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The Screen and the Workshop: Robert Holyhead and Geoffrey Ridgen

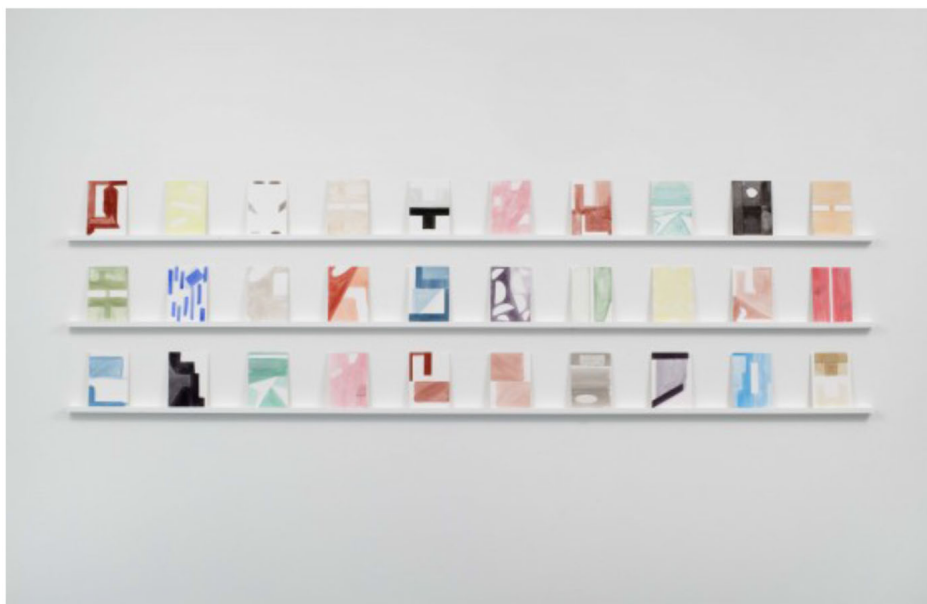
Written by David Sweet

Robert Holyhead: Peer Gallery, London, 16th May – 7th July

Geoffrey Ridgen: Poussin Gallery, London, 6th – 30th June

In painting, facture counts for a good deal. In 'abstract' painting it confers particularity on components that, encountered outside the pictorial domain, are otherwise generic; lines, planes, discs, triangles, parallelograms, etc. It's not just a question of style, of giving the work a certain overall look, but of creating and managing its constitutive formal activity.

As if to conveniently demonstrate the influence of facture on form, the work in Robert Holyhead's show divides into two sections; in one room, a large number of small watercolours, perched on three racks, like an array of magazines, and in the other, six modestly sized canvases, at least four of which might be classed as easel paintings.



Installation view, Courtesy of the artist and PEER

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abstract *critical*

Sweet, David: The Screen and the Workshop: Robert Holyhead and
Geoffrey Ridgen
23.06.2012

The watercolours are freewheeling excursions into possibilities and variations of shapes and colours. Their status lies somewhere between sketchbook 'ideas' and working drawings, resolved enough to settle the early questions posed by the empty, bright gesso surface that greets Holyhead at the start of the oil painting process, but not wholly pre-emptive. What happens when forms are transferred from one medium to another is that their promise and triviality falls away. They become more serious and more connected to significant events in the history of modernist painting.



Untitled 2012 Oil on canvas 48.3cm x 33cm. Courtesy of the artist and PEER

The two works that best exemplify this connection, and the two best paintings, are *Untitled 2012* [blue] and *Untitled 2012* [pink]. The shapes in the blue painting are constructed from the intersection of diagonals. Some, around the edges, are blank, others towards the centre register the legible movement of fluid pigment, brushed with or against the axis of the conjoined geometric figures. In those places where one flow of pigment reaches the edge of its shape and meets paint travelling in another direction, or at a different speed, a membrane forms which keeps the two apart. Where the central field abuts the white 'ground', the division is more abrupt.

Similar phenomena can be observed in the pink painting. The indented triangle on the right edge and the more compound zigzag shape on the left are filled with slightly different gestural velocities and densities of thinned red. In the central zone the same red is encouraged to hang onto the surface, then allowed to drift down, under the forces of gravity and its own inertia, to leave characteristic tide marks of a darker value. The otherwise total pink field is interrupted by a white tapered oblong shape, which sits high up towards the top right, its sides echoing the angles of the adjacent structures.

In both of these paintings, and in *Untitled 2012* [green] to a slightly lesser extent, the constitutive formal activity creates optical conditions that can be usefully compared with those in works by Jackson Pollock in particular *Cut-Out*, ca. 1948-50, and the better known *Out of the Web*, 1959. Both examples make use of the physical removal of parts of the canvas, allowing another underneath to show through. Unlike a collage, where it's easy to detect the extraneous material and its literal relation to the

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Sweet, David: The Screen and the Workshop: Robert Holyhead and

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Untitled 2012 Oil on canvas 45.7cm x 30.5cm.
Courtesy of the artist and PEER



Untitled 2012 Oil on canvas 61cm x 33cm.
Courtesy of the artist and PEER

supporting plane, the excision method causes certain optical problems. Briony Fer talks of an 'anamorphic moment' in respect of *Out of the Web*, claiming that in it Pollock made visible 'the spectator's failure to master the visual field'. Michael Fried likens the lacuna in *Cut-Out* to a 'blind spot, a kind of defect in our visual apparatus'. Confronting these examples, the desire for formal coherence and resolution is not fulfilled within the viewing experience. Instead, as Fer and Fried attest, the viewer is presented with a combination of two irreconcilable spatial systems, like two magnetic fields of the same polarity, neither of which will give way to the other, nor be subsumed under some higher unifying principle.

The blue, pink and green paintings involve a similar disturbed and conflicted visual experience. Where the colour is cut away to reveal the white gesso, the relationship between the two elements is not of positive to negative, for both are positive. Nor is it of figure to ground, for the white appears as another field, on the same level as the colour. But there is an extra layer of complexity. Within the colour, the bounding membrane described above acts like a further cut, slicing the area into component sub-fields, each slightly at odds with its neighbour.

Compared to Holyhead's delicate finessing, Geoff Ridgen's paintings look like a version of abstraction made by a village carpenter. The surfaces of his earlier pieces such as *Off-Minor* 1985 and *Cycladic Violet* 1990, still retain something of the nap of the underlying cotton duck, and the brush-marks and forms sit back into the fabric, occupying a slightly absorbent space. But later works seem constructed out of paint that bears no trace of its liquid ancestry, drying to a crust, on top of crust.