

SCREEN

Pip Dickens

Published on the occasion of the exhibition:

Screen, by Pip Dickens, Rugby Art Gallery and Museum,
Rugby, UK.

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Cover image: *Flash-back (detail)*, 2013.

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29 June - 31 August 2013

Rugby Art Gallery & Museum

FOREWORD

Jessica Morgan

Senior Exhibitions Officer, Rugby Art Gallery and Museum

The notion of the screen is a fascinating one. A screen can be used to hide or obscure. It can be both a divider and a marker of space. A screen can also be a decorative element, such as the traditional three panel screens found in Japan.

The idea of the screen in terms of the marking and dividing of space and the obscuring of detail, relates to Pip's work in myriad ways. Her sensitive and intuitive use of subtle and sweeping layers of colour creates both a transparency and opaqueness in equal measure. Each layer of paint obscures the previous one but the building of transparent layer upon transparent layer creates an internal luminosity to the canvas.

The motifs developed through this process make reference to decorative elements found in Japanese and Chinese textile prints and screens. There are also references to Pip's travels in Japan and her experience of the Japanese garden and landscape as a series of 'screened' areas building to create a cohesive whole. These motifs hover on the surface on the canvases resonating with the layered textures Pip creates.

We are thrilled to have Pip's work on display at Rugby Art Gallery and Museum and would like to offer huge thanks to Pip for her dedication in producing such a large body of new works for this exhibition. It has been a fascinating process to work with Pip on the development of the new works for the show and a truly rewarding

experience as a curator to witness the thorough research, enthusiasm and attention to detail that are trademarks of Pip's practice.

Rugby Art Gallery and Museum would like to thank Arts Council England for their support of the development of the exhibition through Grants for the Arts, writer, critic, artist and curator David Sweet for his very insightful essay and Karl Jackson at Janus Kreative for the design of this publication.

2013

INTRODUCTION

Pip Dickens

Producing a new series of works is always exciting leading into realms that are unfamiliar and testing. When Jessica Morgan approached me with this exhibition I instantly knew that the works would, somehow, refer to the notion of the 'screen' but in what manner, or what references they may draw upon, was very open. There are numerous definitions of what a screen is: a protective device, a defence play in sport, a military tactic, a substrate upon which to project light or film upon and so on. There were, too, other sources of information gathered along the way which seemed to chime with the subject matter. One important reference being the 14th Century Italian 'fenestre impannate', or 'curtained window'. This was, essentially, a wooden frame stretched with canvas and soaked in oil and then inserted into openings in a domestic wall (the option of glass being financially prohibitive for most people). This intrigues me - we often think of windows as providing us with an open and clear aspect upon the world. In the case of the fenestre impannate no such clarity of vision is possible given that the canvas is a dense material and, once soaked in oil, would result (at best) in a form of light diffusion. The only visual information received would be a rather opaque and shadowy 'flicker' depending on external movement and light values.

I think it is an obvious progression, therefore, to respond to this Italian stretched canvas, or 'curtained window', given that the object is, essentially, a painter's stretcher and what better place to start a new series of paintings. In doing so, the development

of the paintings was overtly conscious of the inherent qualities of the stretcher itself - it's structure, edges, material composition, tension and so forth. This consciousness permeated all aspects of the painting process itself: staining, layering, glazing. How marks are made and to what extent they block out or make clear, how strong or how subtle.

When one considers a screen in the contemporary sense I suppose we instantly imagine film, cinema, television and projection devices. My lifelong interest in cinema and cinematic technology permeates these works, with particular recognition of recent news (*The Telegraph*: 7 May 2013 'Hollywood Says Goodbye to Celluloid') that from the end of 2013 Hollywood will, in the main, be going digital. The physical, photochemical substance of celluloid and the magical, inventive ways in which directors have exploited this medium may soon become extinct after 120 years.

The works in this exhibition are merely the beginning of, I hope, a prolonged exploration into the magic of film through painting and hold a mirror, too, to the magic of painting itself. Some of the titles of the works refer to technical aspects of film, others acknowledge the qualities of celluloid as a medium or the films that, thankfully, remain permanently etched in my memory.

2013

GRISAILLE AND TINT

David Sweet

Painting is such an old practice. It has such a long continuous history of producing convincing visual effects and representational sleights of hand, such a reputation for artifice that it seems to have the attributes of magic. Learning to paint, up to fairly recently, involved a kind of sorcerer's apprenticeship, more like being initiated into the mysteries of the art form rather than mastering a craft. Even when the materials and methods were simplified and grinding pigment or boiling varnish were no longer required, you had to qualify as an illusionist, telling white lies about space and volume to an audience confronting a flat surface. The lies had to be ennobled, of course, with references to religion or ideas or aesthetic principles, but they had to be sustained by tradesmen's tricks of perspective, or judicious use of shadows and highlights, which separated the adept professional from the amateur practitioner.

Again, perhaps because of its long past, which every individual work invokes, painting not only has associations with magic but also necromancy, the practice of divination involving communing with the dead, to gain insights into the unknown or the future. It's often talked of by its detractors as deceased, or treated as if an obsolete language, like Latin. Yet paintings ancient power to represent remains active, and inescapable. The brain processes information from photographs that give a quantitatively adequate account of the world, but photographs don't really trade in illusion. They grudgingly record but don't convincingly suggest

depth, for example. In a painting or drawing, however, the same brain can interpret two or three smudges in the right order, as a vast and uncanny vault of infinite space.

Painting's sorcery often lies in its small secondary effects, little touches and flicks of light and dark, highlights and shadows, which can set up irrefutable suggestions of space or movement, while remaining mere dabs of paint. In many of her paintings, Pip Dickens exploits this sorcery in a tightly limited shallow structure where the illusion is more telling. *Composition #7* (2012) is almost minimalist, consisting of a surface of combed pigment, whose irregularities create an impression of rippled fabric, which becomes the ground for linear elements seemingly made from plaited paint. But the agents doing the most work in the painting are the shadows accompanying, but not exactly matching, the plaited elements. The shadows are disproportionate, some far too large or in the wrong place, but while they don't make sense, they force acceptance. They are corroborated by the positioning of the highlights on the braids, causing them to visually float in front of the combed ground. Their peculiar buoyancy is inexplicable but nevertheless persuasive, even if the tonal logic, which should be determined by the position of the light source, is nullified.

Composition #7 demonstrates the mysterious power of painting, producing a successful illusion even when the tonal clues are in the wrong place. Instead

of describing a state of affairs in the real world, as was their original purpose, highlights and shadows have become rhetorical devices provoking what is almost a conditioned reflex. However inconsistent, we react to their blandishments and see depth like Pavlov's dogs were led to associate the bell and the food so they responded to the first stimulus as though it were the second.

This Pavlovian tendency is exploited more dramatically in *The Last Cells – Final Cut* (2013). Instead of a figure/ground standoff between the relatively level combed field and the floating incidents in *Composition #7*, the whole rectangle is filled with a network of expanded brush-marks and an associated gravity-produced mesh of vertical paint trails. The work is explicitly layered; first, the dense black ground, then two layers of pale turpsy pigment in a loose grid of broad short horizontal strokes to which the long drips are attached. Though there is a subliminal suggestion of colour, the scheme is basically a monochrome, which, taken together with the prominence of the methodology by which it was made, recalls the systematic practices associated with minimalism. But the operation of what seems like a mechanistic process produces sensations of depth and motility, generated simply by superimposing one run of strokes over another. A highlight is formed where they are doubled, accompanied by half-tones on either side, giving the impression of a structure composed of linked convex pictorial units

emerging from the deep shadow of the black backcloth.

If *Composition#7* and *The Last Cells* use tonality to conjure the appearance of depth then *Matte Masks* (2013) gives the eye little to work with in the way of representational clues. The repeated trapeziums may be derived from regular rectangles, echoing the theme of the screen, as foreshortened by perspective. But they have little spatial influence on the rest of the painting. This is partly because they excavate the established surface, causing an absence rather than a presence that demands to be accommodated within the painted field. They are, however, more than just gaps or holes in the pictorial fabric. Their boundaries are sharp but colour has bled under the masking tape to leave a red vestigial stain, inside the edge of shape, on the exposed canvas. The canvas that shows through is un-primed though not raw, so it has a particular warmish tinge. But it is clearly canvas and so the viewer is well aware of its function as the continuous foundation field onto which the interrupted painted field is imposed.

These three works are very different from each other. They seem to position themselves on a spectrum between illusion and disillusion, or between enchantment and disenchantment. *The Last Cells* is full of illusionist sorcery, delivering an ambiguous, complex image in which resolutely two-dimensional systems collide, generating the

appearance of an inexplicable third dimension, like a phantom summoned to a séance. The third dimension in *Composition#7* should be less of a mystery, except the enforced perception of depth, which seems to have a rational basis, turns out to be the result of a distorted and misaligned arrangement of tonal rhetoric. In *Matte Masks* the artifice is swept away showing not only that pictures are actually two-dimensional but also revealing their basic anatomy of paint on canvas on which the whole edifice of illusion is built.

The three examples above contain impervious grounds with which the pictorial elements interact, but in more recent paintings the absorbency of the canvas support is deployed in an illusionistic cause. The method involves overlays of glazes, with some areas masked out to create divisions or forms. As in *Matte Masks* the edges are sharp and precise though set in a very fluid field constructed from broad trails of liquid pigment. The variegated threads of paint that go to make up this field resemble the warp on the weaver's loom, before the weft is passed through to make the cloth. Each bristle registers as a separate filament, like the TV picture on a cathode ray tube, with indecipherable configurations emerging from small fluctuations and irregularities in the electron stream.

In *Artificial Intelligence* (2013) and *Auteur* (2013) this effect is used in distinct areas, set against pre-established backgrounds. They appear as free,

diaphanous forms, woven from delicate material that seems as palpable as a shadow or a patch of moonlight. Yet however delicate they are they have a surface, often subtly marked with a feint faded pattern, and this empowers them visually, increasing their leverage and influence in their dominant pictorial environments. Both of these paintings might be called compositions because attention is drawn to the decisions that have determined the placement of independent forms. In *Auteur* they are in a more gravitational context and take up the posture of the double portrait, or cinema 'two shot', while in *Artificial Intelligence*, they flutter like two flags caught in an updraft.

The position of the equivalent, blade like element in *Violet Venable, Venus Flytrap* (2013) is not freely decided. It is more integrated with the painting's geometry and more clearly related to the shape of the support. The containing rectangle is subtly emphasised by the darker shading around the perimeter, particularly at the top and bottom. The yellowish parallelogram on the right is, of course, a shape but its primary function is to provide the diagonal that divides the painting in two, and draws forth an answering shape on the left with which it forms an architectural partnership. Because everything seems to be insubstantial, composition is less of an issue. Compositional balancing of one component against another implies that they have weight or mass but here they do not displace tactile space or compete with each other. They resemble

slight, dematerialised effects, like the phenomena of double exposure or images that persist on the retina.

This same phenomenological quality also pervades most of *Superimposition – Opalesque* (2013). The borders of the rectangle are even more explicitly stated than in *Violet Venable*, in a three-sided device reminiscent of the framing around the photographic negative in pre-digital technology. The frame emphasises the ethereal quality of the rest of the painting. The darkness at the margins is echoed by the diagonal crease that partitions the rectangle, producing a pair of dovetailed parallelograms similar to those that feature in *Violet Venable*. The junction of the two areas is cleanly defined as a splice interrupting the grain of the pigment. Taping and masking one area, then the other, creates a seam between them where a tonal accent is deposited, with its intensity greater at the leading edge. Similar shadows occur more randomly in the lower part of the painting, where the brush trails overlap, adding to the illusionistic clues.

Vignette/Dream Scene (2013) dispenses with the overt framing device of *Superimposition* allowing the spliced fields to take up the whole canvas. The upper and lower edges are reinforced however by rows of stalagmite and stalactite formations growing or hanging from the bottom or top of the picture. Because the incidentals have been muted, the role of the diagonal as an axis or spine around

which the pictorial events turn or fold is more visually prominent. The junction is also more active with the single tonal break of *Superimposition – Opalesque* complicated by secondary bands of what looks like reflected light mitigating the darkness of the shadows. Paralleling that, on either side of the central penumbra, are areas where the lighter tones accumulate causing the surface to curve outwards around the seam. The odd thing is that this highly illusionistic effect melds with the chromatic shimmering veil, with subtle accents of reds and purples, which spreads across the rectangle.

The fold creates a binary division of the field, but the convincing illusion of tones arranged in adjacent tracks of highlights, shadows and intermediaries, so resembles an open book that it's hard, if not impossible, to avoid seeing the whole image as just that. The two sections either side of the fold, though presented at an angle, read like recto and verso, with the verso page more active and colourful than the recto. The strong sense that we are looking at a representation reminds us of painting's sorcery. It seems at first to distance the pictorial events, but then the optical resonance of the pigment and the visibility of the paint reassert the work's visual immediacy.

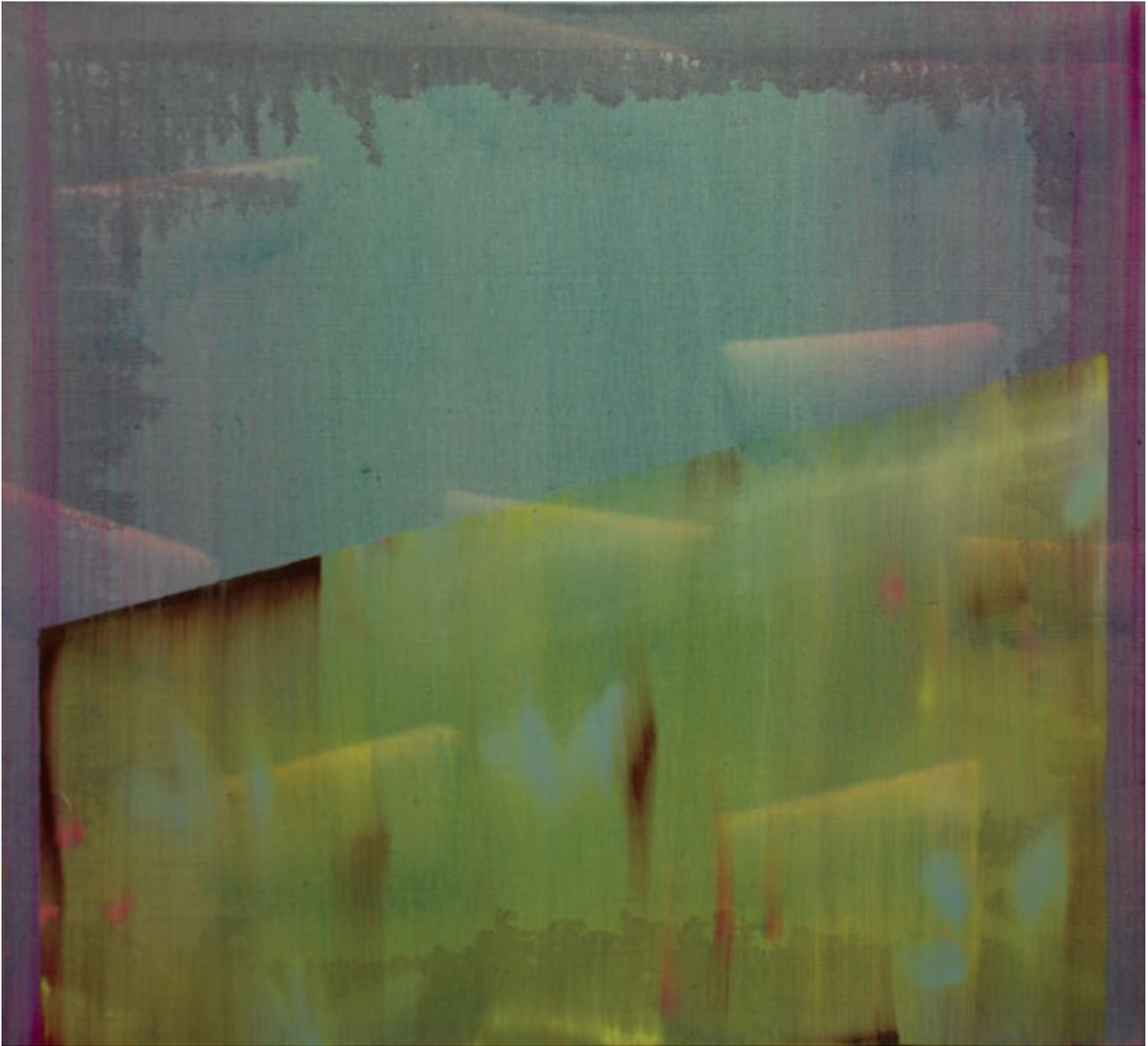
It will be obvious to the viewer of this exhibition that Dickens' methodology is highly developed. The signature space in many of her paintings takes the form of a slim envelope into which a surprising

variety of subjects can be slipped. But the contents have to be flat, or flattened like flowers in a flower-press. The inventory is extensive, each offering different challenges and formal opportunities: panes, pages, drapes, veils, hangings, film, stains, shadows, silk, lace, screens, reflections, projections, after-images, ghosts in the machine. She achieves impressive results by co-presenting two polarised elements found in painting practice, tone and colour, the grisaille and the tint. Traditionally the grisaille was an image rendered in darks and lights that sometimes acted as the under-painting. It gave the forms a sculptural definition. Colour was then added as a transparent glaze or tint over the grisaille.

In recent work Dickens has used these procedures side by side, almost as independent forces within the painting. They coexist but don't entirely fit together, the tone making its case for illusion, the colour for chromatic interest and a more 'abstract' spatial effect. The result is a hybrid pictorial code that preserves dichotomy and never entirely complies with either a representational or non-representational reading of the image. It's this combination of agendas that gives the work an unsettled ambivalence, the same mixture of rationality and sorcery that seems to define the art and history of painting.



Artificial Intelligence
115.5cm x 120.2cm
oil on canvas, 2013



Mélièse: Kingdom of the Fairies

62cm x 68cm

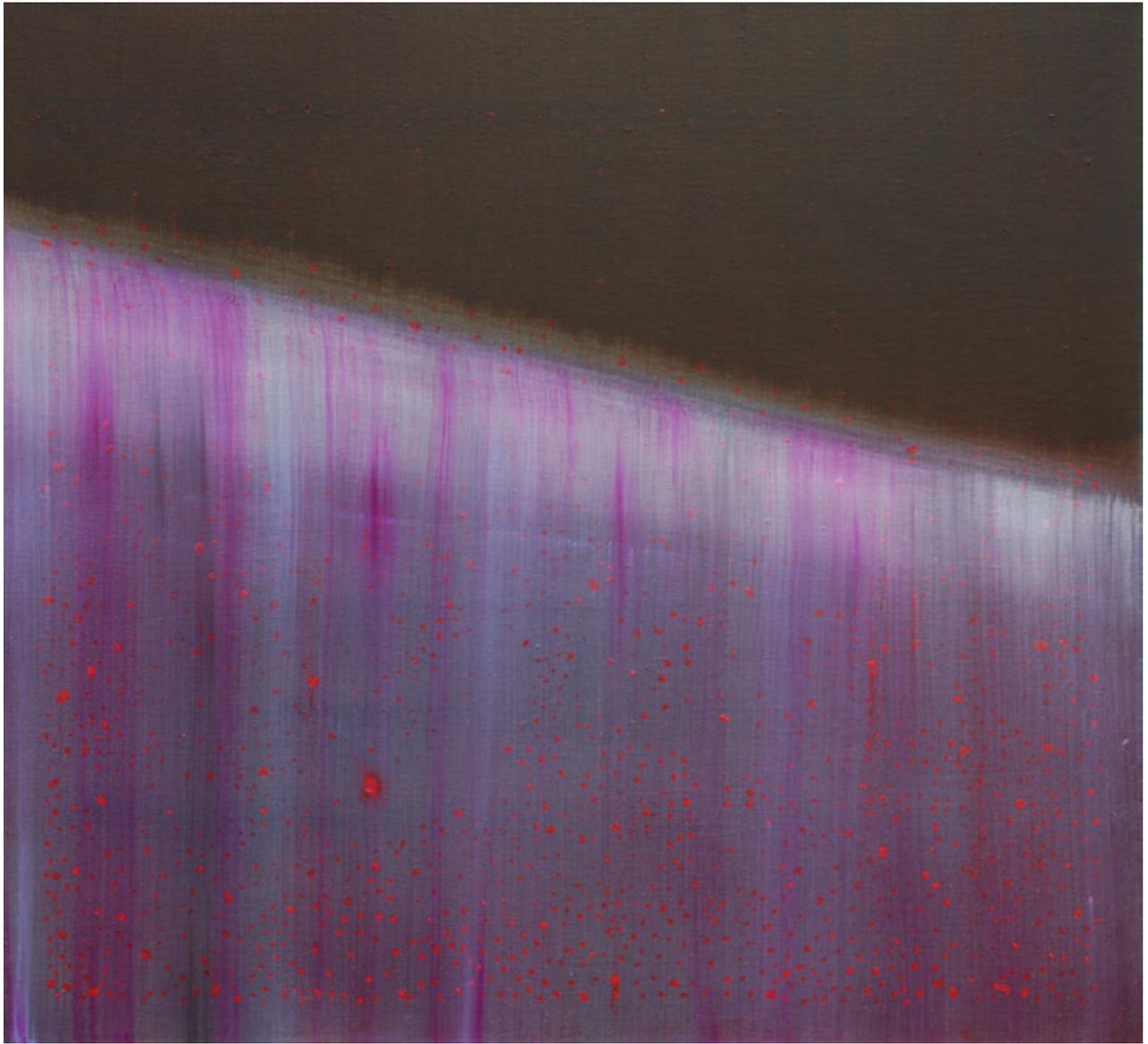
oil on canvas, 2013



Auteur
115cm x 180cm
oil on canvas, 2013



Flash-back
44.3cm x 46cm
oil on canvas, 2013



When the Stars Fall

62cm x 68cm

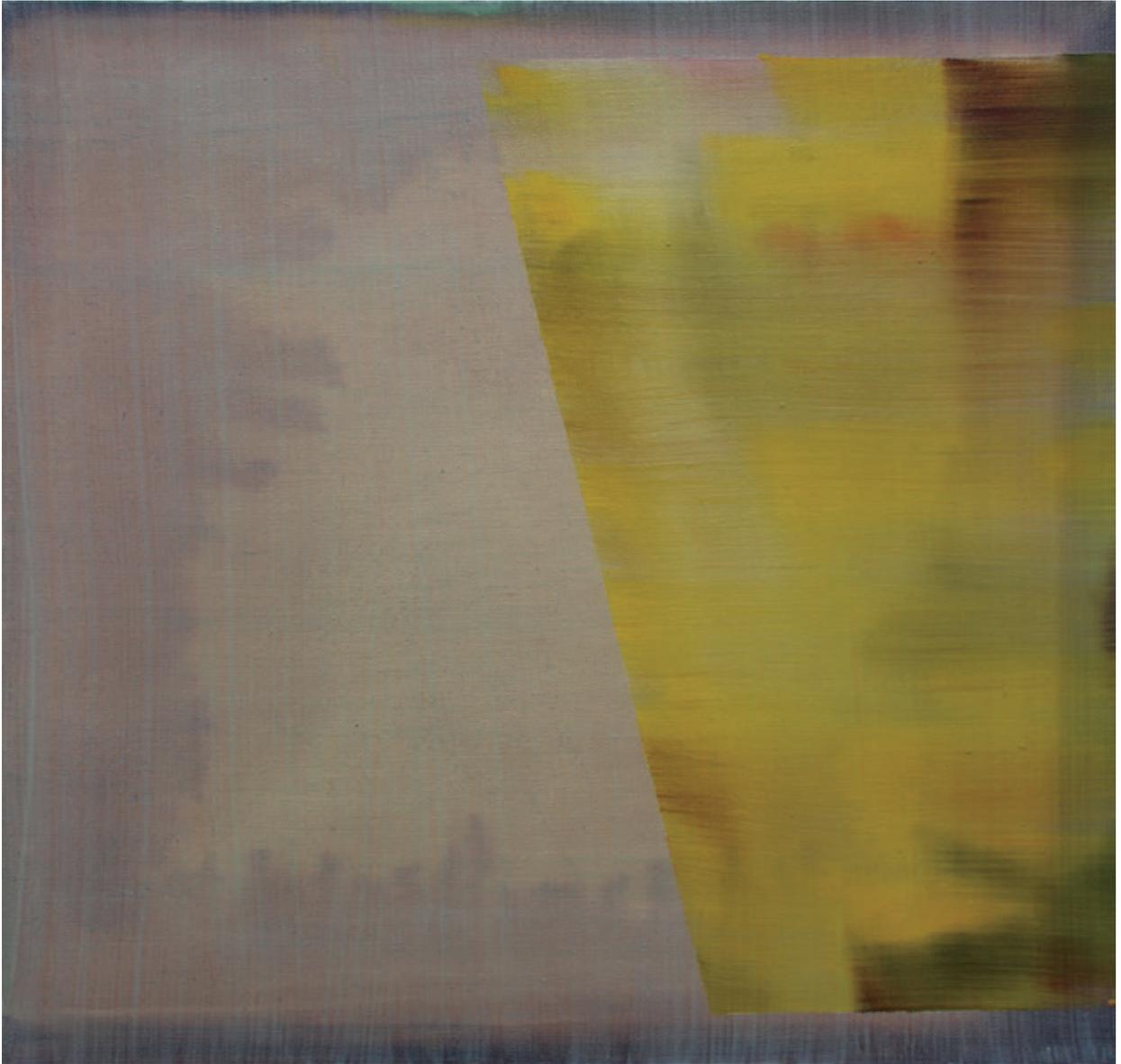
oil on canvas, 2013



Vignette/Dream Scene

56cm x 56cm

oil on canvas, 2013



Violet Venable, Venus Flytrap
44.5cm x 46.3cm
oil on canvas, 2013



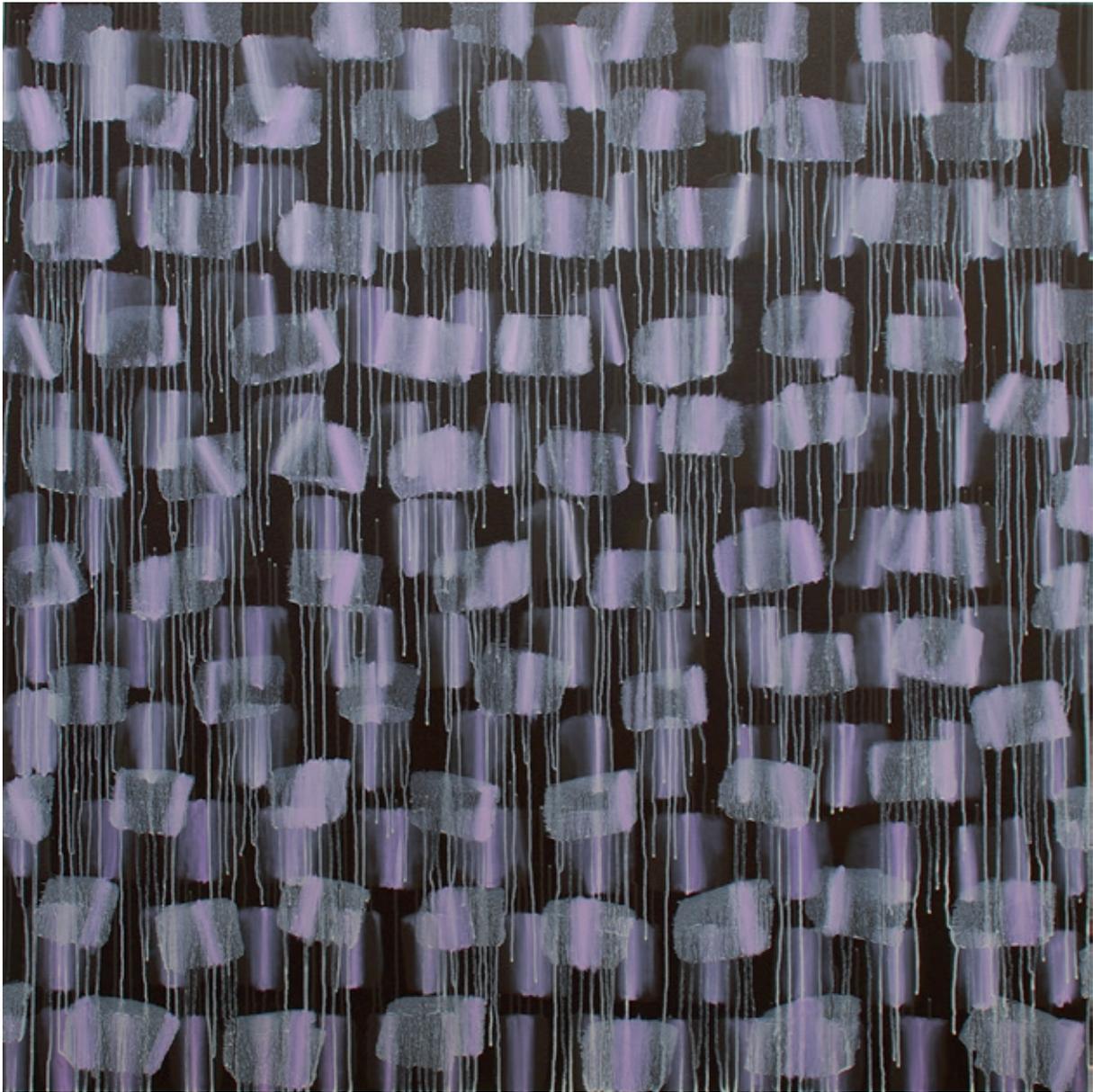
Superimposition – Opalesque

68cm x 62.3cm

oil on canvas, 2013



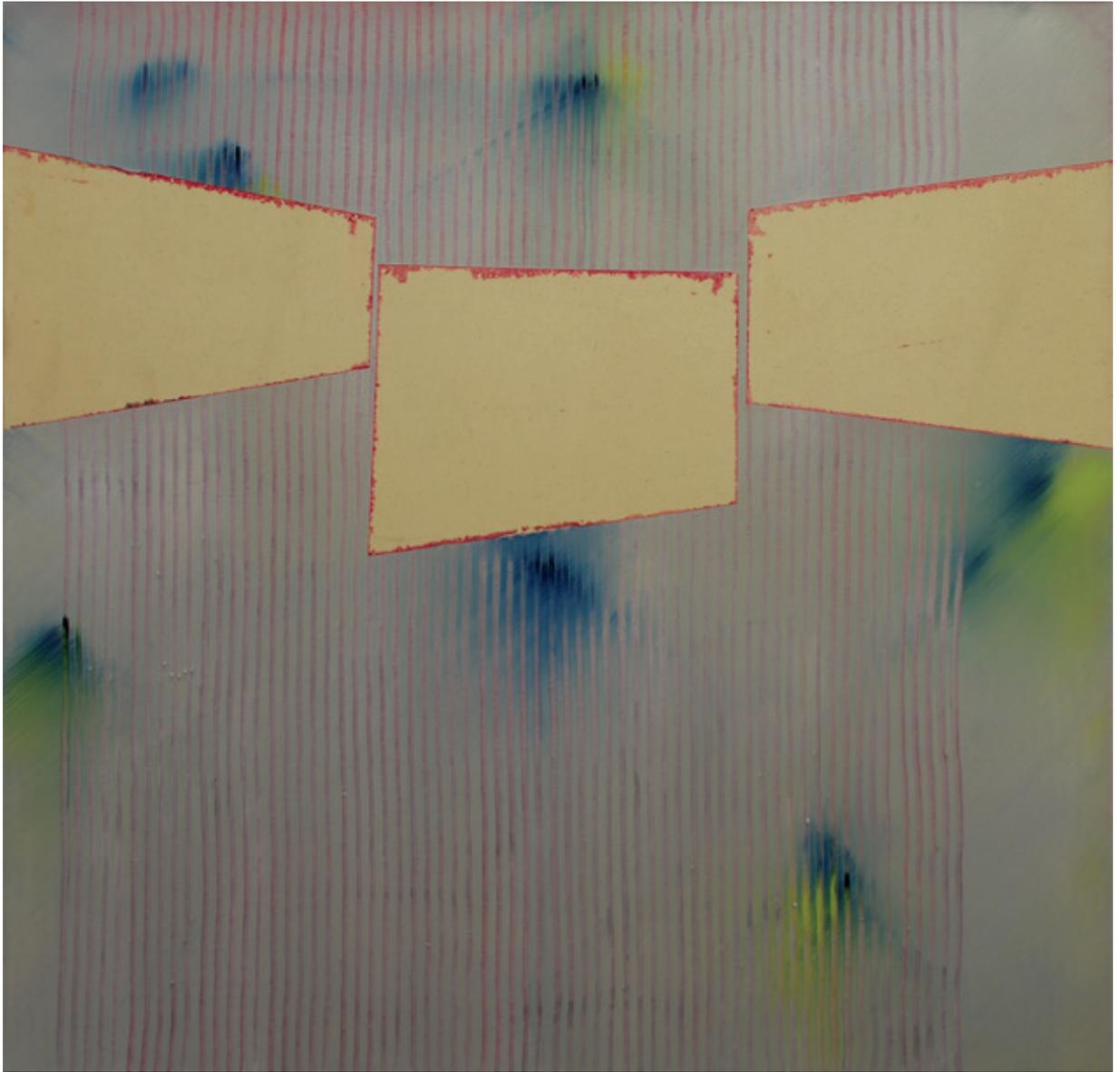
Liliom
40.8cm x 40.5cm
oil on canvas, 2013



The Last Cells – Final Cut

122.5cm x 122.5cm

oil on canvas, 2013



Matte Masks
116cm x 120.2cm
oil on canvas, 2013

Pip Dickens

1962 Born in Fiskerton-cum-Morton, Nottinghamshire

Education

1993-96 BA(Hons) Fine Art, Leeds Metropolitan University

1998-00 MFA Fine Art: Painting, Slade School of Fine Art, University College London

Solo Exhibitions

2013 Pip Dickens – Screen, Rugby Art Gallery, Warwickshire, England (supported by Arts Council England)

2013 Pip Dickens, Campden Gallery, Chipping Campden, Gloucester, England

2012 Toward the Light- Pip Dickens, The Brindley Arts Centre, Cheshire, England (supported by Arts Council England) a solo Touring Exhibition

2012 Pip Dickens – Patterns of Shadows, Daiwa Anglo-Japanese Foundation, London, England

2012 Pip Dickens – New Works, Stanley & Audrey Burton Gallery, University of Leeds, Leeds, England

2011 Hajime – The Beginning, University of Huddersfield, Huddersfield, England

2010 Toward the Light – Pip Dickens, Cartwright Hall Art Gallery, Bradford, England (supported by Arts Council England) a solo Touring Exhibition

2008 Fabrications, Brass Gallery, Leeds, England

2001 Pip Dickens, Cassian de Vere Cole Fine Art, London, England

2000 Pip Dickens, Casian de Vere Cole Fine Art, London, England

Selected Group Exhibitions

2012 Brittle Crazie Glasse, Man & Eve Gallery, Salford, England

2011 Colour in Art, Beldam Gallery, Brunel University, London, England

2010 Twelve Constellations, Vulpes Vulpes, London, England

2009 Mill, Monika Bobinska Gallery, London, England

2007 Pip Dickens, Stephanie Hoppen Gallery, London, England

2006 Nocturnal, Sarah Myerscough Fine Art, London, England

2004 Double Take, Business Arts Council, San Francisco, USA

2004 In the Mix, Tangent Contemporary Art, San Francisco, USA

2003 Starting a Collection, Art First, London, England

2003 Illusion, Sarah Myerscough Fine Art, London, England

2002 Oil & Stone, Pip Dickens and Deveren Bowman, East 73rd Gallery, London, England

2002 Sharon Ben-Tal, Pip Dickens and Laurel Hunter, Tangent Contemporary Art, San Francisco, USA

2002 Beneath the Surface III, Sarah Myerscough Fine Art, London, England

2001 Beautiful & Unique, Beatrice Royal Gallery, Eastleigh, England

2001 Bittersweet, Danielle Arnaud Contemporary Art, London, England

1999 Grrr!, The Paper Bag Factory, London

Competitions/Awards/Residencies

2012 Marmite Painting Prize: longlisted final 50 for 2012 published catalogue

2010 The Leverhulme Trust, Artist in Residence, University of Huddersfield, England

2009 Celeste Painting Prize (shortlisted)

2009 Jerwood Contemporary Painting, England (nominated)

2009 Residency, Cartwright Hall Art Gallery, Bradford, Yorkshire, England

2000 Jeremy Cubitt Prize, Slade School of Fine Art, London, England

1995 Edna Lumb Art Travel Award, England (Research in Iceland)

Publications

Book: *Shibusu – Extracting Beauty*, Pip Dickens and Professor Monty Adkins, ISBN-13: 978-1-86218-101-4, published by University of Huddersfield Press, February 2012

Catalogue: *Pip Dickens – New Works*, Layla Bloom, ISBN -13-978-1-874331-47-6

Catalogue: *Toward the Light - Pip Dickens*, published by Cartwright Hall Art Gallery, Bradford 2010 ISBN 9780946657650

Critical Text: *The Alchemy of the Surface: The Paintings of Pip Dickens*, by Roy Exley, 2010

Surfacing Art Journal (online journal), April 2009

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