

This text was produced
for the exhibition

Paul Becker
New Paintings

19 September –
11 October 2015
at Drop City, Newcastle

20 South Street
Newcastle upon Tyne
NE1 3PE, UK

From left to right:

Labian, 2015.

Oil on metal. 17 × 23cm

Cat's Tail, 2015.

Oil on canvas. 30 × 40cm

Nineteen Eighties Painters,
2014. Oil on metal. 31 × 42cm

Untitled, 2015.

Oil on linen. 91 × 91cm

Untitled (Collar), 2014.

Oil on board. 14.5 × 15.5cm

The Sling, 2015.

Oil on metal. 26 × 17cm

Scorpio, 2014.

Oil on metal. 17 × 16cm

Untitled (Headpiece), 2015.

Oil on linen 91 × 91cm

Painter (Portal), 2014.

Oil on canvas. 40 × 31cm

Untitled, 2015.

Oil on board. 18 × 20cm

Fold, 2014.

Oil on metal. 17 × 18cm

WILL HOLDER

Why I Am Not a Painter*

A figure sits, right, in the top corner. If human, then something in the line describing her profile would indicate that these are not male features. The line is softened by the addition of a highlight, decreasing in sharpness as it runs from her forehead to her chin. This line – brighter than the grey-mauve skin tones – suggests she is illuminated from a source to her right. What is left for us to see of her is determined by two rectangles, placing her in a square up there (in the top right corner); and, contrary to western reading patterns – left-to-right top-to-bottom – these two aid our gaze in her direction, right, before anything left. The square they form has two notable properties: it is not a true square, but one that has been optically corrected, since it is taller than it is wide. Secondly, two of its corners are not quite right-angles. Of the two rectangles placed (hence) quasi-perpendicular over each other, the bottom, horizontal one is painted in a colour reminiscent of green sand which has been spread lightly over a red surface, thicker above than below. The bottom of our 'square' – that is: located at the top of the horizontal rectangle – has a line not unlike that of our figure's profile: a bright orange highlight slowly merging from the left, with that colour of sand, as it proceeds right.

* Frank O'Hara, 1957

WHY I AM NOT A PAINTER

The direction, texture and colour of the brushstrokes of the first continue under a second, vertical rectangle, painted over it. As stated, the side of this vertical rectangle forming the left edge of the 'square' is not perpendicular to its bottom edge; and its darker, greener brushstrokes are also vertically oriented. They are bisected by a light stroke which forms a semicircular arc (whose radius might be the same length as the one of the square's sides) running under their surface, from where the vertical rectangle's left side bisects the horizontal one's upper side, through her forehead, over her right shoulder, over her back, and off the edge of the painting. Though: while this might follow the line of her back – were she leaning forward reading her book – it is anatomically too far behind her profile. The lines of her body are extended by a cloak, a robe, or (dare we say) mantle of thick, opulent sky-blue material; or she is curled up under a duvet, or comforter. Either way, the disappearance of her body under such luxuriant layers gives us a sense that she is rather comfortably immersed with the book that she reads. Even that measured distance at which the book is held – a touch of flesh-coloured paint at the foot of its spine – denotes 'comfort'. Were it not for the empty space of the dark background behind her, we might think she is lying, with her head on its side and the book on its side. Such a point-of-view on her figure would be the only way to explain the presence of the thickest orange line along the right side of the vertical rectangle as another highlight, on the edge of the frame of a skylight.

WILL HOLDER

Otherwise these two rectangles are simply compositional and painterly devices, forcing our inevitable, formal, figurative reading in other directions than the above. That is: if it wasn't for the slight nature of the profile reading the green book, we wouldn't produce a narrative of the whole, including the 'comforter' extending to the other side of the vertical rectangle. After all, there – without the other half's additional luxury of gradual blue tones rendering thick, warm cloth – it really only comprises six disconnected triangles and a rhombus. Above these – following an arc similar to the previous, but from the top left corner downwards – is a grey-mauve, hence, here, flesh-coloured circle with two highlighted folds. Helped along by colours, we imagine the information hidden from us by the vertical rectangle, needed to join the two parts in the same perspective and scale. This would make our figure impossibly pregnant, then cause us to doubt her imminent offspring's terrestrial nature. As does her hair. It is our conditioning, not the painting, after all, which automatically attributes the female gender to a figure with a large volume of hair. Especially when it is adorned with sixty seven brightly coloured circles, each with its own colour (royal blue, ruby red, dog whelk purple, lime green, cool grey, turquoise, pastel pink, light blue, office grey, whitley blue, army green, rose orange, pill pink, mint green, emerald green). Not one is dripped, no: each is finely circumscribed by a metallic reflection off the surface of the steel, on which the paint is applied. It's the book which makes her human.