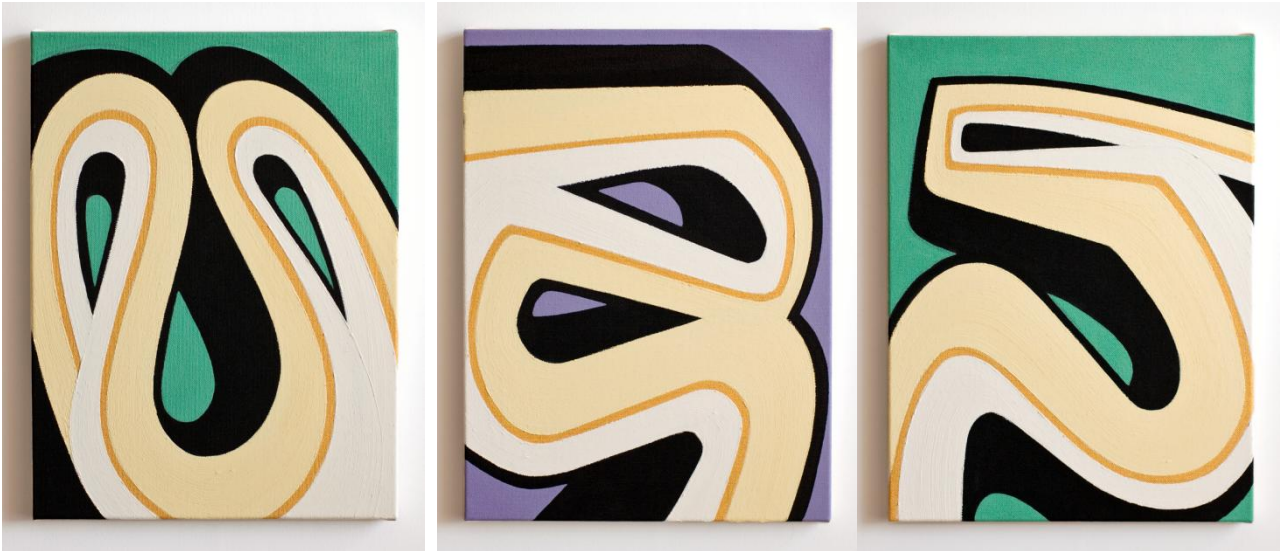


PIERS VENESS



In The Loop

Private View: Thursday 17th July 6.30 – 8.30pm

Take a look at any of these paintings by Piers Veness and you're met with two visual ideas, apparently going in opposite directions. One is a graphic simplicity, borrowed from natural forms. See: leaf-like, hand-like, or snake-like shapes. The other is a physical weight that's almost sculptural: the paint is toothpaste-thick in places, in others striated like a vinyl record. Veness' paintings pit these two ideas against each other – the speed of the line, let's say, against the slow materiality of the painted surface – to catch the eye and make it slow. Like many paintings today, these are arguments for the continuation of painting as a practice. What can painting still do, is the question, and the answer is, maybe, to assert the importance of the material in a culture of rapidly increasing immateriality. The spectral digital image on the screen removes images from real bodies, real gravity. Paintings like Veness' bring it back.

Look at Veness' black-on-blue paintings for further evidence. Shapes that have a familiar ring to them – Aztec patterns or a word graffitied on a wall – fold themselves into the rectangle of the canvas like a cat in a box. The black paint, mixed with a thicker oil to give it that vinyl sheen, becomes sculpturally weighty, shimmering in the real light of the room rather than an imagined inner light in the painting itself. These are embodied images, things that share our atmosphere, whose physical make-up – matter from the earth, suspended in a medium – is ours too. That's why painting feels so close, and why it never stopped.

The abstract forms in Veness' paintings – blackened angles, or creamy loops and swirls – make them part of an historical language that dates back to the early years of the last century. But there's a graphic immediacy in these paintings that reaches beyond that, into a world of design, a language of the street. Their punchiness is a trick, though: they dare you to take them in at a glance, like something half-seen in a crowded square, and then, once you've committed to a proper look, slow you right down to a standstill. They pull you in and hold you there, locked in a loop.

Ben Street, June 2014

Ben Street is a freelance art historian and writer based in London. He writes for Art Review and is a lecturer at Tate, the National Gallery and Christie's Education. www.benstreet.co.uk