

bernard jacobson gallery

Denny, Hoyland, Smith, Vaux

On Paper

2nd February – 5th March 2022

On Paper, an exhibition of works by Modern British icons Robyn Denny, John Hoyland, Richard Smith and Marc Vaux. Departing from the 1960s, a time when artists sought to shun the confines of British semi-abstract painterly tradition of London and the St. Ives School, the exhibition explores the dialogue between each of these four artists' distinctive use of the medium as they champion new advances in abstract painting.

Having risen to prominence during the ground-breaking *Situation* exhibition at the RBA (Royal Society of British Artists) Galleries in September of 1960, Denny, Smith and Vaux emerged from a London that was still suffering the after-effects of the II World War. Drenched in an overarching mood of austerity, London was looked upon by the art world as a stagnant backwater, especially when juxtaposed with the buoyant art scenes of Paris and New York. To the Situation Group - whom the four artist's belonged to - the 1959 Tate Gallery exhibition of Abstract Expressionism – *The New American Painting*, galvanised their urge for radical change, and the powerful influence of the American painters manifested itself in the ethos of the group. Hoyland, although having not participated in the Situation exhibition, came to display his work with the group during their short-lived but influential existence.

Missing a defined group identity, the Situation artists were nevertheless linked by their desire to showcase large, abstract work, that emphasised the importance of working with purely painterly elements, without explicit reference to discernible objects and phenomena. Symmetry therefore lent itself as a key implement from which to develop a new visual language as witnessed in the works of Denny and Vaux.

In *Untitled* (1964), Marc Vaux explores the juxtaposition of absolute regularity and anarchical impulse by laying out perfectly sequenced squares and superimposing gestural slashes of paint. Through placing the erratic and the symmetrical together, Vaux reconciles attitudes to painting which were normally thought to be mutually contradictory in the classical and romantic traditions. Similarly exploring modes of perception, Robyn Denny's razor-sharp arrangements in *Untitled 4* (1981), demonstrate the painter's capacity to evoke classical

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notions of painting without any of the apparatus of representation. By focusing on space, surface, colour and formal structure, Denny alludes to visual relationships of the physical and architectural world, without having to surrender to figurative methods.

Richard Smith, of all the artists in the exhibition, was the most enraptured by American culture, which attributed his architectonic compositions a strangely artificial quality, often referencing boxes, cartons, even cigarette packages, and the mood of Pop Art. Instinctively, his interest in packaging and construction led him to experiment with surgically precise incisions and folding of the paper, as seen in *Large Green Drawing* (1970). On the other hand, John Hoyland embraced the exuberant chaos inherent in modern abstraction instead of the strict, compositional structures of some of the other Situation artists. To Hoyland, the ambiguities that arose from the arrangement of motif, texture, colour and enveloping ground were a main concern, only loosely relying on geometric forms to convey perceptual experiences such as in *Untitled* (1972).

The collective impact the artists on display had in the development of British art and abstract painting both locally and internationally was remarkable, namely in view of the challenge. As art critic John Russel poignantly observed, *“one characteristic of the new situation in art is that the opportunities before a young artist are not too few but too many. The whole of art, past and present, lies open to him: anything is allowed, and most things are encouraged. The painter’s difficulty lies, therefore in judging just where his particular gift will find fulfilment.”*

By reaffirming the language of abstraction with a new growing objectivity, Denny, Hoyland, Smith and Vaux made significant strides in the solidification of British art as a cultural force, settling London as a fertile ground for new and emerging art to bloom once again.

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