

# Catalogue

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## LYDIA GIFFORD

### Library of Nuances

Simone Menegoi

Lydia Gifford's painting is delicate and ethereal. Who would have guessed that it incorporates mud and dust?

Lydia Gifford has described her work as 'an enquiry or questioning of what painting is or isn't, can or can't be'. Although the artist uses paint in all her works, she doesn't limit herself to traditional supports such as canvas, paper or wood panel, and often applies her pigments directly on the wall or on the floor. Writing in the French magazine *Les Inrockuptibles*, art critic Judicaël Lavrador has compared Gifford's works to the stains caused by time and chance: dust, soot, fat or mud. Lavrador's comparison couldn't be more accurate; Gifford really attempts to mimic these elements' hues by integrating them into a palette she finds too limited otherwise. Her painted supports are freed from verticality: they are tilted, leaning against the wall or making simple volumes. A kind of choreography takes place. There are movements, stops, shifts and transitions, all present – sometimes literally – in the painting. In *Passage* (2009), three black marks on the wall seem to encapsulate the movement of the hand and to materialise its speed. In *Tar* and *Tie Tie* (2010), the lines suggest that the artist has corrected her own gesture, as if the canvas had been moved after Gifford had taken its measurements.

### Radical Improvisation

The phrase 'expanded painting' doesn't really do justice to this silent choreography. Nor does it help us to understand the precarious balance between the practice's performative dimension and its all-important composition in Gifford's exhibitions. The gestural quality of the artist's work naturally evokes dance, and overall her shows function like musical improvisations in which established themes (i.e. the artworks previously realised in the studio) are subjected to a singular and unexpected metamorphosis through their encounter with the public. To continue with the analogy, one could compare Gifford's creative process with a radical kind of improvisation entirely reliant on chance, one that would challenge all the parameters of musical composition with each fortuitous noise. I can't help thinking about a tune, a piece of music improvised on cello by the late Tom Cora who played with guitarist Hans Reichel in a gig I went to in the early '90s. The musicians had discovered that one of stools on stage was creaking and they chose to repeat the noise again and again, creating a haunting *raga*.

*Brackets*, Gifford's recent exhibition at the gallery Marcelle Alix in Paris, was a combination of these 'orchestrated creakings' and other, often barely noticeable, circumstantial elements. For instance, the artist painted large chunks of the walls with paint slightly shinier than the

gallery's usual white. The difference between these two nuances was difficult if not impossible to see when the gallery was lit up with artificial light, but it became obvious when looked at in the bright daylight that filtered through the shop window. The artist also painted a black and grey stain on the wall above the doorway linking the gallery's two spaces. Although visible, this smoky halo was positioned slightly higher than expected and could easily be missed by a distracted visitor.

## Nuances

Focused gaze and movement, improvisation and composition, shapes and uncertainty: a growing range of nuances and sensibilities is being developed by the artist within the limits she has chosen for her practice. In a text on her 2008 solo show at London's Laura Bartlett Gallery, JJ Charlesworth describes these nuances as 'physical or tactile echoes rather than merely visual ones' and uses idioms that brilliantly qualify her work, such as 'looking through', 'inside and out', 'instability or precariousness'. Although still valid, two years later, this first attempt to define Gifford's work needs to be expanded upon. Indeed, to her already extensive range of nuances, the artist has added other effects at once more concrete and yet impalpable, which have to do with spatial depth, air and light, natural landscapes and atmospheric phenomena – all transcribed in fresh new colours (a delicate green, a pale grey, among others) first shown at the artist's Paris exhibition. But one needs to understand that 'landscape' probably means a 'grainy and humid feel' or a 'mineral and vegetal composite crackling' ; and 'atmosphere' could be translated as 'a fresh foggy light' or something along the same lines. Rendering these works with words is almost impossible. The sensitive zones defined by the artist cannot be transposed into the precise code that language is. To experience her work first hand provokes sensations that one knows but cannot verbalise (think of the music with which abstract art has been compared since its inception). Gifford's 'library of nuances' (to use the artist's words) is - as strange as the word might seem - what *contains* her work.

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