

## Interview with Louise Tuckwell

by Alyce Neal, Assistant Curator, UNSW Art Collection

Sydney, 26 September 2019

### **You are known as a hard-edge abstraction painter, can you tell me a bit about your work?**

In my practice, I work up to the point, I am at the edge. It took a while to get there, but I met it, I met the edge. I have been working with hard-edge abstraction now for so long and it is something I am known for. Because I have been doing it now for so long, now it's too perfect. It's too exact and now that is what is driving me crazy. If it's one millimetre out, I think, 'well now I have to repaint it...' I am experimenting with softer edges, something I did earlier in my career.

### **Can you tell me about your embroidery alongside your painting practice?**

I have always done embroideries; I've done them since I was in school. I love the embroideries, I can't knit, but I love the embroideries. Like with my paintings I think about the same ideas in my tapestries, about meeting the edge. I paint non-stop and it's nice to get a break from that. I also collage and I would like to do some small assemblages. For me the collages are little experiments which allow you to be free.

### **Can you tell me about your long canvases? They are a very distinct shape.**

I have been doing these long ones forever. I love squares, but it's lovely to go totem-like. Sometimes they are the height of a human and I often hang them together, they are very sculptural and lend themselves to different arrangements. When they are very narrow, it feels like they are at the limit, they can't go any narrower.

It's not easy to paint on a narrow shape. It's so much easier to paint on a canvas that is 15 cm wide, but sometimes I paint on narrow canvases that are 10 cm wide. For my first show in Melbourne I was doing tiny 5 x 10 cm works and arranging them together, I really enjoyed them. Circles don't work either; they are very difficult to paint. And with the tapestries, they take me a very long time to complete.

### **Do you call them tapestries or embroideries?**

I do call them tapestries, but I have been questioned to say that they are embroideries. Tapestry is embroidery, I looked it up in the dictionary. I've also tried to do a circle in a tapestry, but it ends up jagged and out of place, it does not work. Over the years my tapestries have grown bigger, I use a tacking stitch, if I hadn't, I would still be doing it now. This tapestry [in apartment] took me six weeks to complete – I can do about 50 paintings in that time. Creating a tapestry is a lot more work.

**You talk about your love of painting. Is it a constant and pure enjoyment of painting all the time, as you push it to its non-objective limit, or its materiality?**

Painting for me is different to embroidery. I use little half inch brushes and with my paintings I paint the same colour in the same shape three or four times depending on the transparency. I like the paint to be it to be solid and matte. I like paint that flows, I don't like crunchy old oils or anything like that. I love figurative art, but not many people do it well. I used to paint figuratively all the time when I was younger. When I had my first shows at Olsen's, I thought I would do something completely different [painting non-representational works], I did a complete 180 and I have never gone back to figurative. It was a complete jump; it was in the 1990s. It's lovely doing nudes all the time, but you have to study anatomy. I studied anatomy, I know when muscles and bones join. When I see a figurative painting that has a circle for a knee, it drives me insane.

At that time I used to work at Garry Anderson Gallery and we used to show Agnes Martin, it was a great gallery and many of the artists there were abstract artists and it's what turned me abstract. Being surrounded by abstract art, I fell in love with it. That's why I started painting in a completely different way.

**That's very interesting, going from something that was so familiar, painting figuratively, to something that was completely different, an obstacle or point to overcome. You were around abstract art, working at the gallery, but had you experimented at art school with this style? What spurred you on? Was it being in Sydney at that time?**

I went to Julian Ashton and NAS [National Art School, Sydney]. SCA [Sydney College of the Arts, University of Sydney] was conceptual, Alexander Mackie [later UNSW Art and Design] was figurative. I chose to go to NAS because it's always been on the abstract side. I did sculptural looking things and forms, but they were abstract, they did turn and had a shadow. It progressed from there and became hard-edged.

**It sounds like there are rules that you set yourself in terms of working with scale and consistency, rules for the type of paint and the forms you create. You push their very limits yet maintain a sense of playfulness.**

My work is essentially about colour and shape. I always have the notion of the 'golden mean' or the perfect balance, in mind while working, it gives the work balance and tonality. You have to understand tone before you embrace colour, rather than doing everything high key, which is light. You have to have a dark in it, a dark tone to give it gravitas. And the balance, you have mainly high key, a little bit of mid key, a bit of dark. It's all about balance and tones and expressing colour.

**Were there particular practices or people that you were drawn to working in that way?**

I love abstract painters and all kinds of work. I love Piero della Francesca and my all-time favourite is Matisse. The abstract painters I really love are Ben Nicholson and Ellsworth Kelly. I have always tried to do a white square painting or a black square painting: do you know how difficult it is to do that painting?

**We do have your work Red square, a tapestry in the UNSW Art Collection.**

That's a reference to Malevich. He did a red square.

**You have been trying to do a red square?**

I wanted to bring it down to the bare colour, reduce, reduce and reduce. In other works, I have used four different tones of one colour. But I can't help myself, I tried to do a work with one colour, but I can't, I have to put another colour in. It is very difficult to do a one colour painting. One of my favourite artists is Melbourne artist Alan Mittleman. He does oils which have many layers, you can see a bit of yellow and bit of cream, but it's a white painting or a black painting. Because he does so many layers, it still appears as a white or black painting.