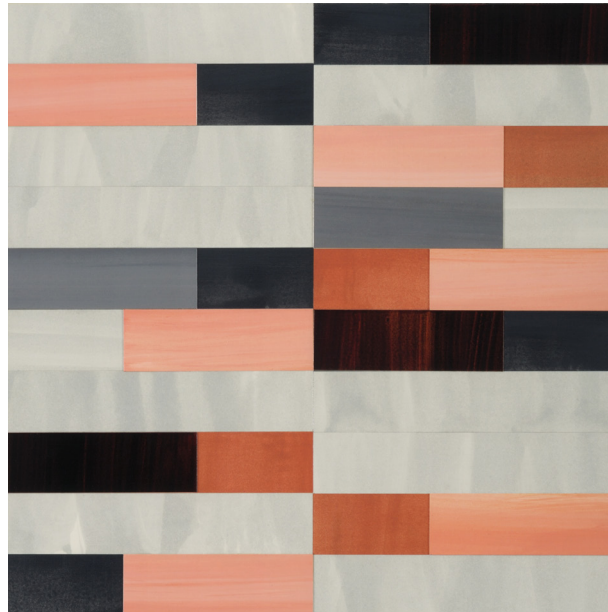


Trevor Sutton Paradise Circus

FLOWERS

13 October - 13 November 2010



Ice Moves 2010 Oil on paper and board 38 x 38 cm

Flowers 21 Cork Street London W1S 3LZ

This exhibition presents a survey of work produced by Trevor Sutton over the last 40 years, work that evidences the multiform guises of abstraction. Among the paintings shown here, some for the first time, are colour fields composed of an uncompromisingly visual flatness and formal order; networks of linear inter-lacings that simultaneously evince a pure-form emblem of modernist ambition yet conjure the sturdy frame of a yawning window on the world; picture planes imbued with an 'earthy solidity' tempered by the careful ritual of the artist's brush marks.

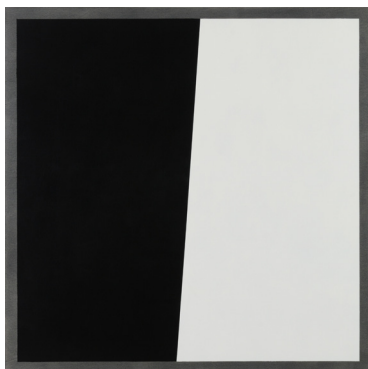
Despite this appeal to the archive, the exhibition does not take the form of a retrospective. Such a framework, built on the reductive precept that from the microcosm one can individuate the macrocosm, would limit readings of a body of work that rejects artistic determinism and ascensional logic. Many years of work are not represented here: the selected paintings and drawings prioritise a unified visual and intellectual presence between the 'then and now'.

To express this in another way, we might say that in Sutton's work the time is out of joint. That is not to suggest there is no history here. The paintings – in particular those from the last two decades, which comprise evocative abstract spaces formed from layer upon layer of semi-transparent oil based glazes – manifest individual archaeologies of colour and gesture that are a record of their own making. But while Sutton has expressed his desire for the works to remain 'anchored' both spatially and temporally, the presence of an ineffable otherness – the sound of no sound, the space between – creates a tear or a fold within their history, puncturing the hermetic seal of the gestalt.

To understand this disjunction, it is important to note that Sutton's work emerged out of a unique moment of temporal fissure that signalled a paradigm shift in the formations of modern thought. Sutton was studying at Hornsey College of Art during the time of the student sit-in, a flourish of revolt that formed part of a global protest movement that would lead to profound socio-political and philosophical reconfigurations. Within the visual arts, Abstract Expressionism – the rugged embodiment of this rebellious post-WWII fervour – was at its apex. The forms of art, its doctrines and parameters, were changing dramatically.

If, as Paul Bonaventura states, "one of the functions which society expects of its artists is that they create some sort of order out of the chaos of lived experience, then perhaps Trevor Sutton succeeds more than most". Indeed, we might assess Sutton's ritualistic process and controlled schema as a means of subsuming the instability inherent in the temporal 'break' at the heart of his practice. To a great extent, order characterises Sutton's work and defines his artistic practice. In his studio, brushes and tools and assorted ephemera are arranged with poetic precision; filed into lines and punctuated by spaces that seem to further define the objects.

Such an assessment would, however, indicate that there is repression at work here, when in fact there is none. The trace of a spirited otherness announces itself in Sutton's work and demands a different reading. The grid that features in many of the early paintings and now re-emerges as a composition of gossamer planes with a transparency akin to watercolour, is not a structure that walls the work into the exclusive realm of the visual, defending it against the intrusion of speech. It acts instead to expose the traditional parameters of language as insufficient. Hugh Stoddart relinquishes disinterested contemplation of the work for a bodily encounter based in a haptic/optic interplay: "If eyes were hands, we would take these paintings in our hands and understand [their] source, a kind of Braille against our skin".



This fluid sensory exchange is symptomatic of the pervading sense that Sutton's work speaks differently. It is significant that two of the most compelling commentaries on the paintings, one by Stoddart and the other by David Toop, both suggest the inadequacy of the vernacular in providing the tools of our interpretation. To sufficiently account for his response to the work, Toop reverts to the Japanese concept of *ma*, which alludes to the unsounded part of experience, the pause or interval that "has at the same time a deep, powerful and rich resonance that can stand up to sound". For Toop, Sutton's paintings offer a score of interwoven absences and articulations, an aggregate fabric in which the silences, the spaces between, are as weighty and urgent as the positive forms they contour and caress.

Finding the traditional languages of interpretation to be similarly deficient, Stoddart employs the term *fertig* – a German word which means 'being finished' with the added implication of 'being ready to start something else' – to describe the latency and assertive irresolution of the paintings. Both critics borrow from a foreign tongue to articulate the sonorous silence and abounding absence with which they are confronted. The terms, appropriated from cultures to which the artist is powerfully drawn, words with no English equivalent, assert themselves as native to a reading of the paintings, illustrating the claim that Sutton's work "is so strikingly speaking a language at variance with [its] surroundings."



Toop has described how Sutton "collects words" and "connects them to make evocative images", suggesting that the artist, far from excluding language, in fact sees it as a precursor to visual enactment. Sutton's commitment to abstraction does not extend to a severance of the sources, whether lyrical or prosaic, that compel him to paint. However anti-pictorial the paintings are, they are never completely without reference in language, and their titles often provide an invitation to narrative engagement. Once we have entered the work, the play between registers becomes non-differentiated, non-hierarchical, and our reading of space becomes inseparable from our meditation on the 'sound of seeing'.



Works on paper from the late 1970s present grids composed of painted paper fragments that, whilst ordered and geometric, distil the possibility of fragility and flaw contained in the human touch. Their surfaces, caressed by an enticing imperfection, are rhythmically undulated from the process of collage, their outer edges stroked by a delicate papery fray. These visual intimations of the artist's hand seem to provide narrative clues, hinting at a weight of meaning beyond the abridged plane. The titles of these paper-works and paintings of the same period – three letter abbreviations that suggest personal initials, abstractions of the proper name – reinforce the sense of the works as somehow coded, and thus narratively as well as visually compelling.

Sutton's paintings from the 80s exhibit a marked shift towards an exploration of the picture plane as a formal unit. The surface of the work is flattened to such a degree that, rather than providing a silent support for the application of paint, the canvas or panel takes on the contours of a closed visual system. Multi-part units of painted shapes are presented as unified anatomies. Some, such as **To You** (1981), are wholly linear and geometrical, fashioned from a confederation of rectangles, triangles and squares. Others are more figuratively suggestive: the plane that dominates **Devil in Love** (1981), for example, appears to mimic the appearance of the protagonist in the painting's literary title.

The dense opacity of acrylic is exchanged for the sensual physicality of oil in work produced from the mid Eighties onward. In **Dreaming** (1999), a square is ensnared within a circle, a single curved edge consuming four discontinuous ones: an enactment of the formal play of geometric hierarchies. The textural richness of these forms, brush marks tracing the grain of the board, weaving a covering of mossy green viscosity, provides a startling contrast to the flat colour block configurations of previous decades.

Two works from 2008, **Reflected (Thousand Island Park)** and **Walking in Roath**, develop this method of layering glazes so that colours are made to bleed and filigree into one another, creating horizontal strokes of gauzy luminescence that impart an atmospheric weight. In works from this period we find powerful invocations of place, paintings that forge intrinsic connections to latitudes and landscapes beyond the picture plane whilst evading geographical or pictorial detail.

In Sutton's most recent paintings, the grid, depicted with a lightness of touch so deft that oil paint is alchemised into a film of watermarked fragments, fluid forms in equal parts tenebrous and diaphanous, held in suspension by ghosts of lines, enacts its spectral return. The re-emergence of the grid does not signify a coming-full-circle. Nor does it signal a regression, the failure of art's progress towards an enlightened manifestation of *Geist*. Instead it reveals Sutton's work to be defined, and by extension, undefined, by an essential flux; harnessing an always-present past, recasting its forms into ever new mappings.

Notes to Editors

Trevor Sutton was born in Essex in 1948 and graduated from the Hornsey College of Art in 1971. He has been exhibiting with Flowers since 1990. This year his new collage paintings have been exhibited in Tokyo and Hiroshima. His work has also been included in the group exhibitions **Black + White**, at Galleri Weinberger in Copenhagen, and **Material Lightness**, a curated exhibition of eight non-figurative artists, at Flowers, London. He has launched a box edition of etchings **Magic Carpet Ride** published by The Cold Press, Norfolk.

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