Abstraction and British Art 1955-65 (Cambridge, 5 Mar 16)

Downing College, University of Cambridge, Mar 05, 2016
Deadline: Feb 1, 2016

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Generation Painting: Abstraction and British Art, 1955-65

‘Generation Painting: Abstraction and British Art, 1955-65’ is a symposium co-hosted by the Heong Gallery at Downing College and the History of Art department, both of the University of Cambridge. Accompanying the exhibition at the Heong Gallery titled 'Generation Painting 1955–65: British Art from the Collection of Sir Alan Bowness', it will investigate a wide range of British artists and art writers who were active between these years. Dr Chris Stephens (Head of Displays & Lead Curator, Modern British Art) will give the keynote address.

Scholarship on the period has often relied upon a series of firmly established dichotomies, such as high modernism/pop art, UK/USA, 1950s/1960s and abstraction/figuration. The symposium aims to cut across such oppositions and the periodisation that supports them. Looking beyond the most familiar moments to account for the interactions between particular individuals and groups, papers will consider how generational, geographical and critical boundaries have in fact been subject to contestation or radical revision both by artists and their advocates, such as curators, critics and dealers.

The focus on the years between 1955 and 1965 is designed to suggest new approaches less dominated by a view of the ‘50s and ‘60s as dramatically different art historical, cultural and socio-historical units. Topics will call attention to bodies of work that spanned these moments, either by looking forward or by resisting the shifts of the time. One possibility suggested by the periodisation is the examination of interchanges between the ‘Middle Generation’ (a term used by Alan Bowness in 1959) of Terry Frost, Patrick Heron, Roger Hilton and others who came to prominence in the years following the Second World War, and younger groups who came to critical attention in the early 1960s with exhibitions such as 'Situation' (1960) and 'London: The New Scene' (1965–66) and the 'Young Contemporaries' series. Another is to look for ways around the notion of the ‘Swinging Sixties’ as a decade unified by the dominance of Americanisation and pop, with artists in Britain forced to take conscious positions vis-à-vis a range of options determined by a flood of cultural activity from across the Atlantic. Bringing together these generations with other under-explored groups and individuals, fresh narratives of ‘cross-generational’ commonalities, adaptations and divergences might emerge.

Proposals might also respond to different meanings of abstraction and abstract art during this period. ‘Abstraction’, for instance, could signify distillation of motif, the use of non-representation-

al geometric or organic forms, structural flexibility and cross-media play. It could also be examined in relation to philosophical models, such as existentialism or phenomenology. The abstraction/figuration boundary could be blurred by the inclusion of motifs referring to the external world, such as the human figure, the rural landscape and the urban environment. Themes that might be explored on this basis extend beyond the interstices between abstraction and pop, and might consider how artworks crossed since-established categories by combining eccentric conceptions of 'self-reflexivity' with little or no regard for 'medium-specificity'; the shifting use in art writing of critical terms such as 'abstract', 'non-representational', 'pure', 'formal' and 'geometric'; and the ways that 'abstract' work was used to negotiate, embrace, or memorialise the national past in the face of the new. Perspectives might also take into account exchanges between the London-centric art world and places of activity outside of the capital; changing opportunities for and conceptions of women artists and writers; and competition or collaboration among individuals, generations, groups or schools.

Please send your abstract (of no more than 300 words) for 20 minute papers and a brief biography to curator@dow.cam.ac.uk by Monday 1 February 2016. Contributors will be notified by the end of Thursday 4 February. Expressions of interest for alternative modes of presentation, such as posters or films, will be welcomed. Contributions will be made towards costs incurred to presenters to attend.

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Reference:

CFP: Abstraction and British Art 1955-65 (Cambridge, 5 Mar 16). In: ArtHist.net, Jan 10, 2016 (accessed Nov 1, 2026), <https://arthist.net/archive/11925>.