

strata

## The Surface Subject

*'One tends to see what's in an Old Master before seeing it as a picture, (whereas) one sees a Modernist painting as a picture first ... the Modernist way of seeing is, of course, the best way of seeing any kind of picture, Modernist or Old Master.'*<sup>1</sup>

No one could argue that a painting is not an object first, a physical enactment of materials laid bare on a flat plane. Modernism brought with it this awareness for both painters and viewers. Clement Greenberg fought for painting as an act of purity and autonomy but many of today's painters see these rigid paradigms as too removed from the intricacy of the world around us. Just as it is possible to see the abstract qualities of surface and line in Bassano or Raphael, isn't it just as valid to search for meaning or narrative within abstraction? The painters in this exhibition wrestle with the dichotomy between surface and subject. They find common ground in the acknowledgement of modernism, whilst considering the ways to deconstruct, taint or expose its apparent simplicity.

James Lumsden and Andrew Mackenzie are both preoccupied with the monochrome surface. For Lumsden the flat surface takes on a photographic theatricality, suffused with illusionist depth and light. But wait: look closer and the perfect surface is disrupted; the layers of paint can be tracked in explorative, translucent glazes built up in multiple layers, whilst edges or borders of canvas are stripped bare or left unpainted. Lumsden hereby draws us closer to the materiality of the surface, making his paintings more abstract than ever. But does this materialism simply draw us to their process of making, or is he picking apart modernism's seamless vision, exposing it as a failed utopia?

Like Lumsden, Mackenzie draws in the viewer with seductive surfaces but his process is subtractive, laying on paint only to take it away again. There is a tragic romance in his erasure, reminding us how much gets lost in the passage of time. His ghostly surfaces seem worn as if by nature, like walls gradually stained by the weather. Mackenzie uses historical landscape paintings as a source for creating this romantic atmosphere. Trees frequent many of his paintings, forming heavily networked layers which play with the borders between realism and abstraction. They are counterbalanced in recent paintings by contemporary sources in the man made environment, including pedestrian footbridges, service stations and pylons.

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<sup>1</sup> Clement Greenberg, *Modernist Painting, The Collected Essays and Criticism, Vol. 4: Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957-1969*, ed. John O' Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993)

Where these artists use the painted surface as atmospheric field for Michael Craik, Sharon Quigley and Jo Milne the surface is a site for decoration and pattern, emphasising the flat autonomy of the painted object. Craik uses architectural geometric pattern as a framework on which to build up layers of paint into the subtlest form of relief. Painting onto aluminium further enforces the objectivity of the work, their slimness bringing them close to sculpture. His generic patterns are coolly detached from the specifics of place, seeming instead to recall the anonymity of the urban experience. Recent developments see Craik using Arabic patterns as inspiration, moving from the modern urban ideal to the primitive roots of abstraction.

As complex as the minutiae of ordinary life can be, a range of structures hold it together and these complex and varied patterns provide a starting point for both Sharon Quigley and Jo Milne. Quigley's sources are richly varied, including kimono designs, arabesque and nineteenth century engravings and cellular structures. The sources are united in a personal vocabulary involving richly worked surfaces built up with wax and resin. This personal language could be likened to what philosopher and curator Nicolas Bourriaud has recently defined as the '*altermodern*'<sup>2</sup> – an attempt to gather together multiple sources into a personal and unified language, the preoccupation of many contemporary artists.

If Quigley starts broad and narrows down, Jo Milne's practice could be seen in reverse; her paintings start with specific areas of language or coded symbols and expose a playful or complex spirit beneath. For example DNA structures, jacquard loom cards, pianola rolls and Braille are exploited as starting points but broken apart into complex and layered patterns. In Paul Auster's *New York Trilogy*<sup>3</sup> systems of language come into question too, where a word can lose its meaning with the simple removal of one letter, bringing the tower of communication tumbling down. Like Auster, Milne references elements of language as technological constructions or 'cyphers', but they are grounded in the rich and human surface of paint, a near symbol for the human body.

The artists here explore the variable ways in which tautological paintings can be relevant and accessible to the contemporary viewer and find themselves scattered across the spectrum between process and meaning. But it seems they would all share art historian Meyer Schapiro's stance:

*'...there is no 'pure art'; all fantasy, and formal construction, even the random scribbling of the hand, are shaped by experiences and concerns ...'*<sup>4</sup>

Rosie Lesso is an artist and writer in Scotland © 2009

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2 Nicholas Bourriaud, *Ideal Syllabus*, Frieze Magazine, Issue 115, May 2008

3 Paul Auster, *The New York Trilogy*, (Faber & Faber, USA, 1987)

4 Meyer Schapiro, *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate*, ed. Francis Francina (Routledge, New York, 2000)

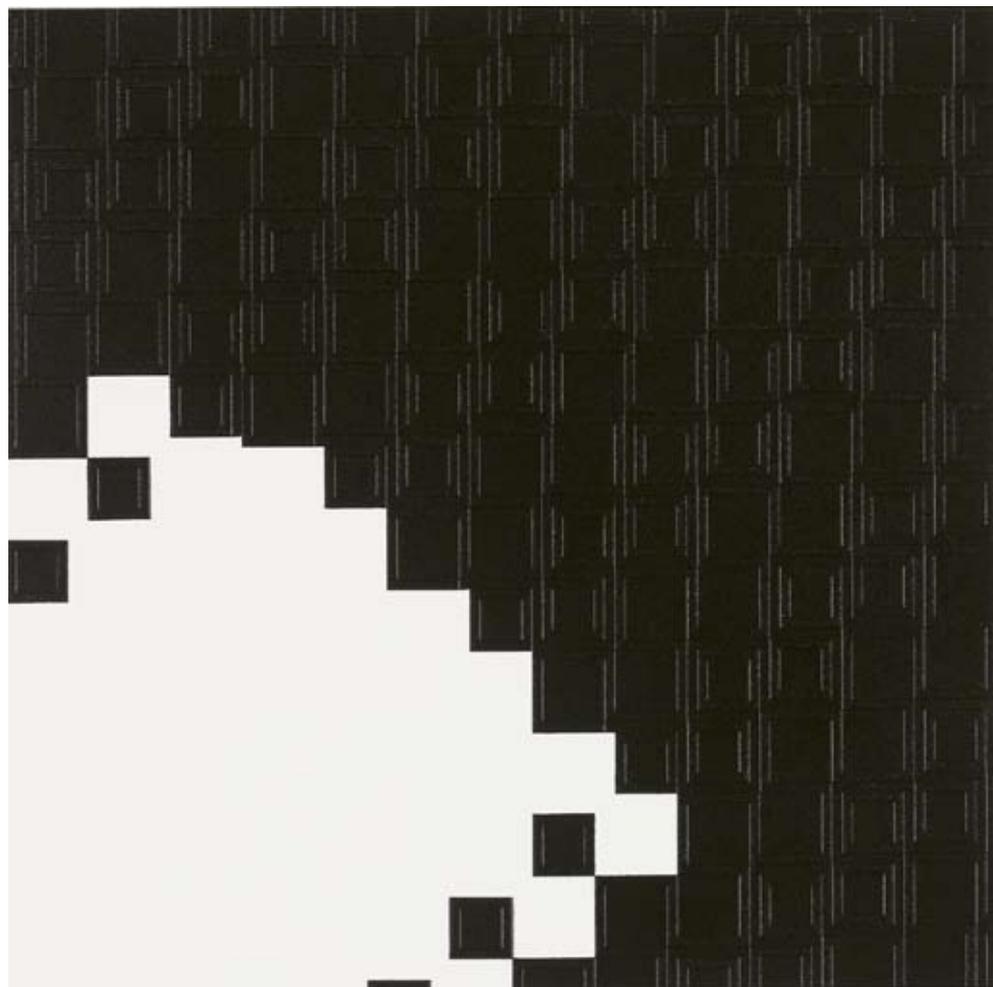
# Michael Craik



*Somewhat Serrate (No.1)* 2009, acrylic on aluminium, 15cm x 15cm

*Somewhat Serrate (No.2)* 2009, acrylic on aluminium, 15cm x 15cm

*Debatably Dentate (No.1)* 2009, acrylic on aluminium, 15cm x 15cm



# James Lumsden



*Liquid Light (1/08)* 2008, acrylic on linen, 75 x 85cm

*Liquid Light (14/08)* 2008, acrylic on canvas, 35 x 40cm

*Liquid Light (1/08)* 2008, (detail)



# Andrew Mackenzie



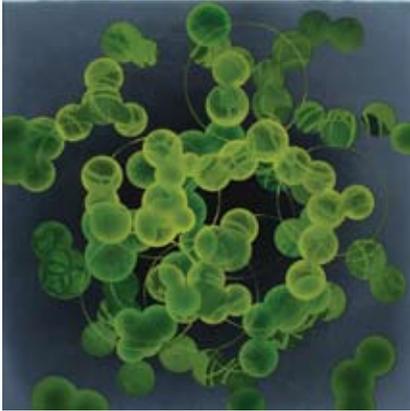
*Building, Trees 2* 2008, oil on panel, 68 x 40cm

*Dark ground Illumination 1* 2008, oil on panel, 55 x 32cm

*Service Station Overlap* 2008, oil on panel, 30 x 30cm



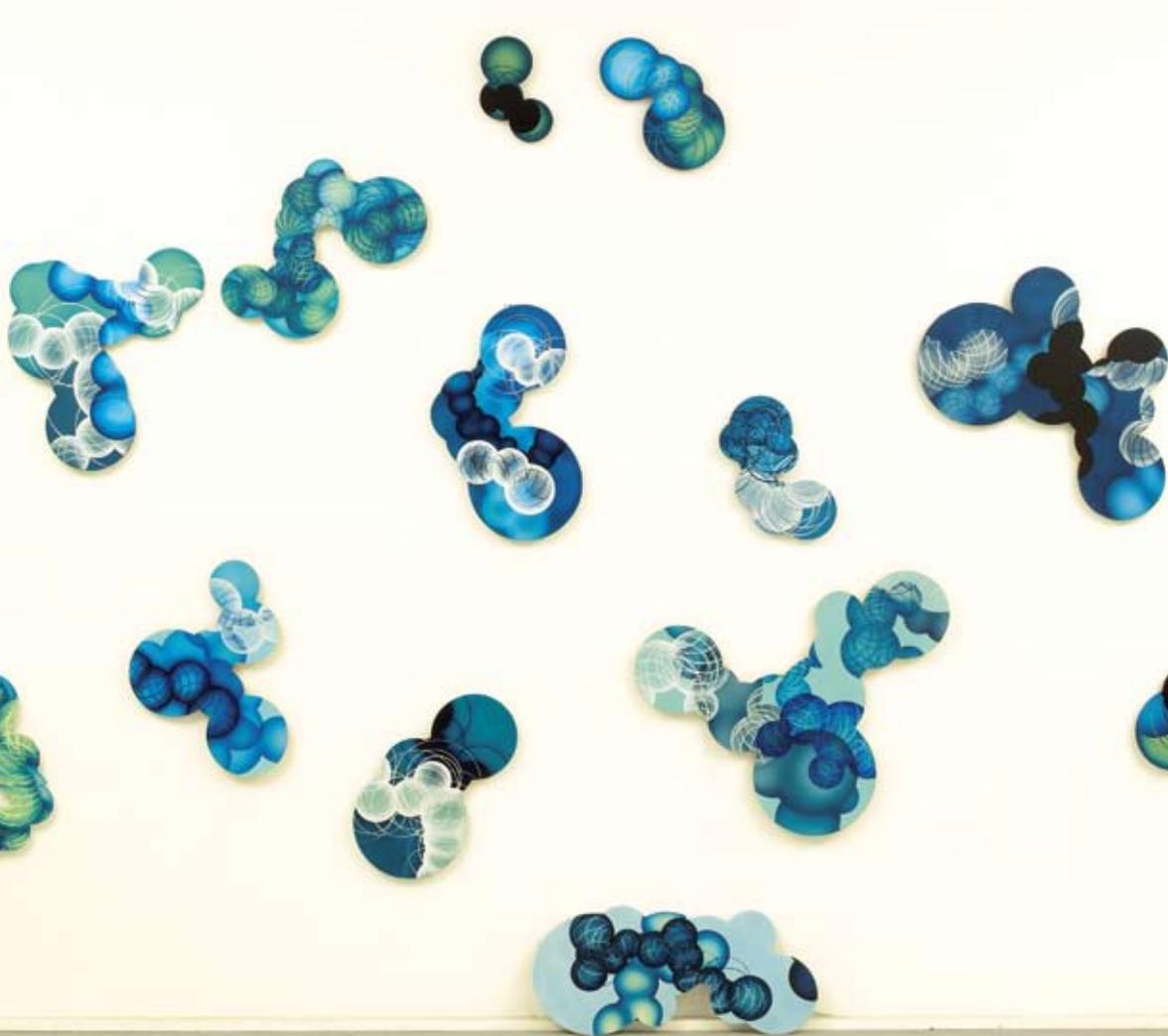
Jo Milne



*Higgledy Piggledy-piggled* 2008, acrylic on aluminium, 50 x 50cm

*All a wibble wobble* 2008, acrylic on aluminium, 120 x 120cm

*Essentially compact schemes for unsteady incompressible flow* 2008  
acrylic on wood, dimensions variable



Sharon Quigley



*Stem Cell* 2008, oil on paper, 155 x 118cm

*Ganglia* 2008, oil on paper, 140 x 100cm

*Indelible Evidence* 2008, oil on paper, 140 x 100cm





**Michael Craik** (Born 1972 in Edinburgh)

Studied Fine Art at Gray's School of Art in Aberdeen before completing an MA in European Fine Art in Barcelona. He currently lives and works in Edinburgh. Craik has been the recipient of several awards including a Scottish Arts Council Creative Development Award and an Arts Trust of Scotland Award. He has work in the collections of The Fleming Collection, The Royal Bank of Scotland, Mastercard, and The Grampian Hospital Art Trust.

Selected solo exhibitions: *Razed To The Ground*, Amber Roome Contemporary Art, Edinburgh (2007); *Plate Tectonics*, Galería Alonso Vidal, Barcelona (2006); An Tuireann Arts Centre, Portree (2006).

Selected group exhibitions: *Preview 2008*, Sarah Myerscough, London (2008); *Open*, Cube, Manchester (2007); *ArtSway Open 06*, ArtSway, Sway (2006); *Art Futures*, Contemporary Art Society, London (2005); *Mostyn Open 12*, Oriol Mostyn Gallery, Llandudno (2002); *Big Small New*, Houldsworth, London (2000).

[www.michaelcraik.com](http://www.michaelcraik.com)



**James Lumsden** (Born 1964 in Inverness)

Studied Graphic Design in Glasgow. He currently lives and works in Edinburgh. Lumsden has been the recipient of several awards including a Scottish Arts Council Creative Development Award. He has works in the collections of The Royal Bank of Scotland, HBOS, Mastercard, The Ballinglen Arts Foundation, Aalborg Kommune and The Gulbenkian Foundation. Lumsden has undertaken residencies at The Ballinglen Arts Foundation, Ireland and The Aalborg Triennale, Denmark.

Selected solo exhibitions: Sarah Myerscough Fine Art, London (2009, 2005, 2004, 2002); Amber Roome Contemporary Art, Edinburgh (2007); Atticsalt, Edinburgh (2006); MAC, Birmingham (2006); An Tuireann Arts Centre, Portree (2005); Triskel Arts Centre, Cork (2001); Aalborg Triennale, Aalborg (2000).

Selected group exhibitions: *Shared Ground*, HAC, Irvine (2008); *Equinox*, Sarah Myerscough Fine Art, London (2007); Paul Kuhn Gallery, Calgary, Canada (2005).

[www.sarahmyerscough.com](http://www.sarahmyerscough.com)



**Andrew Mackenzie** (Born 1969 in Banff)

Studied Fine Art at Edinburgh College of Art. He currently lives in the Scottish Borders and works in Edinburgh. Mackenzie has been the recipient of many awards including The Royal Academy Aeneas Award, Scottish Arts Council awards and a Hope Scott Trust Award. He has work in the collections of The Fleming Collection, The Royal Academy London, Edinburgh's City Art Centre, HBOS and Bank of America. Residencies include The Ballinglen Arts Foundation, Ireland.

Selected solo exhibitions: *Cross Section of a Cascade*, Sarah Myerscough, London (2008); *Delicate Ground*, Amber Roome Contemporary Art, Edinburgh (2006); *Sunlight on Grey-painted Steel*, *Watching Water Rise*, round room, Talbot Rice Gallery, Edinburgh (2003).

Selected group exhibitions: *New Commissions*, Printmakers Workshop, Edinburgh (2009); *Ten Decades*, City Art Centre, Edinburgh (2007); *Viewpoint*, National Galleries of Scotland, Banff (2005); *Art Futures*, Contemporary Art Society, London (2003).

[www.andrewmackenzie.co.uk](http://www.andrewmackenzie.co.uk)

**Jo Milne** (Born 1966 in Edinburgh)

Studied Fine Art at Edinburgh University, before completing an MA in Printmaking at Camberwell School of Art in London. She currently lives and works between Edinburgh and Barcelona. Milne has been the recipient of several awards including The Elizabeth Green Shields Award and the Premio de Pintura de la Ciutat de Igualada. She has work in the collections of La Caixa, Museu d'Art de Sabadell and The Warwick Arts Trust. Milne has undertaken residencies at The Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin and The Museu d'Art de Sabadell, Spain.

Selected solo exhibitions: *Babble Bubbles*, Edifici Miramar, Sitges (2008); *All a wibble wobble*, Galeria Trama, Barcelona (2008); *Celestographs*, Metro 4, Basel ((2006); Amber Roome Contemporary Art, Edinburgh (2006); Museu d'Art de Sant Pol, Sant Pol (2005).

Selected group exhibitions: *Art Santander*, Santander (2008); *Between Two Worlds*, Widener Gallery, Hartford (2005); *ARCO*, Madrid (2003); *vostèstaqui*, La Virreina, Barcelona (2001).

[www.jomilne.com](http://www.jomilne.com)



**Sharon Quigley** (Born 1968 in Stirling)

Studied Painting at Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art in Dundee before completing an MA in European Fine Art in Barcelona. She currently lives and works in Edinburgh. Quigley has been the recipient of several awards including The Royal Scottish Academy Latimer Award, The Royal Glasgow Institute of Fine Arts Exhibitionship Prize, The Jeffrey Orchar Award for Painting and Edinburgh Printmakers' Visiting Artists Award. She has work in the collections of The Royal Bank of Scotland, Mastercard and The International Centre for Cultural Development in India. Quigley has undertaken residencies at Peacock Printmakers Workshop, Aberdeen and The International Centre for Cultural Development, Trivandrum, India.

Selected solo exhibitions: PatrioHall Gallery, Edinburgh (2002); Phillip's Contemporary Art, Manchester (2000); The Royal Glasgow Institute, Kelly Gallery, Glasgow (1994).

Selected group exhibitions: Society of Scottish Artists, Edinburgh (2008); Royal Scottish Academy, Edinburgh (2008); Amber Roome Contemporary Art, Edinburgh (2007).



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