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## SYSTEMS CHECK

In the 1960s Systems Theory, as developed by Talcott Parsons and Niklas Luhmann, among others, found practical applications in the development of computer communication networks, corporate infrastructure, and what became known as "policy analyses" in government and "Systems Esthetics" in art. In simple terms, a system is defined as a chain of related events within a defined boundary. The boundary establishes a frame between the system and the larger environment. For every system there is an interior and exterior; the inside is defined, the outside infinitely complex. Systems can be both dynamic and static. An "open" system crosses boundaries and interacts with other systems; by doing so, each system is changed. "Closed" systems remain isolated and static.

Jack Burnham's influential essay "Systems Esthetics" appeared in *Artforum* in September of 1968. The Post-Minimal promise of Systems Esthetics was the dematerialization of the Modernist art object and the emergence of conceptual models using "new media" or systems as media:

The specific function of modern didactic art has been to show that art does not reside in material entities, but in relations between people and between people and the components of their environment.<sup>1</sup>

Since 1968 new media has proven its ability to become old media and conceptual practice is no longer adverse to engagement with materials.

Though Systems Theory has become synonymous with the post-formalist esthetics of the 1960s and 70s, another perspective reveals the influence of Systems Theory within object-based art. A critical shift accompanied the influence of Systems thinking on how art was made: a shift from the perception of painting as autonomous to viewing painting as an "open" system operating within and interacting with larger systems. This insight provided artists with a way to navigate through the fury and gestural abandon of Abstract Expressionism, through the high claims and limited possibilities within Post-Painterly Abstraction, and beyond the reflexive reductiveness of Process Painting into the expanded field that painting now inhabits.

In 1966, two years before Jack Burnham's "Systems Esthetics" appeared in *Artforum*, the exhibition *Systemic Painting*, curated by Lawrence Alloway, opened in New York's Guggenheim Museum. Among the artists featured in the exhibition were Frank Stella, Ellsworth Kelly, Agnes Martin, Kenneth Noland, and Robert Ryman. In the same year Lawrence Alloway coined the term "Systemic Art" to describe a "type of abstract art characterized by the use of very simple standardized forms, usually geometric in character, either in a single concentrated image or repeated in a system arranged according to a clearly visible principle of organization."<sup>2</sup> This definition, functional for the time and providing some insight, is not of much use in describing contemporary Systems Painting: organizing principles may or may not be obvious; forms are not always simple or standardized. However, when describing methodology rather than esthetics Alloway's words become more pertinent:

The end-state of the painting is known prior to completion (unlike the theory of Abstract Expressionism). This does not exclude empirical modifications of a work in progress, but it does focus them within a system.<sup>3</sup>

In this brief passage Alloway states the fundamental underpinnings of a Systems approach to painting, as useful today as it was then. One telling trait shared by the work Alloway featured in *Systemic Painting* and the work featured here in *Systems Check* is a deliberate downplay of the artist's hand. In 1966 the suppression of gesture would have been viewed as a pointed departure from Abstract Expressionism and the Modernist belief in the imprint of the artist's hand as an expression of the soul. Today, painterly codes are more nuanced. A brushstroke can be as cool and detached as geometry. The notion of "touch" can be both material and analytic.

The downplay of both gesture and material evidenced through a matter-of-fact approach to application is a common characteristic of Systems work and brings it into contrast with Process Painting. The two share a common lineage that can be traced back through Minimalism to Jackson Pollock. Process Painting tends to hang on one well-crafted reflexive manoeuvre: a drip, a pour or the methodical spread of paint from one side of the canvas to other. Process Painting gives forum to Clement Greenberg's Kantian-based belief in "the use of characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself, not in order to subvert it but in order to enrich it more



firmly in its area of competence."<sup>4</sup> Greenberg believed painting could be rendered pure through self-examination, painting examined through painting — a "closed" system. Here, painting becomes an exercise in mnemonics, a report on the gestures involved in making the work.

Process work strives to fulfill and maintain the certitude in Frank Stella's line, "What you see is what you see." Today we live in a world where the factual is difficult to discern from the fictional. We live in a polytheistic, Photoshopped, global multi-plex. To believe "What you see" is "what you see" is naïve at best. In both approaches each step in the making of the work carries significance and contributes to the content of the work. However, whereas Process Painting is ultimately reductive and concerned with material, measurement, and repetition, Systems Painting is nuanced and gregarious, focused on algorithms, alignments and interpretation. Systems Painting and Process Painting may share some historical overlap and both are analytic. Yet Systems work operates within a more complex and open framework; the final work represents an "open" rather than a "closed" system.

Systems Painting has multiple histories, multiple points of origin. In France there was Support-Surface and later the BMPT group. In 1969 a number of English artists came together in an exhibition in Helsinki entitled *Systemi-Systems: an Exhibition of Syntactic Art from Britain*. In Germany Gerhard Richter took a meta approach employing multiple systems. Richter's first survey exhibition in North America was in 1988 at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto. The exhibition, curated by Roald Nasgaard, resonated with the work of Canadian artists such as Jaan Poldas, Ric Evans, Ron Martin, David Craven, Eric Cameron, Arlene Stamp, Garry Neill Kennedy and the late Gerry Ferguson — artists who can be credited for creating a context for analytic approaches to Abstract painting in Canada.

The artists brought together in *Systems Check* — Paul Dignan, Angela Leach, Lowell Bradshaw, Ingrid Calame and Mathew Bushell — have each developed unique methodologies that blend the objective and subjective, fact with fiction, chance with intention. Each artist has his or her own idiosyncratic approach for making work that resonates with the history of Abstraction while challenging expectations. This is not an age of manifestos or -isms. The title *Systems Check* is intentionally light. The demarcation lines being drawn are permeable. My intent is to highlight how Systematic

approaches function within a diverse range of Abstract paintings from a diverse group of artists. The majority of the participants in this exhibition are mid-career, with the exception of Mathew Bushell — who might be described as being on the cusp, having recently graduated from Yale with his MFA. No two artists in *Systems Check* are based in the same locale. Ingrid Calame lives and works in Los Angeles. Lowell Bradshaw is based in Toronto, having moved from Boston in 2004. Mathew Bushell now calls Brooklyn home after living in Vancouver and New Haven. Paul Dignan moved from Scotland to Canada in 2000 and is now based in Elmira, Ontario. Angela Leach lives and works in Scarborough, Ontario.

Abstract painting has survived ideological bottlenecks, the emergence of new technologies and the art world's shift from singular to plural to inflationary multiverse. The weight of painting's history has not prevented it from being nimble and adaptable. The artists in *Systems Check* have avoided Post Modernism's more cynical tendencies. Modernist missteps are often reenacted with winking faux-naïveté or as a rearguard reactionary operation. These artists are not making straw dogs or taking painterly pratfalls. They are engaged with the world beyond their studios. This engagement informs the frameworks they work within; frameworks that provide structure while allowing for both invention and chance to broaden the syntax and potential of contemporary Abstract painting.

**Jordan Broadworth** was born in Esquesing, Ontario in 1968. He studied at the School of The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston and the Nova Scotia College of Art & Design prior to graduating from the University of Guelph's Master of Fine Arts program. In 2010, The Tom Thomson Art Gallery in Owen Sound, Ontario organized a survey of Broadworth's work, 1994–2010. Jordan Broadworth is based in New York City. [www.jordanbroadworth.com](http://www.jordanbroadworth.com)

#### Notes

1. Jack Burnham, "Systems Esthetics," *Artforum* 7, no. 1 (September 1968), 30–35.
2. "Systemic art," *The Oxford Dictionary of Art*, 2004 ed., eNotes.com (accessed 19 March, 2008).
3. Gregory Battcock, ed. *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 58.
4. Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 4, ed. John O'Brien (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 85.



Mathew Bushell, *Five Easy Pieces*, 2010





## Lowell Bradshaw

Bradshaw's recent work features a central, irregular black sphere that floats, isolated, within a ring of white. Continuing to move out from the centre, white is followed by concentric slivers and bands of blues, reds and yellows. Secondary colours and tonal shifts occur as the irregular trajectory of the primaries intersects and overlaps. Black reappears once again as a framing device, holding the corners but quite containing the interior's polychromatic verve; some slippage occurs. Around the frame of the painting slivers of white advance in from the edge, sometimes bulging towards the middle. The end result is a series of paintings that draw the viewer in towards the centre, then through the viewer to the edges — only to be drawn in, again and again.

Bradshaw's paintings look as though they are backlit. It is not surprising that his process begins within the glow of a computer screen. Major decisions concerning colour and form are made on the computer before Bradshaw starts painting. The areas of white are arrived at through the use of Photoshop's eraser tool. Erasure occurs digitally before paint is applied. In transferring the image from printout to canvas Bradshaw allows room for transformation and change. The changes that occur in the transfer from computer to canvas cycle back into the next series of digital images. Bradshaw's work is continually evolving.

Bradshaw's paintings are both enigmatic and elusive; however, they are rich with references and are grounded in a well-established compositional approach. The works appear to be informed by thermal or magnetic resonance imaging. (It may not be surprising that Bradshaw comes to painting from a science background.) The question of what it is that is being 'imaged' brings us back to painting. Though it might not be obvious at first, the underlying composition is the target. The target followed the flag in Jasper Johns' early "ready made"-influenced paintings. Later, Kenneth Noland transformed the target from Pop into Post-Painterly territory. Montreal's Claude Tousignant used the target to more formal ends in his *Chromatic Accelerator* series. In looking at Bradshaw's paintings as targets, they are targets for our times: complex, ephemeral, and with no clear exit strategy.



Dark Ride, 2011

## Mathew Bushell

Mathew Bushell started using computer-based generative systems in his work while a student at Vancouver's Emily Carr Institute of Art in 2004. I had the pleasure of working with Mat while at ECIA as a visiting artist. Though the fact Bushell was using a computer to produce paintings was in no way novel, how he was using the technology was. Bushell devised tasks the software could not fulfill, problems it could not solve. The computer's failed attempts became Bushell's artwork. The optically arresting results were the product of Bushell asking the wrong question and the computer's failed attempt at answering. In visual terms the two wrongs made a right.

Bushell's current work is the product of another generative system. Enlisting the help of a software developer, Bushell has devised an algorithm that creates the schematics for his paintings and is capable of producing endless variations. The programmer works with Bushell's often oblique guidelines, such as "populate with a random number of generated forms — include some rectangles" or "eliminate all negative space."<sup>1</sup> Bushell intends the instructions to be open to interpretation. The first image that is produced is referred to as the "seed image." Thousands of variations are spun off this initial image. Bushell selects from the computer's offerings, and with the aid of several vinyl templates he faithfully translates from digital to acrylic on panel. The scale of the work varies, as does the installation of modular pieces, such as the work featured in *Systems Check*.

The paintings that result from Bushell's dialogue with technology are an amalgam of chance and intention. The results are both fresh and enigmatic. The paintings simply don't read the way one might expect relational paintings to read. There is no evidence of erasure, re-working, second-guessing or fine-tuning. Bushell's work is an esthetic of rules into which randomness is introduced. It is interesting to note that over the three years Bushell and the programmer have worked together, they have never met, never spoken directly to one another. In Bushell's painting negative space is dropped information and misinterpretation. Like many artists before him (from Jean Arp to Marcel Duchamp and John Cage, to name a few) Bushell uses chance and randomness as a strategy to circumvent control and frames of reference.



Five Easy Pieces, 2010 (detail)

1. In conversation with the artist



## Ingrid Calame

In understanding Ingrid Calame's work I have had to appreciate the fact that while I walk from my apartment to my studio I pass over countless possible paintings — it's a quantum view of painting. As humans we create and inhabit surfaces,

surfaces that are often regarded as negative spaces between where we live and where we work, where we are and where we're going. In these gaps, along these corridors, on concrete and pavement, we leave traces (some intentional, others not) — forgotten stains, like stray memories. In some distant future these wayward, transient spills, drips, leaks, splashes and smears may be as relevant and telling as the words I'm using now or any amount of terabytes of stored information. Calame constructs her works out of the lexicon of anonymous trace marks left largely as byproduct and without intent. She began in 1996 with her own unintended spillage — the paint that had accumulated on her studio floor. Calame then moved out of the studio and onto the streets of Los Angeles and hasn't stopped since. Her scope is global and her work is at once site-specific and universal.

Calame's work begins with the one-to-one tracing of the aforementioned minutiae of marks. This is the first step in the transformation of unintentional into intentional. The tracings, often gathered with the help of a team, are made on large rolls of tracing paper without modification or enhancement. In the studio each mark is assigned a colour. Colour selection is a subjective process for Calame; she often pulls colour from memory and personal experience. In subsequent stages of the process Calame will overlay multiple tracings. As each sheet is overlapped, geography and multiple histories are flattened as drips, splats and spills cross, weave and connect, forming what Calame refers to as "constellations."<sup>1</sup> In using the term "constellation" Calame points to one of the dualities in her work: the micro and the macro. Each work contains a myriad of marks brought together to form a whole which itself is a small part of something infinite.

In Ingrid Calame's work dualities abound; it is at once literal and abstract. The paintings appear expressionistic, painterly and Pollock-esque in their all-over bombast, yet they are carefully and systematically constructed, cartographic rather than expressionistic. Using enamel



Tracing from the Indianapolis Motor Speedway I, 2009

sign paint and working on aluminum, she fills in the designated areas of colour, remaining faithful to the objective documentation in the initial tracings. In addition to paintings, Calame produces prints and linear mono- and polychromatic works on vellum. The vellum pieces as well as works painted directly onto walls can take on an environmental, ceiling-to-floor scale. In keeping true to the nature of her source material and methodology her work has a built-in mobility that allows it to be diverse and adaptable. There is an inclusiveness and openness at the heart of Calame's program; it's a thought process as well as a painting process.

1. Dana Fris-Hansen, *Abstract Painting Once Removed* (Houston, TX: Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, 1998), 50.

## Paul Dignan

Dignan's work has taken dramatic shifts over the last two decades, all the while maintaining a high degree of chromatic complexity and technical prowess. One of Dignan's strengths is his ability to defamiliarize formal tropes with equal doses of wit, reverence and irony. I was a graduate student at the University of Guelph in the mid-90s when I first encountered Dignan's work. He was then based in the UK and known for meticulously crafted, off-kilter stripe paintings. Stripe paintings with stripes within stripes, all with a slight lean to prevent the painting from being locked into the frame. After immigrating to Canada, Paul's work took a turn towards what might best be described as "bio-engineered Pop." There were no specific cultural references in these paintings, but they pulsed with a contemporary hyper-esthetic, at times cartoonish, glee. Dignan would sample and manipulate forms and fragments of images taken from the Internet. The resulting bursts, serifs, clouds and waves would fold, weave, collapse and sometimes collide with concussive abruptness. Dignan's current work is born of a similar mix of order and disorder.

The grid is a central condition of modernity, and one of the fundamental geometric elements of Modernism. The grid exists as an ideal, as an organizing principle. It is so basic it becomes invisible, so pervasive it becomes real. The grid is both inherently concrete and abstract; duality is at its core. As Rosalind E. Krauss wrote in *The Originality of the*



Cells I, 2011

*Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, "The grid's mythic power is that it makes us able to think we are dealing with materialism (or sometimes science, or logic) while at the same time it provides us with a release into belief (or illusion, or fiction)."<sup>1</sup> Poststructuralist criticism aligns the grid with male dominance and political authoritarianism. Dignan is not afraid to take on a conflicted, sordid Modernist motif. Though the grid may be used to organize and measure, a look at Dignan's recent work proves that the perception and meaning of the grid are not static.

At first glance the structure in Dignan's paintings appears solid. The paintings vary in size but are always square in format and comprised of squares aligned in an even grid. The palette has shifted from high-keyed to weathered, each painting based on variations of just two colours. Sustained viewing challenges the viewer's own perception as the solidity found in the first take dissolves. With razor sharp edges and seamless application Dignan subdivides the initial grid. Each square contains a different composition. At a certain moment, after prolonged engagement, the smaller sub-divisions begin to form their own patterns and the grid begins to break down; the initial organizing factor suddenly becomes secondary. Dignan adds another foil by complicating the grid's sober embrace of the flatness of the picture planes. Using an air gun Dignan creates subtle tonal shifts resulting in tilting planes. The fracture and dissolve, the spatial contradiction between illusionistic depth and the flatness of the recurrent grid entrap the gaze. There is nothing reductive in this work. Within a limited and regular format Dignan creates endless shifting variation. Underlying Dignan's obvious skill and intelligence is an appreciation of the absurd that adds a subversive angle to his hard edges.

1. Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 12.

## Angela Leach

Angela Leach came into prominence in the 1990s. In her *Abstract Repeat* series and later in the *AR-Wave Large* series the visual and optical collided in vibrating fields that were as clear and direct as they were mesmerizing and mystifying. Sequencing of pattern transformed the picture plane with undulating waves that pitched and swayed. In some canvases patterns would weave and intersect with sharp seams that would form yet another curving schism. While the linear patterns followed regular sequences, Leach's colour followed looser guidelines. How composition and colour would align was unknown until the work's final outcome. Though the sequencing of the colour was not predetermined,

the palette was. Since 1989, when Leach graduated from the Ontario College of Art & Design, Leach has drawn from the same list of thirty-two colours inspired by textile design.

Leach received training in textile design at Sheridan College's Crafts & Design Program in Oakville, Ontario while she was also pursuing fine art studies at the Ontario College of Art & Design. After graduating Leach worked for a hand-weaver for a coat manufacturer. The influence of Leach's applied arts experience is evident in both the complexity of her patterns and her pedestrian palette. Writers and critics often mention Leach's early interest in Victor Vasarely and draw comparisons to the Op Paintings of Bridget Riley. I think a more salient connection exists with the Pattern and Decoration movement. In the 1970s P&D artists — Robert Kushner, Valerie Jaudon, and Joyce Kozloff, among others — turned to vernacular sources such as quilts, wallpapers and printed fabrics in order to break with the arid hegemony of Minimalism. Informed by feminism and working with an early multicultural bent P&D blurred distinctions between high and low, art and design, concept and object. In addition to being beautiful and bracing, Leach's paintings are investigations into how visual systems are valued and coded.

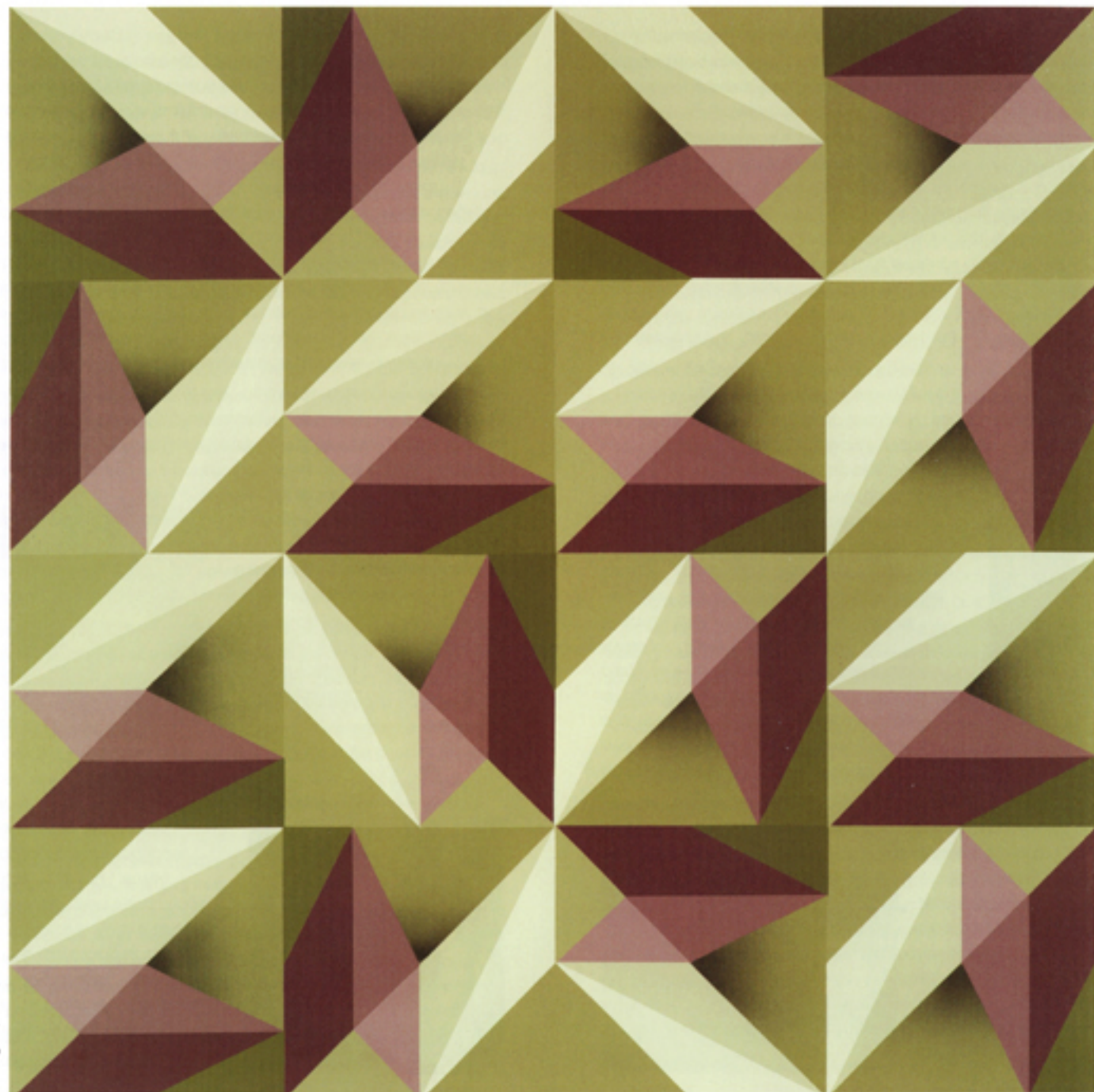
In 2000, Keith Wallace described Leach's work as having a "visual energy poised to burst beyond the edges."<sup>1</sup> In recent years the work has "burst" and the frame has been transgressed, becoming another generator of visual energy. The edges of the paintings now echo the flow of curves within. In addition to the change in supports, Leach's approach to colour has also shifted. She still works within the same set of thirty-two colours, but whereas the colours once worked independently of the illusionary space created by the compositions, they are now divided into warm and cool and used to create the illusion of light and shadow that supports the composition's optical effects. As a result these tight-knit structures are both more literal and more illusionistic. As the pictorial velocity has increased, so has the questing into what it means to see and what it means to know.

1. Keith Wallace, *Visual Stimulants: Angela Leach, Ken Singer, Jeremy Stanbridge* (Vancouver: Contemporary Art Gallery, 2000), 23.



Shape #10, 2010





## SYSTEMS CHECK

Lowell Bradshaw, Mathew Bushell, Ingrid Calame, Paul Dignan, Angela Leach  
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### List of Works

#### Lowell Bradshaw

Untitled, 2010; 66.5 x 56 cm; oil on canvas  
Twizler, 2010; 91.5 x 88 cm; oil on canvas  
Pretzel, 2011; 213 x 213 cm; oil on canvas  
Dark Ride, 2011; 213 x 213 cm; oil on canvas

#### Mathew Bushell

Five Easy Pieces, 2010; 14 components, 57 x 29 cm each; acrylic on MDF

#### Ingrid Calame

Working Drawing #60, 2000/2007; 226 x 226 cm; coloured pencil on trace Mylar; Collection of Michael Nesbitt  
Tracing from the Indianapolis Motor Speedway I, 2009; 7/30; 51.5 x 76 cm; etching and aquatint on paper (printed at Pace Editions, NY); Courtesy of the James Cohan Gallery, NY  
Tracing from the Indianapolis Motor Speedway II, 2009; 7/30; 76 x 51.5 cm; etching and aquatint on paper (printed at Pace Editions, NY); Courtesy of the James Cohan Gallery, NY  
Tracing from the Indianapolis Motor Speedway III, 2009; 7/30; 76 x 51.5 cm; etching and aquatint on paper (printed at Pace Editions, NY); Courtesy of the James Cohan Gallery, NY

#### Paul Dignan

Cote 1, 2011; 122 x 121.5 cm; acrylic on canvas  
Cote 2, 2011; 61.5 x 61 cm; acrylic on canvas  
Cote 3, 2011; 122 x 121.5 cm; acrylic on canvas

#### Angela Leach

Shape #10, 2010; 94 x 61.5 x 5.5 cm; acrylic on board; Courtesy of the Wynick/Tuck Gallery, Toronto  
Shape #11, 2010; 94 x 61.5 x 6.5 cm; acrylic on board; Courtesy of the Wynick/Tuck Gallery, Toronto  
Shape #12, 2010; 65.5 x 77 x 5.5 cm; acrylic on board; Courtesy of the Wynick/Tuck Gallery, Toronto



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**Lowell Bradshaw** was born in 1959 in Lafayette, Indiana and raised in South Boston, Massachusetts. He studied at Goddard College in Plainfield, Vermont and the University of Oxford, UK. Bradshaw has exhibited at Stavaridis Gallery, Boston and Hunter and Cook Gallery, Toronto. In December 2011, New York's StandPipe Gallery will hold a solo exhibition of his work. Bradshaw lives and works in Toronto.

**Mathew Bushell** was born in Fort McMurray, Alberta in 1982. He received a BFA from the Emily Carr University of Art + Design and an MFA from Yale University. Recent exhibitions include *Enacting Abstraction* at the Vancouver Art Gallery and *Making Real* at the Or Gallery in Vancouver. Bushell divides his time between Brooklyn and Vancouver. [www.matbushell.com](http://www.matbushell.com)

**Ingrid Calame** was born in the Bronx, New York in 1965. She received a BFA from Purchase College, State University of New York and an MFA from the California Institute of the Arts. Recent exhibitions include: *Ingrid Calame*, Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh, Scotland, *In Process*, Ingrid Calame, Monterey Museum of Art, Monterey, California, *Step on a Crack*, Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York, and *Traces of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway*, Indianapolis Museum of Art, Indianapolis, Indiana. Ingrid Calame is represented by the Frith Street Gallery, London, England, Galerie Schmidt Maczolek, Cologne, Germany and the James Cohan Gallery, New York. Calame lives and works in Los Angeles.

**Paul Dignan** was born in 1962 in Dundee, Scotland. He studied at the Gray's School of Art in Aberdeen, Scotland and the Slade School of Fine Art, London. The Gorecki Gallery, Saint John's University, Minnesota recently curated a survey of Dignan's work from the last decade. Paul Dignan is an Adjunct Professor at the University of Waterloo and lives in Elmira, Ontario. He is represented by KWT contemporary in Toronto. [www.pauldignan.com](http://www.pauldignan.com)

**Angela Leach** graduated from the Crafts & Design Program at Sheridan College, Oakville, and the Ontario College of Art & Design, Toronto. Leach's work has been exhibited at The Art Gallery of Ontario, the Power Plant in Toronto, McMaster Museum of Art in Hamilton, Southern Alberta Art Gallery, Lethbridge, and The Contemporary Art Gallery in Vancouver. Leach is represented by Wynick/Tuck Gallery in Toronto and Herring Kiss Gallery, Calgary, Alberta. [www.angelaleach.com](http://www.angelaleach.com)

COVER: Angela Leach, Shape #12, 2010

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