



Deb Covell

Hearing from Artists

Deb Covell examines the material qualities of paint. Her three-dimensional paint forms make material investigations into colour, form, surface and process. In 2020, Covell held a mid-career retrospective exhibition at the Kirkleatham Museum, Redcar which included a selection of artworks from the Middlesbrough Collection that have informed her practice. Deb is based in Saltburn-by-the-Sea in the Tees Valley. She is in conversation with Helen Welford, Assistant Curator, in April 2020.

HW: Your work explores the sculptural possibilities of paint. How does your engagement with paint thread through your ideas and interests?

DC: I love the versatility of paint and how I can adapt the medium to house my ever-evolving ideas. I enjoy feeling part of a paint tradition that spans over sixty-thousand years, from the early cave paintings of our ancestors through to contemporary practice. I push against proclamations that painting is dead or a redundant artform. I guess I enjoy having an anarchic attitude that insists on its relevance today.

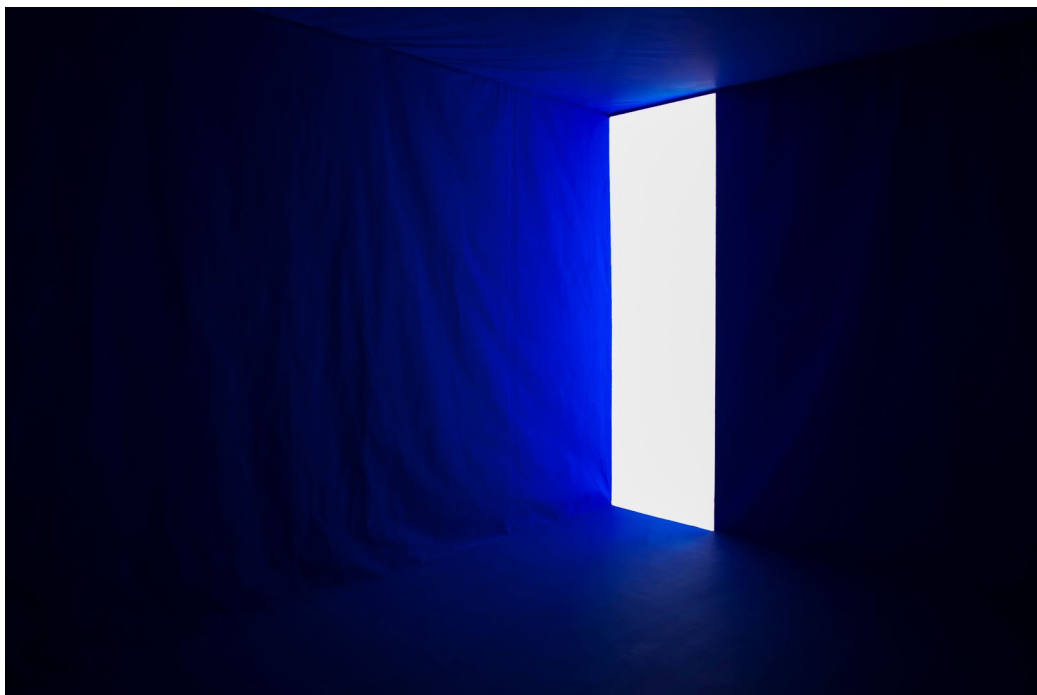
Paint is a delicious and almost edible material that is wet and gooey but hardens to become permanent. This tactile material is reminiscent of the flesh and blood that is at the core of our physical beings. Painting can be traced back to our early childhoods, to the scrawling we made as children trying



Deb Covell (photo by Cathal Carey)

to understand the world or as babies making squidgy marks and shapes from their lunch using their highchair trays as canvases. As a child, I remember melting Crayola crayons onto old warm radiators and the feeling of delight as I watched these solid coloured sticks slip around and magically transform into a luscious liquid substance.

For the past eight years, paint has been my only medium. I no longer work with traditional paint supports such as wood panels or canvases which feel restrictive in their predefined surfaces and hard edges. I've developed paint 'skins' which are built up layers of acrylic paint applied to stretched polythene sheets and peeled away. I manipulate the skins into three-dimensional forms or use as supports for paintings. Working with pure paint, I take control and define the edges. I can cut, fold and drape these pliable skins. I experiment with perspective and spatial dynamics by tapering skins through folding so that they become narrower towards one end. Most skins begin with the right angle in reference to the traditional right angles of the canvas support.



Altered States, Acrylic paint sheets on metal framework, LED lightbox, 1400 x 500 x 308 cm, 2020 (photo by Cathal Carey)

I create folds and then dissolve them back by pouring layers of paint over them or by sanding them smooth. This push and pull process of bringing something into being and taking it away relates to natural life cycles. In 2020 I developed these approaches through a walk-through installation made almost entirely from paint. *Altered States* pushed this incredibly adaptable medium further than I'd taken it before.

HW: Can you tell me about the importance of repetition in your work, for example, the layering of paint and the recurrence of certain marks and gestures?

DC: I follow systematic and intuitive processes of repetition and I approach each new piece in relation to previous work. For example, I rework and incorporate remnants from larger works into sister pieces. This cyclical process knits my practice together so that works make natural groupings or families. I liken the process to slightly changing a favourite recipe. This continuity allows me to pick up threads fairly easily if I return to the studio after a period of absence. To a large extent, my work is autobiographical even though it may not appear so at first glance so I am curious to see what emerges from my studio after the current Covid-19 lockdown and how this situation will affect these 'recipes'.

My work is made from built up layers of acrylic paint which form a skin. I love this repetition and easily lose myself in this almost meditative process. It is often through this repetition that new ideas creep in. I usually work in a series and explore variations on form, shape and colour. My working method is a system or chain of decisions and my intuition and experience dictate when the work is complete. I like the comparative aspect of this way of working and view finished pieces like members of a family who are strongly related yet have unique characteristics.

NW: Your recent Mid-Career Retrospective exhibition at Kirkleatham Museum, Redcar, featured your immersive work *Altered States*. Can you describe the piece and how you intended a viewer to experience this work?

DC: *Altered States* is my latest and most ambitious work. It involved many years of rigorous planning with many partners each playing a particular role. The work is a site-specific installation made almost entirely from acrylic paint skins. The resulting paint skins were attached to a metal frame structure and the entire work spanned 14 meters long by 5 meters wide and 3 meters high. It is composed of three large adjoining 'paint chambers' individually painted in the



Red Flux 3, Acrylic paint sheet coated in aerosol paint, 45 x28 cm, 2018 (photo by Cathal Carey). Private Collection

symbolic colours of black, blue and white. A 'light wall' at the end of the third chamber illuminates all spaces. I invited the public to go inside the painting and to enter each chamber sequentially.

Through this work I aimed to challenge traditional perceptions of what a painting *is*, as well as questioning what it *can be* by giving the viewer the experience of being inside the painting rather than viewing a two-dimensional painting in the traditional sense. I explored ideas around spiritual, philosophical and art historical narratives throughout the project and aimed to offer audiences a new experience and insight.

The work calls to mind transformation and like much of my work, it connects to the universal yet highly personal experiences of birth, death and dying. The black paint is weighty and solid and I selected this colour to create a thick indelible space that feels absorbing and disorientating. In contrast, white is a weightless colour and the white chamber was intended to be both silent and ethereal. The blue central space was a liminal zone or in-between space that bridged the other chambers.

Viewers brought their own histories and sensibilities to the experience of passing

through the chambers. I observed that at times people described quite opposing physical and emotional reactions, for example, some felt relaxed in the white chamber whilst others experienced anxiety. I encouraged people to walk through the chambers in different directions and to notice how this affected their feelings. Lighting was a crucial device and I worked closely with specialists to obtain an even light quality and ambient colour temperature.

HW: Your retrospective featured works from the Middlesbrough Collection, held at MIMA, that have influenced your practice. What is your relationship with the Middlesbrough Collection?

DC: My relationship with the Middlesbrough Collection spans many years, from when MIMA first opened its doors. At this time I delivered a series of seminars and workshops alongside other artists in response to a number of collection works. Most recently, I worked closely with MIMA curators to select collection works to display as part of my retrospective exhibition at Kirkleatham Museum. Together we chose pieces that connect with my material investigations into colour, form, surface and process. I have huge respect for the artists we showed, who have influenced my practice in different ways.



Silver Drape, Acrylic paint sheet coated in aerosol paint, 540 x150 cm, 2016
(photo by Cathal Carey)

We selected works by Richard Lin and Fred Sandback for their visual clarity and economy of colour. These qualities connect with my interest in 1960's Minimalism where artists used simple and repetitive forms. I am motivated by Lin's use of real objects within his elegant compositions. These tangible elements butt up against his traditional painterly gestures which give the illusion of spatial depth. Sandback plays with similarly oppositional elements too and these ideas are certainly relevant in my practice today.

As we've discussed, repetition is a key part of my work, and I selected a work by James Hugonin for its uniform and repeated grid lines. The drawing is meditative and gives the impression of light and space, informed by the landscape of Northumberland. Like Hugonin, I allow my world to 'leak' into my work in pared back ways. I was fascinated by the calligraphic marks and words made by León Ferrari. MIMA's curators drew a comparison

between this piece and my diaristic drawings from the early 2000s, which combine words, sentences, scribbles and scrawls that are continually edited, erased and reworked.

I love the intentional imperfections in Edmund de Waal's ceramic pieces which echo some of my concerns that perfection can never be reached and nor should it be. I strongly believe that human fallibility and sensitivity should be celebrated and not berated. Betty Blandino's balloon-shaped vase in the collection plays with subtle variations in texture, tone and colour, whilst Shōji Hamada employs painted and poured surface decoration in flowing lines across a clay body. These pieces connect to my making techniques and explorations into the sculptural possibilities of materials. My paint skins test the limits of the medium and here parallels are made between the pliant qualities of the porcelain and stoneware and the malleable nature of my paint skins.