

Surfacing

Through each semi-transparent work in Kathryn Stevens' latest exhibition, *Surfacing*, a playful tension ensues in which one has a sense of shapes and forms emerging from beyond the surface. The exhibition title suggests that each surface is a site where two worlds encounter one another: forms that lie 'beyond,' surface to interact with forms that have already surfaced or taken shape. That which surfaces becomes perceivable, morphing and changing the visible plane. At the same time, forms that already exist on the surface, are altered. It is here that Stevens generates new perceptions of her distinctive floating folds and shapes, creating surfaces that are sites of transformation and possibility.

Such possibilities are partly negotiated by a shift in materials. Stevens has used cast acrylic with adhered silk, and acrylic paint rather than oils, to create a semi-transparent surface. Strips of silk are stretched tightly across the screen, then painted over to adhere them, ensuring the long-term preservation of the fabric. Cast acrylic lends a firm base to each work, while the diaphanous nature of silk adds luminosity to the forms surfacing on the two-dimensional plane. Through this combination, the wooden stretcher behind the screen becomes discernible, suggesting a physicality of each work. The stretcher is intended to be a key element, though not immediately obvious. Stevens explains it is: "taken to a point where the frame appears to be submerging, but it is important that the light can go in there." The frame is thus part of a dialogue with the forms surfacing, while anchoring a trace of solidity in the image.

Alongside a shift in materials, the works in *Surfacing* reveal new developments in format, yet retain a distinctive flatness of the two-dimensional surface for which Stevens' works are known. The paintings, *cell 1-12* are small scale, alongside three large unframed works, *surfacing 1-3*, on architectural drafting film hanging away from the gallery wall. At 500x600mm the *cell* works are more conversational than in Stevens' previous series, *Switch*. Asymmetrical compositions and subdued colours, with a refined linearity, show the artist's continuing interest in interplays of folded pleats and the effects of light and shadow, allowing forms to float on each painted surface. Colour performs a functional role by lending weightlessness to abstract forms, rather than operating as pigment alone. Stevens explains: "Our reading of a colour is dependent on what it sits adjacent to; if it gets too heavy, it has gone too far." Meanwhile, physical traces of the acrylic medium or brushwork are minimised as part of Stevens' exploration of forms and surfaces that float with many possible meanings. Playful intersecting lines bring this dynamic back to the horizontal plane; lines extend and unfold as part of each composition, balancing weight with lightness, defining shapes and forms against that which is still unformed.

Through thin layers of pigment a diffused light appears to bounce off the wall, getting right in behind the paint. Square tiles of light and angular shadows cast by the shapes on the surface create a sense of intrigue as they are reflected, multiplied and cast shadows of their own. Stevens says: "Sometimes the shadows are just as interesting as the objects themselves; they generate other shapes within the shapes." The relationship between shadow, light and reflection is not just a description of the surface. Rather, it shows how surface is affected, how meaning is unfixed, and how the surface is a mode of possibility for that which is non-tangible, or still surfacing.

This refraction of light illuminates the space behind each work, making space equally significant to the dialogue taking place on the surface. Stevens explains: "In terms of the relationship, I want the actual space to be a part of the conversation, rather than it just being on the surface. A physical extension into the space around the surface means one develops more awareness of what is going on in the construction of that surface." Each work therefore anticipates a relationship with its spatial surrounds.

Stevens' exploration of surface and spatial relationships begins with a working process of making 'impromptu structures,' miniature folded freestanding maquettes made with printing plate. These are not final objects but experiments in how an object occupies space through the process of folding, a sustaining concept in Stevens' work. Folding is a transformative process; it takes up, defines and makes space. Once it is folded, a flat surface cannot go back to its pre-folded form, and thus is not completely controllable; the only option it offers is to continue folding, or to stop. Each delicately folded maquette is balanced, marking out space, standing alone on a surface and offering different perspectives. These perspectives offer various plays of shape, angles, light and shadow, which form the basis for Stevens' standalone painted works.

A sustaining interest in transparency and relationships between folded surfaces and reflections is partly informed by a curiosity with architectural forms, framing in particular. As Stevens explains: "I simply like being able to see through a structure rather than it being solid; solidity changes the appearance of what it seen or unseen. It is more interesting to see through the framed structure of a building than the façade that encloses the structure. It's less final; there are more possibilities." Such possibilities for seeing through floating forms on opaque surfaces is more achievable on a transparent surface. Thus the planes and folds in *Surfacing* are more mobile, sitting at angles where they have more movement.

As the shapes and forms appear to shift restlessly between what is perceivable and what is still surfacing, one becomes more aware of the surface as a permeable boundary. A conceptual and physical merging of background and foreground allows shapes and forms to float, yet they also appear to be fixed; some are visible though not quite tangible, offering a possibility of depth that is both grounded, yet suspended. These components work together as part of a playfulness with space, ultimately returning to the surface as a medium for transformation and possibilities.

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