

# scratching the surface

STEWART  
**GEDDES**

EMILIE  
**HOPKINS**

FRANCESCA  
**SIMON**

EMILY  
**WRAGG**

ESSAY BY MATTHEW COLLINGS

# scratching the surface

STEWART  
**GEDDES**

CLYDE  
**HOPKINS**

FRANCISCA  
**SIMON**

GARY  
**WRAGG**

ESSAY BY MATTHEW COLLINGS

IN THE DRAWING SCHOOLS  
ETON COLLEGE

OCTOBER 6 - NOVEMBER 4 2007

The title of the exhibition is intentionally ambiguous.

This cannot be a comprehensive survey of abstraction: it is, after all, a show of paintings by only four artists working today, chosen from a very crowded field of artistic endeavour. But the title also refers to what it is the viewer sees: the organisation of the surface of the painting, how it is painted, is key to perceiving what the painting is about. In figurative art well-developed techniques convey a sense of depth and distance; in abstract art, by contrast, the flat surface may be treated as if the surface itself were a 3-dimensional object. The artist will search endlessly for other ways of adding a dynamic to the surface of the work; scratching the surface is one of the ways in which an artist can activate the surface of his work, today, as in the past.

*Scratching the surface* looks at work by four British abstract artists: Stewart Geddes, Clyde Hopkins, Gary Wragg and me. It is impossible to summarise careers in a sentence or two: perhaps the paintings themselves, representing different approaches to surface, stand as more fitting testimony to the character and achievements of the artists who painted them.

Further biographical notes can be found at the back of this catalogue but, briefly, Stewart has recently completed a research project at the Royal College of Art in London. He has wide teaching experience, including most recently as Course Director of the MA Drawing Course at Kingston, and is an academician of the Royal West of England Academy of Art. Clyde was Head of Painting at Chelsea College of Art for 17 years and has extensive experience in teaching and research. He has exhibited widely, both in this country and abroad. At a formative period in his life, Gary spent time with Willem de Kooning. From that time comes the investigative journey that still endures in his work. He has taught at several of the London art schools, and has paintings in many important collections.

As curator of the show, I am including some of my own work. I studied for a degree at Cambridge in the 1970s and began to paint in the 1990s.

Francesca Simon

## HELLO PAINTING

Matthew Collings

There is no culture of painting any more, or history or tradition or discipline, just many things done by different people. This is our peculiar moment of art. We have so much relativity we're drowning in it. On the other hand it's impossible to look at paintings without thinking in these impossible terms. At least I think so — I still can't quite see painting as an extension of conceptual art installations. I have to focus in a particular way when I see one. A painting culture really does come into my mind. I start living it. It has certain myths and one is about this culture's own ending.

Painting has no obvious place in society. It's part of the new idea of "art". Art used to perform a function that was quite straightforward: it depicted what needed to be depicted. When other means arrived to do that job art became a strange, interesting, redundant, mystifying, moral, often irrelevant and often contested area, off to the side of society's main concerns. We are going through a relatively late stage of this development, the early stages of which we refer to as Modernism. Previously belief, authenticity and authority were important. Now something different has come in: art must be accessible. We must feel it is for everyone and not just for a few. This is not a belief as such but a necessity, consumerism says no to elitism because it just doesn't sell. We cannot have those other important things and popularity simultaneously. And so we accept a giddy lot of fragments of all of them, and a mishmash of misunderstanding and uncertainty, which reflects society's uncertainty — the swirling incomprehensibility of now.

Today art is a lightning conductor for new values, an absurdity, a thing for people to do who the rest of society finds incredibly repellent, a wonderful spiritual oasis in a desert, a place of higher values, a grotesque market phenomenon, a multi-million dollar industry, and a contemplative activity that requires a lot of time and quietness both on the part of the maker and the viewer — and this is only high art. We haven't even begun to describe the weird mainstream: hobbies, amateur art, Beryl Cook, therapy art, art in prisons, etc. In the new world nothing can survive that isn't popular. Obscurity does not disappear — it is made glamorous. Within the rarefied atmosphere of new Turner Prize and Tate Modern high art entertainment are the swimming remains of painting.

To "get" them you have to accept the unacceptable, the strange obsessive hard work of balancing elements, having an idea then doing something and then correcting it and correcting it again, looking and looking, finding a right placement, thinking about line and colour and intricacies of pattern, making an object dynamic instead of inert, going slightly underground socially, not listening for applause all the time.

Somehow if you're a critic and your job is to cast light on what seems obscure you cannot approach art like the "Martian" poets of the early 1980s who used to describe the objects in a normal room without ever mentioning their real names, but only using metaphors (as in Craig Raine's 1979 poem, *A Martian Sends a Postcard Home*). Describing, evaluating, enthusing — these require you to just push the boat out and say "Braque" or "Venetian painting" or "abstract" or "picture plane", and hope you won't be too far out to sea for the readers.

Francesca and Stewart both evoke the landscape, rural for Francesca, urban for Stewart. Both go round the houses. You can't get what they do straight away. Francesca seems to filter the light and atmosphere of North Yorkshire where she has a studio through jazzy technology, like diagrams generated on a computer. Her paintings seem futuristic in a quaint way, like lampshade designs that might have been considered modern in an apartment in Milan thirty years ago (maybe there's a Vasarely on the wall). And Stewart has clashing structures, structures that seem to destroy each other: a torn poster surface integrated with a surface of gestural paint marks and both sometimes interrupted by a harsh geometric grid.

Torn posters already have a meaning in art. They are about excavating rich seams of Pop culture, when Pop is still something exotic. European affichistes of the late 1950s and early 60s invented it: Mimmo Rotella, Raymond Hains and Jacques de la Villeglé. With Stewart the look is more a response to what he sees everyday in South London, Impressionism done by other means. Nothing is really a picture but everything looks like *The Oval*: the unconscious Anthony Caros and accidental Cy Twomblys of construction workers and worn rough outdoor surfaces. He builds equivalents in the studio – scratching, tearing, breaking, remaking and re-balancing.

He is always adding while Francesca is always reducing. Why does she risk wobbly obviously hand-done contours in a graphic language that seems to call for an element of mechanical slickness? The shapes are schematic evocations of North Yorkshire natural terrain and dry stone walling. It's an odd characteristic of lyrical abstract artists that they seem to want to express themselves but not to make fools of themselves, to evoke a flood of feeling like a poet but to cut down on the usual means, be numb instead of quivering. Is she painting a language or what the language refers to? Why not paint the life model posing in the studio like artists used to? For some artists language is the new model.

The point with painting is that you get more out of it the more you put in — if you are prepared to think about what you're looking at critically, to understand the work you're looking at according to its own individual ideal.

"Painterly" is a term that has no wide currency. To define it art historically would be to mention German boffins of the early twentieth century and the boat of meaning would soon go down the rapids. Let's say it means you've got the canvas weave and the brush strokes, the strokes are always somehow referring to the beginning position, and woven into each other, so the painting seems to breathe like the canvas weave breathes: one is a metaphor for the other. The painting has an internal life, regardless of either what the picture is or the life story of who painted it - or what was going on in society at the time. The painting is more important than what is painted. And this all applies whether it's Titian in the 1570s or Rubens in 1618 or Velazquez in the 1640s or Watteau in 1729 or Matisse in 1917. Plus a thousand years of Byzantine mosaic seems to be in the picture, as well as all sorts of Islamic art from architectural decorations to Mughal Indian watercolours, but also fabric

design in the 1950s and Bridget Riley in the 60s. All these forms by whatever means manifest a common glitter or shimmer, a play of light, metaphors for light, they are about a pulsating vibrating abstract visual pleasure of an incredibly rich and refined but at the same time immediate kind.

Why muck about with it? Why make things hard for yourself? Why not go straight for Rembrandt? How hard it is to apologise on behalf of artists for this failure! Why does Gary risk a heavy dry crustiness in his paintings, which otherwise seem so enthusiastic about fleeting atmospheric effects? He gives you the baked muted colours of a Monet or a Gauguin, the energy of de Kooning and Pollock, the form-surprise and the colour sting of Indian watercolours. Why does he risk chaotic pile-ups of colour-relationships and multiple perspectives and viewpoints? Because beauty and seduction are strange and difficult and have to be tough and tight in painting, they can't just be laid on.

Every time he approaches the canvas he is starting from zero. He might have begun a painting ten years ago or yesterday. He comes back fresh. He wants to dive into space. He wants to experiment and experiment until there's nothing of him left at all and the experiment is its own solution. An experiment is always a question, the painting isn't an illustration of something that already exists, it's a challenge: here's the idea — what do you think of it?

How enjoyable are the decorative Paris-school paintings from the 1910s that you can see in Tate Modern's permanent collection! Why doesn't Clyde restrict himself to exactly those tasteful colours, the cool greens and browns of Cubism? Wobbly rectangles all connecting, configurations within configurations, hot colour, imitation surfaces and real surfaces, dots and flat areas, emerging silhouette shapes that recall splashy hieroglyph figures by Miró, and funny island and bay contours that suggest garden evocations by Patrick Heron (they might be earnest homages to Heron or wry jokes on the cult of him): this is all in Clyde's stuff. Plus the feeling of Robert Motherwell's *Little Spanish Prison* (the constructed, charming side of Abstract Expressionism), the feeling of Stuart Davis's awesomely solid American-style Cubism, Patrick Caulfield's understated English suburban Pop art, USA cartoons, *The Flintstones*, funny westerns and towns with the word Gulch in the name: he gives you all these layers of pleasure.

At the same time where there could be an elegant flow he goes in for a deliberate slow stubby filling in; where the colour could be subdued he makes it uniformly souped-up. Gary risks a picture looking like it's done by a madman and Clyde risks it looking like it was done for the walls of Pizza Express. Looking at paintings is like painting them: you have to learn and unlearn. We can't escape the paradox of reading and understanding according to an ideal that can only be achieved by being undermined, broken up in order to be put together differently, while still recognisable as the same thing. You can't just inhabit a culture ready made. You have to make it up again by giving it trouble.

HOPKINS



**FROM GORKY'S DUSTBIN #5 (ii) - MY DIXIE DARLING, 2007** oil on linen, 122 x 152 cm



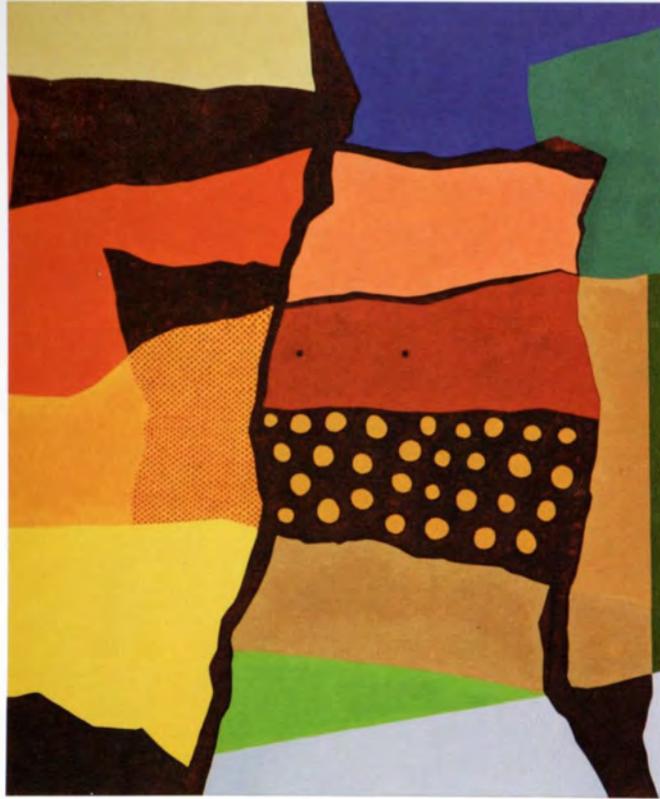
**FROM GORKY'S DUSTBIN #1, 2005** oil on linen, 114 x 137 cm



**DEAD WOOD GULCH, 2004** oil on canvas, 152 x 127 cm



**THE PRIVILEGE OF ASYMMETRY, 2007** oil on linen, 60 x 50 cm



**SKIPPER CRAZY HORSE, 2007** oil on canvas, 61 x 51 cm



CLYDE HOPKINS was born in 1946 and studied Fine Art at the University of Reading in the 1960s. His studio is in Deptford and he also works in St. Leonards on Sea. Principally a painter, he has also made screen prints in recent years, with Advanced Graphics London.

He has exhibited work for over forty years, from a schoolboy show in the Gas Showrooms in Barrow in Furness in 1964 to recent shows in London, Cardiff and Hastings. Amongst his solo shows are the Serpentine Gallery (1978 and 1986), Ikon Gallery and Rochdale Art Gallery (1985), Salisbury Art Centre (1988), Castlefield Gallery, Manchester (1989), Kunstverein Kirchzarten, Germany (as part of Kunst Europa 1991), Reg Vardy Arts Foundation, Sunderland (1994), Atkinson Gallery, Millfield (1996), *Vodka, a Stiff Breeze and Paranoia* at the London Institute Gallery (1998), Francis Graham Dixon Gallery, London (1989, 1990, 1992, 1994, 1997) and Galeria Joan Prats, New York (1990 and 1994).

His work has also been in numerous group exhibitions in public venues in the UK and Europe, including the Hayward, the Whitechapel, the Axiom, the Bede, MOMA Oxford, the Royal Academy, Hastings Museum and Art Gallery, as well as in many private galleries, including *Flowers East*, Bayer Germany, Advanced Graphics and Martin Tinney, Wales. He has work in a number of public and private collections in the UK and USA, including the Arts Council of Great Britain and Andersen Consulting (three commissioned works).

In 1980 he was awarded the Mark Rothko Fellowship (USA) and in 1988 the Lome Award.

Throughout the 70s and early 80s he acted as a visiting painting lecturer to many colleges and universities in the UK; he still acts as an external examiner for a number of undergraduate and postgraduate courses. In 1982 he became Head of Painting at Winchester School of Art, then Head of Fine Art in 1988. In 1990 he moved to Chelsea College of Art & Design, as Principal Lecturer in Painting. He left Chelsea in December 2006, by this time Professor of the University of the Arts London.

CLYDE  
**HOPKINS**

With many thanks to Ian Burke, the Drawing Master of Eton College; to the Headmaster, Provost and Fellows of Eton College; to Robert Holden Limited (Fine Art Agents), whose generous sponsorship has allowed for the printing of this catalogue; to Nicholas and Elodie Stanley; to David Verey and Leigh Spiers of The Art Fund; to Tom and Elizabeth Fortescue Hitchins; to Stella Wrightson; to Matthew Collings; and to Ferdie and Peregrine Simon.

**ROBERT HOLDEN LTD**

FINE ART AGENTS

13 Old Burlington Street

London W1S 3AJ

Tel: 020 7437 6010

Fax: 020 7437 1733

Email: [robertholden@robertholden.com](mailto:robertholden@robertholden.com)

Essay © 2007 Matthew Collings

Designed by Peter Gladwin

Photographed by Jane Lunzer Gifford

Printed by Creative Press London