



756
press

APPROACHES TO ABSTRACTION

JONATHAN MEULI
APPROACHES TO ABSTRACTION



Wolfson College
Cambridge

In association with



Loughborough
University

ISBN 978-1-9993285-0-4



9 781999 328504 >

756 press

J O N A T H A N M E U L I
A P P R O A C H E S T O A B S T R A C T I O N

756

press

Jonathan Meuli

Approaches to Abstraction

Jonathan Meuli is unusual in that he is a painter who also trained as an art historian. He read Art History here in Cambridge in 1978 alongside the curator of this exhibition, Professor Phillip Lindley. Together they were supervised by Charles Saumarez Smith for Duncan Robinson's course on Trecento painting. Jonathan graduated in 1980 and went on to the Ruskin School at Oxford to train as a painter. Since that time he has pursued both painting and art history, teaching at the University of East Anglia and the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and publishing his PhD research on Northwest Coast Art in a monograph entitled *Shadow House* (2001).

In this exhibition Phillip considers Meuli's 'abstract' studies, tracing his career-long impulse to produce works which are neither figurative nor representational. *Approaches to Abstraction* aims to identify

the wellspring of Meuli's artistic creativity and to showcase some of his most visually significant work. We are most grateful to Jonathan for his enthusiastic support of the present exhibition and for making his Glasgow studio, stores and archives available. We would also like to thank the individual lenders for their generosity and the private sponsorship that has made this catalogue possible. Finally, my thanks to my colleagues at Wolfson College: the President, Jane Clarke; Christopher Lawrence, the Bursar; Owen Edwards and Margaret Greeves, Chair and Secretary of the Fine Arts Committee; Anthony Green RA, Sheila Betts, Frieda Midgley, Neil Newman and Alan Hawkins.

Dr Meredith M. Hale
Excellence 100 Lecturer, Loughborough University
Fellow, Wolfson College, Cambridge



Introduction

Phillip Lindley

Loughborough University

From the perspective of an academic historian of art, Jonathan Meuli's career changes look dramatic and reflect the tensions between his impulses on the one hand to study art and on the other to practise as an artist himself.¹ As a child, he had been taught to paint by the sculptor and painter Paul Mount and the latter's first wife, the mosaicist Jeanne Mount, in St Just in Penwith. Michael Bird wrote in Paul Mount's obituary that the artist 'combined a passion for formal clarity with an instinct for sculptural power and presence', and Mount's artistic predilections, particularly his pleasure in 'pure form', deeply influenced Jonathan.² So, too, did the paintings of other artists who had worked in St Ives, particularly those of Roger Hilton, one of the pioneers of abstraction in Britain, and Peter Lanyon's abstractions from Cornish landscapes and exhilarating gliding paintings.³ Jonathan initially chose to study art

history rather than to paint and went up to Cambridge in 1976. However, after graduating from Peterhouse with a double first in 1980, Meuli went to the Ruskin School of Art at Oxford, where he was allowed to complete the degree in two years. His degree show in 1982 exhibited explorations of violently movemented abstract forms derived from representational prototypes [1]; this was a route to abstraction taken by Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, for example, whose work Jonathan had seen at Kettle's Yard. After graduating from the Ruskin, instead of heading for London like many of his contemporaries, Meuli returned to Cornwall, where he lived and worked first in a caravan, and then in a studio in Newlyn, just down the road from Terry Frost. Later, he went on to work in the Algarve and then in Italy. In 1987, at Vacciago in Piedmont, he painted a series of superb gouaches and watercolours, two examples

of which are shown here [3 & 4]. These paintings reveal radical experimentation with the handling and balance of colour and form and Meuli's assimilation of a wide variety of artistic sources as he reacted to his immediate surroundings – an eighteenth-century palazzo with a frescoed dining room and enclosed garden. There is a rich variety in these paintings, ranging from rather expressionistic figural paintings to almost entirely abstract gouaches, 'abstract' in the sense that any representational references are difficult to detect. From some of the Vacciago drawings, he also produced two large and sparkingly colourful canvases – strongly influenced by Bonnard – in Norfolk the following year.⁴ Next, he returned to university to read an MA on the Arts of Africa, Oceania and the Americas at the University of East Anglia and then to write his PhD there, on Northwest Coast Art. Meuli continued to paint whilst researching Northwest sculpture. His chief achievement during this period was a series of *Abstract Horizons*, painted in Vancouver in 1991, on a large scale. They are generally very dark in mood and colour, as if Jonathan was working to a point where the series could go no further (fig. 1).

After completing his PhD, Meuli was awarded a Henry Moore Fellowship, to study Sculpture and Orality, in 1997. Having published his book, *Shadow House*, in 2001, Jonathan was able to devote himself again, finally, to full-time painting. His studio is in the WASPS (Workshop and Artists' Studio Provision,

Scotland) Factory in Hanson Street, Glasgow. The dramatic changes in Meuli's oeuvre over the decades he has been painting are as striking as his career changes from artist to art-historian and back. They stimulate a number of conjectures, for example about the trigger-points for his shifts of direction and more generally about his philosophical approaches to abstraction and figuration. These changes mask some essential continuities of ideas and techniques from his earliest work to his latest. For example, whilst the substantial differences between the paintings produced on either side of



fig. 1 Jonathan Meuli, *Abstract Horizon 6*, 1991
acrylic on unstretched canvas, 99 x 152 cm

the long pause in his artistic career during the 1990s are obvious, there are drawings from the 1980s such as the one with which this show opens [2], abstracted from Cornish landscape forms, which presage the more conceptual abstracts of the recent *Collision* and *Wave* [14–19] watercolours. The handling of the crayon and the movement produced by the watercolour brush drawn across the sheet is admittedly more calculated, less economical and assured, but there are strong connections between them, for example in the way that he has held several crayons at a time to produce linked, roughly parallel lines.

Other sheets of abstract drawings (e.g. fig. 2), some of which were transformed into the large works of the 1982 degree show [1], anticipate the 2011 *Al Bahar* sketches (fig. 3) in their carefully sequenced series of ideas and their gridded layouts. Grids across or under which organic forms squirm and expressive brushstrokes strain and flow are characteristic of many of Meuli's works. In his latest paintings, such as the series made for exhibition in Vienna's Aktionsradius and the larger *Earth Systems* canvases, carefully constructed square grids, which may themselves be manipulated and part-coloured, develop fertile tensions with lavish expressive brushstrokes.

At the beginning of the century Meuli returned to full-time painting, but for a decade, he produced series of paintings and drawings in which



fig. 2 Jonathan Meuli, Sketches of a medieval effigy, i / ii 1981, mixed media on paper, 20.5 x 28 / 22.5 x 28 cm



fig. 3 Jonathan Meuli, Studies for Al Bahar towers, iv 2011, mixed media on paper, 122 x 162 cm

representational elements are dominant. A show at Roger Billcliffe's Glasgow gallery in 2001, for example, displayed a series of very large watercolours of landscapes and cityscapes, showing the same view in two or three works. Many of the paintings were displayed framed as triptychs. The Glasgow paintings represented a significant departure, not just because this was Jonathan's first employment of the medium of watercolour on such a scale, but also because the works grappled with the modern painterly and moral difficulty of representing cities and landscapes, dissected as they are today by roads, scarred by car parks and service stations and marred by the detritus of environmental pollution. Meuli's watercolours, based on photographs, resolved the dilemma by embracing the contradictions between presenting a romanticisation of the viewed scene and a more disinterested or sometimes melancholic observation of what stood before him. Scottish mountains and hills are often represented centralised in his compositions and are shown with roads, car parks and parked cars in the foreground, exactly the twenty-first century's experience of natural beauty, disfigured and depleted by the very means through which we have easy access to it. The watercolours' potential for conventionality was disrupted by their large size and by the imposition of texts often centrally on the work, sometimes very prominently, sometimes merging into the image. The Futurists and Cubists experimented with the incorporation of

written messages (and found texts) into their paintings; but here the device is more like a transformation of Ian Hamilton Finlay's wry 'poem-object' interventions in the landscape at Little Sparta into painted representations of naturalistic landscapes. Jonathan has pointed to the placing of text on landscape imagery as also reminiscent of John Kippin's use of text on his photographs – though without the latter's politicised signposting.

Meuli's integration of text into a representational painting problematises any notion of the picture as a transposition or transmutation of a perceived reality. Three of the landscapes, for example, are variations on one another in different climatic and light conditions but from the same viewpoint, like Monet's 1890s series on Rouen Cathedral. However, they are also 'overlain' with texts taken from the first canto of Dante's *Inferno* (perhaps a resonance of his training in the culture of fourteenth-century Italy) (fig. 4). The texts force the viewer to engage with the fiction of painted representation, even when their colours render the letters transparent or submerge them into the scene. Many questions are prompted by these texts. Are they allusions, cues to interpretations, or are they intended to resonate in the viewer's mind? If so, how do they work? The Dante quotations, for example, will have different associations for every spectator; quite other than those they trigger in the artist. Meuli used similar techniques in his A9 watercolours in 2002 but

thereafter abandoned them. His subsequent representational series include one on wine making in the Haut Poitou, exhibited in 2008, the result of a fifteen-month stay in the area; twelve large canvases painted as a major project for the Institution of Civil Engineers in 2010; various private commissions, and two large paintings of the construction of the Al Bahar towers in Abu Dhabi, by Aedas architects. However, almost from that time forward, Jonathan has principally been producing abstract paintings, not on commission, but for exhibition. The switch from his representational works to such a 'pure' abstraction is one which seems to justify Sir Herbert Read's contentious – if psychologically astute – dictum that 'an alternation between abstraction and realism is desirable in any artist'.⁵

This exhibition concentrates almost exclusively on abstraction. In selecting abstract drawings and paintings from Meuli's works I have done so not only because these include what are, for me, his most powerful and innovative works aesthetically and intellectually, but also because they lead towards his current series of chromatically intense, abstract oils, exploring the relationship between art and science. The exhibition aims to uncover the route by which Meuli came to his current practice, but the line I am tracing, from the early works to the present ones, is not a straight one, but zigs and zags across his oeuvre. One can of course see structural and chromatic (and numerous technical) similarities

between many of the figurative works and the abstracts, particularly in the collage-like use of jagged blocks of colour in the paintings of the ICE and *Al Bahar* series. Their chromatic range and underlying structures have much in common. Jonathan's earlier abstracts often incorporate figurative elements, sometimes themselves derived from other works of art, sometimes observed from nature.⁶ A number of works shown here are abstracted from particular landscapes – for instance the Glencoe studies of 2005 [7, 8 and fig. 5] – and/or cityscapes, people, or indeed earlier works of art. However, the latest ones depart further from any



fig. 4 Jonathan Meuli, *Via*, 2000
watercolour and crayon on paper, 74 x 109 cm

direct reference to representational elements and there is a substantial distance, conceptual as well as visual, between them and the earlier representational series.

Even whilst he was producing his paintings of Scottish landscapes, some of Meuli's studies – as opposed to the finished works for exhibition – moved away from the subjects ostensibly represented towards a pure abstraction. He was not employing the studies diagrammatically, as shorthand notes or aids, to help him work towards the final, representational painting. These studies are manifestations of a different and contrary impulse, one which seeks to create a separate reality from the colours and marks on the painted or drawn surface. In other words, the Glencoe studies here are finished works in themselves, increasingly abstracted from any external reality and refocussed inwards.

These studies, along with *Blue* [10], dating from 2010/11, seem absolutely crucial in documenting Meuli's move from representation to abstraction. The starting point of *Blue* is the 2005 Glencoe studies, which experiment with levels of abstraction from the observed landscape. In other words, reflection on his own moves towards increasing abstraction some five or six years earlier catalysed a fundamental reorientation in Meuli's painting towards its current combination of expressive and geometrical abstraction. This is a form of *imitatio* – an adaptation

and reworking of an earlier piece – albeit his own. In *Blue*, we can see a point of departure from mimetic representation. John Golding's observation that 'each painting is born out of another painting, rather than an outside experience' is entirely apposite here.⁷

Many of Jonathan's recent paintings have titles which direct the viewer to muse on their relationship to nature and to science. The large Planet Earth paintings from 2016, feature 'frames-within-frames' whose geometry holds the compositions together but also separates different expressive fields. These square forms became increasingly animated and modified. Frame widths were narrowed and layered with different colours, sometimes refracting the expressive fields over which they lie and often changing the direction of flow between the areas inside and outside the squares. The same is true of the large *Big Bang* canvas and the rest of the *Mass-Energy* paintings, which feature circular forms separated by circular hoops of colour, or 'lenses,' a term Meuli himself prefers.⁸ He employs the word to articulate the notion that the border areas between the circular forms are not simply frames, but are a means of defamiliarising the picture surface, so that the spectator has to look both through and at it.

In 2016, Jonathan wrote of these new large abstracts that he interpreted 'the form of [his] recent paintings as that of a lens rather than as a frame. This is how I think of it, now: as a lens like the gravitational lenses

photographed in the distant universe by the Hubble telescope. Without the central part, the outer part simply would not be visible at all'.⁹ These large new works, combining different forms of abstraction, geometric, organic and gestural, are conceived as artistic responses – on a metaphorical level – to scientific discoveries.

If it is true that abstract painting seems to have begun in the early twentieth century by referring outwards, to observed reality, the converse is also true, namely that figurative painting always appears, if you are close enough to the canvas, abstract too, in its compositional arrangements of paint on a surface. As Sir Herbert Read said long ago, 'all art is primarily abstract'.¹⁰ Meuli's website shows details from Delacroix's 1822 *Barque de Dante* in the Louvre, of water droplets and their shadows created from four discrete pigments. He also features extraordinary details of clothing created from dots, blobs, and wavy brushstrokes in Goya's *King Ferdinand VII in Court Dress* and the wonderfully schematic details of the sash of the same artist's unfinished *Infante Don Francisco de Paula* in the Prado. This minute scrutiny of the surface can be seen in Meuli's *Friederike Mayröcker* oils, [12] with squares which can be read as if they were based on pixelations of digital photographs at great magnification. The paintings in the series often used unexpectedly fugitive pigments – fluorescent ones – which are doomed to fade quickly when exposed to

light. The physical permanence of the pigments will be as short as the 'life expectancy' of the Nexus-6 replicants in *Blade Runner*.

Meuli's own view is that there is an essential consistency of approach across his figurative and abstract painting. In an exchange of emails in 2017 about the distinction I am drawing between his abstracts and his representational paintings, he sent me an image of 'a large exhibition drawing which is representational but which contains a lot of the abstract mark making which I have developed in the



fig. 5 Jonathan Meuli, *Glencoe study iii*, 2005
mixed media on paper, 56 x 76 cm

abstract work. (Variety of marks, use of music to generate pattern, holding several pencils in one hand, so that marks are made in parallel lines, with an element of happenstance) ... it is a drawing of the building site outside my studio windows'¹¹ (fig. 6). The Auchendrane collage of 2005 [9] illustrates a closely related point. Separate rubbings of leaves, reeds and grass, as well as strongly abstracted graphic forms, are combined in multiple layers onto an image of the house in its landscape; the drawing paper has been dramatically cut and torn, with reed-like strips at the base. Representation and abstraction here co-exist in an image whose purpose remains primarily to portray a house in a landscape, whilst at the same time critiquing the possibility of two-dimensional representational accuracy. Abstraction is, of course, a complicatedly diverse category, on which the late Frank Whitford, a distinguished senior member of Wolfson wrote at length.¹² Still, it is Meuli's ventures deeper into abstraction – precisely his departures from all mimetic reference – which are arguably most interesting, not least because they ask a good deal from the viewer and a very great deal from the artist himself – and from which the selection for this exhibition has been made.

At the time of writing, Meuli is exploring five interrelated and overlapping themes: wave and river paintings; mass-energy paintings; earth systems; collision paintings, based on the theme of

elementary particles and their interactions; and tree paintings. Of all these, three *Great Wave* oil paintings of 2017–18 [20] are some of his most rewarding recent work. As with all his oil paintings in recent years, the underlayers are very carefully and painstakingly composed; but here the subdivisions lose their geometrical rigidity and have become themselves part of a dynamic, musical interplay of layered surfaces, interacting with the final, expansive and rapid brushstrokes (fig. 7). The small, related watercolours exhibited here have a great visual economy and intensity [14–15]. Somewhere in the



fig. 6 Jonathan Meuli, *The field of the fountains*, 2005
pencil on paper, 76 x 112 cm

background one senses the influence of Hokusai's *The Great Wave* but also of pictograms in which the wave is a stylised representation of the movement of water, or of sound. Jonathan's watercolours often combine a type of calligraphic stylisation with a vital, expressive brushstroke. They can be read as studies for the finished oil paintings and they are directly related to the 10ft-long *River Scrolls* from which they could easily be 'extracts', but they are very accomplished works in their own right and have an unfettered energy and fluidity.

The arresting works in this exhibition highlight recurrent concerns and moments of change through the artist's career over four decades, leading towards his present explorations of abstraction on a large scale. At the turn of the century, John Golding, one of the great authorities on abstraction, ended his monograph *Paths to the Absolute* with the statement that: 'Profundity has been in short supply [for a decade and a half] but it can and will assert itself'.¹³ In Jonathan Meuli's recent abstract paintings, the depth and seriousness that Golding sought is evident, both intellectually and aesthetically.



fig. 7 Jonathan Meuli, *The Great Wave I*, 2016
oil on canvas, 193 x 193 cm

Notes

- 1 It was in the context of art history that I first met Jonathan in 1978, in Charles Saumarez Smith's supervisions for a course on Trecento painting directed by Duncan Robinson. After we graduated in 1980, Jonathan went to Oxford, whilst I stayed on in Cambridge.
- 2 *The Guardian*, 12 February 2009.
- 3 Jonathan gave me a copy of Roger Hilton's *Night Letters* in the early 1980s. He has pointed to the influence of Ben Nicholson's (d. 1982) cool, rather austere, but beautifully calculated and balanced paintings as having been influential on his work. In an email to me on 5.10.17, he wrote: 'it was something about the care with which lines were chosen – when you look really closely at a Nicholson, you see how many erasings and alterings there have been to get the perfect line. Like Mondrian too. So the expressiveness is there, but very quiet.' Meuli was also conscious of the work of Patrick Heron (d. 1999).
- 4 Jonathan wrote to me about Bonnard's influence: 'It was for me the absolutely accurate placing and weighting of every brush stroke, every mark, and the placing of a different colour in every gesture. Looking at a Bonnard was to see a painting where not a single brush stroke was wrong.'
- 5 H. Read, *The Meaning of Art*, 1931 rev 1968, 1972, p. 261. Read was writing about Barbara Hepworth's turn back to realism from abstraction.
- 6 Just as Kandinsky's early abstracts (e.g. *Improvisation No. 30*, painted in 1913) retain traces of the scenes or objects from which they were abstracted.
- 7 Quoted by Duncan Robinson, 'An Introduction to the Work of John Golding', *John Golding, From the Artist's Estate*, Yale Center for British Art 2017, p. 10. The obvious comparisons between Meuli's and Golding's careers, similarly torn between occupations as art historian and painter of abstract works, are only superficial.
- 8 This, of course, differentiates the forms from, for instance, Robert Delaunay's 'disc' paintings from 1912 onwards [see J. Gage, 'The psychological background to early modern colour: Kandinsky, Delaunay and Mondrian', in *Towards a New Art: essays on the background to abstract art 1910–20*, London 1980, pp. 26–8].
- 9 <https://jonathanmeuli.com/2016/05/01/more-like-a-lens-than-a-frame/> accessed September 2017.
- 10 H. Read, *The Meaning of Art*, p. 42.
- 11 Email 14.9.17
- 12 F. Whitford, *Understanding Abstract Art*, London 1987. John Golding, *Paths to the Absolute*, London 2000, offers a series of monographic essays as an introduction to the subject. See also Dawn Ades, 'Making Visible, Abstract Drawing', in R. Deacon et al, *Abstract Drawing*, London 2014, pp. 106–117.
- 13 Golding, *Paths to the Absolute*, p. 232.

C A T A L O G U E



1 Study of Forms

1982

Mixed media on paper

75 x 75 cm

Private collection

Meuli went up to the Ruskin School of Art in 1980. After year one, he progressed nominally into year three. Perhaps as a result, he never formed long-term friendships with contemporaries such as the environmental landscape artist Julie Brook, with whom he shared a studio. Amongst those who taught him, he remembers the watercolourist John Newberry and evolutionary biologist Jonathan Kingdon, who instructed the students in the compulsory life-drawing and anatomy classes.

There, one of Meuli's characteristic reactions when drawing a model, was to rotate the sheet of paper and repeat the study, thus creating an essentially abstract rhythm. His drawings show his predilections for simplification, rhythm and abstraction. In a series of studies of a medieval knight's effigy in Dorchester Abbey, views of the figure are increasingly schematised, injected with pace and transformed by the application of wash until, in the final drawing on the sheet, the contorted image has lost contact with the original subject and become something entirely different (fig. 2). Jonathan had seen Henri Gaudier

Brzeska's self-portrait drawings with a pipe, progressively simplifying representational forms in the direction of Cubism, at Kettle's Yard. Meuli's abstraction, though, does not lead towards a faceted, planar Cubism: rather, the forms dissolve into a writhing, three-dimensional dynamism. The dynamism and torsion of these studies is directly transmitted into the larger-scale compositions with multiple elements for the degree show paintings.

The large drawing exhibited here is a worked-up preparatory study for the Ruskin graduation show paintings. It possesses an aggressive dynamism and a sculptural quality with a strong rotation and spiky triangular forms. The two swirling shapes almost seem engaged in a violent theological debate, with triangulated forms like medieval mitres. The palette is restricted but one notes the intense attack of the drawing on the watercolour paper, a limited use of yellow wash as well as white crayon and acrylics and the liberal use of black paint to define and clarify areas – producing the same effect, but by an inverse process, as the masking he has used since c. 2006.



2 Abstract Drawing

Cornwall. c. 1985
Watercolour and crayon.
29.7 x 21 cm
Collection of the artist

This drawing is abstracted from a representational prototype, the Cornish landscape. Here, one does not wonder so much about Meuli's initial reference as one sometimes does with Lanyon's landscape paintings for example: it is the abstracted endpoint which holds our attention. In that sense, and in more technical details, it seems to foreshadow the latest watercolours in the show. Jonathan has, for instance, drawn a mesh of coloured pencil lines roughly parallel with one another by holding several different

crayons simultaneously in one hand. The dashing of watercolour over the surface to produce movement and blur outlines will be seen frequently in his later works. Here crayon is applied over watercolour in different layers. Coloured drawings are found throughout Meuli's career but in this work the colours have no representational significance. The blue does not refer to sea or river forms, though it is tempting to read it this way, when one looks back from the *Great Wave* studies.



3 Destroying Angel

1987

Watercolour and crayon

56 x 79 cm

Collection of the artist

Destroying Angel is one of a series of gouaches, watercolours and drawings produced in Vacciago, near Lake Orta in Northern Italy, in 1987. The innovations, experiments and absorption of a huge range of visual source materials made this period the most significant in Meuli's early career. Several of the finest gouaches are now in a private collection in New York: for example, the witty little take on Manet's *Olympia* called *After Manet* (fig. 7). This last is a good example of how Meuli borrowed from many different artistic sources for this series of gouaches. In the case of *Destroying Angel*, the flying figure owes something to Quattrocento painting but also to Jonathan's deep interest in Chagall.

All these gouaches, with their sometimes expressionist colours and symbolist or neo-expressionist style, were painted in a short time span. In an email to me [28.9.17] Meuli described their subject matter as 'partly surreal, fabulous, partly autobiographical ... partly literary and art-historical'.

In these gouaches Meuli uses colour with a new freedom, simplifies forms and partially submerges drawing under wash.



fig. 8 Jonathan Meuli, *After Manet*, 1987
gouache, 56 x 76 cm



4 Elements of an Interior Landscape i

1987

Mixed media

100 x 70 cm

Collection of the artist

This is one panel from a series of seven triptychs, the largest works Jonathan produced whilst in Italy (the large oil paintings *Italian Garden* and *Yellow Wardrobe* were actually painted in Norfolk from sketches made in Vacciago). Each 'panel' is 1 metre by 70 cm. Each individual painting of the three was treated separately. So, although notionally part of a triptych, each panel might be treated in a different 'mode' from the other two, though they are often thematically linked, sometimes humorously. By 'mode' I mean visual treatment here, not just the choice of medium (pencil or gouache, or a mixture) or attitude to the white sheet of paper: they vary from very simple pencil outlines to complex, fully worked gouaches. In a much smaller triptych, *Tit City* (fig. 9) produced later, in Norfolk, the three panels are on a single piece of paper but the modes are still different.

The painting exhibited here belongs to a triptych entitled *Elements of an Interior Landscape* of which it is the left-hand panel. Over a potential chaos of busy, overlapping forms and colours, a repetitive form of three intersecting lines painted in black, like

a child's indication of grass, has briskly subjected the whole work to an irregular grid. A pencilled rectangle, like a doorway, is inscribed on the right. Here, the move towards an abstract composition seems largely complete, with the representational elements almost entirely submerged. In some ways, in the language of mark making, this resembles Howard Hodgkin's work of the mid-1970s.



fig. 9 Jonathan Meuli, *Tit City*, 1987
mixed media on paper, 29 x 59 cm



5 Ugly Head i

1987–88

Mixed media on paper

39 x 58 cm

Collection of the artist

Ugly Heads i and ii are mixed-media works featuring strange 'ugly heads', in profile, turned at 90 degrees, motifs derived from *commedia dell'arte* masks and cartoonish Philip Guston style heads. Male and female addorsed profile heads can also be seen on one of the earlier drawings for an Italian triptych, *Explanation of a particular relationship*.

Jonathan has said that these two works were probably started in Italy in 1987, but finished in Norfolk the next year. One of the gouaches painted in Vacciago, *Carnival in Verona*, showed small children wearing their elaborate carnival clothes and the memory of carnival masks has clearly resurfaced here. The Italian commencement of *Ugly Head i* began with two garden arch forms related to the

large *Italian Garden* oil painting; a similar arch form also appears in *Carnival in Verona*. The squiggly lines at the top are like the servant's head in *After Manet* (fig. 8) and the colour choices are directly related to the gouaches. Two, slightly sinister, standing figures can also be discerned on the left of the composition, now largely obscured. The prominent addition of the 'ugly head' to the study prevents one from reading it as an abstraction derived from a particular view; the head changes and disrupts the image, giving it a sense of layering and rotation. The media here are watercolour, ink and gouache, with crayon and pastel. Additionally, in the bottom left of *Ugly Head i* is a postcard of Kew's glasshouse interior, folded over the paper and stapled to it. This was removed and redeployed from *Ugly Head ii*.



6 Ugly Head ii

1987–88

Mixed media on paper

38 x 58 cm

Collection of the artist

The sense of multiple layers, palimpsesting and partial transparency we have noted in *Ugly Head i* is just as striking in *Ugly Head ii*, with its trio of lines running top to bottom over the outlined head and with the garden arch now almost completely submerged. On the left-hand side one can see where the postcard now used for its companion piece was

first fixed. Meuli has partly blurred the hard edges it left, but its shape can still be seen: he evidently valued the contrast between rigid geometrical shapes and densely worked expressive modelling, and this contrast will frequently recur in his later works. Repetitive blue-green zig-zag lines, applied in columnar rows, contribute to the density of the composition.



7 Glencoe Study i

2005

Watercolour

59 x 80 cm

Collection of the artist

A series of remarkable studies of Glencoe date from 2005, after Meuli's series of watercolour landscapes described above (p. 8). Both the studies shown here are derived from a type of drawing he had first developed in Portugal and in Italy in 1987, selecting various motifs or features and then employing different graphic techniques to treat each one separately.

The watercolour *Glencoe i* is obviously abstracted from a specific landscape, with the hill Meall Mór placed centrally. In 2001, Meuli had painted this same landscape in his series of large representational watercolours with text. The composition is handled dynamically with black wash used principally to

frame and outline the central features but also to indicate the dark sky in which a cloud stretches down to the hill on the right. Specific areas of the hill are differentiated and delineated, with wash applied to them and crayon, chalk and charcoal quickly deployed to indicate particular features such as trees. The use of a very diluted watercolour is particularly striking in the left foreground where it has been very thinly applied and its dripping down the paper has been employed as part of the patterning, then punctuated by orange blocks. The blocks of watercolour and agitated graphic forms produce a visual rhythm and there is a balanced dynamic between representation and abstraction which makes this an immensely satisfying work.



8 Glencoe Study ii

2005

Watercolour and mixed media

56 x 67 cm

Collection of the artist

In *Glencoe ii*, Meuli has chosen specific features in the landscape, separating them from one another and employing a different graphic notation for each one. Each element thus becomes, in a sense, a different abstract feature in a larger composition. This simultaneously emphasises both their individuality and differences from one another and their belonging to a greater whole. This study has ventured much further into abstraction than the companion piece *Glencoe i*.

In *Glencoe ii*, the individual marks are both separated and unified compositionally by the powerful charcoal black surround, faded into greys and blue-greys, which paradoxically illuminates each white area. The border is carefully smudged to effect a

smoother transition from the graphic areas. Within them, individual elements are treated with an intensity of gaze which makes this a major artistic achievement. In the white area, top left, are highly schematised rocks. Beneath them, the shaking lines of two different blues, running down vertically, are streams etched into the rocky landscape. The green lines are trees, their fuzzy tops carefully emphasised by the blurring of the border in the same direction. The orange and yellow horizontal marks are bracken. The main element notionally, is the central Munro, Aonach Dubh, patches of which are shown on the right. The Munro is not wholly absent, but nor is it present except in the implied slopes and selected features picked out in the darkness.



9 Auchendrane

2005

Collage

100 x 84.5 cm

Private collection

In 2005, Meuli was commissioned to produce two images, the medium unspecified, of Auchendrane House in Ayrshire, in its landscape setting. For both of these he chose to use collage, a technique which is unusual in his oeuvre. However, the techniques employed here can be partially related to the *Glencoe* studies.

A pencil representation of the view of the house is seen in the distance, from fields beyond the river Doon, with fencing cutting across the composition. The foreground tree, top right, has been broken up into different graphic forms and the two right-hand trunks are separately applied pieces of paper. In fact, separate pieces of paper are layered all over the composition: sometimes the drawing runs across them, sometimes they are separate details applied.

Beneath the squiggly line which forms a roughly horizontal division of the drawing, Meuli has added, from his sketchbook, seven different rubbings of leaves and grass stalks found on site; some of the sheets are cut up and torn. The scattering of details

and their application to the drawing reminds one of *Glencoe ii*, though here the sheets of rubbings are distinct. Collages by their nature disrupt planarity, fragmenting the picture's flat surface and layering different pictorial spaces. These effects are particularly clear here, where Meuli has ostentatiously drawn attention to his manipulation of different surfaces, planes, colours and textures by dramatic cutting, tearing and layering and by applications of wash. Sections of the drawing paper have been cut out and the sheet has been glued to another piece of much whiter cartridge paper which has itself been cut down at the left. Wash, tearing and abrasion have articulated the layered surface, further emphasised by the pieces of the white paper cut and torn into jagged shapes and glued on the left hand side and by rhomboidal shapes cut from the drawing paper on the left hand side of the tree. At the base on the right, the drawing paper has been torn into shreds echoing the rubbings of grass. This spiky, rather three-dimensionally layered outline, has been accentuated by its application over a dark piece of paper which has also been torn.



10 Blue

2010–11

Mixed media

35 x 52.5 cm

Collection of the artist

Around 2012, there was a decisive change in Meuli's work, away from the representational paintings on which he had been engaged for a decade. He had already begun painting new abstract compositions. The 2010/11 painting, *Blue*, constitutes the vital link between his 2005 *Glencoe* studies and the later abstracts. Meuli had returned to his *Glencoe* studies five or six years later, finding inspiration again in their progress towards abstraction, but now started to develop it in an entirely new direction. Here, the basic form of the Munro is still visible, if submerged, but the abstracted elements have been redistributed and integrated into the overall composition. The original reference to a specific landscape has disappeared. *Blue* responds to his *Glencoe* studies, not to the landscape that inspired them.

The right side of the painting is a series of dark brushstrokes bending back into the centre of the composition; a blue underpainting, which has been masked, shows through beneath and the artist has clearly been fascinated by the shapes left as he takes the loaded brush from the paper. Abstract

components have been redeployed across the composition and some are layered over the black brushstrokes: others have been masked. Pale blue areas, some streaked with orange, have been constrained into distinct shapes, archaeologically integrated into the developing composition. Their subtle presence may have suggested to Meuli the geometrical elements, notably the roughly square shape with its cloudy-sky blues and much more obtrusively, the rectangle on the left, preserved by masking from a swathe of black which now frames it. Jonathan must initially have been dissatisfied with the basic composition and imposed the geometric shapes upon it to try to force a new order to emerge. The rectangular shape with iridescent yellow stripes is like the postcard on *Ugly Head i*, functioning as a formal, geometrical shape, visually 'collaged' onto the expressive composition. This dynamic and exploratory painting links the 2005 studies abstracted from landscapes to the 2012–14 paintings where the exchange between the expressive and the geometric develops a fruitfully dynamic tension.



11 The darkness in which life was lived

2014

Watercolour

20 x 30 cm

Collection of the artist

By 2014, Meuli had begun a series of paintings titled from Jun'ichir Tanizaki's essay on Japanese aesthetics, *In Praise of Shadows*. Meuli's method of titling his works often indicates their intellectual hinterland. The relationship between a text and a painting is an indirect one in which the pictorial forms are imbued with a meaning for the artist derived from his reading. Here, the title comes from a passage on lacquerware and its appearance in dark, traditional Japanese interiors. The novelist writes: 'the lacquerware of the past was finished in black, brown, or red, colours built up of countless layers of darkness, the inevitable product of the darkness in which life was lived.' He continues that a superb piece of black lacquerware decorated with flecks of silver and gold will appear sombre and refined, dignified, when illuminated by a single lantern or candle, but vulgar when lit by an electric light.

This small watercolour belongs to a group where one visual effect is of layers, but another is of the struggle between geometrical forms and broader

swathes of dark colour. Some of the squares here look as if they have been preserved from a black background which encroaches over them; it is itself overlapped by smaller squares – like lacquerware glimmering in candlelight – which are also superimposed on some of the larger squares. In this work, we see the beginning of a vital concern in Meuli's later abstracts: the visual opposition of tightly controlled grids and geometrical forms on the one hand and expressive, broad brushstrokes on the other. Here, right at the beginning of this development, though, the squares themselves are already modulated and tuned with meshes of brushstrokes and counterchanges of colour. This brooding, yet elegant work represents a major development from *Blue*, the turning point in Meuli's new abstraction.

Later, Meuli began to develop bright, exuberantly colour-laden abstract canvases, employing the square as the building block. The squares were arranged in regular grids, suggesting pixellated digital images under high magnification.



12 Alas the Dignity

2012–15

Mixed media on board

32.5 x 43.5 cm

Private collection

Meuli employed poetry to furnish titles for his paintings from around 2000. A group of paintings from 2015 are named either from Friederike Mayröcker's passionate, intense and collaged poems in *Raving Language: Selected Poems 1946–2006* (translated by Richard Dove) or with phrases derived from a 2015 interview with her in *PN Review*.

The first version of *Alas the Dignity* (fig. 10) is unique in the Mayröcker series. It was initially painted in 2012. The painting started off as a series of shimmering bluish squares, some of which were visually collaged onto the surface. Then much of the painting was covered with lavish black brushstrokes: but this left a central void in the composition, or at least an imbalance. In 2015, Meuli cut the painting down and inverted it, a very rare procedure in his practice. He then reworked it by the addition of the smaller squares, mainly over the black mass but also over some of the larger blue squares. Now, it was retitled with a phrase taken from the conversation between Mayröcker and Tobias Haberl: she was

contrasting her own aged appearance with that of Samuel Beckett.



fig. 10 Jonathan Meuli, early stage of *Alas the Dignity*
2012, mixed media on board, 41 x 51 cm



13 Vienna Abstract xi

2016

Oil on board

40 x 39.5cm

Collection of the artist

This is one of twelve paintings produced for the Aktionsradius, Vienna. Originally, they were simply numbered, as here. Then, becoming more involved in the metaphorical connections between his painting and hard science, the artist retitled them on the theme of elementary particles: but he subsequently felt that the names he had given to them fitted the works less well than he had hoped.¹ His extended rumination on the aptness of the title is a gauge of the attention he gives to paintings executed even years previously and to his changing attitudes to what they 'mean'.

The nearly square border area separates the inner and outer sections of the painting, which were painted independently of one another. Meuli uses the frame-within-a-picture in a fashion superficially analogous to Howard Hodgkin's. However, there are also major differences, as is revealed by attention to the frames or lenses within Jonathan's work, which overtly impose geometrical shapes as a means of organising and disciplining the composition. As

Meuli painted squares of different forms, he realised that the borders between the squares were also a 'site of creativity': in other words, the areas of borders defining the squares as well as the colour fields within them became sources or generators of forces.

Analysis of the work reveals its complex, almost archaeological layering, achieved through masking, glazing, and wet-on-wet painting in oil. The ordered geometry of the square contrasts with the broad expressive brushstrokes counterchanged in the horizontal areas, predominantly blue and purple and pink. The tightness of this visual control contrasts with Hodgkin's work and shows that any possible influence is rather indirect. Here, the tensions between abstract geometry and expressive brushstrokes are a source of the work's potency. The chromatic intensity of the bright pinks and greens and spattered blue are visually striking. Meuli was searching for an almost luminous vibrancy of colour as a substitute for the fugitive luminous pigments of the Mayröcker paintings.



14 / 15 Wave Studies ii / iii

2016

Watercolour

Each 38 x 56 cm

Collection of the artist

This pair of watercolours belongs to a series of paintings dating to 2016 and 2017. They demonstrate Meuli's interest in seismic sea waves, or tsunami as well as in wave forms more generally – in music or physics, for instance. In *Wave ii*, the stylised wave flows, with broad brushstrokes of blue, horizontally across the image. The blue is flanked by other colours, pink, orange, green, which are interrupted in the centre of the composition. A broad swathe of red sweeps vertically down, partly overlapping some of the coloured wave, but stops like a broken bridge. It emerges as a rainbow of coloured crayons on the other side of the blue wave. Another rainbow block is partly covered by the wave. At near right angles is

a block of blue and red paint and two further passages predominantly of dark blue and dark red have been splashed spikily onto the lower centre and right.

Wave Study iii is more complicated: the central wave surges and crashes more three dimensionally over and under other shapes. The crayon lines extend down from top to bottom over and under pink, red and orange blocks. The upper one features Meuli's distinctive triangular shapes (at first an unconscious echo of Kandinsky, perhaps, but consciously employed in works this century), first seen here in *Study of Forms*. Touches of wash soften the shapes.



16 / 17 / 18 Collision Drawings i–iii

2017

29 x 35 / 25 x 34 / 26 x 38 cm

Watercolour

Collection of the artist

The three 2017 *Collision* studies exhibit some of Meuli's characteristic drawing techniques in purely abstract colour sketches of great energy and vitality. Crayons held simultaneously in the right hand produce lines which snake or zig-zag together across the paper. In *Collision iii* there are two sets of lines, one running across the other; those running horizontally have been contorted on the right after penetrating the orange block. In all three drawings, the crayon lines lie across, or are traversed by, large solid blocks of orange to red. In *Collision i*, nervous passages of lilac, pink or green frenetically agitate the composition as do the looping green lines, also seen in *Collision ii*. Thicker groups of dark and light

blue curve up and off the top of the paper in *Collision iii*. Water has been pre-applied with the brush, and parts of the drawing are blurred and smudged in all three of these watercolours.

The *Collision* drawings can be related back to the (less developed and denser) drawing from three decades ago with which the exhibition opens – in the use of roughly parallel crayon lines of different colours and the employment of water to blur and move the composition for example – but they are much more economical formally and show a mastery of the materials and techniques to expressive effect.



19 Large Collision iii

2017

Watercolour

120 x 120 cm

Collection of the artist

This is one of three very large *Collision* watercolours. Each explores the same themes as the (even larger) square canvases that Meuli has been painting in oil. Visually, however, they differ strongly from the oils, dominated as the latter are by the central square bordered section, a direct development of the smaller Aktionsradius paintings.

All the *Collision* watercolours were painted in the wake of conversations with Paul Soler, Professor in Experimental Particle Physics at the University of Glasgow. Professor Soler's chief research is on the LHCb experiment at the Large Hadron Collider, set up: 'to explore what happened after the Big Bang that allowed matter to survive and build the Universe'. The aim of the experiment 'is to measure differences in the decay of B-mesons (quark-antiquark states containing the beauty quark) with respect to their antiparticle partners. The mechanism that governs the difference between B and anti-B decays is called CP violation. It is thought to be the mechanism that allowed matter to

dominate over antimatter at an early stage in the formation of the universe'.¹ The Collision paintings, Meuli explains, have a connection with science not because they possess an intentionally science-related content, but metaphorically. This watercolour has obvious visual connections with the smaller *Wave* watercolours as well as with Meuli's *Collision* oils. It is dominated by the violent clash between two rotating 'systems' of red and blue, the red one breaking up from the impact of the blue one on the right and strafed by blue lines running across it like the crayon lines in the *Wave* watercolours. The work flashes and sparks (effects generated by Meuli's employment of masking fluid) with the intensity of the impact. The use of masking has resulted in forms whose white lines reveal the paper underneath the red and blue disks; these white lines are themselves overlain by later wavy brushstrokes in parallel lines. One roughly triangular shape is echoed by the triangle of red wash applied over the blue circle: two other lines bend across the blue circle, touching at one point.



20 The Great Wave ii

2017

Oil on board

122 x 122 cm

Collection of the artist

This is one of the latest in a series of *Wave* paintings intended to depict, in the substance of the paint, the energy, force and power of the tsunami. The two larger oil paintings in the series are just over six foot square. In *The Great Wave ii*, the geometric forms (mainly in orange) are reminiscent of the two boats in Hokusai's *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*, though they are filled with rapid brushstrokes as if being submerged and overwhelmed. Jonathan states that his choice of colours attempts to show 'something of the invisible world of gigantic forces at work in the earth's crust to produce the initial shock wave: reds and oranges rising from the depths, blues and greens tumbling over them, and dark colours woven all through.' The whole painting has a feeling of turmoil induced by the wave's overwhelming of the geometric forms, metaphorically related to the 2011 Japanese tsunami disaster.

As is the case with all his recent oil paintings, Meuli first embarks on careful planning of the underlayers. Different painted strata are superimposed on one

another after careful masking. The last, upper layers employ rapid, expressive brushwork, injecting rhythm and movement into the compositions. He often uses music to help generate the necessary energy and thinks of the brushwork as embodying it. Of this painting, Jonathan states that 'the making of the final surface was very carefully choreographed over two days – but the actual painting of it probably took just a few minutes.' What oil permits, in terms of distinct layers and masking, is a much more layered composition than is possible with water-colours. This painting has a complex archaeological structure glimpsed through different strata, some partly submerged by the flowing later layers, mostly in blue. Recognisably, the multi-coloured geometrical shapes with mainly red and orange outlines, bottom right and top left, are related to the masked shapes left in the white paper, penetrating the whirling red and blue forms in the *Large Collision* watercolour. However, oil paint renders possible the intense, almost ostentatious, chromatic saturation seen in many of his current canvases.



21 / 22 River Scrolls i / ii

2016

Watercolour

Each 30 x 300 cm

Collection of the artist

The four *River Scroll* watercolours obviously relate to Chinese or Japanese scroll paintings in their format. In their energy, flux and dynamism, Meuli's watercolours embody a restlessness and percussiveness which is peculiarly appropriate for his subject.

Unlike East Asian handscrolls, Meuli's were painted in a movement from left to right. The first of the series was painted in three separate sections, standing at a desk, but the other three were the products of a single session, with the paper stretched out on the floor. There is an air of experimentation in the way that a single brush stroke (actually a composite tool of several brushes strapped together) runs like a river all the way through the composition in the later

three. The first is sunny in tone, disciplined and organised, with Meuli's characteristic masking and layering, triangular and rectangular shapes. The second scroll, clearly broken into three parts, is very closely related to the *Wave Studies ii* and *iii* in terms of technique and colour, and especially in the striking use of black. The turbulent forms in the right-hand section in particular remind one of early Kandinsky, for instance *Composition VI* of 1913, with its complex pockets of space and theme of the Deluge.¹ Kandinsky's venture into 'pure painting' just before World War I had very great interest for Jonathan (as for all abstract artists ever since). The influence is not just formal; it is also connected with Kandinsky's notion that his paintings would engage the viewer in a deeper, spiritual, contemplation of his works.²



23 / 24 River Scrolls iii / iv

2016

Watercolour

each 30 x 300 cm

Collection of the artist

The third *River Scroll* is much more an integrated whole than the previous two, with a diminution of force towards the right-hand side and with blue balancing the black. Passages in the turbulence of *River Scroll iv* relate even more closely to the

Large Collision paintings. Here, the river seems to have engulfed everything on the left with its subaqueous colouring, but the dark blue turns to violet, pinks, purples and greens in a gradual diminution of its crescendo to the right.

Notes

Vienna Abstract xi

- 1 This one in particular, as he explained on 15.8.18, was too contemplative for the name he had planned to give it:
Collision Painting no. 11, Z Boson Waltz.

Large Collision iii

- 1 Paul Soler's web page accessed 9.10.17:
<http://ppewwww.physics.gla.ac.uk/~psoler/>

River Scrolls i and ii

- 1 Golding, *Paths to the Absolute*, pp. 100–2
- 2 Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, transl. with an introduction by M.T.H. Sadler, New York 1977: 'The life of the spirit may be fairly represented in diagram as a large acute-angled triangle divided horizontally into unequal parts with the narrowest segment uppermost...' (p. 6) and 'Painting is an art, and art is not vague production, transitory and isolated, but a power which must be directed to the improvement and refinement of the human soul – to, in fact, the raising of the spiritual triangle' (p. 54).

Acknowledgements

I must first thank the President of Wolfson College, Professor Jane Clarke, the Bursar, Chris Lawrence, and the Fine Arts Committee of Wolfson College for the opportunity to curate this show. Dr Meredith Hale provided guidance and kindly commented on drafts of the text. I want to thank, too, the committee's chairman Dr Owen Edwards and secretary Margaret Greeves for their warm support. Sir Charles Saumarez Smith and Mr Duncan Robinson proffered advice and prompted memory. In Glasgow, Jonathan Meuli and Liffy Grant offered generous hospitality and Ghislaine Kennerley kindly

allowed me to see the Auchendrane collage hanging in her house. We are all grateful to her and the other owners for lending their works, to supplement those loaned by the artist. Jonathan generally resisted an almost overwhelming temptation to curate the curator. He tolerated my attempts to chart and explain his career and responded to my questions with generous feedback which I have sometimes quoted in the text. In the end, however, responsibility for the selection of works, the views expressed in the catalogue and for any errors the text contains, is mine alone.

Phillip Lindley
Loughborough, October 2018

Phillip Lindley is Excellence 100 Professor of Art History at Loughborough University. His art history career started here in Cambridge, first at Downing College, where he gained his degree, doctorate and Bye Fellowship and then as a Research Fellow at St Catharine's College. In 1988 he was awarded a British Academy Post-Doctoral Fellowship at the University of York and subsequently went on to become Head of Department at the University of Leicester in 1998, before coming to Loughborough.

He has curated a number of exhibitions, including *Image and Idol* at Tate Britain in 2001–02, co-curated with the sculptor Richard Deacon and *Richard Deacon: This is where ideas come from* at Wolfson College, Cambridge (2015).



Wolfson College
Cambridge

In association with



Loughborough
University

Published by seven-five-six press
to accompany the exhibition *Approaches to Abstraction*
at Wolfson College Cambridge,
January – March 2019

Wolfson College
Barton Road, Cambridge CB3 9BB

wolfson.cam.ac.uk

756press.com

Exhibition curated by Phillip Lindley

Photographs © Jonathan Meuli
Foreword text © Meredith Hale
Introduction text © Phillip Lindley

ISBN 978-1-9993285-0-4