

HIGH ON HOPE

BY DANIEL STURGIS

The exhibition High on Hope has been conceived as a memorial exhibition for the artist Gerard Hemsworth (1945-2021). It brings together a selection of Hemsworth's canvases with that of work by eight other artists whom he taught, on the part-time Master's programme at Goldsmiths College in South London, in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The exhibition, which has been devised by the painter Rebecca Scott, focuses on artists whose work she sees as resonating with Hemsworth's own engagement with a type of "post-conceptual figurative or representational painting".¹

For Hemsworth, both in his own work and in his teaching, the criticality of art was central. He saw all art as falling into two broad categories "art that celebrates the world we live in, and art that questions it", or to put it another way "art which addresses what we know, and art which addresses what we do not know".² It was the latter of these positions that governed much of his thinking in the studio and pedagogically. That Hemsworth valued an art of enquiry, and indeed uncertainty, owes much to his experience as a sculpture student at St Martin's School of Art in the late 1960s. Then under the influence of Anthony Caro, who taught at the school, St Martin's was a bastion of bright, modernist, New Generation thinking, as well as a contrary and equally strong hot-house that questioned those very assumptions. With students like Gilbert and George or Richard Long, all contemporaries of Hemsworth, challenging the underpinnings of what sculpture could be. Hemsworth straddled this opposition, which undoubtedly enriched his thinking and led him after St Martin's to set up a studio with the late-modernist sculptors at Stockwell Depot. He then swiftly denounced that mode of working, for more conceptually based works culminating in the text works of the 1970's. Here he employed gnomic phrases, which were displayed on walls or in books. The text, which was often appropriated from other sources and then through display removed from its original context, was employed to examine ideas of intuition, language and meaning.

These ideas Hemsworth would continue to explore for the rest of his career. In the mid 1980s in carefully observed figurative drawings and paintings, such as in Table Manners (1983), and then from the 1990s using an appropriated vocabulary of stylised drawings and later children's illustrations. In Hidden Agenda (2008), for example, Hemsworth's twists the innocence of these childhood images, and questions the purity of how we read them, to create a language of humour and menace. Faultlessly rendered in acrylic paint, and utilising sharp linear forms, Hemsworth asks us to question our assumptions as to what it is we are seeing. Both within the strange imagery of teddy bears and mushrooms, and within a process built on the repetition of stencils leading to a pictorial balancing of abstract shapes and structures.

The questioning of ideas of intuition and language also underpin much of Hemsworth's pedagogy. He saw the language, and indeed the point of art as dependent on art's ability to "question the very rules that sustain it."³ So when he came to jointly run the Masters programme at Goldsmiths in 1982, he saw the course's philosophy as needing to enable students to become knowledgeable with the language of art, so that "once they are familiar with the language of art, then they are in a position to question that language".⁴ The other eight artists in this exhibition all experienced this critical and reflective environment. One that saw Hemsworth, and his co-lead the artist Nick de Ville, purposely "constructing [an environment for] debate" through rigorous critique and by inviting in visiting artists "who would have opposing opinions about the student's work and then [leaving] it for the student to decide what

was right for them.”⁵ As Hemsworth put it “We were interested in an ongoing debate which inevitably made that student a stronger artist”.⁶ This atmosphere of debate and deep intellectual reflection was unique in London’s art schools at the time, as was the idea of creating a programme that was very outward looking and had just one foot within the institution and the other firmly placed beyond the college and through its association with outside studios and artists, in the artworld more generally.

Since its inception, the Goldsmiths MA was set up as a two-year part-time course for a small cohort of 10 -15 students who would be “working in their own studios in various parts of London... and visiting each other’s studios for group criticism”.⁷ Under Hemsworth and de Ville a greater emphasis was put on the nature of these critiques, and in the idea that being an artist was a real profession that was valued in the world. They also introduced a development that allowed the students to have the agency themselves to choose any artist they liked to visit them for a tutorial, making it possible for a very diverse collection of artists, and those artists visiting from other countries, to feed into the programme.⁸

The Goldsmiths MA and Hemsworth as a teacher and artist influenced a huge number of artists working in all fields of art. Those gathered by Rebecca Scott for *High on Hope* reflect her own circle of influence and interest in the language of representation in painting. Scott has selected each work carefully to draw out allegiances, connections and what she describes as “trickles of thought”.

Mark Wallinger’s (Goldsmiths MA Programme 1983-85) *primal id Paintings* (2015) spotlight, through their resemblance to Rorschach test, perennial questions associated with all paintings – what do we read into a painting from our own subjective experiences? And how much of what the artist has made – like Freud’s psychological definition of the id – is unconscious and impulsive? These massive works, like Leonardo da Vinci’s eponymous drawing, are Vitruvian in proportion and association. Each canvas measures twice Wallinger’s height by that of his outstretched arm span and is made without brushes but with the artist’s hands and fingers. The paintings, which are symmetries, were painted ‘blind’. Wallinger was unable to see what he was doing on the canvas when making the works as he needed to stand very close to the surface so that he could use both of his hands simultaneously to create the image through touch. As such, the *id Paintings* record an event, as much as an image and an idea. Other artists in *High on Hope* also complicate the reading of pre-existing imagery. **Suzy Willey** (Goldsmiths MA Programme 1986-88) has consistently used comic strips as a format to speak about the nature of making and communication. Her slowly made paintings are all about painterly concerns – edges, colours and brushstrokes. They are often based on elements and frames from the classic Hergé cartoon strip *TinTin* or the American animated sitcom *The Simpsons*. During Willey’s painting process however, she changes and carefully adapts and balances the colours in these sources as she plays with the direction of her thick and impasto brushstrokes, and edits and embellishes the underlying structure, to emphasise aspects within each composition. On another level Willey’s paintings speak of culture, of contemporary domestic rooms, home and a life lived. The cartoon is just an armature, and through text bubbles being flipped, over written, or just filled with colour, the paintings, though iconographically familiar seem to remain open enough for the projection of individual reflection and autobiographical connection.

Rebecca Scott (Goldsmiths MA Programme 1985-87) and **Michael Stubbs** (Goldsmiths MA Programme 1988-90) use, to consistently different ends, a process of visual layering within their paintings. Both artists place fragments of one image on top of another, recognising how painting as a language is an unstable and frequently growing palimpsest of past positions. In *DPM Membrane* (2021) Stubbs builds a painting through a dynamic coming together of bold slabs of household paint and softer stains and pools of tinted floor varnish. He carefully orchestrates this painterly vocabulary to hint at, and interconnect with, both art historical precedents and the ever- present and encroaching digital and photographic vocabularies. Through their use of specific symbols, and in their crispness Stubbs’s paintings allude in part, to a flat mediated world of changing layers and digital surfaces. However, these paintings also celebrate an opposing position. A much more raw and haphazard materiality. Perhaps this is most visible in their seamless incorporation of photographic images, pictures of tubs of household paint and varnish, which show the artist’s own working materials and processes. Scott’s interlayering of images is very different as she unites and merges art-historical references with images of women from glossy magazines and advertising. In works such as *Trends* (2020) the relaxed virtuosity of her painted figures is purposefully defaced with a crude overpainting which seems to disfigure and

obscure the underlying work. In other works this overpainting is more pictorially emblematic. This coming together of different painterly languages and emotions is key to Scott's work. Through acts of pictorial unification, she critiques gendered understandings of representation – where contemporary and historic notions of glamour, fashion and culture are complicated through different modes of depiction.

There is also a jamming together in **Jessica Voorsanger's** (Goldsmith MA Programme 1991-93) embroidered wall-hangings. These complex and decorative works, which are made from recycled clothing and vintage fabrics employ a variety of home-spun sewing and tapestry skills, in balanced but wonderfully eccentric compositions. Voorsanger wilfully incorporates rogue elements into each work, such as the retro 3D cardboard glasses in *Fabric Construction with 3D Glasses* (2022) or the large curtain rings that are consistently used to fix and stretch the wall-hangings onto the wall. A reflective thrift-shop ambience underpins these pieces, brought about by Voorsanger's choice of fabrics – which are often bold, high-octane and dated from the 1970s – but this quality is augmented by the addition of brightly stretched and stitched thread, that look back to earlier American embroidery and quilting traditions and forward to environmental concerns, and the cultures of recycling and customised clothing. Voorsanger sees tapestry as the ultimate form of popular art, and one that is both democratic and yet anonymous.

For *High on Hope* the artist **Bob & Roberta Smith** (Goldsmith MA Programme 1991-93) is exhibiting two text paintings that ask us to consider how we should as individuals and citizens engage with art. Painted in sign-painter's enamels with improvised fonts and colour schemes paintings such as *Look, Listen, Make Things* (2021) are, like Voorsanger's work whom the artist often collaborates with, resolutely political. They emphasise the importance of active participation and the universality of art. Smith's paintings are perhaps best understood as urgent and joyful rallying cries. In paintings, performances and installations Bob & Roberta Smith uses optimism as a tool with precision, to challenge not only the viewer to act, but to also bear witness and for culture more generally to expand and accommodate.

For *High on Hope* **Mark Fairnington** (Goldsmith MA Programme 1987-89) is showing two paintings of the same horse. One work is vast, the other small and in a natural but subversive gesture, this scale shift is also echoed in the relative size of the horse's penis in each painting. In Fairnington's carefully observed canvases, such as those of horses or bulls, the pedigree of both a type of painting and the animal itself is put under scrutiny. The artist depicts 'prize-winning' animals, that are valued by farmers and breeders for their prowess and heritage. Isolated on to clean painted backgrounds, these works echo the British nineteenth century portrait tradition of prize stallions, bulls and the monumental paintings of horses by George Stubbs. However, in their scale and dry humour the paintings also ask us to consider questions of portraiture and lineage, and to wonder at the painting's actual creation.

Roy Holt's (1942-2007) (Goldsmith MA Programme 1985-87) paintings are similarly paradoxical and meditative. They revel in asking questions. Both in what they depict, and how things are depicted. In works such as *7 Hinges* (2006), the artist has chosen to paint a series of recognisable and flattened hinges, which are arranged as if tinted, and on a smooth white canvas. But by painting the hinges in this way, Holt has actually robbed them of the very characteristics and qualities that make them a hinge. Now displayed flattened out, like butterflies in a case, we recognise them for what they are now not. And in doing so we recognise the fragility of meaning – both visual and contemplative. It is interesting to note that Holt, like Hemsworth, was also a teacher, and was greatly influenced himself by the pedagogical theories of Josef Albers, particularly the influential colour course that Albers developed at the Bauhaus and later at Black Mountain College and Yale.⁹ What Albers showed in that course was that our perception of a colour changes – sometimes dramatically – by which colours are adjacent to it. In other words, it is the context that helps govern the reading.

It is this understanding of the importance of context, and noticing how altering and changing context complicates and expands our readings – that Holt and the other artists in *High on Hope* all explore. They recognise how language is unstable, how by shifting contexts, they can speak freshly to the present.

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1 Rebecca Scott, conversation with the author 30.03.22.

2 Gerard Hemsworth, *Foreign Policy*, Galeria Luis Serpa, Lisbon: 2007. In the essay 'Foreign Policy', written to coincide with an exhibition of work from alumni who studied on the Goldsmith MA course in the late 1990s, Hemsworth lays out most succinctly his position for what constitutes criticality and newness in art which like "Foreignness by its very nature is questioning of what we already know and are familiar with".

3 interview with Gerard Hemsworth by the filmmaker Johannes Maier, June 2008, Goldsmiths London. <https://vimeo.com/johannesmaier> [accessed 8 April 2022]

4 *ibid.* Hemsworth started teaching on a part-time basis on the BA course at Goldsmiths in 1979, prior he was a senior lecturer at Trent Polytechnic Nottingham (1974-1978) the first polytechnic to develop an interdisciplinary Fine Art course.

5 *ibid.* Nick de Ville's significance in forming and developing the MA at Goldsmiths between 1983-1993 is also crucial to understand. As a student he studied under Richard Hamilton in Newcastle, who he would later go onto work for as a studio assistant; having befriended Brian Ferry when an art student in Newcastle he went on to be art director for Roxy Music's graphic work and worked on a series of album covers that explored what de Ville sees as the "pre-Postmodern dilemmas" of artificiality, authenticity and identity, see 'Just/Talk: Justin Strauss with Nick de Ville', *Ace Reader*, 2022 [https:// reader.acehotel.com/art/just-talk-justin-strauss-with-nick-de-ville/](https://reader.acehotel.com/art/just-talk-justin-strauss-with-nick-de-ville/) [accessed 8 April 2022]

6 *ibid.*

7 Goldsmiths MA catalogue 1979-1981, Goldsmiths College University of London, 1981.

8 The MA was set up in 1978 and run by Michael Williams, supported initially by Richard Wentworth and from 1981 by Jon Thompson. Though both Hemsworth and de Ville contributed to the programme during this period it fully passed to them to lead in 1982 which they did together until 1993 when de Ville left to develop the Fine Art PhD programme and become Head of Visual Arts at the college. Hemsworth continued to solely run the course supported by a roster of different artists until his retirement in 2011. He was appointed Reader in Visual Arts in 1995 and Professor in Visual Arts in 1999. Nick De Ville email to the author 05.04.22.

9 Roy Holt taught at a number of art schools most noticeably at Liverpool John Moores University 1968-2007.