

# SACHA CRADDOCK

Programmed to run alongside the 6th exhibition at The Fine Art Society of work by Gluck, this exhibition has an open as well as specific aim. Instead of collective direction or a curatorial push to say any one thing, however, this selection of domestic, functional, private, abstract, descriptive, discursive and decorative work by 12 artists presents a generous range of activity, experience and realisation.

Would Gluck, such a distinct person, welcome this? She was both selfish and selfless, the creator of fiercely autonomous artwork. Her stridently independent personal history, her social life blurred by isolation and her occasional return to society makes for a bundle of contradictions.

The conflicting metaphor of Gluck's life work runs parallel to the function of this exhibition; works may function on their own, or in terms of each other. For Gluck, the public and the personal merge and then separate. Stepping outside the communal, social and familial expectations of the time she attempted to make and control her own context - funnily enough she never once chose to exhibit her work in a mixed show.

For decades The Fine Art Society has remained exceptional in the way it combines gallery and showroom. An understandable place to see art, as well as perhaps a place to re-consider it. With pieces often on tables as if in a house, the gallery has a domestic sense and scale to it, which literally mimics both interior and exterior expectations for art, a particularly pre-Modern relation to scale and function.

**Ishbel Myerscough** (p.26) paints herself and her children as well as more formal portraits. Her paintings have a high level of detail that flattens the image as the eye skips and builds

a somewhat staged process of comprehension. We have a flow reminiscent of Flemish or certain Northern Italian Renaissance painting, where each strand of hair has energy yet the figure becomes still. The recent self-portrait, mixing confidence with doubt, has the painter in a boldy patterned high-street dress of not massively expensive material. The current but retrospective design is rendered with a hard glare that brings it all back to the present, to the relationship the artist has with herself. A virtuoso appointment with truth that combines fine observation with generality.

Again, shifting backwards and forwards in terms of stylistic familiarity, **Bettina Von Zwehl** (p.36) brings the structure and mores of miniature portrait painting - and therefore that tradition shifted into early photography - to a somewhat disturbed and repetitious set of questions. From a residency at the Victoria and Albert Museum she makes a series of works that depend on expectation, and association, not innocent in their need for physical attention.

**Jennifer Durrant** (p.18) makes abstract painting that carries a sideways, assured sub-plot - stepping her surface back, with no retinal play but instead into a contained logical world. First of all the range of surface and depth to the colour is unusual. Durrant builds - with apparently simple structure - presences that she expects to work all at once from top to bottom and side to side. The often opaque colour is registered, recalibrated over time with great concentration to make sure the simple idea of a performing image is replaced by something else.

**Vanessa Jackson's** (p.18) geometric works hint at the philosophical nature of sense, a world rationalised, broken and ironed out

again. But of course, the point is not just to use the pace of colour and touch of paint to render the invisible visible, but to see what it can bring.

Jackson, disciplined, imbued with the marriage of philosophy and geometry, shows a couple of paintings here that are both spatial and shallow. Colour is apparently contradictory as she fights against her own expectations as well as those of others, making the negative positive and the other way around. Neither restful nor difficult, the painting makes a questioningly playful manifestation of language.

So, inside and outside, the body and exterior, work here is painted, photographed, observed and made up, and in the case of **Cathie Pilkington** (p.28) uses objects that fit in terms of context.

Pilkington's sculptural pieces - part souvenir, part objets trouvés - cement an already established ambiguity of scale. She uses the found element, breaks it up, keeps it intact, but elevates sections to different levels of meaning and function - a world of in-between art, strange scale, a world within a world.

Pilkington's collage plays with exactly the same associative mesh of value and recognition that brings all of the work up to the current, to knowing, away from simply undermining expectation to building something different to do with the role of the camera, self promotion and self consciousness.

For decades **Eileen Cooper** (p.12) has been telling a particular story about her expectation from painting; its tone and ambition. Familiar but insistent she uses each canvas as a holding pool or bay. We look in through a range of scale, to the edge of a skirt, perhaps, the body, and a shifting dance of a general nature. Automatic rules and the

expectations of timelessness, of forever, overpower any notion of immediate statement. This is not history; there is no declaration of moment, no particular event to recall. Instead, Cooper makes a space across both time and surface to place women - who go through a range of gesture - the painted surface likened to skin, their state one of existence, not day to day but general and therefore political. Here by referring to Gluck's one time partner Constance Spry, in particular, Cooper allows the world to enter but then asks it to leave.

**Annie Morris** (p.24) makes sculpture with free standing balls of different circumference piled one on top of the other. The colour is simple in range, the intention of it all one of apparently questioning the role of the work in the first place.

Outline makes a presence with non-imagery, and it feels like sculpture as notional play where all seems to remain in the role of diagram, and still despite physical fact to be more suggestive than actual. But subject, as such, is difficult, more about the sense that women artists were often expected to reflect upon their own situation. The greatest freedom is not to say any thing, or to be able to speak or subvert the same or a different language. The range of work in this exhibition is deliberately subtle; calls for attention are deflected and often denied. **Susie MacMurray** (p.22) uses mass to create mass, the significance of the light source, the light bulb, is just nowhere, but references to earlier radical female art imagery is extended here and seen and felt and understood as something that can also be turned off at night, after everyone has gone.

A sort of retrospective gaze at a complex notion of role is at play in **Caroline Walker's** (p.40) paintings - which are both inside a

place, with optimism, and outside - in layers of perfected photo shopped representation. Walker conjures the false expectation of the show-home, a perfect circumstance in which it is difficult to relax, seen as if from the outside, as if through glass. The painting is touching, loose and impressionistic, as if the paint itself is on its way through and does not stay: someone else's idea of what you want inevitably makes you feel unwelcome.

**Geraldine Swayne's** (p.32) painting is even more markedly about a gathering of stroke and material, a sort of fluidity and looseness that builds a huge portrait. Painters talk of finding things in their work, and Swayne's whole relation to portraiture appears to be one of finding people. Hovering between constructed image and the representative her series of small drawings show how meaning can erupt out of material and not the other way around. Automatic writing is replaced by automatic drawing, figures blur and merge and do strange things to each other. Nothing is necessarily sinister, however, and the process of making means that fluid and even arbitrary meaning can arrive.

Deliberately full, asking for attention to be divided every direction, this exhibition avoids, perhaps, the sense of expectation for subject and the equally galling projection of a simple forced narrative. The notion of Woman's Art has a good history but now it is also hard to hold on. This show is about a cross wired cross referencing where much is happening or has already happened.

**Annie Kevans's** (p.20) touching series of women in art history is disarmingly literal. By representing she is respecting, but also questioning the power of drawing itself to touch on subject. This notion could take the form of a list of names, or a list of images, but the artist draws and paints at the same

time as a form of evocation, a way of holding on to what has already happened, and conjuring what might otherwise not have been seen.

'Strangers in the Village' is made up of images of photographs that **Phoebe Boswell** (p.8) drew of men who made contact with her through Tinder at one particularly lonely time. The drawings, making up a sort of flight map of destination, represent that transient, faint, stuttering non communication, and attitude, all so predictably samey. Boswell is there on her own, a solitary artist on a residency in the very undiverse city of Guttenberg. Along with the messages, written directly on to the wall, are pictures of the men who have responded to an image of her, in the centre. Boswell portrays a criss-cross of awkward, simplistic and stereotypical expectations that were channelled and projected onto her - the solitary female artist who in turn answers back by drawing and not seeing them for real.

Women artists are generally still under-supported and under-represented but what does it mean to mount an exhibition of work by women artists, now? This exhibition of course appears to say many powerful things, to provide a mass of approach in terms of the experience it gives, but in what way do general considerations touch, reflect, enhance the experience of individual work? The contradiction between an overview and the manifestation of individual pursuit will always be there. To write generally about women artists is fundamental and important, yet akin to saying that the sky is sometimes blue, mainly black and often grey, and that is true for half the world.

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