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The Big Review: Fugues in Colour at the Fondation Louis Vuitton in Paris

An intoxicating summer exhibition focuses on five abstract artists—Megan Rooney, Sam Gilliam, Steven Parrino, Niele Toroni and Katharina Grosse. But the chromatic emphasis denies broader interpretations of their work

Eleanor Nairne



Megan Rooney's With Sun (2022), located in the exhibition's opening room, was painted in layers that were then eroded with an electric sander

© Megan Rooney. Photo © Fondation Louis Vuitton/Jean Picon/SAYWHO

I came to Paris on a pilgrimage, really, to see the new mural by Megan Rooney at the Fondation Louis Vuitton. She is one of the most formidable abstract painters working today. And while I was making my way there—as the Eurostar thundered through the tunnel, and as I ambled through the park that houses Frank Gehry's billowing glass building—I was wondering about what abstraction means today. Specifically, I was thinking of Joan Mitchell's pastel from 1975, in which a mass of glowing ochre sits above flecks of purply-blue, with James Schuyler's poem, *Daylight*, typed below:

And when I thought,

"Our love might end"

the sun

went right on shining

How could 14 words across four lines say so little and so much?

The tension between restraint and expression is critical to much of the best abstract painting. And despite the many prophecies that our romance with it would end, especially once the golden age of 1950s Abstract Expressionism was eclipsed by Pop and performance, video and conceptualism (“Arrivederci, Modernismo”, wrote the critic Carter Ratcliff in 1974), it has somehow kept on glowing. Museums, commercial galleries and private institutions such as Fondation Louis Vuitton (FLV)—where there will be a retrospective of Joan Mitchell this autumn (touring from the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the Baltimore Museum of Art)—have done much to keep that lamp burning, but they have also been responding to a recent wave of popular and critical interest in transnational modes of abstraction in the post-war period.

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Rooney’s installation has been commissioned for the opening room of FLV’s summer exhibition, *Fugues in Colour*, which brings together five international artists of different generations, each broadly engaged with the legacies of these movements; the others are Sam Gilliam, Katharina Grosse, Steven Parrino and Niele Toroni. The concept is an expansive one: the catalogue describes the exhibition as a “launching pad” in which “colour breaks free of all boundaries and reasserts its primary role”. Artists have long been intoxicated with colour, which is, after all, how we light-sensitive creatures orientate ourselves in the world. But it is also about the power of colour as metaphor and hex: as Roland Barthes put it, “colour is like a closing eyelid, a tiny fainting spell”. Which makes me wonder about David Batchelor and Angela de la Cruz and Ann Veronica Janssens and Yves Klein and Melanie Smith and James Turrell and all the other colour-drunk artists who might equally have found a home here.

Perhaps it’s better to think of *Fugues in Colour* in the musical sense that the title encourages—not as an interrogation of the history of this theme so much as a melodic refrain introduced by one voice and then developed by subsequent parts. The second room opens with Gilliam’s three extraordinary drape paintings, suspended from the ceiling in arcs that accentuate the liquidity of their patterning. Gilliam described 1968, the year that he began his drape paintings, as “one of revelation”; Martin Luther King had just been assassinated and there were four days of riots in Washington, DC, where he had recently moved. His raw canvases, stained with pools of paint and then folded and knotted into complex sensual surfaces, seem to carry all that a body might delight in and endure. Although he made no explicit reference to the civil rights movement, Gilliam was clear that “the expressive act of making a mark and hanging it in space is always political”.

There is something in the tender sag of canvas, for example, that evokes the banners carried through the streets in centuries of social justice protests, to this day. The wall text offers excellent detail about his technique for the drape paintings—the diluting of acrylic paint and dabbing of aluminium powder—but I worry that the focus on “the lyrical, vibrant power of colour [to redefine] Frank Gehry’s architecture” somewhat dampens his political spirit. This formalist approach is accentuated by Gilliam being paired with Steven Parrino, whose misshapen canvases are described as “taking colour out of the frame and letting it flow into space”. This is a little

confusing since the majority of his beaten-up tondos and canvases scrumpled up on the floor are either industrial silver or monochromatic. (I invite you to Google “Is black a colour?” to be lured down a rabbit hole.)



Katharina Grosse's Splinter (2022)
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Parrino was not a committed political figure (too busy being a New York rebel-without-a-cause) but he did desire his “mutant form of deformed painting...to speak about life”, and there’s little sense here of what that might have meant, or who the intended victim was for the violence in his work. Toroni, who still lives and works in Paris, must have been glad to have his own small gallery, given the quiet, obsessive minimalism of his paintings, for which he uses a 5cm brush to daub paint at regular 30cm intervals. We are told mysteriously that the “tondi with the ‘reds’ of Bordeaux stem from the imprints the artist made on wine barrels”. Again, I wonder why and to what end.

The word “fugue” stems from the Latin *fuga* for flight, and ideas of refuge and the fugitive are powerfully felt in the two new commissions, which will exist only for this summer, before being submerged under fresh white paint. Grosse, whose work *Splinter* adorns the largest, final space in the top-floor galleries—as well as the opening pages of the catalogue and the poster campaign—is clearly intended to be the climax of the exhibition. And the eruption of colour across the floor and walls is certainly visually impactful. Await the viral images on social media! But her signature use of spray guns gives a slickness to the effect, which lacks the warmth or fallibility of human touch and makes it hard—for me, at least—to feel emotionally moved by the experience.

By comparison, Rooney’s installation, which you circle back to before descending downstairs, is like being swallowed into the belly of a painting with all the gastric juices flowing. The vivid oranges and pinks and creamy primrose yellows dash and dribble around the room, punctuated only by wild flashes of oil stick. There’s all the charm of spring growth, but also the gravity of entropy and decay. In a poetic text at the threshold of the space, she explains how “before I start

painting, I like to put my bare feet on a bit of earth. So that I can feel the force and energy of all that is happening below ground". The paint is then worked in layers, which are eroded with an electric sander, in order to recover under-passages. It's as if the painting has been brought to the brink of death so that it can be charged with the flush of new life. And I can't help but think: this is how it goes right on shining.

Fugues in Colour, Fondation Louis Vuitton, Paris, until 29 August

Curators: Suzanne Pagé (general curator), Ludovic Delalande, Nathalie Ogé, Claire Staebler, Claudia Buizza

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