

A microscopic image showing numerous cells, likely yeast or bacteria, with bright red fluorescent spots distributed across their surfaces. The background is dark, making the red spots stand out. The cells are densely packed and appear to be in various stages of growth or division.

REVEALING LIGHT
COLIN BOOTH

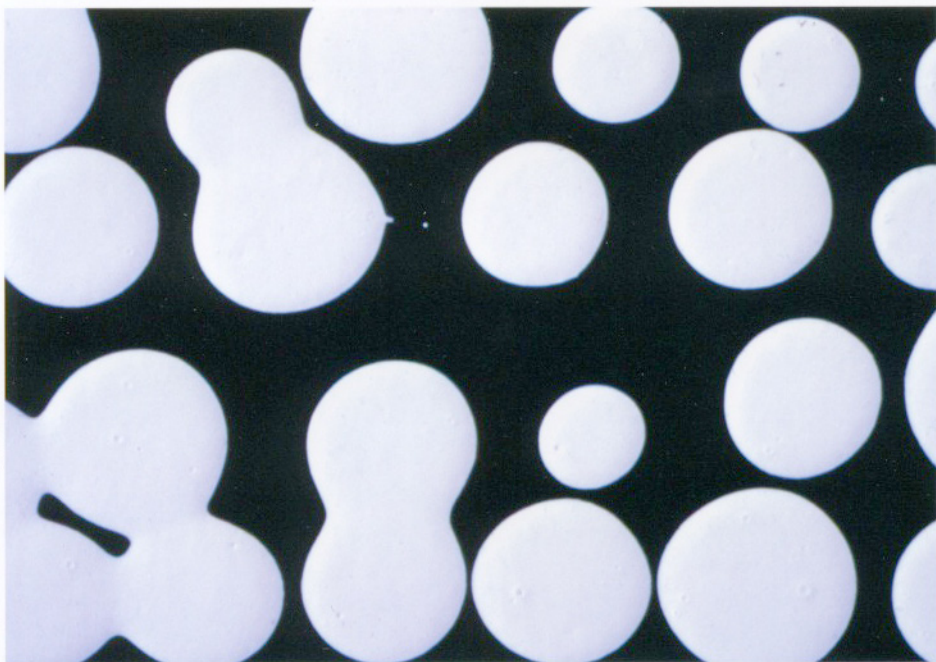
REVEALING LIGHT

"The subject matter of artwork is reality, the truth. Keats has said truth and beauty are the same so we can include beauty. Works of art speak about beauty, truth and reality. These three are the same."

This exhibition presents Colin Booth's work during a period of transition. The paintings shown at the De La Warr Pavilion in 2001 share with the current paintings a fundamental technique of pouring pools of paint onto a prepared ground. That series of paintings had a clarity and sense of assurance; white on white, in a white building, they breathed good taste – with everything seemingly under control.

However the pools of paint have since become smaller, their deployment less calm; the ground has become more variable in colour and texture. There is evidently a healthy desire to take risks and to avoid easy or tasteful mark-making.

Although the paintings have become more elaborate, the basic initial process remains the same: the paintings are made by laying the stretched canvas on a perfectly flat working platform on the floor of the studio. The paint is then poured meticulously onto the prepared ground from a gantry, built especially to move across the painting's surface, it is then left to dry at length. This sounds like a description of a very deliberate light industrial or craft process. Indeed, these paintings rely upon a systematic process



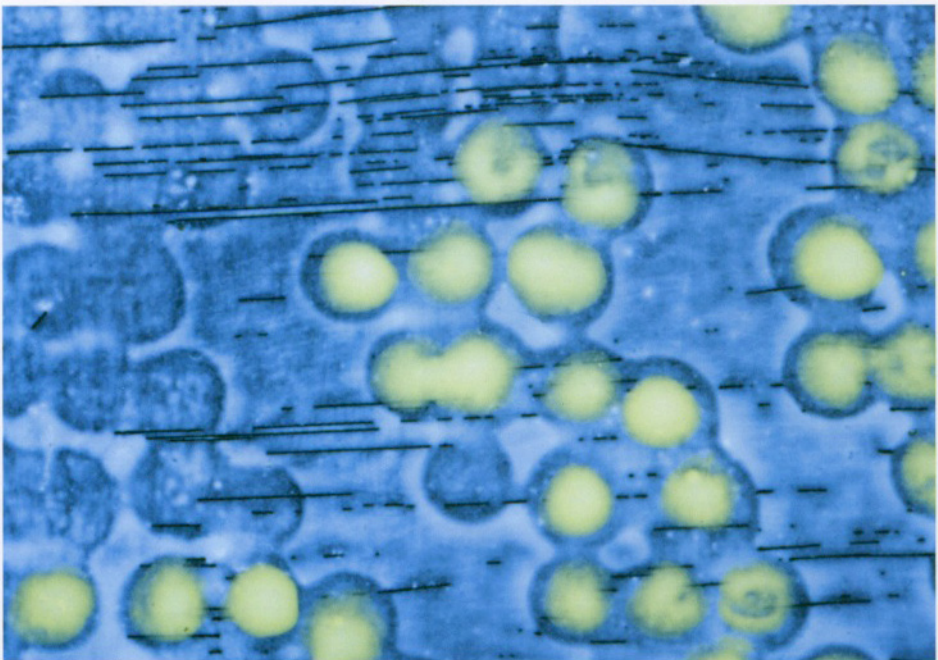
White Field III (detail) 2002

involving elaborate preparations and great skill. The placement and size of individual spots of paint are carefully judged, but by this stage the process is giving way to chance and the pools of poured paint begin to spread and coalesce, mutating to form endlessly varying groupings.

The results might bear a likeness to certain things in the world: a dot matrix, molecules or bacteria, or be reminiscent of text in the way that the marks travel across the surface, but the paintings successfully elude pictorial representation. Although the patterns of marks share some characteristics with the fractal patterns found in nature, they are too deliberate to invite an irrational interpretation, like the random surface of a weathered wall in which you might, like Leonardo da Vinci or Max Ernst, interpret fantastic (or not so fantastic) images from deep within your psyche.

The field of marks on the surfaces of the paintings are non-hierarchical, they are not organised to make compositions in a traditional way. They are generated by a process, but the process is not one of ironic detachment as in so much contemporary painting, but one that gets the painter to a certain point, before allowing elements of chance and placement to intervene.

The recent paintings do not give up their secrets easily. Their painterly effects are fugitive and there is an increasing sense of movement in the placing of the pools. All this is suggestive of a fleeting condition poised between physical states. Uncertain, like the highly charged moment when rain begins to fall and the individual drops are still clearly visible on the dry ground.

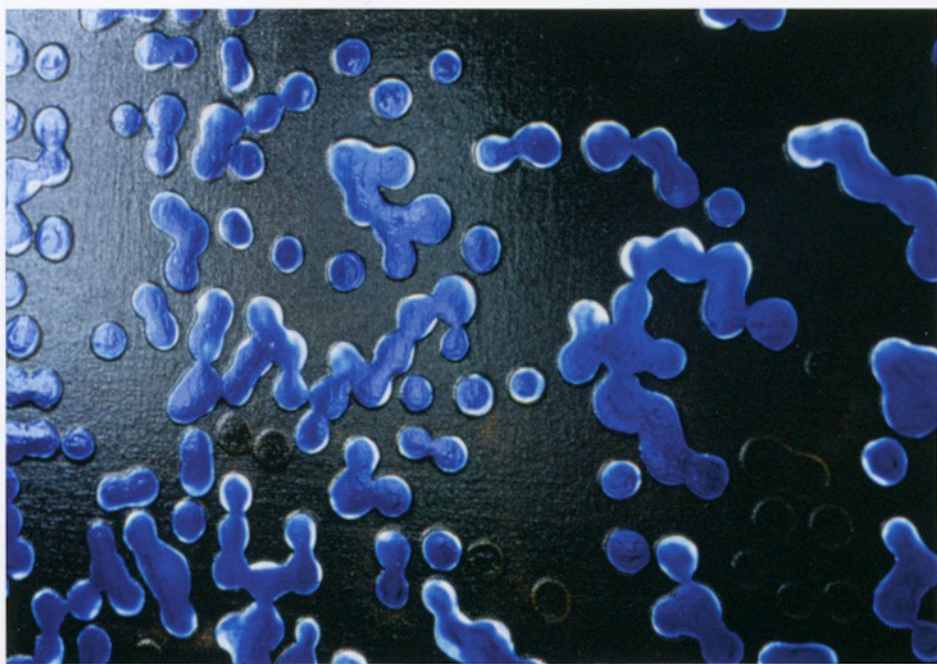


Fluxional II (detail) 2003

The overlaying of veils of glazes and varnish on the ground of the paintings creates a suggestive and ambiguous space on which the figure of the poured pools of paint now floats. The spatial ambiguity of the figure-ground effect is hard for the viewer to resolve in a single pictorial plane and contributes to an uneasy sense that things are not fixed.

As the paintings have evolved, the prepared ground has become increasingly elaborate. The pools of paint however, remain intact, left to dry as poured. But, in the most recent paintings both the pools and the ground are "up for grabs" as fields for experimentation; to be over-painted and coloured. This is reminiscent of medical microphotography, with its artificially added colours, but these colours act to clarify while the effect in the paintings is to introduce further ambiguity.

In the earlier paintings, the process appeared to dominate. But the re-workings of recent paintings move them closer to a more traditional form of relational painting; where the artist's intuitive adjustments are more important than predetermined rules, which allow ideas to run their aesthetic course. The result is a heightening of the visual tension that already existed between the underlying linear structure and the artist's intuitive placing of the pools of paint. Clearly this carries an inherent risk: like the insistent reworking of Balzac's painter Frenhofer in *Le Chef d'Oeuvre Inconnu*, it can and sometimes does destroy what might have previously been considered a successful painting, a reliable formula rendered into a state of chaos. Yet, when this high-risk strategy works, the paintings reach an entirely new area of invention. Bold in colour, softly geometric in form, the contours, textures and glinting reflectivity of the surfaces, render them incredibly sensitive to subtle changes in light.



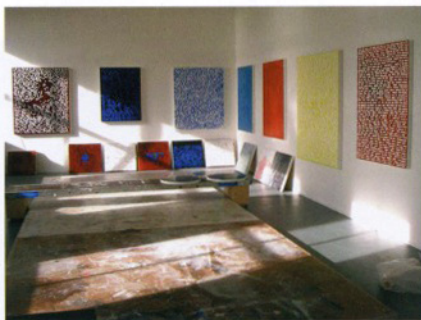
While they are clearly the result of a deep interest in light, these are not paintings that depict light, rather they attempt to reveal something of the nature of light. They are very much within a tradition of modern painting, which accepts the painting's status as an object in the world, not a window onto a world.

Colin Booth's studio is not the traditional artist's studio with even north light. It is a south facing, light-filled space only yards from the sea, which enjoys constantly shifting light, one moment direct, the next reflected. A large part of the making of these paintings comes from living with them in this space, moving them around and seeing how their surfaces are activated by light over time. Accordingly, in this show a deliberate decision has been made to show the works in uncontrolled natural light so that the experience of seeing them is particular to the moment.

The "reality" of these paintings is not a romanticised nature and there is no dramatic evocation of the sublime. But the way in which they are experienced offers a reminder of the pleasure to be had from merely being in the world. There is a valuable prompt to enjoy the transitory visual pleasures that are all around, from the reflection of sunlight on the surface of the sea to something as simple as the gleam of light on metal.

Simon Barker 2004

**Agnes Martin: unpublished correspondence with Colin Booth*



Studio 2004