

Alex Vardaxoglou

Press Release

The Experience of Painting

Gillian Ayres, William Crozier, Howard Hodgkin, Richard Smith

Alex Vardaxoglou Gallery, Holland Park, London
1 February – 2 April 2022

Alex Vardaxoglou Gallery presents a group exhibition featuring works by Gillian Ayres, William Crozier, Howard Hodgkin and Richard Smith. The exhibition brings together a group of exceptional paintings by artists united in their attention to place through a particular style of abstraction. In turn, a new dialogue is opened up between the artists – all born between 1930 and 1932.

For all their differences, Ayres, Crozier, Hodgkin and Smith each master the manifestation of colour, gesture, and affect, to create intuitive and explorative visual languages. Representation is important, but each artist works without specific communicative intention towards the discovery of the image – importance is always with the method of representing. This method is a complex interplay of lines, shapes, blobs, and marks, constantly operating directly on the viewer. Importantly, it is interplay without a great deal of muddying. Areas of colour are contrasted, but not heavily mixed. Colour is used as a vehicle to isolate particular forms, and these forms co-exist together to create intense and varied communications of each artist's actuality.

Reflecting time-stamps and personal memories, each work marks important physical places; the sound of a train; a lake; the studio; and the rain. As such, the works in the exhibition transform an aspect of lived experience – some feeling, conscious or unconscious – into a sign. This sign, complex and indeterminate, is not translatable and can only be apprehended by the viewer, looking at the work. Through these paintings, reality is constantly reimagined and revealed.

The earliest painting in the exhibition, William Crozier's (1930-2011) *Black Lake*, was painted in 1969 and marks a rare transition away from the subject of death and towards abstract representation of place. This tension between the representation of the subject; a lake and forest trees, and the heavier emotion of the work is communicated through washes of saturated colour contrasted against heavy, dark black space. This electric combination of composition and colour work against one another to depict a moment of poetic expression.

Studio Visit (1981-82) is one of the last of Richard Smith's (1931-2016) larger works during this period of flat-canvas experimentation. Smith was always interested in the relationship between painting and sculpture; form and dimensional space. The flattened geometric shapes that dominate this piece sit on the surface of the canvas to create a print-like effect. Through his interplay between clean lines and a measured layering of colour and tone, *Studio Visit* is suggestive of a spatial experience, foregrounding his fascination with depth and perspective through this linear construction. Gillian Ayres (1930 - 2018) demonstrates a similar appreciation of geometric shape in her painting *Choo Choo*, 1996, yet she refuses to acknowledge or even suggest any depth of field. Through her direct and playful application of paint, blobs and dashes of colour work together to create shapes in isolation, where a dialogue of movement across the canvas is made without muddying her palate. The work refers to the sound of a steam engine

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passing through the valley near her place of work in the north devon area. The painting exists therefore, as a documentation of the experience of sound.

The Hodgkin's (1932 - 2017) work that we show is similarly experiential but works the eye in a more understated way. His monochromatic layering of paint onto a wooden frame expresses a moment in time, as one has come to expect with Hodgkin. The painting spills out of its frame, to the corners of the wood, as though the image cannot be contained. It is based on a sixteenth century poem 'Western Wind', and expresses very little suggestion of subject matter; rather the expression is in the application of paint and the texture of the brushwork.

The works in 'The Experience of Painting' all share intentional expression of a moment in time without explicitly giving the subject away. In fact, the artists depend on the viewer to apprehend subject matter through gesture. The exhibition pays homage to 'The Experience of Painting', an important but overlooked exhibition at Hayward Gallery, London in 1987 curated by Mel Gooding.

About Alex Vardaxoglou Gallery

Based in a townhouse in Holland Park, Alex Vardaxoglou Gallery was founded in 2020 with an exhibition of works by celebrated British artist Patrick Caulfield. Our programme focuses on exceptional works of modern and contemporary British art, and features a growing number of contemporary artists with whom we work closely - Mimi Hope, Tanoa Sasraku, and Tim Stoner - alongside regular historical surveys that seek to present pioneering artists to a new audience. Recent historical exhibitions have included artists such as Richard Smith, Bruce Bernard, William Crozier, Lucian Freud, Gillian Ayres and Howard Hodgkin.

Artist Biographies

Gillian Ayres (1930-2018)

Gillian Ayres was one of the most celebrated British abstract painters. Having first exhibited in Young Contemporaries (1949) and the London Group (1951) in 1963 her paintings were included in Whitechapel Art Gallery's ground-breaking exhibition British Painting in the 60s. Ayres is known for large-scale, electric canvases caked in inches of paint. Until 1981 she taught at Bath Academy of Art, Corsham; St Martin's, London; and then became head of painting at Winchester School of Art where she remained until 1981. During this time Ayres exhibited regularly with Kasmin in the 60s and then later Knoedler and Gimpel Fils. In 1983 a retrospective of her work was held at Serpentine Gallery, London, which travelled to Barnsley, Penzance, Nottingham, and Llandudno. She had a solo exhibition at Tate Gallery in 1995 and the Royal Academy in 1997. Ayres was awarded an OBE in 1986 and elected Royal Academician in 1991. She lived in Cornwall and London until her death in 2018, aged 88.

William Crozier (1930-2011)

William Crozier was born in Glasgow to Irish parents and educated at Glasgow School of Art between 1949 and 1953. Crozier allied himself consciously with contemporary European art throughout the 1950s and 60s, rather than with the New York abstract circles. In 1964 the Arts Council included Crozier in the exhibition Six Young Painters alongside Bridget Riley, David Hockney, Peter Blake, Euan Uglow and Allen Jones. Based in London throughout the 1960s and 70s, Crozier exhibited his works all over Europe and

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taught at Bath Academy of Art alongside Howard Hodgkin and Gillian Ayres, with him finally leading the painting course at Winchester School of Art. Crozier's work of the 1960s is considered some of his most important, having been influenced by a trip to concentration camps in Germany. Still very active and in demand, in 1975 Crozier was part of a two-person exhibition alongside Francis Bacon at Walker Art Gallery in Liverpool. Institutional collections include; Museum of Modern Art, Dallas; Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA), Dublin; Victoria and Albert Museum, London; Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art (Edinburgh). In 2017 the Irish Museum of Modern Art mounted a two-part retrospective of his work in Dublin and Cork.

Howard Hodgkin (1932-2017)

Howard Hodgkin has long been celebrated as one of the foremost British contemporary painters. Characterised by his distinctively gestural application of paint and sensitivity to colour, he was educated at Camberwell School of Art between 1949 and 1950 and Bath Academy of Art between 1950-54, and went on to have his first solo show in 1962 at Arthur Tooth and Sons in London. In 1985 Hodgkin was awarded the Turner Prize, the year after representing Britain at the Venice Biennale with his exhibition *Forty Paintings*, which later opened at the Whitechapel Gallery in London. By 1995 his work was exhibited in America at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York and the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Texas. His first full retrospective was in 2006 at the Irish Museum of Modern Art, which then travelled to Tate Britain, London, and Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid. In 1992 Hodgkin was awarded a knighthood and in 2003 was made Companion of Honour. Almost a decade later, he was the first artist to be awarded the Swarovski Whitechapel Icon Award. He lived and worked in London until his death in 2017.

Richard Smith (1931-2016)

One of the most influential British painters of his generation, Richard Smith was born in Herefordshire in 1931. He studied at the Royal College of Art where he developed his practice in painting and printmaking between 1954 and 1957. Awarded the Harkness Fellowship in 1959, Smith moved to New York where he had his first solo exhibition at Green Gallery. While still in his thirties he had a 1966 retrospective at the Whitechapel Gallery. Often associated with colour field painting and pop art, Smith pushed the boundaries of traditional painting, gaining critical acclaim for building sculptural shaped canvases with monumental presence. In 1967 he was awarded the grand prize at the 9th San Paulo Biennial, and went on to represent Britain at the 1970 Venice Biennale. The following year he was awarded the CBE. One of his biggest retrospective exhibitions, held at the Tate, London was in 1975. After moving permanently to New York in the late seventies, Smith's work was shown in major museums including the Museum Modern Art, New York, The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, The Walker Art Centre, Minneapolis and the Philadelphia Museum of Art. He continued to live and work in New York until his death in 2016, age 84. Smith's work is collected by many museums across the world, including MoMa, New York; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; Philadelphia Museum of Art; MOCA, Chicago; Tate, London; V&A, London; Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna, Rome.

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Gillian Ayres, *Choo Choo*, 1996, oil on canvas, 91.4 x 91.4 cm © The Estate of Gillian Ayres. Courtesy Alex Vardaxoglou Gallery, London



William Crozier *Black Lake*, 1969 oil on canvas 152 x 152 cm © The Estate of William Crozier. Courtesy Alex Vardaxoglou Gallery, London

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Richard Smith *Studio Visit*, 1981-82, acrylic on canvas, 153 x 323 cm @ Richard Smith Foundation. Courtesy Alex Vardaxoglou Gallery, London

Gallery hours:

Wednesday – Friday
11 am – 5 pm

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Bookings made by appointment only.