

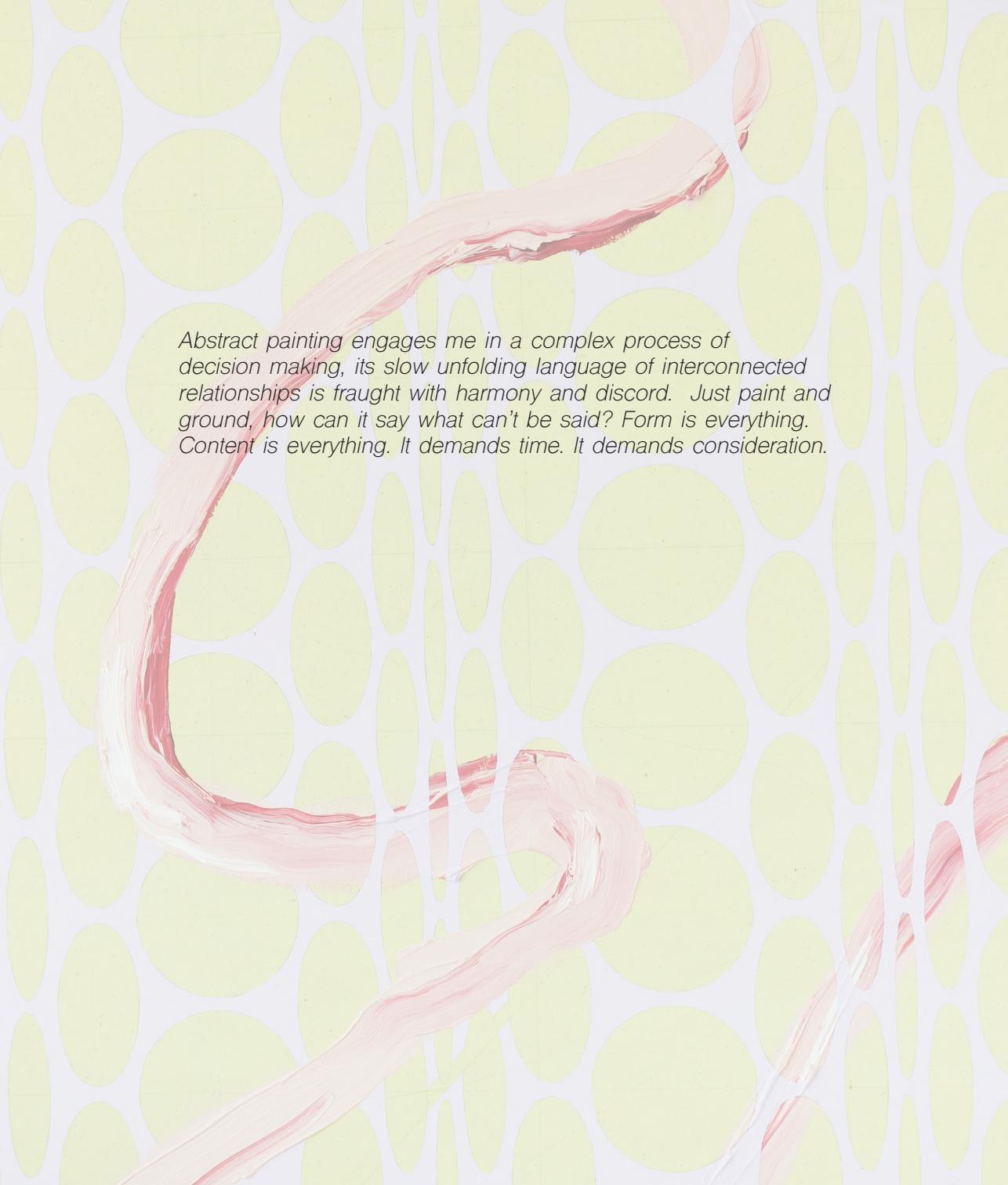
The background of the image features a repeating pattern of organic, abstract shapes. These shapes are primarily composed of two colors: a light beige or cream color and a vibrant red. The red areas often contain smaller, darker red spots and irregular outlines, giving them a textured, cellular appearance. They are separated by thin, wavy lines of a bright blue color. The overall effect is reminiscent of a microscopic view of biological tissue or a stylized map.

Julie Mayer

## Acknowledgements

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An abstract painting featuring a grid of yellow circles of varying sizes on a white background. Overlaid on this grid are several thick, expressive brushstrokes in a reddish-pink color. One prominent stroke starts from the bottom left, curves upwards and to the right, then descends again. Another shorter stroke is visible at the bottom center. The brushwork has a textured, layered appearance.

*Abstract painting engages me in a complex process of decision making, its slow unfolding language of interconnected relationships is fraught with harmony and discord. Just paint and ground, how can it say what can't be said? Form is everything. Content is everything. It demands time. It demands consideration.*

## **Looking at Language, Finding a Register**

In his influential 1961 essay ‘Modernist painting’, Clement Greenberg championed Modernism’s dominant paradigm of: purity of art form; rejection of narrative and illusionistic space in favour of two dimensionality; the importance placed upon properties of medium and ‘potency’ of gesture; the unique authentic brushstrokes and the trace of the male artist ‘genius’ as a sign of quality. Women artists of the 1970s rejected Greenberg’s ideology of Modernist painting. In particular, abstract painting was seen as epitomising the ‘high art’ of masculine patriarchy; it was to be avoided like the plague. As Lucy Lippard said, ‘Feminism’s greatest contribution to the future of art has probably been precisely its lack of contribution to Modernism’ (Lippard, 1980). Women artists turned to the traditionally categorised ‘low art’ forms, the decorative arts e.g. sewing, embroidery and china painting, they also embraced popular ‘mass’ media e.g. photography, video, poster and billboard art. In addition, they chose ephemeral body art and performance as a primary form of practice. Also popular was the ‘Scripto-visual’ which was upheld by some as the most effective progressive art form for ‘feminist’ art practice<sup>1</sup>. However, women’s abstract, formalist painting was given little critical attention and yet again, was marginalised, ignored and left illegible within feminist critical analysis.

The mid to late 1980s saw a general taking stock of feminist art criticism and feminist women’s art practice. Documentaries and exhibitions, such as ‘State of the Art’ broadcast on Channel 4 in 1987, ‘The New Spirit of Painting’ at the Royal Academy in 1981, (38 men 0 women), ‘The British Art Show’ in 1984, (72 men 11 women), attempted to map a ‘particular’ trajectory of the visual arts in the 80s, this attracted feminist critical response. Essays by artists (Rosa Lee’s ‘Resisting Amnesia: Feminism, Painting and Postmodernism’ 1987 and Rebecca Fortnum and Gill Houghton’s article ‘Women and Contemporary Painting: Re-presenting non-representation’<sup>2</sup>, 1989) set out, ‘to instigate some discussion of a feminist case against deconstruction and propose an investigation of the possibilities of non-representation as a radical political stance’.(Lee, 1987).

A very prominent book at this time ‘Framing Feminism’ by Griselda Pollock and Rozsika Parker was published in 1987. Although the book was generally

considered to be an important chronicling of fifteen years of feminist action and an important record of this history, it was met with mixed reviews. It was becoming clear that there was not one single universal freedom-fighting sisterhood and that feminist art practice and, more precisely, feminist art criticism was thought by some to be in serious danger of becoming part of the hegemonic, exclusive ideology that it was fighting against in the first place. In talks such as the one held at the ICA in 1988 'Framing Feminism'<sup>3</sup> the lack of art historical attention to black women's creativity, acknowledgment of their work by white feminists and the validity of women, in general, to use paint as their chosen medium were hotly debated, further highlighting gaps and exclusivity within feminist art criticism.

*I am an abstract painter and as such I cannot ignore these histories of painting. I am eager to uncover and trace a lineage in Modernism's abstract painting and to follow its threads that lead to contemporary women abstract painters and myself. My paintings reflect my feminist ethos and through my practice I investigate and challenge patriarchy. I critique the canon, Modernist ideologies of male genius, quality and style, autonomy of the artwork, form over content, mastery over materials, singularity and closed fixed meanings. My work plays with the language of painting, form, scale, colour, gesture, trace and tradition all have their say. I paint the many possible readings of its materiality and its potential to embody and articulate my psychic and physically held sexualized subjectivity as a woman.*

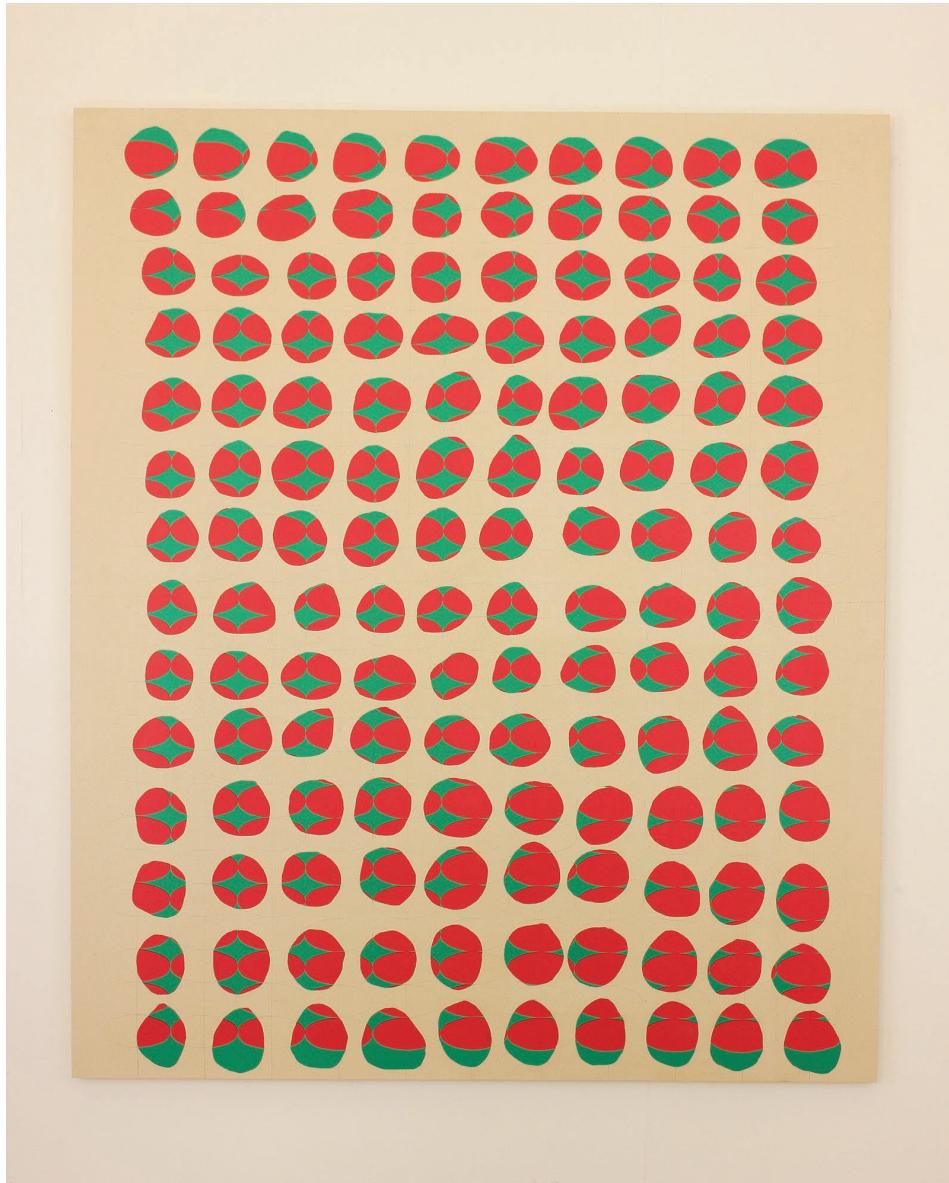
*I will be contextualising my painting in referencing texts by art historians and artists such as Rosemary Betterton, Hilary Robinson, Griselda Pollock, Rebecca Fortnum and Rosa Lee. The writings of French feminist, philosopher and psychoanalyst Luce Irigaray also informs my practice. It is through their analysis of the symbolic order that certain alternative concepts concerning the reading of the materiality and embodiment in painting which 'are productive in the search for feminist critical analyses of contemporary art practices by women, not because they explain the work, but because they can help make those practices more legible.' (Robinson, 2006: 3).*

Women want to make art, they want specifically to paint, a desire which is as much about wanting the right to enjoy being the body of the painter in the studio – the creative self in a private domain – as it is about wanting to express individualistically the none the less collective experiences of women. (Pollock. 1992: 140)

*It is this historical and personal position of the ‘body of the painter’ as woman, producer of art and meaning, that I want to make visible and claim. I do this by means of weaving, multiple, calculating **STRATEGY**.*



**A Different way of speaking: How do I read materialism and embodiment in abstract painting and position it within a feminist context?**



*Multiple Diffuse Touch*, 2018, Oil on canvas, 183cm x 152cm

Morphology, Mucus and the Lips - a detailed account of making visible  
'Multiple Diffuse Touch' - Stage One

No matter what anyone says size is important. I measure my body against the painting. I am at full stretch.

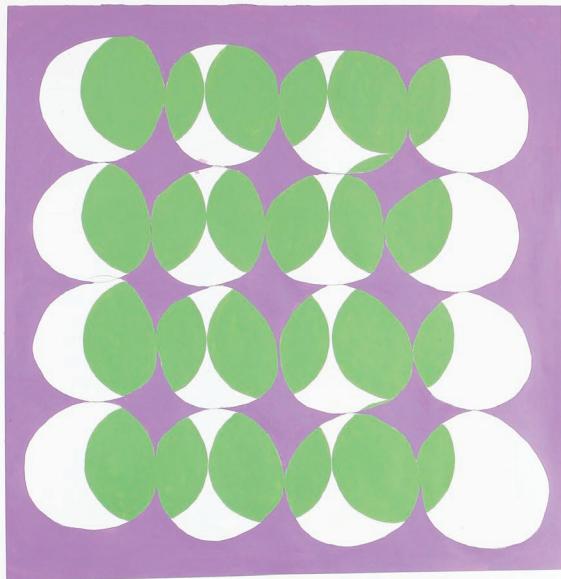
Wood is first carefully chosen, no holes, knots or warp, then exactly measured and precisely cut. Internal edges are planed to a soft curve then sanded smooth, so not to be caught and made visible on the surface of the canvas by brushwork or drawn lines. The strainer's skeleton must remain hidden from view. Corners are glued, clamped and nailed. More sanding if the two surfaces are not exactly meeting and any gaps are filled. Cross pieces must be cut due to the size of the strainer, the depth of these is reduced using the circular saw, to again allow invisibility. Steel brackets are screwed into the corners and cross piece joints for extra reinforcement, to fix and ensure there is no movement.

Canvas is measured and torn, not cut, so that the bias is maintained, and the weave will remain true and not be twisted when stretched. It is pulled tightly around the strainer using canvas pliers, as tight as possible. Staples, equidistant, pin it to the wood. Particular attention is paid to the canvas' corners, trimming them and folding them in such a way to ensure they lie as flat as possible enabling the painting to hug to the wall as closely as is possible.

The canvas must be protected and prepared for pigment. I want the canvas to remain as tight as a drum so the best preparation to use is rabbit skin size. The making-up of which, needs to follow a formula, the ratio of water to size matters. The ingredients are heated in a double boiler, gently to prevent boiling. When the correct temperature is reached the glue properties of the size are released and it is ready for application. Apply quickly whilst hot, working the size backward, forward, up and down to penetrate the weave thoroughly. If applying to a large canvas the glue tends to cool down before the canvas is completely covered, so it must be reheated again to the correct temperature, otherwise the glue starts to set and lose fluidity. Now it is a waiting and watching game. As the size starts to dry it shrinks the canvas, drawing it in ever more tightly. The strainer starts to strain. If the wood starts to bow too much the staples must be let out quickly and realigned, but if let out too much the canvas will be slack. Once dry this process is repeated twice more.

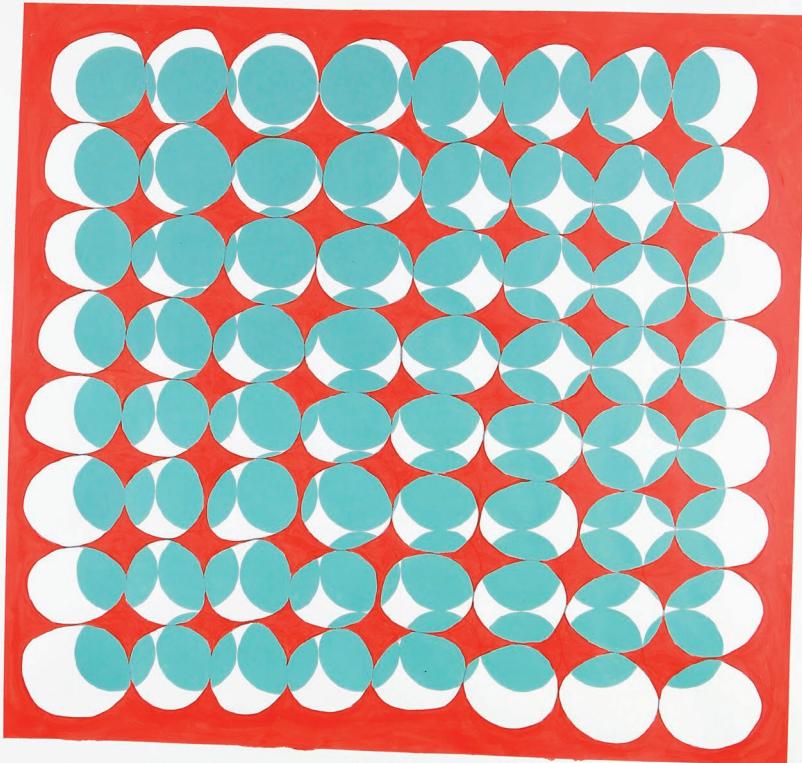
What I have now is a tightly sealed surface. A drum to play. Flick at it to hear the tension. Scratch at the surface to feel the crisp impenetrable texture. A skin.

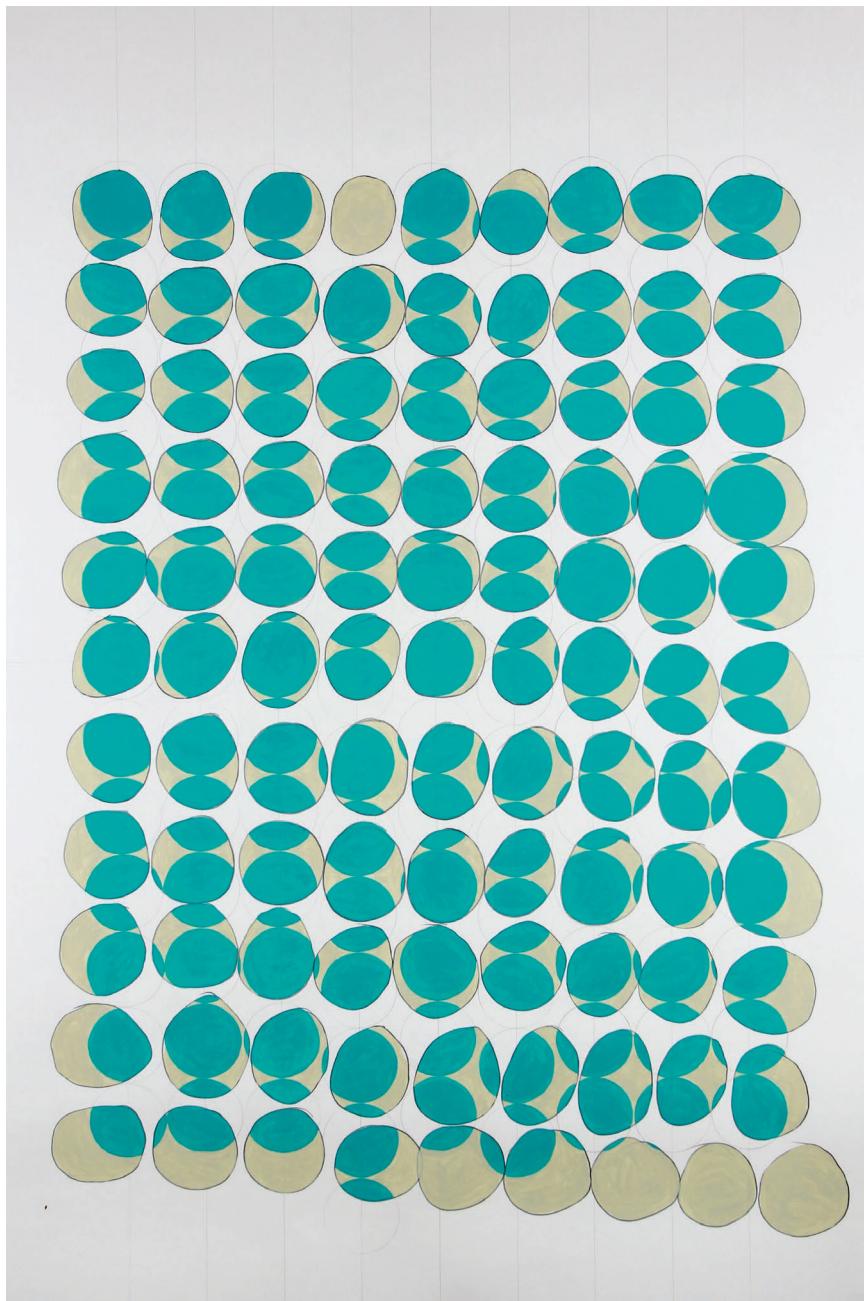
The painting's surface is now ready to be inscribed.



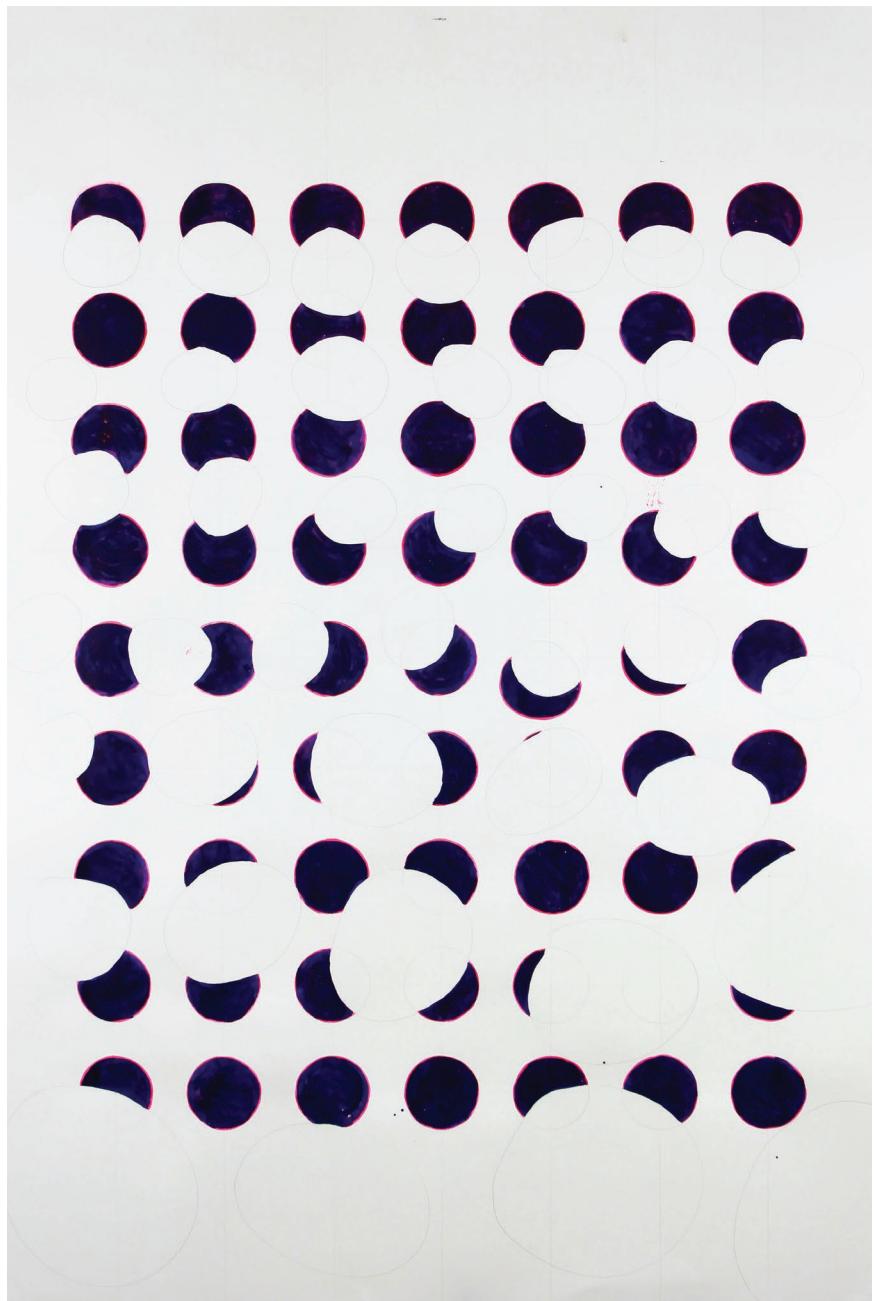
Studies, 2018, gouache on paper, 59.4cm x 84.1cm

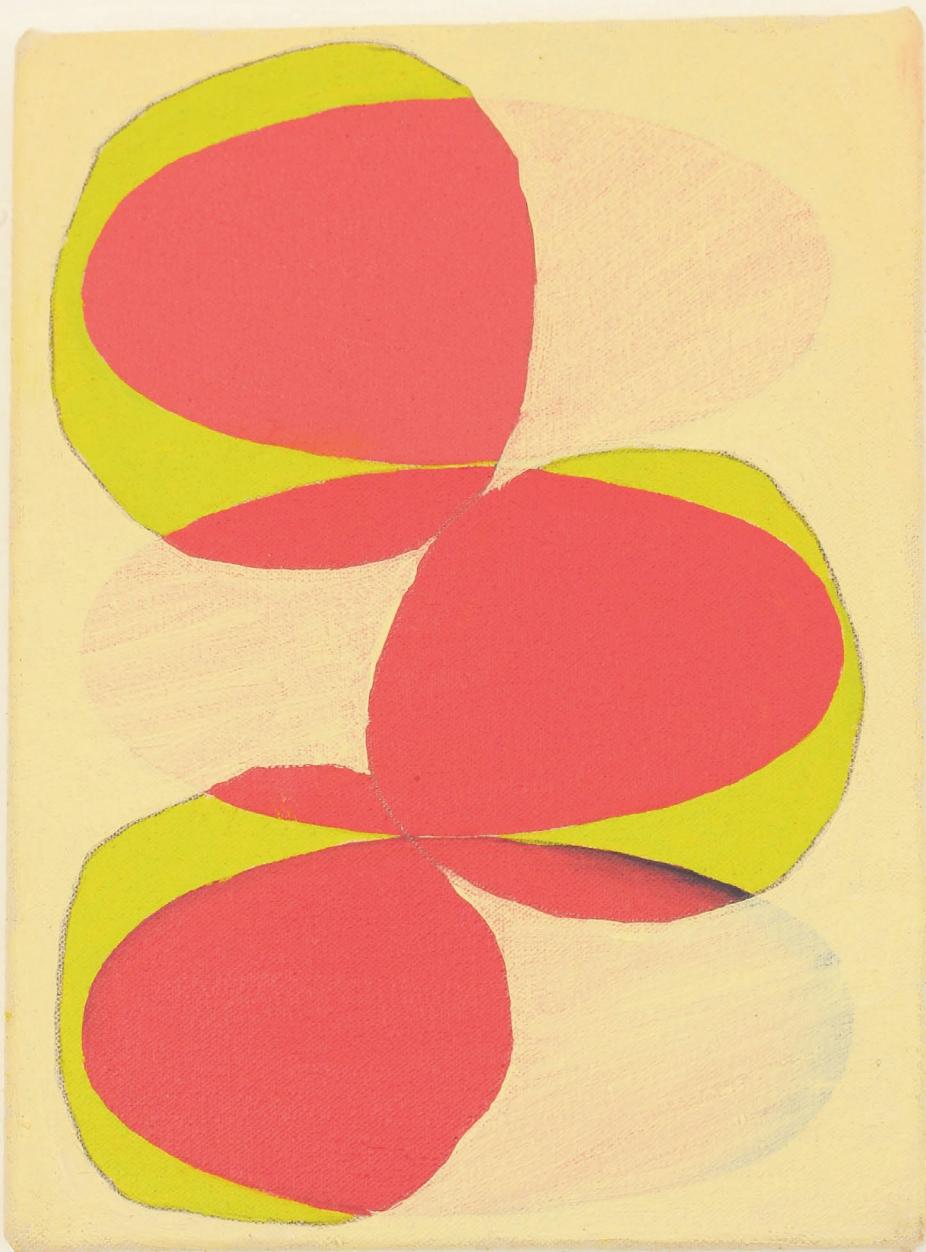
Friendly patterns impression



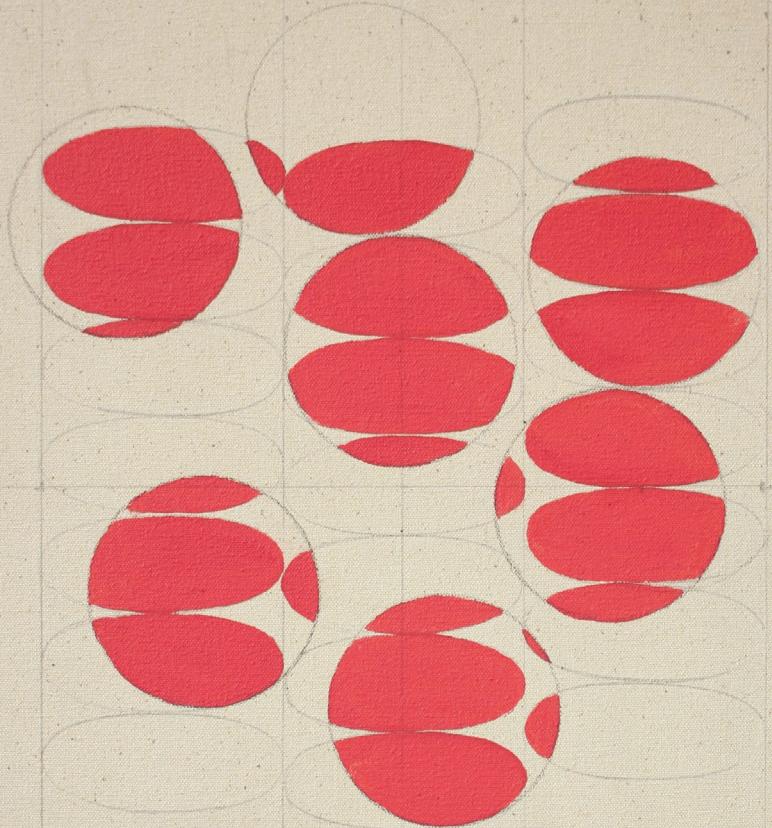


Studies, 2018, gouache / acrylic on paper, 59.4cm x 84.1cm



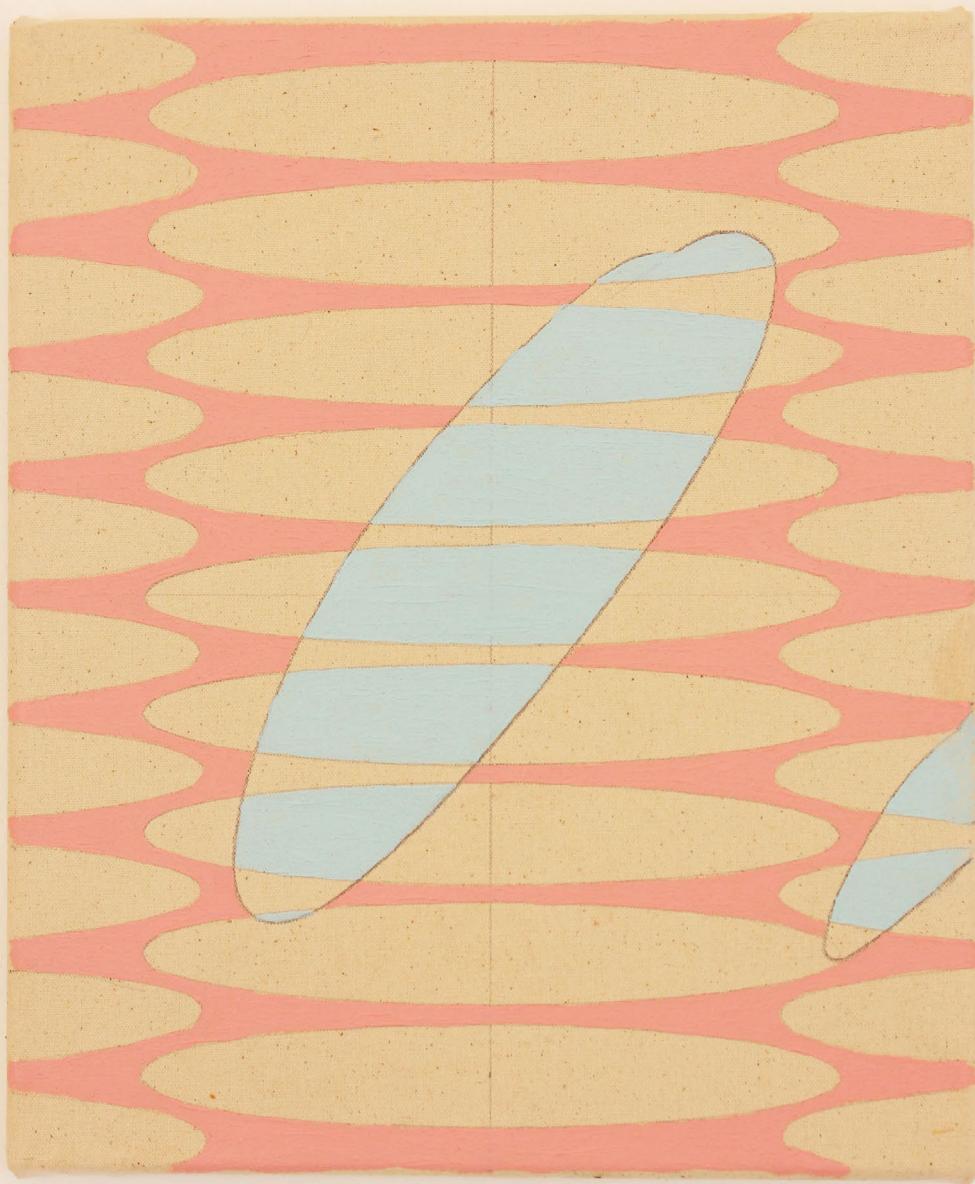


Studies for *Multiple Diffuse Touch*, 2018, oil on canvas, 25cm x 30cm





Studies for *La La La*, 2018, oil on canvas, 25cm x 30cm



## Shape Shifting

Absence of the grid allows the figure to morph and roam  
freely

Mirroring and dancing

A definite sense of travel, movement towards or away  
Journey from one point to the next

Tension between destinations

Images caught in flux, like microscopic entities that adapt  
and multiply

My eye is dragged around the drawing

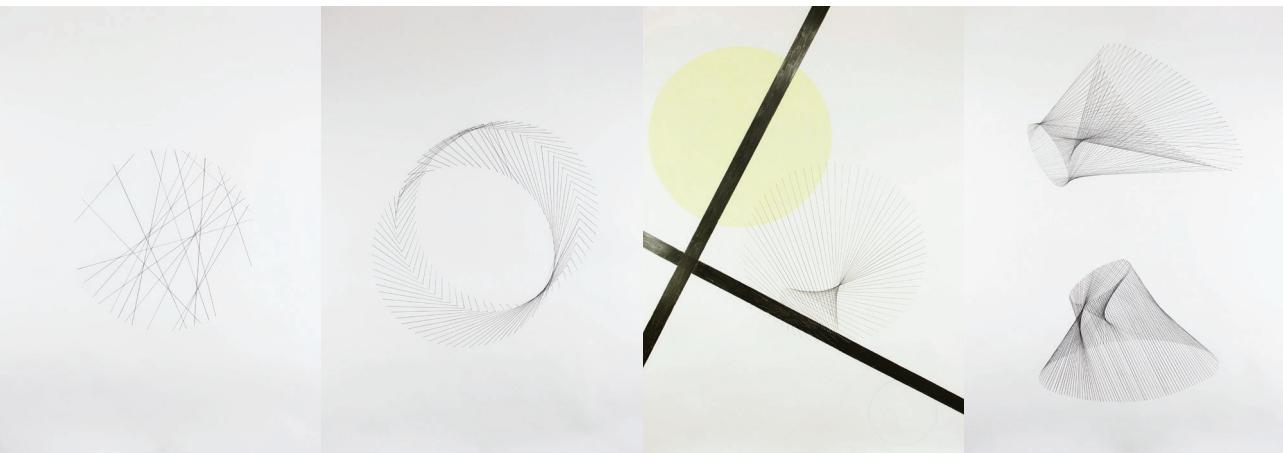
I try to make sense of the process

A coming into being, missing pieces trying to form a whole

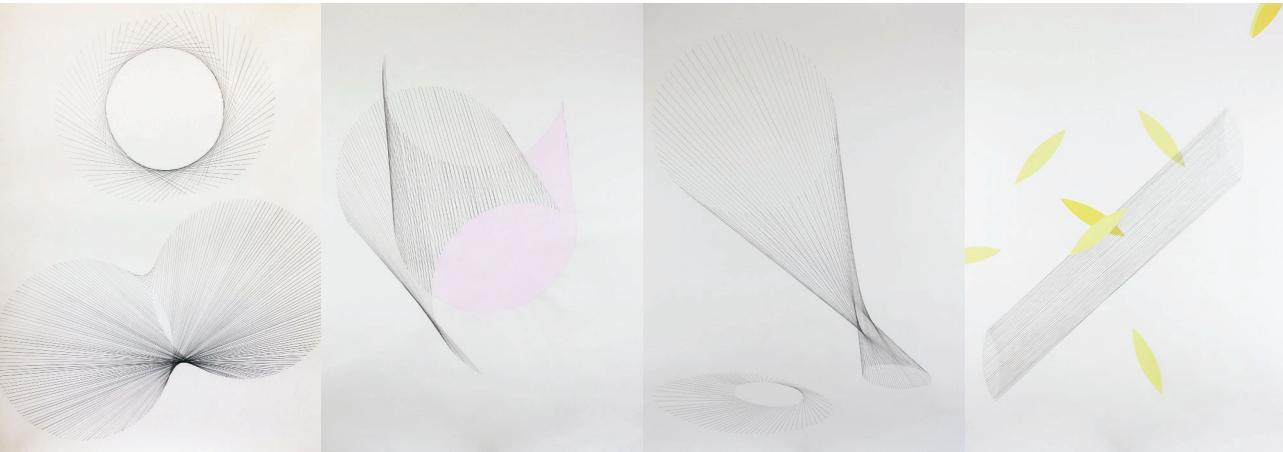
Later, it occurs to me that the figure and the ground, (line and grid), from earlier drawings have become one. But now, the grid is distorted, stretched, pulled apart and ordered to a new, ever changing position.



*Shapeshifting*, 2018, gouache and pencil on paper, (installation view - Hanover Building, UCLan)



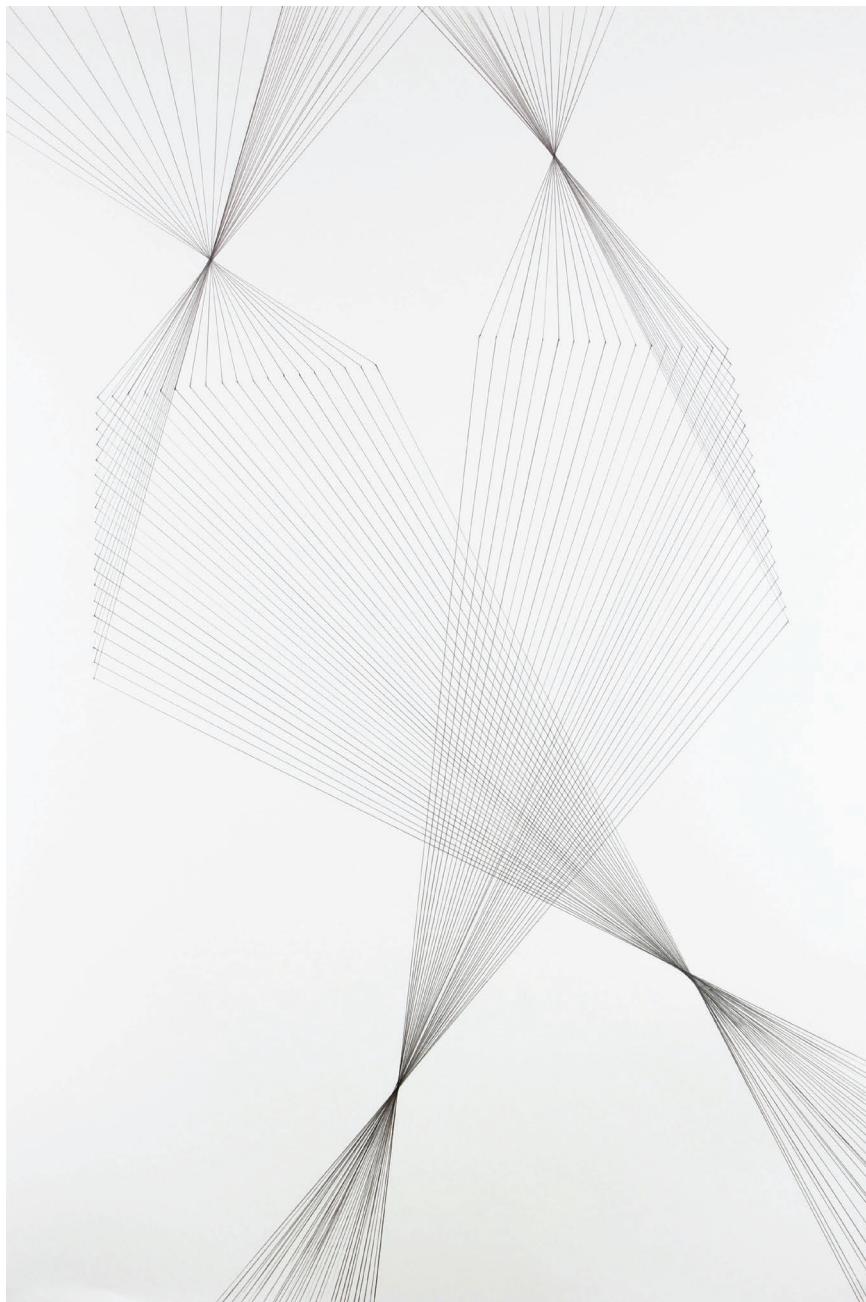
*Shapeshifting (1-8)*, 2018, pencil and gouache on paper, 90cm x 115cm

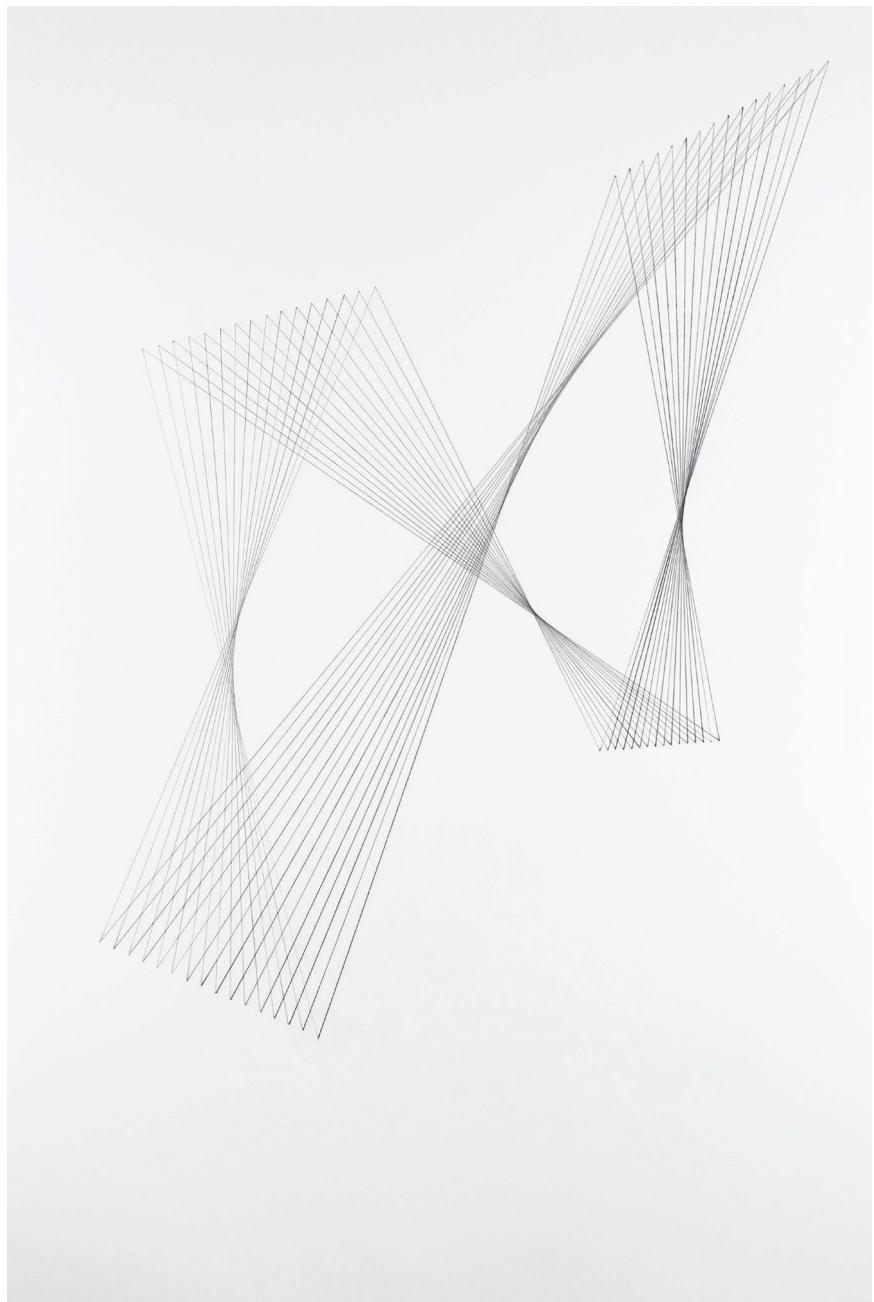


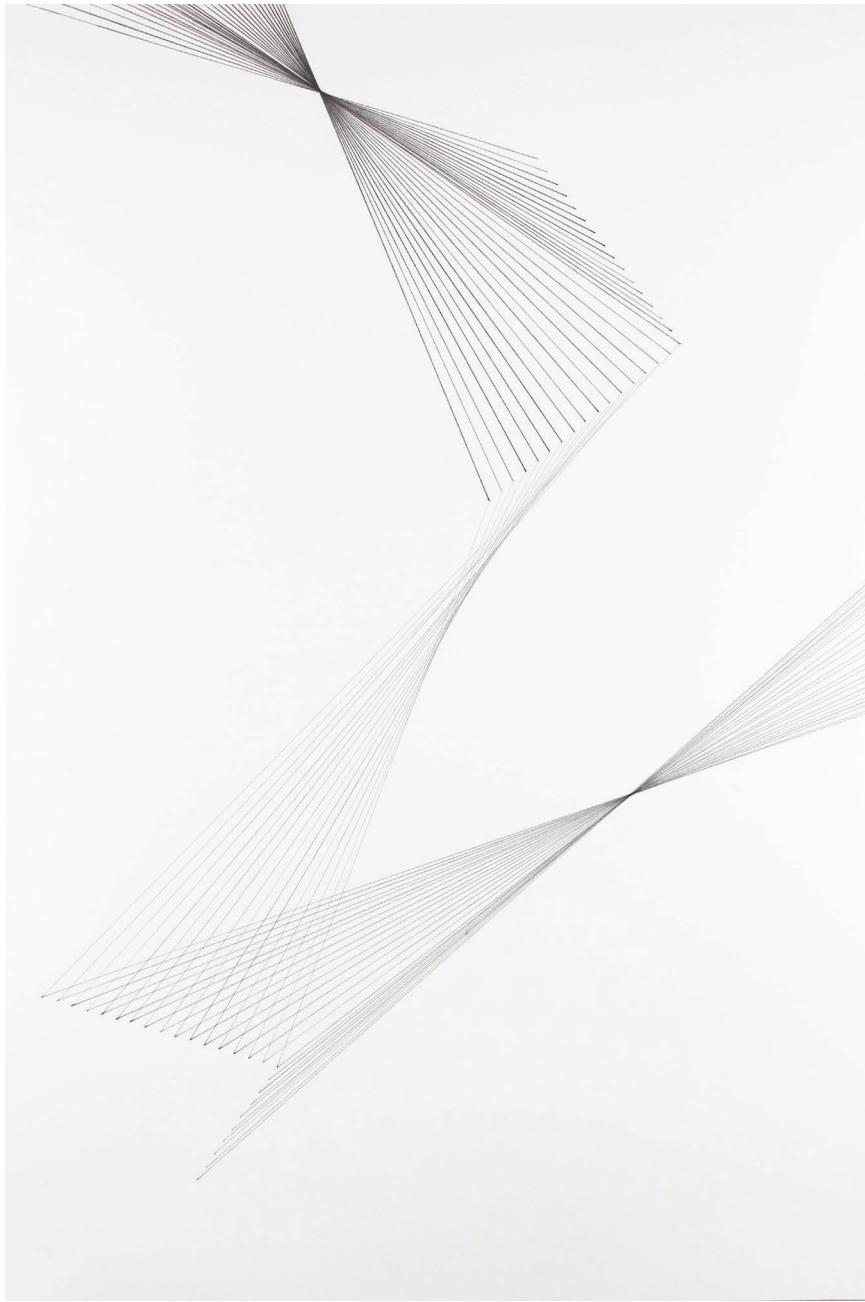


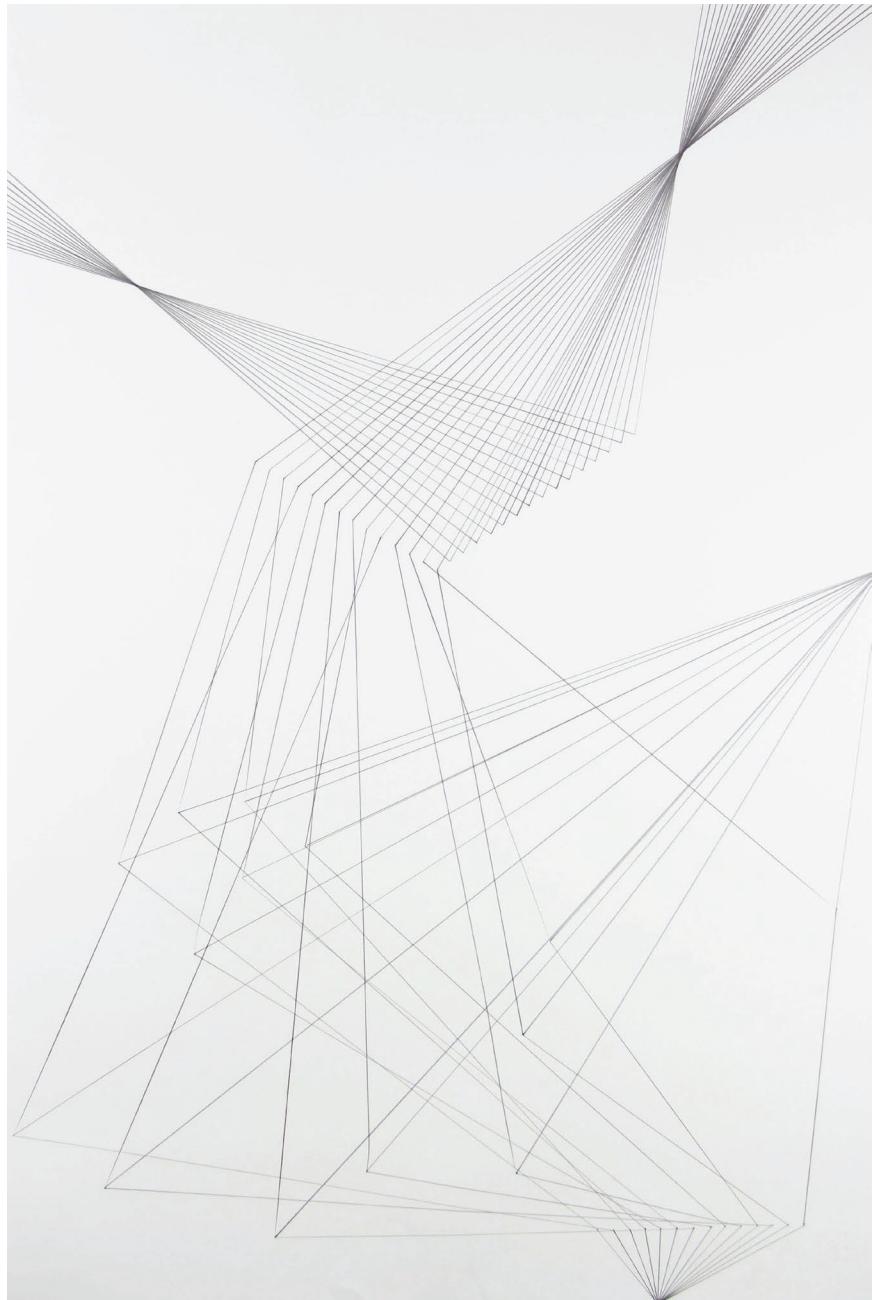
*Changeling*, (1-6), 2018, pencil on paper, 59.4cm x 84.1cm











## **STRATEGY 1.**

**Painting difference, reimagining the body and increasing legibility: Irigaray's philosophy of Mimesis and Femininity<sup>4</sup>.**

or

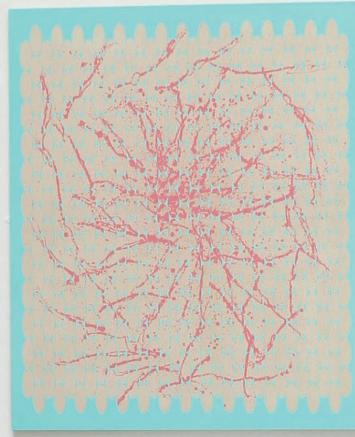
"Let's play pretend."

*Using what we have, to work with. My sex, my history, my recognition, my understanding, my skills, the position of my body and psyche. I cannot pretend to be someone else, as I do not know that person, but I still try. What I should do, what I could do and what is done. Are many different scenarios available to me? Does my form fit comfortably into my given space/context or am I constrained?*

Irigaray's theories and analysis of mimesis together with her other ideas of morphology and gesture have been explored by women artists and art historians (such as Hilary Robinson in her book 'Reading Art Reading Irigaray: the politics of art by women') as a possible model for reading and enabling artworks to be made legible within a feminist context. This can be of particular importance, use and relevance to abstract painters. Two definitions of mimesis become clear in Irigaray's writing. These speak of some kind of repetition, the first form that of 'productive mimesis' and the second form 'non-productive or maintenance mimesis', a term coined by Hilary Robinson<sup>5</sup>

Productive mimesis, Irigaray likens to that activity of a musician reading, interpreting and performing a piece of music. Many different renditions, many different readings which in turn can lead to new meanings. In contrast, Irigaray describes maintenance mimesis as that which repeats specific cultural signs and systems uncritically and that which perpetuates the myth of given structures as original truth. She elaborates extensively on the subject of 'femininity' in relation to these theories. It is, in fact, in the 'performance' of a productive mimesis of 'femininity' that Irigaray suggests patriarchal ideals can be challenged. Through a self-conscious 'mimicry' of femininity, Irigaray believes a disruption of ideologies can come about.

Julie Mayer



*Let's play pretend*, 2019, oil on canvas, 183cm x 152cm (installation view, PR1 gallery, UCLan - Praxis exhibition)

There is, in an initial phase, perhaps only one 'path', the one historically assigned to the feminine: that of mimicry. One must assume the feminine role deliberately. Which means already to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus begin to thwart it. Whereas a direct challenge to this condition means demanding to speak as a (masculine) 'subject', that is it means to postulate a relation to the intelligible that would maintain sexual difference. To play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it. (Irigaray 1977:73-74; 1985:76)

Women artists have been seen to actively adopt this stance of 'productive mimesis' in their practices in order to challenge and expose the ludicrousness of 'femininity' that they are expected to exhibit and perform.

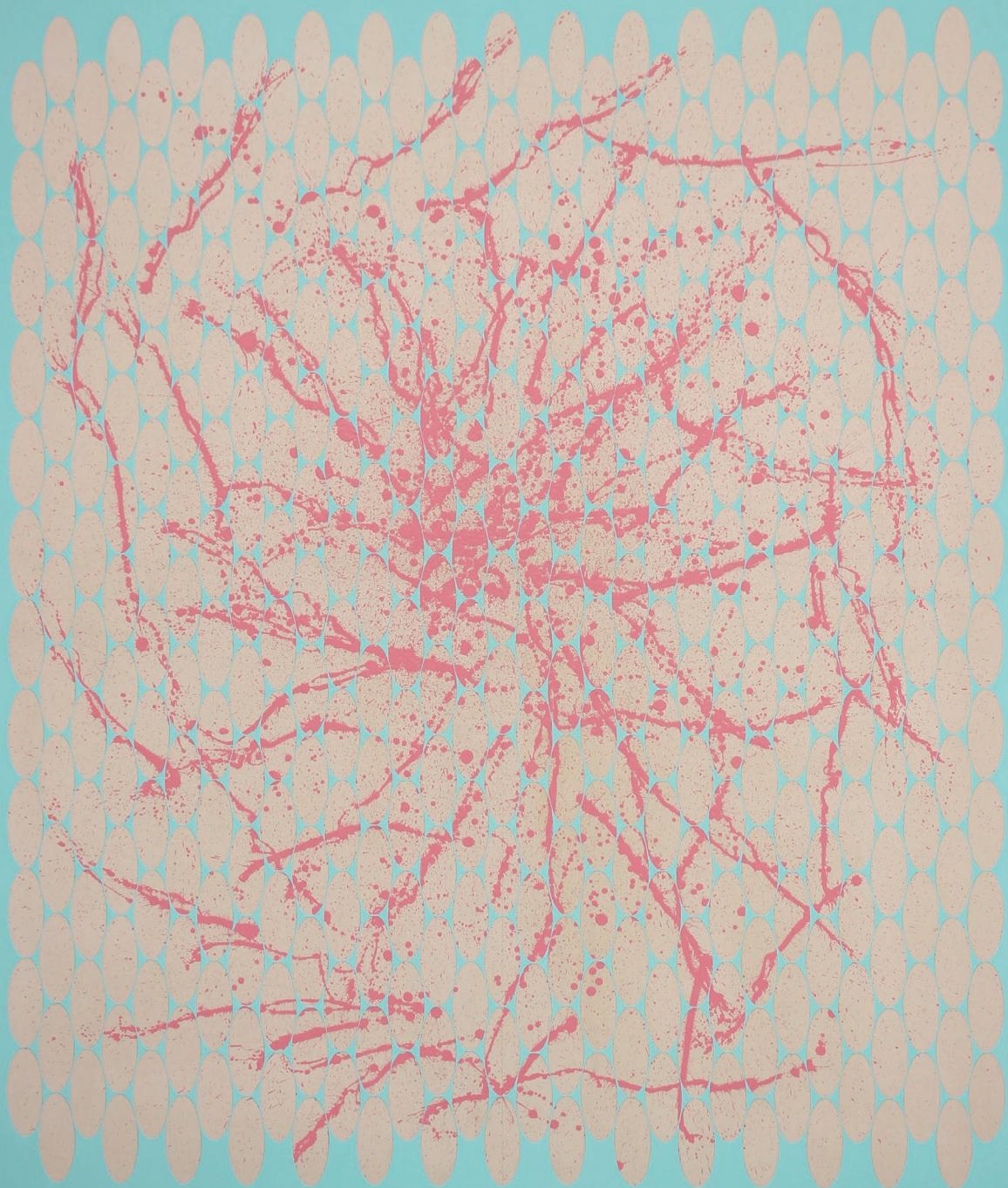
One clear example of this strategy would be Cindy Sherman's series of photographs, 'untitled film stills, 1977-1980', which reference 1940s, 50s and 60s cinema, or Laura Godfrey-Isaacs' paintings of the 90s, where she uses thick, pink-wrinkled skins of oil paint to parody femininity as surface. But, as Rosemary Betterton has pointed out, 'mimicry can be a tricky enterprise for women and...always runs the danger of reproducing what it mimics' (Betterton 1996: 98). Robinson too, also suggests that even a productive mimesis, for example that of consciously mimicking 'hysteria' is a 'knife-edge strategy' (Robinson 2006: 41) which could again run the risk of becoming what it mimics, 'self-defeating paralysis'.

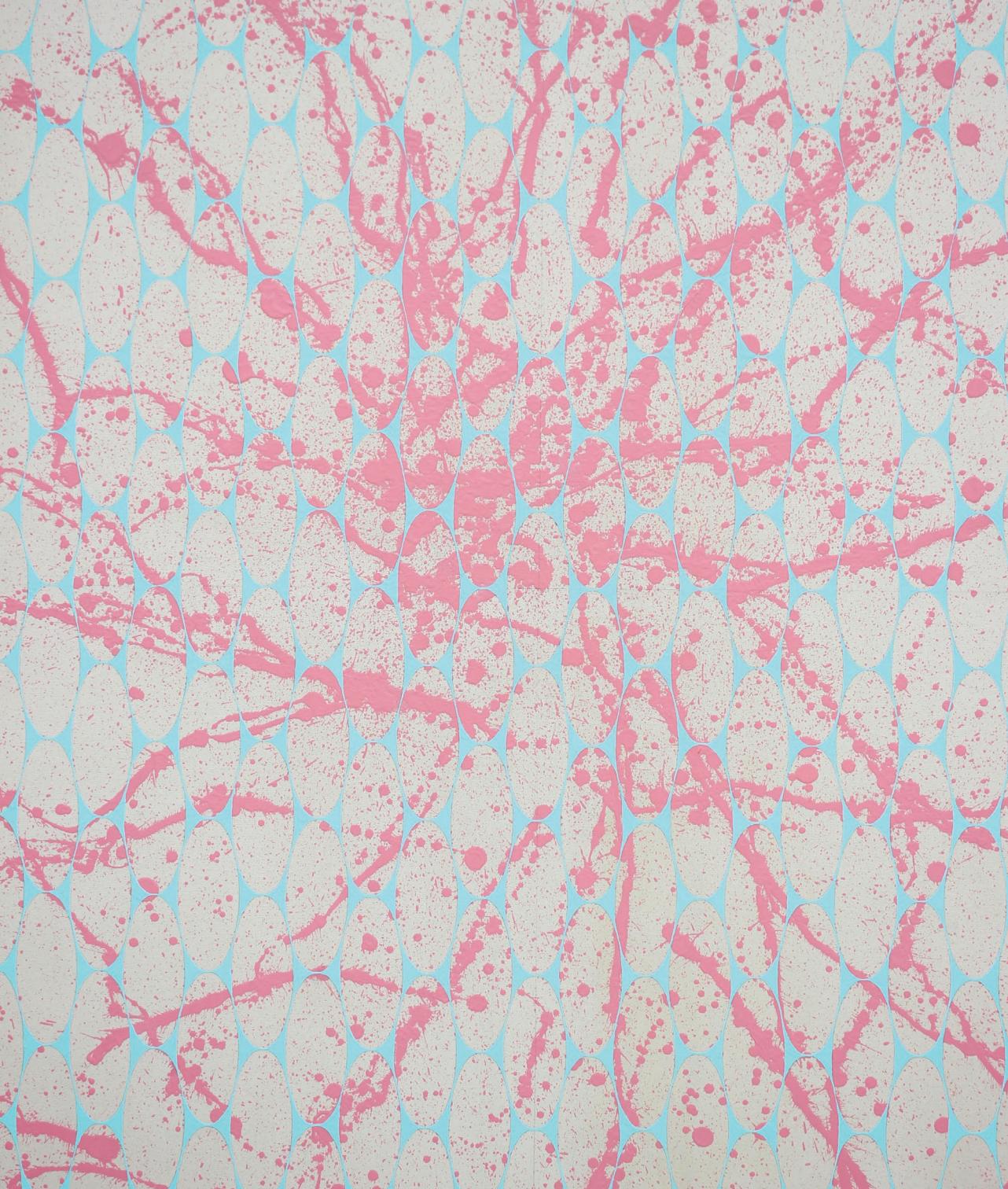
*When I started the painting 'Let's play pretend' I was thinking about how much I 'enjoy being the body of the painter in the studio'. I had been reading about Modernism's most famous example of the body in the studio – Jackson Pollock<sup>6</sup>. A Greenbergian hero, Pollock typifies the modernist definition of 'artistic male genius'. The Hans Namuth photographs of him at work in his studio seal his fate as master of materials, his virility and domination are clearly evidenced in his acts of frenzied painting, over, on and around his prostrate canvas. As many art historians and artists, such as June Wayne<sup>7</sup> have noted, the stereotypical attributes of male artistic genius i.e. recklessness, out of control alcoholism, inept with money, emotional, intuitive, prone to madness and 'creative seizures' (Wayne 1973), when applied to women take on the negative, derogatory definition of 'femininity'.*

Am I allowed to lay my canvas on the floor? What does it mean when I circle my canvas, jerking the paint from my brush? Can you see my body and my hysteria moving around the painting?



*Let's play pretend*, 2019, work in progress







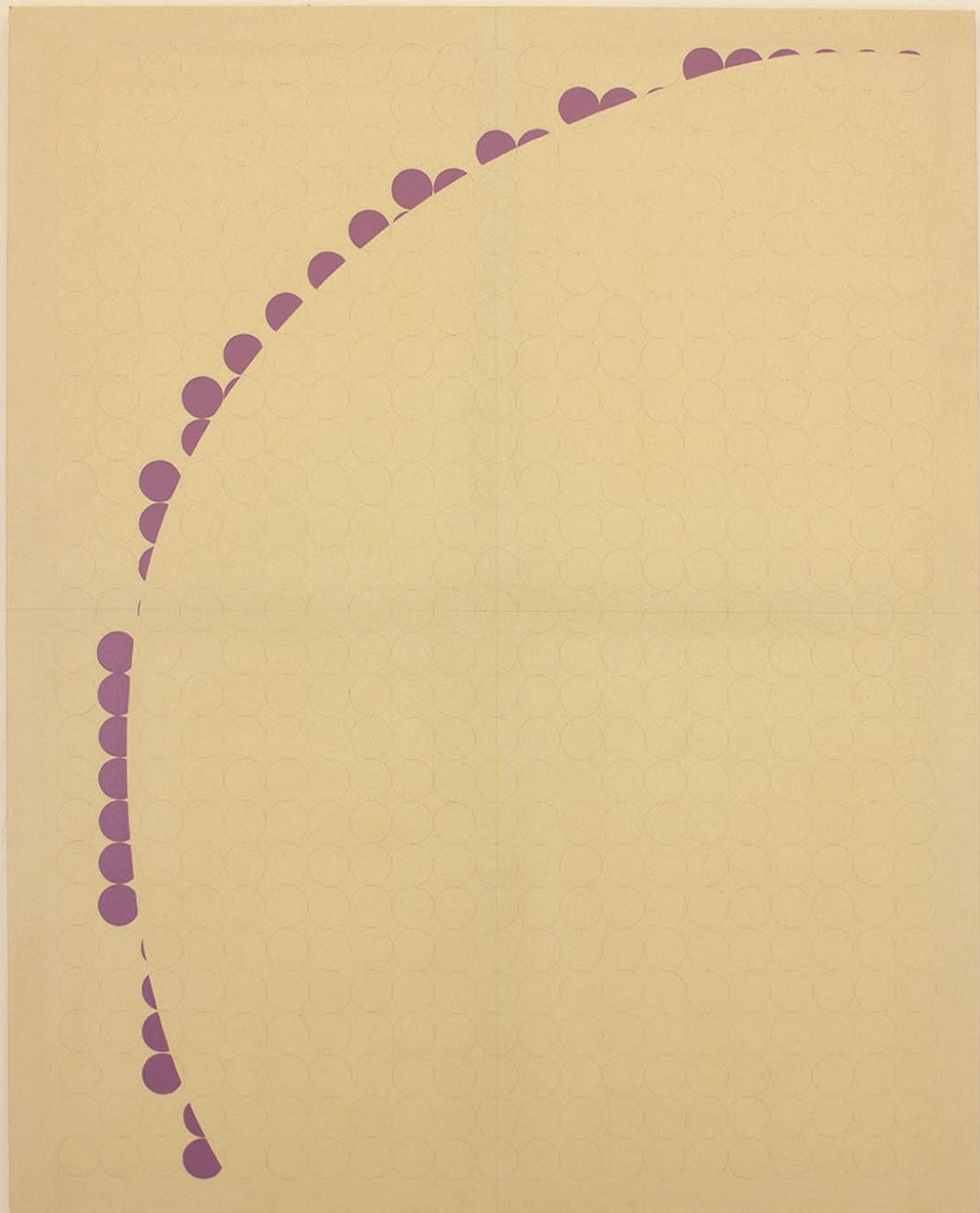
Study for *Let's play pretend*, 2019, oil on canvas, 26cm x 26cm

### 'Let's Play Pretend'

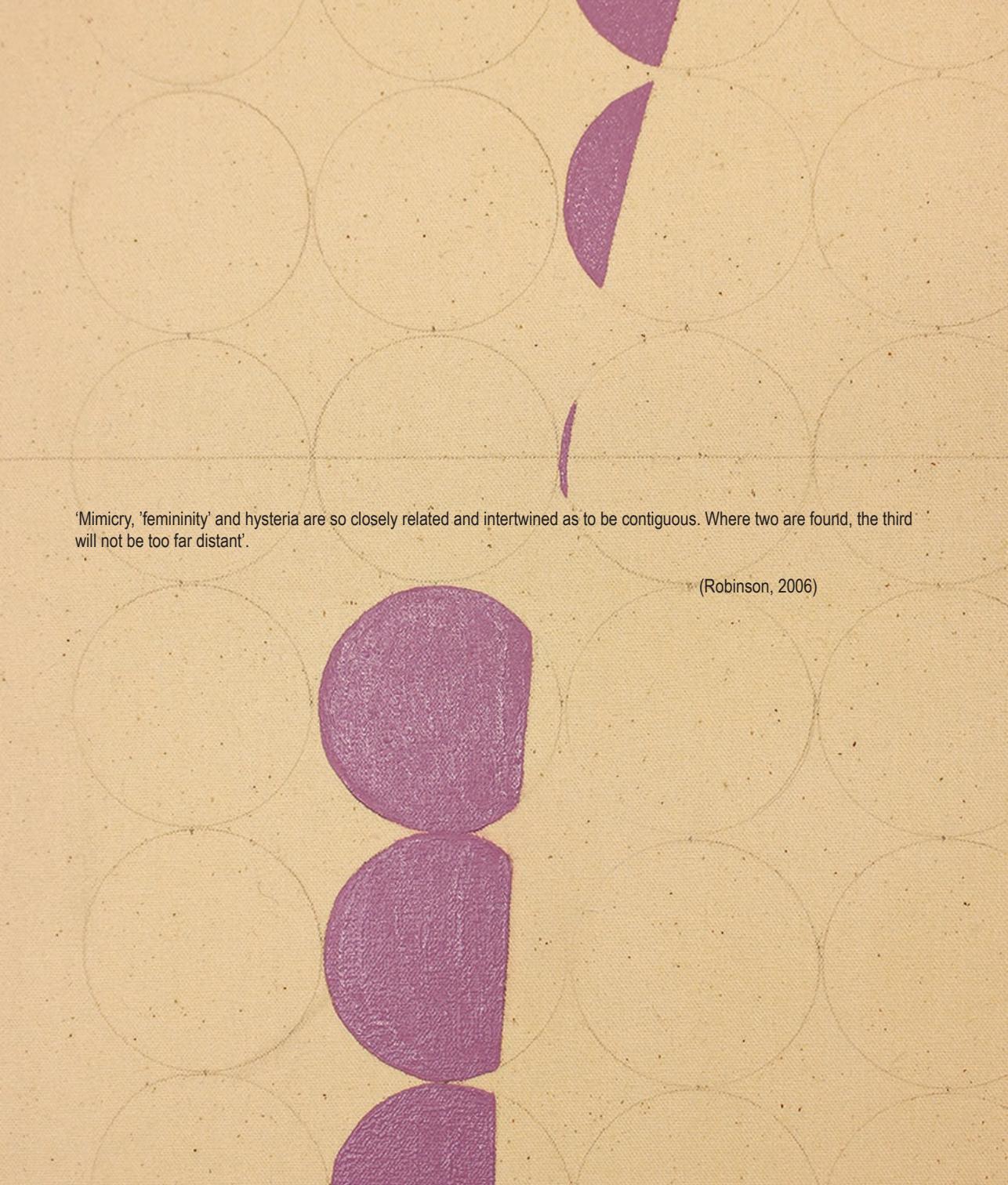
Pretty pink, pretty in pink, in the pink. Centripetal expulsions burst and spill around the canvas. Round and round trance like rhythms spew forth sickly pink ejaculations. What would Jackson say about my chaotic pink hysteria? More's the point what wouldn't Freud Greenberg say of his? I wanted to experience that feeling, or falling, falling from grace, into repetitive rebellion.

Was my body mistress or mastered?

Measure by measure order is restored. Slow pattern and delicate decoration appear and adorn. A complementary Albers afterimage of turquoise geometry contradicts and contains. Just a thin skin. You need to develop a thick skin; it takes time and many layers to build up.



*Arc of Hysteria*, 2019, oil on canvas, 153cm x 122cm



'Mimicry, 'femininity' and hysteria are so closely related and intertwined as to be contiguous. Where two are found, the third will not be too far distant'.

(Robinson, 2006)

## **STRATEGY 2**

**Challenging the gesture of Modernism and resisting definition, refusing fixed meanings and disrupting binary opposites, embracing contradictions and painting with ambivalence.**

In Rosa Lee's essay 'Resisting Amnesia: Feminism, Painting and Postmodernism' written in 1987 she references debates raised by the 'State of the Art' series when she talks about the 'problematic relationship between feminism and the practice of painting.' Lee highlights the lack of feminist critical attention given to painting and the bias towards deconstruction techniques of images and representations, which were considered as the most progressive artworks. She advocates a feminist case against deconstruction in favour of working within given traditions, in this case painting. Lee argues that although deconstruction is a very important feminist theory and has been very successful at revealing oppressive patriarchal structures inherent in society, it only in fact takes apart and analyses systems but does not produce any feasible suggestions of reconstruction. In short, we are left with the broken pieces of an ideology and nothing to fill its place. Lee cites the work of abstract painter Therese Oulton as offering a re-reading of painting's traditions concerning gesture. Oulton's work questions the processes of painting which lead to recognition. In her use of alla-prima technique, small brushstrokes of multi-layered paint build the surface of the canvas; they seem to be trying to describe something, but allusions of chiaroscuro and modelling of paint don't add up to describing anything recognisable at all. Her paintings challenge traditional notions of the gesture, they refuse definitions and fixed meanings, the painting language is disconnected from its old meanings. Rosa Lee's paintings also refuse fixed meanings and disrupt binary opposites so favoured in patriarchal ideology e.g. man/woman, order/chaos, active/passive, culture/nature, rationality/emotion, rigid/fluid.

Rosemary Betterton gives a succinct overview of her practice:

'in Rosa's paintings, underlying numerical systems are dissolved within rich webs and repetitive rhythms of rich colour and tonal and textural variation. A geometrically generated structure resists the assumption of the intuitive nature of creativity, but at the same time underpins a surface which is detailed and decorative. Against the search for purity, closure and control, the contained object and the finished statement in minimalist painting, her work offers openness and a willingness to let the impurity of life spill into paint.' (Betterton 1996:101)

'My anger is such that I need to be sedated'

Thin skin, stained canvas, luminescent lemon yellow is an acid glowing even film of light. What pattern to overlay? Then how to disrupt? Geometry. First find the middle and draw a line, must have a starting point, must have a point. Time measuring is time thinking. Planning the pattern, I have many possibilities and with each painting new possibilities emerge. I love those pencil marks, see the drawing, see the working out, trace the line and back again, repeat, repeat, repeat.

It is not petering, that pattern, it's forming. Is it forming order or an order? Either way it's pretty. Pretty sure that's right, it seems to fit nicely. Slightly pulled, slightly stretched, in and out, backwards and forwards flatness moves.

Now how.

I like the way they look together. I like that optical reverb that happens, how it oscillates in my eyes. Lovely lilac I can't see you without (an)other. I can only see one at a time, at a time when they vibrate next to one and another. Two coats are needed.

Stream. Quickly thought, not much conscious thought in that stream of consciousness. Funny how it always seems right though, isn't it? You don't have to think, you don't have to do, you don't go, you don't go through. In and out again. On top or on the bottom? It's up to you.

*How to explain and still leave the room?*

*I take pleasure in the different registers of painting language. At one, small brush, slow, painstaking, measured, thin, flat skin, super-mindful repetition. At two, big brush, full to bursting big brush, heart quickening gesture, thick textured trace. They 'don't go'.*

*They create a contradiction between each other causing in my mind a fissure. The incompatibility of gestures refuses that ego-centred trace, singular 'mark of the artist' a symbol of distinctive style and mark of quality, the 'one form'. One gesture works against the other finding moments of connection and harmony but ultimately retains its difference and ambivalence. Different times and different places, all the same. An ordered pattern is satisfying, even comforting to read and be part of.*

*Disruption = Change. Change is not always such a comfortable feeling. Images are caught in flux whilst trying to make sense of themselves, reconfiguration, a coming into being missing pieces trying to form a whole.*



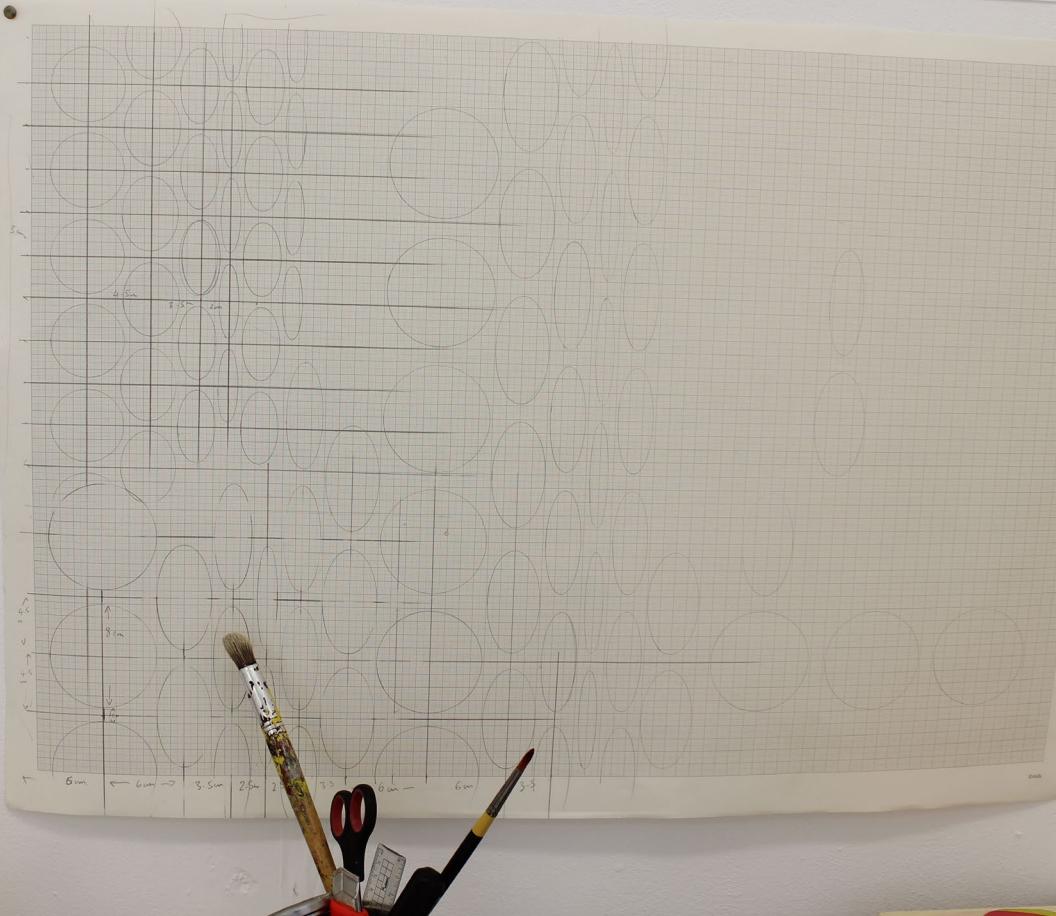
*My anger is such that I need to be sedated*, 2019, oil on canvas, 183cm x 152cm



Arian

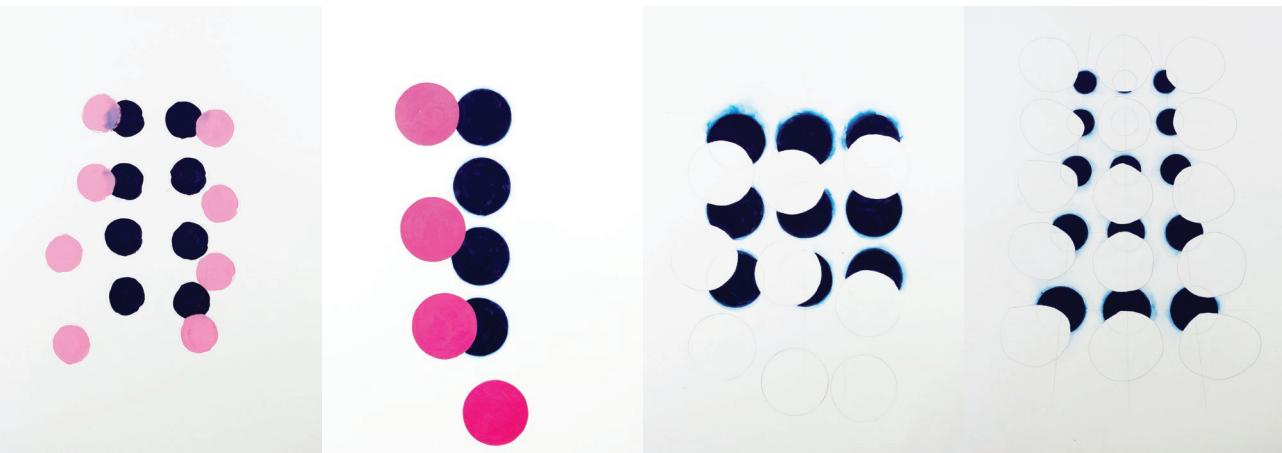
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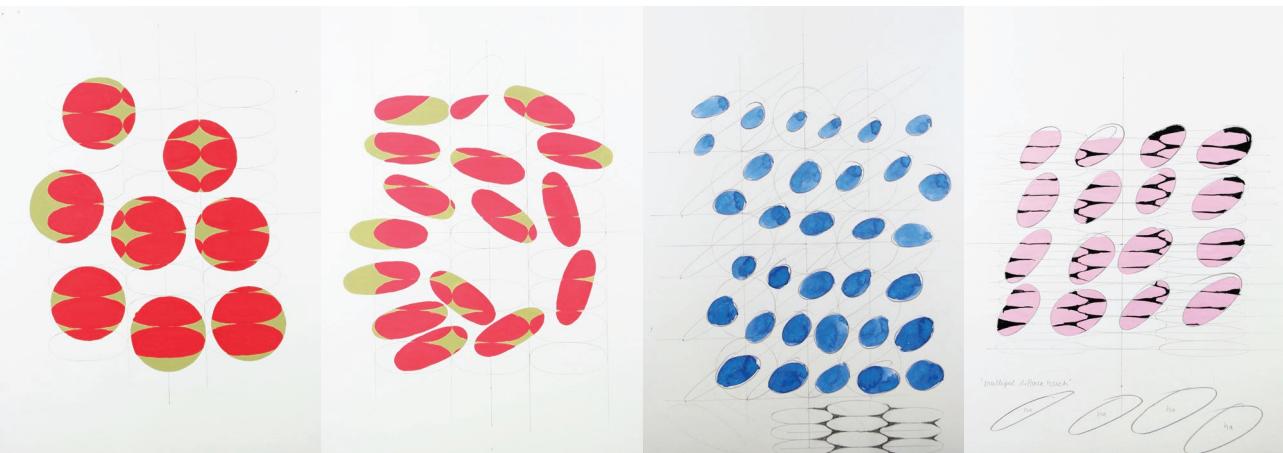


Studies for, *My anger is such that I need to be sedated*, 2019, works on paper, 59.4cm x 84.1cm





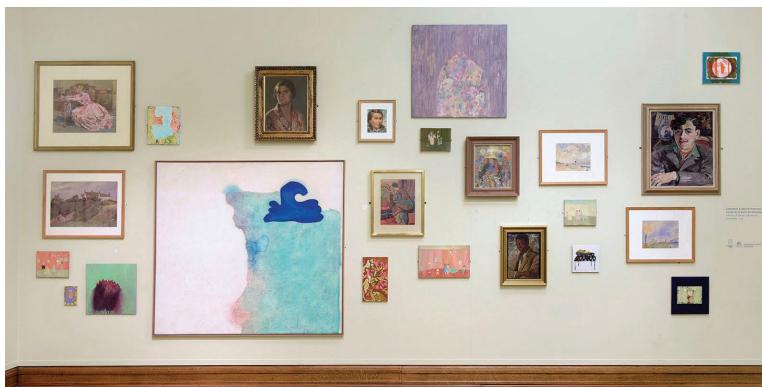
Sketchbook pages, 2018-2019, pencil and gouache on paper, 29.7cm x 42.0cm



## **STRATEGY 3**

**Looking for a Lineage – Maintaining knowledge and visibility of women artists, from the past, into the present. Making connections with other artists and curators, collaboration and support.**

In Rebecca Fortnum's essay 'Baggage Reclaim: Some thoughts on feminism and painting', (Fortnum 2017), she reappraises feminist discussion around contemporary painting by women. Fortnum maps women artists' rejection of painting in the 70s using Judy Chicago as an example of one such artist who left painting as she didn't want to be seen as 'one of the boys' anymore and who embraced alternative media and female collaborative working methods, e.g. 'The Fresno Feminist Experiment'<sup>8</sup>. Fortnum's essay comments on Helen Molesworth's 2007 essay 'Painting with Ambivalence'<sup>9</sup>, which looks at specific women artists ( Mary Heilmann, Joan Snyder and Howardena Pindell) who carried on painting in spite of feminist disapproval, but unfortunately due to lack of feminist critical attention they received little success. It is only relatively recently that Mary Heilmann's work has had the attention it deserves from the 'art world'. Unfortunately, this lack of feminist critical attention of abstract women painters continued into the 80s and 90s and she suggests that this is still the case today. Fortnum then examines the projects of several contemporary women painters, Melissa Gordon, Nadia Hebson and the Obscure Secure group (Jacqueline Utley, Hayley Field and Claudia Bose,) this group unearth past women artists in museum collections and archives making them visible again.



Obscure Secure, collaborative practice based research project in Ipswich Borough Council collection (2013-2015) culminating in an exhibition at Wolsey Gallery at Christchurch Mansion<sup>10</sup>

All artists clearly show that contemporary women painters are engaging with the 'flagship' feminist ideals of collaboration and that painting is not an elitist, solitary practice.

All the painters listed above have developed projects with other women forming mutual non-competitive, supportive, artistic friendships, networks for discussion and exhibitions which maintain feminist contexts, and which run contrary to art world hierarchies. By creating value outside excluding commercial structures of gallery/art dealer they, 'retain control of 'its intellectual capital and its creative games' rather than allowing the market to appropriate them, which would risk draining the work of its feminist content' (Joselit 2015:176).

## *In search of Rosa Lee*

*I remember, whilst studying on BA in 1997, attending a Garden Party at New Hall College Cambridge. The occasion was to celebrate their fantastic women's art collection<sup>11</sup> and the arrival of Barbara Hepworth's sculpture 'Ascending Form', 1958, it was there that I first came across the artist Rosa Lee. Her painting was my favourite.*



*Comus Revelry*, Rosa Lee, 1992, Oil on canvas, 36cm x 38.2cm

*My own paintings at that time were heavily influenced by feminist deconstruction theory and I struggled with myself to justify why I loved this little painting so, but I did, and I still do. It was painted in a language I could relate to, but I didn't have the words to speak about it, it was the overriding materialism of the work that I found so powerful. For me, at that time in my art practice, it was at odds with my then figurative sensibilities, I wasn't able see how abstract painting could speak the language of feminism.*

*Jump 20 years on and I'm researching abstract women painters. Rosa Lee's work comes up in a number of articles from the 80s and 90s, I remember her work and try to find out what she's painting now but without much luck. I discover she died in 2009 aged just 52. And so, I start to search for her legacy.*

Margaret Walters' article in 'Modern Painters' (Walters 1992), gives a brief account of Rosa Lee's biography. She was born in Hong Kong in 1957, her parents were both Chinese. She moved to the UK when she was a baby and was educated here. Her first degree was undertaken at Sussex University, in Intellectual History. It was only after graduating she decided to study art. Lee worked as a typist to support herself, first through night classes in Putney, a foundation course at Brighton, then BA at St Martins where she studied painting. In 1987 Lee gained a place on the Painting Department course at the Royal College of Art. In 1989 she was a prize winner in the John Moores. Before her early death in 2009 she had become an established artist, exhibiting widely. Lee's writing was an important part of her practice and she wrote academic journal essays, she used feminist critiques to investigate contemporary women artists' relationship to painting, Modernism and Post-modernism.

Rosa Lee was an abstract painter. Her work was often monumental in scale, depicting highly textured surfaces of ornate geometric patterns. Her work has been described as ...'intriguing because it seems to enact the impossibility of maintaining rigid categories. She creates dualities only to confound them, acknowledges opposites - between rational and sensual, natural and artifice, abstract and representational; perhaps even between masculine and feminine - only to dissolve them', Margaret Walters.



Rosa Lee, in her studio, working on one of her series of paintings titled *Speculum*, 1990

*Today she is hardly recognised or remembered. Rosa Lee, like so many women artists throughout history, is in serious danger of slipping into obscurity. I look online to see who owns any of her paintings and, to my joy, I find there's one in Liverpool.*

## **Matrix**

*Dr Amanda Draper is the Curator of Art and Exhibitions at the Victoria Gallery & Museum which is part of the University of Liverpool. The university bought Rosa Lee's painting 'Matrix' directly from the John Moores Painting Exhibition in 1989 for £1,000. I have contacted Amanda and she has arranged a viewing for me of Rosa Lee's painting, as it is not on public display. It is, instead, interned in the common room of the Surface Science department at Liverpool University and is only seen, or not seen, by the students therein. I enter the room and even though I know it's in there I feel a huge sense of surprise when I see it. The painting sneaks up on me from behind, as I turn to look for it, there it is just over my right shoulder, a huge, glowing presence.*

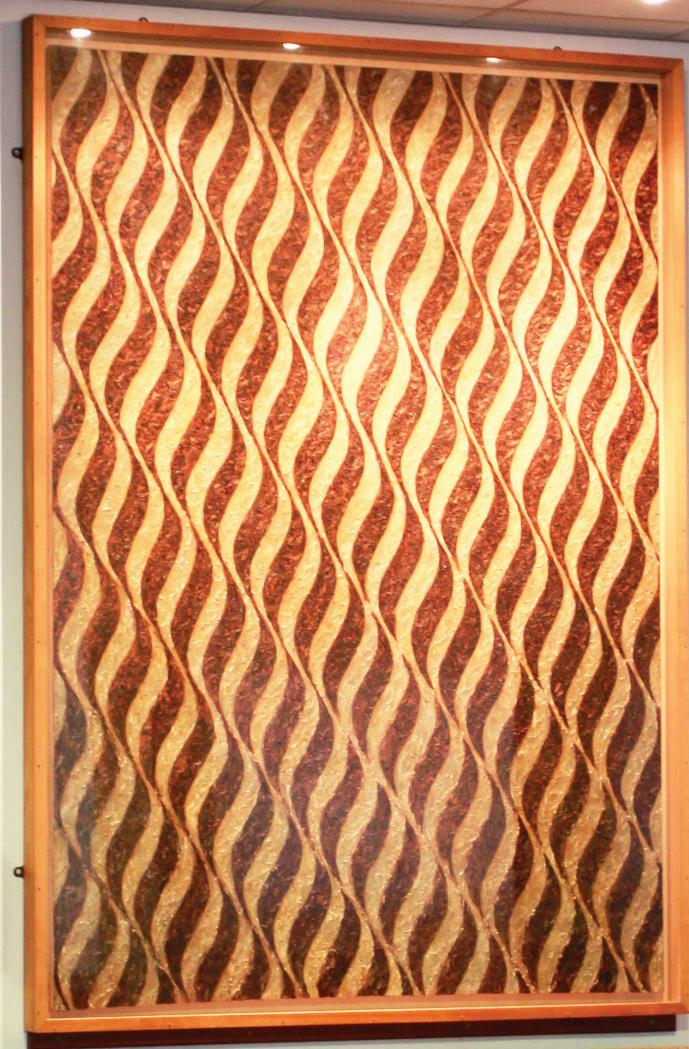
*It is a large painting, oil on canvas measuring 240.5cm x 170cm size. It's hung a little high as it has to sit above the common room sofas, this adds to the reverential feeling I'm experiencing as I have to look up to the painting like an altar piece. Amanda says the Dean of faculty is in love with this painting, she chose the fabric of the sofas specifically to complement the painting and unfortunately is reluctant to lend it out for exhibition.*

*Matrix is framed behind glass but not in the usual sense of being framed behind glass. It is instead held within a shallow space with a simple wooden frame. The thin raw edges of the canvas are visible, it is held in a hermetically sealed case exemplifying its status as object. Precious object.*

*Form. I enter the Matrix via an undulating, pulsating rhythm of geometry. The highly organised repetitive structure of the painting conjures memories of Bridget Riley's Op-Art works. The movement of the painting carries my eye up and down, across and back and round and round. I'm looking for the end but don't find it. I am seduced. I move closer. But, unlike Riley's precise, flat, tightly sealed, painted surfaces Lee's brushstrokes are overflowing, fluid and gestural. Her painted surface is built up with what looks like luminous glazes of opulence which are overlaid with small, thickly painted, textured brushstrokes. Painterly paint paints painterly paint. This tight form and materiality of the paint are at odds with each other. A contradiction of states of being? Backwards and forwards it plays me like a dance until the song is over.*

**Opposite page**

**Matrix, Rosa Lee, 1989, oil on canvas, 240.5cm x 170cm**





*Matrix (detail)*, Rosa Lee, 1989, oil on canvas, 240.5cm x 170cm



Installation view, 'She's Eclectic', 2019, Victoria Gallery & Museum, Liverpool

Amanda and I head back to Victoria Gallery; she had agreed to speak to me about the current exhibition she has curated: 'She's Eclectic: Women Artists of the VG&M Collection'.

The gallery information for the exhibition describes a 'showcase of the diversity of women artists in the collection'. It talks about the university's drive in the 60s and 70s, due to rapid expansion, to collect more women artists as a way of attracting more women students into the arts. The exhibition also forms a tribute to Linda Nochlin who died in 2017 and whose pivotal essay 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?', 1971, sparked a debate around how and by whom art histories are written and how women had been systematically denied access to art education and written out of this version of history. (Nochlin 1971)

I ask Amanda about her reference to the Linda Nochlin essay, her thinking behind the exhibition and how the show came about.

**"I've only been working here at the VG&M for a year, I started in Jan 2018. The first thing you do when you're a curator of any collection is you must find out what you've got. So, as I'm surveying, it becomes apparent to me that we've actually got more women artists in our collection than I'm used to working with before. I've usually worked with local authority collections, where we might have a dozen or even half a dozen women artists in the collection and here it's a much bigger proportion. It's not huge, I'd say about 3-4%. But there was clearly a conscious thought process to represent women in the collection.**

**And, where were they? Well they weren't hanging on the walls. In fact, I could tell that a lot of them hadn't been out on display, possibly, since they had arrived. I thought well we're going to change that!**

**2018 was kind of the year of the women, 100 years of the vote and Linda Nochlin had died in 2017. Her seminal essay changed the landscape for women in art, women in culture. It was Linda Nochlin who really said look this is what's happened and is still happening. I think there has been a change and we wouldn't be sat here today if there hadn't. I thought we should mark that in some way and so it was a sort of synthesis of two, celebration of women getting the vote and a nod to Linda Nochlin for her contribution."** <sup>12</sup>

The exhibition certainly is a 'showcase' with many recognised artists, i.e. Bridget Riley, Elizabeth Frink, Susan Hiller and Gillian Ayres. But there are many artists on display who I haven't heard of. A bronze wall-mounted sculpture by Mitzi Solomon Cunliffe (1918 – 2006), 'Loosestrife' was purchased in 1957, from the artist, for the Civic Design building. Recently it had to come out of the Civic Design building as they were knocking down the wall it was screwed to. Amanda says they had to have it specially conserved as it was black, due to years and years of people smoking

next to it. I learn that Solomon Cunliffe was famous for designing the 'Bafta Award' trophy; I comment saying how 'this upsets me that I am not aware of this and if say a man had designed it....' Amanda says '**yes I'm sure if it had been Henry Moore we'd all know about it.**'<sup>13</sup>

Another sculpture Amanda has rescued ('from behind a pop-up banner in the Physics Dept common room') is a bronze bust by Eve Goldsmith (b1928), apparently no-one had looked at it for years, it was also against a wall – so impossible to view in the round. Goldsmith is a Liverpool based artist and is still actively working. The bust was commissioned in 1986 by the Physics Dept to celebrate the life of the eminent physics Professor Herbert Frohlich. Amanda agrees with me when I say due to the technical ability evidenced, the work could easily be mistaken for an Epstein.

Amanda Draper is continuing the feminist address with regard to the gender imbalance evident in museum collections and also in the exhibition is her first acquisition since being in post – a fantastic sculpture by Fiona Banner 'Runway Show', 2017, purchased with the support of The Contemporary Art Society in 2018.



(From left to right)

*Loosestrife*, Mitzi Solomon Cunliffe, 1957, bronze

*Professor Herbert Frohlich*, Eve Goldsmith, 1986, bronze

*Runway Show*, Fiona Banner, 2017, aircraft part and letaset

*Still on the hunt for more of Rosa Lee, I contact Emma Hill founder of Eagle gallery<sup>14</sup> as I have discovered that an exhibition of Rosa Lee's paintings was posthumously exhibited at the gallery in 2012, where a number of unseen works from 2000-2009 and some early paintings were shown. A, now unavailable, catalogue was published by the gallery with an introduction by Sacha Craddock that I am keen to read. I ask Emma Hill if there is any chance, she has a copy I can purchase direct from her.*

*Not only does Emma send me a catalogue but she also puts me in touch with abstract painter Vanessa Jackson RA, who was a close friend of Rosa's and who helped to put the exhibition together.*

*I am stood outside Vanessa Jackson's house and studio. I am nervous. I ring the doorbell and Vanessa appears from around the corner. She is wearing her painting overalls.*



TOP FLAT  
Jackson  
Dougill

Vanessa Jackson has invited me to visit her, at her London studio, and view the paintings she has by Rosa Lee. Vanessa taught Lee at the Royal College of Art, she also became close friends with her, developing a mutual supportive, artistic relationship. Both artists are concerned with the language and histories of painting. Theory plays an important part in their practice; they shared knowledge of art theoretical texts, for example Vanessa tells me she gave Rosa a copy of 'The Mediation of Ornament', by Oleg Grabar and Rosa gave her 'Cezanne's Doubt', by Maurice Merleau-Ponty . They were in group shows together such as, 'Warped: Painting and the Feminine' Angel Row Gallery, 2001 and 'The Spirit of Time', at APT Gallery in 2006.

Vanessa isn't at all as intellectually intimidating as I expected, she is very welcoming, and we quickly strike up conversation about the show that's on around the corner at White Cube – Tracey Emin's paintings and sculptures. This conversation about 'identity', feminism and painting leads me to ask Vanessa if, when she was at St Martins' in 1971, she ever felt the pressure to shun painting in favour of the more 'acceptable' new medias being used by women. 'No, she says, I was too determined to paint'.<sup>15</sup> Not only to paint but also to consistently make painting using an abstract language, which she tells me was hugely influenced by the Constructivists. She said that when she discovered them, she felt an instant affinity with their work.

Rosa Lee's paintings are dotted around Vanessa's house.

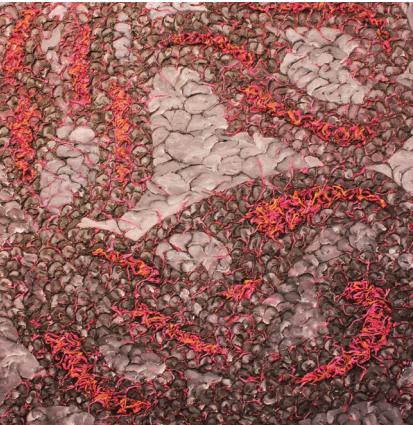
'Falling from Grace', one of Vanessa's paintings by Rosa Lee, is even smaller than *Comus Revelry*, just a tiny 18cm x 16cm. I am used to seeing representations of large expansive canvases by Lee and I am taken by surprise with the intimacy this little canvas emanates. Talking about painting technique, Vanessa explains how, using a similar method to that of Therese Oulton, Rosa had at least three colours picked out on her palette and, using an alla-prima technique, she rolled her brush individually in the colours lifting and twining each colour separately on the length of the bristle. Then, in one small turning of the brush against the canvas, the colours were transferred – as if separately painted on top of each other. It's hard to describe the detail and textured surface of the paintings and, like all good paintings they do not reproduce with the same intensity as when experienced in the flesh.

Opposite page (Top to bottom)

*Falling from Grace*, Rosa Lee, 2004, oil on canvas, 18cm x 16cm

*Braid 2*, Rosa Lee, 2001, oil on canvas, 46cm x 44cm

*Untitled*, Rosa Lee, 1999, oil on canvas, 28cm x 30cm



## *Reflection*

*Process, methodology and materials is an important part of my painting practice and Lee's work has this in spades. Part of the lure I experience when viewing her work is trying to understand the process and put it into some order which, of course, I never manage to do. My paintings do not bare the ornate textured surface, but like Lee's they are made using small brushes, a constant, repetitive touching of brush to paint, to canvas, which slowly builds a repetitive, ordered, patterned surface. This process of repetitive touching puts me in mind of a passage in 'This Sex Which is Not One' by Luce Irigaray, where she describes female sexuality.*

*This organ which has nothing to show for itself also lacks a form of its own. And if a women takes pleasure precisely from this incompleteness of form which allows her organ to touch itself over and over again, indefinitely, by itself, that pleasure is denied by a civilization that privileges phallomorphism....The one form, (my emphasis) of the individual of the (male) sex organ, of the proper name, of the proper meaning.. (Irigaray 1985:26)*

Hilary Robinson in her book '*Reading Art Reading Irigaray*' refers to this passage when developing her argument for a morphological reading of materials to produce an alternative syntax, paint being just one possible medium, which she suggests could enable legibility of women's artworks within a feminist context. Robinson goes on to talk about Irigaray's theories of '*mucus and the lips*' in relation to morphologies in materials, her analysis of Irigaray's meaning and motifs of the mucus and the lips are very open and do not suggest a literal bodily reading which, simply put, could run the risk of setting up yet (an)other binary opposite in relation to the one. She asks, '*How do we self-represent without reproducing (to ourselves or others) the phallomorphic representation, 'woman'? How do we resist incorporation while retaining legibility, developing appropriate syntaxes for legibility?*' (Robinson 2006:107)

*These questions resonate within my painting practice and I wonder if they resonated with Rosa's.*

*In looking for a lineage, I am not shocked at how women will indiscriminately help other women, or, how giving of time and knowledge they can be. What I was shocked by is how easy it is to make contact with women artists, gallery owners and curators which I previously thought out of reach. Is it just that women are more willing to support each other, would it have been as easy a route had they been men? I don't know. What I do know is that it is possible to form supportive female relationships within the art world, to support one another in our practices, to increase our creative visibility as women, as artists and challenge the 'status quo'.*



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<sup>1</sup>For an examination of feminist strategies of the 70s see 'Textual strategies: the politics of art making', Judith Barry and Sandy Flitterman, *Screen*, 1980, vol. 21 no. 2. Reprinted in 'Framing Feminism', Pollock & Parker, Pandora Press, 1987, p. 313-321.

<sup>2</sup>This article set out to address the lack of feminist criticism about women's abstract painting practices, the article sparked the formation of a group of women painters who met regularly to support each other's very differing painting practices. Exhibitions such as (dis)parities at The Mappin Gallery in 1992 followed.

<sup>3</sup>A voice transcript of this symposium can be heard via 'The British Library Sounds', (<https://sounds.bl.uk>) 'Griselda Pollock and Lubaina Himid. Framing Feminism', ICA Talks, 1988

<sup>4</sup>For a very detailed analysis of Irigaray's philosophy of femininity and mimesis see Robinson, H, 'Reading Art reading Irigaray: the politics of art by women', pp 17-51

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 26

<sup>6</sup>See Griselda Pollock, 'The artist in the studio' in 'Painting, Feminism, History' in 'Destabilizing Theory', Barrett, M, Phillips, A, polity Press, 1992, pp 142

<sup>7</sup>June Wayne's essay 'The male artist as stereotypical female', *Art Journal*, 1973, vol. 32, no 4, Summer is as relevant to artists today as it was when it was first written and in my opinion should be part of core reading lists for all art students.

<sup>8</sup>An exhibition and symposium documenting the Fresno feminist art programme was held at the Phebe Conley Gallery in 2009. A catalogue was published by Press on Endeavours, 2009

<sup>9</sup>This essay appeared in the exhibition catalogue, 'Wack!: Art and the Feminist Revolution', Butler, C, Mark, L, G, MIT Press, 2007

<sup>10</sup>For further information on the projects of the Obscure Secure Group visit their website at <https://www.obscureresecure.co.uk>

<sup>11</sup>A catalogue of the work held at New Hall College is available, Warner, M, (1992) 'Women's Art at New Hall', published by New Hall

<sup>12</sup>Amanda Draper in conversation with Julie Mayer, 08.02.19

<sup>13</sup>Ibid

<sup>14</sup>Eagle Gallery, Farringdon Road, London, is recognised as one of London's first alternative art spaces.

<sup>15</sup>Vanessa Jackson in conversation with Julie Mayer, 29.03.19

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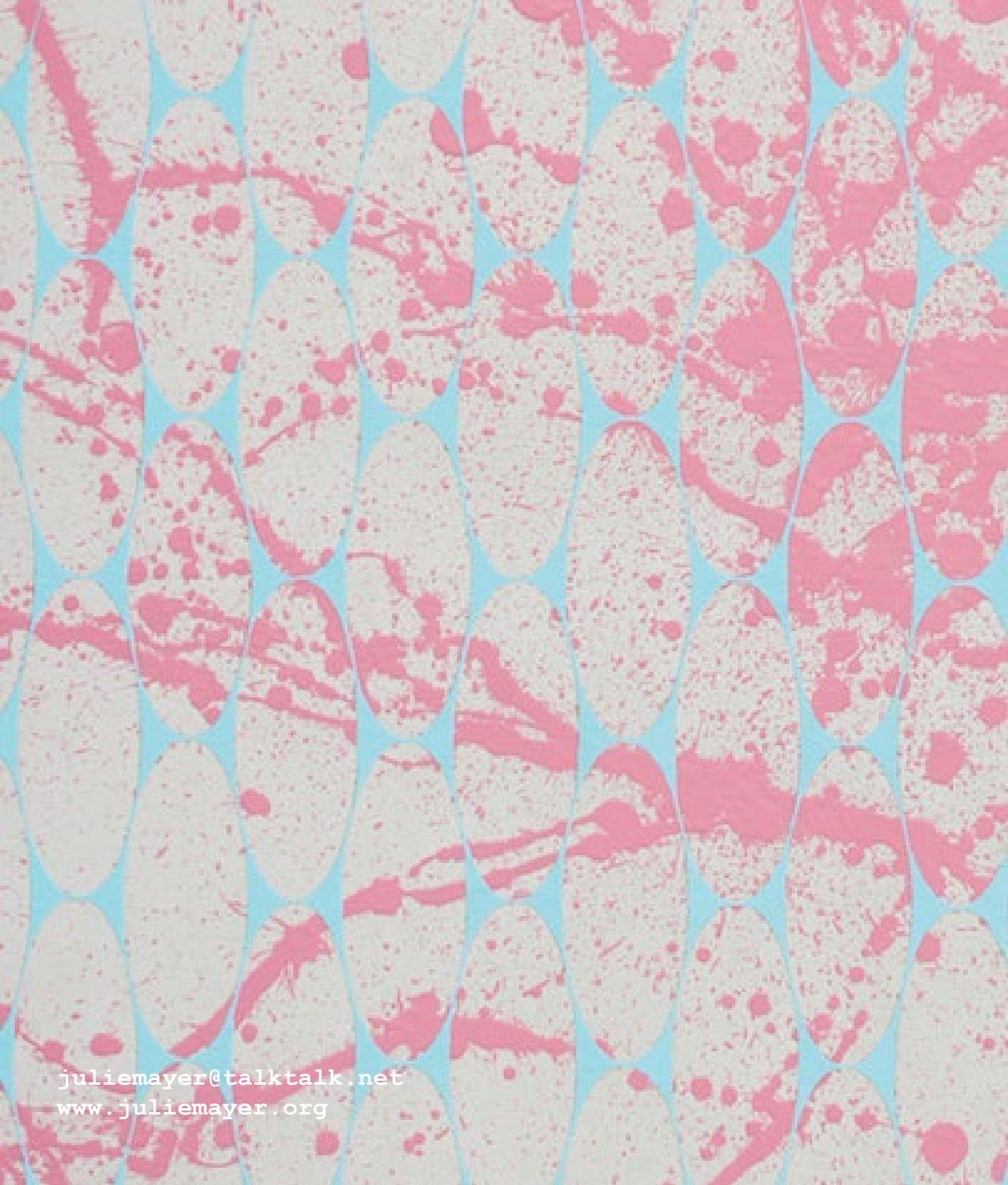
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