



1/8 Installation shot

Studio Visit with Lydia Gifford

In advance of her solo presentation at Siegfried Contemporary Modern Forms caught up with painter Lydia Gifford. Interview by Nick Hackworth.

NH: How do you see the relationship between your art and the world? I ask that because I recently returned from the opening of the latest Venice Biennale, where most of the works are at pains to define themselves through their supposed relevance to our present historical moment. By contrast your practice seems very traditional, at least in 20th century terms.

LG: My work is a means to live, to translate everything I think and feel. A way to try and understand my life and the world that we are living in. I'm obviously very sensitive to the contemporary concerns we're all living through. I think I try and strip my reactions to something really raw and instinctual. Often it's about bodily movement. Sometimes "traditional" or basic materials are the most sympathetic to carry those needs, to deliver or to access a connection to pure feelings. It's something to do with materiality, mark making, cloth, the residue of a mark. These are simple ideas. Early man ideas. It doesn't make them out of date. I think they are more relevant today, in that we are so disconnected to physical actions. Connecting to instincts, to feelings, to currents that go through my mind and my body. It's reactionary.

NH: How consciously do you relate to the history of abstraction and specific artists within it? Is it a source or a distraction?

LG: I'm overdosed on the history of abstraction. Obviously it's well-trodden territory but it is not exhausted. I've found myself now pulling away and it's important to be in my own space. It's personal. I have huge respect for the history of abstraction, but more and more I need my own space from it. That doesn't mean I wouldn't jump at the opportunity to go and see an exhibition, but I try and carve out an empty space for me to approach it.

NH: Can you tell us about the works in this show? Are they a discrete series?

LG: It's a journey or loop. There are some works included that have been shown before, but I've wanted to use them as springboards. To me it feels tight, they are very related and meshed. But somehow as they move together they also pull apart. That's always what I'm looking for. Like threads drawn together. I'm excited to see them installed. There is a bit of editing to happen in the space which always leaves an exciting open question.

NH: Can you tell us about the materials you use and paint on? By most standards they are rough and unconventional. Amongst the different materials you have listed in the work details you have towel, wood, corduroy, canvas. How do the materials you use affect the painting you do? And how do you see the relationship between the paint and the various surfaces?

LG: I love towel. Something we use to wrap our bodies in. It can feel rough, soft. There's a daily routine connection to a towel. It just makes me want to bring paint to that. Clothing fabrics also, corduroy. I like testing resistance, making surfaces that are unwelcoming to paint. Carpet is interesting. Domestic textures. I've only just opened this door really. I've used paint that I make myself, stains, dirt, fat. I'm looking for something that can carry a thought and a feeling. Surface and resistance, absorbency, playing with all these kind of nuances. I try to make cloth sculptural. I try and wrangle the cloth into structures, bodies, and see how I can intrude on them with paint.

NH: Your work is often described as performative, one critic described your work as 'kinetic' and certainly your paintings give the impression of capturing movement and action – especially – from the works on show here, Demand, Surge and Grab. Could you expand on these observations? If and how you relate to them...

LG: For me it's difficult not to see each piece as part of my studio practice. I set up a habitat in my studio where all surfaces are equal, waiting, and I move through that space, always trying to connect to a sense of conscious movement and mark making. The individual works themselves are extracts from that space.

NH: Following on from this question – I wonder if you could give us a mini history of the making of one of the works – Surge. On inspection it is a layered work, but at first glance it seems quickly executed because the main pictorial elements are the thick, brushstrokes on the surface, of light greeny-grey and the eye catching, single, thick, broad, brushstroke of white in the top half of the painting.

LG: It's a contrast of paces. I have to be patient. I set up surfaces and wait for them to dry, sometimes for months. With Surge I responded to a surface I'd been making for a long time with an impulsive immersion into paint. I battled with it, applied, removed, piled on, removed. And then I have to step away.

NH: What does scale do to the works? The largest work in the show, as yet untitled, has a very different feeling to the smaller works. The smaller, intimate works, seems to capture movement much more. The large work feels more composed...

LG: I like the claustrophobic nature of small space /surface/object. You hum in it, it hums, you can't get out of it. You work it out until you over work it. A larger space/surface invites indulgent movements that feel shameful to allow. There's lots of nuance in scale that fascinate me. It's about the space of the body.

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