oil on canvas
106.5 x 106.5 cms

Trevor Sutton
Black Butterfly 2001
Oil on board
38 x 38 cms

Estelle Thompson
Here & Now 2001
Oil on aluminium
195 x 171 cms
Courtesy Purdy Hicks

Marc Vaux (b 1932)
SQ FO 23 1999
Anodized aluminium and cellulose and
acrylic on medium density fibreboard
121.92 x 121.92 cms
Courtesy Bernard Jacobson Gallery

Virginia Verran
Black Painting No.4 2000
Oil on canvas
56 x 50.5 cms

Gary Wragg
Blues, Red and Yellow 1998-2001
Oil on canvas
230 x 165 cms

Manijeh Yadegar
C28 2000
Oil on canvas
71 x 83.5 cms
Courtesy Eagle Gallery

Tim Allen
Douglas Allsop
Sue Arrowsmith
Gillian Ayres
Chris Baker
Basil Beattie
Tom Benson
Andrew Bick
George Blacklock
Sandra Blow
Allan Boston
Michael Brick
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Vanessa Jackson
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Zebedee Jones
Peter Joseph
Natasha Kidd
Michael Kidner
Edwina Leapman
Rosa Lee
John Loker
Jason Martin
Nicholas May
Shaun McCracken
John McLean
Gina Medcalf
Mali Morris
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