

Extract from *Acts of Retrieval and Conception, or, Painting Intuition* By Stephanie Moran

“We want to be judged on our painting”

How much are creative processes connected to gender? When biologically and neuro-biologically founded instinct and intuition inform working processes, does that make painting inherently gendered? Or is there a process of temporal retrieval of painting substance that comes from a pre-subjective, pre-gendered biological? There do not appear to be universals of process and material particular to women. As Linda Nochlin points out, women artists don't share a style with each other so much as with their contemporaries. Nochlin positions the question “why have there been no great women artists?” as a socio-economic one of opportunity and power, responding with an enquiry into what the conditions for “great artists” are.¹ How important is the “*feminist rewriting of the history of art in terms which firmly locate gender relations as a determining factor in cultural production and signification*”?²

... Bright **magenta** and **peachy** teeth puncture upwards swallowing **blackened quinacridone violet bruised** depths, beneath fresh **peppermint**, traces of **pink** drizzling the **green** verticals, all thickly softly merging except for the incision of sharp saw-edges...

... Linking this triad of artist curators are practices that draw on ‘intuition’ and ‘instinct’... which, on cross-examination, relate to remembering... If *thought* is an act, and painting a process *modelling* thought, what structures these thought-acts? Intuition is a component of thinking, a grasping of patterns in order to operate in a hostile, inherently foreign and deeply unknowable world environment³... Where intuition demonstrates a fundamental human neurobiological response, instinct may form its embodied counterpart qua set of sense memory reflexes.⁴

Hayley Field's ‘Creekside’ is delivered from a memory of the shape and sense-feeling of a hole in a fence... The intuition abstraction lies in the desire for autonomy or cutting (off) and the way that she isolates the memory-form. This “pure mutilation: amputating form from the sensible matter” enacts Negarestani's conceptualization of rudimentary abstraction as a procedure of pure cruelty. The “abstracting cut” fragments and withdraws, allows a close reading of what the paint does when separated from the image.

...Detail. A part cut out. [New World] **Golden ochres** cut with **red-brown** slashes... Oscillation between **red** and **turquoise** pushing forward and back... Gestural violence is reiterated in all-over extraneous **red** splatters, outlines and highlights.

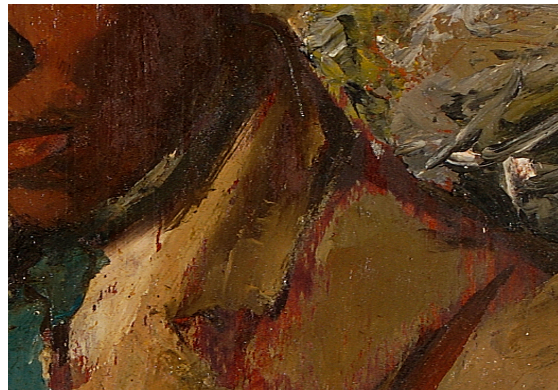
¹ Linda Nochlin, ‘Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?’ (1971), in ‘Women, Art and Power and Other Essays’, 1988, p145

² Griselda Pollock, ‘Vision and Difference’, p17

³ Reza Negarestani and James Trafford speaking at ‘Radical Geometries’, Tate Britain, 10 December 2014

⁴ Reza Negarestani, ‘Torture Concrete’, 2014

Zoom out. A **red-brown** boy dressed in jacket and tie looks down, contemplative. The calm pose sits uneasy with crude brush marks...



For Negarestani, intuition must undergo a rigorous process... to harness the transformative potential of abstraction... [to] “change the shape of thought” through a mathematically rigorous approach that breaks intuitive patterns of thought.⁵ But the *Obscure Secure* paintings come out another tradition of abstraction, the Modernist breaking down of Enlightenment’s mathematically based compositional form and central perspective. They belong to a desire for an affective abstraction... There may be a retrieval, dredged out of the deep time of body and mind through the act of painting, from the artist’s pre-subjective biological memories and desires, as Julia Kristeva suggests occurs in Bellini’s paintings, through the (re)construction of pre-linguistic and pre-symbolic chromatic spaces⁶... Intuition... may be materially and biologically based⁷... As such, the experience is *pre-subjective*, *pre-symbolic*, and *per se*, following Lacan, *pre-gendered*...

Claudia Boese’s abstract forms and spaces consciously attempt to confine, through her process... “the historical”... The envisioned heaviness, crustiness and shininess of bodies and the layers of remembering embed themselves phenomenologically and affectively in the layers of paint built up over an extended time, and in the use of colour as emotional tone ... The ‘intuitive, instinctive’ use of space and colour which are affectively psychological, attempt to uncover what may be hidden or obscure...

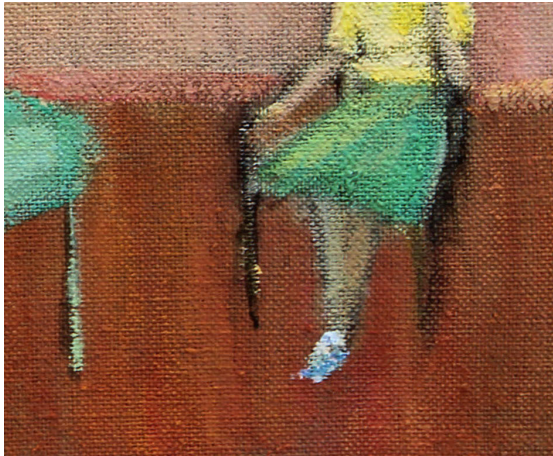
Hazy striations beam out over cloudy RAF-blue-grey and navy grounds, deep charcoal architectural shapes rise vertically into twilight gloom.

Boese’s organic abstract memory images of war contrast with Blanche Vulliamy’s sharp pastels graphically depicting World War searchlights in darkened streets... She records searchlights flaring through urban streets, delineating a real, observed pattern of wartime night light...

⁵ Negarestani, *ibid*.

⁶ Julia Kristeva, ‘Motherhood According to Bellini’ in ‘*Desire in Language: a Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*’, 1980,. p242 - 243

⁷ Peter Fuller, ‘*Art and Psychoanalysis*’, 1980, p166 - 7



... Delicately crusted, **creamy** light band above, grey shadows beneath seep through in verticals, dropping along **nicotine yellow** stain emerging from under scratched **duky rose** ... onto rusted **bloody-streaked** stripe below. Thick strokes of over pastel shades float on a shocking pool of deep **orange-red**...

Jacqueline Utley's paintings combine imagined and real histories through her process, working between idealistically envisioned non-hierarchical groups in flattened spaces and collage... unlike Vermeer's... women their immersion is social as they labour in groups. Utley reverses Vermeer's roles – the 'Lacemaker' is the artist herself, toiling alone in the studio as she paints the canvas surface over and over, dreams of utopian collectivity notwithstanding...

The introspection of Anna Airy's central female figure... [in] 'Trinkets' (1951), contrasts with the realist paintings of workers in factories she made while employed as a war artist... from house-wifely domestic solitude to socially outward-looking participation in the war effort, Anna Airy observing and painting furiously in the heat of molten shells burning the shoes off her feet in the gaze of the workers' relentless rhythm, all engaged in "socially useful collective activity"...

... **Deeper pink tones**, watery and firewarmed **pale magentas** pull away from **cool loose blues**, **flesh-greens** and **yellows**, rounded shapes of colour contained more or less by series' of curling **black** lines, knotted, coiled-up towards the middle in glowing domestic vortex.

Obscure Secure operates as an art historical documentation of women's practices from a specific location and within a particular time frame. In answer to the question of how important is the "feminist rewriting of the history of art in terms which firmly locate gender relations as a determining factor in cultural production and signification"? I would suggest that while being valuable for art historians, for practicing artists it is more essential to engage the structures of power... *Obscure Secure* approaches power structures via a tactic of DIY exhibition organisation that

could be considered as what Maria Lind terms 'social abstraction'.⁸ It can be read in terms of the move towards a kind of artistic independence or "autonomy", in the vein of current art discourses about 'exit' and 'escape'. Like Negarestani's "cut" of abstraction, does engaging power structures not require some form of cruelty, or at least an application of inherently violent force?... As Nochlin states:

*"Those who have privileges inevitably hold on to them... until compelled to bow to superior power of one sort or another."*⁹

But what is the territory of painting triangulated by this project...? The paintings have an inclination to abstract what is known or observed... and give them new structures or patterns based on an 'intuition' or 'instinct'... functioning as forms of remembering rather than cognitions "*not determined by a previous cognition of the same object*".¹⁰ The works recall, commemorate, represent and wishfully anticipate different social orders; they explore minor histories to reveal experiences often hidden or unrepresented. There may be some (inconclusive) use of "biologically and neuro-biologically founded instinct and intuition" in the choice of colour and the way that images and memories are transcribed into paint (gesturally, signatorially). According to Negarestani's theorizing of intuition as human neurobiological response, there would be no reason to presume an essentially gendered neuro-biological... [This is supported by Julia Kristeva and Peter Fuller's hypotheses around] painting process: painted forms may be pre-symbolic, escaping language, and therefore there is nothing to connect creative processes to gender... Gender is introduced in power and social structures, in the way that painting is received, framed, and viewed (or not)...

The use of intuition maintains the "emotional and intuitional" tradition of abstraction outlined by Barr,¹¹ continued through 80's psychological readings by writers such as Kristeva and Fuller, and still persisting in an 'affective turn'... Intuition as a premise may be overly vague, anti-intellectual mystification, obscuration or reaction; it may over-privilege the body, in 'embodiment' and reliance on instinct in itself without the necessary 'intertwining of intuition and reason' to complete the 'act of thought'.¹² The kind of potential Negarestani describes for 'bootlegging' and 'changing the shape of thought' through mathematical abstraction *may* have an equivalent in abstract affectivity and its 'structures of feeling', but these need to be thought rigorously and specifically in art to be meaningful or useful...

**Sensible solid female mass on a chair in front of a hearth, leaning
in towards the flame warmth...**

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⁸ Maria Lind, 'Abstraction', 2013, in introduction p20

⁹ Nochlin, op cit, p152

¹⁰ Charles S. Peirce, 'Questions Concerning Certain Faculties Claimed for Man', *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* (1868) 2, 103- 114. <http://www.peirce.org/writings/p26.html#notemark1>

¹¹ Alfred H. Barr Jr, op cit.

¹² James Trafford, op cit.