

Betwixt: Petalia Humphreys, Odessa Mahony-de Vries and June Sartracom  
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### **Painting is Dead. Long Live Painting!**

Words by Dr Louise R Mayhew | [www.louisermayhew.com](http://www.louisermayhew.com)

180 years ago, the French painter Paul Delaroche viewed an early daguerreotype and uttered his famous words: "from today, painting is dead." Rather than killing the medium, the invention of photography forced painting to reinvent itself: as expressive, durational, self-reflexive and confessional. At the halfway point between then and now, American art critic Clement Greenberg argued that Modern painting should excise figurative narratives and illusory space to concern itself exclusively with flatness. His medium-specific Formalism corralled painting toward a second death, this time via the dead-end of pure abstraction.

These histories haunt Betwixt. Further apparitions take the form of Robert Morris' Minimalist installations, Helen Frankenthaler's vast expressive canvases, the optical experiments of Bridget Riley and Brazilian Neo-Concretism, Modernism's preoccupation with geometry, and the white on white of Robert Ryman and Robert Hunter. Amongst these spirits, Petalia Humphreys, Odessa Mahony-de Vries and June Sartracom metaphorically reimagine Greenberg's dead-end as a cul-de-sac. By this I mean that the boundaries of abstract painting offer them a vibrant space of investigation and play.

Each of the artists' practices occupy a liminal space between painting's flat surface and the expansive possibilities of three-dimensionality. All three begin their practice at, and break away from, the wall: confusing, alluding, concealing, manipulating, dismantling, reconfiguring, protruding, hanging and crumpling the painted surface into new objects. Betwixt offers a moment to reflect on the traditions in each work—canvas, paint and brush—as well as each artists' movement away from academic painting into sculptural space.

As we move around the gallery, the artists' shared interest in us is also clear. These works are made to be viewed in person, and to delight us in our viewing. Notice the differences in scale. An oversized work asks you to stand back to fully comprehend its size. Another is especially small, luring you close to perceive the intimate details of its surface and the texture of its frame. Observe where the works are positioned on the wall and placed on the floor. How does your body move to see them? How do you twist or turn? Perhaps you crane your neck up or down. Maybe you bend at the waist, lowering your eyes down to align with a work's centre? Or do you move your whole body, slowly, concentrating your gaze on an artwork as you step through the gallery and the work transforms before your eyes?

Humphreys' work is especially sensitive to this conversation on perception. Her precise painted objects update the discordant imagery of Op Art and geometry of Hard Edge painting with contemporary colour palettes. Each of her works prompts us to find an ideal location for contemplation. Once there, they spark questions about their construction. For me, they conjure

visions of the artist in the studio and the gallery. With a tape measure in one hand and a paintbrush in the other, she straddles the worlds of fine art, architecture and industry. Serial iterations and peculiar artwork titles point to the manufacturing industry. Her boxy pink works remind me of a square IKEA table that I once owned in the same colour. And her use of mistints (incorrectly made-to-order and returned house paints) connects her with the industries of home decor and renovation. Yet unlike industrial artists before her, who outsourced their labour to factories, eschewing the artist's touch and the emotion of artmaking, Humphreys' considered works reveal their handmade status. Moreover, they bask in the affective joys of subtle and brilliant pinks.

The question of colour leads us to Odessa Mahony-de Vries' expressive canvases. On first glance, *Instructions Unclear* (2021) is comprised of clear reds, greens, blues and blacks. Closer looking reveals whites and browns, as well as a variety of subtler shades made from the mingling, overlapping hues. As your eyes move across her oversized canvas, a lexicon of painting strokes and styles emerges. There are free-form swirls, tight and repetitive bars, flowing drips and spotty flicks, messy geometric shapes, layered sections and meandering marks. In some areas, the arc of a blue line conjures Mahony-de Vries holding a spray can in her hand. In others, dripping paint evidences gravity. The artist stood atop a huge, outdoor scaffold to paint the enormous and weighty 40kg canvas. Formally, Mahony-de Vries' works are a world apart from Humphrey and Sartracom's neat paintings. The category 'abstract painting' doesn't feel large enough to contain all three. This is the pleasure of their cul-de-sac. Freed from figuration and flatness, painting is expansive and fresh in their hands.

Sartracom's stunning monochromes take us in another direction. By working exclusively in white, Sartracom draws our attention to materiality and texture, shapes and shadows. Beneath her canvas surfaces, partial geometric forms push and protrude. Where painting normally draws our attention to what occurs on the surface, Sartracom redirects our attention to what lies beneath. Here, canvas becomes a skin. The resulting works have the same elegance as gymnasts and acrobats: they make difficult tasks appear equally fascinating and deceptively simple. Mahony-De Vries identifies a dance between revelation and concealment as a pre-occupation shared by all three artists. In her work, different parts of the canvas are in/visible depending on how it is crumpled or folded during installation. For Humphreys and Sartracom, hiding and revealing relates more squarely to the creative process. In the gallery, their works provoke us to unravel the mystery of how they were made. Looking closely at their construction, we return to the question of paint. This duology reminds me of Kasimir Malevich's *Black Square* (c. 1915), which originally presented a deep void. 100 years later, it is riddled with the undeniably beautiful and materially delicate cracks of aged paint. Similarly in Humphreys and Sartracom's work, as we try to look beyond the surface, we cannot help but notice paint's presence in their strokes, colour and texture.

If photography, Modernism, the Internet or Social Media killed painting, like a phoenix it continues to rise from the ashes. Betwixt demonstrates contemporary painting's vitality and confirms that the painted canvas still holds so much to be explored, known and seen for artists and audiences alike.