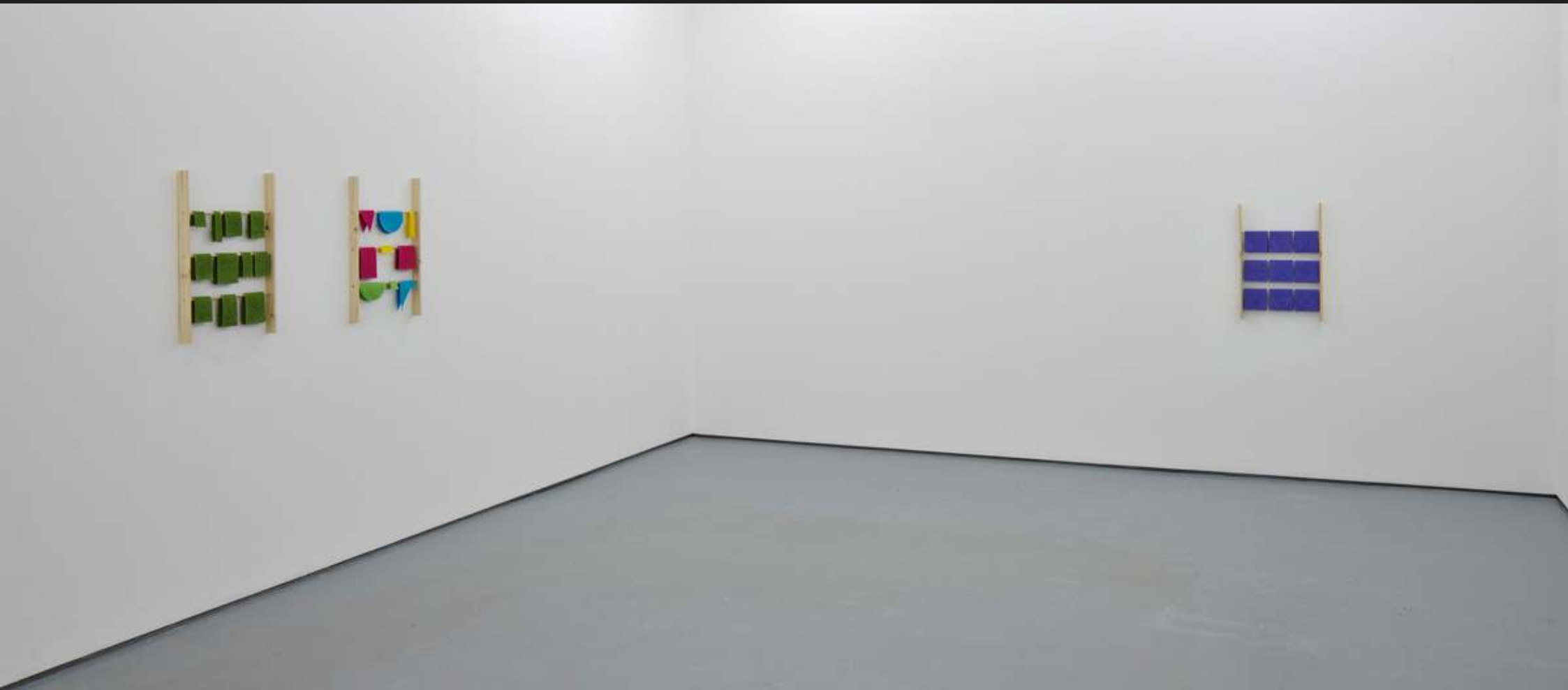


MAKING KNOTS





Type of output:
Exhibitions

by
Dean Hughes

Front cover image:
Dean Hughes – solo exhibition,
Maria Stenfors Gallery,
January 2014

Left: *The shape of things*, 2014.

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**Northumbria
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SUMMARY

The primary research aim was to rethink the place of time in the painted artwork. It asked: 'How can fractions of time commonly occluded in the making process be foregrounded as artistic subject?' In this series of 8 artefacts Hughes developed an innovative non-hierarchical view of the constituent parts of the artwork.

The research's originality lies in its use of drawing to posit an equivalence between constituent parts of an artwork commonly presented with an implicit priority. This method was arrived at through a repeated drawing practice that over a number of years deliberately conflated graphic and structural elements. Rather than see the constructed frame of a painting simply as its support, the drawing process foregrounded it as equivalent with other aspects of the constructed artwork. Similarly, hand-dyeing calico (which immerses colour into the warp and the weft of fabric) was chosen as opposed to the usual method of applying colour to a surface to allow Hughes to use colour without the recourse to an established and already known painterly language. This approach to suppressing subjectivity is a leitmotiv that runs through this body of work and as a means of making took its point of departure from the methods of the late 1960s Parisian artists' group BMPT.

Making Knots was exhibited at Maria Stenfors Gallery (24th January to 8th March 2014). The exhibition was chosen in the top 10 exhibitions for March in London by art critic Paul Carey Kent. The work was also exhibited at Cairn Gallery, Pittenweem (6th April to 25th May 2014) and at Laure Genillard Gallery, London (29th June to 21st September 2019).

The exhibition was reviewed in *ArtReview*, April 2014 by critic Jennifer Thatcher.

INTRODUCTION

“Hughes’ work makes tangible the passing of time – time taken to cut, to dye, to dry, to sew, to hang; repetitive actions that slowly build to make a whole”

Jennifer Thatcher, *ArtReview*, April 2014

This body of work *Making Knots* was the culmination of a period of research that produced eight artefacts. All works share three common elements:

- Hand dyed calico shapes.
- Presentation of these shapes on wooden slats measuring 64 x 42 x 4.5 cm.
- Utilisation of stitched marks as drawings.

The artworks are individually titled as follows:

1. *The location of multiples.*
2. *Drawn Edinburgh shapes.*
3. *Winter.*
4. *The shape of things.*
5. *Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday.*
6. *Half light / half shade.*
7. *Dashed matter.*
8. *Windowless work.*

The title of this body of work is taken from Italian novelist and essayist Italo Calvino: “the art of making knots, which is the peak of both mental abstraction and manual work, could be seen as the human characteristic par excellence, just as much and perhaps even more than language...”

Calvino, 2014



Right: *Half light, half shade*, 2014.

RESEARCH CHALLENGE

This research output seeks to elucidate, and make a subject of, the time and labour that can be hidden in the process of making and exhibiting artworks. Hughes's aim in this series of artworks was to establish an equality of space and attention to all elements within the constituted artwork (frame, gesture, line, shape, front, back, surface, wall). A more prevalent, habitual process in the making and presentation of an artwork results in the presentation of a subjective view for consideration by its audience. In following this process there are aspects of artistic labour which are not shown or are occluded. Hughes wanted to challenge such a partial view of artistic labour and materiality and instead wanted to make a series of works which paid equal attention to all its constituent parts. Hughes wanted to dwell upon the incidental moments within a making process and to give equal manifest presence to all constituent aspects of an artworks' making process, construction and exhibition.



Right: *The shape of things*, 2014.

CONTEXT

Hughes is known internationally for his work which investigates the quotidian within artistic practice (past solo exhibitions having taken place in UK, USA, and Italy and group exhibitions across Europe and the US). Since 1996 he has made a number of solo exhibitions which have employed a range of unprepossessing objects such as bus seats and tickets, passport photobooths, ruled A4 paper and staples to look at the fate of the everyday when viewed through artistic subjectivity.

Making Knots is the second instance where Hughes has presented a series of artworks that are formally unified in materiality, size and shape - the first being his solo exhibition at Dicksmith Gallery, London in 2010. *Making Knots* is distinct in Hughes research practice, however, in being the first body of work focusing upon painting and the structural aspects that constitute the painted object: surface (front/back) and frame/stretcher. Whereas in previous work Hughes sought to find new artistic expression within routine, ubiquitous experience within the 'everyday' world, in this group of artefacts Hughes focused instead upon the idea of overlooked, hidden labour within an established artistic process.

Art historical references that are important to this project were the work of Italian Arte Povera artist Giulio Paolini from 1962-65 which presented the 'frame' of the painted object as the subject and 'image' of the work (often the back of the canvas was prioritised). Also, the American post-Minimalist Richard Tuttle's ongoing deconstruction and blurring of artistic mediums, particularly his emphasis from 2010 onwards on the use and function of fabric and weave – evident in his exhibition *I Don't Know. The Weave of Textile Language* at the Whitechapel Gallery, 2014.

Distinct from both Paolini and Tuttle, Hughes constructed a series of artworks more fluid and less identifiable as fixed objects or images. *Making Knots'* innovation emerged during the installation process of Hughes' exhibitions when it became apparent that the calico coloured shapes could easily be moved, swapped and interchanged in a manner that is not viable with conventional artworks.



Right:
The location of multiples, 2014.

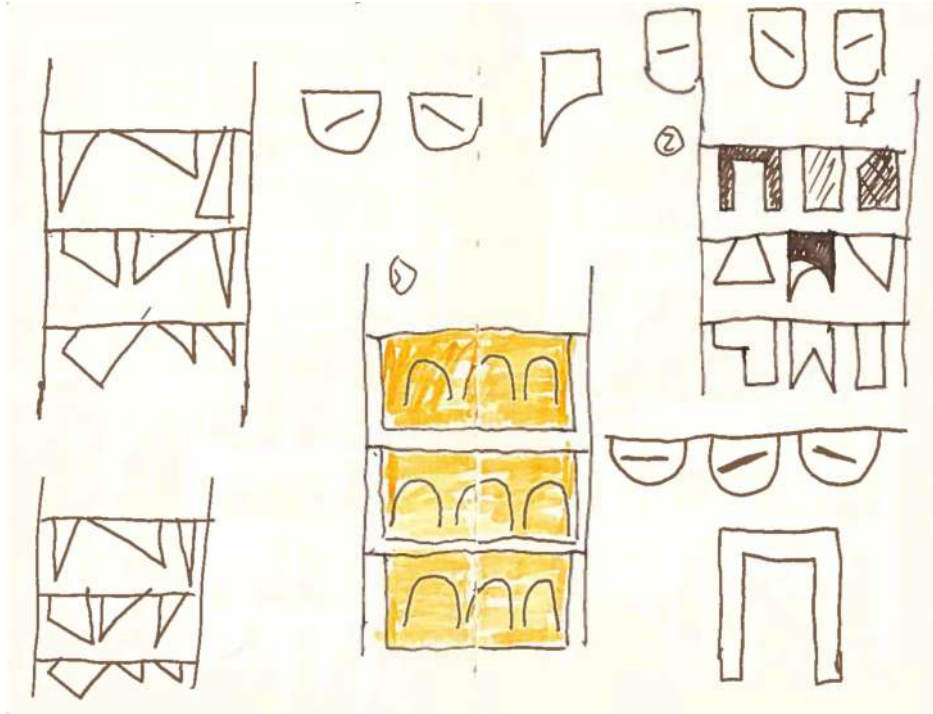
Left:
The location of multiples (detail).

METHODS AND PROCESSES

A drawing process was fundamental in developing this research project. The research was process-driven, the initial genesis of the artworks encountered through line drawings made repetitiously in notebooks. In making the same identical drawing over a number of years the functional elements within the artworks (for example the frame) became conflated with other elements within the works that have a more traditional relationship to “made” artistic sensibility (for example the cut and dyed calico elements). This process moved the drawings from being simple mimetic exercises in recording shapes of potential artworks through to deliberately confusing frame and shape. A comparable confluence was achieved by using stitched lines to “draw” upon the calico shapes, otherwise conventionally used to create the hem on a fabric. Informed by his interest in British Anthropologist Tim Ingold’s connection between sewing, stitching and thinking, Hughes’ use of thread to make lines (which began in 1994) is a more embodied, felt and incremental process of drawing that contains time differently to a hand-drawn line. The action of sewing allows a line to move over and under a surface, to make the physical, embodied process of making a mark - a line - more legible in using thumb, forefinger, and teeth.



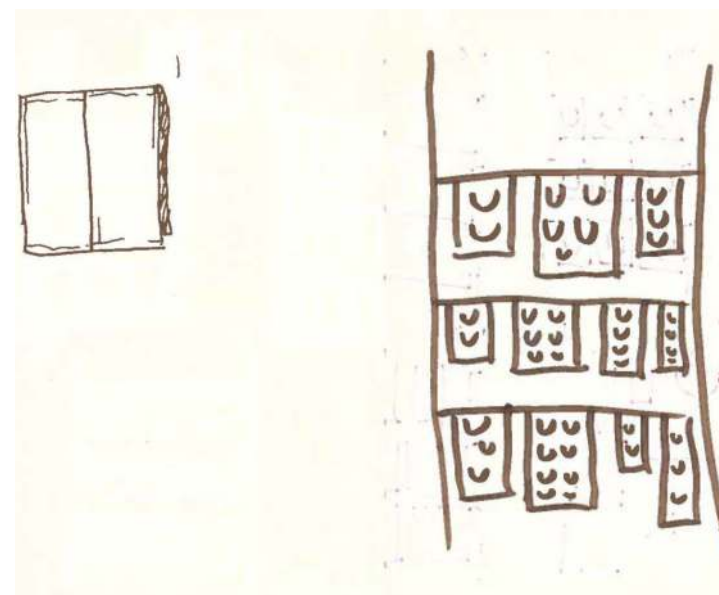
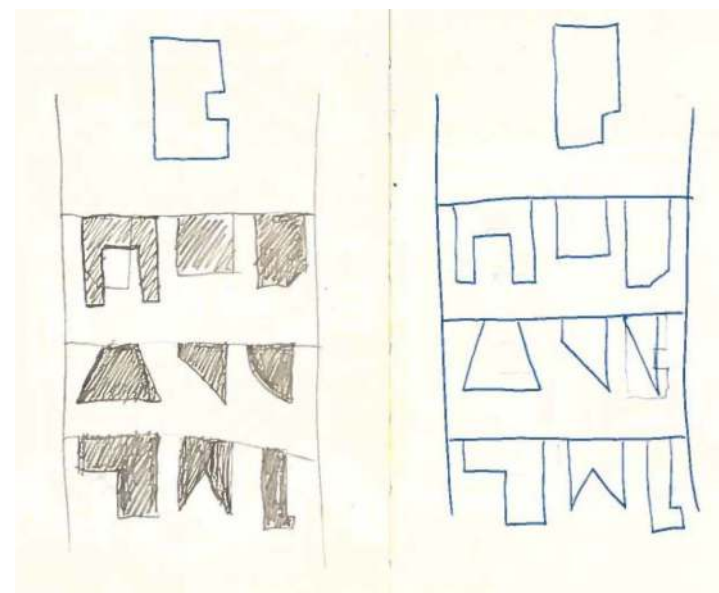
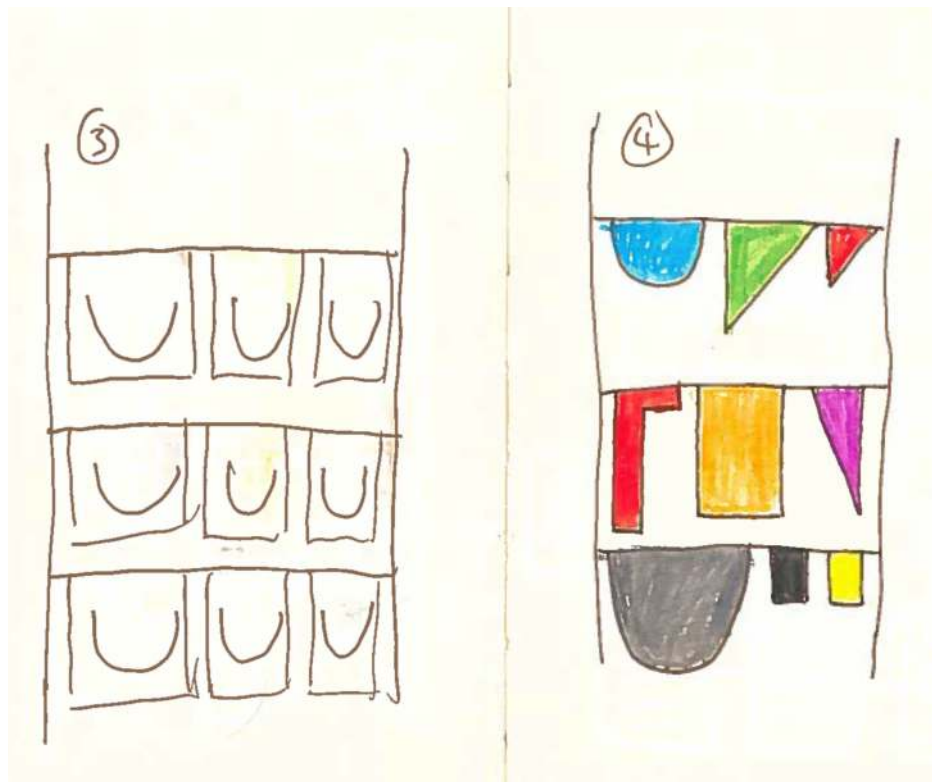
Right: *Winter*, 2014.



Above: Notebook showing development drawing for *Windowless work*.



Above: *Windowless work* (detail).



Above and right:
Notebook drawings.



Right: *The shape of things*, 2014.

DISSEMINATION

- The 8 works of this series were exhibited in a solo show at Maria Stenfors Gallery, London, 24th January – 8th March 2014. This exhibition was chosen in the top 10 exhibitions for March in London by art critic Paul Carey Kent.
(https://kristinhjellegjerde.com/usr/documents/press/download_url/68/1.pdf)
- 4 of the artworks were subsequently exhibited in a solo exhibition at Cairn Gallery, Pittenweem, 7th April – 25th May 2014.
- 4 of the artworks were also exhibited in Different Tongues at University of Central Lancashire Gallery Hanover space, 1st-23rd October 2015 and reviewed in Corridor 8.
(<https://corridor8.co.uk/article/review-different-tongues-hanover-project-preston/>)
- In April 2016 (28th -29th) Hughes was selected by Professor Alva Noe (Professor of Philosophy, University of California, Berkeley) to deliver a paper 'Incidental Moments, Happenstance, and the Role of the Anecdote within Artistic Research' at the Society of Artistic Research at the Royal Conservatoire and Royal Academy of Art in which he discussed 'Making Knots'.
- In June 2019 *Half light/half Shade* and *The Shapes of things* were included in Hughes retrospective exhibition at Laure Genillard Gallery London which ran from 29th June - 21st September
(<http://www.lglondon.org/index.php/project/dean-hughes--junessept-2019/>).

Right:
Dean Hughes @ Maria Stenfors,
ArtReview, 2014

Dean Hughes

Maria Stenfors, London 24 January – 8 March

Dean Hughes used a great line in a recent talk at Glasgow School of Art, available online: 'I used to be a waiter, I used to wait for work.' Given his deadpan delivery, it's hard to tell whether he intended the pun (on the kind of clichéd crap job on which many an artist relies financially), but the line offers a useful way into his latest body of work, which is more about materials and making than worrying about concept and a self-conscious relation to 'art'. For this series, Hughes has dyed little cutout shapes of calico in a variety of colours, stitched their edges and hung them delicately on wooden rungs, like miniature washing left out to dry on a towel rail, or bunting strung up. The supports are the size of small stretchers and are hung on the wall as if they were paintings; perhaps no surprise, since Hughes trained as a painter. Yet they appear so light, so loose, that it's hard to think of a category to which they belong. The titles bear out this ambiguity: they refer to things, shapes, work, matter, multiples.

Hughes definitely wants us to notice the

making – the multilayered process, the precision, the hand-dyeing, the dainty hand-stitching. The calico has taken on the vivid colours of the dye but crinkled lightly in the process, creating little marks on the otherwise perfect shapes. On some pieces of fabric, Hughes has stitched small 'u' characters. Set against blank fabric, like words on a page, or graffiti on a wall, the marks urge us to read them as signs, but of what? Letters, smiley faces, cheeky body parts, phases of the moon? Likewise, the dashes on *Dashed Matter* (all works 2013) suggest a cartoonist practising facial expressions or some kind of semaphore. They look abstract yet familiar: a code or a language; a trace of something whose source we won't know; a Rorschach test. Sometimes the titles lead you into seeing figuration in otherwise abstract shapes, as in *Drawn Edinburgh Shapes*, that transforms the coloured shapes into architectural motifs: a rooftop, a steeple, a rotunda, a tower block.

The title *Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday* reinforces the

idea of the washing line, suggesting that the seven pieces of cloth are items of laundry – it made me think of those kitsch 'knickers of the week' that Stella McCartney has recently been peddling. But the tracking of days might just as well be about routine and banality: the idea that making things is inseparable from the general business of getting through another week. Indeed, you could say that Hughes's work makes tangible the passing of time – time taken to cut, to dye, to dry, to sew, to hang; repetitive actions that slowly build to make a whole. It is about small details, fiddliness, concentration, picking up and putting down and picking up again. But Hughes's works are not retro; they are not paeans to the kind of wholesome craftmaking that we like watching on TV. If they are nostalgic, it is for a time when objects and materials were valued, not threatening to overwhelm us; when terms like 'activity' and its cousin 'hobby' were commonplace, before we all got too busy and distracted. *Jennifer Thatcher*



Windowless Work, 2013, wood, dyed calico and thread, 64 x 42 x 5 cm.
Courtesy the artist and Maria Stenfors, London



Above left: *The location of multiples*, 2014.



Above right: *Drawn Edinburgh shapes*, 2014.

Below left: *Winter*, 2014.

Below right: *The shape of things*, 2014.





Above left: *Monday, Tuesday,
Wednesday, Thursday, Friday,
Saturday, Sunday*, 2014.

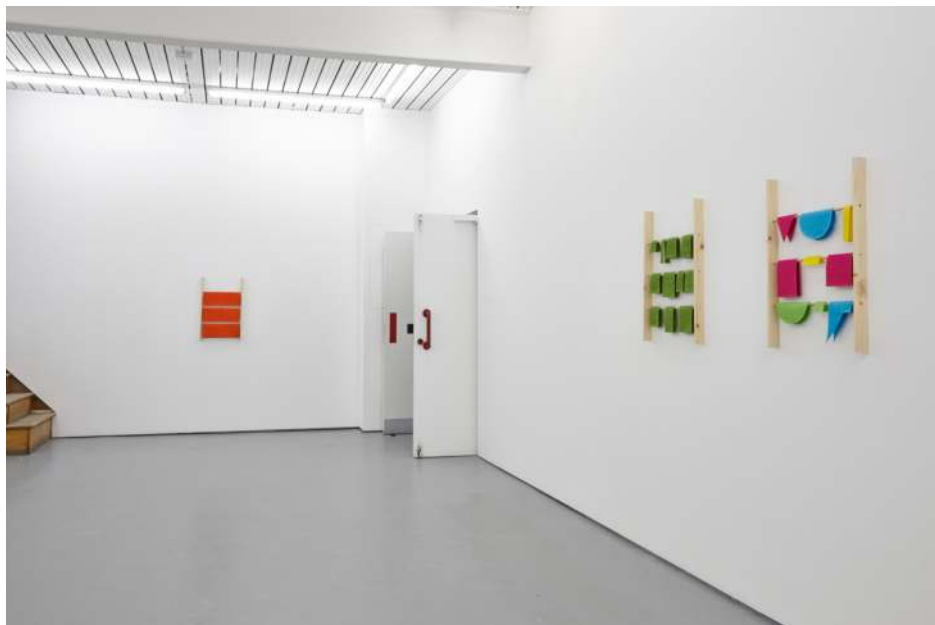


Above right: *Half Light, Half Shade*,
2014.

Below left: *Dashed Matter*, 2014.

Below right: *Windowless work*, 2014.





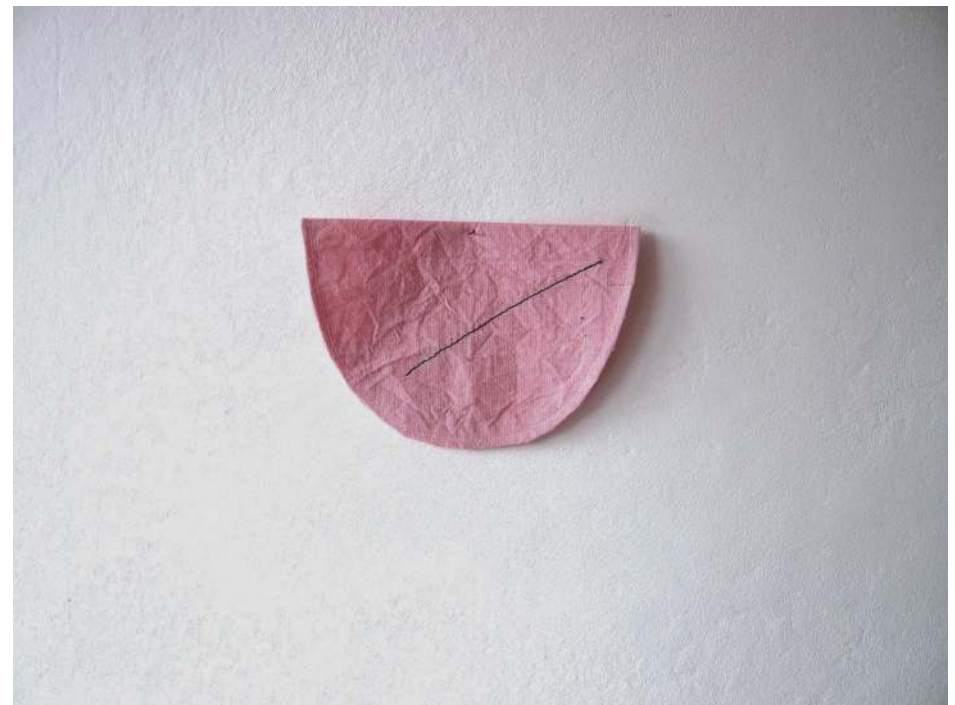
Above: Installation images from
Maria Stenfors Gallery, January 2014.



Above: Installation images from
Maria Stenfors Gallery, January 2014.



Above: Installation images from Cairn
Gallery, Pittenweem, April 2014.



Above: Installation images from Cairn
Gallery, Pittenweem, April 2014 (detail).



Above: Installation images
Laure Genillard Gallery, June 2019.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

With thanks to:

Thomas A Clark

Laurie Clark

Laure Genillard Gallery

Maria Stenfors

University of Central Lancashire

Photo credit: All images by
Dean Hughes

Back cover image: Dean Hughes,
solo exhibition,
Maria Stenfors Gallery, January 2014.

