

# JEFFREY STEELE IN CONVERSA- TION WITH KATRINA BLANNIN FOR TURPS BANANA

I remember my tutor Jeffrey Steele as a lone figure in Portsmouth's painting school in the mid 1980s where we were experimenting with personal narrative, allegory – and lots of up front sexual politics.

Since then a total 'sea change' has occurred in my work and when I saw that Steele was 'in conversation' with Andrew Bick one evening recently, I had to go and say hello. It had all been bothering me: geometry, mathematics, logic, Gestalt – intuition or calculated – how far to take it? Furthermore, questions still remain, that he remembers me asking back then, about painting itself being a political act.

In a statement Steele proposes:  
*"to abolish as far as possible subjective, contingent and random factors in favour of a principal of necessity; to develop a pictorial context conforming to this principal and to render this principal as intelligible as possible...and to develop a formal situation which induces the viewer to make determined movements in the real space round the objects."*

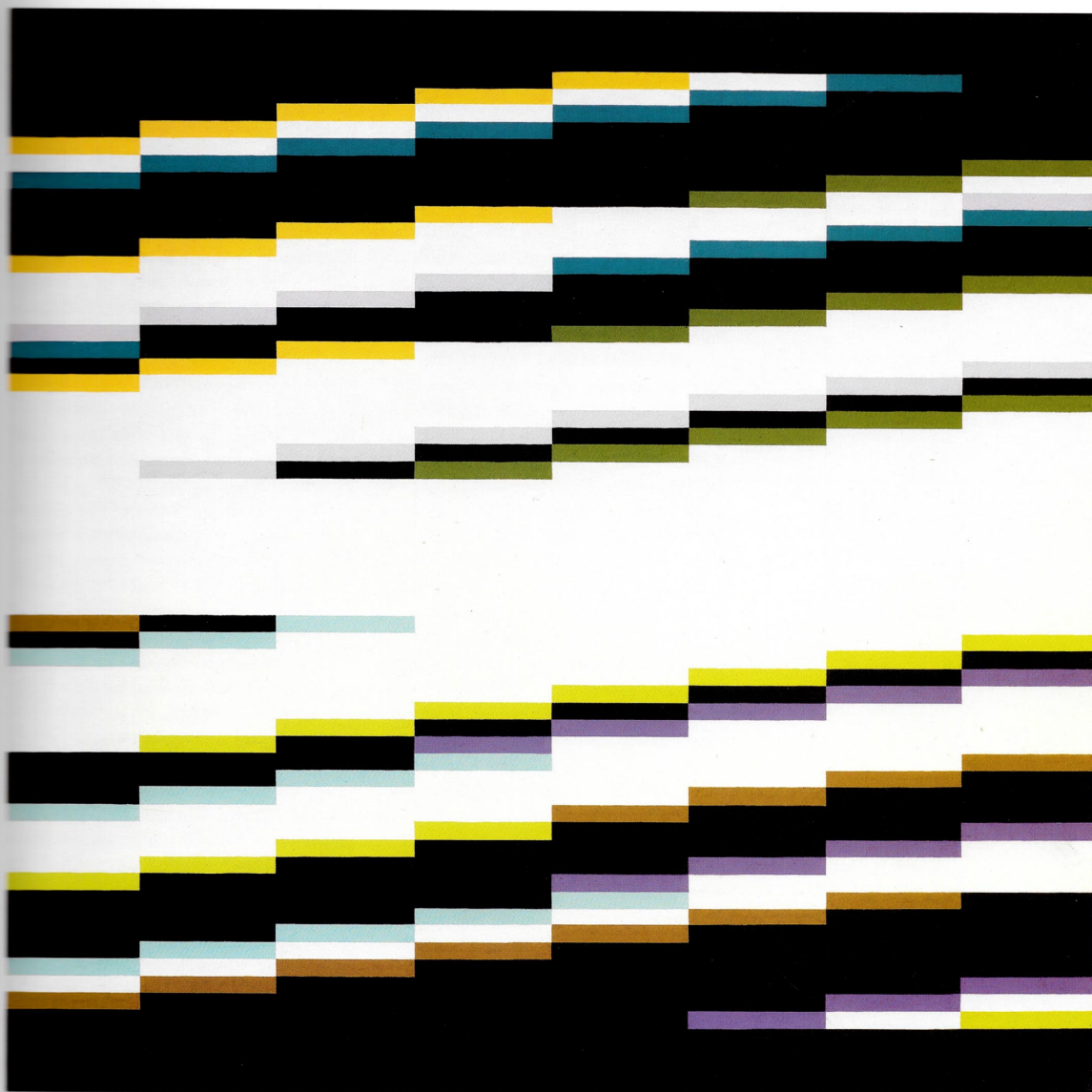
I was intrigued to find him at the age of 80 still enthusiastically researching, writing and painting.

**Katrina Blannin:** You have talked recently about how the English Constructionists in the 1950s were working with utopian or idealistic values and that their attempts to integrate their work with new architecture, in fact the greater 'new' social environment, was just a 'cosmeticising' process. Would you even use the word 'adornment'? You feel that these ideals avoided a more coherent progression towards the 'rational'. Had you come to these conclusions by

the late 1960s when you began to bring together the Systems Group?

**Jeffrey Steele:** Yes, but in a much more intuitive way and since then I have developed these ideas in a more precise and detailed way. It was Malcolm Hughes, who at the time was clearest about rejecting the utopian content of the earlier movements associated with *Konkrete Kunst*, Constructivism and of course the Bauhaus. So what are the grounds for this rejection and the implications of it? The conditions of the argument are fairly clear. There is of course no absolute right or wrong but take the earliest context of the Aubette. This was a large restaurant and leisure complex in the main square of Strasbourg. Its interior was designed and realised by Theo van Doesburg, Hans Arp, Sophie Taeuber-Arp and others, hoping to demonstrate the constructivist ideal of 'art into life', and the *Gesamtkunstwerk* integration of the visual and musical arts, architecture, the urban environment and so on.

This was in the later 1920s, but within a very few years it had fallen into disrepair. It didn't work and people hated it. At one time Richard Lohse led a campaign to have the Aubette restored, and there have been other such attempts, but I have always been sceptical about this type of project. I am glad it happened of course, because it sets up a definite aesthetic marker in history, and the absolute heroism of the artists involved is incredible, but the socio-political effect was that of an imaginative fiction and all the examples since then, such as Pasmore's Apollo Pavilion, Peterlee, Caracas Airport in Venezuela and so on, have all been imaginative fictions. Quite a lot of fine scholarship is coming out around this problem, but the way I rationalise it at the moment, from a socialist's point of view still, is that these are ideas about society, in fact a social economic order, that can't come about under a capitalist order. There is no



Syntagma Sg III 104  
1992  
Oil on linen  
(61 x 61cm)

*Courtesy of the artist and Osborne Samuel, London*

way of telling what kind of architecture socialism would produce - in terms of a utopia. This is still on the other side of the river - ha - beyond the revolution! This was the great fault of the Bauhaus of course. You can't expect to build a little bit of beautiful socialist architecture, only for it to then become its opposite; solely the province of a sub-fraction of the capitalist class and this alongside a lot of decaying crumbling tower blocks which just give Modernism a bad reputation. The cosmeticising process of Constructivism is then deeply, deeply ugly in terms of its social aspirations. That is not to say that it hasn't produced some beautiful art.

**KB:** In the light of this can you clarify the importance for Systems art of staying with painting - as opposed to say relief, sculpture or architecture inspired installation pieces that became an important new vocabulary for the Constructionists? Why is it important to develop or advance the historically charged process of 'paint on canvas'?

**JS:** I hadn't worked this out theoretically during the 1950s, and although it seemed sometimes as if I had been producing constructivist art then, in fact I spent the whole time experimenting with how to be a painter: talking about it and exchanging ideas with whoever would participate, and avidly looking at everything. It was a 'given' that painting was the thing and I have always wanted to try to justify the supreme importance of painting. As Biederman said, art is the evolution of visual knowledge, and visual knowledge is knowledge. And then knowledge or cognition affects our actions and this in turn is political. It is the fundamental question in its widest sense. I am interested in what happens to psychology and the collective ideation or ideology borne out of encounters with painting and imagery in all its visual manifestations: comic strips, mass media, advertising, different sections

of fine art, in fact the whole notion of *Bildlichkeit* as set out by Feuerbach, who influenced Marx and Engels when they wrote *The German Ideology* in 1846. It was Feuerbach who recognised the crucial effects of Christian images on society. Painted images of the Madonna and Child were for instance key to the forming of German Romanticism and this impact could not have been created by anything except through the art of painting - and it's inescapable, to this day! To turn one's back on painting and all its political effects throughout history would be foolish. Rather than taking a stand against painting, as Anthony Hill and the Martins were said to have done at the time, I became interested in *Taschisme* and painters like Michaux and Hartung. In 1960 when I was living in Paris I saw a group exhibition with the wonderful title *Antagonismes* that included Vasarely's 1950s paintings and they influenced me greatly. Although I am not a complete Vasarely apologist (earlier and later works were inferior, rather tinselly and cheap), here I could see everything, the geometric, the mathematical, the Cartesian and a bid for rationality. Here was everything combined from the history of painting: Poussin, Uccello, Chardin and Watteau and crucially the pictorial architecture of Cézanne. Here you could see the birth of Cubism in Cézanne's last paintings. Here was Tatlin and Malevitch. Here was a realist facing all the problems of picture making and dealing with the clash of mimetic and constructed imagery. Of course, I pretty soon realised that this interpretation was my own, and very much exaggerated - that neither Vasarely, nor most of his followers and associates actually delivered the effects that their art had seemed to promise. Also, a large Poussin exhibition in Paris at that time was just as important to me as the *Antagonismes* exhibition, the events in cinema, theatre, music etc., and



the political context of the Cold War, the war in Algeria and so on.

**KB:** I have seen your works in the setting of a gallery and they are so much more pleasing to the eye than reproductions with regard to materiality and sensation – I would go further and say that they are beautiful. Can you say something about the aesthetic values that we might bring to Systems painting?

**JS:** This is a very fine question because I can't answer it readily at all. It is a central problem but I don't really know the answer. Take my newest painting for example, which is a set of fifteen square paintings, each 50cm x 50cm, the culmination of many years of research. We were just talking about the white, which is actually the priming of the canvas and then there are 4 colours. In a sense they are like a set of drawings and the whole piece could be seen as a prototype for a work which could go on to be realised again in different materials – I don't know, I don't have an engineer's outlook. It is like a mine of visual structural information and is, I think, perfect. Yes, there is perfection here in the offing, waiting in the wings. This perfection of course raises problems and to clarify I just mean that nothing can be added or taken away without damaging the whole. Now, why should the prototype be superior to the eventual product in the case of a painting, when this is obviously not the case with an aeroplane or other utilitarian objects? The question begins to answer itself doesn't it? The artists who I was influenced by or working alongside in the early 1960s, such as Getulio Alviani, were interested in having their works made for them in a factory. They were against the idea of the artist's touch. They believed that the artist was the manager in a way: a Bauhaus idea of course. However, in this process you lose the evidence of the 'journey'. And for me the 'journey' is worth knowing and the traces of that

'journey' are important to see.

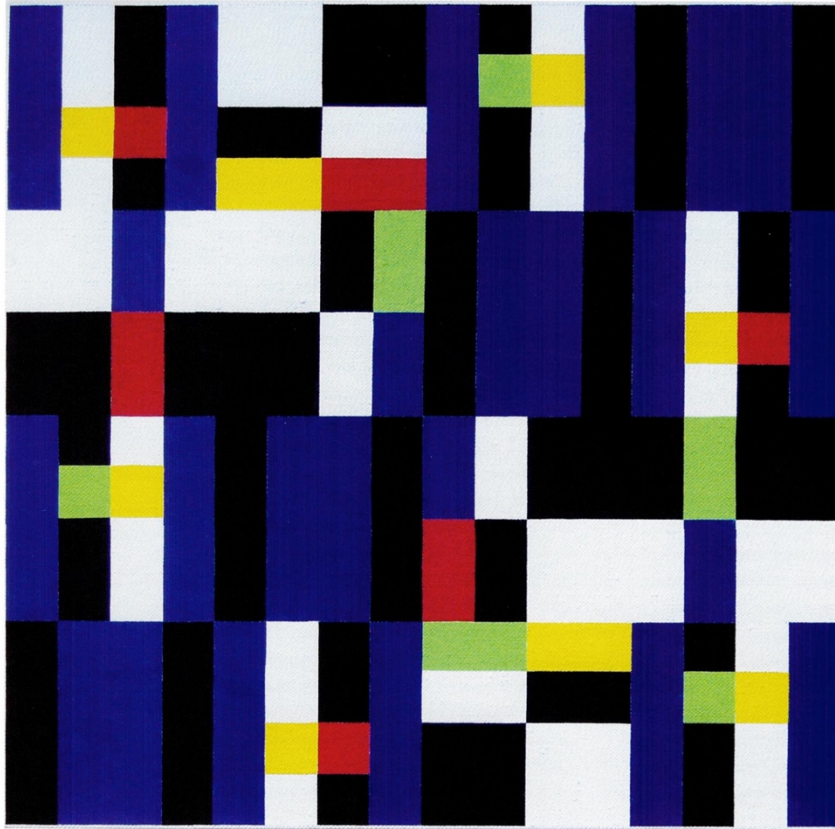
Trevor Clarke set me straight on this matter quite recently. But ok, maybe there is an aesthetic sensibility in these factory made pieces and their materials: these 'products' can sometimes look beautiful enough but...

**KB:** It speeds up the process perhaps - you can produce more work?

**JS:** Yes, but maybe it then becomes 'too' quick - the fact that it is slow is very important. If you are going to do it yourself then you really have to commit yourself to it. And then there is the money - you have to pay someone. And I don't like the lifestyle of giving orders. I don't want to give orders or take orders - and this also fits with the fact that I have always been a pacifist and a conscientious objector. I may take suggestions and negotiate with people but that's a different thing - even if it came to fighting a war. Somebody needs to give me a convincing argument before I would pick up a weapon and join an army and certainly nobody is going to give me instructions. I don't believe in that kind of hierarchy. I believe that people should come together to discuss and collaborate - this is basic socialism; in fact it is the fundamental communist ideal. I have always been a communist in the literal sense. So, going back to the work there are many projects that I would like to do, and which of course I will now never have the time for, so I have to choose the one that will be the most interesting, and likely the most problematic. I am certainly not going to work towards satisfying any kind of art market in that 'professional artist' kind of way.

**KB:** How do you respond to ideas of 'intuition' and 'perception' or the notion that artists have or can acquire 'a good eye'? Could you further clarify the inherent use of the mathematical and logical systems in your painting?

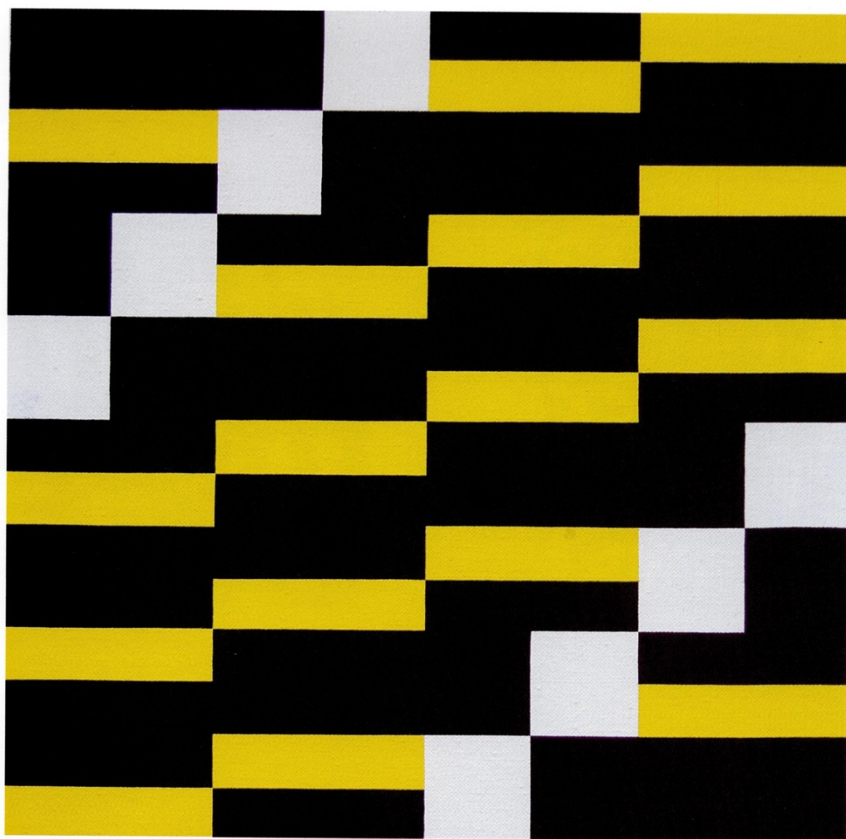
**JS:** Well, it's a large philosophical question. I don't like the word 'use' in this



**Syntagma, Sg IV 146**  
2010  
Oil on flax  
(50cm x 50cm)

A panel from Large Transformation Group  
(Tg IV 1, Sg IV 135 to 149) comprising of 15 panels

*Courtesy of the artist*

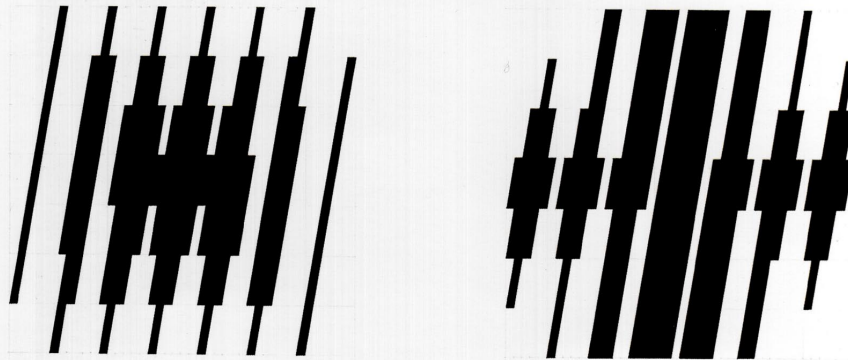


**Syntagma, Sg IV 139**

2010  
Oil on flax  
50cm x 50cm

A panel from Large Transformation Group  
(Tg IV 1, Sg IV 135 to 149) comprising of 15 panels

*Courtesy of the artist*



5g XII 2/2

**Numerical Reduction of Two Gestalt Figures**  
2006  
Tempera on paper  
(42 x 59.5 cm)

*Courtesy of the artist and Osborne Samuel, London*

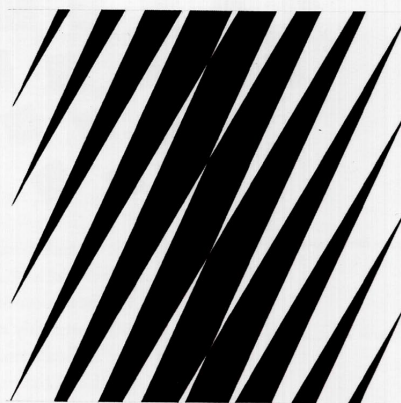
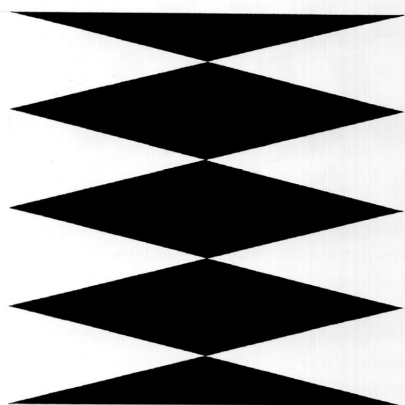
way: using methods, say mathematics, in the way that you might use an assistant. There is nothing that is translated from the abstract to the concrete. Aesthetic values are 'dispersed' throughout the whole process; there is no instrumentality involved. Yes, it is a process of 'dispersal' and I am against the idea of the sublime - it should be more graspable than that. In the context of discussing Bridget Riley's use of assistants and her role as 'manager' in a kind of 'factory' she was asked in an interview if a moment came when she would have to judge 'by eye' whether a painting was good or bad when finished and if so, did she have a room full of rejects somewhere? She didn't of course and, well, this moment doesn't actually arrive does it?

No, there is no final moment of aesthetic judgement or revelation in this way.

**KB:** But do you have a 'good eye' - perhaps better than someone who is not an artist?

**JS:** No, no - there is no such thing, I want to demystify all of that. There is only one world and we all see the same things. Ok, maybe I exaggerate - we could say that artists are trained and perhaps notice things that others don't and have a certain kind of education, but really, I would love it if the whole category of the sublime and the genius would go away! This is the sort of thing people like that terrible man Edmund Burke talked about - such a bourgeois class-ridden concept and just a form of mysticism that we need to be rid of.





**KB:** Do you find it easy to plan your day and work with a routine?

**JS:** No, not really. I am terrible - I don't have a talent for it. I am not good at living, although nowadays I try to prioritise a good diet so that I can get into better shape and stop myself from feeling ill. But yes of course with regard to materials I do have time to do things. I have time to stretch and prepare my own canvas and I make my own oil paints using pigments - it is important that I do the whole process. There is the endless round of menial tasks, but also definite programmes of disciplined reflection: reading, record keeping, note taking, archiving, and even dreaming.

**KB:** You said that you make and plan

your work as slowly as possible?

**JS:** No, I didn't quite mean that but things have to be ready. You can't start something until it is ready.

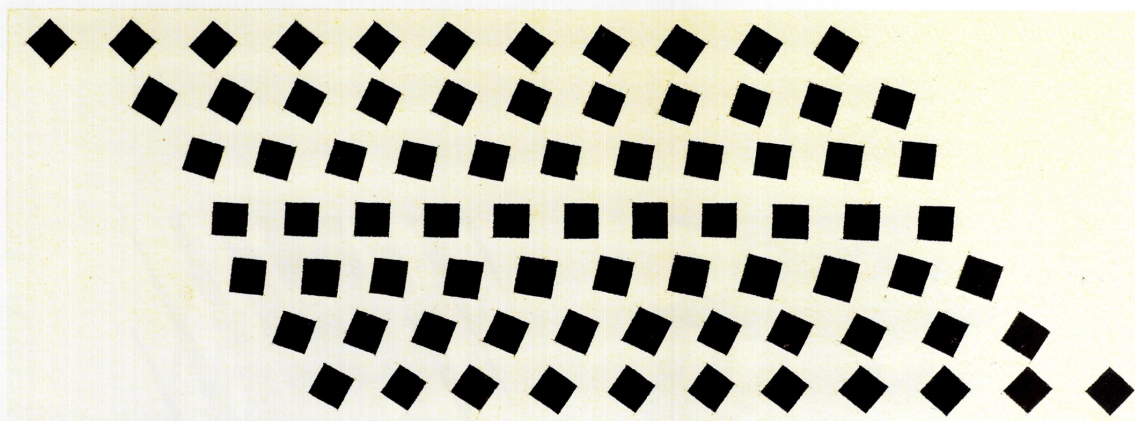
My acquaintance with a work has to come at its own pace. Going back to the idea of 'using' the 'mathematical or logical system', in relation to linguistics Chomsky used the term 'generative grammar'. In this case it was when talking about generating sentences: the idea that something generates states of itself. For me it's the 'system' that 'generates' possible paintings.

**KB:** Is there anything you could say about the choice of colour in your paintings? You have said that you are sceptical about colour theory.

**Two Chiasmic Syntagmata - Sg IV 125/126**  
2007  
Tempera on paper  
(42 x 59.5cm)

*Courtesy of the artist and Osborne Samuel, London*





**Seven Rows of Eleven Square forms in Cinematic Rotation**  
1961  
Tempera on paper  
(8 x 21 cm)

Courtesy of the artist and Osborne Samuel, London

**JS:** I need to explain how I have arrived at a position of dismissing the whole notion of a theory of colour. I was recently reading something by the difficult and crazy philosopher, mathematician and rationalist Gottfried Leibniz (1646-1716) who stated: *'Moreover it must be confessed that perception and that which depends on it are inexplicable on mechanical grounds. That is to say by means of figures and motions. And supposing there was a machine so constructed as to think, feel and have perception, it might be conceived as increased in size, while keeping the same proportions, so that one might go into it as into a mill. It being so we should, on examining its interior, find only parts which work one upon the other and never anything by which to explain our perception.'* So, there is colour perception and hence visual perception, if not 'all' perception, and this perception is not subject to explanation. Merleau-Ponty came close to this too when he talked about the idea that what breaks down first is the process of explanation itself.

**KB:** So colour theory is just a notion?

**JS:** Newton's experiments with light and the prism and the spectrum are all very interesting but they don't tell you anything about the actual phenomenology of colour. Colour is its own thing and it's not a function of anything else. These colour theories get you nowhere, absolutely nowhere.

But, let's be careful again. It is only because I have been through all of these issues concerning colour, perception, cognition and so forth that I can allow myself to make such a preposterous statement. Let's say that classical colour theories need to be superseded, rather than dismissed out of hand.

**KB:** So where is the starting point?

**JS:** The starting point is your actual experience: the actual aesthetic sensation of the colour. The phenomenological experience is the most important thing to grasp.

**KB:** So in this painting you have four colours as well as white?

**JS:** Yes, they are the nursery colours red, yellow, blue and green and also a black, a kind of Guinnessy black, and I am thinking here about their dynamics. They are not the primary colours in the traditional sense. I suppose that Goethe, dismissed often as too romantic, is still the best that there is. His thinking has not been superseded and there is no way it can be superseded.

**KB:** The titles of your paintings often clearly describe what we are looking at or what is happening eg. *Four sets of Chromatic Oppositions in a System of Rotation, or Square in Cinematic Rotation through 90 degrees*. How essential is it for the viewer to have access to the titles?

**JS:** The simple answer is that it is

absolutely not essential for people to know the titles of the paintings and furthermore they can be a complete pain in the neck sometimes. The titles are really like nicknames - you need to give a painting a name so it can be referred to. I have always criticised the idea of poetic titles that refer to something other than the painting itself, but I do like some of the words I have used. I came up with the word 'tsunami' a long time ago for instance and now everyone knows what that is.

**KB:** They are often beautiful words?

**JS:** Yes, another one is 'syntagma'.

You may have heard about all the riots now taking place in Athens in Syntagma Square. This word and others, like 'syntactica', are in fact all technical terms used by the Ancient Greeks for shaping their armies and planning military adventures. The word 'cosmetica' means the captain of an army, who organises the 'cosmos' or 'order' of the regiment, and 'syntagma' means 'constitution' or 'regiment'.

**KB:** So syntagma is a set of individual parts?

**JS:** Yes, but what is important is that it is also an organisation of a group of parts in a 'space' - and the space is also important. You will see words like this in the studies of linguistics by people like Roland Barthes. A word like 'syntax' is a combination of 'syn' meaning 'with' and 'tax' (or 'tagma') meaning 'arrangement' as in 'taxonomy'. And as you say they are beautiful in spite of their military origins, but have also often proved to be very useful not only in linguistics but also in areas of study such as for example botany, for classification purposes.

**KB:** 'Syntax' is to do with meaning?

**JS:** Well, it is really to do with arrangement, and 'taxonomy' is to do with the laws or principles governing this arrangement: the arrangement of the arrangement! So the syntax is when you can separate out the words (verbs

or nouns etc.) or different elements of the 'syntagma' and then place them or arrange them together. You can arrange the words in different ways in a space - an abstract space - in order to form a sentence and hence meaning or sense. And as I said this 'space' around them is also very important: this is where it gets to the nitty gritty. Here we could go on to ask a Leibniz type question: what is the relationship between the space and the different elements within? Does the space derive its character from the elements or the other way around?

**KB:** So in relation to abstract painting?

**JS:** Well, if you have something that is completely abstract, a mathematical structure like for example a Euclidian triangle, in order to make it 'concrete' you need to invent a syntax. Ah, and this is where it gets genuinely problematic. Cézanne, in one of his letters to Emile Bernard (Aix, 26 May 1904), uses the word 'concrete' probably for the first time in relation to painting. The phrase he used was '...le peintre concret...' which when translated would seem to mean 'the concrete painter'. But no - note the final 'e'. He was using it as a verb, not as in 'concretises' as in the English meaning to concretise from the abstract - turn the abstract triangle into a drawing, but something else - it's a different meaning. He didn't mean 'to concretise' it but to 'make' the triangle, or 'concrete' the triangle.

**KB:** So if I understand this correctly could you say that we don't just 'draw' the abstract triangle or materialise it in some way, we 'create' the triangle? Is that a good word?

**JS:** Yes, that's it, I think you've got it. And this is where the syntax becomes important. It is the syntax that brings it from the abstract to the concrete.

**KB:** So the syntax is the tool?

**JS:** Yes, precisely in this case it is the tool - something you invent, in order to have it available for use, 'to hand'





Early photos  
Courtesy of the artist

in Heidegger's sense. This is what Cézanne was doing, he had these materials available, the things he was seeing, the things he was thinking and a copy of Virgil in his pocket and devised his syntax... finding things in the abstract and using the syntax to create. Cézanne's great contribution to epistemology, which, by the way, would not have been possible without the work previously done by Manet, was to bring to our attention the elementary fact that initially, at the 'starting point' of the cognitive procedure, the physical 'woman in a blue costume' seated before him, has exactly the same status-in-reality as his canvas, brushes and paint tubes. The transaction, so to speak, sets out from a plane of equitability. And this fundamentally democratic impetus in Cézanne's art is the one that tends to get overlooked in the mass media-type presentations and celebrations of his work.

**KB:** So what is the space in the painting then?

**JS:** The space remains mysterious. It is empty, infinite and undefined. We might as well use Plato's own words here, from the Timaeus:

*'...that which is going to receive properly and uniformly all the likenesses of the intelligible and eternal things must itself be devoid of all character...we shall not be wrong if we describe it as invisible and formless, all-embracing, possessed in a most puzzling way of intelligibility, yet very hard to grasp.'*

**KB:** Can you tell us why you became interested in the Gestalt theory of visual perception?

**JS:** Gestalt, it's a key word and has always been important, from quite early on actually. One needn't go into Rorschach inkblots and the whole psychology thing really, but the idea in the first instance is about 'perceiving' and then 'naming' something. Then it means you have to draw a line round it so it stands out or is isolated from its surroundings in a successful way. It is

all about 'figure' and 'field' and people noticed that you could also switch the 'figure' with the 'field'. You can then start to think about whether something has good Gestalt or bad Gestalt – has it got a clear shape to it? Basically I can look at one of my paintings and see whether it has good Gestalt or bad, and this has happened occasionally. To clarify my idea is utterly simple. A clear process of abstract thinking should lead to a satisfying visual Gestalt. I don't necessarily 'reject', or stop work on a project when this is not happening, but it bothers me, and I want to know what's going wrong.

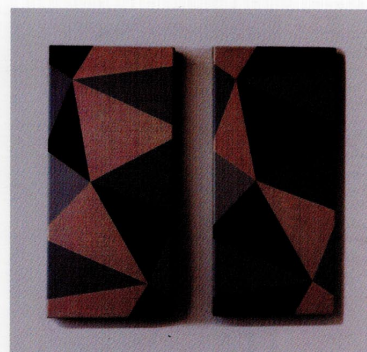
**KB:** Does Systems painting have the idea of a universal language at its heart? How important is the 'readability' of your paintings?

**JS:** Yes, that's a key question. Well, I have been thinking about all these horrible TV programmes about art I have watched recently and I argue with friends about the fact that people are taking their families along to the Tate for a day out these days and about the new accessibility or popularity of art. I have, of course, been accused of being a hypocrite and an elitist. But really, I do hate it when people insist on avoiding talking about art or music in more depth. A supposedly friendly critic wrote recently about Kenneth and Mary Martin:

*'This kind of constructivist art might initially bring back bad memories of tedious afternoons of double physics, but the Martins built on something more idealistic and irregular than just angles and fractions'.*

I have also noticed this kind of thing on the radio when they talk about new or experimental music. They seem to think that discussing the work seriously is not as important as actually listening to it – and I think it is. What I object to is that they are treating ordinary members of the public as fools. It's an authoritarian set up. And of course there is always

something intelligible there that 'would' add to the understanding of what's going on. It is insulting to the public, and the art, on the one hand to exclude them or on the other hand to try to deliberately give them a difficult puzzle to figure out. Art is not something to just be received unquestioningly by people. Furthermore, questions should be raised about the reasons 'why' art is being produced here, now or then, and for instance 'why' is Waldemar Januszczak making a supposedly popular, but in fact rather infantile series on the Impressionists at just this point in time and who is it for? But, to come to the main point of your question, in the Systems group discussions in the early 1970s we used to talk about the principle of 'recoverability', that is the retrievability of the structural information contained in a work, and the accountability which, by the way, nobody has asked for, and from which artists are traditionally supposed to be exempt. Now this type of information might be easy or difficult to retrieve, and in my own case it lies at the difficult end of the spectrum, but the idea is that whether the art form is easy or difficult, popular or esoteric, something intelligible is going on, perhaps something counter-intuitive which might repay closer attention and critical work on the part of the recipient. And if a work presents such an object of knowledge – something relatively invariant under scrutiny – then indeed a high level of consensus about its nature becomes conceivable, something like the 'universal language' you mention. But this, in its turn, would require the cultivation of different habits of viewing and reading from those currently encouraged by the mass communications industry.



**Pink – Katrina Blannin**  
2012  
Acrylic on linen  
(2 x 56x26cm)

*Courtesy of the artist*