

St IVES
TATE

Sandra Blow Space & Matter

**Tate St Ives
11 December 2001 – 10 March 2002**

Notes for Teachers

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Introduction

The winter season at Tate St Ives is devoted to energy, gesture and colour with an exhibition of the abstract work of **Sandra Blow**. Key works are displayed which represent her career from the 1950s to the present. Also included is a special selection by the artist from the Tate Collection entitled **Artists on Artists**.

To complement the main exhibition there is a display of **Collection works in Gallery 1** which explores a range of artists associated with St Ives and who have all, in their different ways, explored abstraction.

Also on display is a special exhibition by **Vicken Parsons**. Entitled **Other Places**, this exhibition is an opportunity to see her small scale atmospheric paintings. In Upper Gallery 2 there is a display of ceramics and paintings focusing on the work of **Bernard Leach** and **Mark Tobey**.

So how do we approach these displays?

We can revel in the sheer exuberance and joy of colour and materials. We can marvel at the scale and audacity of some of the works. Many have a feeling of spontaneity and immediacy. But for new visitors this intensity and focus on abstraction can be disorientating.

As you work your way through the galleries you will see paintings by Sandra Blow at different stages of her career. Alongside this you will see works by other artists who are her contemporaries. This season's displays therefore present us with the following key points:

- An exploration of the language of abstraction
- An exploration of pictorial space
- An exploration of process and materials within painting
- An understanding of the roots of the work of Sandra Blow
- An insight into the aims and defining characteristics of Sandra Blow's work
- An insight into the recent work of the younger artist Vicken Parsons.

There are many starting points appropriate to these displays that you could develop according to your group's needs and interests. Perhaps one of the best ways to explore the exhibition would be to start with a simple warm-up practical activity exploring collage, materials, processes and textures. You might choose to do this in school in preparation for a visit to focus on some of the following key themes in the exhibition. You could then take a thematic approach such as:

- Colour and light
- Materials (matter) and texture
- Space and scale
- Balance and rhythm
- Tension and atmosphere
- Movement
- Collage
- Sound

Or you could choose an art historical 'hook' to start from such as:

- Abstraction
- St Ives artists
- Women artists
- Painting materials and processes.

The aim of this pack is to provide information about the works on display, trigger questions and further points for discussion. A biography for Sandra Blow and information on her choice of materials and techniques are included together with suggestions for further reading and a glossary of technical and art historical terms.

Sandra Blow: a brief biography

Sandra Blow was born in London in 1925. She attended St Martin's School of Art (1942-46) and the Royal Academy Schools (1946-47). She lived in Italy for a while and also travelled extensively in Spain and France before settling in London in 1950. She had her first solo exhibition in 1951 and in 1958 she won an International Guggenheim award and was also represented at the Venice Biennale. Between 1961-1975 she taught at the Royal College of Art. She was elected an Associate to the Royal Academy in 1971 and a Royal Academician in 1978.

In 1957 Sandra stayed near to her friends the artist Patrick Heron and his wife in Zennor, near St Ives. She rented a cottage nearby at Tregerthen, famously occupied by D H Lawrence during the First World War, where she stayed for a year, before returning to London in 1958. She made frequent visits to West Penwith during the next few years and was an associate member of the Penwith Society. In 1994 she moved to St Ives where she lives and works today.

Sandra has work in numerous collections including the Tate and the Victoria and Albert Museum, London; the Arts Council of Great Britain and the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Sandra has exhibited at the Tate Gallery, London in 1963, 1967 and 1985 and had a retrospective exhibition in the Sackler Galleries of the Royal Academy, London in 1994.

Sandra Blow: inspiration and influences

Italy & Alberto Burri

Sandra's time in Italy in the late 1940s where she studied Renaissance art and architecture has remained a vivid inspiration in her work. She has talked of her time there as 'pure paradise' and she revelled in the colours and textures of this Mediterranean country. During her time there Sandra met and travelled with the Italian artist Alberto Burri who also had a profound impact on her work. Burri's work is often described as expressionistic or *art informel* (see glossary) and emphasises simplicity and directness. Burri focused on the process of making art and the physical, material nature of the art object itself. He frequently used rough, unconventional materials such as sacking, cloth, plaster and tar (see Gallery 4).

European Abstraction

Sandra's time in Italy, France and Spain also exposed her to developments in art in post war Europe that focused on abstraction. For example, she would have seen work by *CoBrA* and *Art Informel* artists (see glossary). While in Italy she met a student of the American abstract painter Hans Hoffman called Nicholas Carone whom she has said was an influence.

St Ives and Roger Hilton

In St Ives in the 1950s she met the painter Roger Hilton and from this point onwards friendships with other artists associated with St Ives developed. Hilton was exploring the abstract language of painting, simplifying his use of shape and colour to emphasise flatness and the object quality of painting. By the 1960s Hilton had developed a new style in which abstract shapes and looping lines suggest the presence of figures or a landscape. Sandra has said that Hilton influenced her use of line. (See Gallery 4).

Nature

Landscape and forms found in nature have influenced Sandra's work. In the 1950s and 60s she enjoyed painting in the landscape in Cornwall and Devon. Landscape is not so much described as simply 'present' in her work through her choice of shapes, colours and textures. The writer Mel Gooding describes her as an 'artist of nature' in that her paintings respond to the textures, light and dynamics of the natural world.

For Sandra nature includes both the urban and the rural. She revels in the variety of materials and also what she describes as the 'geometry of nature'.

'I marvel at the beauty and construction of the leaves and flowers outside the studio. I love London skies, because they are frames and one sees them almost like painting. I'm often amazed at the juxtapositions of trees, parts of buildings and the sky, and constantly changing, subtle colours. I also love great sweeps of moorlands, where you have wonderful undulating lines.'

Sandra Blow

Sandra Blow: materials and processes

As well as wanting a balance in the composition, there should be what I call a startling rightness. This can be any shape or colour: the crucial thing is that although perfect in its place, there is an unexpected quality about it, an element of surprise. Sandra Blow

Sandra's search for this 'startling rightness' has been the enduring theme of her work over the past fifty years. She talks of the 'the thrill of a leap, a daring, a lightness' when she achieves the right combination of rich texture, shape and colour.

Her work is not produced quickly, however. Her achievements are hard-won and often the result of long periods of consideration and selection in the studio. Having worked for almost 60 years and explored a range of media she is still, today, exploring and experimenting.

At the age of 75 Sandra still sticks to her routine of working seven days a week from morning to mid-afternoon. Her large, light, airy studio, high upon the hill in St Ives, is a converted furniture show room. The main studio is full of enormous canvases, piles of coloured paper and small drawings. A tiny studio adjoins it where she makes small gouaches and collages, sitting at a table.

Matter

Sandra has been called a 'matter painter' – a painter who adds to and substitutes paint for rougher materials such as earth, ash, cement and sawdust. Sandra never disguises the way a painting has been created and the qualities of the materials used. Her work in the 1950s included sacking which she often combined with ash (from her stove) and plaster. She said she used sacking because it makes shapes so immediately.

In the mid-1960s she used tea which she combined with paint and ash to create thin washes. She said 'I went through a time of being terribly hard up and I was being economical with my materials. As I was drinking tea I thought well, I might as well use it, plus, of course, I liked the colour of the tea on the canvas.' There are no tea paintings in this exhibition, however you can see works which incorporate ash and wood chips and she has continued to use sacking.

1 matter from which a thing is made. **2** cloth, fabric. **3** (in *pl.*) things needed for an activity (*building materials*). **4** person or thing of a specified kind or suitable for a purpose (*officer material*). **5** (in *sing.* or *pl.*) information etc. for a book etc. **6** (in *sing.* or *pl.*, often foll. by *of*) elements, constituent parts, or substance. *adj.* **1** of matter; corporeal; not spiritual. **2** of bodily comfort etc. (*material well-being*). **3** (often foll. by *to*) important, significant, relevant

Prime matter, brute matter, material, raw material, basic materials, materials, materiality, stuff, mass, fabric, body, frame, structure, substance, solid substance, corpus, organic matter, flesh, flesh and blood, plasma, protoplasm, cells, organism, element, elementary unit, fundamental particle, building block, principle, first principle, unit of being, origin, the four elements, earth, air, fire, and water, ingredient, factor, component, constituent, mineral, monad, chemical element, basic substance, isotope, physical element, atom, molecule, elementary particle, electron, neutron, meson, proton, quark, nucleus, nucleon, photon, quantum, ion, minuteness, nuts and bolts (Inf), the nitty-gritty (Inf)

Bloomsbury Thesaurus, © Bloomsbury 1997

Acrylic

In the early 1960s Sandra started to use acrylic paints (see glossary). She says it gives her the advantage of quick-drying colour washes and she likes the purity and brilliance of acrylic colour. Acrylic is often contrasted with the collage technique in her paintings. Sandra also likes to use acrylic texture paste (see glossary) which can create a texture similar to her earlier work where she added plaster and ash.

Collage

Collage (see glossary) is an important part of Sandra's work. She says she was first attracted to collage to create texture within painting. However, its real purpose, for her, is to help her compose her paintings. Collage enables her to make constant adjustments until she achieves the balance and structure she is looking for. For Sandra collage is a process of trial and error.

'I use it [collage] as a medium that may or may not be left out on the painting. I work out a painting in a flexible way with collage. I can try things out and change them. Quite early on I decided I liked the purity of single washes of paint rather than a broken surface, so with collage I avoid over working. I accumulated great sacks of colour in bits of paper. When I began to use them, the picture would call for different colours and then I would know what colours to mix in paint. It was as if I waited for the picture to talk to me – to tell me what it wanted. You look at the picture and it sort of asks something.'
Sandra Blow

Polaroids

Sandra often takes polaroids (instant photographs) of works in progress. The Polaroid enables her to turn the picture round and look at it from all angles. It also helps her to see immediately where the balances are wrong within the composition. She says she has been using this process for over twenty years and the polaroids have become 'a storehouse of ideas that I didn't realise at the time, and I now regard them as sketches, and occasionally use them as the starting point for a new work.'

Drawing

Sandra has made drawings at various points in her career. Some of her early 'oil drawings' are better described as small paintings. Others are simply 'acrylic' drawings showing a response to a place or atmosphere. Her use of collage is really like drawing or sketching. She uses collage to try out ideas and prepare for a painting. A selection of her drawings is displayed in the Education Studio.

Printmaking

Sandra makes use of printmaking techniques such as screen-printing and it is a process particularly suited to her interests. She uses the process as another medium within which to work out ideas and explore colour and shape. Some of the results have a particular vibrancy. A selection of recent prints by Sandra is on display in the Café. The Gallery has also published a limited edition colour etching entitled *Zen* to accompany this show.

Gallery 1: St Ives Space and Matter

Throughout the twentieth-century many artists explored abstraction, abandoning representation and using only line, colour, shape and texture to express their ideas. This display highlights the ways in which artists associated with St Ives explored abstraction; from the use of pure geometric form to a more dramatic and expressionistic approach. This display has been selected to complement the main exhibition and works by Sandra Blow are included to emphasise the connections.

Key work

Peter Lanyon

Thermal 1960 Oil on canvas

This painting is full of energy and light. The swirling brushstrokes and swathes of paint suggest an upward movement. In 1959 Lanyon took up gliding and this experience brought a feeling of sea and air to his paintings. Lanyon said that the title of this painting not only referred to glider flight but also the way a bird soars above the cliff face. It is interesting to compare *Thermal* to Terry Frost's painting *R. B. and W. Spiral for A.* (1991) at the other end of the room. Both paintings, in very different ways, explore and play with depth, spatial ambiguity and the spiral. It is interesting to note that Lanyon was interested in the work of Turner and the painting *Snow Storm* (1842) comes to mind. Lanyon, like Turner, attempts to suggest a physical experience of place and time – a sense of the spirit of the place.

By way of direct contrast compare *Thermal* to Naum Gabo's *Construction in Space with Crystalline Centre* (1938-40) or Victor Pasmore's *Relief Construction in White, Black and Maroon* (1962-3).

Trigger questions

- Look around the room and find a work that catches your eye – look at it closely. Why do you think you noticed it more than the others? Can you find words to describe it?
- Now glance around the whole room again. What sorts of things are these artists interested in? Make a list.

Things to think about:

- **The language of abstraction.** This display contrasts two very different approaches to abstraction. On the one hand you have artists exploring paint and surface in a fluid, expressionist way. On the other you have a more 'constructed' geometric and controlled approach to form and colour. For example, you can contrast the works of Naum Gabo and Marlow Moss with that of Peter Lanyon and Patrick Heron. Consider how Sandra combines aspects of both types of abstraction within her work.
- **Space.** These artists explore a sense of space in different ways. All the paintings play with pictorial space and illusionism denying traditional perspective and depth. They create a sense of space and surface-tension through colour, shape, surface and texture. For some, relief or construction are used to create real space. In Barbara Hepworth's work space is explored by cutting through and opening up the inside of the sculpture.

- **Matter or stuff.** This display highlights the interest artists have had in using a range of materials, processes and textures. Some artists deliberately choose to use collage and bits and pieces to draw attention to the picture surface and edges.
- **Light and rhythm.** There is a sense of light and airiness to some of the work in this room. Why do you think this might be? Some artists seem concerned to create a sense of rhythm and balance through their choice of colours, shapes and textures.

Note: for further information on the artists in this display please refer to the Tate Website at www.tate.org.uk.

Lower Gallery 2: Sandra Blow Space and Matter

This dramatic display includes four large paintings by Sandra along with two smaller paintings that include sacking. The paintings are the largest single canvases to be shown by any artist at Tate St Ives and they have rarely been shown in the UK.

Keyword

Vivace (1988), acrylic and collage on canvas

The dramatic red 'v' shaped form jumps out at us in this painting. It is as if it has exploded onto the canvas splashing and splattering at the edges. The right-hand side has sharp splinter-like bits of collage and the top and left edge of the canvas has a black band. Both the collage and black band contrast with the energy of the red shape – as if they are hemming it in. Sandra made this painting using a bucket of acrylic paint which she threw at the canvas and then spread across using a scraper board. This process enabled her to create a painting of great energy and immediacy and the title *Vivace* translates from the Italian as lively, vivacious or spirited. Of course, part of the dynamism within the painting is, in fact, very controlled, because Sandra adds both the collage pieces and the border.

Trigger questions

- What are your immediate reactions when you look at these paintings?
- Stand close to and then move back from one of the large paintings. How does it make you feel?
- Describe the colours and shapes?
- Describe some of the materials Sandra has used?
- The paintings seem to have either a feeling of movement and energy or stillness and quietness. How do you think Sandra creates these feelings?
- What do the paintings remind you of?
- Why do you think they are so big?

Things to think about

- **Collage.** Look at the way Sandra combines collage with painting. Why do you think she has found collage so useful within her work?
- **Acrylic.** Sandra first started using acrylic in the 1960s and has found it particularly suitable to her needs. She likes the boldness and clarity of colour and the way it dries so quickly and soaks into the surfaces. Both *Vivace* and *Glad Ocean* (1989) are painted onto cotton duck canvas; a favourite material of Sandra's precisely because of the way the acrylic paint is absorbed. Look at the way Sandra combines acrylic with collage.
- **Drama and action.** Some of the large paintings are very dynamic. They give the impression that their creation involved a lot of physical action – almost as if Sandra has completed a performance.
- **Large-scale painting.** How do you feel standing in front of the very large paintings? Sandra has said that part of her choice to paint large scale was a response to the very large American Abstract Expressionist paintings first seen in this country in the early 1960s.

- **Extremes.** These paintings combine extremes such as light and dark, hard and soft, translucent and opaque or sweeping and dabbing. She combines bold colours with bare canvas and ragged edges. Consider how these contrasts draw us into the paintings and contribute to their drama or stillness.
- **Titles.** These large paintings, which were made in her London studio, have particularly evocative titles. Sandra often titles her work some time after it is complete and will even change titles. Consider how her titles add layers and further meanings to her works.
- **Repetition of shapes** – Sandra repeats certain shapes such as squares, ‘v’ shapes, triangles and particular lines in her work. She says, *‘I use certain shapes and although I don’t exactly repeat them I use them in various forms’*.
- A key theme within Sandra’s work is the exploration of **tension and balance**. Her choice of materials and processes and her selection of colour, shape and line involve a complex exploration of these rhythms. Sandra has described this situation as the ‘push and pull’ of things – as the strange and contradictory conditions of space and colour within a design which holds the tension of the whole. As Mel Gooding writes in the catalogue *‘she has an extraordinary ability to place elements in a space in such a way as to present the illusion of a moment of poise, an instant of perfect coherence’*.
- These painting suggest a feeling of **energy, movement or light**. There is an element of surprise or what Sandra would call the ‘thrill of a leap, a daring, a lightness’.

Education Studio: drawings, sound and text

In the 1990s Sandra Blow collaborated with the performance writer Alaric Sumner to produce a book called *Waves on Porthmeor Beach* (see Further Reading). The book combines drawings by Sandra with texts and poems by Alaric exploring the relationship between word and image and providing insight and ideas about the form of waves and the experience of the beach directly opposite Tate St Ives. A selection of these drawings and texts are displayed in the Studio (off Lower Gallery 2). Some of Sumner's poem 'inserts' have been included at the back of this pack.

Also included in this space is a sound recording of '*text out of image (Sandra Blow)*', a performance with words and music written and composed in response to Sandra's work in the New Millennium Gallery in 1997 and was originally performed in the exhibition. This collaboration between Alaric Sumner and the sound artist John Levack Drever suggests ways of seeing, thinking and responding to Sandra's work.

Trigger questions

- How would you describe the way Sandra creates drawings?
- What materials and techniques does she use?
- What sorts of links can you make between Sandra's paintings and her drawings?
- Stand still and listen to the sounds/voice you can hear in this space. What do you hear and how might it relate to Sandra's work?

Things to think about

- **Why is it interesting to look at the drawings of a painter?** Sandra's drawings are more like mini paintings – why?
- Sandra's work provokes a range of reactions. Sometimes it is actually quite difficult to find the appropriate words to describe this. **Consider how it might be possible to express one's reaction through another medium such as sound.**
- Sandra is clearly interested in the relationship between word and image. **Students could be encouraged to think of words and/or sounds that best describe Sandra's work** and even develop a poem or sound piece about their response to the exhibition. Encourage them to think of 'equivalent' words or sounds rather than simply descriptive ones.
- A study of Sandra's work could form part of a **wider focus on poetry and literature**. Consider also looking at writers particularly associated with Zennor and St Ives such as D H Lawrence, W S Graham, Denys Val Baker, Sven Berlin, Norman Levin and George Baker. [More detailed research on post-war writing and artists associated with St Ives is due to be published by Falmouth College of Arts and Tate St Ives early in 2002].

Gallery 4: Sandra Blow Artists on Artists

Artists on Artists is an ongoing series of displays drawn from the Tate Collection. To complement her exhibition, Sandra has selected works by artists with whom she feels a particular affinity. Her choices reflect the range of her contemporaries from the 1950s and also her interest in 'poor' materials and abstraction. The display helps us to understand the roots of her own work and emphasises her interest in a twentieth-century European tradition of art which values direct expression. The display includes work by the Karel Appel, Alberto Burri, Roger Hilton and Ben Nicholson as well as paintings by Sandra herself.

Key work

Alberto Burri

Sacking and Red (1954), acrylic and hessian collage on canvas

This painting combines red and black oil paint with real sacking. There are holes in the material and it is roughly stitched together. Its shabbiness is quite startling and the contrast between painted areas and real material is strong. It provides a good example of a painting that uses 'poor' materials to emphasise its material reality. Burri, whom Sandra met in Italy in the late 1940s, began to use sacking in his work because he said '*in sacking I find the perfect match between shade, material and idea that would be impossible in paint*'. The use of sacking can also be read as symbol of the post-war period when materials were scarce. Burri's experience as a surgeon during the war also meant that stitching and fabric had a particular association for him.

Trigger questions

- As you walk into this room, what are your first impressions?
- Look around the room and find a work that catches your eye – look at it closely. Why do you think you noticed it more than the others. Can you find words to describe it?
- Now glance around the whole room again. What do all these works have in common?
- Sandra has chosen the works for this display. Can you think why she chose these particular works?

Things to think about

- **Materials and 'stuff'**. These artists experiment with materials and processes often using cheap, rough, non-artistic materials and 'stuff' that was lying around the studio. Artists such as Burri deliberately chose 'poor' materials to work with. Sandra's painting *Space and Matter* (1959) includes charcoal, cement, bitumen, straw and sawdust. Ben Nicholson painted on the back of hardboard which he scraped down and then incised and chiselled into. Karel Appel uses traditional oil paint in his painting (*Amorous Dance*, 1955) but in a very free and versatile way – paint is literally squeezed out of the tube to create thick lines and layers.
- **Mark making and composition**. Contrast the way, for example, Ben Nicholson builds up his composition using a limited tonal range and blocks or shapes to Roger Hilton who seems to deliberately choose a loose, haphazard

technique of unrepeatable marks across his canvases combined with areas of colour. Appel has an almost childlike approach to mark-making which is very fluid and energetic.

- **Post-war art and abstraction.** This display, along with Gallery 1, could provide an introduction to abstraction in painting and a starting point for a wider discussion about post-war European art. It provides a context for Sandra's work revealing the type of art she was inspired by when she was starting out as young painter in the 1950s. Sandra explored the debates that raged at this time about the suitability of an abstract language for painting in a post-war context. To help to explain this context below are brief biographies of the artists Sandra has selected.

Appel, Karel - born 1921

Dutch painter, printmaker, sculptor and ceramicist, born in Amsterdam. Founder member of the CoBrA group. Appel's paintings of the 1950s are characterised by bold and vivid colours and by the powerful physical presence of the painted surface, at times reminiscent of children's art.

Burri, Alberto (1915-1995)

Italian painter who originally studied medicine and worked as a military doctor in Africa during the war. Taken prisoner in 1943, he was sent to a camp in Texas where he began to paint. On return to Italy in 1945 he decided to become a painter and moved to Rome. In the late 1940s Burri began incorporating sacking and then wood, iron and plastic into his paintings. Sometimes he actually burnt the surface of his paintings to create a patched and scarred surface.

Roger Hilton (1911-1975)

Roger Hilton studied at the Slade School of Art and then spent time in Paris in the late 1930s before serving in the War. He first developed an abstract style in the early 1950s. In 1953 he met the Dutch painter, Constant, a member of the CoBrA group, and travelled with him to Holland where he saw work by Piet Mondrian. Hilton developed a style of expressive abstraction which emphasised bold colour and shape and flowing line. Hilton visited Cornwall in 1956, taking a studio first in Newlyn and then St Ives. He became a regular visitor over the years and eventually settled at St Just in 1965.

Ben Nicholson (1894-1982)

Ben Nicholson has come to be regarded as a key St Ives artist. He studied at the Slade School of Art and then spent time in France and Italy before settling in London in the 1930s. From 1939 to 1958 he lived and worked in Cornwall before moving to Switzerland. He returned to London in 1974. Nicholson's early work was influenced by Cubism and he first made geometric and abstract reliefs in 1933. During the 1930s Nicholson was part of a group of artists and architects who wanted to apply 'constructivist' principles to their art, advocating mathematical precision, clean lines and an absence of ornament. In his later work, seen in this display, Nicholson suggests depth and overlapping planes in a more complex way. By carving into hardboard and working colour into the surface during the carving process, he gives a wonderful subtlety to the tone and texture.

Note: for further information on these artists please refer to the Tate Website at www.tate.org.uk.

Gallery 5: Sandra Blow New Works 2001

This display focuses on new work by Sandra Blow. It includes two large paintings and a twelve-part piece entitled *Re-sounding*. This latter work was commissioned especially for this space and is hung on the end wall. This room resonates with energy and vitality and reveals how Sandra is still exploring and experimenting with her materials and processes.

Keyword

Re-sounding, 2001 (twelve-part work), acrylic on canvas

This work is made up of twelve 4 x 4ft canvases hung across the wall - four across and three high. Each is painted in a different colour in bright acrylic paint. The flat areas of colour are contrasted by 'bars' and shapes of white/cream paint that draw your attention to surface and depth within the paintings. Originally, these areas which Sandra describes as 'off-slant' were collaged pieces of paper which she placed onto the canvas. As you look at the paintings you can start to play with the links and connections between the canvases.

Trigger questions

- As you come into this gallery what are your first impressions?
- Describe the range of colours Sandra has used in these works
- Describe the range of shapes she uses in these works
- Why do you think she has chosen to make up one work using 12 canvases?

Things to think about

- **Colour.** The colour in this room is quite dazzling. Consider the range of colours Sandra uses and how they interact with each other. Compare these recent works to both her large, bright paintings from the 1980s and 1990s and the earlier more subdued and earthy works. It is also useful to compare this her recent paintings with her prints upstairs in the café (and to look back down through the round window into Gallery 5). Sandra plays with the vibration of colour, the contrast between soft edges and the absence of colour. Sandra recently said in an interview, *'I would love to use a much stronger palette and a wider range of colours. It's something I am still struggling with. I use a lot of primary colours, mainly red and blue. I'd like them to be subfusc* colours – not primary colours but the beautiful in-between tones'*. (*subfusc means dull, dusky or gloomy).
- **Formats and sizes.** Compare the effect of a twelve-part painting next to a single large canvas. Sandra says she likes to work with the 4x4ft format because it is related to her own size – it is her arm span so she can lift and turn the picture as she wants to. She also particularly likes the square format. She has described painting as 'non-functional architecture' and here we see her exploring geometry and asymmetry.

- **Words and sounds.** Notice Sandra's choice of titles for these recent works. She evokes ideas that play with both an abstract visual language of colour, shape and texture and the language of sound. We think of the sound of waves and water (*Reeling Water*) but we also think of the pun 're-sounding' as an idea of repetition within a composition. Interestingly the painting *Porthmeor* (1996), included here, is the only work that has a title that relates to a specific place.

Apse and Gallery 3: Vicken Parson Other Places

This exhibition shows new work by the British artist Vicken Parsons. The paintings form a series exploring a sense of space which moves from dark to light and from representation to abstraction. They are constructed using oblique lines and tipped planes, with seemingly changing boundaries. They suggest feelings of emptiness and stillness but also unease.

The paintings are all small in scale. Vicken applies coloured grounds of thin oil paint and charcoal drawn lines onto thick plywood panels. She only applies paint to the front surface so it is easy to see the laminated layers that make up the plywood.

The paintings have been deliberately hung at different heights within the gallery space to challenge the accepted view that works should be hung at the 'standard' eye level.

All the paintings have been created in a large room, which has been her studio for several years. Vicken was born in 1957 in Hertfordshire and studied at the Slade School of Fine Art from 1975-9. She lives and works in London.

Trigger questions

- Describe what you can see in these paintings.
- What do all these paintings have in common?
- Why do you think they are so small?
- Why do you think they have been hung at different levels?
- What sort of mood or atmosphere do these paintings create?

Things to think about

- Vicken's paintings explore **architectural space**. They explore the space of her studio which is a large Victorian room at the back of her north London home. The paintings do not describe that space in any detailed way, rather they evoke it. Although her paintings are small in scale – the spaces they suggest are both huge and strange. Apart from the space of her studio, Vicken has talked about her interest in a confined narrowed space between two high walls or buildings. She has also said that her experience of visiting Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum in Berlin has been an impetus for this series of paintings. Vicken was able to explore the dramatic architectural spaces of the Museum before it was filled with exhibits.
- The paintings **evoke the memories of places and spaces**. The space inside our head – partially remembered experiences or fragments. Her paintings have been described as 'psychological architecture: an associative space within the mind which stirs memory, creates atmosphere and has the potential to disturb or haunt us'.
- Vicken is fascinated by rooms and she talks of them as an extension of oneself – the walls could be compared to skin, they breathe but also contain feelings within them. Her paintings could be described as representation not

of real rooms but rather the '**sensation**' of the room, felt through the optical and physical experience of the body but remembered in paint.

- Her paintings describe the **borders of a room – walls, edges and corners**. At first glance they suggest we are looking into a room. If you take a close look it seems that they suggest more than one room. In some they seem doubled or laid over and inside one another. In others tunnels stretch away curving towards the light at the far end or walls lead to dark corners and tiny slivers of light. Patches of colour seem to suggest doors and windows, screens and mirrors.
- Walking into the room there is a mood of **quietness and stillness**. The ambiguous and mysterious spaces Vicken evokes have a disturbing, hypnotic quality – rather like the space in a dark cinema or theatre. They evoke a sense of **emptiness**. There are no people or objects. There is a feeling of absence.
- **Perspective and light**. In contrast to Sandra Blow, Vicken plays with traditional perspective and the illusion of spatial depth. The sense of dark deep space is created through her use of line, muted colours and patches of light and shade.

Resources available in the Gallery

There is an **Exhibition Study Point on Level 3** that has a selection of books relating to the exhibition. You can also access the Tate Gallery **Collection Data base** online at this point.

The **Tate Gallery shop** has a selection of books, catalogues, postcards and related materials.

The following publications have been produced in relation to the current displays are available to read at the Study Point or to purchase in the shop:

Sandra Blow – An illustrated catalogue with an essay by Mel Gooding. £9.99

Vicken Parsons – An illustrated catalogue with an essay by Michael Archer. £5.95

Artists on Artists – broadsheet. £1

Bernard Leach and Mark Tobey – broadsheet. £1

Further Reading

In addition to the catalogues and broadsheets listed above the following are recommended:

Waves on Porthmeor Beach Alaric Sumner & Sandra Blow, WordsWorth Books, London 1995

Sandra Blow Royal Academy of Arts, Exhibition Catalogue, 1994

Sandra Blow – Recent Work Francis Graham-Dixon Gallery, London, 1991

Tom Cross – Painting the Warmth of the Sun, St Ives Artists, 1939-1975 Alison Hodge, Penzance, 1984

Marion Whybrow – St Ives: 1883-1993: Portrait of an Art Colony Antique Collectors Club, Woodbridge, 1994

Jo Crook & Tom Learner – The Impact of Modern Painters Tate Gallery, 2000

Jeremy Lewison – Ben Nicholson Ediciones Poligrafa, 1991

Norbert Lynton – Ben Nicholson Phaidon Press, 1998

Roger Hilton Exhibition Catalogue, 1993

Note: for further research the **St Ives Library** and **Archive Study Centre** holds a range of material related to Sandra Blow and other artists associated with St Ives.

St Ives Library, Gabriel Street

St Ives TR26 2LX, Tel: 01736 796408

e-mail: archive@stives.trust.demon.uk

The following websites can also provide useful starting points for further research:

www.tate.org.uk Tate online

www.stivestrust.demon.co.uk/archivesite St Ives Archive Study Centre website

www.britannica.com References to artists and art movements

www.artchive.com information on key artists and movements

www.artcyclopedia.com information on key artists and movements

www.britisharts.co.uk gives information on individual artists and galleries

www.xrefer.com reference search engine.

Glossary

Abstract art

In its most general sense abstract art is art that does not represent aspects of the visible world. It is also described as non-objective, non-representational and non-figurative art. In the twentieth-century many artistic movement (such as Cubism, Constructivism and Abstract Expressionism) explored and developed abstract art. But the term means different things in relation to different artists.

Abstract Expressionism

Usually connected with American artists working in a non-geometric style of abstraction. The term emphasises the spontaneity of expression and the idea of the subconscious. It encompasses a variety of styles, from Pollock's dribbling techniques to Rothko's colour fields. Key artists include Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Mark Tobey and Willem de Kooning.

Acrylic paint

Artists' colours made by dispersing pigments in a vehicle made from polymethyl methacrylate solution in mineral spirits. The advantage of acrylic is that it does not yellow over time, it dries rapidly and it is easily removed with mineral spirits or turpentine. Artists first used acrylic paints in the 1950s, initially in America. Today there is a range of acrylic media available to artists including water-based emulsions, gels and pastes.

Art Informel

A term coined by the French critic Michel Tapié in the early 1950s. Art Informel was the European counterpart to American Abstract Expressionism which emphasised intuition and spontaneity. Artists associated with Art Informel include Alberto Burri, Jean Fautrier, Hans Hartung, George Mathieu, Pierre Soulages, Nicholas de Staël, Antoni Tàpies, Bram van Velde and Wols. Tachisme (see below) was part of Art Informel.

Art Povera

A term coined by the Italian art critic Germano Celant in 1967 to describe a type of art that emerged in the late 1960s which made use of 'humble' or 'poor' materials such as sand, wood, cement and newspaper. Artists associated with Arte Povera include Giovanni Anselmo, Luciano Fabro, Jannis Kounellis, Mario Merz, Guiseppe Penone, Michaelangelo Pistoletto, Giberto Zorio and Giulio Paolini.

Assemblage

Assemblage is the technique of creating 3-D works of art by combining various elements including found objects. The term is used to describe freestanding constructions more closely related to sculpture than painting but the process is comparable to collage (see below).

CoBrA

CoBrA was founded in 1948 by the Belgian writer Christian Dotremont and its name came from the three cities where many of the participants lived – Copenhagen,

Brussels and Amsterdam. CoBrA style is characterised by violent brushwork and strong colour. Their abstracted but still recognisable imagery was often derived from prehistoric and folk art. CoBrA artists included Pierre Alechinsky, Karel Appel, Cornelius Corneille, Asger Jorn and Karl Pederson.

Collage

Collage (from the French verb *coller* – to glue) is the technique of creating a pictorial composition made up of various materials such as cardboard, string, fabric, newspaper and photographs. These materials are pasted on to canvas or board and sometimes combined with painting and drawing. Collage evolved out *papiér collés*, a technique in which decorative designs were made with pasted pieces of coloured paper. Picasso was one of the first artists to use collage as a fine art technique. Other Cubist, Dadaist and Surrealist artists further developed it.

Constructivism

Constructivism describes a movement of art in 1920s Russia which included the artists, Rodchenko, Stepanova, Tatlin, Pevsner and Gabo. They emphasised the role of materials and developed a language of abstraction based on ideas of pure form. The Constructivists aimed to make art a detached, scientific investigation of abstract properties (picture surface, construction, line and colour). Gabo and Pevsner left Russia in 1922 after Constructivism had been condemned by the Soviet regime, and they and other exiles helped to spread the ideals of the movement throughout Europe. They were influential, for example, on the Bauhaus in Germany, De Stijl in the Netherlands, and the Abstraction-Création group in France, and Gabo was one of the editors of the English Constructivist manifesto, Circle, in 1937. Gabo spent time in St Ives at the beginning of the war and his presence encourage artists such Hepworth and Nicholson to develop abstract art based on Constructivist principles.

Cubism

An early twentieth-century style that developed from the idea that an object should be shown from all angles, not just one point of view. Artists therefore rejected conventional techniques of perspective and dimension, and instead broke their subject matter up and reconstructed it in an abstract form that showed a number of points of view simultaneously. Key Cubist artists include Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque.

Oil Colours

Artists' colour made by dispersing pigments in linseed oil or another vegetable drying oil. A painter in oils may increase his/her manipulative control of his/her colours by adding a medium and using a thinner such as turpentine. Oil painting has been the standard of easel painting for over five centuries.

Tachism

This European, mainly French-dominated, style of abstract painting emerged during the late 1940s. Similar to American Abstract Expressionism, Tachism (from the French *tache* or blot) aimed to communicate expression through the application of spontaneous, gestural brush strokes, that were free from the conscious mind. Key

artists include Hans Hartung, Georges Mathieu, Henri Michaux and Pierre Soulages.

Included below are a selection of Alaric Sumner's poem 'inserts' from Waves on Porthmeor Beach (see Further Reading).

Insertion #12

Now at high tide
I imagine low tide
and then I remember
yesterday's low tide

I imagine remembering
today's high tide
when watching the waves
of tomorrow's low tide

I remember a photograph
of my mother, aged one,
on Porthmeor Beach
with the Gas Works behind

I turn and see
the building site
of the St Ives Tate
nearing completion

I imagine a tide
my mother saw
as I watch this tide –
long past to you

I contrast this real tide
with the imagined and the remembered
and I'm imagining the tides
that will ebb when I leave

Insertion #32

I rage through the night against the storm
and find symmetry and order
in wave and cloud, imposing
myself on my perceptions

The storm rages through the night
imposing the order and symmetry
of chaos on wave and cloud
I perceive myself within me

The night rages through the storm
perceptible through imposing
order and symmetry on the chaos
of wind and cloud

I wave to myself across the waters

Insertion #35

In white Tate,
high
over white and slate
eye
observes and records
surf,
surfers and surfboards.
Turf,
thrift and bracken
coat
rift, and pattern
coast
in brown shades
a cloud
masks and fades –
as sound
of artist's talk
distracts ...

Insertion #39

perception of time
isn't fixed:
a wave can dominate
consciousness
so that its inexorable roll
to the beach
is perceived as a traumatic
slowness
or hours spent gazing
at the sea's
multitudinous repetitions
can seem
mere moments in millennial
movements

Insertion #42

In each curl of the lines of breakers
amid translucent green
float cryptic symbols of dark seaweed.

If read, would these texts speak
of time and storms and violence
of life and dying, of distance and sunlight?

Or would the folding and vanishing literature
of the waves through the millennia be as new
as unimaginable in thought as in language?