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Ron Left

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The invisible stirs the surface of the visible

Foreword

Now + Then presents a body of new work (as part of the Fenestra Series 2020/2021), alongside a selection of works dating back to 1975. This show is neither a retrospective nor historical survey. Rather, earlier works are used to reveal a range of concerns and key moments that relate to the current paintings. The ideas presented are not intended to develop inclusive contexts for these works or any sense of chronological development, but to use selected works to generate discussion on specific developments and obsessions over many years. Although completed in many cases decades ago, these works are still current in the sense that the ideas explored through them have an on-going life of reinvention and reinterpretation.

Consequently, individual works have a double life; the moment and time of their making, and the on-going life of reconstruction through new iterations and interpretations. In this sense paintings are complexly temporal in that they are fixed in a specific moment, while also migrating into the future of themselves and other engagements. Since 2020 I have been working on a large body of work titled the *Fenestra* Series.

The Latin word fenestra refers to a window, but also more widely to an opening, a niche or portal. Penetrating the solidity of a wall the window is a space of passing through, of shifting images, reflections and shadow. Like the retina it is a screen on which images coalesce. The word fenestra, with its associational richness, appears in a multitude of interpretations. The term, for example, is adopted in Biology to refer to small holes in bone structure, and to the tiny passage between middle and inner ear, where sound waves pass and are transformed into electrical triggers to become audible meaning. As with all passages, nothing that passes through emerges unchanged. Paintings are loaded with edges and borders; places of passing through, across and into.

Windows are spaceless screens on which invisible forces play. They mist and fog, obscure and reveal. Scientifically, a glass pane is somewhere between a solid and an imperceptibly slow moving liquid. In a sense a painting is a surface where condensation takes place; where ideas, images, memory and experience condense and are compacted in the materiality of paint, surface and gesture.

The paintings in the series do not represent actual windows. The Fenestra title is an entry into the works through analogy. The paintings are more concerned with liquid, moving states than solid, established ones, generating movement and transformation. There are multiple movements in the works; the painterly flows and runs, the vertical spine-like movements beyond the frame, the hints of grids that migrate out in all directions. There are multiple points of focus, often in semi gridded planes with little ability to focus on any one centre, forcing the eye to wander across the surface. In an analogous dynamic to the surface screen of a window, invisible tensions appear to disturb and transform the painting plane.

The following sections begin a discussion related to specific on-going ideas and processes. They are deliberately separated to give them more intensity and to allow the reader/viewer to work in between in making connections, applying ideas and words to the work, and forming interpretations.

The Hinge



—
A mirror image
hinges off its twin

—
Fenestra No.20
2021
Acrylic on plywood
740 X 740mm



1.

The Hinge

Processes of hinging and anchoring are ubiquitous and multifarious. The analogy of the hinge refers to devices in the work that, although having a material, aesthetic form, are more like processes. Hinging involves separate things kept apart and simultaneously brought together, like the corner of a room. The hinge is a fulcrum, about which things open and close, swing and traverse space.

There are the fixed, mortised hinges of necessity, the tentative hinges of uncertainty, the two ambivalent anchors of belonging and the known, and the pull of the oceanic and the void. The hinge of memory, of a thing and its shadow, page to page, the perpetual relocating hinge of the present to the past and the future, the hard-wired hinges of place, hinges of proximity, association, the tremulous hinges of attraction.

The relationship of the two squares in *Painting No.5* (1983) might best be described as two forms hinged together with the suggestion of movement into new spaces. Equally the configuration could be read as a single square and how it might appear if swung down on its own hinge. This relationship is perhaps akin to that of an object and its shadow.



—
Painting No. 5
1983
Acrylic on board
1730 X 1010mm

In poetic rhyming, the hinging of words forms dynamic links of sound, rhythm and association. In the art work similar devices operate at producing visual connections, patterns and energies across the surface. Many works are diptych in form, with each panel hinting at a mirror image of the other. These dynamic connections involve more than relationships of juxtaposition, contrasts and links.

—
Fenestra No.22
2021
Acrylic on plywood
740 X 740mm

In *Fenestra No.22* (2021) vertebral anchor points in an undifferentiated field act as a central hinge around which the painting surface unfolds. Across the plane incomplete hints or ghosts of these dark anchor points repeat. These work more as visual manifestations of processes of influence or connection than as actual solid forms. These are visual poetics of how the visible hinges to the invisible.



The hermetic abstract square of *Shadow Painting No.1*, 2019, is in fact underpinned by a shadowy photographic image of the corner of a room split into two mirror images.

—
Shadow Painting No. 1
2017
Acrylic and photographic image on aluminium
500 X 500mm

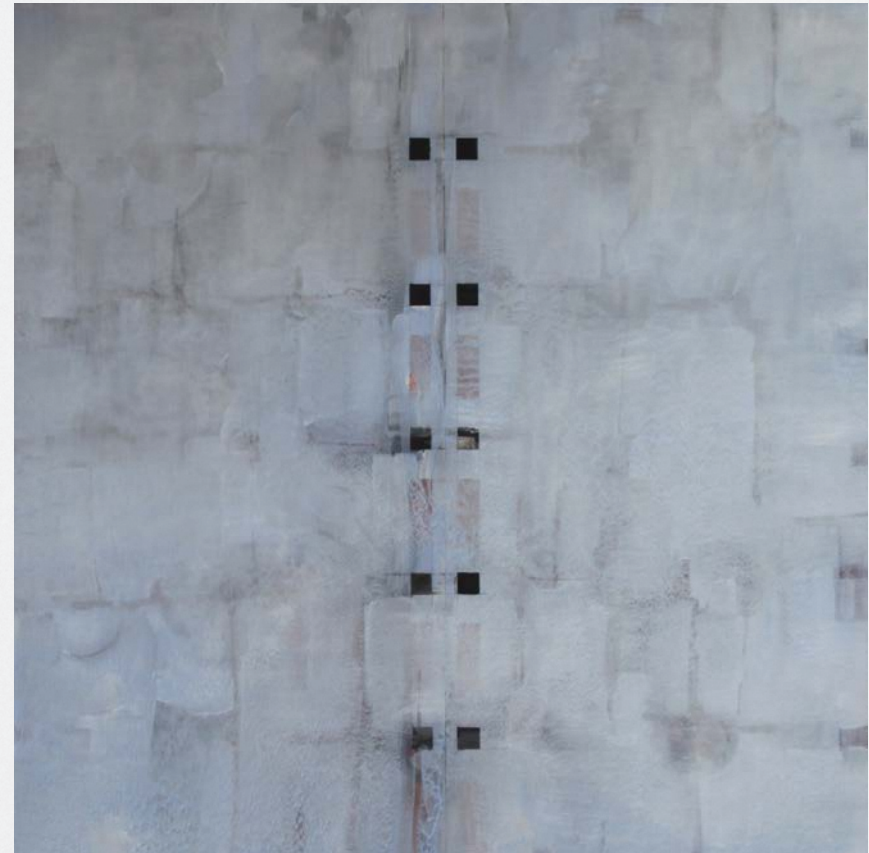


Surface



**There are no surfaces,
there are only surfaces**

—
Fenestra No.24
2021
Acrylic on plywood
740 X 740mm



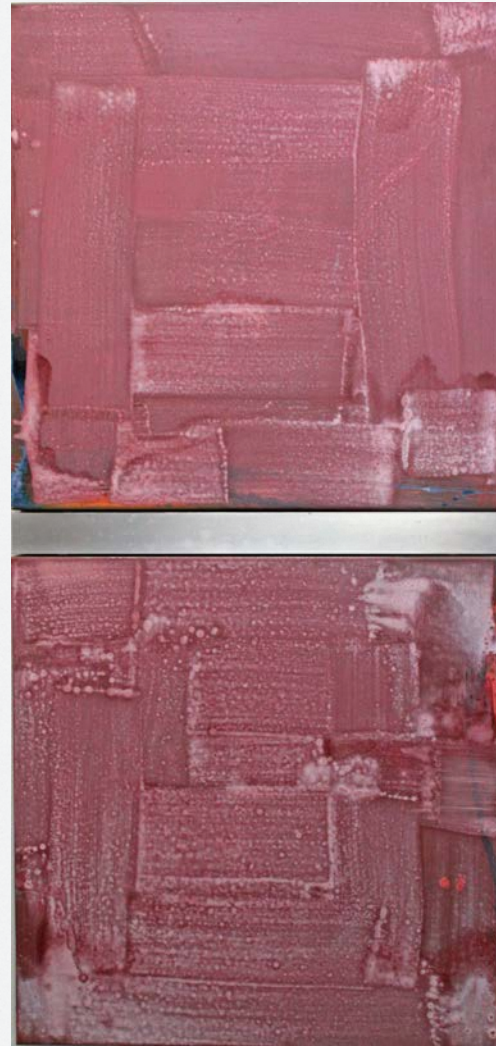
2.

Surface

—
Channel Painting No4
1987
Acrylic on aluminium
1260 X 600mm

Concern with surface has always been fundamental to my work; the support itself, flatness, edges, materiality. Beyond this however, the exclusion of illusory space allows a more complex exploration of space/time and poetics of transformation.

Aluminium sheet as a painting surface has served in my work as a means to reduce the visual weight of the support and the frame, to allow painting to become almost a skin of paint. In this way the painting, although determinedly material and painterly, is able to transcend its own materiality. In *Channel Painting No4* (1987) the aluminium sheet is folded back to project the thin surface out from the wall. The two panels are split by a horizontal aluminium channel. Edges, joins and junctures become dynamic sites where one surface transitions into another.



—
Fenestra No.25
2021
Acrylic on plywood
740 X 740mm

Paintings in the *Wind/screen Series* (2017 see page xx.) incorporate photographic images taken through a windscreen in a carwash. These images have been laminated onto aluminium sheet, overpainted to create a dynamic interaction between image and abstraction. This photographic source is already half way to an art work; it is a flat screen on which liquid forces play. It is like being inside a movie, or seeing out from behind the eye's retina and witnessing a field of shifting light and gesture. Everything is fluid, including the boundary between photographic image and abstract surface, which appear to mimic each other.

Just as obscuring or disguising an object draws attention to it, rupturing the skin of a surface emphasises its surfaceness.

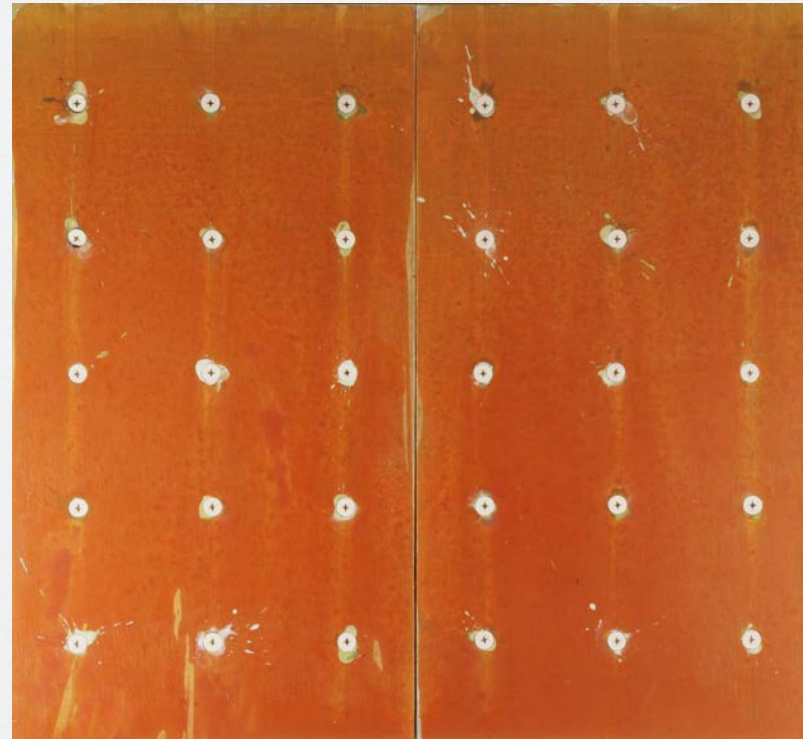


**Ruptures
in the Surface**



**A hole is a
significant nothing**

—
Orange Plug Painting
2004
Acrylic and plastic plugs on plywood
583 X 640mm



3.

Ruptures in the Surface

—
*Escalator Painting
No. 4*
2017
Acrylic and
photographic
image on
aluminium
900 X 1600mm



Throughout my work there has been an unease with the hermetic nature of minimal abstraction. This has manifested in numerous ways, including a number of series predicated on the puncturing of the surface. Self-sufficient surfaces are broken into, penetrated by perforations into an ambiguous space behind the work.

In *Orange Plug Painting* (2004) the holes penetrating the surface are plugged, arresting the tiny spatters of paint appearing from behind the surface. Energy is captured in the moment of its creation, drawing attention to something going on behind the scene. The plugs are functional joining devices usually hidden in the structure of furniture. Like the meaningless word and, they connect and create meaning around them. Here they float to the surface as manifestations of connection and energy.

The capturing of painterly moments on a surface becomes almost the subject of the work. Tiny gestural events spatter out from behind the painting, frozen and plugged to arrest an image of gesture and invention.

Holes are ambiguous entities. They are at once nothing and significant. They open up at the same time as containing a secret space within.

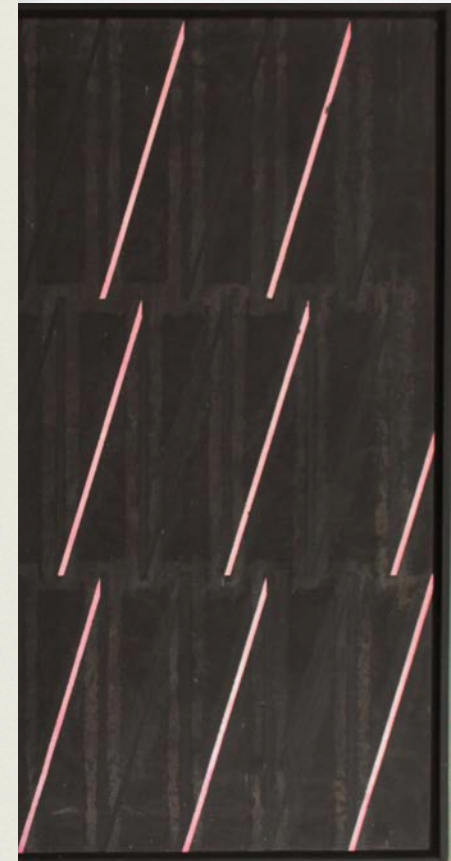
In *Escalator Painting No4* (2019) a monochromatic pour of red almost covers the surface, exposing a photographic image beneath. Beneath one surface another is revealed, as layers of association.

In a recent work, *Fenestra No7, Nocte Fenestra* (2020) small punctures in its surface allow paint to spatter and trickle from behind the painting. These are simultaneously both physical actions and metaphorical devices. They allude to something going on behind the work.

—
*Fenestra No.7
(Nocte Fenestra)*
2021
Acrylic on plywood
950 X 655

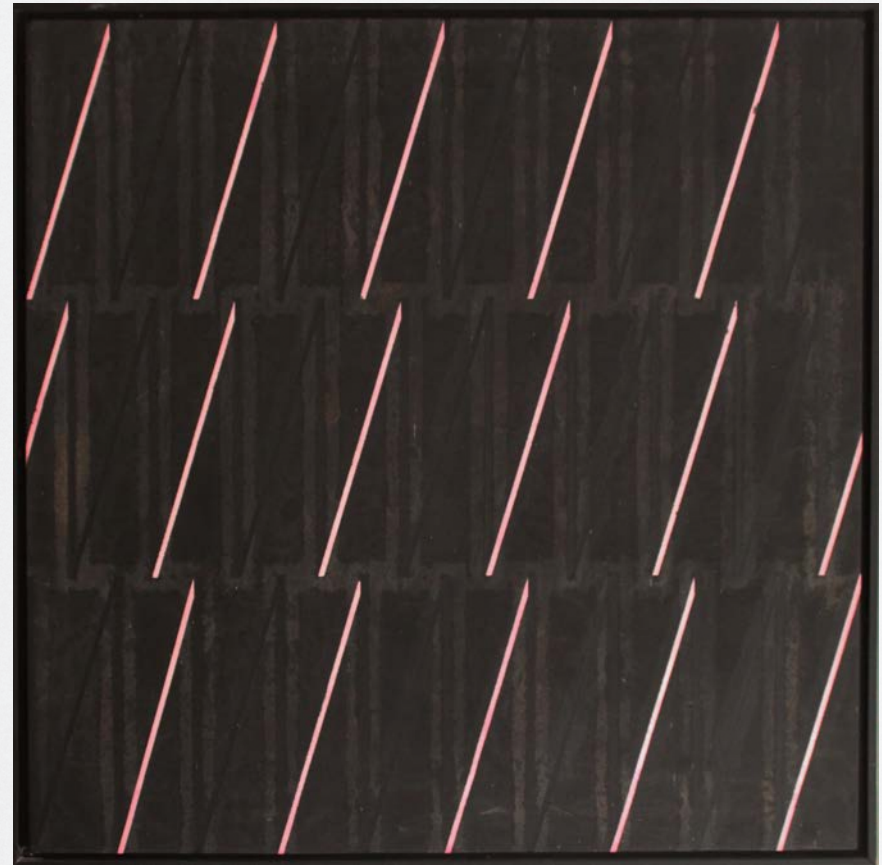


The Grid



A grid is a
temporal diagram

—
Untitled No6
1977
Acrylic on canvas
945 X 945mm



4.

The Grid

Over many years gridded structures resurface in my work, interrogating the nature and function of the grid over time. Contrary to a Modernist reading of the grid as reductive geometry, in my work it serves as a way of generating continuity across and beyond the surface. At the same time, the use of gestures and activity on the points of the grid denies complete continuity and sameness. The resulting dynamic is one of constant reinvention and outward connection.

The grid is considered not as a spatial device but rather a temporal one, in that it generates movement across the surface, into and out of the frame. The grid is repetitious but each point is unique, like a tiny moment in a field of momentum and change. I use the grid and repetition not as a mathematical, objective structure, but with each point on the continuity of surface as a perceived, subjective moment. The grid implies movement, in all directions across and beyond the frame.

The grid in *Fenestra No.19* (2021) is not a fully realised diagram. A deep need for order appears on the surface with just enough structural presence for liquid, inventive gestures to be grounded. Like a musical stave, the gridded surface is the objective frame around which invention plays. Even the supposedly objective perfection of the grid is susceptible to inventive play. It appears, fades out, has its own colour and ambiguity.



—
Fenestra No.19
2021
Acrylic on plywood
740 X 740mm



—
Fenestra No.23
2021
Acrylic on plywood
740 X 740mm

Beyond the frame

**As much of a
painting lies outside
its frame as inside.**



—
Escalator Painting No6
2017
Acrylic and photographic
image on aluminium
1800 X 1100mm



5.

Beyond the frame

Outside of their internal dynamics, paintings have a magnetic field, gathering an external, ever shifting accumulation of contexts, associations and interpretations. Alongside the use of the grid to draw space and perception beyond the edge, there are numerous other devices that have the same agenda. My work has always had a fascination for ambiguous surfaces that are at once abstract, self-contained and constructively stable, while at the same time shifting visually, physically or conceptually outside the frame.

In Escalator Painting No.6 (2017) we are drawn into the space of the painting and perceptually transported up and out. The pours and gestures of paint themselves start outside the edge of the work and flow beyond the frame. What is suggested in this reference to beyond the frame, is not solely the outside physical world, but the world of the invisible lining up against the actual. Marrati connects the inside of the frame with the invisible, in that "... what is seen through the image itself always opens onto the invisible" (Marrati, 2008, p. 22). The frame is thus seen as not only porous but a fulcrum between inside and outside, the visible and the invisible, and the physical and virtual fields.

Travelling on the escalator is such a normalised experience and yet it is a strange place where the normal movement of people and things in space is reversed. We stand still and the space itself moves. Space and time seem to become one. Things enter the frame of the escalator and disappear out the other side, continuously re-populating the field of our vision. It is almost like a still life in which the objects in the composition are constantly recycled through the work.

—
Wind/screen Series No1
2019
Acrylic and photographic
image on aluminium
XXX X XXXmm

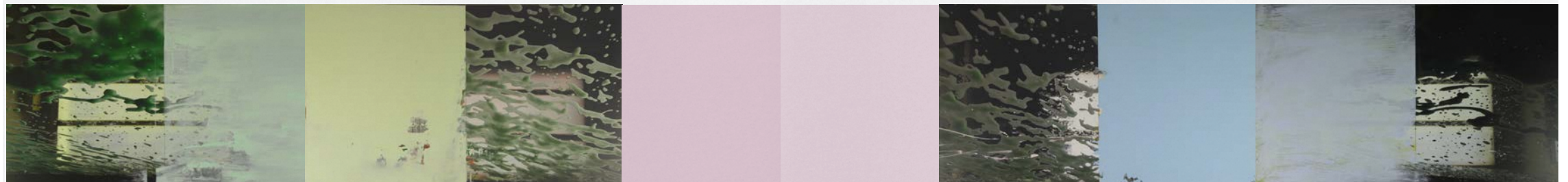


—
Unfurling No.6
1989
Acrylic on aluminium
1480 X 600 X 230mmD

In Unfurling No.6 (1989) the surface of the otherwise flat painting unrolls like a scroll and curls into the space of the viewer.

Wind/screen Series No.1 (2018) comprises five aluminium panels, each linking with surrounding surfaces. The work explores not only the explosive gestures playing out on the windscreen in a carwash, but an almost filmic structure that alludes to continuation beyond its edges.

As discussed in the section on the grid, repetitious geometries spread space out across the surface of many works, implying continuity beyond the edges of the frame. In many recent *Fenestra* works the dominating central squares appear also at the outer edges as tremulous hints of continuation and interaction beyond the frame.



**Gesture
revisited**

**Gesture is the play
of the invisible
and the visible**



—
Escalator Painting No6
2017
Acrylic and photographic
image on aluminium
1800 X 1100mm



6.

Gesture revisted

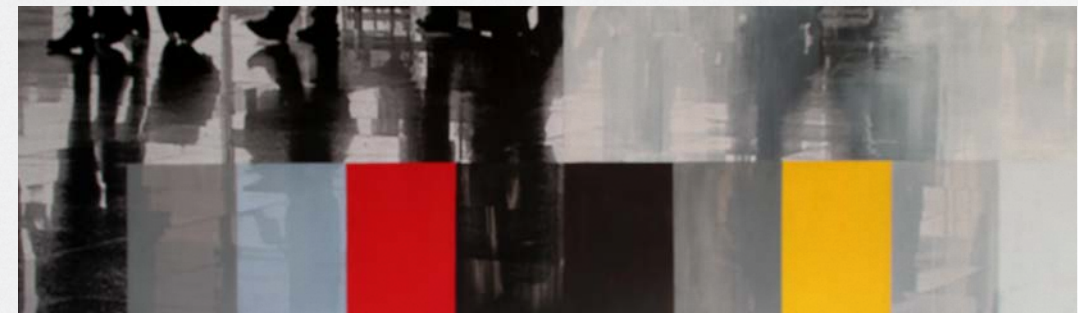
Over the last few years I have become engaged in re-examining modes of gesture. A primary focus in revisiting the nature and form of gesture has been to find painterly modes which site gesture not solely in the control of the artist's hand. In many works marks, splatters and runs seem to be generated partly from outside forces, In *Fenestra No.7 Nocte Fenestra*, (2020) gesture takes the form of tiny, accidental splatters and trickles appearing from behind the surface of the work. These repeat in a rhythmic flow across the painting. It is almost as though the artist has drilled down, liberating invisible forces in a play with paint on a screen.

In a recent work from the *Fenestra* series, *Fenestra No4* (2020) the paint surface opens at junction points to reveal underlying circular, rhythmic gestures. These are unlike the artist's signature gestures of Abstract Expressionism in that they appear to come from somewhere else besides the hand of the painter. In this sense they are not solely the signature gestures of an artist. These gesticulations are rhythmic and repeated, more like a sign language than the improvised movements of Abstract Expressionism. To this end gesture is closer to sound or noise than to a calligraphic display, a project that James Joyce, for example, undertook in text and language. Joyce sought a form of language where gesture was not an emphasis but a rhythm. (Joyce, 1983).

Since 2015 I have become interested in gestures that have an origin at least partly outside of the artists play with material. The most overt example of this is in the *Wind/screen Series*, 2017. In *Wind/screen No.1* (2017) the paint-like calligraphic movements flow across the surface, seemingly mimicking an artistic processes. Although the artist captures these 'gestural' moments in the fluid world of the carwash, they are a priori to, and spatially outside of the making of the artwork; the flowing, liquid play across the screen, obscuring and blurring outside space. Simultaneously they blur the distinction between the process of painting and external processes. The interaction of invisible forces of gravity, of cohesion and repulsion, play with the material at hand, and coalesce on the retina of the windscreens. Not only do the boundaries between photography and painting bleed into one another, but gesture itself is seen as not solely a human display, but a ubiquitous external process of interaction and creative transformation.



—
Fenestra No.14
2020
Acrylic on plywood
XXX X XXXmm



—
Shadow Painting No2
2017
Acrylic and photographic
image on aluminium
580 X 2000mm

Afterword

What links these new works and earlier paintings? There are perhaps the more obvious connections; the on-going obsession with and reinvention of abstraction, the power of colour, the development of dynamic structure simultaneous with a certain transcending of structure. There is the privileging of movement and energy rather than stasis. A commitment to a form of slow, contemplative, aesthetic abstraction has been underpinned by an obsession with agnostic, ontological states.

These concerns form the history of the work and its development, with an undercurrent of links and connections punctuated by moments of new discovery, breakthrough and direction. The *Tondo* Series of 1975 was such a moment of radical change. In *Tondo No. 7 (Dark Tondo)* (1975), the circle, which had appeared in my work prior to this, has been cut from background space. There is no residue of landscape, of figure and ground, of illusory space.

And what is the relationship between the work and the writing? For me they are parallel practices that often work in productive tandem. Painting is a process of synthesising and embedding. Through writing, ideas are unpacked and laid out. Juggling these parallel practices of accumulation, synthesis and compressing, laying out and making conscious, is the on-going push and pull of a painter.

There is another field of connection between these works spanning 46 years. Paintings have a strange life. They come into being in a very short time, but are a synthesis of long periods of pondering, looking, making, eliminating, reading and listening. The life of a painting is not fixed at the moment of its making. The artist keeps it alive through constant reinvention and re-interpretation. The Romanian philosopher Cioran alluded to this in a beautifully succinct statement, "Everything that can be classified is perishable, only that which is susceptible to several interpretations endures" (Cioran, 1986). As much as the earlier work informs current practice, there is a continuous re-appraisal and understanding of previous work through current thinking. In this sense the future informs the past as much as the other way around. An overt example is *Fenestra No.18* (2021) constructed in 1993, reworked in 1995 and completed in 2021.

Rather than a historical survey show mapping chronological development, *Now + Then* aims to present an idea of the development of an art practice that considers the complex nature of key moments in relation to the duration of practice. The history of making moves back and forward. At moments of intense work on a series, the paintings sit out in front of me, drawing me towards something I don't fully understand. The moment of laying paint to a surface is deceptively brief and singular, yet it actually entails an expansive temporal connection, drawing upon and synthesizing a vocabulary of ideas and experiences. In that brief moment of making a painting begins to separate and move ahead of the artist, with a gravitational force drawing the artist to it to play a part in giving it a resolved form.

— Ron Left

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**The past informs
the future, the future
transforms the past.**