Pattern Soup

A text by George Vasey

Skinny tree branches thrust awkwardly skyward, forming angular typography. A wren's plumage echoes the arc of a neighbouring flower stem. The mouth of a darkened cloud threatens a downpour on a pert hill. A letter box is agape; a loose letter recoils tongue-like. Journeying casts hungry attention outwards to scenic details and inwards, ripening inchoate thoughts.

I start most days by walking around the small North-East coastal town where I live and work. The rhythm of running and walking is crucial to my creative process. Distracted-looking, deep in thought, conjures tangential patterns as eyes map repetitions in the landscape.

What would the late painter Prunella Clough make of this scenery? Her diaristic Modernism aligns pictorial experimentalism with industrial and humdrum iconography. She elevates slag heaps, transit vans, and machinery into something monumental and mysterious, furnishing a concrete cooling tower with the gravitas of a snow-capped mountain top. Clough's art has always magnetised me: partially abstract and never entirely figurative, painting as a soup of intention and messy intuition.

Contour Lines, curated by Tom Cole and Sid Motion, convenes eight artists who, like Clough, absorb the environment via creative osmosis. The thematic exhibition is conceived around and with the landscape, although land here is stretched in myriad ways: macro and micro, industrial and rural, sort of figurative and partially abstract. Work, encompassing ceramics, painting, collage and textiles, is imbued with a sense of place and implied through colour, form, and materials. While artists in *Contour Lines* flirt with pattern and abstraction, I doubt these definitions would fully satiate any of them.

Take the work of Lubna Chowdry, whose protean practice draws from a diverse range of industrial, artisanal, and architectural techniques and imagery to produce sumptuous works that take curvilinear twists and angular turns. Like many artists in the exhibition, her work veers between iconographic elements and non-representative forms. There is a generosity and generative quality to her use of everyday materials that persistently point outwards to the world, refracting her magpie interests through a metaphorical kaleidoscope.

The artists in *Contour Lines* tangentially point to their environment, picking out elements in their peripheral vision. Their work reminds us that the human brain is wired to make connections and see patterns. We might see Micky Mouse in burnt toast and Jesus in passing clouds. Visual information is often partial, deceptive, and errant. It is continually mistranslated in the transition from the eye to the brain. Humans are narrative-hungry and frequently quick to project meaning and order onto random information. The emphasis on pattern recognition is often called apophenia or pareidolia (seeing faces in objects). The scientist Michael Shermer coined the term patternicity to describe the human propensity to see order in noise. This cognitive bias – with humans since Palaeolithic times – can help and hinder, prepare us for hunting and stop us from being hunted.

As Shermer clarifies, patternmaking is a form of meaning-making, a creative process in prioritising, editing and synthesising. In moving away from hunter-gathering, humans continue to deploy patterns and decorations to appease and excite the brain. While we might see a static image, our eyes – which have a tiny window of focus – are rarely still: they motor around, generating images through fragments. Some theorise patterns are attractive because they're similar wherever our attention lands. Likewise, symmetry can be unconsciously comforting because it conforms to an order that calms us.

Patterns can offer repose or restlessness. They can seduce and deceive us. Lull us into false securities and camouflage in plain sight. Artists often implicitly understand this, bewildering compositional expectations.

Take Elizabeth Fritsch, who trades in communicative errancy. In her signature patterned pottery, we encounter illusionistic games with depth of field. Initially studying music, Fritsch's ceramic and pictorial forms reference musical notation and architectural diagrams. The works hold us in a contradictory space, challenging our brain's persistent sense-making impulse. Fritsch understands that, like polysemous words, images are rarely reducible to a singular meaning.

Sort of pattern and kind of abstraction, expanded relationship to landscape, and quotidian material culture: themes pile up in *Contour Lines,* generating lines of enquiry and conversation between artists.

Jacqueline Poncelet's collaged carpets and painted textiles reference patterns adopted globally from parts

of India, Africa and Japan. Anglophile style often borrows and takes from other cultures. Patterns, of course, are not neutral; they're freighted with histories of empire and exchange. Poncelet is astute in how design is imbued with macro and micro sense of place: ideas and visual forms transformed from dress to sofa transited across seas to living rooms.

Poncelet plays on the divergent historical associations of pattern and abstraction. While abstraction has an elevated and high-minded history, pattern has often been lazily dismissed and sidelined from intellectual enquiry. Using metaphorically loaded materials such as carpet, Poncelet usurps the domestic and genteel, rendering it an impolite affront to high-minded modernism. Pattern, abstraction, minimalism, and figuration: these terms feel particularly unhelpful in articulating the nuanced ways that artists now work.

What many artists in *Contour Lines* share is perhaps not such a focus on location as much as dislocation. Layering and merging, sort-of-this and not-quite-that. Ideas and visual forms are taken out of context and deployed elsewhere. Throughout the show, we remain constantly on the move, details beaming in and out of focus.

Take Vicken Parsons, whose intimately scaled paintings often suggest grand architectural spaces. Walls, doors and windows become flattened pictorial planes, creating discrete blocks of colour. Like stage sets, their lack of activity and habitation invites us to envision ourselves roaming these environments. Are these imagined or half-remembered spaces? Their head-like size heightens the feeling that we are tasked with mobilising our imagination. Parsons' work feels perched between revelation and concealment, a simultaneous pictorial request and rebuttal.

Where Parsons' paintings can feel airless and static, Max Wade's canvases, with their wet-on-wet paint, rapidly worked with a brush and palette knife, evoke an urban kineticism. We encounter the city at speed; the horizon line upended, the picture plane flattened. The environment is a blur of impressions, patterns and shapes. Oil paint is a particularly adept medium at translating distracted and layered cognition, and the work of painting, as Wade understands, is an amalgam of memory, observation, intention and messy intuition.

While Wade's paintings are about the landscape, Kate Newby is in cahoots with it. She picks up materials such as found glass from the environment local to the gallery to create glazes and imprints the surfaces of her ceramic tiles with ephemera found on the streets. Previously embedding her installations in windows and sinking them into the floor, she dissolves the threshold between exterior and interior. Works, made with porcelain and terracotta, have been weathered and sculptured by natural forces. Wind chimes are a recurrent motif. Often architectural in scale, the work retains a sense of intimacy. Meteorology and geology encounter the scale of a body. There is a sense of working with rather than against natural forces, perhaps a countenance to ecological anxiety.

Rana Begum's practice draws from abstract antecedents and is similarly architecturally scaled, expanding from the gallery into major public commissions. The work, saturated with a vibrant palette of hot pinks, neon orange, and lemon yellow, is more urban in tone than Newby's. Begum's focus is light: artificial and natural, diffuse, dappled and direct. Sculptures project it, frame, deflect and mirror it. Her work constantly changes, remaining alert and responsive to environmental conditions.

What we see depends on who we are, where we're from, and how we move. How we see changes as the world changes. Environmental conditions such as dust, light, humidity, and atmospheric pressure also play a part. The artists in *Contour Lines* revel in the ways observations of the world are evolving, partial, and errant. Our eyes dart around, attention drifts, and details emerge as we make connections and draw patterns from a soup of messy impressions.

George Vasey is a Curator and Writer based in Saltburn-by-the-Sea.

www.sidmotiongallery.co.uk

24a Penarth Centre,
Hatcham Road, SE15 1TR

Open: Thu–Sat, 12–6pm,
or by appointment