

Herald St

They are both here and there, they penetrate all ways
They go both north and south, they are past and to come
They pierce all directions at once, they move and are still
They are the profound tilt, the absolute angle
To things that we know.

– Ithell Colquhoun, *Les Grandes Transparentes* (1944)

There is a condition of form that swirls through Lesley Vance's painting. They teeter on the brink of teeming possibility, converging into shapes that, once seen, immediately dissolve and break apart. They come from nothing and from everything at once, revealing something deeper than the artist's imagination: a kind of innate intuition, a stirring, a sensing towards the unknown, the not-yet. They reveal the alive-ness of colour as form and form as colour – a conscious equation of both that practically arrives fully formed, demanding its existence. The painting is making itself while Vance, with one eye paying attention and the other averted, guides it into reality. These works exist in a perpetual state of transformation, continually moving between interpretations – here a cornetto of silvery hair, there a veil of gauze, a knot of lacquered wood, a flurry of gulls' feathers. These twisted forms dance a waltz of illusion around our human impulse to look for representative and recognisable symbols. Distinction between levels and layers has been flattened here, playing the whole drama out across one scene.

Vance's paintings occupy a certain theatricality, as bands swathe and ribbons skirmish in tension between depth and surface. In this way, they sit within the Surrealist tradition of performance; there is an absurdity to the way the forms overlap, quarrelling for supremacy. They are not designed to deliberately confuse, but from the artist's improvised play comes humour and lightness. It can be surprising to learn that one of Vance's touchstones is René Magritte, whose objects hang so clearly and crisply in representation of a message. Yet it is Magritte's use of space within the canvas that is useful for Vance: the background rising up to meet the foreground, sitting one on top of the other; the fullness of the plane; the gradient shaping folds across dimensions.

Surrealism can also cross over into spirituality, as improvised marks are given space to unfurl. Vance speaks of the energy of the act of painting, of a whole life embodied in one canvas. The artist's ego of authorship is pushed aside as brushstrokes are allowed to follow their own trajectory, a process of making ephemeral energy concrete, of laying it out. It's a quest towards a less representational view of the world – abstraction as transcendent reality. In this spiritualist tradition, Vance sits within a long lineage of female painters turning towards an abstracted unconscious: Hilma af Klint, Georgiana Houghton, Ethel Annie Weir, Anna Zemánková, Ithell Colquhoun. Some of these were mediums, conducting their own séances; others drew on automatic writing and streams of consciousness. Vance's flourishes and fluid forms both belong to and work against this history. Intuition wills curves into existence that she might then resist – she speaks of 'fighting against what is so easy to do' – resulting in a canvas that is almost sculptural, an inverse collage, pushed into and pulled against over and over.

Every painting in the exhibition is untitled; in essence, there are almost limitless stories within. In their playful imbalance of perspective between solid, material colour and the parts Vance call more 'chaotic', a kind of lyrical expressionism unfolds. As with poetry, form and content meet in dialogue, constituting each other in symbiosis. The life of each of Vance's paintings can be read within the marks that hold the forms, physical residue from the performed act of painting. In this way, time becomes material – geometric variations in tempo – and immediacy becomes the subject. When you read between the lines, latent narratives begin to appear from the motion of colour. The works transcend painterly boundaries of form and, in doing so, embody a conditional, provisional energy that exists as the not-yet, the almost. They are both here and there.

Text by Phoebe Cripps