

“About Painting” at Castlefield Gallery

with 2 comments

[About Painting](#) at [Castlefield Gallery](#), Manchester, curated by Lisa Denyer, is an exploration of contemporary abstract painting, featuring eight artists including me. I hope it's acceptable to review an exhibition in which I am a participant. The artists are : [Claudia Böese](#), [Louisa Chambers](#), [Lisa Denyer](#), [Terry Greene](#), [Matthew Macaulay](#), [David Manley](#), [Andy Parkinson](#) and [Anne Parkinson](#) (no relation). It is an honour to be associated with this group.



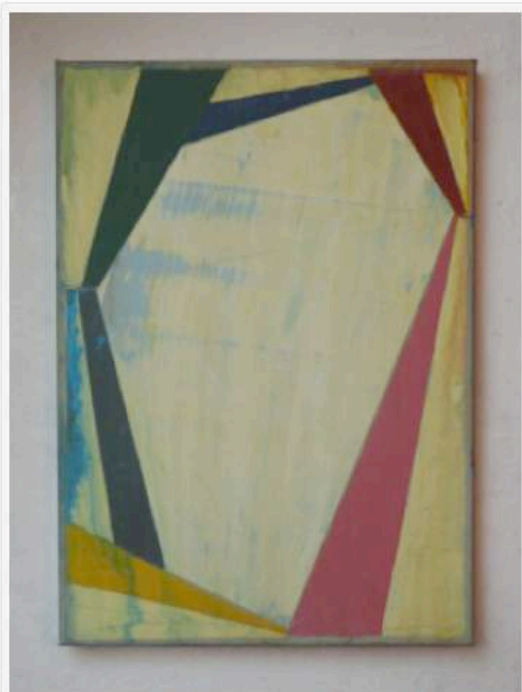
Window of Castlefield Gallery with my own painting "cover" on the wall below.

The gallery, which is this year celebrating its thirtieth year, looks out onto Castlefield and Deansgate rail and metro stops. Today at the opening, on such a warm and sunny evening the place has something of a continental feel to it. The colours of some of the paintings, warm hues against a pristine white backdrop, add to this sensation.



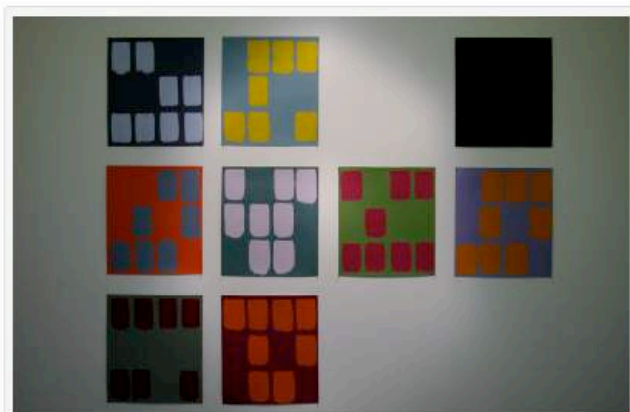
Installation shot, my photo: On wall: paintings by Lisa Denyer, Louisa Chambers and Claudia Böese, On floor: paintings by Claudia Böese, Lisa Denyer and Matthew Macaulay, including painted stones by Lisa Denyer

In the upper gallery, works by Terry Greene, Anne Parkinson and Louisa Chambers kick off the show, and already what I am noticing is the variety of approaches. Greene's paintings are intuitively arrived at, through a process of trial and error, in a context in which it is difficult to define what an "error" might be. In a way it's painting as problem-solving, as opposed to puzzle-deciphering, where I am thinking of problems as having multiple correct answers and puzzles as having just the one correct answer. And whilst this could perhaps be said of all painting, for me, Greene's work gives particular emphasis to this aspect of the medium. Colour/shapes are added and responded to and then, according to some internal logic, some are wiped away with a cloth and then something different laid down in their place. The residue of previous configurations shows through the final arrangement. It would be an overstatement to say that the painting makes itself, along the lines of a self-organising system, but I bet it feels that way to the artist, proceeding by continually asking the painting what it wants to become. *Neighbouring Grounds* wanted to become a ground only, surrounded by other grounds that might also be standing two dimensional figures gathered around a portal when the central area is an absence. When the central area becomes a positive shape then I can divide the action in half diagonally from top right to bottom left, the other shapes joining together to form a warped frame with the three shapes touching the top and left edge receding in space whilst the shapes along the bottom edge and right hand side push forward. Three shapes opposing three others forming an irregular hexagon in the centre.



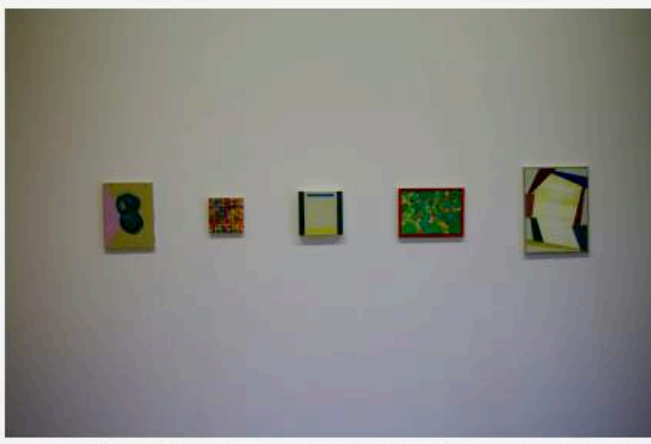
Terry Greene, *Neighboring Grounds*, 2014, Acrylic on canvas, 35x25cm. Image by courtesy of the artist

In Anne Parkinson's approach to painting most of the decision making takes place before the paint is laid down. A system is described according to particular rules, though I am unsure whether I am working them out correctly, perhaps due to the multiple ways we have available to us of classifying our experience. In *Expansion*, nine paintings on unstretched canvases are pinned to the wall in a grid formation, I see a row of three rectangles above a row of four rectangles, above a row of two rectangles, but my brain fills in the 'blanks' to find three rows or four with spaces. Each individual painting similarly has three rows of four rectangles, that could be read as single brush strokes, with units missing, no one arrangement ever repeated. On the top row, one of the paintings is simply a black monochrome rectangle, yet I cannot help but read it as an 'empty' grid now that I have become conditioned to see the grid format. I am recalling [Boolean algebra](#), or digital information theory, where either a 0 or a 1 is the carrier of 'meaning'. Yet the colour and subtle irregularity of paint handling is decidedly analogue.



Anne Parkinson, *Expansion!* 2014, Acrylic on canvas, 95x114cm, my snapshot

If this analogue/digital contrast could be stretched to suggest a theme of something akin to "Technology vs Primitivism" I could claim to find this theme running throughout all modern and contemporary art and certainly it would be a way of codifying the paintings in this show. I feel sure this dichotomy is actually present in the paintings by Louisa Chambers, though I acknowledge my propensity to over-interpret.



Paintings by (left to right) Terry Greene, Andy Parkinson, David Manley, Louisa Chambers and Terry Greene

There are four wonderful paintings by Chambers here, two from her *Flatland* series, one from her *Rotation* series and one from her *Two-Foldness* series. I love her use of colour and the way the images shift and create multiple readings, only one of which can be held at any one time, creating a sense of movement as well as a shifting of space within an essentially two-dimensional framework. Patterns are established and then interrupted, and figuration is suggested and then suspended in a continuous loop. The images have a cartoon like appearance, reminding me at times of TV graphics, and when I find figuration it is often technology or machinery in a landscape that comes to my mind. Issues of playfulness (and its difficulty) within a technologically determined world seem at least alluded to.



Louisa Chambers, Sound Reflector, 2012, Acrylic and oil on canvas, 70x60cm, my snapshot

If in my viewing of Chambers' paintings today it is image that I am most aware of, in David Manley's and Lisa Denyers paintings I am reminded that a painting is also an object. In Manley's delightful small canvases here, he explores a theme based on a proscenium arch that he first began using many years ago, and to which he has recently returned. The colours are inspired by light and colour of Cornish coastal villages, beaches and coves and the scale is small, miniature even, so that what their presentation as beautiful objects is what I see first, the fact that some of these tiny canvases are painted all the way around the sides increases my perception of them as things, also noting that the colours look particularly vibrant along the top, recalling the experience I often have when working on a painting horizontally, the amazing colour I see when the work is flat dissipates the moment I lift the work to view it vertically on the wall. Manley has maintained this colour vitality by continuing the painting around the edges and especially along the top.



Paintings by David Manley, my snapshot

Denyer's paintings on stone are quite evidently objects. In these three dimensional paintings she brings attention to the stone rather than simply decorating it. There is an element of adding something that wasn't there before, especially in the colours she uses, and there is a definite process of 'doing something' to the stone, but I am put more strongly in remembrance of Michelangelo's strategy in relation to his [Prisoner](#) sculptures, where he claimed to draw the forms from within the rock rather than imposing them from without. In bringing my attention to the stones I notice that they are not at all in their natural state, they have already gone through a lengthy process of being quarried, built and demolished. If moments ago, I was thinking in terms of the opposition of digital vs analogue, extended to technological vs primitive, I am now thinking about the natural vs the artificial, which might actually be a subset of the other opposition already referred to.

In Denyer's two dimensional paintings I am once again impressed by the refinement of the carefully made object, as well as by the textures of the surface when she uses found plywood. I think I have said before that I find both affirmation-and-denial of materiality going on here.



Lisa Denyer, Cube, 2014,
Acrylic on found plywood, 28x31cm, my snapshot

I like that in her curation of this exhibition, Denyer has chosen to display the work in interesting ways. Some of her own paintings as well as some of Claudia Böese' and one of Matthew Macaulay's are propped against stones or displayed on plinths, emphasising their materiality. I am also very impressed by the way she has lit my own paintings so that the surface detail that is so difficult to show in a photograph, becomes easier to see.

The charming paintings by Böese here, are varied in style, some are "hard-nosed" abstraction exploring process in grid like arrangements whereas others approach figuration, based on [Chaim Soutine's](#) paintings of flowers, often it's frames and edges that she seems interested in. I sense that this links to metaphorical 'content' both about painting and about the psychological experience of feeling "on the edge" of something.



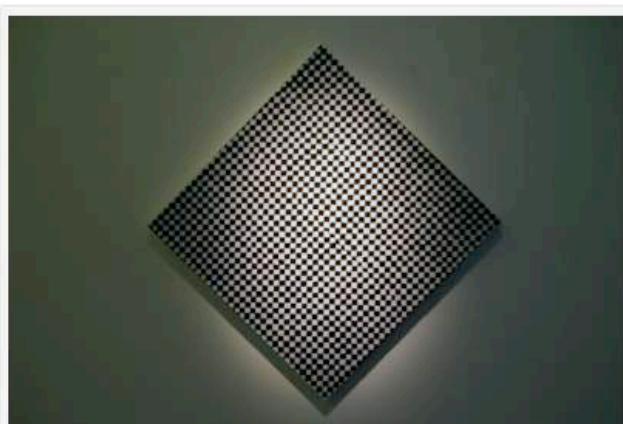
Claudia Böse, Relocation (I), 2010, Oil on board, 36x30cm, My snapshot

Matthew Macaulay's paintings seem to have taken a near-monochrome turn as haptic mark-making and resultant images are unified using a larger swirling gesture, recalling the act of "whitening out" that builders or shopfitters might use on a large window or a vacant storefront. The gesture at once connects to a painting that is urban, vernacular, and largely unconscious. At the same time the colours he employs seem far removed from whitening. In this wonderful painting *Living in a Daydream* for example the overall red glows with an assertive energy. It's energy is all vision and image, whereas its gesture is more texture and material.



Matthew Macaulay, Living in a Daydream, 2014, Oil on board, 40x40cm, my snapshot

In my own systems oriented paintings, I may appear to be doing the opposite of Macaulay, who's affirmation of colour and energy I might even be attempting to obliterate as I cover fluorescent coloured designs with a diagonally oriented chequer pattern. Actually, it's what remains after this process that interests me, the way that colours show through, as well as, and perhaps more importantly, the way that when faced with a black and white pattern, and taking time to look, we involuntarily invent colours of our own.



Andy Parkinson, Contra Check 2, 2014, Mixed media on PVA coated paper on canvas, 50x50cm

<http://patternsthatconnect.wordpress.com/2014/06/23/about-painting-at-castlefield-gallery/>