

In a hall of mirrors

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In a hall of mirrors, nothing is as it immediately appears. Lizi Sánchez works on surfaces that look like paper, but are in fact aluminium foil. A language of abstract colour that seems derived from geometric abstraction is actually appropriated from commercial sources. Precisely printed patterns are in reality, laboriously hand painted. 'In a World that Laughs' explores the intersection of Modernist Abstraction and its utopian ideologies with that of commercial graphic design. This highly self-conscious orchestration of material and form does not simply mirror a formal legacy of abstract painting, but instead offers a multifaceted reflection on the complexities not only of medium, but on the labour and the business of being a working artist in a 21st century megalopolis. However, 'In a World that Laughs' wears its serious concerns lightly, filtering its attention through the prism of desire and consumption, and its attendant soap bubble pleasures.

The exhibition's title comes from Karel Teige's *Poetism Manifesto* of 1924. Teige, a Czech modernist, avant-garde writer, artist, graphic designer and critic, conceived of Poetism as a jubilant clarion call for the avant-garde to balance the sobriety of Marxist constructivism with joyous, life affirming celebration. After the trauma of the First World War, Teige called for an art of life, 'an art of living and enjoying, [...], a natural part of everyday life, as delightful and accessible as sport, love, wine, and all manner of other delectations⁽¹⁾'. Neither heroic, nor academic, nor born out of aesthetic speculation, but out of life, Poetism represented a 'modus vivendi ... the art of living and enjoying life'⁽²⁾. Sánchez filters her attention through Teige's playful embrace of ordinary pleasures, while remaining observant of her moment and location. Operating from this perspective, Sánchez gathers her source materials on her journeys through London. To move through London is to move through a city increasingly dedicated to the pursuit of pleasure through consumption and through rarefied luxury retail. London is also in the midst of a construction boom, and Sánchez's studio abuts a busy construction site; her view is cluttered with wooden pallets, scaffolding and foil wrapped insulation board. Her work balances between these two poles – the raw materials and brute labour of construction, and the refined pleasures of frivolous consumption.

At first glance however, Sánchez's work seems occupied by formal concerns, and by the legacy of abstraction in particular. Her wall mounted works, scrolls and banners composed of stripes of vivid colour as with *Dreams of Dreamers*, or the elegant, angular lattice of *May All Come True*, appear to continue a conversation with Op Art, with Russian Constructivism or perhaps Bauhaus textile design, and her small multiple sculptures, a tongue in cheek dialogue with Minimalism. However this is not quite abstraction, but its refraction. Sánchez is interested in how the often severe and highly serious language of geometric abstract painting has been co-opted and transmuted to commercial ends. Rather than the virtuality of pure abstraction, divorced from material referents, Sánchez maintains a connection to the actual by appropriating her compositions from commercially available sources, often referencing high end packaging. She takes designs and colour schemes from commercial sources and reproduces them, stripping them in the process of any logo or identifying text. Minus the branding, the original source is rendered unrecognisable – instead they recall their initial inspiration, the abstract language of Modernist painting.

This strategy draws attention to a certain circular logic. Recuperating patterns and designs from the commercial arena, rendering them again purposeless and abstract, we can admire them for their formal precision. The language of geometric abstraction is revealed as magnificently capacious, a vehicle adaptive to diverse ideological persuasions. Modernist artists and thinkers were often motivated by utopian ideals; Constructivists wanted to create a new visual language for a Marxist world order; the artists of the Bauhaus sought beauty in the functional, in order to devise accessible, utilitarian design. However, geometric abstraction informed by noble principles was enthusiastically co-opted by designers who evacuated it of revolutionary fervour and turned it to commercial ends for book design, advertising and packaging design. This act of appropriation allows Sánchez to maintain a delicate balancing act; remaining cognisant of this complex history of co-option and compromise while celebrating the formality and the seriousness of a visual language of indulgence.

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Look for example at *May All Come True*, a long slender banner painted in white, with a complex interlocking fretwork of slim gold ribbons. Sharp and precise, the elegant pattern of lozenges and diamonds, at once decorative and restrained, brings to mind several possible precedents: the Bauhaus abstraction of Anni Albers, or the dizzying constructivist designs of Varvara Stepanova, even the acetic zen spirituality of Agnes Martin's line drawings for instance. In fact, Sánchez found the pattern on the shop front of a luxury boutique. This strategy of appropriation then draws attention to the magnificently elastic capacity of abstraction, which can function as a vehicle for wildly different yet similarly utopian social and aesthetic movements.

The tactic of appropriation also offers us an opportunity to reflect on the status of the artist as labourer. By removing the process of aesthetic decision making from her facture, and taking her patterns and colour schemes directly from a commercially available source, the painting of the surface is recast. Rather than rarefied it becomes rote, almost mechanical. Sánchez's studio process is painstaking, indeed, almost tedious whereby the found colour and design is meticulously transferred by hand, but with such fidelity and care that it becomes a kind of craftsmanship. The foil surface is carefully prepared, the colours precisely matched and judged against their source, the paint applied with such dexterity that the print of the brush, or any indication of the artist's hand is utterly evacuated. Similarly her box sculptures are meticulously formed and painted. Although they look like cardboard, these little multiples are made of wood, ends precisely tooled to mimic the flaps and tabs of a folded construction, the whole painted to disguise their material nature. The artist here is self-consciously reframed as an artisan, and the art object acknowledged as a covetable commodity. These works hover between painting and sculpture, and her choice of surface contributes to her works' obdurate object-ness. Sánchez paints on foil; not domestic tin foil, but a thicker industrial grade, usually used for food packaging. Gleaming and impermeable, she disguises its original silver and polished state, painting it with acrylic until it is opaque and paper like, with only slim bands of its untouched surface evident at each margin. Working onto metal as soft and flexible as paper, so responsive it buckles and ripples with pressure, the foil retains the traces of the surface against which it has been pressed. As it is worked, it ages palpably, moving from pristine, machine-finished smoothness to subtly crumpled and crushed. Painting becomes sculpture when slung in a length over an industrial trestle table like a strip of wall paper or a section of billboard waiting to be pasted in place. The subtle stiffness of É's foil support not as ductile as paper or fabric, holds a sculptural arc. Sánchez's choice of material support opens up more than formal possibilities. By painting on to a surface commonly used in packaging, she invokes the physical reality of her explored forms and materials. Equally, the skin of the surface recalls the mayfly life cycle of wrapping, which moves from desire and anticipation swiftly to destruction and then disposal, reflecting obliquely the emotional micro-dramas of compulsive consumption. The packaging of small luxuries such as soap or chocolate, hand bags or ice cream is carefully calculated to arouse desire, or a naked acquisitiveness. It is precisely engineered to snag our attention and is soaked in pleasure and anxiety. To paraphrase art historian and critic James Elkins, each precisely designed wrapping is a barb, a tiny catch just the size of our eye⁽³⁾.

Take *Every Day*, the dainty box sculptures that are literally multiple, collectible, covetable. Flirting with minimalism's modular rhetoric, but each gaily individualised with a swatch of colour, they deliberately induce déjà vu; a coffee brand comes to mind. Equally, her painting *Ice Cream* is initially abstract, a fancifully stepped motif in white on a pale blue ground. It recalls an old fashioned ice cream dish, with cut glass bowl balancing on a fluted stem. Continuing a dialogue with Op Art, the image plays with multi-stability, or the tendency of ambiguous perceptual experiences to move unstably back and forth between alternative interpretations. You can't see both at once; instead you bounce back and forth quickly between the two stable alternatives. By being difficult to perceive, it can be argued that such a work is never seen in its entirety; is oscillates in and out of multiple orientations and states just by looking at it. *In a World that Laughs* operates in a similar fashion, occupying contradictory positions simultaneously.

Sánchez's work is decorative and pointedly so. The unabashed gorgeousness of her formal compositions, the 'celebration of beautiful colours that don't belong to me' seduce the viewer and

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tempt us to engage with complexity and complicity⁽⁴⁾. In co-opting this decorative idiom, lifting it from commercial design while pointing to its idealistic Modernist heritage, Sánchez offers a reflection on the anomalies and conflicts of the artist within the commercial system. As Karel Teige's *Poetism Manifesto* enjoined his audience to balance the asceticism of communism with a joyous, life affirming celebration, so this work balances the rigour of modernism and its utopian ideologies with the unabashed seductiveness and frivolities of luxury packaging, while acknowledging the role of the artist as a participant, however reluctant, in the commercial realm. Teige's poetic dream offered 'a way out of the disharmony of clashing world views'. Sánchez offers us a chance to reflect upon and to savour the complexity.

By
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Cork, Ireland, August 2015

Notes

(1) Karel Teige 'Poetism', 1924, trans. Alexandra Buchler in 'Between Two Worlds: A Sourcebook of Central European Avant-Gardes 1910–1930' (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 2002).

(2) *ibid.*

(3) James Elkin, 'The Object Stares Back: On the Nature of Seeing' (London, San Diego & New York: Harvest Books, 1997), 20.

(4) Sánchez in conversation with Sarah Kelleher, 28 July, 2015.