

abstract *critical*

Abstraction again?

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On 23 September 1940, Piet Mondrian boarded the White Star liner Samaria at Liverpool and sailed for New York. He died there three years later. For the previous two years, now largely forgotten, the Dutch Neo-Plasticist had been living in London, in Belsize Park. He had moved there less from a fear of war than because Alfred H Barr, founder of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, had said that England was the one place where pure abstraction would survive. He was wrong.

The British have always had an odd relationship to abstract art. At times, it has seemed on the point of becoming the national style. This was true in 1938, when Mondrian moved here: painters such as Ben Nicholson and John Piper were making pure abstract works, strongly influenced by the Dutchman's. By 1940, when Mondrian left for America, abstraction had been unofficially outlawed by Sir Kenneth Clark. It came to the fore again in the 1960s, most memorably in the work of painters such as Bridget Riley and Patrick Heron. Again, the recovery was short-lived. This time, it was painting as a whole that came under attack, from the ironising of Postmodernism and theoretical rigours of Conceptualism. Abstract painting, always the hardest to put into words, suffered particularly.

So it is heartening to see this show, and particularly the work of its five degree-show student finalists. Like that of their selectors, this work suggests a truth about abstraction by no means universally acknowledged. Abstract art does not sit outside the mainstream of art in general, locked away in an ivory tower: it is part of the cut-and-thrust of art-making, of the way we are now. Each of the artists in this show is entirely contemporary, and has dealt with contemporaneity in his or her own way.

They are also young: the average age of the short-listed artists for the first abstract critical Newcomer Awards show is 27. This implies an interesting problem. Abstract painting has been out of fashion in most British art schools for at least the last 20 years. If you have wanted to learn about installation or performance or video, there has been no lack of examples to follow or teachers to point you to them. As at British schools after the Second World War, would-be abstract painters have had a much leaner time of it. To a large extent, students such as the ones in this show have had to reinvent abstraction from the ground up. While their German coevals had a more robust tradition to attach themselves to – it is no accident that the only Turner-Prize-winning abstract painter of recent times was born and raised in Kiel – the British chain was broken. Abstraction now is as new as it gets.

The work in this show suggests how immensely liberating that newness is. To the question, What is abstraction? the five participating artists have produced five

different answers. At first glance, Zara Idelson's *In the Garden* seems to follow in an English lyrical tradition, although a second look suggests something tougher and more dangerous going on. Dan Roach, too, understands the history of abstraction, but peoples his own new abstract world with hexagons – wavering ghost-shapes that cluster and disperse like living cells. Like the painting itself, the title of Gwenann Thomas's *Black*, like snow plays with ideas of prettiness only to dismiss them. Jack Sutherland's *Prosecution of the Grand Dream* edges towards geometric abstraction while at the same time leading us into a precise and perspectival dream-world. And *Looking Good* by Katy Kirbach takes its painstaking grammar and meticulous forms to an end that is unexpectedly allusive and poetic. There is no single voice to the work in this show, which is as it should be. Diversity is a measure of strength, a sign of growth. Perhaps Alfred Barr was right.

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