

Vicken Parsons. By Dylan Cotton

Vicken Parsons was born in Hertfordshire 1957. She studied at the Slade school of Fine Art, from 1975 to 1979. Parsons creates small scale paintings from thin layers of oil paint. "Her bold, abstract, architectural works have been compared to Francis Bacon and Mondrian's. She is critically very well received and has had solo shows at Tate St Ives; pieces exhibited at the Whitechapel Gallery in London and is included in major collections". (Battersby 2016) She currently lives and works in London, at comfortable proximity to her roots in the south.

At first glance Parsons' work is delicate and intimate in its nature; however this initial observation is nimbly supplanted by the awareness of the presence of a sophisticated and serious artistic entity.

Parsons creates mysterious fabricated environments and imagined spaces. Her little images simultaneously facilitate and augment meditative journey in a way that's far from little. These are the characteristics of her paintings that I find most appealing and why her practice is of particular interest to me.

Many of her geometrically influenced paintings establish an inviting sense of an internal room like place or partial place; however once the threshold has been crossed the viewer has a pitiful chance of interpretation or making any logical sense of his or her surroundings. Resigned to not finding a purpose the mind is directed towards delicate reasoning, this is sponsored by pleasing formations, absorbing geometric happenings and mesmeric colours. Luminosity and meek aesthetic rewards induce subtle emotional enquiry, mildly perplexing yet valuable internal curiosities are thus created, experienced and entertained.

So what's going on here? Am I over reacting to these little paintings? I feel driven to discover more about these works and why they exist the way they do. They are on unframed plywood, the painted surface ends at edge crudely leaving the sides of the plywood and the laminations exposed, typically just 25cm by 30cm in size. (See Figure 1) The vast majority of Parsons' paintings are untitled.

During a recent interview Parsons was quoted as saying "I'm interested in going down into a place which is hidden. Trying to get down to the unconscious, I suppose." Parsons' remarks are noted by the interviewer as being delivered with hesitancy but interestingly she backs this up by repeatedly saying... "looking is the most important thing" (Spence 2012)

When looking at Parsons' work I've certainly experienced a tangible sense of positive connection to my unconscious and become aware of the tantalising possibilities that this presents. It's something I'll be striving hard to achieve through my own practice; whilst my output will always have a greater aesthetic emphasis and other clear differences here lays the first palpable relationship to my studio interests. Other similarities include Parsons' preoccupation with space, her use of geometry and her 3d assemblages (See Figure 2) which are very similar to my own in appearance. I do wonder if these assembled blocks (for some of her work) form an integral part of Parsons' internal creative process in much the same way as my own constructions do. (See Figure 3).

"Parsons talks enthusiastically about her first encounters with Cubism and at her excitement at discovering the possibilities inherent in the fragmentation of form and the dislocation of space. Cubism taught us that we can represent an object or a space not by restricting ourselves to depicting how it appears from a single viewpoint, but by approaching it from all sides. Furthermore, the realisation that this freedom to move around the external features of a thing exists" (Archer 2001: 14) this is a well description of Parsons' work.

"Parsons' work quietly encourages us to consider new visual relationships. We admire the intelligence and ambition of these paintings too; their sense of purpose and visual power out of all proportion to their scale. Above all we recognise that rare ability to transfix us with the reality and beauty of paint and colour while opening up vast worlds of possibility and feeling." (Nairne 2015)

In Vicken Parsons' paintings there is quite often the suggestion of deception, smoke and mirrors or deliberately constructed anomalies. Paradoxical elements are implemented to good effect and also assist in the delivery drama and illusion. One could argue that her work is in many senses overstated but also with equally plausible accuracy describe it as understated. The comparable between this and Vicken Parsons professional career must at this juncture be taken into consideration.

For reasons I don't need to cover in this essay Parsons is very closely connected to the upper echelons of the art establishment, a simple Google search for 'Vicken Parsons' reveals this. Enviously, should she wish to raise

her profile she could do so hugely and with relative ease. Instead she keeps her distance from the art establishment and remains for the most part self-sufficient. Just as her paintings are on small panels, holding their own in big spaces, Parsons' professional profile is understated in a similar way. It's her most commendable and refreshing choice to be a small fish in a big pond.

"If twin thirsts for self-publicity and instant communication are characteristic of contemporary culture, then painter Vicken Parsons is not a woman of her time. She takes several days before replying to my email request for an interview. When I do meet her, she is friendly, nervous and quite devoid of the narcissism that is a default setting for so many of her peers. Parsons' self-sufficiency reflects her detachment from the contemporary art scene". (Spence 2012)

"At first you scarcely notice it, and then it grows on you. So does the notion that Parsons is an intriguing and underrated painter." (Gayford 2016)

Since leaving the Slade Parsons has selflessly dedicated much of her energy to her others, "her children and financial situation decades ago meant that for a while Parson's artistic career took a back seat out of necessity." (Battersby 2016) As for now I think it's safe to assume Vicken Parsons is genuinely working for the absolute love of it, for the most part free from commercial pressure and unnecessary outside influences.

In summary I think the work of Vicken Parsons is in a league of its own, I'd encourage anyone and everyone to spend some time taking it in. I'd go as far as saying her art is good for ones sole, perhaps Vicken Parsons is... 'The Angel of the South'

#### Reference List

ARCHER, Michael. 2001. *Other Places Vicken Parsons*. St Ives: Tate St Ives

BATTERSBY, Matilda. 2016 'Artist Vicken Parsons Interview'. *The Independent* 21 November [online]. Available at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/features/vicken-parsons-antony-gormley-a7430066.html> [accessed 23 March 2017].

GAYFORD, Martin. 2016. 'An Entertaining Show at Marian Goodman Gallery – Where the Joke's on us'. *The Spectator* 26 November [online]. Available at: <https://www.spectator.co.uk/2016/11/an-entertaining-show-at-marian-goodman-gallery-where-the-jokes-on-us/> [accessed 20 March 2017].

NAIRNE, Andrew. 2015. 'New Vicken Parsons Publication'. *Kettle's Yard.co.uk* [online]. Available at: <http://www.kettlesyard.co.uk/about/news/new-vicken-parsons-publication/> [accessed 21 March 2017]

SPENCE, Rachel. 2012. 'Great and Small'. *Financial Times* 27 January [online]. Available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/1083688a-45b5-11e1-93f1-00144feabdc0> [accessed 21 March 2017].

#### List of Figures

Figure 1. CHRISTINE KONIG GALERIE. 2016. '*Exhibition view within*'. [online image] Available at: <http://www.christinekoeniggalerie.com/id-2016-details-196/items/vicken-parsons1.html> [accessed 24 March 2017]

Figure 2: PARSONS, Vicken. 2012. *Untitled*. From: Richard Morphet. 2016. *Iris* [Exhibition Catalogue]. London: Alan Christea Gallery.

Figure 3: COTTON, Dylan. 2017. *Untitled*. Studio work.

Figure 4: PARSONS, Vicken. 2016. *Untitled*. [oil on board]. Alan Christea Gallery [online]. Available at: <https://www.alanristea.com/collection-108-697-Paintings> [accessed on 24 March 2017].



Fig. 1: Christine König Galerie. 2016. Exhibition view within.



Fig. 2: Parsons 2012, *Untitled*

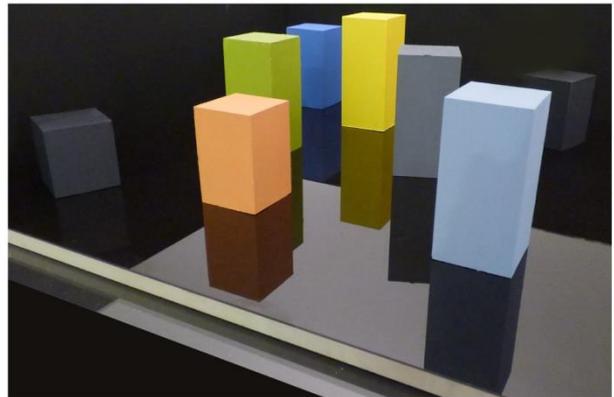


Fig. 3: Cotton 2017. *Untitled*

FA104 Dylan Cotton

# Vicken Parsons.



Fig.4: Parsons 2016, *Untitled*