At the City Art Centre: Beneath the Surface

In a recent interview, Fife-based painter Michael Craik talked about seeing the works of abstract artists James Turrell and Ellsworth Kelly for the first time. They gave him, he says;

> *'an early jolt that made me realise that art, simply by exploiting colour and by playing with our perceptions, could illicit overwhelming responses and emotions that could not, nor need not, be easily explained'*
>
> *Adam Reid Fox for the Freud Monk Gallery*

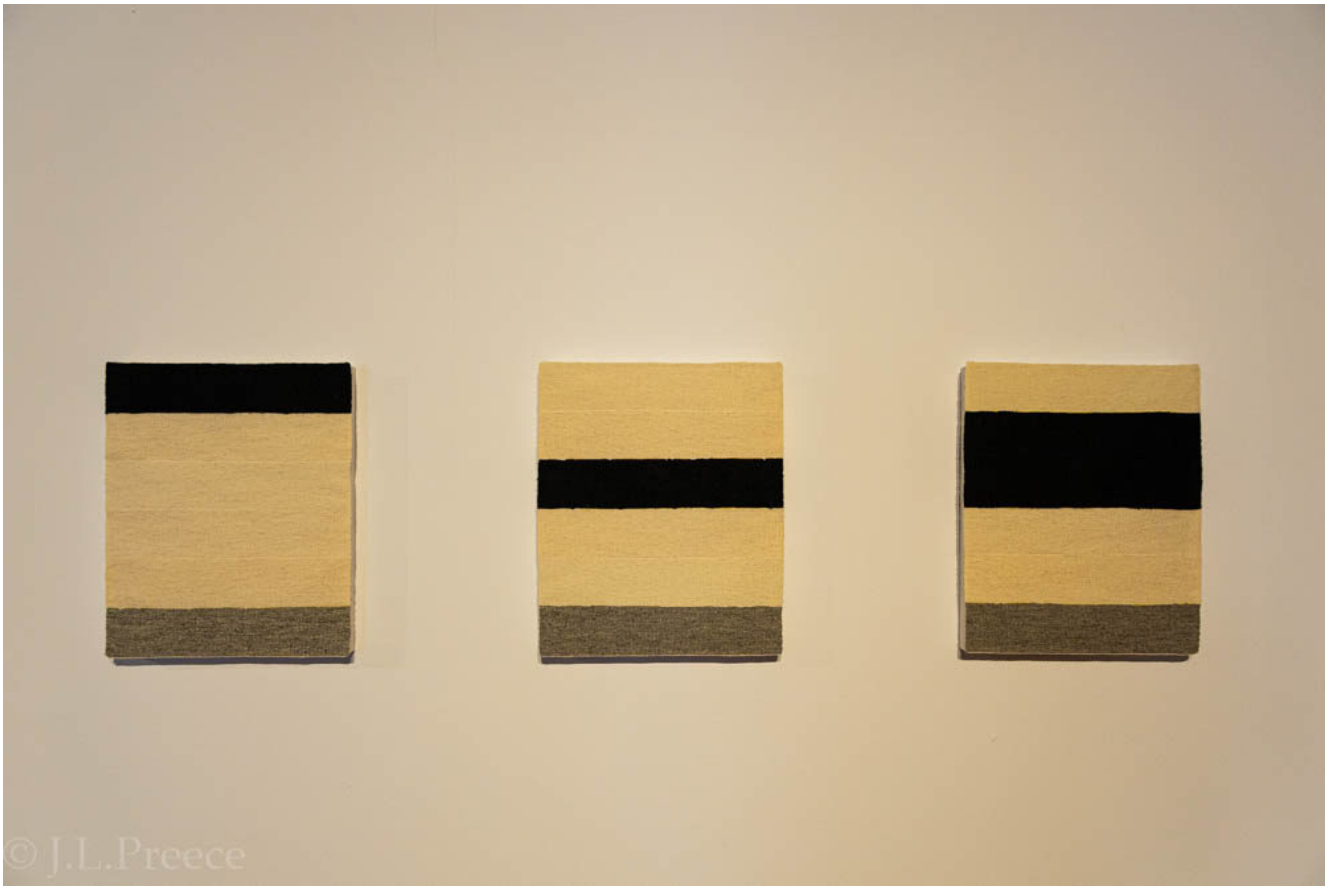
Craik is one of nine contemporary abstract artists featured in the City Art Centre's outstanding new exhibition *Beneath the Surface,* which looks at the continuing Scottish contribution to what Kenneth Dingwall calls;

> *'the greatest change in visual language since the Renaissance'*
>
> *Abstract Art From Scotland (exhibition catalogue)*

As the world changed in the early decades of the 20th century, several Scottish artists started to experiment with abstract art as a new way of understanding and expressing thoughts and feelings, of developing a new visual language beyond the literal, figurative painting that had dominated the 19th century. Even then they were met by much more opposition than similar artists working in European countries, Japan and America. When the Scottish Gallery hosted an exhibition of William Johnstone's abstract art, the gallery director wrote to Johnstone to tell him that no-one understood his work;

> *'I fear that in this part of the world you can look to no future on your present line.'*

Abstract artists often moved abroad to work in more sympathetic environments, a trend that has continued to this day; several of the artists featured in *Beneath the Surface* have worked in Japan, Switzerland and the USA. Many, however, have stayed in, or returned to, Scotland and continue to make art in their own quiet, understated way, producing the meditative, rewarding works now on show.



Sarah Brennan

Sarah Brennan weaves tapestries from old wools; some she inherited, others she has sourced from disused mills. She describes her work as an ‘unspoken response to landscape’ as, using a muted and restrained colour palette, she explores the qualities of these irreplaceable yarns. Her *Small Old Grey Band* series are small works in grey, black and white; they are inspired by nature but they are not pictures of it – instead they aim to trigger memories of place, or the rhythm of a landscape, a line:

> *‘a horizon has no edges nor does the shadow of a cloud.’*

A patient, protracted viewing suggests movement between the colours; white recedes, black comes to the fore and recedes again. Brennan says ‘the yarn must work to help balance and convey the feel and mood.’

Callum Innes: Exposed Painting, Charcoal Black, Red Oxide

The apparent simplicity of many abstract works belies the long and repetitive processes employed in their making. To create his *Exposed Paintings* series, Callum Innes uses a technique of layering and removal, painting and un-painting, applying oil pigment onto linen canvasses then removing it with turpentine – sometimes using up to 15 or 20 washes – so that only a vestige of colour remains. In *Exposed Painting Pewter/Violet,* horizontal lines appear across pewter, while black is smooth; there is an inherent tension between them. This huge, beautiful painting, and *Exposed Painting, Charcoal Black, Red*

Oxide, (Innes deliberately gives his works bland titles because he doesn’t want to coerce the viewer into thinking as he was thinking when he created them) have a mesmeric, calming, power.

Michael Craik’s paintings (*Veil 2018_12*, *Veil 2018_15, Vestige 2019_43* and *Vestige 2019_44*) are blocks of colour surrounded by alternating outlines. His technique also involves the application and removal of paint, but instead of turpentine he uses sandpaper to expose previous layers of colour. In his work Craik explores ‘the interplay of colour and repetition as a method of producing quiet, contemplative work concerned with colour, material quality and process’. He is sometimes inspired by thoughts about geological erosion and the passage of time, but for him it is primarily about the repetitive, meditative process.

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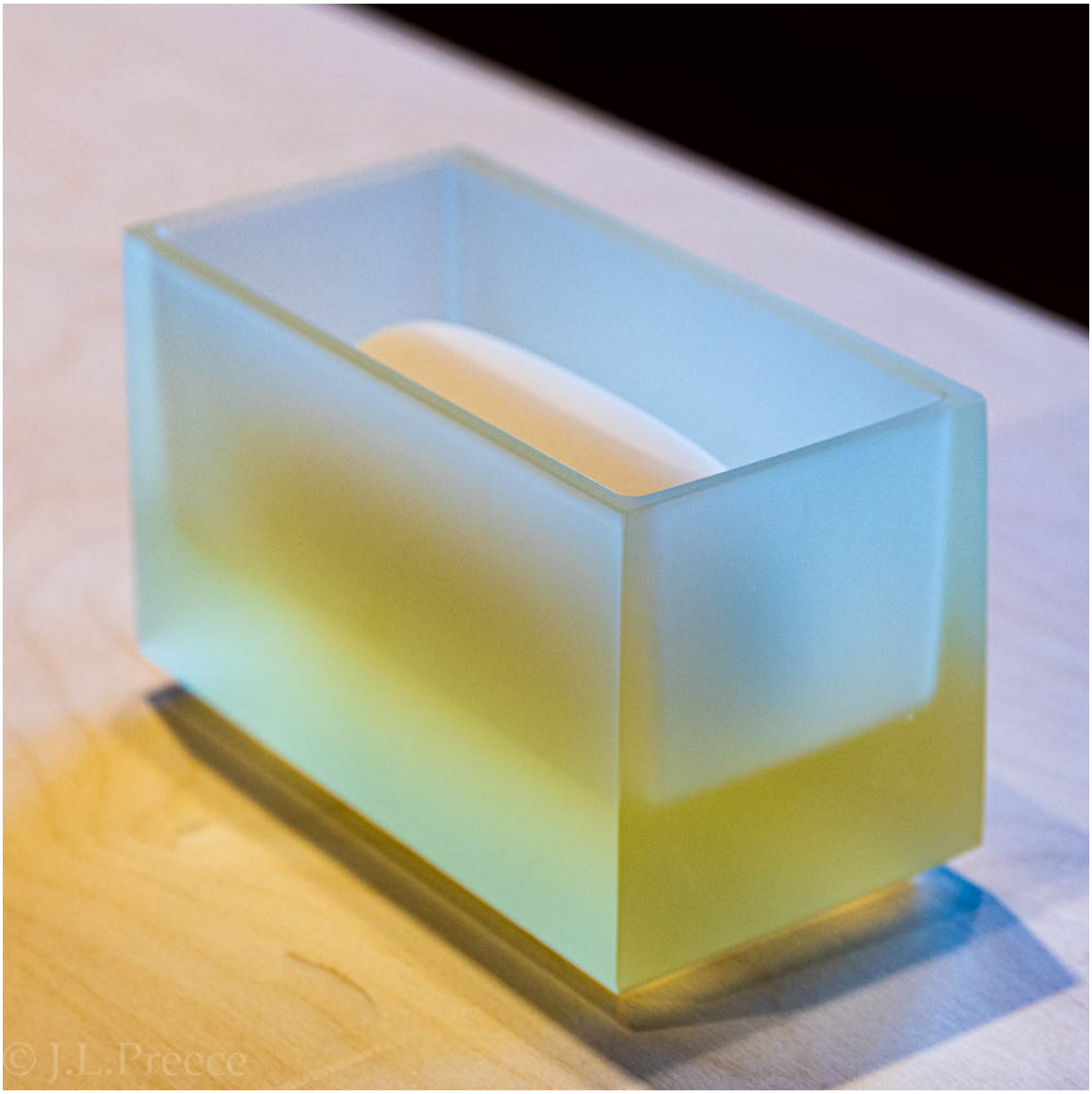
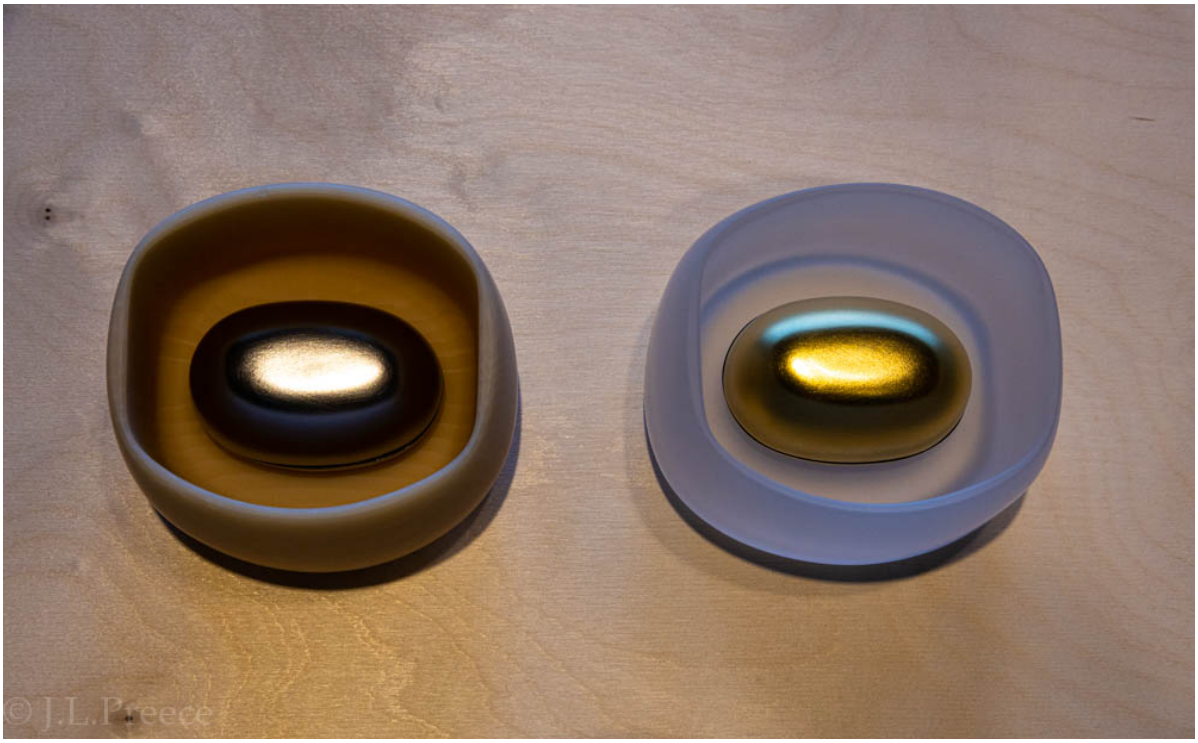
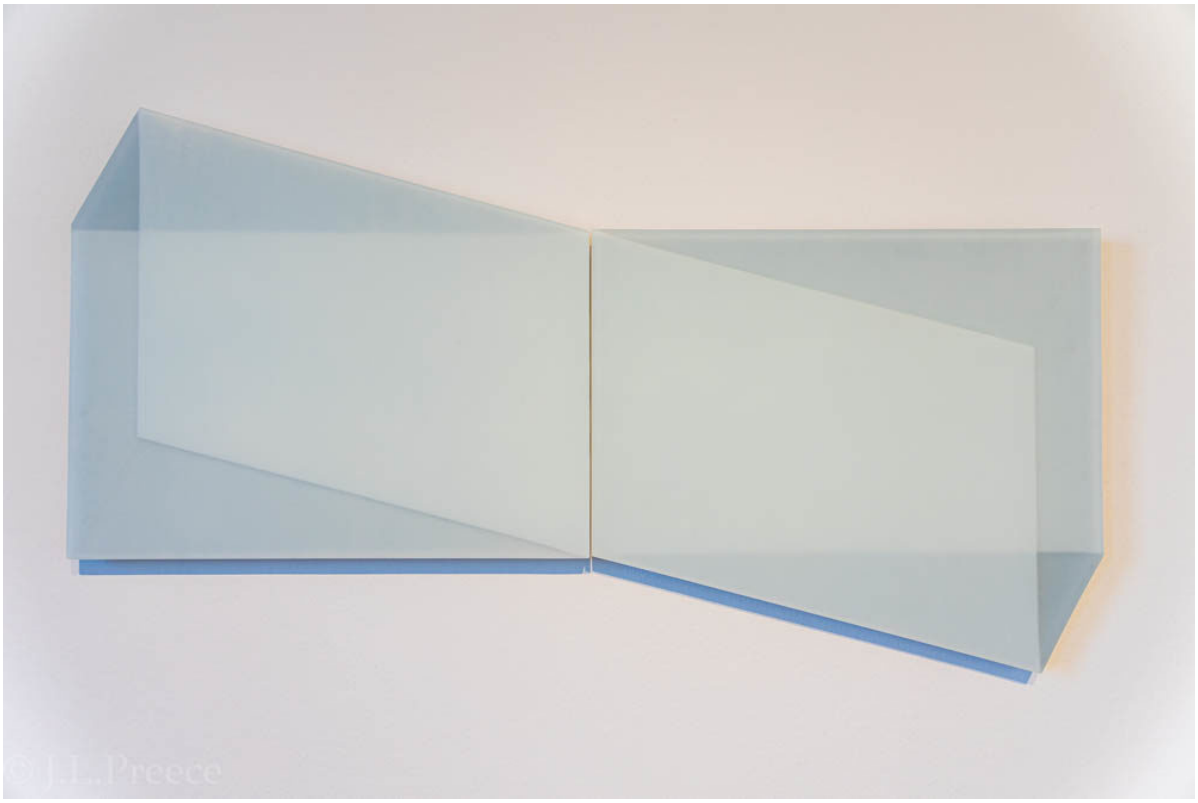
- 

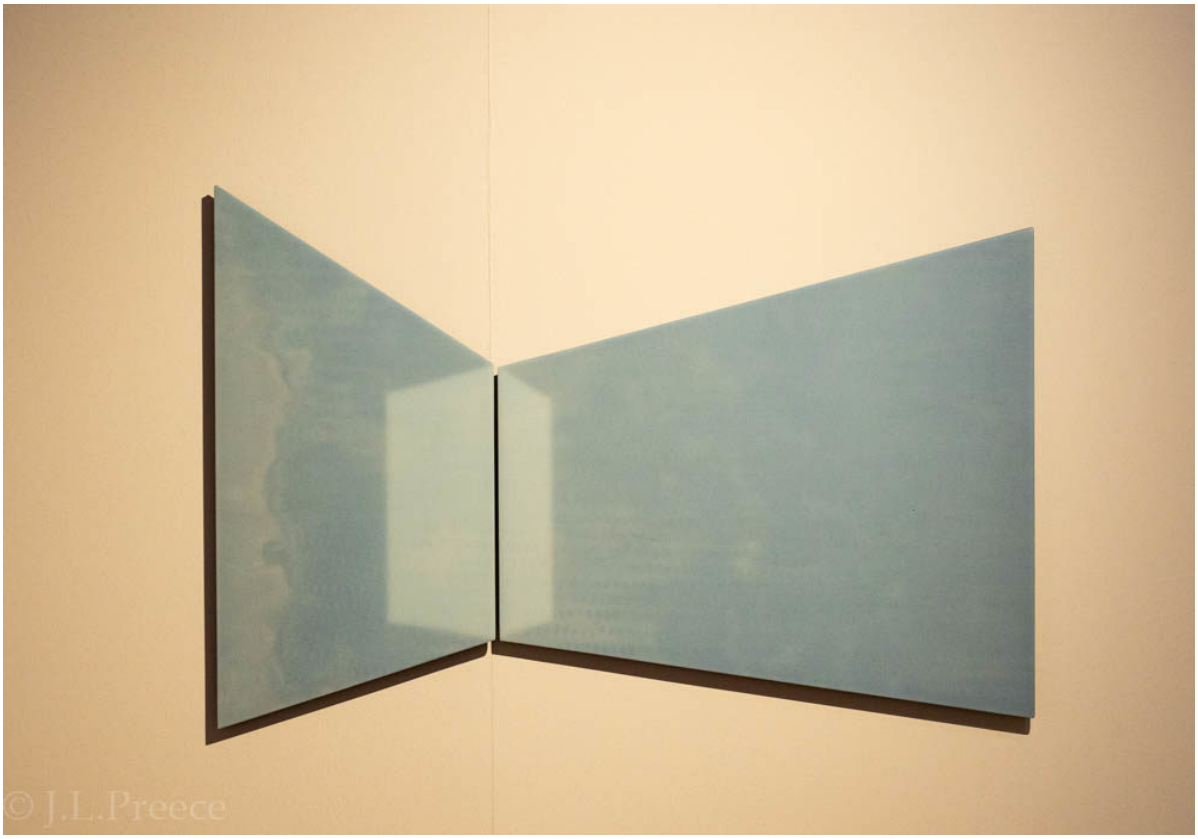
Andrea Walsh Collection of Contained Boxes

- 

Beneath the Surface includes sculpture, glass, tapestry and drawing; curator Maeve Toal wanted to bring together artists who shared a similar aesthetic, whatever their medium. In her *Collection of Contained Boxes* Andrea Walsh shows us two rounded glass holders cradling smaller boxes; the surface of one is smoothed to give it the appearance of wood or ceramic, the other is opaque. The boxes inside have lids of gold or platinum. Inside the third, rectangular, holder there is a box of white china. Walsh explores ideas of containment, and of why we hold on to the things we cannot let go. Japan has been a major influence – Walsh's mother passed on her fascination with the country and its aesthetic, the importance of how objects are placed in the home, and Walsh herself has spoken of the epiphany she experienced on visiting the art museums on Naoshima. In these pieces, form once again overrides function; the small, quiet works resonate with unspoken, buried emotion.



Karlyn Sutherland: Light Study, Toyama (3)



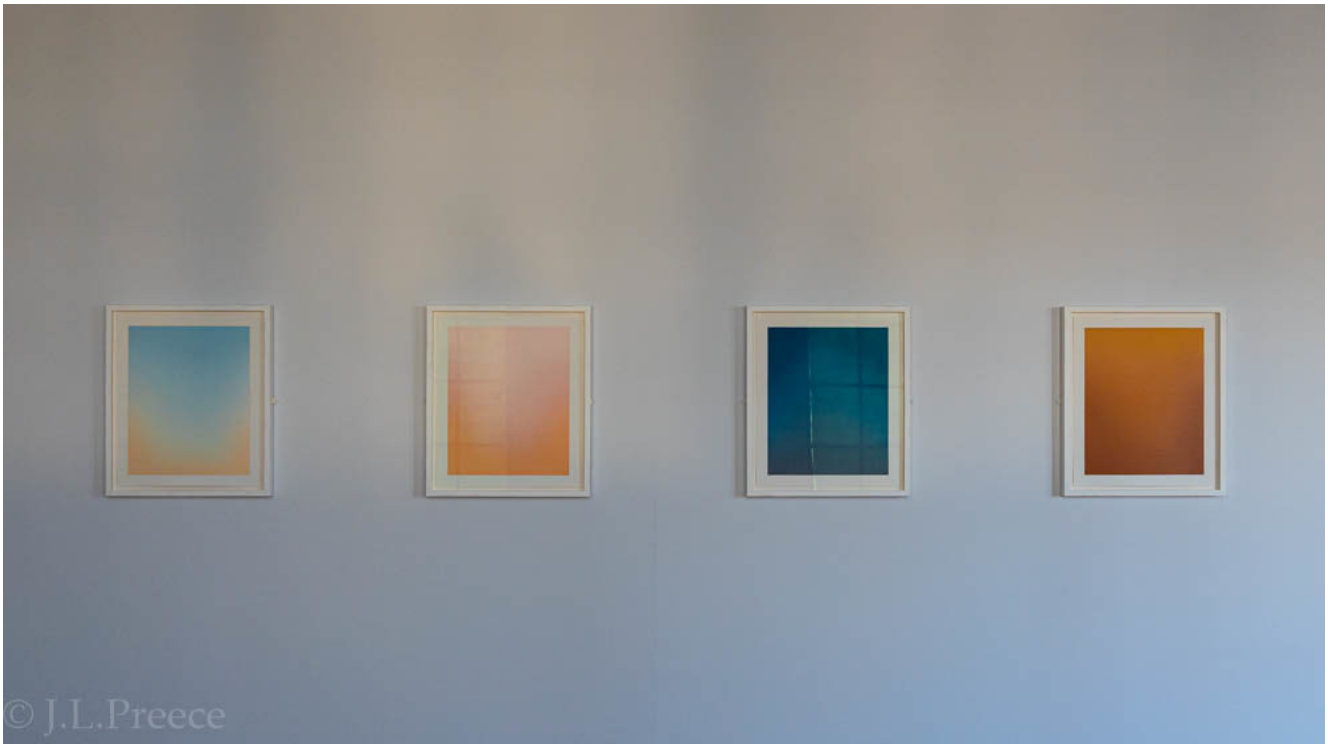
Karlyn Sutherland: Light Study, Toyama (4)

Several artists share an interest in architectural forms, again not in the literal representation of a building or place, but in the memories and feelings that light and shadow

may bring to the surface. Karlyn Sutherland's geometrical glass pieces *Light Study, Toyama (3)* and *(4)* use the material to evoke traditionally unreachable experiences. She is interested in architectural atmosphere, and our attachment to, and detachment from, place, and draws upon her own memories of this, and of the qualities of light, sometimes from her childhood.

Alan Johnston looks at light and shadow before deciding what to draw. For *Beneath the Surface* Johnston spent some days in the gallery creating a pencil abstract directly onto a wall; a white rectangle, perhaps a door, is surrounded by a background of pencil marks, while in *Untitled 1993* we see four beige squares, painted in acrylic, on a white background, parts of which are also pencilled. Johnston is interested in the Japanese concept of *wabi-sabi*, a beauty that is imperfect, impermanent and incomplete, an evocation of loneliness and transience. These pencil marks are not doodles; Johnston speaks of the need for controllability in tone and mark-making, and of the trance-like state that can be induced by the physical repetition of the drawing. As the viewer moves backwards and forwards, the drawings change from shadow to line/void;

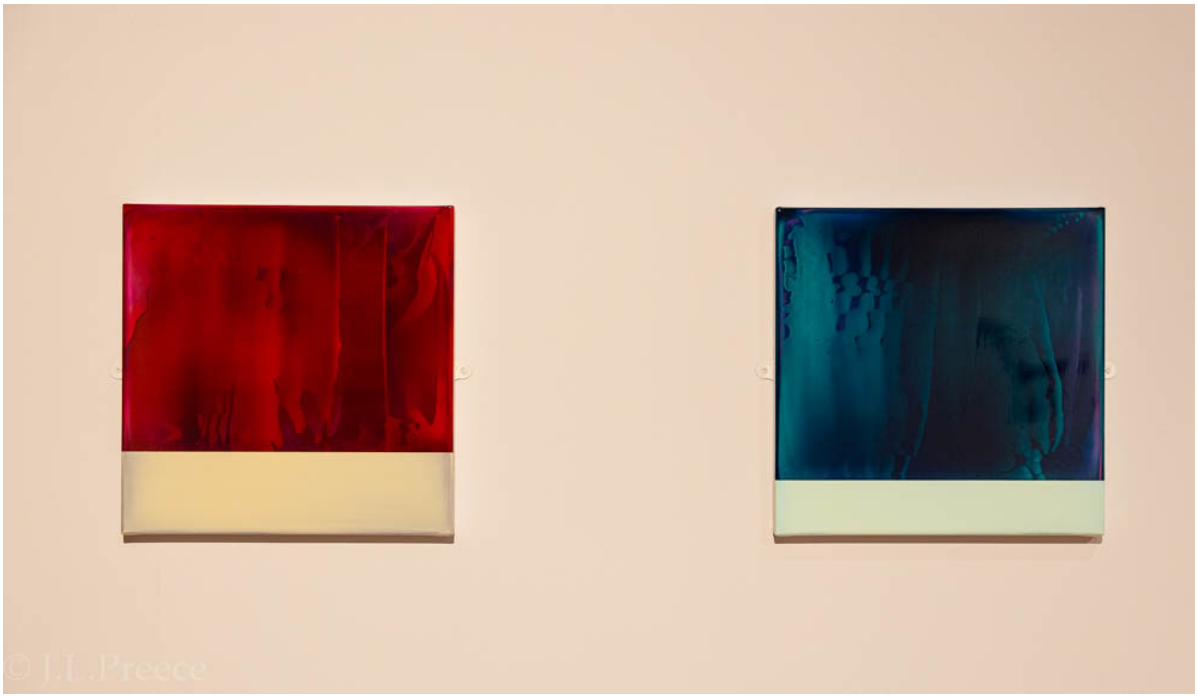
> *'a rhythm of space.'*



Erik Cruikshank: Untitled 1,2 ,3 and 4

Like Sarah Brennan, Eric Cruikshank takes his inspiration from nature, but his beautiful oil paintings *Untitled 1, 2, 3* and *4* are not pictures of the sky, but 'panels looking to capture a moment in time'. Pale blue fades into soft peach and pink; dark blue changes to a darker, violet-tinged blue then back to peach. Cruikshank spends hours working a surface then wiping the brush until just a thin skim of paint remains, allowing light to penetrate and hinting at something beneath – his technique has been called an active meditation.

The beauty of the Highlands where Cruikshank grew up has been the primary influence on his work; his paintings are personal interpretations of a time and place, evoking his own memories but able also to awaken the viewer's own emotions, to encourage their personal response.

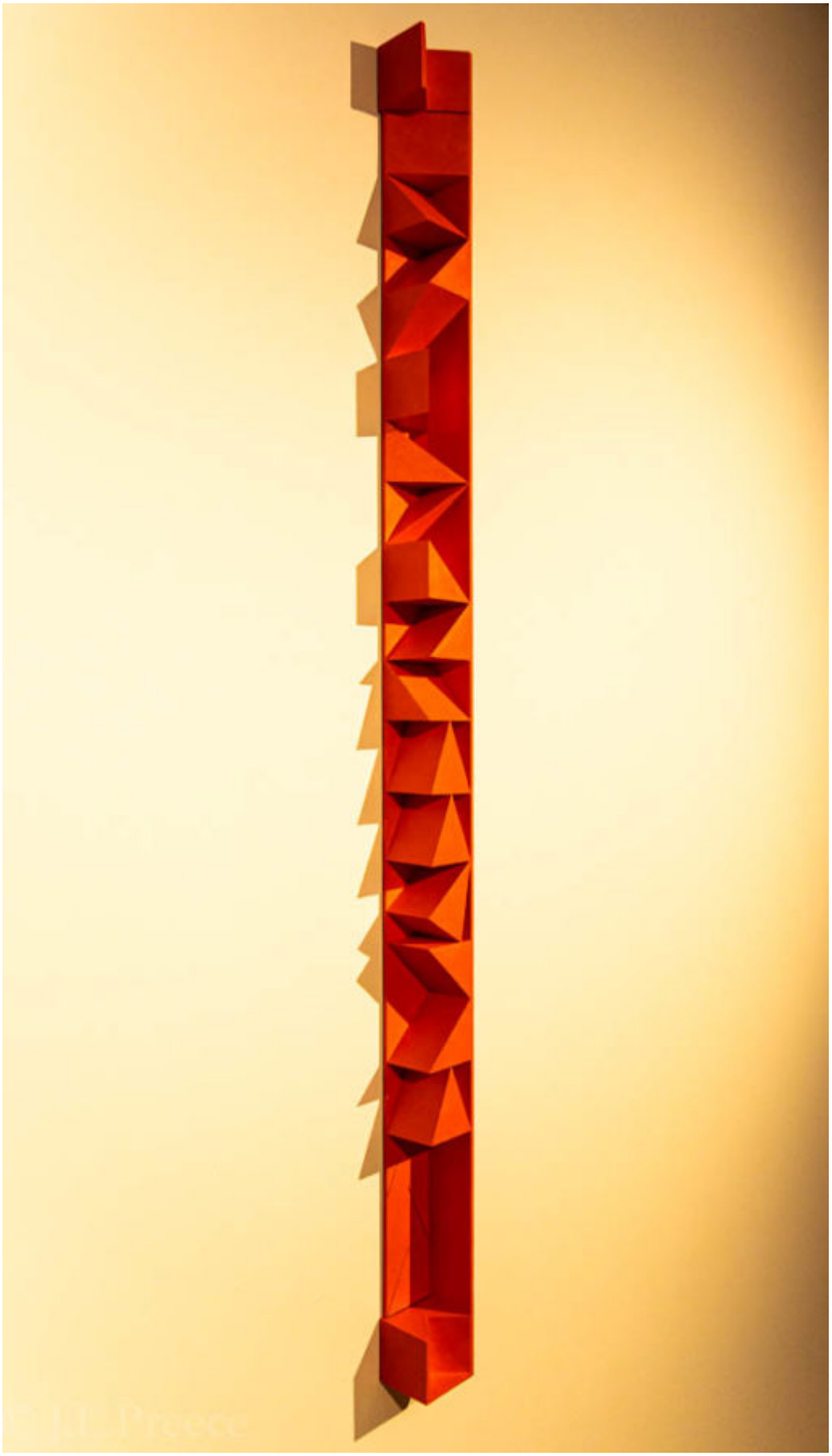


James Lumsden: Fugue (17/11), Fugue (30/11)

Resonance (1/19)

The technique of layering is also employed by James Lumsden. To create his ethereal, translucent images he applies up to forty glazes of acrylic and gloss, then uses various implements to drag, pull or squeegee each layer. The final paintings have an underwater feel; the purples and pinks of *Resonance (1/19)* suggest perhaps a strange world of floating fish and seaweed, while *Liquid Light (20/10),* with its panels of dark blue beneath paler blues, could bring to mind the sea and sky, or something quite different; Lumsden says that any

allusions to landscape are primarily a device to heighten the dynamic, contrast, tension and intensity of the painting. Above all, his pictures are atmospheric; the viewer is drawn beneath the surface but any meaning will come from the emotions these luminous paintings evoke.



Kenneth Dingwall: Pending

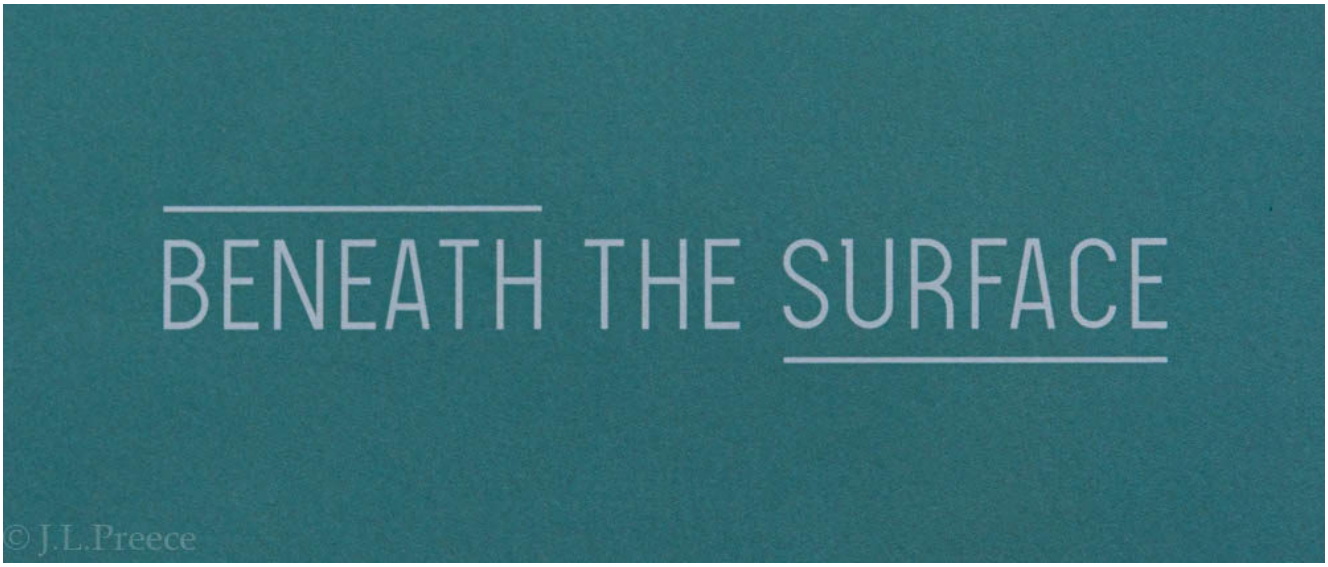
When Maeve Toal began working on *Beneath the Surface,* she was surprised to discover that there is to date no definitive

publication on the history of Scottish Abstract Art; the most it gets is a mention in more general art histories. On approaching artist Kenneth Dingwall as a potential exhibitor, she learned that he was carrying out his own research and hoped to publish a book on the subject; in the meantime he has written a very interesting and illuminating essay for the accompanying catalogue. Influenced by the patterns and shapes of nature, Dingwall has contributed three pieces to the exhibition, including *For Paul Overy*, a vertical line of white wooden triangles, and *Pending* – a similarly vertical structure, but here red triangles are less regularly placed, and sit above a space marked with black lines; something has still to happen, and what that something is is for the viewer to discover.

There is so much to learn, and to enjoy, in this rewarding exhibition.

Beneath the Surface is at the City Art Centre, Market Street, Edinburgh until 1 March 2020. Admission is free and the gallery is open 10am-5pm daily (but please check opening times over Christmas and New Year with the Centre direct on 0131 529 3993.)

A number of events will be held in association with the exhibition, including workshops, masterclasses and tours: for more information contact the Centre.


BENEATH THE SURFACE
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