

# FOR YOU / AND ME

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## ARTIST INTERVIEWS

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After the death of Blinky Palermo in 1977, Imi Knoebel created a series of monochromatic shaped paintings titled, "24 colors for Blinky" as a tribute to his friend. Making an artwork as a dedication is an intimate gesture that forms complex, interesting and personal relationships.

*For You / And Me*, suggests a give and take, and highlights an exchange between artists and their influences. This exhibition, composed of nine Canadian artists, explores what it means to learn, communicate and create parallels with something or someone they're devoted to. Interested in the ways in which artists create a correspondence with a person, history, subject or movement, the exhibition explores a multitude of approaches in art making within the sphere of an homage. *For You / And Me* presents work in painting, drawing, collage, and sculpture.

The participating artists include, Sarah Cale (Toronto), Mark Clintberg (Calgary), Jessica Groome (Toronto/Berlin), Tiziana La Melia (Vancouver), Deirdre McAdams (Vancouver), Erica Mendritzki (Winnipeg), Sondra Meszaros (Calgary), Les Ramsay (Vancouver) and Jim Verburg (Toronto). Curated by Ashleigh Bartlett (Calgary/Boston).

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## **SARAH CALE**

*AB: How would you describe your relationship to abstraction, or abstract painting in particular?*

SC: My relationship exists somewhere between a love for the history of abstraction and a sort of willful amnesia of where it ended up- in some sort of dramatic rhetorical death that is hard to comprehend now. I enjoy the early formal explorations that are simultaneously awkward and visually intelligent.

*AB: In our email correspondence, you mentioned that your paintings "are an ode of sorts", which I'm also interested in. Perhaps it's less direct, but addresses the tension within a movement. I'm curious if this tension has a role in your work?*

SC: I say an "ode of sorts" as I think the ode comes inadvertently. This is not any less of an ode, but I do think it is in response to the legacy of a movement, rather than the movement itself. I feel I respond to absence of a movement, or tensions that remain in an end point of something major having happened historically, which is never wholly resolved and satisfied. Abstract Painting's history has spurred a flurry of painting in its wake which cannot help but be in response to its impact, whether the maker is reverent or not.

*AB: The titles of your paintings often address a kind of spiritual presence, they're poetic, witty and often humorous. I'm thinking of "New Age Rage" "Pseudo Spiritual" and "Low Rent Oracle." How do you determine your titles?*

SC: I try to be simple and imply a quick duality between abstract painting's history of striving and a desire for spiritual transcendence, combined with the self-conscious impossibility of this; self-conscious in my ability to convince a viewer I can offer this. There is both the presence of spirituality and a humourous undermining of it within the titles. I want to present this tension- the spiritual idealism of abstraction combined with this funny futility, and ultimately a sadness in knowing I will always fail at the task.

*AB: I'm interested in the direction of your new work, and the inspiration drawn from craft, as you described an interest in sewing, quilting and weaving. How did you recognize your interest in craft and how has it impacted your paintings?*

SC: I would say these more "craft" defined techniques were the beginning point for me growing up and painting has just been a long divergence. I've realized some semblance of "spiritual" work can be found in slow, methodical dedication to a process. The grinding out of mundane daily life. This combined with the powerful and loaded visual cues of abstract painting is potent territory for me.

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## **MARK CLINTBERG**

*AB: I'm drawn to the way you describe your respect and tenderness towards Felix Gonzalez-Torres. Do you feel as though you're having a dialogue with the artist?*

MC: I do see my work in dialogue with the legacies of many artists who are no longer alive - Joyce Wieland, and Gonzalez-Torres, for instance. In these cases, my projects are more than simply influenced by antecedent artworks, they take a particular practice as an

origin point for a body of work. This approach to origin (and the related term "originality") is a way to dedicate a component of my practice to the work of another artist.

*AB: Do you see a parallel between the generosity of the work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres and the act of a dedication?*

MC: Generosity and dedication may be connected. If Gonzalez-Torres practice frequently employed acts of generosity it did so in order to achieve certain affective and political outcomes. To be "politically dedicated" is an intriguing phrase to consider in light of his practice: the act of giving away posters and candies is a means for expressing a political affiliation. And accepting the gift may imply an aligned political affiliation, even unintentionally. I do think that the generous undercurrent of his work has been instrumentalized by institutions who choose to celebrate the communal and sanguine associations of gifting, while obscuring the politically contentious content of many of his pieces - such as a give-away poster that shows a photograph of an empty bed formerly occupied by two men, lovers, both of whom eventually died from AIDS-related complications. Such complex systems of generosity are appealing to me because they present difficult, polysemic messages in a public environment.

*AB: What can you tell me about your piece titled, "Two Coins"?*

MC: It was originally designed in response to the Roman convention of breaking a coin in half when two friends or lovers part ways, with the intention that one day the two halves would be joined together again. In antiquity such a gesture would have indicated a bond of affinity or erotic attachment.

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## **JESSICA GROOME**

*AB: During a residency on Toronto Island in 2014, you found an important connection with the painting, "Drei Akte im Wald" (Three Nudes in the Forest) by the German painter Ernst Ludwig Kirchner. Can you describe the significance of this work on your practice?*

JG: I found the image of this painting towards the end of my residency and what struck me was the stylization of the anatomy of the figures: how the legs, breasts and bums of the nude women were interpreted. I had been thinking about recurring shapes in the collages I was making at the time in a figurative way, and then I saw some of the exact same decisions mirrored in the Kirchner. For example, the breasts of Kirchner's figures resembled exactly the double-curve shapes that I was using in many of my collages. I found this to be uncanny. I was also fascinated by the way light and palette in this painting. The three women are sitting in a beam of light shining down through the trees. This light is abstracted into a jelly-bean shape which illuminates them, and leaves the rest of the painting in purple shadow. Kirchner's thought process about colour and light interests me greatly. It is at once rational and invented, plausible and insane. Just as the way the figures are depicted makes sense upon first glance, and then once the decision making of the painting is scrutinized, it all breaks down into exaggerated, eccentric shapes and lines. I also find the painting to be humorous because it is so bizarre. All of this reaffirmed the collages I had already been making, and also gave me permission to continue. Kirchner's painting was and still is a thing of inspiration, pushing me to leave behind my conservative tendencies and give in to the weirdness of making art.

*AB: Initially, you located Kirchner's painting in a book, and recently, you visited the painting at the Wilhelm-Hack Museum in Ludwigshafen, Germany. I'm interested in the way this work can impact your practice over time. What was it like to visit the painting in person?*

JG: I had known that the painting was located at the Wilhelm-Hack Museum for some time, and finally decided that it was possible and important to go see it in person since I'm living in Germany. My encounter with the real thing took me by surprise. I had spent so much time thinking about this painting (or what I thought this painting was), and of course it was different once I saw it in the flesh- almost like a cartoon of itself. I spent a lot of time really looking at it, trying to break down the assumptions I had about what the painting was.

The colour and the way it was painted were amazing to witness. I was the only person in the museum, and the pilgrimage was real! Another amazing thing is that the museum has published a book specifically about *Drei Akte im Wald*, which I purchased. It's in German so it's going to take me some time to read the whole thing, but it will offer insight into his thought process as well as letters, sketches and prints that he had made in preparation for the final painting. I can't say how the painting will impact my work over time, but I think it will always be somewhere in the back of my mind for the foreseeable future.

*AB: The work of Henri Matisse has had a significant impact on your practice, and over the years we've had numerous conversations about how his cut-outs informed your work. Do you feel as though you're having a dialogue with Matisse's cut-outs?*

JG: Yes- I definitely feel as though I am having a dialogue with Matisse's work. I like to look at images of his studio, study them for clues and imagine what it would have been like to be there.

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## **TIZIANA LA MELIA**

*AB: You have a connection with Joan of Arc, as well as other Joans. How are you thinking about Joan(s) and why is this significant to you?*

TL: I wasn't looking for Joan's. The Joans came to me.

I remember being drawn to the story and to the image of Joan of Arc through the actress who plays her in the iconic Bresson film *The Trial of Joan of Arc*, and drawing her portraits because I was seduced by Florence Delay, then in Anne Carson's essay *Variations on the Right to Remain Silent*, and through a google search got to Joyce Carol Oates story *Grandpa Clemens and Angelfish*, 1906 - which was a different rabbit hole. The artist Vanessa Disler kept insisting I read Joan Mitchell's biography *Lady Painter* - which introduced me to a different Joan. I started noticing the Joan pattern through conversations with Jesse Birch, the former curator at the Western Front. He invited me to co-organize an exhibition there in 2013-14, which we called *Joan Dark*, after Bertolt Brecht's *Saint Joan of the Stockyards*, (though the show wasn't intended to be directly about Joan, but characters and roles....)

*AB: I've been thinking about the way artists communicate ideas and address work to specific people or moments in time. Do you see your piece, "Lot" as form of dedication, or a kind of correspondence with Joan(s)?*

TL: I think of it as a correspondence and as a way to bring together patterns.

*AB: What role does poetry play in your practice?*

TL: Psychoanalyst and telecom operator.

*AB: You mentioned that you "pin point things later and find through lines."*

TL: Maybe that goes back to trusting patterns.

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## **DEIRDRE MCADAMS**

*AB: In our emails, we discussed the relevance of painting and what it means to work within a tradition. I often consider what it means to be a painter today, and I'm curious about the way you think about the discipline of painting?*

DM: I am more and more aware of the very specific things that painting can do and still think there are a million more ways to do them. I am opening up to new mediums at the moment but most of my ideas occur in the shape of a painting and I am stuck with it for now.

*AB: I'm wondering if in your practice, you might address work to a particular movement, history or subject?*

DM: My work is a representation of my devotion to the potential of painting, and of a love for the history of painting.

*AB: How do you develop the language around your titles, and why is this significant?*

DM: My titles are the guiding forces for the works for the most part. Even when the titles come after the making of the painting, they are an important part of the work. I've always felt that even though my imagery is somewhat abstracted, it is always based upon something 'real', whether that is an object, a concept of an object, a personal narrative, or a thought/feeling. They are always informed by something subjective, and my titles reveal and support that aspect.

*AB: I'm interested in how you express a fascination with language, specifically the way you describe your intention "to honor how language plays a part in the imagery." What is the relationship between words and imagery in your practice? Does this have a connection to way you approach abstraction?*

DM: Words are an integral part of how I conceive of an image. I think there is a very close relationship between language and what is thought of as abstract art. A lot of early abstract painting originally sought to convey spiritual information through essentialized form. I think often the titles ascribed to the works bridged the gap between thought and form to elucidate what was being represented. Titles offer the viewer a way in to the work, and a way for the artist to further articulate their intent, if that is something they are interested in doing.

I feel the way I make images is kind of like a filtering system where I have an idea that I want to convey, but work to question it while I'm making it real. I view writing as an activity where you can reveal things to yourself about a subject that you didn't know you knew through writing about it. Speaking about something to someone can be similarly revealing. I think painting is another way to expand upon an idea that has some kind of meaning or interest to you while simultaneously learning about or questioning that thing. For me, an abstract painting is essentially a visual representation of a thought process, much like language, words and letters are representations of abstractions. There's a nice back and forth for me there.

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## **SONDRA MESZAROS**

*AB: I'm interested in considering what it means to learn, communicate and create parallels with someone or something that you're dedicated to. Does this resonate with you, and how does it impact your practice?*

SM: As you know we have discussed this a lot in terms how this could be a beneficial strategy in the studio or how it encourages dialog with another artist. I think sometimes it is simply a creative companion that you can learn from and also it helps you feel not alone while making. It can provide certain directives or ways of seeing or knowing through acts of emulating, copying, re-making, or appropriating to provide a foundation that expands the read of the work. I feel like dedicating work to another artist is a very sincere act that helps me push past myself in many ways.

*AB: I'm curious about the presence of the artists who have made a significant impact on your work, the "shadow figures" and "trusted companions" as you've described them in our emails. Who do you look to, and do you see this as a kind of dedication or devotion?*

SM: I think that I have always been aware of shadow figures within my practice, often these artists (Betty Goodwin, Joseph Beuys, and currently Meret Oppenheim/Hannah Hoch) have given me some sort of protection, strength, or even guidance/confidence to proceed in my practice and take risks. The artists I have chosen are trusted companions that I engage with respect for them as people and their individual creative process' and sensitivities towards individual methodologies and aesthetics. Sometimes I literally need to just channel the energy, confidence, or bravado of a shadow artist to push me outside of myself and my limiting comfort zones or bias'. I always seem to gravitate towards artists that I feel that there is some sort of connection or personal parallel in terms of who they were as a person, their relationships, how they navigated being an artist or educator. Currently I am attracted to how these artists worked with a sense of resistance or rebellion against expectations. For instance, Meret Oppenheim was constantly challenging her male colleagues on defining her as a muse or a 'femme-enfant' within Surrealist circles. She wanted to buck against these gender roles and expectations and define/negotiate her own identity through her work.

*AB: How has the dialogue with Meret Oppenheim impacted the way you navigate your process in the studio? Does this have a direct connection with the work you're currently making?*

SM: I have always seen Meret Oppenheim as being someone that I aligned myself with in terms of her attraction to and use of fetish objects and materials. When I found 'Genevieve' it felt like a really strong signifier of what I had been struggling with and the more I researched, the more I found direct parallels to myself. This piece was particularly interesting since it was very obscure. It was originally conceived of in sketches in the 1940's, but not realized as a sculpture until the 1970's. I was so attracted to the charge of that gap between the idea and realization. Oppenheim struggled with creative production and explored this within the work by dedicating multiple pieces to the same idea. I was only able to find three images of this piece and the one is a tiny photograph in a monograph of the sculpture documented within nature. This image was so alluring to me in terms of placing a crude wooden figurative sculpture of the female body in a forest which is referenced within the original myth of Genevieve. I wanted to have a large collage behind the sculpture using nature based imagery to bring the nature back to HER (MERET).

The piece asks a lot in terms of what is being communicated through this body. What does SHE want? I was very interested in the act of inserting myself within this piece by reproducing it. Mostly through the performative act of breaking the thick wooden arms that outreach to the viewer. This soft violence being enacted through me into the piece was so important to me understanding the female body. Using wood as a material was very new and finding the 100+ year old wood proved to be very difficult, but I am so pleased with the results. I was not prepared for how active this wood still is in terms of sapping. The fact that MERET is weeping sap is very exciting to me. SHE is very much alive. I also wanted to introduce drawing into the piece by producing a pattern drawn from a projected image of the original and then traced onto the wood to be cut. I see a pivotal link between drawing and performance within my practice. This was a way to dialog with Meret and feel connected to her/HER. I keep thinking that re-making this piece and giving that object a presence and identity feels like one of the most important things I will ever make. It feels like a marker in my practice, one of autonomy and independence.

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## **ERICA MENDRITZKI**

*AB: I'm considering concepts relating to an ode, as a form of dedication when making an artwork. Is this something that relates to your practice?*

EM: I like the idea of an "ode." Such a romantic concept! It isn't a term I have used to describe my own artistic actions, but I do certainly think about communicating and addressing other works and artists in my practice, and I have certain pieces where this is pretty explicit.

To me, the idea of an ode implies throwing yourself into the act of admiration—it's passionate, it's loving. It's sweet, and maybe also a little foolish—I think it's easy to imagine the person on the receiving end of an ode rolling their eyes a little, or stifling a laugh. I think it's probably healthy for an artist to be prepared to risk embarrassing herself a little. It's brave to be loving!

*AB: I'm intrigued by the way you described "picking up an idea and replaying it in a key of your own practice." How has this line of thinking impacted the way you approach your work?*

EM: The critic Jan Verwoert often uses the phrase "in the key of" to describe the migration of ideas or motifs from one artist or one era to another. I think it's a useful phrase, especially when thinking about actions that are maybe adjacent to appropriation—I admire a lot of work that was done in the '80s by the Pictures Generation, for example, but there is also something perhaps a little smug or flat or unjuicy about pure appropriation, whereas the idea of transposition is a little looser, a little more melodic.

When I use the work of another artist as a starting point, I'm not only interested in probing how the identity of the artist impacts the reading of the artwork, but I also want to allow the idea or motif to morph a little, and become naturalized in the habitat of my studio. I might find a motif in another artist's work and want to use it, but I recognize that the thing about that motif that attracts me is probably not exactly the same as the thing that was attractive to the original artist. I want something new from it, and it means something different in relation to my own work. I don't have an archivist's instinct—I don't want to preserve the original form or context in a pristine condition. So I play with the motif in a different key.

*AB: Your work, "Model Model," has connections to Rosemarie Trockel and you describe this as "a kind of tribute to her." I'm curious about how you first approached Model Model, and how you came to consider the notion of a 'remodel'?*

EM: There are many artists whose work I admire and love, but Rosemarie Trockel's body of work is the one that I most wish I had made myself. "Model Model" is the piece of mine that references her work most directly, specifically a 1986 sculpture by Trockel titled "My Dear Colleagues." This sculpture consists of a clear plastic torso with knitted sleeves attached at the shoulders, and the words "My dear colleagues..." written in cursive across the chest. I love this piece, but painting the whole thing didn't make sense to me—the palette wouldn't be right for my work, and as I said I'm less interested in appropriation than in transposition. I was curious about the formal question of what would happen if I painted this torso very thinly and minimally, but in such a way that wouldn't emphasize its transparency. I liked the fact that the torso was ambiguously gendered and also that it has this weird hook at the top. So I painted it, and I thought it worked—it looks more solid and opaque than Trockel's torso, but also not totally solid, not totally natural or real, and I liked that.

*AB: I'm interested in the series of drawings and paintings based on Henry Moore, as well as your work based on Neolithic sculptures. What prompted this investigation and why is it significant to you?*

EM: I have early memories of playing on the Henry Moore outside of the AGO in Toronto, and I definitely am fond of his work, but not uncritically so. With Trockel, I'm an unreserved and ardent admirer—but I'm not jealous of Moore's body of work in the same way. I like it more for its dorky, uncool properties than for what it does well. And I think the dorkiness of the forms resonate with the kinds of shapes that keep cropping up in my work—awkward, lumpy, bodily shapes.

I've been thinking too about what it means to draw or paint another artist's work: does it make the image mine? What gets digested by and incorporated into my own meanings



and forms, and what remains distinctly Moore-ish? With the Neolithic sculptures, some of the same questions are going on, but with them I think there's also a desire to create a matrilineal art history--it's not known whether those sculptures were made by men or by women, but it's easy to think that probably the artists were female, and I've found it interesting to connect in a physical way with those shapes and forms through the process of drawing. They're kind of talismanic icons that I can hold on to in the endless "becoming" of being an artist, and being a woman.

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## LES RAMSAY

*AB: I'm thinking about the way you're exploring materials, and your mention of having "an homage to craft and a sympathy to working intuitively." How does the homage function in your practice?*

LR: The homage works in a broad way for me. Homage is not an obsession nor is it specific or dedicated, it comes out with the right moment of alignment. Working with craft for me is homage to a different attitude of high and low materials, to a different era, and to working with an inherently slower pace.

I don't think a specific homage has any different impact on the intuitive process, and they can often dangerously stray into reading very corny. The intuition of the making is important to me, but the homage part is often just a bonus, it seems to happen when hunting for materials and something just clicks.

*AB: I'm interested in the hybridity of craft with the discipline of painting. Are you considering this relationship and why is it important to you?*

LR: Craft and painting are both disciplines that take time and decisions. The difference is, one could rush the making of a fabric work and the impatient hand will show through the quality of work. If one was to rush a painting, they could end up with surprisingly fresh results.

I like how the two disciplines have informed one another through the decades. I enjoy recognizing the cross-overs between the two, like looking at the rigid shapes and colors involved in the quilts of the Amish compared to some Minimal/Post Minimal art, Op art, and the Neo-Geo movements. Or try comparing the quilts of the woman of the Gees Bend, Alabama to moments in Abstract Expressionism and especially in the attitude towards the unfinished look of today's Provisional painting. There's lots of similarities happening between the two mediums, and I appreciate discovering them.

*AB: You mentioned the use of quilting patterns, and the act of breaking apart, "fracturing" or "pixilating" the pattern. Can you describe the way you think about "glitches" in your work?*

LR: The sewn paintings employ templates of basic and advanced techniques of block patterns, with added distortions and enlargements of scale. Working with and against the traditional blocks I'm able to deform the patterns, play with ideas of irregular patterns, and by blowing them up in scale I'm encouraging the familiar and recognizable to become abstracted.

*AB: Where do you locate other sources of inspiration?*

LR: I find inspiration when I go looking for materials, both at fabric shops and second hand stores. I enjoy visiting garage sales and flea markets, and I've found myself recently using Craigslist to source craft items and obscure objects.

I love the idea of slapstick and how it can be used to categorize not just comedy but visual content and off kilter compositions. I often keep visuals running in the studio while I work, they keep me company and they always offer me moments to reflect on my time at the moment. I like to bounce between pop cultures of the ages, for example watching Buster Keaton or The Three Stooges keep the sentiment of comedy running through the air and it reminds me to keep a sense of humour when I'm working. Other days I'll throw on The Breakfast Club or an Indiana Jones movie, to remind me of the 80's and what it was like growing up in those eras.

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### **JIM VERBURG**

*AB: I'm curious if in your practice, you might dedicate or address work to a particular person, movement, history or subject?*

JV: In a way, I definitely address work to a particular movement history or subject. I've been greatly influenced by the writings of Agnes Martin, and the experience of Rothko's work in the Rothko Chapel. I wouldn't necessarily say that the work is dedicated to, or made with these specific artists in mind, more that these are some of the artists who weave spiritual or intangible concerns into their minimal works. Something that I aim to do. I'm definitely interested in the relationships between minimalism and spiritual matters, and in turn, interested in artists who have explored these relationships.

*AB: How did you come to know the work of these artists?*

JV: When I studied photography, I learned a lot about the major figures in that specific field, but after a gradual move to a more minimal, abstract and multimedia practice, I realized that there were significant gaps in my art education. I knew very little about the prominent artists working with shape, form and minimalism that are currently of great inspiration to me. It has only been in the past few years (through recent studio visits with curators and other artists) that names such as Agnes Martin, Josef Albers, Robert Ryman, and Mark Rothko have come up- artists that I had previously known very little or absolutely nothing about. I believe is during a conversation a few years ago with Sondra Meszaros (one of other artists in this exhibition), she said something like "...similar to Agnes Martin" and I said "who?" It seems odd that any artist today wouldn't know of these giants, but sadly, painters really aren't discussed in the photography department. These are a few of the holes in my art education.

Last year I visited the Rothko Chapel in Houston. I was always into the shape and line in Rothko's work (the images of the work I've seen before - those sections, the horizon) but I was so moved by the subtle layered black/blue works in the chapel. I got lost in them as I sat there I saw mountains, fields and then the moon appeared. What is it in this work that elicits this sort of introspection, is it the space? The layered minimalism? The light? It's amazing that an art work, or a grouping of works can effectively provide a space for being absorbed, lost, reflected inward. There is something about that work that seems so

honest. I know that's a big statement, but there's something about the spirit or intention in the work that's coming through when viewing (can an artwork be the vehicle of intention?) Almost impossible to accurately photograph. Martin and Rothko, like the wonders of the world, needing to be experienced in person rather than through a photograph.

*AB: I'm interested in the way you describe your relationship to Rothko and Martin, and then, the impact of spiritualism and minimalism. Is there a connection between the formal decision making processes in your work and the manner in which you address spiritualism?*

JV: The title of the series that the larger painted white works are from ("An Accurate Silence"), is a reference to the Rothko quote "silence is accurate." It's interesting to think about silence as being something that is accurate- that can be defined as such, or defined in any way at all- that silence could be so much more than nothing- something that could connect to so much else- or perhaps the state to achieve in relation to so much else.

These beautiful minimal works that both Martin and Rothko have made, these monochromes, these fields of blacks and whites are often (at first look) deceptively simple and in a way starts- or resets the viewer to a rich and full state of nothing where the subtle gesture or line can express or reveal so much. It seems to connect to a different place or provide a different base for the experience of, and the engagement with things that cannot be said, that may not have any words at all. Where a work could almost look like 'nothing' in certain light, but can reveal so much when viewed at a different perspective. It's in these works where I feel a connection to whatever might be considered spiritual- it's in the undercurrents where all of the good stuff might live, there the less obvious things lie to be pondered.