

MODAL PAINTING

Press View: 21 January 2021, 10 am – 1 pm

Private View: 21 January 2021, 6 – 9 pm

Exhibition Dates: 22 January – 6 March 2021

Maximillian William is proud to present a group exhibition of abstract painting curated by the artist Oscar Wollheim. *Modal Painting* will explore the shared concerns and approaches of leading abstract painters crossing generations and geographies, bringing together works by Reginald Sylvester II, Sam Gilliam, Sir Frank Bowling Kt OBE RA, John Hoyland RA and John Golding CBE FBA. Although a complex web of aesthetic and contextual comparisons can, and should, be made between the artists, Wollheim seeks to gently draw together these connections through the concept of ‘modal painting,’ which above all considers the artistic process of the abstract mode.

In order to paint abstractly, the artist must have some guiding principles or concepts to rely, but never rest on. For Sylvester it is a strongly held faith in the process of painting. Both Sylvester and Golding originated in figurative painting and in each of their work traces of the figure remain, forming an armature around which their fluid abstract compositions emerge. Golding worked in a patient mode and sometimes would spend months on a painting, favouring an introspective and constantly reappraising approach. Hoyland took a comparatively robust approach, working rapidly and embracing the organic and inherently entropic behaviour of wet paint on canvas to guide his improvisational process. Gilliam and Bowling were both proponents of upending the tenets of painting, doing away with standard easels, stretchers and canvases and creating their own apparatus.

Aside from formal and working similarities, there are contextual echoes between them all. Each of these painters’ wholehearted adoption of the abstract mode followed influential encounters with other artists, exposure to a new environment or a reaction against restricting discourses around their output. Both Bowling and Hoyland met Barnett Newman, among others, in New York, with the famed Abstract Expressionist clearly influencing the subsequent works of the younger artists. The light of Mexico echoes throughout the work of both Golding, who grew up in the country, and Sylvester, whose time painting in the country resulted in not only a change of materials but advanced his understanding of the painterly process, resulting in richer colours and more immersive paintings. For Sylvester, the rigorous, inchmeal transition that he made into pure abstraction also resonates with the efforts by painters like Bowling and Gilliam to forge a space, against the grain of the times, for Black artists to make abstract work, in a contemporary climate that echoes similar schisms.

Modal Painting is a starting point, a concept which hopes to allow audiences to reconsider the work of five masters of abstraction through a renewed focus on the origins of genre - the artist’s process - while inviting speculation around the significance of their contextual similarities.

Notes to Editors

The exhibition will be accompanied by a publication featuring a newly commissioned scholarly text.

Reginald Sylvester II (b. USA, 1987) is an American abstract painter who conceptualises painting as a matter of finding, rather than spontaneously generating images, a practice rooted in Willem de Kooning's philosophy of painting as well as broader theological traditions. Biblical wisdom compels faith in the unseen with the promise that our passage from material to ethereal states will manifest as knowledge beyond mortal comprehension. Yet Sylvester's seeking through abstraction is rooted in social realities as well as spiritual practice.

Sam Gilliam (b. USA, 1933) is one of the great innovators in post-war American painting. He emerged from the Washington D.C. scene in the mid-1960s with works that elaborated upon and disrupted the ethos of Color School painting. Gilliam has subsequently pursued a pioneering course in which experimentation has been the only constant. Inspired by the improvisatory ethos of jazz, his lyrical abstractions continue to take on an increasing variety of forms, moods, and materials.

Sir Frank Bowling Kt OBE RA (b. Guyana, 1934) began his artistic career shortly after his arrival at the Royal College of Art, London in 1959. Beginning as a figurative painter, Bowling incorporated personal and political imagery, before moving to New York in 1966, where he made a decisive turn towards abstraction. In this career-defining moment, he developed a process-based practice, exploring the nature and possibilities of paint.

John Hoyland RA (b. UK, 1934 – 2011) was one of Britain's leading painters, renowned for his bold use of colour and inventive forms. Though he preferred not to be known as an abstract painter - as he thought the term implied some kind of premeditation in his process and too great a distance from the sensuous experience of the world - having been trained in the figurative tradition in the 1950s he became a life-long proponent of the possibilities of non-figurative imagery.

John Golding CBE FBA (b. UK, 1929 – 2012) was initially influenced by the Mexican muralists, in particular José Clemente Orozco. However, it was his encounter with the New York School of Abstract Expressionism in the 1950s, which proved the catalyst for Golding to move into pure abstraction and abandon the human figures that had populated his earlier work. Well known as an art historian for his seminal book on cubism, he also curated two major shows at the Tate focusing, respectively, on Picasso's sculptures, and his lifelong relationship with Matisse.

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