

bernard jacobson gallery

William Tillyer: The Mulgrave Tensile Wire Works

28 September – 28 October 2023

Bernard Jacobson Gallery presents The Mulgrave Tensile Wire Works by British artist William Tillyer, alongside his Scalby Suite and Study for a Constructed Painting series. This exhibition presents Tillyer's reinvention of the traditional still life genre. The first series, the Mulgrave Tensile Wire Works (2021-22), are painted on wire mesh deconstructing the conventional relationship between medium and support. The second series, the Scalby Suite etchings (2022), demonstrate Tillyer's skill as a printmaker while including his distinctive grid motif. The final series on display are the watercolours, Study for a Constructed Painting (2023), which reveal Tillyer as the colourist and simultaneously exhibits the unifying structure of the grid.

Tillyer was born in 1938 in Middlesbrough and studied at both Middlesbrough College of Art and later London's Slade School of Fine Art. Tillyer has long refused to be pigeonholed by aesthetic categories and rejects traditional painterly methods, instead turning to wire mesh as his support and acrylic paint as his medium. Tillyer first used wire mesh in the late 1970s in the works Portrait, Head and Shoulders, and Portrait, Head and Shoulders (Lattice). The wire mesh provides space for paint to protrude through it, a technique which Tillyer compares to the movement of cheese through a grater.

Art historian John Yau celebrates the unconventionality of Tillyer's work, comparing his still lifes with the classical Roman fresco Still Life with Peaches and Water Jar (c. 62-69 C.E.). Tillyer's use of wire mesh extricates the still life from Western art history, as the industrial hardware redefines a traditional subject

matter. Tillyer believes that there is energy in paint, which he describes as coming from nature, and is controlled by the grid of the wire mesh. Tillyer has investigated the grid motif since the 1960s, prior to his use of wire mesh as a support, and utilises its structural composition to oppose the fluid forms of his still lifes.

The Scalby Suite are a series of etchings that intertwine the grid with a collection of still life objects. In these works, the grid serves as far more than an ornament – it is integral to the composition and equal in significance to the still life. Each etching presented in the exhibition is individual, alternating in colour, orientation and opacity, yet the unifying structure of the grid places the series in conversation with Tillyer's wider subject matter.

Study For a Constructed Painting, the third series in the exhibition, consists of a new collection of watercolours produced this year. The name of the series call attention to the sculptural quality of the Mulgrave Tensile Wire Works as the three-dimensionality is explored through the curved brushstrokes and grid formations, create a sculptural illusion. The bright, dynamic colours present in the series are pulled from those of Tillyer's local landscape on the North Yorkshire Moors.

"So much has been done in painting... What could I add? I didn't want to repeat what I was seeing, I wanted to come up with my own answers." - William Tillyer, 2020.

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