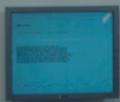


Nottingham
Contemporary



Somewhat Abstract



For more information

If you have any questions or want to find out more about the exhibition, please ask our friendly Gallery Assistants. They're here to help.

Join us on our Wednesday Walkthroughs led by our staff and guests for more information about selected artworks and the ideas behind the exhibition. Please see our website for details.

If you would like to read more about the exhibition, or watch videos about the artists and artworks, please use our Study, off Gallery 1. Or you can learn more online by visiting the Research and Archive areas of our website.



Front cover image: Cerith Wyn Evans, "Diary: How to Improve the world (you will only make matters worse) continued 1968 (revised)" from 'M' writings '67-'72 by John Cage. 2003. Arts Council Collection Southbank Centre, London.

Back cover image: Amikam Toren, Received Wisdom, 2006. Arts Council Collection, Southbank Centre, London. Courtesy Anthony Reynolds Gallery, London

Logo by Klaus Weber

Somewhat Abstract

Selections from The Arts Council Collection

12 Apr — 29 Jun 2014

Founded in 1946, The Arts Council Collection is the largest national loan collection of modern and British art. Somewhat Abstract is the largest exhibition drawn from the Collection since 2006. It features many of the most celebrated figures in British art since World War II, including eight Turner Prize winners.

Spanning seven decades of British art the exhibition's common thread is abstraction – but it isn't limited to abstract art. The exhibition also includes many examples of figurative art on the verge of abstraction, as well as art that isn't abstract but that could not have been made without knowledge of it. Abstract art, the exhibition argues, is many things, if it can be said to exist at all. Is there such a thing as an artwork with no relationship to the visible world?

In the mid twentieth century the major schism in modern art was between abstract and figurative art. However as some of the earlier work in this exhibition shows, there

were many artists making work that shared attributes of both. Is Eduardo Paolozzi's *The Frog* figurative or abstract? Is Francis Bacon's *Pope* simply surrounded by dark brushstrokes or has the artist transplanted him from the glory of St Peter's to some benighted cave? Does the movement we sense in Anthony Caro's *Slow Movement* and Bridget Riley's *Movement in Squares* relate to sculpture and painting's geometry alone, or do they also evoke movement as seen and experienced in the world? To what extent do the forms and colours of Prunella Clough's abstract paintings from the 1960s onwards contain the after images of her earlier, similarly coloured compositions of the marine warehouses of the east coast?

By the end of the 1960s abstraction in painting and sculpture was no longer art's vanguard. The pop artists used various representational strategies to depict a world reshaped by consumerism. The minimalists carved out space with impersonal, factory-made structures alien to any sculptural tradition. Conceptual art in turn privileged ideas over aesthetics. Performance art emphasised action and time over object and space. The works in this exhibition are not archetypes of these and other movements familiar from art history books, but they touch on them, or are informed by them. There are, after all, as many significant artists who fall outside identifiable art movements as there are artists who typify them. It is often these less definable artists that contemporary artists look to today.



Eduardo Paolozzi, *The Frog*. 1958. Arts Council Collection, Southbank Centre, London.
© Trustees of the Paolozzi Foundation, Licensed by DACS 2014.



Martin Boyce, *Dark Unit and Mask*, 2003. Arts Council Collection, Southbank Centre, London.

Much of the more recent work in the exhibition has a paradoxical relationship to abstraction. Gustav Metzger uses abstraction at first to obliterate, then make one physically enter a photographic image of a traumatic episode in history. Christine Borland's square grey blanket on the floor also looks superficially like a minimalist abstract painting, but the marks on its surface are bullet holes she has mended like a hole in a sock. Amikam Toren's "painting" is not made of grey paint but a pulped edition of *The Times*, whose information he renders abstract. Keith Coventry's *Crack City* paintings mimic the revolutionary early twentieth century art of Kazimir Malevich, but they turn out to be the footprints of dysfunctional South London tower blocks rather than abstract art heralding cosmic utopia.

Elegant, functionalist, mid twentieth century design classics by Charles Eames and Arne Jacobsen become enigmatic and fetish-like in Martin Boyce's *Dark Unit* and *Mask*. Armando Andrade Tudela finds abstract paintings on the backs of trucks in his native Peru. In a quite different spirit, the modern ruins in Zarina Bhimji's work bear haunting testimony to the ethnic cleansing of Asian Ugandans by Idi Amin in the 1970s. Absence and presence, negative and positive space, are the preoccupations of Rachel Whiteread's sculpture. Whiteread is best known for casting an entire East End house in plaster in 1993.

Works such as these bring abstraction back down to earth. They also reveal how abstractions shape our world, whether through the geometry of the modern built environment, the social abstractions of government policy units, the financial abstractions of global capitalism, the zeros and ones that determine all computer operations, or the coloured squares of light that are the building blocks of now all-pervasive digital imagery.

That worldliness takes corporeal form in post-feminist works of the 1980s and 1990s by artists including Helen Chadwick, Cathy de Monchaux and Laura Godfrey-Isaacs who challenged the mind/body split in the Western worldview, and its patriarchal association of the intellect with masculinity and biology with femininity. Beginning around this time, the oil and gloss paint on Alexis Harding's paintings sags like heavy skin. Rebecca Warren's abstracted sculptural nudes in bronze and clay invoke and caricature the long lineage of female nudes by modern masters such as Rodin, Picasso, Matisse and de Kooning.

Abstraction in painting and sculpture has made a return in the past decade. Mid century abstraction was often associated with boldness of scale, conception and execution – “tough” was a complement back then. Introversion, reticence or fragility are characteristics in the work of Tomma Abts, Varda Caivano, Karla Black, Lucy Skaer and Karin Ruggaber. Abts has been making small paintings of exactly the same size for more than a decade now. Seemingly related to the constructivist



Tomma Abts, Heit, 2011. Arts Council Collection, Southbank Centre, London.
Photo: Marcus Leith. Courtesy of greengrassi, London



Daniel Sinsel, *Untitled*, 2012. Arts Council Collection, Southbank Centre, London. © the artist, courtesy Sadie Coles HQ, London

strain in abstraction, exemplified in *Somewhat Abstract* by Kenneth Martin, each painting retains the physical imprint of layers of trial and error. Abts gives each painting an obscure proper name for its title, somehow emphasising the introverted character of each painting. Caivano's paintings, though varying in size, are also smallish and intense. Each of her more painterly canvases is the compelling sum of micro-decisions and indecisions. Although often large, Black's choice of fragile materials and pale colours, with their stereotypically feminine associations, pointedly contrast with the heavy metal tradition of modern sculpture.

These days many artists move nimbly between abstraction and representation. Daniel Sinsel, represented here by an almost photorealistic painting of a geometric arrangement of cloth, is a case in point. Another might be Wolfgang Tillmans, who over the last years has made coloured photograms of various kinds (made by exposing photographic paper to light), alongside photography of myriad subjects made with a camera. For Tillmans, an artist profoundly concerned with representing the multiplicity of lived experience, abstraction belongs to the wider visual repertoire available to artists today.

Alex Farquharson
Director
Nottingham Contemporary

Gallery 1

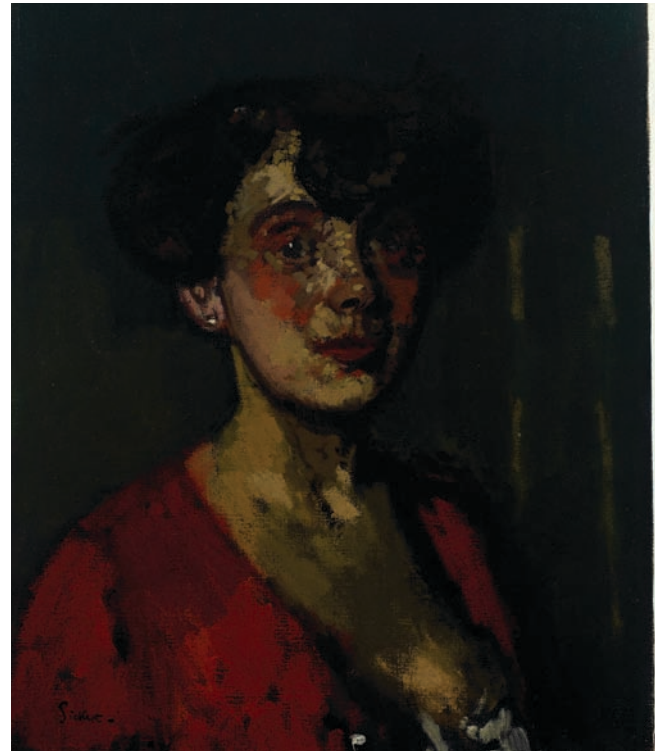
Instead of a room-by-room chronological approach, this exhibition brings together works from different periods according to shared concerns. Symbols of power and authority, linked to the fragility of the body, are arranged around Bacon's iconic Head VI, his earliest surviving Pope painting. Works in the centre of this gallery are concerned with ways modernist design and architecture attempted to reshape society and the urban environment, producing social abstractions in turn - Willats, Toren, Lewis, Coventry, Boyce.



Mark Lewis, Children's Games, Heygate Estate, 2002. Arts Council Collection, Southbank Centre, London

Gallery 2

This room features Walter Sickert and David Bomberg, two artists from outside the time-period of the exhibition. Sickert taught and influenced Bomberg, who in turn taught Frank Auerbach and Metzger – both refugees from Nazi Germany – who reacted to his teaching in quite different ways. The spectre of history haunts Bhimji's work in this gallery, and more abstractly, Whiteread's too.



Walter Sickert, Head of a Woman, 1906. Arts Council Collection, Southbank Centre, London. © Estate of Walter R. Sickert.

Gallery 3

This gallery contains many works that subtly represent the natural environment. It includes a pond, a moorhen, a mountain range, flowers, a cat on a bombsite and perhaps a frog. A magnificent square lake of red paint dominates John Hoyland's large canvas. Kathy Prendergast and Rita Donagh each engage in complex forms of map-making.



John Hoyland, Red Over Yellow, 18.9.73, 1973. Arts Council Collection, Southbank Centre, London. © Estate of John Hoyland. All rights reserved, DACS 2014

Gallery 4

The artworks in the tall gallery are the exhibition's most buoyant. Peter Lanyon took up gliding to experience the elements of air and water off the Cornish coast. Soaring Flight, the title of his abstract expressionist canvas, says it all. Richard Smith's stitched multi-panel painting relates to his experiments in three-dimensional painting with kite-like structures. The grace and athleticism of the body is another subject of the works in this gallery by Wolfgang Tillmans and Hilary Lloyd. Karla Black's large sculpture reveals a similar concern for gesture and suspension. The colour-forms in Bridget Riley's studies for paintings from the 1960s and 1970s recall physical forces – torsion, flexing, tearing away – as well as fluctuating temperature. Finally Cerith Wyn Evans' language-carrying chandelier is an abstract elegy to the poetry of thought.

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Wolfgang Tillmans, *Gedser*, 2004. Arts Council Collection, Southbank Centre, London.
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