Generation Painting: Abstraction and British Art, 1955–65
Saturday 5 March 2016, 09:45-17:00
Howard Lecture Theatre, Downing College, Cambridge

09:15-09:40 Registration and coffee
09:45 Welcome

10:00-11:20 Session 1 – Chaired by Dr Alyce Mahon (Trinity College, Cambridge)
Crossing the Border and Closing the Gap: Abstraction and Pop
Prof Martin Hammer (University of Kent)
Fellow Persians: Bridget Riley and Ad Reinhardt
Moran Sheleg (University College London)
Tailspin: Smith’s Specific Objects
Dr Jo Applin (University of York)

11:20-11:40 Coffee

11:40-13:00 Session 2 – Chaired by Dr Jennifer Powell (Kettle’s Yard)
Abstraction between America and the Borders: William Johnstone’s Landscape Painting
Dr Beth Williamson (Independent)
The Valid Image: Frank Avray Wilson and the Biennial Salon of Commonwealth Abstract Art
Dr Simon Pierse (Aberystwyth University)
“Unity in Diversity”: New Vision Centre and the Commonwealth
Maryam Ohadi-Hamadani (University of Texas at Austin)

13:00-14:00 Lunch and poster session

14:00-15:20 Session 3 – Chaired by Dr James Fox (Gonville & Caius College, Cambridge)
In the Thick of It: Auerbach, Kossoff and the Landscape of Postwar Painting
Lee Hallman (The Graduate Center, CUNY)
Sculpture into Painting: John Hoyland and New Shape Sculpture in the Early 1960s
Sam Cornish (The John Hoyland Estate)
Painting as a Citational Practice in the 1960s and After
Dr Catherine Spencer (University of St Andrews)

15:20-15:50 Tea break
15:50-17:00 Keynote paper and discussion

Two Cultures? Patrick Heron, Lawrence Alloway and a Contested History of British Painting in the 1950s
Dr Chris Stephens (Head of Displays and Lead Curator, Modern British Art, Tate)

Supported by the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art
Abstracts

Session 1

Crossing the Border and Closing the Gap: Abstraction and Pop
Prof Martin Hammer (University of Kent)

One general feature of the 1960s that has been acknowledged sporadically, but never investigated in detail and depth, is the extent to which many of the most interesting British artists, otherwise diverse in their approaches, sought to operate in the interstices between abstraction and the figurative language associated with Pop Art. This seems a shift in emphasis from the previous decade, and also a contrast with the current American art world, where Pop and Post-painterly abstraction existed as polarised, mutually hostile alternatives, each supported by their loyal critics and galleries. In Britain, Richard Smith, Derek Boshier and Eduardo Paolozzi offer examples from the period of a Pop-inflected abstraction, while the early work of Allen Jones and Howard Hodgkin often looks like figuration translated into the idiom of contemporary abstract art. I propose to focus on David Hockney, and the ways in which an informed awareness of the latest abstract experiments, British and American, fed into his emphatically figurative practice, in a spirit often of affectionate but ironic quotation.

Fellow Persians: Bridget Riley and Ad Reinhardt
Moran Sheleg (University College London)

‘Dear Sam Wagstaff, I guess you must have thought I was kidding when you asked me if I saw any interesting English painters and I answered “Bridget Bardot and she’s a nice girl too”? I meant to answer “Bridget Riley and she’s a nice girl too.”
Ad.’

Less than a year after writing these apparently condescending words to a curator friend in 1964, Ad Reinhardt would come to recognise in Bridget Riley ‘a fellow Persian.’ Having met on the opening night of William C. Seitz’s The Responsive Eye exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, where the reception of Riley’s work overshadowed that of her native elder, the unlikely pair would collaborate, for the first and only time, on a typographic work produced during what would turn out to be the penultimate year of Reinhardt’s life. The resultant issue of Poor.Old.Tired.Horse (1966), a periodical edited by the Scottish artist and poet Ian Hamilton Finlay, merges Reinhardt’s distinctive penmanship and ‘Art-as-Art’ creed with the incremental application of oval geometric units seen across several of Riley’s monochromatic canvases of the time. Exploring the contradictory terms of this one-off collaboration, my paper reassesses the stakes of perceptual abstract painting at this moment in the mid-1960s beyond the contentious label of ‘Op art,’ a term which seems to omit as much as it has been presumed to accommodate. Posing instead the generative potential of a lateral mode of abstract painting, at a time when its status on both sides of the Atlantic was being called into question, this singular collaboration between two very different artists suggests a common ground unrecognised in standing accounts of mid-twentieth century art as a polemically segregated field of individualised production.
Tailspin: Richard Smith’s Specific Objects
Dr Jo Applin (University of York)

This paper is about the work of British artist Richard Smith, in particular the three-dimensional works that he made in the early 1960s which the American critic and artist Donald Judd described as ‘specific objects’ in his important essay on the newly emerging work then beginning to appear in the galleries of New York that were, in Judd’s words, ‘neither painting nor sculpture’. I situate Smith’s practice in relation to his American peers but also his contemporaries back home, as he negotiated not only the formal parameters of two and three dimensions in his work but also his shifting status as both ‘British’ and ‘American’ artist.

Session 2

Abstraction between America and the Borders: William Johnstone’s Landscape Painting
Dr Beth Williamson (Independent)

The significant contribution of Scottish painter William Johnstone (1897-1981) to twentieth-century British art and art education has been largely overlooked in the 30 or so years since his death. Throughout his career in art education he continued to work as a practicing artist and solo exhibitions at galleries such as Gimpel Fils (1949), Lefèvre Gallery (1953 and 1958), Reid Gallery (1960 and 1964) and Décor Gallery (1969). Since his death in 1981, however, a career that spanned over five decades seems to have been largely forgotten outside of Scotland. Yet to claim Johnstone’s painting as something essentially Scottish is limiting. And while the scant literature on Johnstone does acknowledge something of the influence of his early European and American travels for his painting, it tends to lack rigour. Therefore, this paper seeks to properly question the Scottishness of Johnstone’s painting, especially his landscape painting.

The importance of America and American art in Johnstone’s artistic development should not be underestimated. In 1928 and 1929 Johnstone lived and worked in California, encountering a very different landscape than that he had grown up with in the Scottish Borders. He visited America again in 1948, 1949 and 1950 when he directed summer schools at Colorado Springs Fine Art Center and lectured at the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation, Taliesin. During these visits Johnstone took a series of photographs of the towns and landscapes of America.

This paper seeks to explore concerns pertinent to the theme of this conference and ask how Johnstone’s later landscape painting might understood as, first, abstracted from the natural landscape that he felt so connected to and, second, in dialogue with American art of the period, despite its surface Scottishness.
The Valid Image: Frank Avray Wilson and the Biennial Salon of Commonwealth Abstract Art
Dr Simon Pierse (Aberystwyth University)

Between 1956 and 1966 the New Vision Centre Gallery (NVCG) was at the forefront in promoting experimental abstract art in Britain. It was also one of the few exhibition venues offering solo shows to young Commonwealth artists working in the UK. The gallery was co-founded in 1956 by Denis Bowen (1921-2006) and Frank Avray Wilson (1914-2009) who were members of the Free Painters Group. For Bowen and Avray Wilson, the dominant influence was not American abstract expressionism but Tachisme and Art Informel - styles of painting predominately drawn from the art of Paris. At NVCG artists from twenty-nine Commonwealth countries staged exhibitions and in 1957 a group of them banded together to organize exhibitions and form a Biennale Salon of Commonwealth abstract art. The group’s first collective venture was Commonwealth Vision (1961): an exhibition of the work of twenty-five abstract painters organized by Sri Lankan artist Leslie Candappa at the Imperial Institute in South Kensington. The exhibition was unusual in projecting the work of Commonwealth artists in terms of a unifying pictorial language and led to further exhibitions of abstract art at the Commonwealth Institute (1963 & 1965). This paper explores the contribution that Frank Avray Wilson made, both as a proponent of vitalist painting and, through his writings on art, in defining ‘valid’ image-making: a cluster of abstract pictorial languages he deemed fit for contemporary post-war life.

“Unity in Diversity”: New Vision Centre and the Commonwealth
Maryam Ohadi-Hamadani (University of Texas at Austin)

My presentation recognizes that post-war notions of British abstraction, in the face of burgeoning globalism, cannot be supported by boundaries of nationalism, cultural particularism, or strictly Eurocentric models of artistic practice. This comes into focus considering that after WWII, those immigrating to the center of the emerging Commonwealth constituted a significant portion of London’s exhibiting artists. New Vision Centre Gallery was one among a handful of galleries promoting abstraction that was “fiercely non-figurative, violently tachiste, [and] remarkably international”. New Vision gave many emerging abstractionists their first solo exhibitions, including Aubrey Williams. New Vision also organized the 1963 and 1965 Commonwealth Biennales of Abstract Art at the newly inaugurated Commonwealth Institute; for co-founders Denis Bowen and Frank Avray Wilson, its mission was to bring to light the accomplishments of Britain’s own Commonwealth. The project of the Commonwealth as a unified political entity during post-war reconstruction often girded the exhibiting practices at the Institute and New Vision, focusing on abstraction as a universal visual language. Yet the significance of artists from the emerging Commonwealth is their contribution to the international aesthetic of abstraction in Britain. My presentation illustrates their contributions by engaging with contemporary critical responses to key works by Denis Bowen and Aubrey Williams and exhibitions of “Commonwealth” abstraction.
Session 3

In the Thick of It: Frank Auerbach and the Landscape of Postwar Painting

Lee Hallman (The Graduate Center, City University of New York)

In the 1970s and ‘80s, Frank Auerbach, along with numerous other London-based artists who came to maturity in the 1950s, was retroactively grouped into a so-called ‘School of London’ characterised by a commitment to figurative painting in opposition to dominant modes of postwar abstraction. And yet the viscous, densely layered, earth-toned portrait and London building site paintings Auerbach showed in his debut solo exhibition in 1956 abstracted their subject matter so extremely within their thick surfaces as to take representational form to the brink of legibility.

To some degree this material assault was deliberate, as the young artist sought to differentiate himself from ‘Kitchen Sink’ realism and what he dismissed as the ‘drawing-room modernism’ filling the West End galleries in the postwar decade. At the same time, Auerbach’s complex absorption of contemporary French painting and American abstraction, and his interest in conveying an embodied experience in paint finds parallels in the work of his older peers in St Ives, for example. The shifts in his work of the 1960s toward brighter colours, more rigorous formal scaffolding, and sites and signs of everyday urban life bring his paintings into unexpected dialogue with the divergent priorities of the rising Pop generation and new modes of geometric abstraction. Focusing on Auerbach’s urban landscapes of the 1950s and early ‘60s, this paper looks beyond geographical labels and the false dichotomy of abstraction and figuration to consider how the artist’s early work at once marked a rupture in the landscape of British painting and can be situated ‘in the thick’ of the period’s aesthetic concerns.

Sculpture into Painting: John Hoyland and New Shape Sculpture in the Early 60s

Sam Cornish (The John Hoyland Estate)

The importance of painting in the formation of New Generation Sculpture (or New Shape Sculpture, as Bryan Robertson called it in Private View, 1965) is often commented on, if perhaps not completely understood. This paper takes a different tack by examining the impact of New Shape Sculpture on the paintings of John Hoyland.

The paper will chart the development of Hoyland’s paintings in the first half of the sixties, as he sought a personal abstract style. It will discuss how his paintings of 1962-64 looked to sculptures by William Tucker, Tim Scott and David Annesley that existed ambiguously between painting and sculpture. It will then describe the importance of Anthony Caro in propelling Hoyland toward a more emphatic, unambiguous and grandly architectural style.

The links between Hoyland and sculpture have been noted by Mel Gooding in his monograph on the artist. This paper will examine the relation in more detail, while also drawing broader conclusions about modernist abstraction in Britain in the early sixties. Despite the importance of American post-painterly abstraction and Greenbergian criticism, in Britain the influence of painting and sculpture on each other was as important as the separation or purity of the two arts. Often accompanied by caprice or ambiguity, this mutual influence connects British abstraction of this period to Pop art. More importantly it also enabled – for Hoyland and for his contemporaries – a greater degree of figuration and variety than that generally allowed in contemporary American art. This suggests – despite many differences – a continuity with the British painters of the fifties who were drawn to what Patrick Heron called ‘figuration in abstraction.’
Painting as a Citational Practice in the 1960s and After  
Dr Catherine Spencer (University of St Andrews)

In a dialogue between the painters Prunella Clough and Bridget Riley, the former stated: ‘I've always found that I have learnt more from some (less accomplished) less resolved (tentative, fragile, smaller) or incomplete work – it's more accessible’. This affinity with the fragment in turn prompted an engagement on Clough's part with strategies of citation and re-combination, through the processes of collage and montage, both of which underlie the development of her painting practice during the 1960s and into the 1970s. Using Clough’s work as a starting point, this paper takes a wider look at painterly production during this period to explore the various ways in which these processes allowed a variety of artists including Tess Jaray, Rita Donagh and Sandra Blow to negotiate the challenges faced by abstract painting as the 1960s came to an end. Focusing on the work of women painters who were not directly associated with the emergence of second-wave feminism, but who nonetheless had to address issues of realism versus abstraction in light of debates within the women’s art movement, and deconstructions of Modernism by feminist critics, it considers how the notion of painting as a citational practice during the 1960s and the following decades enabled these artists to address the power constructs embedded within representation. In particular, it allowed them to challenge established concepts of national identity linked to the landscape and industry, replacing them instead with far more nuanced conceptualisations of subjectivity.

Keynote

Two Cultures? Patrick Heron, Lawrence Alloway and a Contested History of British Painting in the 1950s  
Dr Chris Stephens (Head of Displays and Lead Curator, Modern British Art, Tate)

This paper begins with Heron's repeated assertions that Alloway almost single-handedly marginalised him and his generation of fellow painters. It will consider the two men (surprisingly close in age, background and areas of interest), their development as critics, and their relative ideological positioning. It will survey Alloway's writing to test the basis for Heron's claim. What was at stake for each of them that they could take such bitterly opposed stances over such common ground?
Biographies

Jo Applin is a Senior Lecturer in Modern and Contemporary Art at the University of York, currently on leave as the recipient of a Philip Leverhulme Prize. She is the author of two books, *Eccentric Objects: Rethinking Sculpture in 1960s America* (Yale University Press, 2012) and *Yayoi Kusama: Infinity Mirror Room—Phalli’s Field* (Afterall and MIT Press, 2012). She is a member of the editorial boards of *Oxford Art Journal* (currently also Reviews Editor), ARTMargins, and Tate Papers. She also sits on the Academic Advisory Board for the Terra Foundation/Tate Research Project Refiguring American Art 1945-1980. From Autumn 2016, Jo will be Director of the Centre for Modern Studies at the University of York.

Sam Cornish is a writer on abstract art and curator. Recent projects include a book and exhibition on the artists who worked at the Stockwell Depot, a monograph and exhibition on the UK/NZ sculptor John Panting, and the editorship of a two-volume survey of the paintings of Gary Wragg. He organised the symposium ‘Collaborating with Caro’ and is currently working on the John Hoyland catalogue raisonné and a monograph on the sculptor Tim Scott. From 2012 to 2014 he was editor of www.abstractcritical.com.

James Fox is a Fellow of Gonville and Caius College and a specialist in twentieth century British art. His *British Art and the First World War, 1914-1924* was published in 2015. He is currently writing a cultural history of colour and a history of Modern British art to be published by Allen Lane.

Lee Hallman is a PhD Candidate at The Graduate Center, City University of New York. She is currently completing her thesis on the London landscapes of Frank Auerbach and Leon Kossoff. She has assisted with exhibitions at Tate Britain and the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Her writings have appeared in Tate Papers, *Apollo* and *The Burlington Magazine*, and in 2014 she contributed a catalogue essay for the exhibition *Bare Life: London Artists Working from Life, 1950-1980* (LWL Museum of Art and Culture, Münster, Germany).

Martin Hammer is Professor of History of Art at the University of Kent. He has published books about Francis Bacon, Graham Sutherland, Naum Gabo, and the Naked Portrait. He is currently working on the early work of David Hockney.


Maryam Ohadi-Hamadani is a Doctoral Candidate in the Department of Art and Art History at the University of Texas at Austin. Her dissertation explores the contributions of artists immigrating from the Commonwealth to England between 1950-1970, including Anwar Jalal Shemza and Ahmed Parvez, members of the Lahore Art Circle; Denis Williams; and Aubrey Williams, a founder of the Caribbean Artists Movement. The project also focuses on contemporary critical responses to key exhibitions at New Vision Centre Gallery, the Commonwealth Institute, and the Institute of Contemporary Art. Ohadi-Hamadani holds an MA in Art History and Museum Studies from Case Western Reserve University and has assisted with several curatorial projects, including the exhibition *Afro Modern: Journeys Through the Black Atlantic* (Tate Liverpool, 2009). This autumn in London, Ohadi-Hamadani conducted archival doctoral research made possible by a travel grant awarded through the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art.
Simon Pierse is Senior Lecturer at Aberystwyth University where his research interests focus on post-war British and Commonwealth art. He is author of Australian Art and Artists in London, 1950–1965 (Ashgate, 2012) and co-author of Figure and Ground: Keith Vaughan Drawings, Prints and Photographs 1935-1962 (Sansom, 2012). In 2014 he was awarded a Paul Mellon Research Support Grant and was Visiting Fellow at the University of Melbourne’s Australian Institute of Art History. He is currently working on a history of the Abbey Art Centre and a biography of Alannah Coleman.

Jennifer Powell is Senior Curator Collection and Programme at Kettle’s Yard, University of Cambridge. Most recently she curated the exhibition New Rhythms: Henri Gaudier-Brzeska and edited the accompanying book. She leads the curatorial, research, learning and music programmes at Kettle’s Yard. Previously she held research and curatorial positions at the V&A and was Assistant Curator of British Art at Tate Britain, where she worked on exhibitions including Schwitters in Britain (2013) and curated the Henry Moore Galleries. Her PhD (2009) explored Anglo-French exchanges and exhibition cultures in London between 1945 and 1966, with a focus on organisations that promoted sculpture. She has contributed to exhibition catalogues including Modern British Sculpture, R.A. (2011), and Sculpture Victorious, Yale/Tate (2015), and published articles focusing on post-war exhibitions in the Sculpture Journal and as part of Tate’s Henry Moore: Sculptural Process and Public Identity project. She is currently researching the post-war work of American painter Richard Pousette-Dart.

Sam Rose is a Lecturer in Art History at the University of St Andrews. He is currently completing a book on formalism, art writing, and modernist aesthetics in twentieth-century England.

Moran Sheleg is a PhD student in the History of Art department at UCL, where she earned her second Masters degree after graduating from Cambridge. She also holds a BA (Hons) degree from the University of York. Moran’s thesis traces a set of intergenerational dialogues surrounding the so-called “problem” of abstract painting in Anglo-American art since the mid-twentieth century. The paper she is presenting today forms part of her ongoing research into the work of Ad Reinhardt. Moran was recently elected as co-editor of Object, a research journal in which her essay on the paintings of Eva Hesse was published last year.

Rachel Rose Smith is Curator of the Heong Gallery at Downing College. She recently completed a collaborative PhD on modern art in St Ives 1939–49 (Tate/University of York) and co-curated, with Sara Matson and Chris Stephens, International Exchanges: Modern Art and St Ives 1915–65 (Tate St Ives, 2014). She is currently working on the next exhibition: Ai Weiwei (June–October 2016).

Catherine Spencer is a Lecturer in Art History at the University of St Andrews and was awarded her PhD by the University of York. While her main research focus is on performance art in the 1960s and 1970s, she has retained a strong parallel interest in British Modernism since her MA studies in this area. She recently published an article entitled ‘Abstraction’s Ecologies: Post-Industrialization, Waste and the Commodity Form in Prunella Clough’s Paintings of the 1980s and 1990s’ in British Art Studies, the new online journal of the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art.

Chris Stephens is Head of Displays and Lead Curator, Modern British Art at Tate Britain. Since joining Tate in 1995, he has worked with teams of curators to develop research projects, displays and exhibitions connected to Tate's holdings of British art from 1900 to 1970. He has a particular interest in mid-twentieth century art, and exhibitions he has curated for Tate Britain include Art & the 60s: This Was Tomorrow (2004, with Katharine Stout), Francis Bacon (2008, with Matthew Gale), Henry Moore (2010), Picasso and Modern British Art (2012, with James Beechey) and Kenneth Clark: Looking for Civilisation (2014, with John-Paul Stonard). Exhibitions curated for Tate St Ives include Barbara Hepworth: Centenary (2003), Ben Nicholson (2008), Peter Lanyon (2010) and International Exchanges: Modern Art and St Ives (2014, with Sara Matson and Rachel
Smith). Since his doctorate entitled ‘St Ives Artists and Landscape 1939–64’, he has written several monographic studies of those artists and a major study on art in St Ives is forthcoming.

Beth Williamson is a writer and researcher based near London. From 2009 until 2014 she was a Research Fellow on Tate’s ‘Art School Educated’ project and co-curator of ‘Basic Design’ at Tate Britain (March–October 2013). She has published widely on post-war British art including her monograph *Between Art Practice and Psychoanalysis Mid-Twentieth Century: Anton Ehrenzweig in Context* (Ashgate, 2015) and several chapters in *The London Art Schools* (Tate Publishing, 2015). The Barns-Graham Charitable Trust and the Scottish Society for Art History have supported her research on William Johnstone, which will result in a book-length study of this much-overlooked artist and educator.

**Poster Contributors**

**The Sculptor’s Painting: The Case of Barbara Hepworth in the 1950s and 1960s**

Clare Nadal (Huddersfield University and The Hepworth Wakefield)

This poster examines the role of painting and drawing in the work of Barbara Hepworth in the 1950s and 1960s. These works, typically little known and rarely exhibited, offer fresh contexts for viewing Hepworth in both a national and international context, in considering new potential relationships, including the pre-war modernists, British Generation painting and the work of the American abstract painters. This research forms a component of my doctoral research project 'Barbara Hepworth and Henry Moore: Contemporaries in Context', which aims to re-situate Moore and Hepworth through reference to a wide range of art forms including painting, drawing, writing and poetry.

**Justin Knowles: Context and Conservation**

Olympia Diamond, Maureen Cross and Margaret Barkovic (The Department of Conservation and Technology, Courtauld Institute of Art)

*Composition, 1963,* by the British Abstract artist, Justin Knowles (1935-2004) is a large-format, two-dimensional painting made with early acrylic emulsion paints. The brightly coloured geometric forms are juxtaposed against an unpigmented acrylic prepared linen canvas. The painting has suffered severe water damage causing a disfiguring dark stain, which has compromised the reading and meaning of the artwork. This research is on-going and drawings on art historical context, scientific analysis and materials study to help inform the conservation treatment decision.
**New online journal: British Art Studies**

The online journal *British Art Studies* provides an innovative space for new research and scholarship of the highest quality on all aspects of British art, architecture and visual culture in their most diverse and international contexts. The journal will reflect the dynamic and broad ranging research cultures of the Paul Mellon Centre and the Yale Center for British Art, as well as the wider field of studies in British art and architecture today.

British Art Studies is one of the few completely open access journals in the field of art history, providing a forum for the growing debate about digital scholarship, publication and copyright. We have developed a purpose-built website and carefully considered elements such as identification, preservation and licensing. The Call for Submissions for Issue 4 (Autumn 2016) is now live: [http://www.britishartstudies.ac.uk/guidelines/submissions](http://www.britishartstudies.ac.uk/guidelines/submissions)