

# EveningStandard.

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## Surface Work review: Abstract art goes non-macho at women-only show

By Matthew Collings

Surface Work is a sober show of reasonable work, all in the medium of painting and all of it by women. The approach is varied. One label lists “Bob’s urine” as well as lichen and tea among the many unusual materials used, with no mention of paint. But the works, including this particular piece by Lucy Dodd, are more than just violently noticeable.

You get used to enjoying paintings not for what they picture but for how they attack the problem of creating space and organising sensations. The range of artists is global, from London’s East End to New Delhi, from LA to Japan; as are the works — some of them go back to the early years of revolutionary Russia, and some were done only the other day. The fact that all the artists are women is not nearly so compelling as the tangible, physical, factual objects you are confronted by and the sensations they offer.

Surface Work almost invites you to become a painter. A painter would know immediately to look for eloquence in the way marks lie on a surface, or knit to make a surface, or the surface is already grabbing a certain type of attention by not being a canvas. (One painting is done on an ambulance trauma blanket.)

The show’s overall title is from a quote by Joan Mitchell, a painter associated with the Abstract Expressionist movement in New York in the 1950s, which is usually considered to be a male-dominated moment of art history. The handful of non-macho exceptions were considered lightweight also-rans until the 1970s, which was long after Ab Ex’s heyday, when feminism demanded a canonical rethink. Mitchell, who achieved belated recognition for very big paintings that build a matrix of wriggling marks suggestive of reflections on water or light through trees, once said it didn’t matter if a painting was abstract or figurative. What was important was to “make a surface work”.

Calling work by 50 women “Surface Work” could disastrously backfire but Mitchell, of course, did not mean that for her a painting is on the surface as opposed to anything deep. She was encouraging anyone looking at a painting to really look and not to wish for significance to be pre-packaged as some kind of ready explanation provided by an expert. Don’t ask for the experience of looking to be made unnecessary by the presence of subject matter that any viewer might be reassured by. If it is a profound subject it must be a profound painting is a wrong assumption, according to Mitchell.

Surface Work has a lot of playfulness as well as dignity. But the very decision to restrict these 50 works — one by each artist — to abstraction means the mood overall is serious. There are no distractions either of seeing how the real world has been depicted so it looks immediately like itself or of getting lost in stories and meanings. Meaning is all suggestion and often teasingly elusive.

## VAN DOREN WAXTER



Non-Objective Composition, Liubov Popova, 1920 (Courtesy Annely Juda Fine Art)

One way to get a handle on it is to think about how surfaces have been activated so they're not the containers for something more important but the important thing itself. An untitled painting from last year by Varda Caivano, an Argentinian who lives in London, presents a surface that is all slithery marks in rather beautiful greyed blues and greens. It might tell you about light or human skin in shadow. It is uneven, scored; it opens and closes, goes dense, produces contained rough shapes, and then goes loose again and opens out. The mood of a 1959 painting by Helen Frankenthaler is completely different. Frankenthaler invented a method of painting known as staining, inspired by a visit to Jackson Pollock's studio, which led to a whole international style called Colour Field. Here she contrasts shapes like blocky objects with others that are open and loose, the latter made from a line that skates, veers and judders, and you can't tell if it's paint-dripped from a bowl or applied via a big brush swung using the whole arm. The Varda is quiet while the Frankenthaler tells you about controlled mighty exuberance.

There are some great dialogues. Liubov Popova died of consumption in the 1920s, after years of trying to start the whole of art again from degree zero, to reflect the sudden arrival in Russia of the world's first entirely socialist society. Simple black and white curves and lines, which are the only components of her small but tremendous work, *Non-Objective Composition*, 1920, find a weird and unexpected echo in a recent soaringly skillful painting by Fiona Rae, which appears to have landed from another planet and to have been created by gentle female aliens experimenting with light rays and curving forms that refer to puffs of smoke and spills of milk. The show has been assembled thoughtfully with an eye for subtle connections and balanced differences from one work to another. So every work seems to be gamely introducing the next act in the same moment that it's doing its own original thing.

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Jackie Saccoccio, Portrait (Captive), 2015 (Courtesy Van Doren Waxter, New York/Charles Benton)

Paintings by Elizabeth Murray and Bharti Kher have colours that make your eyes boggle. A 6ft-square painting by Adriana Varejão has little to say about colour and offers only one enormous white dot, with weird cracks running through it. Opposite it, a painting almost the same scale by Yayoi Kusama has so many white dots it's impossible to count them, especially as they're on a white ground. You could certainly feel them if you ran your fingertips lightly over the surface. It is a combination of thick, substantial paste and virtual nothingness: the dried residue of a watery wash.

It might be that you never notice the poetic symbolism of these two paintings, pointed up in their respective titles. Varejão's is Moon; Kusama's is Infinity Net. You might realise, if you do, that nothing changes from finding out these referred-to meanings. The paintings already worked just fine. In fact, they worked magnificently.

Surface Work is not for everyone. But if you can overcome the hurdle of a complete absence of stories and pictures then the pleasures are rich.

*Surface Work is at Victoria Miro, N1 (020 7336 8109; victoria-miro.com) until May 19 and Victoria Miro Mayfair, W1 (020 3205 8910; victoria-miro.com) until June 16*