

# Melissa Gordon

THE LONDON-BASED ARTIST FORENSICALLY EXAMINES THE LEGACIES OF ABSTRACT PAINTING THROUGH POLITICS, BLOW-UPS AND PERFORMANCE



*Pollock Blow Up* 2013

'The Gesture is a Joke' installation view  
Deweert Gallery, Otegem, Belgium 2016

opposite  
'Routine Pleasures' installation view  
Vleeshall Markt, Middelburg, the  
Netherlands 2016

*Fallible Space* 2016 performance  
Bluecoat Gallery, Liverpool

'We neither consider the work of art a "machine" nor an "object" but rather an *almost-body*,' wrote Lygia Clark in her *Neo-concretist Manifesto*, one of a series of texts about her 'Nostalgia of the Body' works made between 1960 and 1966. Melissa Gordon highlights this particular line of Clark's, satisfied that her thinking has been articulated so lucidly, so openly, some decades before. Painting is not an autonomous or reified object, or the result of an isolated gesture, Gordon's work proposes. She has much in common with Clark, who died in 1988: both abstract painters as much interested in studio practice as in the end result; both conscious of the infrastructures that support painting; both committed to its capacity to generate thought; and both actively collaborating with others to progress from the old guard of the Avant Garde.

London-based Gordon is a painter who is fascinated by the legacies of painterly abstraction. Her 'Blow Up Modernism' series of works is named after Michelangelo Antonioni's seminal 1966 film. Like the Italian director's classic, everything in Gordon's oeuvre starts from a photograph. Gordon describes herself as adopting 'a forensic approach' to photographs of paintings published over the years. Zeroing in on the qualities of the reproductions of the surfaces of modernist paintings, her analysis might be interpreted as a critical philosophy of art history through practice. Gordon focuses on the minutiae of an image, the distortions of a surface that is itself cracking up, zooming in closer

and closer until the whole thing threatens to fall apart, to dissolve.

*Blow Up Mondrian*, 2013, is a silkscreen on canvas, mounted on a similarly sized support to the painting it scrutinises. Cropping details from Piet Mondrian paintings, Gordon's black-and-white print homes in on the textures of his paint surface. During her research for the piece, Gordon archived different details of the same work published in catalogues and periodicals over several decades. Curious about how the work has degraded over time, and how that has been picked up in its documentation, Gordon's printed 'painting' conflates two simultaneous deteriorations, of wearying paint and pixelated photography. Her work traces the inevitable failure of Mondrian's efforts to deny space, to seal it off, since his paintings were destined to deteriorate. Gordon, who often cites her interest in Naum Gabo's visit to Mondrian's studio to condemn the latter's determination to annihilate space

through painting, has commented in an interview with Bluecoat's Mary-Anne McQuay that 'many of the white surfaces in Mondrian's paintings have cracked over time and this is because of their density, which is a consequence of using material as thought'. Hers is not a personal slight against the artist but a general rumination on the fallibility of any absolutist ambitions for abstraction.

Gordon's work explores the material aftermath of these ambitions, probing works by Theo van Doesburg, Vilmos Huszár, Mondrian, El Lissitzky, Kazimir Malevich, Burgoyne Diller and their later US cohorts, Ad Reinhardt, Jackson Pollock and Frank Stella. They are, she says, 'a collection of male artists dealing with the legacy of the grid or the plane of painting in Modernism, and it is important for me that the reproductions of the paintings are interferences, interruptions of the intent in the objecthood of the originals'. In *Pollock Blow Up*, 2013, Gordon takes a detail from a reproduction of *Untitled*, 1946, by Janet

Sobel, the Ukrainian-American artist who, recent art-historical accounts show, arrived at drip painting one year prior to Pollock's early experiments in a similar style. Gordon's work shows a detail of Sobel's against a later Pollock. Displayed together, the two expose the historical narrative of Pollock's 'original gesture' of Abstract Expressionism as fallacy. During her research, Gordon could only find one publication that reproduced Sobel's work, a stark contrast to the countless reproductions of her male contemporary's. The plight of Sobel's ill-documented work is generative, as well as symptomatic of her relative absence from the Avant Garde's canon. Thus, Gordon's detail of Sobel's painting reads like new material evidence at a reopened murder trial, exposing how Sobel's posterity was suffocated to give another painter maximum air. Gordon's gesture highlights the relative and non-universal privilege of art-historical reproduction.

Gordon's is a feminist politics that also motivates a more social engagement with her contemporaries in a different form of production. From 2010 to 2011, Gordon convened a series of meetings with the many female artists, curators and writers she knew living between London and New York. The meetings' agendas were to establish her contemporaries' collective concerns. What resulted was a complicated discussion about the work they make and the still secondary place it finds in the art market, where it sells at a fraction of the price of that of their male peers. 'Why are we contributing to an economy,' they asked, 'to which we do not truly belong?' Subsequently, in 2011, Gordon co-edited with Marina Vishmidt *Labour*, a miscellany of texts derived from these meetings with contributions by Nina Power, Lisette Smits, Meredyth Sparks, Avigail Moss and Emma Hedditch, among others. It was the first of several such publishing projects for Gordon, and in the process she felt freed-up to contemplate her own movements within her studio.

Thus came Gordon's 'Material Evidence' series. Rather than looking out at the meaningful incidentals of other artists' paintings, Gordon focuses here on the significant details of her own. Paint splatters on her studio walls – accidental or chance markings testifying to previous works – become an index for subsequent paintings. Gordon uses the capabilities of a photographic lens to guide her own process, 'blowing up' details of the paint-stained wall, floor or palette as a series of independent images such as *Material Evidence (Wall)*, 2014. Gordon has subsequently shown these series three or four abreast, as in her 2016 installation 'Derivative Value' at Overbeck-Gesellschaft in Lübeck, Germany. Each painting partially corresponds to the next horizontally, the perspective point shifting slightly, as if travelling frame-by-frame through an imaginary film reel panning across the studio wall. Here again, Gordon inscribes filmic perspectives into painting.

Gordon uses painting discursively, to examine the gestures, choreographies and supports of abstraction: who, she asks repeatedly, gets to be abstract? In her 2014 exhibition 'Mimetic Pleasures' at Marianne Boesky Gallery in New York, Gordon investigated painting's physical supports by introducing temporary partition walls. Rather than boarding, plastering and painting them to disguise them within the gallery's architecture, their aluminium frames are partially exposed, intimating the exhibition itself as a theatre set and us viewers as its players. In another recent exhibition, 'Routine Pleasures' at the Vleeshall Markt in Middelburg, the Netherlands, a new suite of 'Material Evidence' paintings were shown against a range of partition walls in pale pink, green and taupe, each colour signifying the boards' original purpose: whether water, heat or fire resistant. The cladding was cut to trace the arches of the ecclesiastical architecture around it. Gordon, alert to the significant traces of her own studio practice, keenly articulates the various directives of the spaces that display her work.

Increasingly, Gordon uses paintings to dress the exhibition space as a theatre-in-the-round. The starting point for 'Fallible Space', performed earlier this year at Liverpool's Bluecoat, was Mina Loy's poem-like play *Collision* from 1916. Gordon describes it as: 'a succinct demonstration of the 20th century's transformation of the interior space of the salon into the modernist space of "exhibition". The walls and pictures (windows) collapse, the author (the man caught in a storm), with his gesture (pushing a button), basically transforms/destroys and recreates a space, endlessly.' Its stage was made of ten hanging silkscreens of a fabric often used for theatre sets, printed with 59 triangles and irregular pentagons and coloured in a bright, Sonia Delauney-esque polychrome palette to interpret Loy's line, 'lightning crashes through 59 windows'. In front of them hang diversely shaped screens made of coloured ropes strung through metal frames, replicating the shapes printed behind. Spaced across the stage, each screen can be elevated to correspond and depart from its background by an

individually weighted pulley system. Gordon instructed corporeal mime artist Rita Pulga to move through the space and hoist each one in a particular order, her movements set to an original score performed at the exhibition's opening.

Pulga's physicality is striking, her manual elevations and interim periods of contemplation exaggerated. This dramatic articulation of an artist's working space seems significant in the context of Gordon's practice. She has moved from a deep examination of others' works to a tireless inspection of her own, considering the many discursive and physical supports that prop up and protect painting. It makes sense now to pull focus on the painter's bodily gestures, which transform and recreate space. 'The work', Clark told us 60 years ago, 'being the act of making the work, you and it become wholly indissociable.' ■

**ISOBEL HARBISON** is a critic, curator and part-time tutor based in London.

