

# bernard jacobson gallery

Robyn Denny

Paintings from the '60s

19<sup>th</sup> December 2007 – 20<sup>th</sup> January 2008

'He's a minimalist compared to Bonnard and he's a humanist compared to religious art. But he shares with good artists of any era the ability to touch something deep inside us, to make us feel life is worth living.'

M. Collings, 2007

Robyn Denny's paintings on display at Bernard Jacobson Gallery possess a strange countenance. At once still and pulsating, rational and mysterious, somber and playful, closed and expansive, they elide easy categories or fast answers. Dating from the 1960's they belong to one of the most accomplished periods of the artists career to date, and continue to resonate with a power and intensity, which belies the clear structure of their composition while conforming to Denny's desire that 'no painting should reveal all it has to say as a kind of instant impact'.

Denny was born in 1930, in Surrey, and belongs to a generation of British abstract artists who, having passed through London art schools in the 1950s, had by the turn of the decade made a decisive break with the pastoral abstraction of the preceding era. Having absorbed the practical example of recent American abstract painting and explored a range of solutions to his theoretical interests in contemporary notions of social interactivity and the nature of language, symbol and image in art, Denny had, by the early 1960s, arrived at what we might call his mature style. From this point onwards, pared down abstract compositions, in which hard edge abstract forms wrestle with planes of tonal colour, were to form the bulk of Denny's production.

The impact of such works is significant. Rigorously non-referential, the modulation of pitch and tone, structure and form, plane and contour sets up a flickering effect that simultaneously entices and withstands the viewers gaze. As Michael Fried put it, 'at the same time that the spectator is invited to enter and grab hold, he is held back by the awareness that these are after all merely paintings'. It is the multiple irresolution of these fixed and fixing works that furnishes them with their unique power and beauty. Situated at a strange point of human

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experience between the personal and the detached, the material and the spiritual, they push the viewer into strange and new perceptual modes and maintain a strong hold long after their initial impact.

The power and originality of Denny's vision meant that in 1966 he was selected alongside Anthony Caro, Richard Smith and Bernard and Harold Cohen to represent Britain at the Venice Biennale and by 1973 had become the youngest artist to ever to be given a retrospective by the Tate. Many of the works on display at Bernard Jacobson received their first exhibition in these shows. Also on display are a number of the artist's prints from the 1970s in which his continued exploration of compositional and structural issues is well displayed.

The artist continues to live and work in London, but spends a great portion of each year in France. The opportunity to view these early works together again provides a fascinating insight into the development of a distinguished career fundamental to the history of British art and wider abstraction.