

I have known Gwen Hardie since 1984 when she was still studying for her post graduate Diploma at Edinburgh College of Art. In particular, I remember very well visiting her in her studio in West Berlin in the late 1980's. She had studied under Georg Baselitz while on a DAAD Art Scholarship. I was very impressed by how much her work had progressed, taking on board one of Baselitz's key precepts; that an artist should constantly challenge one's facility by introducing complications into the artist's process, putting 'sand' as it were into the smooth running machine in order to produce new artistic solutions, new discoveries. At that time, Hardie was exploring the possibilities of making sculpture. She had trained at Edinburgh College of Art, a school renowned for its painterly and especially colourist tradition. It was and is a medium in which she excels. Sculpture would lead her if not into the unknown, then the unaccustomed. Finding it awkward; dealing with three dimensions rather than two and having to work with real tactile issues rather than evoking them by purely visual means, Hardie had to emerge from her comfort zone and rise to a new set of challenges. She did so supremely well, and we showed her new work in an exhibition at the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art in 1990.

Hardie has always been fascinated by the human body, not so much as a physical entity, something to be comprehended as a whole, but rather for one particular aspect; the skin, the surface of the body. In the sculptures shown in our Gallery, Hardie gave the skin of her three dimensional bodies a rough tactility, stressing their very real physical presence. In her more recent work, she has concentrated on the visual appearance of skin, its colour, its translucency, the way it changes in tone, the way it advances or recedes in our field of vision according to the interaction with other colours and/or varying degrees of light and shade. She has for the past several years concentrated on painting, imposing on herself set formats and sizes, first tondos and now the square. The canvas has become the equivalent of skin. On it, Hardie has carried out in a tightly prescribed formal sequence, painterly exercises in colour, tone, light and shade, using the canvas as a sort of palette on which to mix her paints.

The delicate shifts in all these values, as they interact with each other, have a similar mesmeric quality to that achieved by Mark Rothko in his paintings where he balanced one colour against another. There is a meditative aspect to Hardie's work, which is underpinned by a powerful humanistic awareness of the wide spectrum of skin colours that Hardie encounters with her friends, on the streets and subways of New York where she now lives. In other words, these paintings are not simply formal exercises in capturing the complex fluctuations of our perceptions of colours, but a meditation on the incredible richness / multiplicity of humanity and, implicitly, the way that ethnicities are not fixed but fluid, especially in such a diverse city as New York.

Hardie's work clearly shows her roots in the strong painterly and colourist tradition of Scottish twentieth century art. But the Edinburgh College of Art was just a starting point. By moving to Berlin and studying with Georg Baselitz, her work gained a conceptual toughness and rigour that it still has today. Living in New York now and being exposed on a continuous basis, not only to the ongoing tradition derived from Abstract Expressionism – a strong emphasis on formalism and a highly subjective approach to painting, but also to the equally strong reaction against Abstract Expressionism – a new concern for the social context, for the application of systems and structures to reign in subjectivity, have given Hardie's work a new depth and complexity. This exhibition of her recent paintings in Berlin is a unique opportunity to map the journey that Hardie's work has taken over the last 35 years.

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