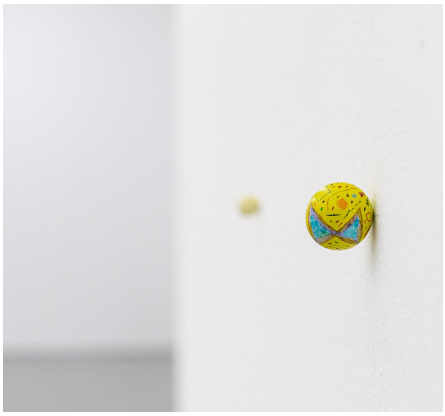
On Emptiness

by Rosa Gubay

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On Emptiness installation view, Patrick Lundberg and Oliver Perkins at Fold Gallery, London (2019).



Patrick Lundberg, *Untitled*, 2017 (detail). Acrylic on resin.



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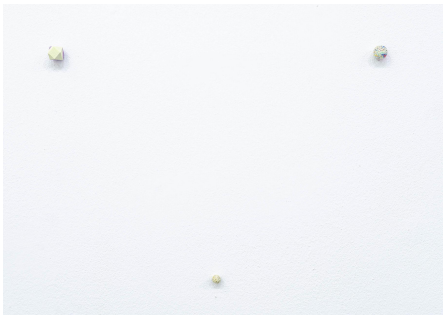
Oliver Perkins, *Untitled*, 2019. Ink, rabbit skin glue, canvas, dowel, rope and staples, 101.5 x 49 x 3.5 cm.

A response to Oliver Perkins and Patrick Lundberg's exhibition at FOLD Gallery, London this year.

Utilising everyday materials, such as dowels, rope and pinheads, and primarily concerned with an abstraction of colour and form, artists Patrick Lundberg and Oliver Perkins share a number of affinities that lend a formal unity to their recent joint exhibition at FOLD, a commercial gallery and project space in London which also presented an exhibition of Judy Millar's work in 2018. FOLD's programme, which focuses on abstraction and materiality within painting and sculpture, is a natural fit for these two painters

working from Aotearoa New Zealand. However, while these formal aspects bring a sense of unity to the exhibition, this cohesion is sustained by the two artists' approaches to the concept of emptiness. *On Emptiness* seeks to develop a particular conversation between two distinct categories of the artists' work – Lundberg's 'sets' and Perkins' 'string and dowels' – both of which draw their strength from their internal composition of negative space.

FOLD's physical gallery space, in a basement off the backstreets of Fitzrovia, lends itself to this collection of the artists' work, which seeks to engage so directly with its spatial surrounds. There is a rhythm to the show in the tangle of slow discoveries and thrusts of shapes, edges and spacing. Through this, the work finds grip on painterly and architectural space. Entering the room, you encounter the first of Lundberg's set-pieces *No Title* (2019) [fig. 1] which sprawls across the first wall. This is a network of 16 painted wooden pins, each ball, balloon, or flat-edged multi-sided shape is a painting in miniature [fig. 2]. The paint on the pin-heads shifts between precise flecks of colour and washed planes, and their scale requires a closeness which necessitates that the viewer accedes to the intimacy they invite. Meeting at the adjoining wall is the first of Perkins' 'string and dowel works' – *Untitled* (2019) [fig. 3]. It has a material immediacy; canvas is wrapped around four horizontal lengths of doweling, which are held in alignment by a single piece of rope. Hanging from a nail, the rope skirts the ends of the dowels, runs along the base of the bottom rung and up the other side, tied blithely at its apex. The raw look of the unprimed canvas, wooden doweling and rope is interrupted by strips of painted black and white which jolt up the left of the canvas covers. The tiers of doweling and the slim string border act to frame the wall echoing the structure of architectural spaces, pitched roofs and narrow, multi-storied buildings like that in which the gallery is housed.



Patrick Lundberg, *No Title* (detail), 2019. Acrylic on wood 16 parts (dimensions variable). Each part 10 - 20 mm diameter.



Patrick Lundberg, *No Title*, 2019.

As outlined in the exhibition's text, both artists have taken their cue from Renaud Barbaras' critique of the idea of nothingness as the absence of being in the phenomenological writings of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty. Invoking a phenomenological study, at first, appears out of sorts (phenomenology having largely fallen out of favour given the dematerialisation of contemporary practices in the 1970s). However, Barbaras' critique of the Husserlian tradition of nothingness as an absolute void underpins a different way of conceiving the object as something more than simply the negation of nothing. Indeed, for Barbaras, this "crude distinction between positive being and negative nothingness" is better reframed as phenomenological perception whose gradations are open to exploration.[01] This consideration is taken up by both Perkins' and Lundberg's incorporation of negative space within their particular practices. By internalising this negative space, Lundberg and Perkins demonstrate how one can compose *with* emptiness, an emptiness that is defined as elemental. For example, the space held within Perkins' string and dowel frames enable these works to take up a propositional stance. The absence between the painted elements plays with and circumvents representational modes, leaving the work in a suggestive and unresolved state. In a more literal sense, the artist is also framing the world, the painted white walls in these hollows reminding us of paintings' expanded field in its relationship with our everyday.

As stated in the exhibition text, both Lundberg and Perkins think of painting as a "receptacle through which the World appears to us negatively". This is evident in Lundberg's set pieces, in which a number of different pins, variously painted in specks and washes, are spread across a wall. With this loose dispersal of pins,

Lundberg's practice relies on the negative space of the wall as the very support for the work, indeed it is integral to the manner of its slow unfolding. Punctured and punctuated, these sparse compositions command the breadth of this space allowing the small painted elements to tug and propel you, exploring their relational potential. The empty wall acts as a spacer, its physical boundaries guiding your relation to the set's elements. It is the ground on which the work finds its structure. Furthermore, the sensitivity of the artist's arrangement of the set on the wall – skirting corners and pipes – makes you aware of the negative space as a positive force with a presence of its own. Unsurprisingly, Allan Smith describes these set pieces as having an "extreme gravitational density" and a pulling power "out of all proportion to their actual size".[02]



The structure of Lundberg's pin works can be explored in relation to philosopher Alain Badiou's use of set theory. Each of Lundberg's singular pins belongs to an immutable group, sometimes defined from the outset and sometimes growing as one piece influences the next. For Badiou, the elements of the sets are only significant in their relation to the other elements in the set. In much the same way, it seems that it is the multiplicity, divergence or consistency between pins which is of interest for Lundberg. However, while

Badiou discounts a perceptual account of the sets within his framework, this is structural to Lundberg's practice. Take the set at the back of the space, *No Title* (2017) [fig. 4]. Comprising a number of spherical pins of transparent resin, the matte surface of each element is painted with small trails of brightly-coloured paint. Seemingly delicate but materially rich, the minutiae of difference within this work is unable to be grasped from a single glance or at a distance. Often only discovered upon close inspection, the deviation between pins dictates a movement on the part of the viewer, negotiating the expansion and contraction of pins on the empty field. In this way, an intrinsic focus also seems to be placed on time in its relation to space and the duration of the viewer's perceptual encounter. Lundberg's work inhabits a slow time that exploits scale and architectural space.

In this same work, three pins are vertically set up the wall, with faint pencil lines still visible from their mapping. These lines are suggestive of a practice that exists beyond the work's final form. Exposing the planning process introduces a consideration of time in its latent potential. Splayed across the white wall, the graphite lines remind us of the many possibilities inherent in this open structure and the infinite variables of form this compositional multiplicity might take on. This can also be seen in other presentations of Lundberg's sets. For example, in *No title: 32 parts 2014 (40 parts revised, 2017)* at Goya Curtain, Tokyo (2017) the artist added eight pieces of wire to a work from 2014, presenting the wooden spheres, ball bearings, hooks and wire on the tatami matting of the gallery floor. In the short text accompanying this work he states, "if no idea is posited as transcendent or outside of the work then every manifestation is immanent to it. Thus the work's 'outside' is its possible future becomings." This is a good example of the perceived restlessness of Lundberg's sets, always seeming to speak of possibility rather than fixity, mimicked in the anxious movement of the viewer. In the repetition of similar or near identical elements, there is always an implication that the elements in question could be multiplied indefinitely. The work is never truly wholly manifest, nor graspable in an instant.



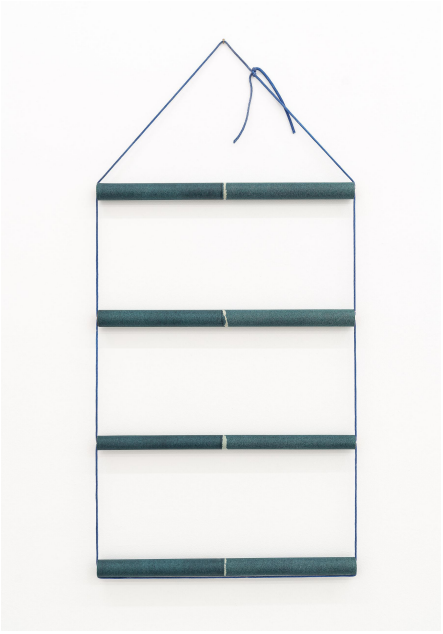
Patrick Lundberg, *No Title*, 2017. Acrylic on resin, 21 parts (dimensions variable). Each part 19 mm diameter.



Oliver Perkins, *Untitled*, 2018. Acrylic, cord, dowel and staples, 49 x 47 x 4 cm.

Almost in the obverse to the expanse of Lundberg's set pieces, Perkins' paintings are self-contained in the most literal sense. In his implant works, for example, where one painting plays host to another, the ghostly silhouette of the second canvas is pressed taut against the exterior. The same sense of containment can be seen in the delineation of the empty space held within or kept outside the rope frames of the string and dowels on display in *On Emptiness*.Co mprising as their base element a composition of wooden doweling, held in vertical or horizontal alignment by staples and rope, this form is treated with an array of pared down formalist painterly language; the dowels sometimes painted thickly in bright colours like children's toys [fig. 5] or wrapped in canvas with two inky colour-fields and a Barnett-Newman-like zip through the centre [fig. 6]. Displayed in this way, the string and dowels begin to form their own kind of set as points in a system. The works have their own multiplicity in the combination and recombination of defined elements. Seen together, they show their deviation; where a work hangs from one nail instead of two or where the same colour is applied thickly instead of finely and these departures offset a monotonous reading. In its abstraction, the frame and the negative space contained within becomes a seemingly endless and highly-suggestive piece of source material. For instance, each variation, each tiered structure could in turn be a house, an arch, or an altarpiece. These references of an exterior world are deliberately internalised and enable the string and dowels to exist in a volatile state bridging materiality and imaginary spaces.

Unlike Lundberg's sets, which, by foregrounding a notion of time, are as much about potential future becomings as their present physical form, Perkins' work focuses on a porosity in which emptiness takes on the equivalence of an object. For example, in the string and dowel works, this porous quality functions as an intermediary device, so that each of the painting's rods oscillates between presence and absence, content and non-content. Internalising this emptiness allows these paintings to absorb foreign qualities both referential and material. Such porosity can also be seen in Perkins' material register where alongside ink, acrylic, canvas and rabbit-skin glue, he employs more commonplace materials, such as the wooden doweling and rope, enamel house paint and staples. As a counterpoint to the use of rigid geometry, this material exploration reminds us of painting's relationship to the everyday and distinguishes Perkins' practice from a kind of sober modernism.



Oliver Perkins, *Untitled*, 2019. Ink, rabbit skin glue, canvas, dowel, rope and staples, 101.5 x 49 x 3.5 cm.



Oliver Perkins, *Untitled*, 2019. Acrylic, pre-primed canvas, rope, dowel and staples, 98 x 42 x 2.5 cm

Lundberg and Perkins turn to painting as an instrument by which to examine the world. In doing so, the artists open up a broader examination of the boundaries between object and non-object oriented practices. Launching from Barbaras' conception of 'nothingness as a mirage', both artists look to compose with

emptiness, centralising the negative space of the gallery walls in their paintings. The works are enthralling, the slow discoveries to be made beg closer examination – where coloured light is reflected on a wall from one of Perkins' dowels, or the precise Kandinsky-like flecks on Lundberg's pins are interrupted by a broad stroke of shocking pink. Both categories of work utilise and redeploy fixed elements to different effect and these shifts direct your perceptual encounter. An innate multiplicity exists in the work, and the exhibition feels as much about painting's potential as its fixed state. Given this flux, Badiou's use of set theory could also be seen to have bearing on the show as a whole. Sets are as much determined by what is included as what is excluded. No two sets can be the same and, as such, are defined against the constitutive elements of another. With multiple sets seen in the space, *On Emptiness* extends this ontological study among and between the works on show.

Footnotes

01. Renaud Barbaras, *Desire and Distance*, translated by Paul B. Milan (Stanford University Press, 2006), 58.

02. Allan Smith, 'Little by Little, Soon a Rich Cloth: Painting Everywhere and Everytime,' in *Nece ssary Distraction: A Painting Show* (Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, 2016), 34.

Biographies



Oliver Perkins (b. 1979, Christchurch) lives and works in Christchurch. Recent exhibitions include: *On Emptiness* (with Patrick Lundberg), Fold Gallery, London (2019); *Bleeding Edge*, Hopkinson Mossman, Wellington (2018); *Japanese Laurel*, Te Uru Waitakere Contemporary Gallery, Auckland (2017); *Translations*, Hopkinson Mossman, Auckland (2017); *Painting: A Transitive Space*, St. Paul St Gallery, AUT, Auckland (2016); *Necessary Distraction*: A Painting Show, Auckland Art Gallery toi o Tamaki, Auckland (2016); *Accordion*, Cell Project Space, London (2011). In 2017 Perkins was artist-in-residence at Parehuia McCahon House, Auckland.



Patrick Lundberg, b.1984, Stockholm, Sweden. Graduated from The Elam School of Fine Arts with a BFA in 2005 and later attended Kungl. Konsthögskolan, Stockholm as a guest student from 2011-12. Exhibitions include: *The science of light* (solo), Robert Heald Gallery, Wellington (2019), *Painting Amongst Other Things* (group), ANCA Gallery, Canberra, *Petrified at the instant of a change of wind* (solo), Ivan Anthony, Auckland, *New Seams* (solo), Station Gallery, Melbourne (2017), *No title, 32 parts, 2014 (40 parts revised, 2017)* (solo), Goya Curtain, Tokyo (2017), *Necessary Distraction: A Painting Show* (group), Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, 2015. Awards include: The Frances Hodgkins Fellowship, University of Otago (2014), Trust Waikato National Contemporary Art Award, Waikato Museum, Hamilton (2008).



Rosa Gubay lives in London where she works as an archivist for the artist Bridget Riley. She completed her MA in 'Countercultures: Alternative Art in Eastern Europe and Latin America 1959-89' in 2017 at the Courtauld Institute of Art, London.

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