

When abstract becomes domestic

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Now at the venerable age of 88, Terry Frost began painting in 1943 while a prisoner of war in Germany. It was an experience that he believed left him with a "heightened perception" of the physical world that encouraged him to take up art.

As a mature student in London he worked in the realist, figurative painting style of the day until Victor Pasmore, his influential teacher at Camberwell School of Art, introduced him to the intense and restrained sensibilities of the St Ives School.

He soon became regarded as a leading member of this school, which attracted worldwide attention until it was overwhelmed by the more bombastic American abstract movement.

Like most abstract painters, Frost's career has not followed a linear progression in either manner or quality, as was revealed at a major retrospective of his work at the Royal Academy in 2000. What, in hindsight, must be judged his peak came in the mid-Fifties when the tightness of his early work gave way to a looser period in which he explored a world of beautifully warm autumnal tonalities, and relaxed his focus on form.

Since the mid-Sixties he has, unfortunately, pretty much stuck to one gun, simplifying everything in some economic attempt to use only the most basic of visual languages. Thus bold colours and shapes wrought in flat acrylic paint now amount to the basis of his work.

The paintings on show here, most executed in the last two years, are very much in this vein, save being more exuberant in their colour scheme than normal. Most are garishly decorative, such as *Central Rhythm*, which could be mistaken for a tea-towel design, commissioned to reflect, say, the spirit of the Caribbean with its mammary-inspired semi-circular shapes passing for watermelons.

The slightly rude colours deployed in *Central Rhythm*, a similar piece called *Frisky*, and in *Halzephron*, a work comprising serried ranks of the semi-circular shapes fused together, are clearly handled competently, but even when married to the forms they delineate, the colour relationships do not amount to a whole that is much greater than the sum of its parts.

Instead, Frost - again like most abstract painters - has succumbed to the dangers that Wassily Kandinsky, the Russian pioneer of abstraction, writing in 1908 foresaw for abstract painting, that it would become "mere geometric decoration, something like a necktie or a carpet", or indeed, a tea towel. ■

- *Terry Frost's work is on show at Beaux Arts, Arts 22 Cork Street, W1 (020 7437 5799)*