

BLENDING
ELEMENTS

magdalena skupinska

Magdalena Skupinska's abstract paintings draw from forms and materials found in nature. In her most recent series, exhibited here in *Blending Elements*, the artist's third solo exhibition at Maximillian William, London, Skupinska's canvases explode in a fresh palette of pastel hues and dark, atmospheric colour fields. Skupinska's language of abstraction brings individual parts into relations of balance, harmony, and dynamism, with a refreshing informality that conveys the geometries of nature as the eye sees them. In this conversation with Gina Buenfeld-Murley, Exhibitions Curator at Camden Art Centre, London, they unpack some of the concerns informing the work. Departing from the presence of vegetal life as both subject and material, they reflect on process, form, and composition to reveal the ways in which Skupinska's paintings resonate with the virtuosity of the natural world.



Installation view, *Blending Elements*

GBM

I've been spending a lot of time thinking about your work these last couple of days, while walking on Hampstead Heath and through the galleries of Tate Modern. In both contexts, your images kept coming back to me, resonating in these two very different environments.

What is so magical about your work is how it amalgamates these two languages and influences. The work obviously draws from the natural world through your materials and subjects but is also clearly indebted to a history of Western Modernism, with your language working through that vocabulary.

I thought we could begin by speaking about plants, as I know the vegetal kingdom is an important source of inspiration for us both. What role do plants play in this new body of work?

MS

In this new body of work plants are teaching me about colour. I mix and combine them, looking for different hues and learning how to navigate these new techniques. Each plant has its own properties, behaviours, and characteristics, so there is a lot of experimentation happening too. Overall, it is a very playful process that I try to keep intuitive.

GBM

You are clearly process-led. This is very apparent in the way you work with materials: you seem to have an intimacy with them, in a sense, and you allow them to bring their personalities into the work, behave freely and, I suppose, express themselves.

MS

Indeed, they all have personalities and a spirit, and that's what I try to unpack and understand while I am in the studio.

GBM

I've spent a lot of time thinking about how plants lend themselves to both abstraction and figuration and that through these different ways in which they express and present themselves, something of their energetic principle comes forth. It emanates from the plant in different ways.

Various cultures have appreciated this way of being and have brought it out in their artforms and art traditions. Islamic art is a good example. Patterns and geometries that are derived from the plant kingdom appear in mosaics and architecture to convey something profound about the nature of being, something fundamental to the way that nature and life operates.

Similarly, when I spent some time in the Amazon, I was very interested in the sacred geometries that Indigenous peoples there create to express something about the entities in the rainforest.

In both instances, there is this looking towards an abstract language to access or convey something about the entity – that is, not just represent

its physical appearance in a figurative sense but reach to something more essential or to some deeper appreciation for the character of the being.

Your previous exhibition *Layú* also included works that seemed to be derived from plant forms. Although they were abstract, they appeared to be reduced forms that were taken from plants, such as leaves and petals.

This really interests me, the in-between realm that plants occupy, because they lend themselves both to figuration and abstraction. They display wonderful geometric patterns and then also the figure of the plant. This seems like such a rich territory to be exploring through painting.

MS It is. With that body of work – *Layú* – material purity was extremely important to me. I really wanted to give space to corn: a strong and proud plant with which we have such a rich history and rely on so much. Shapes and colours were coming from that place.

With this new body of work, the focus shifts to the collective power of plants: it is about colour, mixing and blending. While colour is the main focus of my study, the plants still influence my processes and combinations in a big way. I can't help but be aware of the taste of plants while mixing them. I am thinking, "Okay. This is savoury. It won't go with something sweet." So, for example, a mix of turmeric and carrot was created quickly, however I couldn't get myself to mix broccoli with cinnamon. On the other hand, when mixing herbs, I might be thinking: "Maybe I can mix sage with rosemary and make an intention or meditate deeply on the protective aspects of these plants."

GBM It's interesting that you approach it holistically, because if you think about a flower, it is multisensorial. It is visual, has colour, and also has fragrance and texture. It is through that combination of different aesthetic modalities that the life of the plant is perpetuated. You seem to be led quite intuitively, attracted and repelled by certain things. For me, it brings to mind the foundational philosophy of Ayurveda. The idea of balancing things and bringing them into a harmonic relationship is a really interesting prism through which to think about painting.

MS All these aspects – the smell, the colour, the texture, the history and the human relationship to the plant as well as my own personal insights into the given plant matter – are very present in the process of making. Like you said, they are part of the alchemical process of creating these works.

At the same time, with this body of work I began to refrain from controlling things too much. I feel like the more I allow things to just happen in front of me, the more I allow the plants to work rather than me, slowly erasing myself and allowing things to happen through my hands.



Tower of joy, 2022
Beetroot, arrowroot, turmeric, chilli, blue spirulina,
chestnut on canvas
54.6 × 54.6 cm

Untitled, 2022
Pomegranate, spirulina, beetroot and turmeric on paper
61.6 × 81.5 cm



GBM How does it feel working with this type of colour? It seems like a big departure from your previous work, which is very muted and pared down. Now, suddenly, there is an explosion of extremely beautiful colour, which feels quite playful and joyful.

MS It's very joyful and exciting. Previously I would focus on material purity, so my colour palette would be limited. Since I started mixing materials, the possibilities for colours seem endless and it is truly inspiring.

GBM Do you embrace the idea that the work will have a limited lifespan? Or do you intend that the work will be archivally sound for a long period, if cared for in a particular way?

MS I do believe these works will stay alive for a long time. Of course, some works are going to change over time: for instance, some colours may change under the influence of UV light. It all depends on what happens to them and the kind of care they receive. Either way, I am totally okay with it. This is the nature of things. Especially within my practice, it feels dishonest to interfere with the plant matter in order to make it more durable; for instance, by adding acrylic medium. I went through that already and it doesn't work for me. At this point, it is vital to me that the paintings themselves aren't toxic to the living plants and soil.

GBM I thought perhaps we could talk about some of the paintings. Where do the titles come from?

MS Some titles are directly connected to the plants that are used in the process of making. For example, in the exhibition there is one long landscape painting made with passion fruit flower. Passion fruit flower is well known for its calming and relaxing properties. I titled that painting *Long lasting peace*. In that particular work even the form on the painting is shaped by the plant. It is long and peaceful.

On the other hand, there is a painting in the show called *Tower of joy*. This title came purely from my joyful experience while making the work. It was the first painting in which I applied strokes of paint mixes, creating a floating and playful arrangement, a kind of in-studio study, a purely painterly work.

At other times, new shapes appear in my work and they hold their own characters, and then the title comes from there. Like the big green painting with a shape made of chilli and turmeric. That one is called *Repose*.

I would say, every painting comes from a different moment in my studio and the title often expresses that. Some works are purely about the process of learning how to work with the material, how to navigate the brush, and how

to navigate each mix. In others, the plant is the main focus, and the painting becomes a tale of the plant's properties in healing, nutrition, or colour.

GBM

I want to go back to something that you said when you were talking about *Long lasting peace* and *Tower of joy*. You mentioned this sense of objecthood and when I was looking at the work I really felt that as well. Not just the physical presence of the painting as an object, but within the image, there is both a flatness and yet a sense of weight and gravity.

Tower of joy brought to mind Josef Albers', *Homage to the Square series*. Those paintings are landscapes of a kind - an opening out into space. Again, there is this sense of gravity pulling the transcendent spaces down to the earth, this sense of grounding.

In Native American cosmologies, the square is associated with the ground, the demarcation of space, and the earth. This came to mind when looking at your paintings, in which the compositions are stacked but on the bottom edge.

In *Tower of joy* the bottom limit of the pink square sits right at the base of the frame, so it's almost exceeding the boundary. It reinstates that real sense of gravity and objecthood.

Was Albers in your mind when you were painting, or was this completely incidental?

MS

I thought about him, yes, in terms of his study of colours and how they relate to one another.

Before, I would always work with shapes that float or hover on the raw canvas. When I started my works on paper, suddenly there was this presence of gravity and I liked that. I was creating these empty spaces of colour and then placing lines and objects inside them. As I started moving onto canvas again, I continued doing so. I'm enjoying the weight and gravity of these objects. The colourful backgrounds are like film stills.

GBM

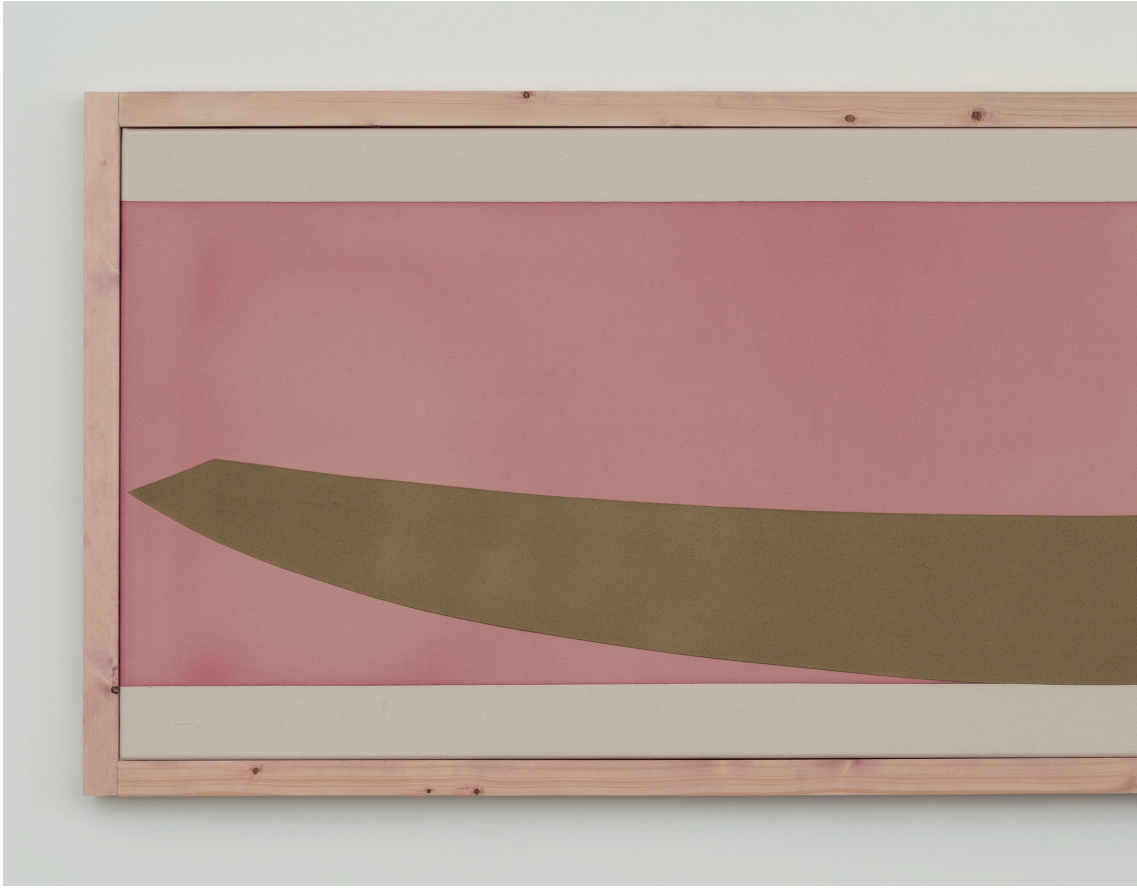
I wanted to ask you about your reference points, and to what extent you are influenced by Western Modernism, particularly colour field painters such as Rothko. Some of your paintings, for example *Repose*, seem to address similar concerns: an indebtedness to flatness, to the purity of colour, allowing it to seep into the canvas. Yet you also seem to destabilise some of those principles by revelling in texture – your pigments and materials cake and crack, and they are very much on the surface. These two approaches seem to operate in tandem.

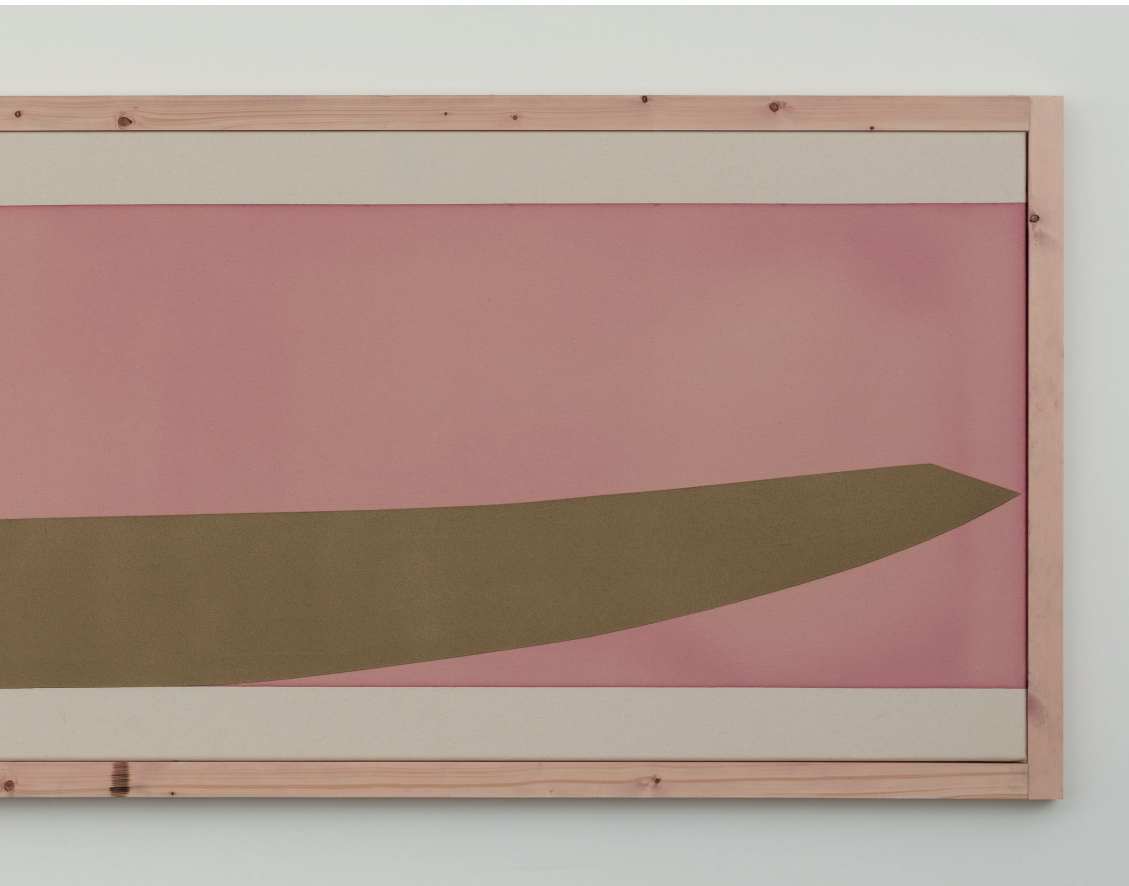
MS

Indeed, my visual language points to the tradition of colour field painting and Western Modernism. For me, however, the reason for simplicity is a means to a different end. My primary dedication is to natural material, and the calmness of these simple forms and fields of colour are places where I can study and observe these different plant matters. So, when cracks, shades, or other textures appear on the canvas, it is welcomed and cherished as the rawness of the material coming through.

Detail view, *Untitled*, 2022
Carrot, turmeric and arrowroot on canvas
34.4 × 44.2 cm







Long lasting peace, 2022
Pomegranate flower, passion fruit flower on canvas
67 × 202.4 cm



Installation view, *Blending Elements*

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Maximillian William, London

Gina Buenfeld-Murley is Exhibitions Curator at Camden Art Centre, London where she has co-curated exhibitions including *The Botanical Mind: Art, Mysticism and The Cosmic Tree* (2020-21). Independent curatorial projects include *Gää: Holistic Science and Wisdom Tradition*, at Newlyn Art Gallery and The Exchange, Cornwall, and *Origin Story*, at The *Wäinö Aaltonen Museum of Art*, Turku, Finland (both 2019).

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