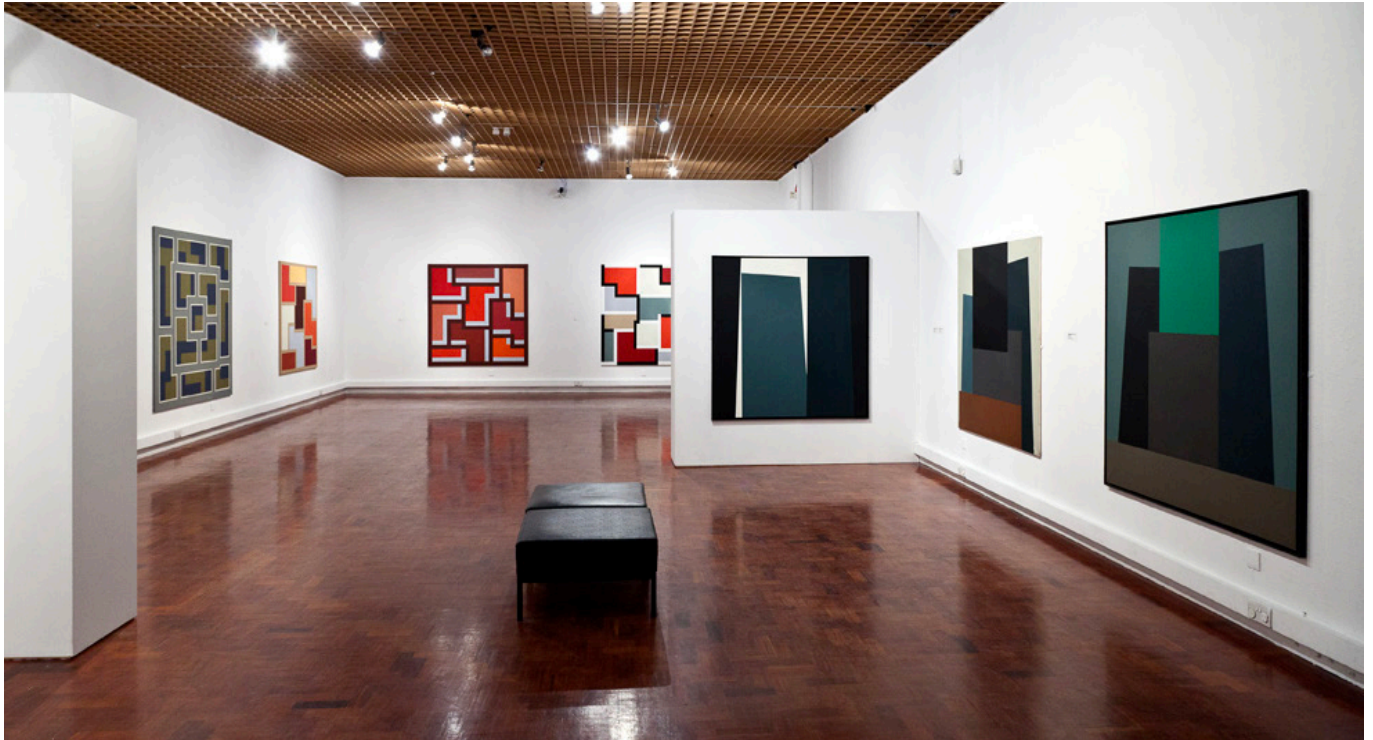


MARY WEBB

Daniel Slater, Mary Webb: Journeys in Colour, Abstract Critical, 12 February 2013



Mary Webb: Journeys in Colour, Installation view, Hatton Gallery, University of Newcastle, 2013

The numerous panels of carefully chosen colours and projecting squares encircling me are seemingly seamless, and applied with the conscientious treatment one might find in the product of some sort of cathartic and repetitive exercise. The arrangement of these paintings – or maybe, more appropriately ‘objects’ – are uncannily balanced and super-symmetrical.

Mary Webb’s early work, such as *Painting no. 6* (1968) is a prime example of work in which the rigidity of the painting’s matter echoes the very article on which it is painted. The viewer’s perspective shifts from seeing the picture as an image to seeing it as an object in a gallery amongst other objects. In this it is very much of its time.

Yet, pictorially certain regions in these paintings appear bound by some unseen adhesion; instantaneously aided by their counterparts. Many are often departmentalised by a cloisonné of black bands, which evoke remote images of intense shadows behind objects which are themselves suffused with white light. This is perhaps the greatest allure of Webb’s work – its capacity to evoke vivid thoughts and memories of the nameless surroundings in which we are inextricably framed and bound.

Such is the case in the subsequent *Circle Line Series*, and in particular *The Isle of Manhattan 2* (1983). Despite the title referring directly to a specific journey and place within the title, the melancholy make-up of these paintings – a subdued palette of blues, and greys – speak of the city before it is made explicit. The unfeeling uniformity of the earlier work has shifted, and been replaced by a tender leaning in the composition.

In the *Circle Line series*, there is a noticeable deviation from the concerns of the earlier paintings in that the fields are less anchored, either to the surface or the edge, and are extended to resemble towers. They are far more pictorial than they are literal. This change was perhaps caused by their grounding in place – designated by the title, and associations of colour following Webb’s experience of these locations; in this case, of the Manhattan borough of New York City viewed from a boat trip. In an interview with Sarah Bartholomew, Webb describes her experience of the city sliding past “like a huge collage”. There was certainly a vague image of shimmering glass and fragmented concrete passing by my mind’s eye when I first saw *The Isle of Manhattan 2*.

Within this exhibition, we are granted access to various personal photographs, illuminating her preoccupations, mostly of architectural façades, gridded windows and landscapes saturated in zestful colour. Her most recent work, namely the Utah series (2011), hangs beside the slide show of photographs, arguably making the reading of these paintings too 'comfortable'. The most striking correlative being the inflamed oranges with Webb's photographs of the arid red rocks of Bryce Canyon.

In many ways, having these photographs present here does the work for us; it expels ambiguity, and perhaps therefore extinguishes much of the initial enticement. Or, inversely the coupling of these two very different spheres in her work augments our fascination, leading us to further analyse elements, fields and forms from her paintings in conjunction to the montage. In a way, seeing her personal photographs, and the consequent visual union of her own memory of these places endears us to her as an artist who is unassertive and intends, not to proclaim, but to simply do.

I have my favourites within her extensive oeuvre. I like her screen-prints and collages the most, as they seem to shed light on her process – that of the passive observer, who on return to her isolated studio concocts images from pinches of memories using minimal materials. There is also a sense of urgency in these studies which is lost in the paintings. To many Mary Webb's work might be somewhat passé, but I think something valuable can be learnt from it. She does not wrestle with what is prevalent, but what is beneficial only to herself whilst making entrancing images in which the viewer can roam.

Mary Webb: Journeys in Colour is on until the 13th of February at the Hatton Gallery. There is a large selection of images from throughout Webb's career on her website.