

PRESS RELEASE

David Saunders *Paintings and Works on Paper 1974 – 2014*.

16 May – 28 June

Private view: Thursday 15th May, 6-8pm

Gallery open: Wednesday – Saturday, 12-6pm, and by appointment



Black Transformation, 1973-74. Household emulsion and blackboard paint on canvas. 3 parts, 63.5 x 63.5 cm each

Andrew Mummery is pleased to announce the opening of an exhibition that brings together a selection of paintings and works on paper made by David Saunders over a period of forty years.

David Saunders was a founder member in 1969, with Jeffrey Steele and Malcolm Hughes, of the Systems Group. The artists in the Systems Group shared an interest in logical and mathematical processes, a sharing of information, the unity of ethics and aesthetics and logic, and the rejection of individualistic expressionism. They made use of a clearly defined vocabulary of elements, emphasising the materiality and objectivity of the work and the intelligibility and recoverability of the process by which it is made. In 1972 an exhibition entitled "Systems" opened at the Whitechapel Gallery in London and toured public venues in the UK ⁽¹⁾. The Systems Group had strong links with international Constructivist and Concrete art, and the work of its members was exhibited widely in the 1970s. The predominance after 1981 - in the art market and in critical discourse - of neo-figuration, sidelined much of the interest in this work, but recent reassessment of the aims and achievements of British Systems and Construction art ⁽²⁾ makes this exhibition of Saunders' unfairly overlooked contribution to it, a timely one.

Saunders was a leading thinker within the Systems Group. His own work is distinguished by a belief that we no longer see art as isolated discrete objects, but as a field of overlapping and connected cyclic processes, as forms oscillating between the determinate and the indeterminate, and between the abstract and the real. He insists that complex mental activity can be generated by a collection of signs even if the observer is totally unaware of the 'code' according to which they have been assembled. The 'code' should however, remain rational and decipherable. The exhibition at Mummery + Schnelle will reveal the consistency and rigour of approach of Saunders' practice, and his concern with establishing working structures and controlling factors. He has always been emphatic in suggesting the possibility of rigorous work that utilises indeterminacy rather than closed systems.

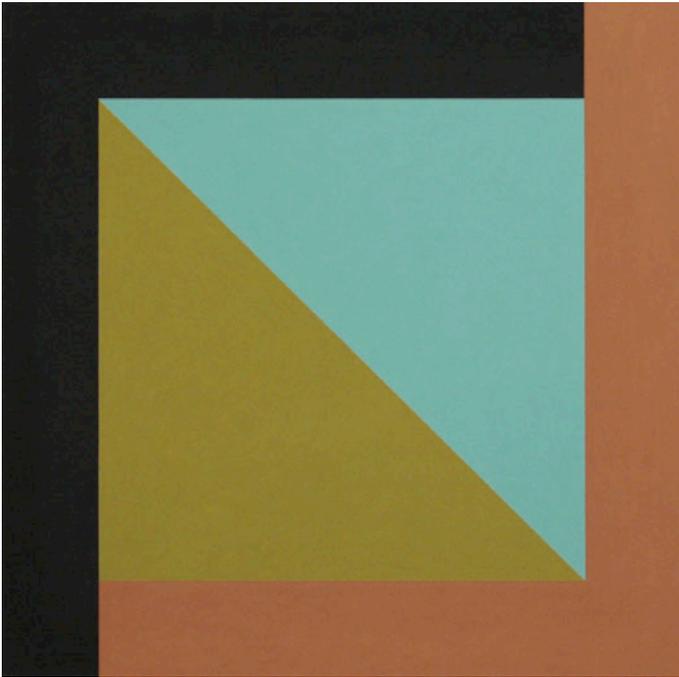
Saunders' work has been strongly influenced by his interest in, and exposure to, experimental music. While teaching at Portsmouth Polytechnic in the late 1960s he came into contact with leading figures of the English experimental school, including Cornelius Cardew, Michael Parsons, Gavin Briars, Howard Skempton and John Tilbury. The Scratch Orchestra, founded by Cardew, Parsons and Skempton in 1969, and the Portsmouth Sinfonia, extended the idea of what kinds of sounds and structures could be considered 'musical'. Saunders continues to collaborate with Michael Parsons and has participated in performances of Cardew's *The Great Learning*. In the mid 1970s, having moved to Liverpool Art College, he helped with the setting up of influential Liverpool art rock/new wave band Deaf School. Saunders does not attempt to make any literal connection between the musical and the painterly, but believes that the relational systems of music and painting can be usefully compared.

The earliest work on show, the three-part *Black Transformation* from 1973/74 is based on the prime numbers as ratios. Saunders became interested in prime numbers in the early 1970s because they provided him with a system of proportions that was, paradoxically, both law-governed and unpredictable. In his works from the 70s, Saunders was involved with geometrical transformations, utilising differences in scale and rotation principles.



601-3 (No.1), 1979-80. Acrylic on canvas. 90 x 179.5 cm

The back gallery space at Mummery + Schnelle will be dedicated to the exhibition of an important suite of three paintings from 1979 that Saunders sees as summing up his work up until that point. In them three simple ideas, linear, tonal and chromatic, are meshed to elicit a rather complex, unexpected and temporal effect. The geometry of the works consists of three kinds of division - the vertical, and two obliques in opposition. Four geometrical figures are produced by the interwoven sequences of colours and tones: rectangles, right-angled triangles, parallelograms and isosceles triangles. There are four colours: blue, yellow, grey and black; three tones: dark, middle and light; and one constant, black. The effect of the variations of these elements in the three paintings seems to Saunders to be somewhat akin to that experienced through the 'pulses' and 'phases' in the music of Steve Reich.



901-2, 1985. Acrylic on canvas. 95 x 95 cm

In the 1980s Saunders carried out a number of experiments with colour theory in collaboration with fellow artist Jean Spencer. In his works from this period Saunders adhered to a series of rules: that there are four primary colours - red, blue, green and yellow; that all colours occupy equal areas of the canvas; that all colours have the same density and the same edge quality, and that all colours are of equal importance regardless of hue, saturation or tone value. The colours in these paintings can be described as light, very light, dark and very dark, but the register of the ensemble can be raised or lowered and the set of colour values can be contracted or stretched. In this exhibition the painting 901-2, one of a pair from 1985, has the four primary colours, in a somewhat darkened register. The particular geometry of this painting provides for every colour to have a common boundary with every other. For Saunders, a particular quality of an individual colour is that it is not really "seen" until it is compared with other colours and identified in relation to them. There is an affinity here with French philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard's idea that a use of colour gives rise to an aesthetic of material presence. The ideas expressed in 901-2 developed, in the late 1980s and early 1990s into a group of polyptychs consisting of monochromatic and dichromatic panels.



Untitled (05 October), 2005. Ink on paper. 38 x 56 cm

After 2002, geometry began to be replaced in Saunders' work with procedures more intertwined with the nature of painting itself, including explicitly gestural activity involving modifications, disturbances and changes of tension and energy. A key event in this development was Saunders' visit in 2002 to the exhibition "The Art of Calligraphy in Modern China" held at the British Museum. Another major influence on the thinking behind the work that he started to make at this time was his long-standing interest and involvement in experimental music, especially that of Cornelius Cardew. (It is worth noting that Cardew's major experimental work *The Great Learning* is rooted in ancient Chinese philosophy)

Saunders now begins by making 'brushes' from all kinds of material – anything in fact that can be used to transfer ink and paint from a container onto the supports he makes from birch ply coated in a traditional *gesso sottile* made from Champagne chalk and rabbit glue. Following the Chinese method Saunders gives importance to variations of gravity, pressure, velocity, fluidity and distancing - the level of contact with the support. The performative and behavioural conditions of making and perceiving become an integral part of the process. All of this is, from Saunders' point of view, systematic, although in a different way from his earlier geometric constructivism. Complex forms begin to evolve from the calligraphic process employed and the material discovered in the drawing suggests the placing, extension and modulation of the colour that Saunders then introduces and which often obliterates much of the calligraphy.



Untitled (April-May 2013), 2013. Acrylic and ink on gessoed plywood panel. 75 x 65 cm

In his most recent works Saunders addresses the question of time in relation to painting, and articulates sensations of time and duration. In a painting there is no 'before' and 'after': all the elements are simultaneously present. Time is nevertheless implicit in the spatial organisation. Similarities and differences are grasped sequentially, but the arrow of time can point in any direction. In relation to music, it might even be said that his recent paintings and drawings create a 'timbral space'. There is a tension in them between indeterminacy and organisation. Saunders initiates a cross-fertilisation between feeling, experiencing and "reading" a painting.

David Saunders was born in England in 1936. He studied painting at Saint Martin's School of Art and at the Royal Academy Schools in London. His first solo exhibition was at the Artists International Gallery in London in 1965. Saunders taught at Portsmouth Polytechnic from 1968 to 1971, and later at Liverpool Polytechnic Art School until 1988. In 2006 he moved to the French Pyrenees where he continues to live and work. His work is included in a number of public collections including Tate Gallery, London; Southampton City Art Gallery; Victoria and Albert Museum, London; Arts Council of England; Arts Council of Wales; The British Library, London; University of Sussex; Dean Clough Collection, Halifax; Gemeentemuseum, The Hague; Meermann Museum, The Hague; Forum Konkrete Kunst, Erfurt; Stamford University, USA.

- (1) Alongside that of Saunders, Steele and Hughes, this exhibition featured the work of Richard Allen, John Ernest, Colin Jones, Michael Kidner, Peter Lowe, James Moyes, Geoffrey Smedley, Jean Spencer and Gillian Wise.
- (2) *Construction Britain*, Tate Britain [2010], *A Rational Aesthetic – The Systems Group and Associated Artists*, Southampton City Art Gallery [2008]. A suite of three paintings by Saunders from 1974 recently entered the collection of the Tate Gallery.