

## STRANGE FOREVER

## MITCH SPEED ON ELIZABETH MCINTOSH

There are close facts, like the way that a stripe, just in front of your nose, is also an environment. And there are facts that exist in deep perspective, like the way in which artworks participate in geographical, political, and socio-economic complexes. Between those are middle distance facts.

In painting, the latter manifest as dimensions, colours, shapes, and the relationships between those things. Middle distance facts are the most usual, because they can be assimilated at a comfortable distance; six feet from the painting, say. In conversation, they flip off the tongue like gossip, and in that way, become abridgements. This isn't ideal. But it also isn't as bad a thing as it might seem. It's just the painting's becoming socially transmissible, like packets of information that re-expand in the imagination. In this vernacular, Elizabeth McIntosh's paintings appear as large rectangles – 190 x 230 centimetres – filled with big, flat shapes, which are in turn filled with opaque and translucent colours. Their compositions are impactful, although their constituent parts often waver. From a middle distance, they embody bright and lucid myopia.

Picture an expanse of blue and white stripes – each about ten centimetres wide – slanting across a rectangle from low right to high left. And now picture

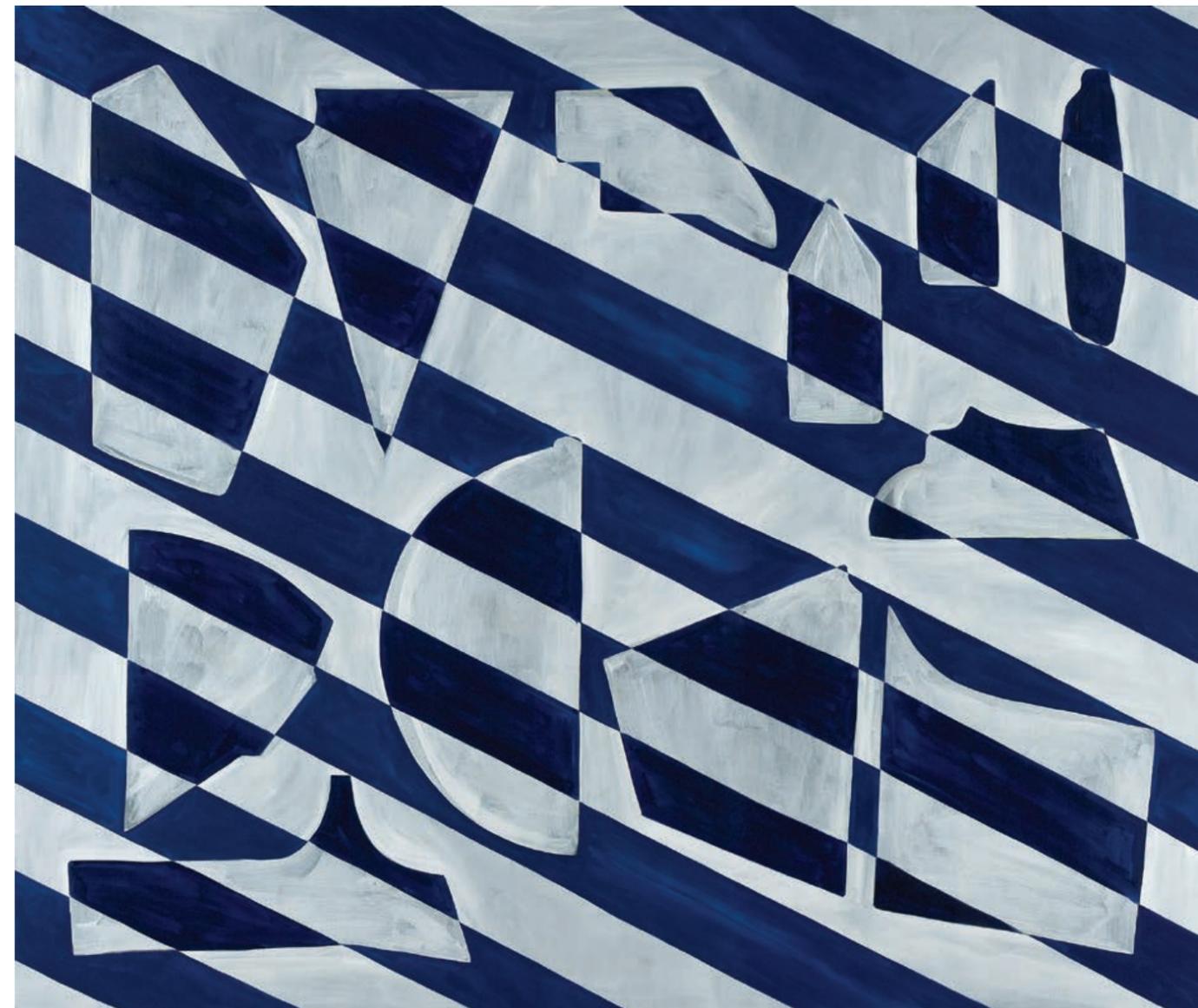
the stripes moving through twelve shapes resembling aberrant puzzle pieces.

Upon crossing the edges of these shapes, the blue stripes flip to white, and white to blue. This is *Paul Klee Fragments* (2009), a painting that makes equal reference to Klee, and a specific form through which his work has been translated.

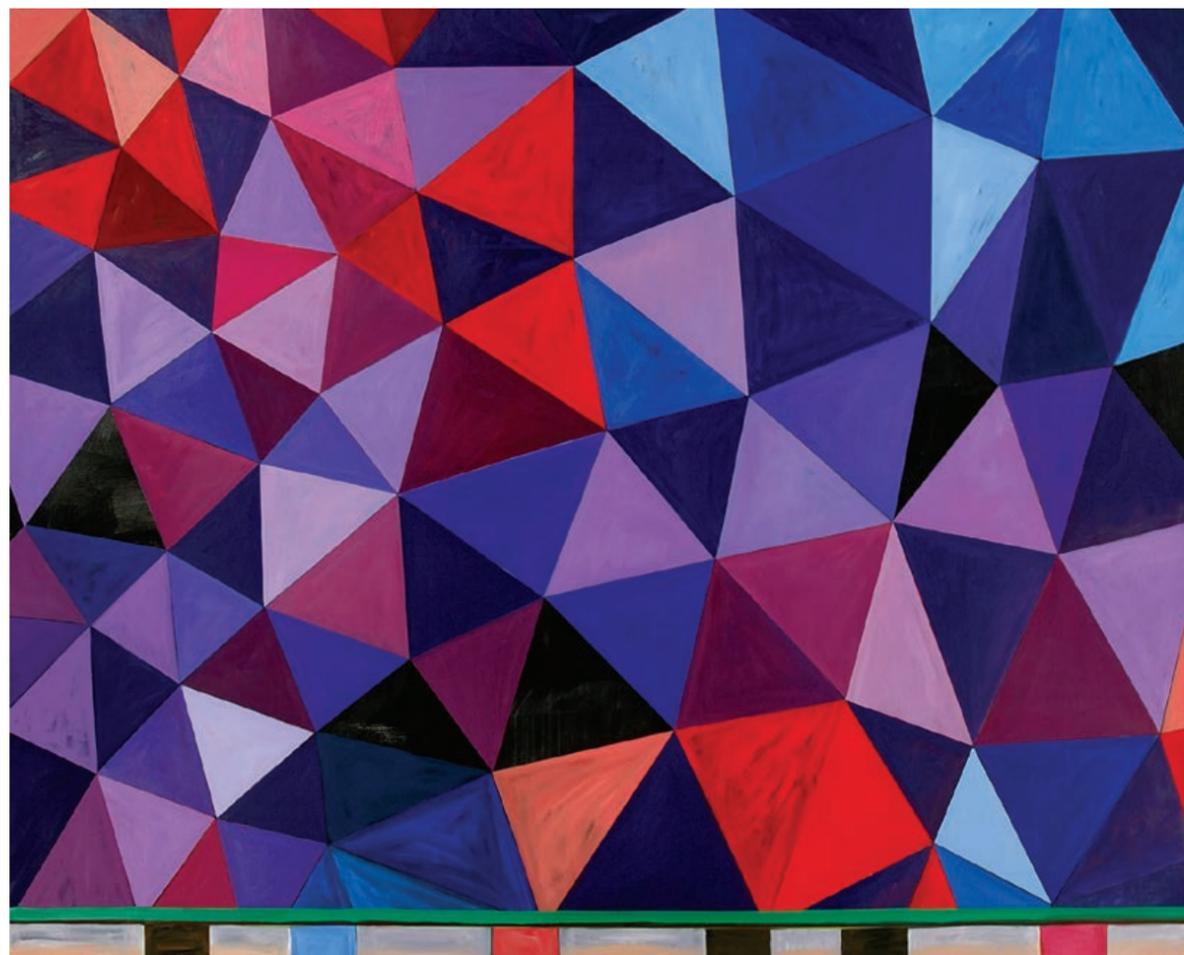
In 2009, McIntosh came across a series of books wherein modern paintings were fragmented into stickers for children. One such book featured Klee. Having already sampled him in other paintings, McIntosh began to mimic the look of these sticker pages – irregular bits and pieces of his paintings against stark white grounds – in paint. Her image was not a facsimile, but an aggregate. She borrowed pieces from this page and that. At a certain point, however, the stripes arrived. The finished painting shows shapes disappearing into their environment, as if under an invisibility spell.

Crucially, *Klee Fragments* also shows a plan disappearing into a process. In this way, McIntosh's paintings move through entropic cycles. These controlled breakdowns encourage unexpected relationships to occur, within a field of quotation. And that paradox produces tension, which produces energy, which propels the paintings through circuits between knowing and dumbness. For McIntosh, painting is thinking. Not like thinking. Not a metaphor for thinking. But, as in the dissolution of the Cartesian boundary between the substance of the body and the substance of the mind, thinking. She becomes herself when moving through painting as exploratory thought.

In a 2009 survey at the Vancouver Art Gallery called *Enacting Abstraction*, her *Untitled (coloured vertical stripes over black ground)* (2007) was hung next to a painting of sixteen vertical stripes by the seminal Canadian painter Guido Molinari, called *Serieel brun-orange* (1967). Whereas Molinari's surfaces are



**Paul Klee Fragments**  
2009  
Oil on canvas  
216 x 190.5 cm



Above: **Untitled (Red, Blue and Purple)**  
2006  
Oil on canvas  
183 x 228 cm

Right: **Untitled (black dots on swatches)**  
2009  
Oil on canvas  
216 x 190.5 cm

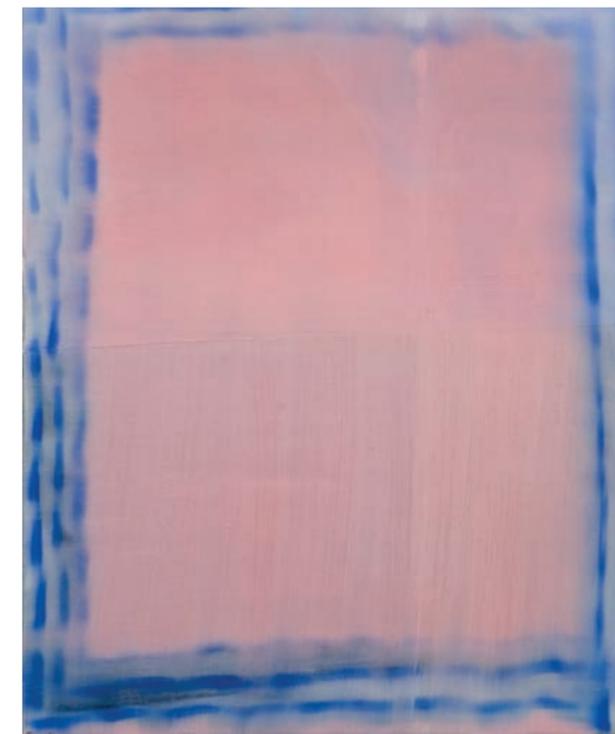
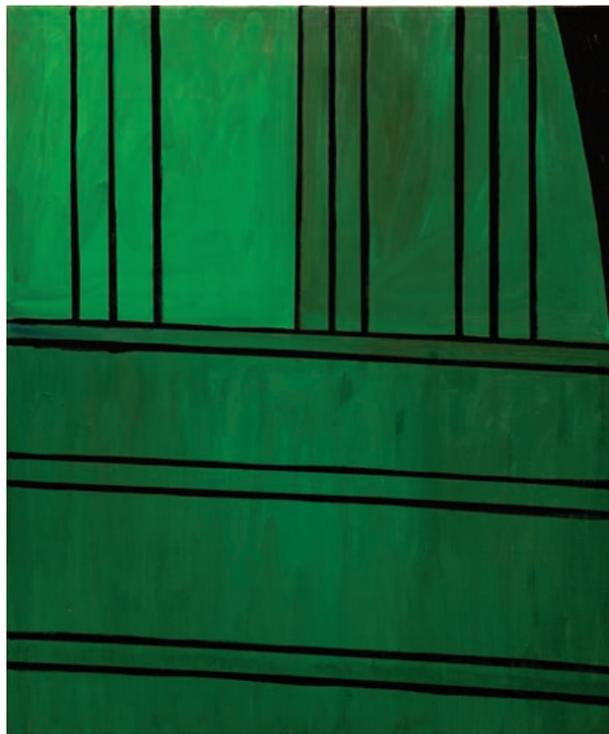


strictly semi gloss, and his edges razor sharp, Mcintosh's surfaces are matte, her edges hard from afar, diffuse up close. Her stripes are powder pink, sour apple green, merlot, sky blue and sunflower yellow. Like Molinari's, they are vertical. Unlike his, they zig and zag through a surface of triangles which, painted in dark and light tones, make the plane into a snapping and buckling undulation. Meanwhile, the odd unpainted triangle reveals a wash of black gesso, like rain in grisaille.

That work was one of Mcintosh's self-described 'triangle plane paintings', wherein triangles painted in every colour imaginable, alternately opaque and translucent, tumbled and interlocked, supporting and hanging off

of one another, sometimes spanning the picture plane, and sometimes grouping into autonomous shapes against colourful grounds which, painted thinly in long horizontal strokes, allow egressions of dark and light. These paintings scintillate in that slow, high modern way. Unfortunately, the seriality that contributed to their hypnotic effect, also contributed to a condition of predictability anathema to Mcintosh's need to think through painting. If you lay out her paintings from that point on, she says, you can probably see geometry disappearing from them altogether.

It's true. From then on, the paintings become more hostile to assimilation within coherent logics. Currently, Mcintosh says, a phone



call will divert the course of a painting as importantly as something more typically inspirational, like spectra through a window, or the serendipitous discovery of an arresting composition, or colour combination. She uses those interferences, and the energies they generate, as opportunities to insert discord, or character changes, into the paintings.

In *Dots on Swatches* (2009) several amorphous black dots float in an imperfectly rhythmic dispersal within a few very light yellow planes. In some cases, the boundaries of these planes are defined by nearly imperceptible changes in the the yellow, like faint shadows. Elsewhere, these divisions dissolve entirely, whereupon straight edges cut into the black dots take up the role of insinuating the planes. This slipping of responsibility for the creation of space, from one element to another, causes the painting to partake in a classically modern coruscation of depths. Concurrently, the pattern within it,

which resembles entoptic phenomena held still in late light, cuts the perceptual gambit with levity. And all the while, a single blank plane in the bottom left corner exerts a soft stabilizing pull, while two errant drips sit, in frozen freefall.

Over and again, McIntosh's paintings have affect moving in collaboration with specific historical resonances. Two reliefs by Sophie Tauber-Arp – *Ei Relief* and *Relief Rectangulaire*, both 1936 – glow through *Dots on Swatches*. In those works, circles appear in subtractive, two dimensional and additive forms over rectangular surfaces. When intact, the circles form a rhythmic matrix for optical movement. When halved, they take up the job of intimating rectilinear divisions in the plane. An influential Bauhaus member, Taueber-Arp was also a signatory of the Dada Manifesto – a history reflected in the mechanically precise randomness of her compositions, and also, now, in McIntosh's confidence in contingency.

There is a table in McIntosh's

From left to right: **Picasso's Dream**  
2012  
Oil on canvas  
61 x 51 cm

**From a Fauve Landscape**  
2011  
Oil on canvas  
51 x 61 cm

**Books on Tables**  
2011  
Oil on canvas  
61 x 46 cm

**Taking a Walk**  
2011  
Oil on canvas  
61 x 51 cm



Above: **Dreamer**  
2013  
Oil on canvas  
216 x 190.5 cm

Right: **Conversation**  
2013  
Oil on canvas  
216 x 190.5 cm

studio, that is covered with notebooks and construction paper cuttings; the wall it abuts, studies for collages, children's drawings and printed reproductions of paintings; an eruption of gushing colour within two interlocking green rectangles from Mary Heilman, for example, and a Matisse, in which the female figure manifested through a field of polychromatic dashes. Sometimes, on this table, paper and pencils and markers are replaced by a laptop, which McIntosh uses to catalogue progress shots of her paintings. The files therein contain a surplus of terminated gestures.

Her immediate context is thus comprised of physical and digital workspaces, as well as nimbus's of latent information. That atmosphere is given an echo in *Untitled (Windows)*, (2006) Therein, rectangles containing myriad colour combinations – acid green meeting purple, rose nudging



blue, and pink blurring into white – hover over a ground made of enigmatic, polychromatic shapes. Bordered by one or two thin bands of colour, like connatural frames, the rectangles appear as autonomous images in an electric environment. Refulgent, and causing the eye to flit here and there and there and back again. And so, although it is a painting and draws on that history in very specific ways, it also recalls a precise sample of contemporary experience; wherein fingertips move everywhere over glowing screens, dancing information in and out of perception, with all the effort of daydreaming.

In hindsight, the rectangles within that painting seem like codes to the way her work would continue to evolve. In them, her application of paint began to draw back, with inchoate brush strokes holding fast, as nothing other than themselves. Their provisionality predicted a series of small paintings – 51 x 61 centimetres – that are presently accumulating in her studio. At times, these smaller works are supple and intimate, like sketches painted from memory after croppings from larger paintings. Other times they turn away from conventions of beauty altogether, manifesting initial thoughts as rough dashes of colour; research without the development; the primary facts of painting, which do not slip off the tongue so much as cramp it.

Currently, the reverberation of qualities moving from painting to painting in McIntosh's studio, is becoming increasingly discordant. The forms in *Dreamer* (2013) are like strange cousins to shapes with names. Here we see baggy shapes made of translucent compounds of pink and white, mauve versions of the same, a white blob running through with red jottings, and little twisting daubs of middle orange and kelly green; all simultaneously adapting to and influencing one another's amoebic aspects. All of this sits atop a fuschia ground, which, run through with faint architectonic forms, invokes interior space. The painting transmits spectra of resonances. It's also like a pile of colourful fabric viewed through a psychotropic lense. It makes shapes without names melt into things of the world – piles, accumulations, folds, laundry, vegetables, interior space – and back again, so that the painting seeps into the mind through multiple passageways.

Within the triangle field paintings, in the interlocking lines formed by abutting shapes, you can see filaments and exoskeletons, like those that appeared in Klee's quasi-scientific drawings. Incognito, the same appear in *La Musique* (2013), looping back into the painting like a diachronic beat. In this painting a set of imperfect ovoids lean lazily against one another, and are backed by warped rectangles of baby and cadmium blue, and by thinner, vaguely anthropomorphic forms in gold and black. At the top of the picture, a patchwork of red rectangles balances the blues while pushing the lower two thirds of the picture down and toward the viewer. The central ovoids are painted in nearly white pastel pinks and blues. Like the triangle planes, their interior space is divided into many shapes, simultaneously architectonic and organic. So in spite of

their chalky colouration they remind of leaves; more so than legs, which is what they were in a former life, in the Matisse painting from which they were lifted.

The working title of this essay, *The Static Slip*, reflected a feeling induced by many of Elizabeth McIntosh's paintings; a slow burn between excitement and anxiety, resultant of the impression of movement in actual stillness; static shapes and colours slipping in perception; the spaces between shapes being at once voids and shapes themselves, like the space between magnetic objects being empty but also electric. But that title failed to track her work's recent migration into borderlands of reference and contingency. As much as her paintings generate primary experience, they are also ways to get inside experience. The best Modern paintings, the ones that flash in our head when we think of the form, seem to have been made for forever. McIntosh uses her memory and her eyes as a kind of technology, panning across the history of Modern painting, before zooming in during moments of epiphany, and cropping. By way of weird alchemical splicings, she then re-charges old energies locked in old shapes and old colours, making a fading version of forever as strange as it used to be, right now.



Warp - Mitch Speed  
2013  
Oil on paper  
58.5 x 91.5 cm

Courtesy of the artist