

**TSM presents:**

## **Abstract Vernacular – Continuing Conversations**

Public Discussion chaired by **Natalie Rudd**

Saturday January 18<sup>th</sup>, 2025

### **Introduction by Alexandra Harley**

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you all here today and I have a few brief thanks to share. Hypha Studios have given us a fantastic space to host this show and Jim and Tonic sponsored our PV. I am especially pleased to welcome our invited artists who have brought fabulous work with them to make a really bold, interesting and exciting show. Finally, it is wonderful to have Natalie Rudd chair the discussion. Natalie is a previous Senior Curator of Collections at the Arts Council and is currently completing a PhD.

Introduction of the format of discussion by **Natalie Rudd**:

**Natalie** starts by asking each artist in turn '*what abstraction means to them*' in a maximum of two sentences:

**Gillian Brent:** making something that hasn't been seen before, although it comes from observations of the world.

**Beatrice Galletley:** Abstraction is a language. It is unique to each person and their understanding of the world. It is a feeling and initiate understanding of material, form, line or color. Abstraction in an instinct.

**Ellen Ranson:** It's the interrogation of colour, layering, motif, pattern and application of paint creating new environments and reflections on the world around us.

**Alexandra Harley:** Something that does not have a recognisable figuration.

**Charlotte Cullen:** My practice resonates around forms of care healing and repair but not representing a known object directly.

**Katrina Cowling:** Focusing on process and materiality while exploring vulnerably, intimacy and failure.

**Jackie Askew:** Abstraction is a way to transform personal experiences and the everyday into something surprising and poetic.

**Sheila Vollmer:** Abstract doesn't represent anything in particular but is about everything - everything that one experiences around them. For me that includes my experience of space (architectural, poetic and organic), material, rhythm, colour and mood.

**Day Bowman:** For me, abstraction is a distillation, a paring down, of what is in the world. Much like poetry that chooses not to creative narrative, necessarily, but to use the simplest of forms to express ideas. (*Day didn't attend the discussion event but gave us her personal definition of abstraction*).

## DEFINING ABSTRACTION

Panel: **Gillian Brent, Beatrice Galletley, Ellen Ranson**

### **Natalie Rudd Introduction:**

*Approaches to abstraction – influenced by diversity of practice (based on age, location, education?); subjectivity, personal, intuitive, intimate, universal, critical engagement, identity(?); Art historical precedents. Thoughts across painting and sculpture.*

Maybe I could start by asking what **abstraction means to you**. How does it operate within your practice on a personal level? Why is it important? (may have already been covered in the introduction, if so I could delve deeper into the initial answers given at this stage.)

**Gillian Brent:** abstraction is a way of removing obvious representative narratives from my work yet using my experiences and observations to create sculpture that explores the nature of material, space, forces, gravity...

**Beatrice Galletley:** Abstraction is in my form of language, which is unique to each individual. I see the world in shapes, form and lines. It is in an integral part to my practice. I see the lines as the letters and the final sculpture is the word. When I am making my sculptures, I work completely intuitively combing the opposing form of harsh line with soft line to create forms that are un-categorizable. They are a combination of my experience, the masculine and feminine, order and chaos. For me abstract is the liminal space between the opposite – it is where the magic happens. Abstract allows for a freedom, for viewers to impart their own understanding.

**Ellen Ranson:** I take imagery from my everyday experiences, patriarchal pasts and presents, memories, surroundings, ancient landscapes and other sources are then manipulated and abstracted, through a seemingly digital process, resulting in a hand made abstraction. As said I'm looking to create new reflections on the world around me.

**Natalie Rudd:** As I highlighted in my text, there has been an upsurge in art historical interest in the contributions that women have made to the field of abstract art. Without wishing to stray down essentialist lines, I wanted to ask if you could reflect on these **legacies**. Who, for you, has been important and why?

**Gillian Brent:** All the artists who I was influenced by as a young artist were men and still are to some extent. Most of my tutors were men. I did discover Eva Hesse later who had a completely different sensibility to the men making abstract sculpture.

**Beatrice Galletley:** There have been a few artists that have been integral to my development. I would say an artist that has inspired me greatly has been Phyllida Barlow. I have always admired her use of materials and her large-scale installations. Also Lynda Benglis, Holly Hendry, Arlene Shechet. What interests me is how all of these artists use the material pushing them to their limits, working intuitively, playing, and pushing with space. I really want to push my work into installation-based practice playing with the space.

**Natalie Rudd:** One thing I take from this show is that you all share a very **active approach** to abstraction. The body is implied even if it is not figured. There is a strong presence of making. I wonder if you could respond to this relationship between yourselves and the work.

Is it to do with a kind of freedom of movement, personal expression and identification?

**Gillian Brent:** I make works on a human scale, that are in our space. I think I want the viewer to not feel intimidated by my work. I cast found objects that people may recognise yet when they are included in the sculpture for me they become additional forms and mass. Yet the fact they are recognisable gives something that the viewer can relate to which may draw them in.

**Beatrice Galletley:** There is a great connection between me and my work on two levels a physical and more conceptual / spiritual level. The work is so intuitively made; it is innate physically understanding / response within my body. So yes without me physically making the work the work would not exist in the way it does. I could never teach someone to make my work or guide them too because it is muscle memory almost. There is also a very performative element to the work, which is private. There is a lot of physicality in making the work moving them around, shifting them figuring how to get around the larger works in my studio. I really enjoy this element of the work in a way the work doesn't feel complete if hasn't challenged me physically or made my life difficult for example with carrying it. I would say the work is very much about my way of exploring my identity, my placement within the world. I think all artwork is intrinsically linked to the artist's identity. I have to say this is not something that I was fully aware of until about 4 years ago and it is something I am really looking to further explore and understand within my work. I do call the pieces creatures of my subconscious; they are to me a record or a moment in time captured of myself.

**Ellen Ranson:** I try to capture a physically powerful expression in my work, a kind of hunger and desire for a rebalancing of female representation and voice within abstract painting, adding to the growing conversations around reclaiming and rearticulating women's voices. Although my motifs and patterning of applied colour looks digital it is very much hand made.

**Natalie Rudd:** I wonder if you could reflect on the balance that you like to strike between **intuition** and preplanning?

We have been talking about a human / embodied presence, and about intuition, and coupled with this, there is a strong feeling of **playfulness** in this work. How important is play to you as a process of making? Beatrice, you have spoken about play as having a performative quality for you. And Gillian, there is a clear spirit of play in the forms you make.

**Gillian Brent:** I always work directly in the material, in 3D. I usually have an idea or set of parameters but have no image of the outcome, as I have learnt that what I make is much better than what I can imagine in my head. It is all about responding piece by piece to the sculpture as I construct it and also take pieces away again. It tends to be a bit unstable though as precarious balance and weight are big factors, always being on the edge of chaos.

**Beatrice Galletley:** For me there is not much pre planning in the traditional sense of drawing a sculpture before making. I do a lot of sketching of forms that come to mind and digital collaging and collaging which act as my starting points / inform my sculptures when I go on to making them. These often start with a word that is running around in my head and lead from that. I always have words that just stick at the time and they tend to become my focus points for a bit. But the re-occurring themes or things are form color and line. So I guess in a sense these are my preplans; I put them up on my studio wall so I am always looking at them but I never directly copy them within my making.

For me it is a big intuitive process when making my sculptures; it is a relationship that I have built with the clay. I have to say it is very much a love hate relationship. There are days when the clay will behave the way I want it too and we flow and connect well. Then there are days when it just doesn't connect. So I guess in a way there is an element of playfulness; it is constant song and dance. There is lots of chatting and sometimes shouting. The process of making is integral within the work as I often don't know exactly what it is going to come out. I would say there is a real performative element in my work it is a song a dance, I am constantly stopping standing up moving around, trying to move the sculpture into different positions. As I said earlier if the sculpture doesn't physically challenge me I don't like it! For me it is always play. Often the most successful pieces broke or parts of them broke off – which I love because then something greater / strong comes out. Failure for me is the most exciting place to be in – if it is too easy it hasn't got the essence it needs.

**Ellen Ranson:** My imagery from memories, surroundings and ancient landscapes are perhaps the preplanning but the application is intuitive, manipulated and abstracted with layering of pattern and application of colour – paint.

**Natalie Rudd:** Thinking about relations with the body, I wanted to ask you about **scale**. There is a clear shared interest in working at a manageable scale, one which enables a certain intimacy. How important is it for you to make this work independently? And how important is it for the work to be **handmade**?

**Gillian Brent:** I have never been able to design a sculpture so the making is part of the artistic process, the forming and manipulating of material and space.

**Beatrice Galletley:** It is integral to my practice that my work can be made independently, because my process is so intuitive. I would never be able to tell or dictate how to make the work. It is as much about my relationship with clay as it is about creating abstract forms that challenge other relationships in the world. Therefore, I feel the work would not carry the impact it has if it were not handmade. A big part of the work is exploring how far I can push the material I am working with, ceramics. I like to push it beyond its limits see what it is capable, of which I wouldn't be able to do if my hand wasn't involved.

I do want to push the scale even larger so it is about figuring out how I can so at the moment that is why I am exploring making in sections and seeing how far I can physically push myself to make larger work. I think with my work and the ways I work and approach making sculpture I am always trying to physically challenge myself and the clay further. It is a bit of a game of let's see how far I can take this. I enjoy growing and learning, being curios

as well and one way I do this is seeing how I can push myself with the making through form and scale.

**Ellen Ranson:** I usually work larger but decided to bring this smaller new work for this exhibition. Handmade and making it myself with the stretch of my own body is a crucial to my interrogation of colour and expression to create new environments and reflections.

**Natalie Rudd:** Layering emerges as an important theme across the painting and sculpture in the show, and this emerges in many different ways, layering of ideas, materials and forms. Ellen, I was thinking of the layers of paint and references in your work, and, Gillian and Beatrice, how you combine contrasting forms to dramatic, almost theatrical effect. I wondered if you could reflect on why this **additive** process is important.

**Gillian Brent:** As a responsive artist I always work with what is in front of me and build on that. I often start with found forms and recycled materials so that I have something to react to in constructing together the parts.

**Beatrice Galletley:** Addition is an important part of the process because to me it is a way to push the work to the point of completion. It adds depth for example to the works in terms of colour. I always layer two glazes of different forms and colors to create a dynamic surface. Sometimes the works have 4 or 5 layers of glaze and are fired 4 or 5 times. I think addition for me is growth; layering is like the workings out to the final piece. That is why I can sometimes fire my works so many times. I guess also in a way the way I make sculptures is constant addition, it is adding slab upon slab to build this dynamic form. For me making or my way or making is always about adding to a form or a space not taking away from it.

**Ellen Ranson:** The layers of colour, motifs and patterns are taken from my everyday experience of memories and looking at my surrounding landscape, learning about its ancient past and finding my own expressive power and voice – trying to rebalance a female representation and voice within abstract painting.

**Natalie Rudd:** Another point of connection across painting and sculpture is via **colour**. And again, it is handled in very different ways, from subtle tonalities, to hot pinks, and neon dayglo contrasts. What is your approach to colour?

**Gillian Brent:** When I started casting in Jesmonite, I realised that I had to make decisions about colour, which I hadn't done much before, which I found a real challenge. I find it very hard to be consistent and it's still trial and error. It's definitely a whole other aspect to consider! Yet it gives another way for people to connect with the sculpture.

**Beatrice Galletley:** Again, much like the way I make the sculptures the way I approach colour is completely intuitive. I want the colour to act as another opposition to the form. I am often combining two opposing colours on the form and structure. I often sit with the form before I decide the colour, the sculptures often tell me what colour they should be. To achieve this, I sometimes have to fire them a few times. I sometimes add extra things into the glaze that I don't write down so that it becomes unique to the piece. Much like with the

form, the glaze is unique and can never be re-made exactly thus truly capturing a moment in time and my subconscious.

I enjoy using brighter colours as it adds another sense of dynamism to the works. If I use too natural colours it always seems that people make this instant connection to nature and the point is the works are meant to be ambitious and encourage you think and challenge what you know.

**Ellen Ranson:** I enjoy exploring colour that looks drawn from the digital world and does come from my experience but it is very much hand made creating a new expression and abstraction of my world.

**Natalie Rudd:** Timely moment to open up to the audience:  
*Good Q&A - observations and questions from the audience to all of the artists and their approaches.*

## ASPECTS OF VULNERABILITY AND FLUX

Panel: **Jackie Askew, Katrina Cowling, Alexandra Harley**

### Introduction:

*Brief acknowledgement of our conversations around finding the right words for this section. restlessness and movement, gravity, balance and poise, energy and tension, contradictions; precarious / reclaimed / reused materials & canvases; art and life intersections: permanence and ephemerality; vulnerability as a strength, relationship between artists' work and their career trajectory, cross generational connections amongst artists.*

**Natalie Rudd:** Procurement of **materials**. You all appear to be interested in materials that are vulnerable or on the edge in some way can you discuss?  
Is this scavenging process a **performative** process or is it a much more practical procedure?  
Does your desire to reuse and recycle reflect **environmental** concerns?

**Alexandra Harley:** I am hugely aware of the environmental impact of my making so wood is reclaimed and the woodland trust gets a donation for each sculpture regardless of the material. I am always being offered wood, people have a special affinity with trees I think, they don't want to see them thrown away. Sometimes I can pass timber onto students, sometimes I can just put the wood to one side to season until I need it. When I use green wood there is definitely a performative aspect as the wood can distort and move unpredictably as it is being worked.

**Jackie Askew:** I don't generally scavenge for materials, but I do try to be as environmentally sound as possible. I try not to waste materials by recycling older destroyed works, new pieces emerge from the destruction, retrieval and reassembly of previous paintings.

**Katrina Cowling:** My neon works are not environmentally sound and I do worry about this, but the 'Near to the Wild Heart' series using industrial and domestic plastic strips are considering reuse and recycle and work to express my ideas.

**Natalie Rudd:** There are indications or **vulnerability** in the way that you present your works. In sculpture, objects lean, hover, balance, teeter, as in your work, Alexandra and Katrina. In

your paintings, Jackie, there is a sense that your imagery is never secure and always subject to change. Why the attraction to risk and uncertainty, and the idea of objects and situations being on the brink?

**Alexandra Harley:** It has always been important to me that my sculptures do not sit as a lumpen mass. I want to imbue them, not just with a sense of their own history and continuing life but also to take on a new role within the sculpture. This is especially true for the reclaimed wood I use. What has it seen, where has it been, how can it re-live? The sculptures often do look as though they are on the point of falling over and that element of risk is, for me, part of the excitement of working with the materials and their combinations

**Jackie Askew:** My work process is intuitive, so naturally includes unknowing and risk, evolving organically, each piece freely transitioning into the next as they evolve and change, I don't see them as individually finished works but rather as part of a continuous process.

**Katrina Cowling:** Precarity and vulnerability is very much evident in all my restless sculptures, leaning, flailing, teering, trembling, supporting, always on the brink of collapse.

**Natalie Rudd:** Aspects of material **deterioration**. Obviously, working with vulnerable materials involves an acknowledgement that they may not be entirely robust and durable. How important is the durability of the final object to you?

**Alexandra Harley:** Nothing lasts forever! Wood is subject to the attentions of insects that will eat it and dropping a ceramic sculpture is rather detrimental. My working methods are not conducive to thinking about potential collectors, it is far more important that the sculpture does what it does and I use the materials in a way that enhances the sculpture. I think for me to try and consider longevity would be a death knell for some works, they would be too safe, lumbering and unwieldy.

**Jackie Askew:** I tend not to think about the durability of the work when I'm making it.

**Katrina Cowling:** I like to explore ideas of stability and instability, safety and threat, growth and collapse in my work so yes working with some of the plastics, I know will have to be relaxed with use.

**Natalie Rudd:** Across your work there is a clear shared interest in how materials and forms can **flow** and **transform**, one thing turns into another, graceful trajectories across the canvas or across the space. Light, almost watery, shifts, undulations and ripples. What does working with lighter materials and undulating forms offer you as artists? Why are ideas of plasticity and flow so important?

**Alexandra Harley:** I think the 'flow' and 'transformation' are each an essential part of the making. I don't want a viewer to predict what they will see as they move around the sculpture, I don't want them to think they 'know' a 3D sculpture from just one viewpoint. As a sculptor I want viewers to move around the work and see each aspect, the subtle changes and the build up, each part of the sculpture playing an essential role. I have introduced different media into my sculptures and seeing how other materials can inform and support



the overall concept is exciting. I also want to build in and pay homage to what the wood as a tree has 'seen' in its previous life. With clay and with wax there is less of this, but I still push the material to its limits.

**Katrina Cowling:** Plasticity and flow are so important because physicality is central to my processes. The span and limitation of my body dictate the form, flow, choice of materials and scope of my work.

**Natalie Rudd:** I wonder if we could open this out to reflect on your work in relation to the world at large and widespread themes of **precarity**. The world is precarious and equally there has been a lot of recent research into the precarious position of many artists, in terms of income and ability to sustain a career. How closely does your work connect with your life and your experience of the world? In other words, are you working through your life and experiences or are your art and lives separate?

**Alexandra Harley:** Going back to what I was saying about not having ponderous sculpture, this inevitably means that I am building into the sculpture a sense of precariousness from the word go. I don't make 'safe' sculptures, I want them to look as though they could get up and dance when I am not looking. There is a performative element to this, having sculptures that discuss their viability with me while I make them and fight back against ideas I might have.

**Katrina Cowling:** My work is intuitive and very much relates to my precarious and physical experience of the world. Perhaps like my body my work explores vulnerability, intimacy and failure but with a focus on materials, process and the body in space.

**Natalie Rudd:** You come together as an intergenerational network of artists, and I wonder if it is timely to open this to the floor - an opportunity to share reflections on what has been helpful when balancing the challenges and opportunities of art and life.

**Gillian:** working in steel which is used for building bridges and large buildings but making small, unstable pieces as I do, is I think a bit of a reaction by me to the power dynamics in the modern world where everything is being covered in concrete and built up to develop capitalism and generate wealth. We should allow the natural world a place (although the modern world does have many good innovations).

*Good Q&A discussion with audience and other exhibiting artists relating their individual experiences and asking more questions of the panel and other artists.*

## **COMMUNICATION AND CONNECTIONS**

**Panel:** **Charlotte Cullen, Sheila Vollmer**

### **Natalie Rudd: Introduction:**

*Communication and connections- vernacular language; language of making, how ideas can be conveyed through the work, informal and authentic, random connections, fanciful experiments, local discourse, rigour of practice, group exhibition. Sharing histories through*



*practice, developing a community and mutual support networks that reach out to audiences too.*

Sheila, how did TSM arrive at the title Abstract Vernacular? Can you tell us about your choice of the word **Vernacular**, what it means to the group and what you hope the audience will take from it?

**Sheila Vollmer:** The title evolved from our previous TSM exhibitions and discussions, ‘to continue the conversation’ – but I think Gillian should answer this as she came up with the title.

**Gillian Brent:** I chose the word Vernacular for our title as we are interested in shared languages of abstract sculpture and painting. We have used the title Dialects of Making in a previous show and I wanted another way to express our interests in the universality of abstraction as well as making it accessible, making it ordinary and a language everyone can understand.

**Natalie Rudd:** This idea of a *language* of making is interesting, especially when combined with abstraction. It once again pushes abstraction to hold more meaning, more content. This is perhaps a tricky question, but I wanted to ask you how you hope that your work will **speak to audiences**, what is it that you are particularly keen to impart?

**Charlotte Cullen:**

**Sheila Vollmer:** My aim is to give the viewer an experience of something that holds their view, entices them to walk around the piece physically and takes them somewhere else to both an experience that surprises and challenges them but also that they can relate to. The nature of my making is within a system of repeated elements, continuous line and colour that creates a visual rhythm and mood drawing the eye in, out and around the piece.

**Natalie Rudd:** Charlotte, your work is rooted in your Irish Catholic heritage, and your work seeks to physically embody intergenerational experiences, and a kind of layering of **narratives and histories** through making?

**Charlotte Cullen:** Yes, I’ve drawn on my family’s Irish history and the forms of labour undertaken to build a new life in England, and the myriad, intersecting, and intergenerational experiences coalescing from this point of view. My practice resonates around forms of care, healing and repair using primarily metal with interwoven jagged and raw strips, scarred and bent, healing and holding.

**Natalie Rudd:** Vernacular tongue also relates to dialects in a particular **place**. There is a strong sense of placemaking in this work. I am thinking of the scenarios you both appear to evoke place in your work, yet in very different ways. Sheila, your work establishes a kind of architecture of its own, and there is a strong feeling of ‘here and nowness’: things coming together in a particular place and time. Charlotte, your work feels like it travels back and forth in time and evokes distant places to battles, and knights and chivalry! I wanted to ask if you could reflect on your approach to place and time.

**Sheila Vollmer:** I do respond directly to the material with not much preplanning other than to choose the material and method of how I am going to join it; like the wood skirting board cut randomly but always joined following the line of the moulding and creating a pattern with the brass piano hinged joints and added gold paint. I like the challenge of working with a hard-edge material like machined steel and wood skirting that do have references to 'place', but then to soften them with the rhythm of construction and added colour. Some of my work is directly influenced by the 'place' of my industrial Deptford studio building. I had a view of an industrial crane outside my window, (until it was removed for safety reasons), that influenced earlier steel angle constructions and configurations. Growing up in small town rural Ontario Canada I can now see, (with some experience), that I have visual references *to the surrounding farming architecture/machinery and growing patterns of the local fields and forests.*

**Charlotte Cullen:** Yes, my work do bear the traces of assault. While the fantasy of ancestral battles lurks behind the work, the real ones are those of alienation, gender identity and social conflict. From the metal plates I sometimes make prints — when pressed into paper, the identity of the battle reveals itself. The random scratches or messages are like those scratched into a school desk or a battered bus stop. It is not the content of the words that speak, so much as the invocation of a conflicted adolescence.

**Natalie Rudd:** Thinking about place, Charlotte, you are based in Leeds, and Sheila you are based in London (and this exhibition features artists based in Yorkshire, Ireland, and the North East). I wonder if you could reflect on the challenges and opportunities of working **inside and outside of London**. What do you perceive to be the main challenges and opportunities of being in London, Sheila, and conversely, Charlotte, of working outside of London?

**Sheila Vollmer:** I like the diversity of artists in London and the opportunity to exhibit and find your people, which is exactly how TSM was formed through an artist, led exhibition. It can also be a difficult fast paced, competitive and expensive city to balance the space to create with making a living.

**Charlotte Cullen:** Based in Leeds but working at York St John's University, I can tap into the art scene in both places as well as the North generally and do feel part of this community. It is cheaper to live and work but can be limiting with opportunities to exhibit and widen your community.

**Natalie Rudd:** Vernacular - unpretentiousness and **informality**, when applied to architecture or language. There is something appealingly informal about the Talking Sculpture Making venture. You pop up in different places, open to engagement with a growing network of artists, always with conversation and dialogue at heart. You are building an intergenerational community of artists.

How is this **network** informing your practice?

What can you do together that you cannot do alone? When does it work to be collaborative, and when do you need to push things independently?

**Sheila Vollmer:** The TSM network has evolved to create a safe space for us all to bounce off ideas about our own individual sculpture practices, which comes about with studio visits as well as exhibiting together. Collaborating to initiate group exhibitions with other intergenerational women artists is much easier with TSM artists having different strengths and weaknesses to help balance the mix. Making work still needs to be a solitary activity to find your own voice.

**Gillian Brent:** We are keen to have artists from across the country and beyond. The experiences of artists working outside London and the ecology of the art worlds they inhabit are very different to those in the capital. I moved out of London 40 years ago and although there is a supportive community of artists in Sheffield where I live, I feel quite isolated in terms of my artistic interests as an abstract sculptor. Each city's artist scene is very much dominated by the University there and the prevailing culture of the Fine Art dept. I ended up finding 'my people' back in London who had a similar art language and motivations as me. So, it is important for me for artists of all generations to have opportunities to mix and show across the country and not be siloed in their own locations. It makes a big difference to how a Northern artist is perceived if they show work in London. I want to mix that up and get more of a flow around the country.

**Alexandra Harley:** Having a direct critical engagement with other artists is so important, I don't want to be isolated in my studio. I want to be challenged so that my sculpture develops, and I want to see how other new-to-me artists are tackling similar concerns.

**Natalie Rudd:** Timely moment to open up to the floor. What the network means to artists and audiences, where it could go.

*Good Q&A discussion with audience and other exhibiting artists relating their individual experiences and asking more questions of the panel and other artists.*