

**Carol Robertson
Mavericks**

An exhibition of twenty nine paintings from 3rd April – 28th April 2005
at
Galerie Sebastianskappele e. V., Ulm, Germany
<http://www.uni-ulm.de/~hteutsch/sebkap.html>

A Project Report

11th April 2005

Maverick – a person of independent or unorthodox views.

Change the description of a maverick from that of a person to a painting and you have an outline for the thinking behind this project.

From September 2004 to March 2005 I made a group of small square paintings that set out to express independent and (for myself) untypical views and ideas. It is important to recognize that artists often develop a long-term identity through revisiting the same visual material again and again. In my own work I regularly make series of works that employ only small variations from piece to piece. I build up a thorough and painstaking visual understanding by repetitively exploring the same ideas and conventions. I paint closely connected 'versions' of one original concept, sometimes for years. This unhurried process is usually reductive; paring things down to the essential and eliminating everything that threatens to break the overall continuity of the series. It is easy to understand in this rarefied context, how even the smallest innovation can seem radical. By slightly altering a single element, let alone several, the whole process can seem new and unfamiliar. The introduction of a different scale for example, or experimenting with some hitherto unused colour combination, can feel like the equivalent of inventing new words to complement one's already sophisticated but conventional use of language.

It was the desire to find new solutions, to surprise myself by challenging some of my long-term conventions, both practically and conceptually, which led to the idea for this exhibition. Over a seven month period I decided to explore ideas that I had put to one side over the last few years, perhaps fearing they didn't quite 'fit' into my normal way of working or that they might not lead anywhere: a kind of brainstorming exercise to produce a body of oil paintings and watercolours that charted my visual and mental processes of trial and error. Instead of making a linked series of large paintings that normally would offer quite minimal variations upon a single theme or idea, I decided to work simultaneously on a range of different abstract geometric formations. The only rule I set myself was that they

were all going to be on a small square format. I worked on three different sizes, using the smallest size for watercolours, image size 8.5 x 8.5cm (framed size 29 x 29cm), and the two larger sizes for oil paintings, 20 x 20cm and 30 x 30cm respectively. I had made small watercolours before but never oil paintings whose dimensions were smaller than about a metre square. For me this was to be an exercise in painting 'miniatures' as well as testing out new ideas.

I was given an introduction to Galerie Sebastianskappele in 2003 and sent material to them with the proposal of making an exhibition at some future date. I liked the fact that the gallery has no commercial constraints and no pre-conceived ideas about the type of artist or style of work that it supports. It embraces experimental ideas and installations from serious artists on a local, a national, and, international level. On subsequently being offered an exhibition I felt this would be a good venue to present the outcomes from my period of experimentation. It would be interesting to see if I could demonstrate a coherent and unified collective identity to this disparate group of images. With three exceptions, all the work I took to Ulm was made since September 2004. The exhibition space is unorthodox and very beautiful, though not without problems in terms of change of usage from 15th century chapel into contemporary gallery space. It presented challenges in terms of installation that I felt might offer a perfect complement to paintings that offer no single theme or solution. Indeed, the final placement of paintings in the space became a kind of game or puzzle; seeing how some images could work together and others could not. I deliberately hung works next to one another that were not obviously natural partners and it was exciting to discover that juxtapositions between both paintings and their surroundings introduced new and untested relationships. I hung paintings together in close groups in one room whilst in another, each might have a whole wall to itself. Some were hung at eye level whilst others were hung high, above carved wood-panelling. I even placed one painting with a triangular motif, *Apex*, in the old wood-beamed roof of the building, on a dark untreated wall that lined up with the apex of the spire. One observation was that this painting became the natural 'point' or full-stop to the exhibition.

Without the restraints of a single theme I worked simultaneously on a range of radically different compositions. Choosing the square as a 'democratic' format to start with, each painting employs geometric formations of circles, stripes and triangles. However, it is the derivation of detail and the associative connections in these paintings that make them interesting. Some have complex asymmetric divisions and structures that create eccentric alignments whilst others offer a simple, symmetric, formality - qualities that much of my previous work contains. My plan was certainly not to turn my back on everything I had done before, but to mix things up, be much more inclusive and open to new possibilities. Many of the paintings use untypical colour, create odd spatial relationships, or play around with orientation. One aspect I have subsequently found to be particularly useful has been experimenting with orientation; using diagonals, verticals, horizontals to change the gravity or emphasis within a work. Each painting carries different

references, though some share the same source of inspiration. I use many sources, some stored for years in my mind, but broadly breaking down into certain categories of influence: architectural form and detail, music, other art, landscape, weather, cyclic or seasonal conditions, people, human behaviour and emotion.

All the works for *Mavericks* are effectively miniatures and this links up with a personal interest. I own a small collection of 18th and 19th century Indian miniatures and have been studying this art-form for many years. I love their intensity, their colour, their attention to detail and their narrative. When you look at one closely you block out the rest of the world, absorbed by their beauty and intricate perfection. In conversation last year with the contemporary gallery director and expert in Indian art, Kapil Jariwala, I learned of a tradition in Indian art called *Ragamala* literally translated as 'garland of sound'. It is a concept explored in miniature painting that introduces sound and music as a subject for appreciation and contemplation. Told through narrative it visually brings to life the poetic history of music and sound. The *raga* is a conventional pattern of melody and rhythm that forms the basis for freely interpreted compositions, and is a basis for religious and spiritual devotions. I listen to a lot of Indian music and feel its influence in my work, as titles such as *Rain Raga*, *Ragamala*, and *Evening Raga* suggest. These, and some of the watercolours in the *Abstract Realities* series demonstrate close associative influences. In *Rain Raga* the cool colours and patterns of horizontal and vertical stripes are analogous with rain and with the patterns and rhythms of an Indian rain raga. The contrast of pale pink ground with dark circle in *Evening Raga*, the serenity punctuated by a tiny disturbance of divided intervals of colour in its outermost ring makes multiple references to time of day, place and again to raga music. There is a meditative aspect in both the making of and looking at my paintings and music often plays a role in this. I listen to many different kinds of music and carefully select music to work to. I find it sets up a mood or atmosphere conducive to painting.

With other paintings my influences are entirely different. I live and work in London, close to the modern skyline of the financial capital, east of the city. Huge glass and concrete towers dominate the horizon, interspersed with some of the taller church spires and residential tower blocks. During the day these buildings have a form and a solidity that is transformed at sunset. Night brings a skyline of light patterns that appear to turn buildings inside out. References to city architecture are clear in *Rhythms - Abstract Horizontal* and *Abstract Vertical* or in *Stack* and *City Light*. The latter contrast strongly with other works that refer to landscape and nature. A series of residencies from 2000 - 2004 in the rural northwest of Ireland have given me a very strong awareness of landscape space and colour. A return to nature and closer contact with the elements and with seasonal change has introduced a softer more atmospheric sensibility to some works. My time in Ireland is rooted in the thinking behind *Uncertain Hour*, *Field*, *Cold Sun*, *Indefinite Weather*, *Spirit Of The Place* and *Salt water Sky*. *Rain Raga* has a connection here also. I included two watercolours, *Ireland 17-09-03* and

20-09-03, made in Ireland as part of a series totally unconnected with anything I had done before. They reflect upon air and space and water, on patterned fossils found on the beach, rippled tide patterns in the sand and upon the tidal ebb and flow. They seemed to fit the spirit of the exhibition and were the starting point for *Inner Space*, made in 2005. The only other earlier work I showed was *As I am #15*, also made in Ireland but in September 2000. It was the precursor of an introspective and difficult period in my life where I did the opposite of what I have been doing recently. I spent two years making variations of circles and symmetrical stripes that only employed a very restricted colour palette. I was representing a side of my character that I had not explored before, using myself as the notional subject. The works became part of a sort of graph that tracked my psychological insecurities and introspections. Although *As I Am #15* was made in Ireland at the same place that was to eventually have such an influence on my later work, I was not focussing on the landscape, I was looking inwards, to myself. This watercolour seemed like a maverick at the time.

Having given myself the luxury of spending seven months working on small paintings I was determined to allow for a margin of error - to take risks and make mistakes. Of course there were both successes and failures along the way, but it is often the failures that point the way to future solutions. I gave up on two paintings and didn't quite manage to resolve two others in time for the exhibition, although both are now successfully completed. While my studio is relatively empty and the new work is still in Ulm I have begun three new large paintings. It is somewhat of a relief to be working on a larger, more environmental scale again, but I realise how important these last months have been. I had obviously felt a deep need to find new material to work with. My openness to such a variety of possibilities has given me a lot to consider. The new paintings already take on some of the ideas that I came up with - most particularly from the asymmetric striped formations of works such as *Field*, *Fire Field 1 and 2*, *Rain Raga*, *Saltwater Sky* and *Spirit Of The Place*. These works are a starting point for me - I feel I've only just scratched the surface. That is a good feeling for any artist to have. I feel a sense of urgency to go further - that there is a lot more to do. I face an odd conflict between the almost hyperactive need to make work and at times, the frustratingly slow process of doing so. That is the key to one's own identity as a painter. It is never enough to have good ideas. They have to exist physically. One thing I was not prepared to lose in this project was my slow and careful method of painting - a measured and intimate building up of the surface, touch by touch. My own standards as to what feels right or wrong ultimately depend on a consistent physical relationship with the work. Another artist's standards may be different but the character and personality of my work is permeated by a time-consuming attention to detail and to a level of perfection that cannot be attained quickly. Nothing is set in stone: ten years from now I might be making action paintings or making digital art. But I very much doubt it.