

# JULIA BROOKER PAINTINGS

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Essay by Sian Hughes  
for catalogue of Julia Brooker's debut solo exhibition  
'Light Touch'.

Exhibition curated by Carole-Anne Davies, Director of Cardiff Bay Arts Trust, Cardiff, UK. Powell Dobson Partnership, Architects, Cardiff sponsored the exhibition in partnership with Arts & Business, Wales. The Arts Council of Wales supported the exhibition. Sian Hughes is a Welsh writer.

One of the first things that Julia says to me is that she loves pink. We are on our way to Julia's studio on Titan Road at the time. A succession of austere administrative outlets offers up a skyline of stark and uncompromising geometry, making the comment seem somehow incongruous. By the time we get there, I am expecting another YBA carnival- kitsch visual puns exploring trash sensibilities à la Sarah Lucas or Tracey Emin- but I couldn't be more wrong.

Cool large scale paintings meet the metallic light of the Bay, head on. Each painting is executed on aluminium, using acrylics; each measures forty nine inches square. The first painting is called 'Girl' after Julia's niece, Mair. Horizontal bands of pink and lilac acrylic, instead of conjuring up candy floss or crinoline dresses echo belts of wind or the banded structure of Jupiter's atmosphere, delivering movement, but also calm. The second painting 'Drawn' creeps up on me. Slender skeins of an olive paint- so dark as to be almost black- intertwine with bands of pink vibrating light. Again, the painting illustrates a conflict. The implied movement of the lines contrasts with a larger feeling of tranquillity induced by the incandescent quality of the aluminium.

I ask Julia what the paintings mean. I ask her why she paints stripes. She doesn't answer. But instead she tells me a range of stories that have to do with memory and with loss. One story tells of the time she touched the soft part of her newborn baby's skull, the fontanelle, of how she marvelled at his heart beat through her fingers. "Often when I am painting, I think about the people I love and tenderness washes over me" she says.

I return to the paintings. The lines now seem like exercises in remembering: a kind of touching. Each line is a sublimation of some memories; a Proustian narrative in which the variations in brush pressure illustrate some intimate topography; the progress of a hand along the contours of a lover's skin, discovering the hollows, the dipped clavicles, or the bumps. I can see now why they seem so brave and defiant. Each line is a charged interplay of presence and absence, in which the possibility of real absence is never far away. "My best friend ended our friendship by letter; eight years later I made a replica and tore it up and painted over it" says Julia. "You could still see the impression of words underneath the paint".

She proceeds to tell me of her love of writing. It seems significant that she paints from left to right, in single strokes, as though constructing a word or sentence in joined-up long hand. She even tells me that printing presses use aluminium. Meanwhile I am reminded of the work of the Minimalist artist, Agnes Martin, who creates horizontal fields of contemplation, or Ross Bleckner, whose emotionally charged striped paintings are often embellished with funereal symbols of remembrance, like flowers, or birds, or wreaths. In turn, Julia refers me to the work of critically acclaimed work of Brit artist Jason Martin, whose minimalist paintings, executed with a single horizontal stroke of the brush, let a series of unpredictable events unfold within their spatial and rhythmical regularity.

Again, I look at the paintings. Each line is consummated with uncharacteristic splodges of paint, illustrating for a moment of closure or resolution reminiscent of the work of Robert Rauschenberg, whose horizontal white lines resolve into themselves as soon as the paint runs out. It occurs to me that it is these moments, as well as from the backscattering of light from the aluminium, that the paintings derive their sense of calm.

"Do you ever paint vertical stripes?" I add. Julia shakes her head. (Later in her career Julia did start to use vertical lines too.) For her only horizontal lines encourage contemplation. She maintains her paintings are non-objective, yet acknowledges that her pre-occupation with the horizontal may have something to do with an unconscious memory reference to the horizon, to ground zero, filed somewhere in the brain's hard drive. To me, meanwhile, each line evokes a desire to start again, a post traumatic search for new beginnings.

We move on to talk about the light that saturates Julia's paintings. She tells me that she fell in love with the effect of acrylic on aluminium, because of the reflected light, before telling me that she also considered a career in stained glass. Years ago she experimented with oils and a range of impasto, but the opacity, the density, the gloopiness of the finished product reminded her of Artx or peanut butter. I am aware once more of how the light, which moves through the horizontals of the paintings like a breeze, seems to amplify the conflict at the heart of them; the conflict between past and present. The reflectiveness of the aluminium, the transparent and crystalline acrylics, can be experienced as a distraction, a white noise, an attempt to seduce the viewer away from the secret and sometimes seismic vents encrypted in the horizontals. In 'Drawn' the backdrop of aluminium has a disorientating hallucinatory quality through which the pink and olive skeins struggle to be heard. At the same time, the light also forces the viewer to assume a broader spiritual perspective, annihilating personal and particular concerns.

As we leave the studio, I notice more paintings stacked against the walls. Julia pulls out a couple of them, and lays them on a table. Some are more akin to what I had first expected. Pink horizontals resembling the kind of stripes you might find on old fashioned candy or sticks of fairground rock. As with the other paintings, I can see how the wavering horizontals articulate and negotiate the constituents of memory, its bittersweet discontents, its pain and pleasures, offering the viewer an intensely charged aesthetic experience that also manages to deliver resolution, calm, and utter stillness. I ask Julia what she is trying to achieve with her paintings. She tells me she is trying to create beauty, which she defines in Schopenhauerian terms as "timeless moments of pleasure" in which you are taken out of yourself.

"I can see that we are thinking along the same lines" I say.

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Extract from essay by Dr Jacques Rangasamy in 'Waterlines' exhibition catalogue

The work of Julia Brooker, Helene Broutschert, Valerie Coffin Price, Mary Husted was curated by Sandra Jackaman, for the Newport Museum & Art Gallery, supported by the Arts Council of Wales. Dr Jacques Rangasamy is an academic and author.

'In Brooker's art, the ritual of making provides the framework for reflecting upon the ritual of living. Civilised living consists of sets of social, professional and cultural rituals that ensure that shared rules of morality, law or ethics, our rational minds prevail over human effort or the outcome of human interactions. The observance of proper rules of behaviour demands that we be true to the 'system' in all circumstances. In the process, however we are often untrue to ourselves. Normality, rationalism and our civilised identity can therefore become obstacles in our search for our authenticity. The consequent cost in frustration and grief being often debited to our emotional health and consequent psychic well-being.

Like an offering to the altar, Brooker brought to art-making her share of life's hurts and pains. The ritual of making became the means for exercising her intelligence of feelings, and the resultant work exemplifies art's propensity for healing the inner self. This is the dimension of Brooker's work that must not be missed. Meticulous studentship had initiated Brooker into the codes and convention of painting she had chosen to follow. Like all methodologies, technical possibilities hide conceptual limits. To set her off on her journey of self seeking Brooker needed a revelation. The latter was supplied by Jason Martin's paintings in his October 1999 Lisson Gallery show. Martin's work mesmerised Brooker. Painting did not need to play up to the visual authority of the beholder not to structure its internal order according to the latter's expectations or shared pictorial conventions. Content can be configured decoratively. Painting can in Brooker's words "take the eye": the seductiveness of the 'pictorial event' can be a visual and expressive virtue.

Brooker is pre-occupied with colour and light. She wanted the pictorial surface to emit light, rather like stained glass, an effect that her previous paintings on canvas had not achieved to her satisfaction. She had to rethink her strategy of making, her medium, material, technique and scale of work and production. The results are here on show. Brooker has turned her metal surfaces into an active collaborator in her play with light. From the active producer of meaning that they were erstwhile, the surfaces had dissolved and liquefied into a passive agent upon which light reacts. Like the surface of a pond sparkling with drops of summer's light, her creations became the site where light flirted with coloured surfaces, in a choreography that was as subtle as it was striking.

Schopenhauer's notion that art is beautiful when it creates timeless moments for the viewer and Rothko's magical ability to halt the passage of time were sources of inspiration. Painting became the ritual that also deconstructed pain and reconfigured the residual experience into inner peace, that gave healing and repair work to the emotional apparatus. It filled the gaps left by existence. These are valuable offerings for the viewer.'

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## Essay by Malcolm Lewis for catalogue of Julia Brooker's solo exhibition of paintings 'Heavenly Bodies'

The exhibition was curated by Hywel Pontin, Director of Llantarnam Grange, Cwmbran, Gwent, UK and it was also shown in Mold. The Arts Council of Wales supported the exhibition. The author Malcolm Lewis is a Welsh writer based in London.

'Julia Brooker's paintings radiate light and colour. They are sensual and decorative, clean and modern - and deceptively simple.

What are they but bands of paint, in some applied broad and thin across the picture, in others criss-crossing, and raised like riverside levees? Their purity and clarity appeals to contemporary sensibilities - they are beautiful objects. But Brooker's paintings touch us too. They appeal at another level, bear long contemplation and stay with us. They are evocative and deeply felt.

'Light' is in a long tradition of painting light and atmosphere. Brooker's Cardiff is a port lying between sea and mountains, its sky always changing. See 'Light's vertical shifts, like veils of rain swept along by wind. 'Breath 3' has the texture of a charcoal drawing, but is like a moisture-saturated sky, just breaking into rain. This is a beautiful restful picture, its verticals playing with light, horizontals giving it the stability of the ground beneath our feet.

Move around 'Glimpse III'. The blues change, the light, never even, mimics the sky after dusk. 'Glimpse I' is altogether darker, even threatening in feel.

Brooker's atmospheric pictures offer contemplation of change and freedom, but here the skeins of light have become a mesh, a cage. Like light through a leaf canopy, or a myriad city lights and reflections, the mood is claustrophobic, pressing.

'Daydream' is light as a summer's breeze. Bands of light bend and sparkle with tiny stars in the dense black of 'Nebula'. Rich with saturated purples and ultramarines, 'Aquamarine' is soaked in colour.

Brooker's paintings trace her life, her feelings and perceptions. Look at the shimmering pinks and purples of 'Ella' and 'Swoon VI'. They embody joy. Enjoy them.