

Artists who defied the market – and the Tate

The relatively obscure but significant Stockwell Depot group changed the history of art in Britain during a turbulent period.

Review by Corinna Lotz

- [Interview with curator Sam Cornish](#)
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It took an intrepid and hardy group to realise the potential in a disused Victorian brewery offered to them by Lambeth Council in 1967. Even the rats running along studio walls, legend has it, held up their paws against the sparks which showered from sculptors' welding torches.

Grasping the nature of the Stockwell “group” is no mean task. While they all eschewed figuration – still a bold intellectual attitude in Britain – the Depot's artists both did *and did not* form a coherent tendency. They came and went, occupying diverse spaces for longer and shorter periods of time, at times included in the annual exhibitions, other times not.

The story of how these more than 26 sculptors and painters came together can be traced back to the St Martin's School of Art's sculpture department. In 1967, Roland Brener, Roeluf Louw and David Evison, all of whom had close connections to St Martin's, needed somewhere to spread their wings.

While many debates and discussions went on, those involved did not sign up to a common manifesto. Nonetheless there was a common spirit afoot, taking forward the democratic atmosphere of critical inquiry that prevailed at St Martin's, headed up by Tony Caro, Frank Martin, Tim Scott and others. It was a revolutionary moment in both politics and art, as news of mass demonstrations in Paris reached London in the spring of 1968. Just as the Depot's founders organised their first show, students began a six-week occupation of Hornsey art college in north London.

Sam Cornish and co-curator David Waterworth have now assembled 22 key works by Stockwell Depot artists in Greenwich University's scattered exhibition spaces, accompanied by a [magnificent book](#). Together they reveal a pioneering movement which changed the history of art in Britain during a time of social, political and aesthetic upheaval.

The artists of this generation were borne along by the expansion of art school education in the 1960s to students from broader layers of society. They were fired up by a fiercely independent attitude to art and what it could or should be. Above all they were devoted to exploring the possibilities of abstract art, inspired in part by movements in the United States, but by now late Modernist abstraction was becoming home grown.

Introducing the first exhibition in May 1968, Michael Compton wrote that the artists wanted to operate outside the commercial imperatives of dealers and the “judgements of critics, juries and museums ... [which] have nothing to do with the direct confrontation of the work and the viewer”.

Working at Stockwell allowed artists to focus on their own concerns and communicate directly with their surroundings, share their work with colleagues and friends who could walk into, through and around their installations. They by-passed the usual commercial path between studio and gallery – and went direct to peers and public. Using semi-derelict buildings as studios eventually became par for the course in the 1980s and 1990s, but it was cutting-edge at this time.

The early group experience comes across powerfully in gritty black and white photographs. Moody images of the sculptors looking like a pop band, perched between steel girders or lounging with their girlfriends on the rooftop are pure 60s. Their mostly welded steel constructions sat directly on the ground and included work by Louw, Brener, David Evison, Peter Hide, Roger Fagin, John Fowler, Alan Barkley and Gerard Hemsworth. Their work sprawled through the cavernous building.

New Sculpture 1969 was organised by the Arts Council in an effort to introduce work by Depot sculptors to the public, beginning with a show in Stevenage Town Centre. The tough nature of the work – not helped by critical indifference and disparagement – provoked hostile local reactions and the newly-commissioned large-scale sculptures on public display were vandalised. The planned tour to Bristol, Harrogate and Billingham was abandoned.

The present show in Greenwich is spread over three spaces. Guarding the entrance to the Heritage Gallery is John Foster’s massive *Full Face*, which looks out over the Royal Naval College’s classical spaces. It embodies the earth-bound properties of iron with its roughly-hewn slabs of rust-red steel which appear weighed down and crouching. Seen from another angle, it looks like a hunched bird of prey unfolding its wings.

The stylistic continuity with the St Martin’s/Caro-Scott tradition is clear in Evison’s *Sculpture II*, which dominates the interior of the gallery overlooking the Thames. It builds on an airy balance through the dextrous wielding of the welder’s tools. Sustained by two slender rods and curved arcs of steel, burnished silvery surfaces appear to strain like sails in the wind. Nearby, Alan Gouk’s heavily-loaded brush in *Sea Horse Tenacity* also evokes a marine atmosphere, with navy blue swipes, gloops and splodges dancing on top of green and yellow. A large orange and yellow canvas, *No.1* by Jennifer Durrant, one of the few women braving the Depot, is uncompromisingly minimal.

A stunning installation in the New Academic Building’s Project Space is a perfect match of painterly abstraction with work in welded steel by Anthony Smart and Katharine Gili. Cornish points to the enhancement obtained through the intimate contrast of highly-coloured, expressive canvases with sternly “pure” sculpture that rejects “pictorial” qualities.

There is, he notes, “a securing of each discipline’s ‘area of competence’ by mutual reinforcement as much as internal self-criticism... painters and sculptors were united in making art ultimately concerned with feeling – though their means were formal their ends were expressive... the exhibitions were not just displays ‘of the St Martin’s method,’ but a united front for modernist abstraction.”

In the same space, Douglas Abercrombie's *Coch-y-Bondu* pushes and drags acrylic paint across the surface to create a subtly textured surface dominated by mauves, violets, purples, seamed by ridges left by a squeegee. It has a musical, loose-limbed ease about it. A grey and silver boomerang lollops in and out of the iridescent pinks, accented by fiery oranges and the odd touch of aquamarine.

Mali Morris' *Party* and Paul Tonkin's *Something* approach colour in quite a different way. Mali's matt tones are thinly washed rather than mixed in separate but intersecting planes, creating individual relationships, like gathered guests. Some of Tonkin's loosely trailed drips float while others eddy out and feather, as in a river estuary, with snaking yellows and greens rising and bending in thrall to watery currents.

The third space is in the Stephen Lawrence Gallery and features a reconstruction of Roland Brener's delicate *Deep Space Installation* from 1970. Thin black rods are strewn across cables stretched across the corner of the gallery, defining an existing space, a cross between musical notation and birds scattered across telephone wires. Stephanie Bergman makes images that turn out to be fabric stitched together into a collage. Her stitched-together, marbled shapes have a mysterious spatiality, reminiscent of Braque's Synthetic period, as pastel rhomboids, pentagons and hexagons float through blue spaces.

The gallery spaces seem haunted – however distantly – by shades of Russian Suprematism and Cubo-Futurism. Bergman's work rhymes with Katherine Gili's *Shift* – unlikely materials like cloth and in Gili's case, mild steel, somehow acquire floating qualities. Peter Hide's *Beryl* rests on the floor, unfolding like a book to reveal a diamond shaped "text". A small silver and lemon canvas is a reminder that John Golding, the painter, art historian and theorist of Cubism, as far removed from the welder's machismo as could be, was also part of this diverse group.

Yearly exhibitions were held between 1968 and 1979, featuring artists working at the Depot, but also including some who simply shared its abstract ethos. The exhibition book provides a splendid photographic record of the founding participants and their creations. By the time of its twelfth and final annual show, which comprised 19 artists (by that time over half of them were painters) – of the original "founding" eight sculptors, only Hide took part. Although the Depot continued to be used as a studio space until the early 1990s, most of the original artists had all moved out. Around the year 2000 the building was pulled down to be replaced by non-descript flats.

As Frank Bowling has written, the Depot contributed "some of the lively energy that sustains British painting and sculpture, not the market, despite the talk of our living in a market economy". Although many went on to achieve recognition and success around the world, the group's contribution to the story of modern art in Britain remains unjustifiably neglected.

The Greenwich displays provide only a tantalising taste of a much larger phenomenon. Robin Greenwood's trailblazing [Poussin Gallery](#) in Bermondsey kept the abstract banner flying with exhibitions and publications between 2005 and 2012. Erudite discussions were hosted on the Abstract Critical website, followed today by [Abcrit](#). A number of Depot artists have studios at Deptford's [Art in Perpetuity Trust](#) and continue to produce exciting work.

And yet, as Cornish notes, the group remains excluded from most accounts of 20th century British sculpture and painting. They are largely ignored by Britain's chief art institutions,

such as the Tate. The Greenwich show should provide the impetus for a major retrospective featuring all the artists who worked and exhibited at the Depot. As Paul Tonkin has said, it's the Tate that's behind the times, not the Stockwell Depot group.

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Stockwell Depot 1967-1979 is at The Stephen Lawrence Gallery and Project Space and the Heritage Gallery in the University of Greenwich Galleries until 12 September. Open Tuesday to Saturday (except 29 August) 11am to 5pm. Admission free, disabled access.

The [exhibition catalogue](#) by Sam Cornish and David Waterworth is for sale at the galleries at a special price of £15.

Curator Sam Cornish on why he was attracted to the Stockwell Depot group of artists and what he means by “late, late Modernism”

Sam: I used to work with Robin Greenwood at Poussin Gallery – Robin briefly worked at the Depot and was included in the 1979 Depot exhibition and lots of the artists Poussin showed were either shown or worked at the Depot in the 1970s. I wrote about a few of the Depot artists for Poussin – most significantly a catalogue overviewing sculptor Katherine Gili's career – and so became interested in the wider context. I'd been sporadically doing my own research on the Depot for a few years before the opportunity came up to develop the project at the University of Greenwich which resulted in the book and exhibition.

Corinna: What do you like about them?

Sam: A difficult question! I think my attraction to the group is primarily because of my attraction to their art – though I could imagine someone approaching the Depot from a completely sociological perspective; considering it for example as a moment within the ever-shifting pattern of how artists live in London. On a slightly different tack my wife suggested that the complexities of the artists' relations – their allegiances and fallings out – would be better as a novel than a piece of art history! But anyway, before I came into contact with Poussin Gallery I'd already begun to realise that I felt I had a 'direct' response to abstract art, in a way that felt out of step with most of the concerns of contemporary art. Beginning to look into Stockwell, I suppose I was fascinated – although it might not have ever occurred to me exactly in this way – by this group of artists who almost no one had heard of and who had continued to develop their approach to art at a time that the history books tell us was all about performance, conceptualism, post-minimalism, arte povera etc – i.e. the very tendencies which are now seen to form the opening scenes of the art-world we now live with. At some level I also – and it is hard to articulate exactly what I mean – have an idea that art is as much about difficulty and restriction as it is about freedom or creativity; and I think that much of the art made at the Depot is in step with this impulse. I suspect the artists will disagree with that – some of them vehemently!

Corinna: What was it that connected the painters and sculptors – apart from sharing the space – i.e. stylistically and in terms of intention?

Sam: It's worth saying that quite a number of the 'Stockwell' artists, painters in particular, did not actually have studios at the Depot, so they only 'shared a space' for the duration of the annual exhibitions. Also that the Depot was first set-up in 1967 by sculptors from St Martin's School of Art and it was only from 1975 that painters had a significant presence in the annual exhibitions, although painter Dick James showed in both 1972 and 1973, alongside sculptor Peter Hide. That the current exhibition at Greenwich has – for practical reasons – more painting than sculpture is perhaps slightly misleading in this sense, though the text and illustrations in the book do emphasise the sculpture. The only thing that could be said to link all the Depot artists was an interest in abstraction and an attraction to large size and – and the distinction is important – large scale. Other more or less accurate generalisations – such as a growing painterliness through the 70s, and a parallel move to dense, heavily worked steel sculpture – can always be met with individual exceptions.

Corinna: You refer to them as "late, late Modernists". What does that mean?

Sam: Late Modernism is commonly taken to be the painting and sculpture produced after the Second World War, dominated by the example of American Abstract Expressionism and the painting – and to a lesser extent, sculpture – which followed it. This art was abstract, large-sized and large scale, concerned with feeling, it was positive, progressive and elitist (in the sense that it wanted to conserve the values of the high art of the past in twentieth-century guise). It is often seen to be 'purist', in that under it the disciplines of painting and sculpture are supposed to have developed by becoming more like themselves: so that painting became increasingly flat, and so 'unsculptural.' The abstract sculpture made at St Martin's in the 60s was a significant episode in the story of late Modernism. Beyond the attention paid to Anthony Caro it has not been given the institutional support it deserves in the UK. From the perspective of my book and exhibition, the sculpture made in and around St Martin's from the early 60s is the backstory to the sculpture made at the Depot later in the decade and through the 70s.

Obviously 'late' implies that late Modernism was a closing episode in the history of Modernism. I'm not really so sure Modernism is over – attitudes analogous to or directly antecedent those found in 'late Modernism' have existed since the nineteenth century, always alongside contradictory or openly opposed attitudes; and anyway, it seems likely that future historians will come up with radically different classifications to the ones we are used to. But it is undeniably the case that a whole range of alternative options came to prominence in the later 60s and 70s which challenged what had been a dominant paradigm. Much of the sculpture made in the early years of the Depot is interesting because it – particularly that by Roland Brener and Roelof Louw – can be seen to marry the art and attitudes developed at St Martin's in the 60s with these alternative options: both artists made sculptures which were temporary or site-specific and which in various ways abandoned an idea of sculpture as a discrete, permanent object. The steel sculpture made at the Depot through the 70s could more readily be called 'late Modernist' (though again the artists might – understandably – disagree) in that it challenged and developed the St Martin's sculpture of the 60s – principally that made by Caro – on its 'homeground' of the discrete, formally coherent autonomous art object.

I wrote 'late, late Modernism' in relation to the sculpture which some sculptors active at Stockwell in the 70s have made since the 80s and continue to make. It was a little tongue in-cheek – and hopefully suggested a little of the difficulties of these types of categories. Ultimately although I do think that words like 'Modernism' do have a real descriptive value, defining them in a limited way and then forcing artists into these definitions is often problematic – particularly as we are still caught up in the incredibly diverse phenomena they are intended to describe.

Corinna: In your book you reference critic Peter Fuller's 1979 accusation that their sculpture was nothing but "hypostatised ideology". Why would he say that and was it true?

Sam: From the late 60s, sculpture came to encompass an ever-widening gamut of objects, activity and ideas. In the midst of this tumult many of the the sculptors at Stockwell abandoned the openness, expansiveness and bright colour of the St Martin's sculpture of the 60s, with densely worked, increasingly heavy, at time brutal, steel. In line with the idea of Modernist 'purity' they – along with a number of other sculptors, in different ways – sought a more 'sculptural' sculpture, and began looking at the history of sculpture – though the art they produced, in its complexity and the difficult emotional tenor it often reached could not readily be described as 'pure'. Though in the 70s still making abstract sculpture some of them returned to investigating the body, the subject of most pre-twentieth century sculpture, which much abstract sculpture had had to reject in order to become abstract. Because of these developments they were increasingly seen as reactionary and conservative.

Fuller's criticism of the 1979 exhibition was in line with the hostile responses their work began to attract. But somewhat ironically his standpoint was one which rejected abstract sculpture as meaningless – and to call for more complete return to the body as the subject for sculpture. Fuller was inconsistent enough to praise some Caros for no reason I can see except his own liking of them – I suspect the extreme almost comic hostility of his review was partly based in personal dislike of the artists at Stockwell.

Corinna: Why do you think they have been a "hidden history" – at least until your book and show!

Sam: As I've suggested, they were caught out by a changing tide – with exceptions – of what art was or could be shifting around them, making their concerns seem old-fashioned or redundant. Through the 70s they had enjoyed quite good institutional support – funding, exhibition opportunities – primarily through the Arts Council. My hunch is that the administrators through the 70s had had their introduction to art in the 60s, and so were receptive to artists who continued (even if through contestation) the ideas dominant in that decade. But that by the eighties this was increasingly less the case. Without this institutional support – though they have continued to work with varying degrees of recognition – they have not been recognised in survey exhibitions or in survey books – where in any case they would have fitted awkwardly in the narrative that the 70s was solely about conceptualism, performance etc. There is a wider problem of a lack of collectors in Britain for abstract art, beyond a few big names.

The 'why now' is interesting. As I said at the beginning quite early on I had an attraction to abstract art, which is in the midst of something of a resurgence. I'm sure my own interest in abstraction was propelled by the same current which is behind this more general resurgence. I hope that enough other younger art historians are interested to seek out other neglected

figures and episodes in our recent art history. More importantly I hope some younger artists can look at the work in the exhibition directly without all the baggage it is the job of art historians to try and wrestle into some reasonable order.