

# Jane Bustin

“With abstract art you have to consider everything; the sides, the wall, the shadows, the space. Where does the picture actually end?”

JANE BUSTIN makes paintings which fuse the hard edges and reduced forms of Minimalism with a distinctly poetic content. Her works are often small, and made up of several evocatively coloured different parts, on surfaces from gessoed oak to aluminium. Rather than simply focusing on the painting surface, Bustin paints the sides of the works, and sometimes the backs, hanging them slightly away from the wall so that the colour glows around the object. As such the paintings command the space around them, despite their modest scale. Bustin has made works in response to poets Paul Celan and Stéphane Mallarmé, and for her current exhibition at the British Library, she instigated a creative triangle, asking the writers Tracy Chevalier and John Hull (who is blind) to respond to her paintings and prompt a new series of works, each made up of several exquisite small paintings. *INTERVIEW: Ben Luke*

**The name Bustin has its origins in the Spanish or Basque name for a potter. Have you ever made any ceramics?**  
I haven't but I really want to. That's really interesting – ceramics are the only thing I have in my home; I don't have any paintings.

**Many artists paint the sides of canvases but you take particular care over this. Sometimes they are completely considered and then there will be others, like Velázquez Handkerchief (2008), where the side and top edge are considered in that they're gessoed and painted with a pale yellowy translucent glaze, but the underneath has all the drips of the very dark green and the pink. I thought about painting that as well, but then I felt that everything else is so perfect, and the drips reveal the mess that happens underneath, so I left it alone.**

**Looking at your paintings is more like experiencing a sculpture. They can be looked at from lots of different angles. I want the viewer to know that I've thought about this, that it's not just surface. If you're just dealing with a flat surface and don't see the edges at all it would, in a sense, feel like you're still picture-making. With something like a Velázquez you don't feel a need to look at the edges because you're immersed in the drama of the picture. With abstract art you have to consider everything: the sides, the wall, the shadows, the space. Where does the picture actually end?**

**Several of your projects have literature as a source. How does that work?**  
Over the last 10 years, all the sources that have inspired me I've found in literature and not what's happening in galleries. There's something about poetry – mainly French – where abstraction and poetry and Romanticism are mixed in a way that is very powerful.

**You've made works in response to Mallarmé, haven't you?**

Yes. There's something about the way in which he puts together the words that just don't always quite make sense – but you have an immediate feeling, you know exactly what he's saying. There's also something very visual about the way his poems are laid out. The piece *Beloved* (2008) is based on a book of poems, *A Tomb for Anatole*, about his young son who had died. The poems are all fragmented, with a lot of punctuation and spaces, and unfinished sentences. When you're looking at the poem, and if you're speaking it, you can see and hear the absence and the grief.

**You've also made several pieces after poems by Paul Celan.**

There's something very effective about the simplicity of his words. He uses neologisms, where he puts two words together to make one. From his series of poems *Atemwende*, I highlighted those words which stood out – like *Meerhaar*, or *Ashenglorie*. I planned to make the size of the paintings relate to the size of the word, each letter taking up seven centimetres. Then I thought, “What's the colour of absence?”, and then, in terms of texture, should it be directly onto wood, should it be onto linen, or flax, or silk? I started to make these associations of shape, colour, and texture simply to do with the actual idea of the word. I spent a lot of time on how the surfaces are made, priming or attaching cloth or sizing cloth. Lots of layering, lots of sanding. You can get the right aesthetic by making the correct preparation. The final painting was the quickest part.

**Using gesso on oak and aluminium, your works seem to refer to the past but also to the present. Is that deliberate?**  
Not really. I think it's much more to do with the aesthetic; to appreciate the qualities of

materials that are very traditional but also the possibilities of newer materials. That's not a new idea. If you look at Donald Judd's use of materials, you start to see the beauty in the copper, for instance. I was enjoying the aesthetic, but then I realised that's the last thing Judd wanted, to see poetry in the materials; he'd be turning in his grave. But then you look at Barnett Newman and his titles. That was an area I suddenly felt I really wanted to do something with. I could appreciate it was complicated – always having to try not to make things look attractive in the true sense of that word, because then it becomes meaningless like wallpaper. Hence those prints and paintings at IKEA that people see and think, “Ooh, I've got to have those two colours together.” It's a dilemma to make paintings that people are interested in but don't fall into that category.

**If someone was to describe your work as beautiful how would you respond?**

It's a double-edged sword. You always think someone's going to say, “It's beautiful, but...” And there's the problem of something beautiful being shallow, but that became the problem I wanted to work with. I was taken with the idea of making beautiful surfaces and objects. I would just have to try to make pieces that went beyond that, that did have meaning, and not just by attaching a poetic word to it – it would somehow have to embody it.

**Finally, if you could live with any work of art ever made, what would it be?**

At the moment I'd say something by Velázquez. Two years ago I'd have said Vermeer, and I rather liked the Rothko black painting of 1964 at the recent Tate show. It's too scary to limit yourself to one painting but with a pot, I think I could do that, so perhaps a pot by Lucie Rie.

*Exhibitions: Unseen, until 14 Mar, British Library, London; www.bl.uk*



1 **Noir Voir** (2005), oil on aluminium, 25 x 36cm

2 **Ossulton Way** (2005), oil on wood, linen and silk, 20 x 150cm, installation view, Timeshare exhibition at Eagle Gallery, London, 2005

3 **Christina of Denmark** (2005), anodised aluminium and oil, and oil on oak, 179 x 83cm + 15 x 18cm

Opposite: **Velázquez Handkerchief** (2008), oil on wood and fabiano paper, 71 x 71cm overall



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### Works from the Unseen series (above)

1 **Touch to possess** (2008), oil on wood and fabriano paper, 15 x 20cm 2 **Touch is silent** (2008), oil on wood and linen, and somerset paper, 56 x 150cm overall 3 **Touch-shout** (2006), oil on aluminium and oil on wood, 40 x 56cm and 15 x 15cm 4 **Stroke-Grief** (2006), oil on aluminium and oil on wood, 40 x 56cm and 15 x 15cm 5 **My Kiss is deep** (2007), oil on linen and wood, 20 x 59.5cm overall 6 **My breath is shallow** (2007), oil on linen, wood, gesso and tissue paper, 28 x 104.5cm overall 7 **Kiss suspends breath** (2008), oil on wood, aluminium and linen, 49.5 x 208.5cm overall 8 **I hold breath to hold you** (2008), oil on linen, aluminium and wood, 49.5 x 195cm overall 9 **Grief endures** (2007), oil on flax, silk and paper, 28 x 71cm overall 10 **Breaststroke** (2008), oil on aluminium and somerset white paper, 26 x 150cm

For *Unseen*, her series shown at the British Library, Jane Bustin initiated a correspondence between two writers. One, John Hull, is blind; his memoir, *Touching the Rock*, records the experience. The other, Tracy Chevalier, is famed for her Vermeer-inspired novel *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, which later became a hit movie. Between them they prompted Bustin's group of multi-part paintings, some of which are shown above. Says Bustin: "I worked with John Hull before and we had interesting conversations about seeing and not seeing; in a sense I make paintings that have nothing in them, and some people find it difficult that there's nothing to 'see'. I wanted to collaborate with a writer who would spend time with the paintings and write a text about them which would next go to John. He would experience the paintings though this writing and then send his own text back to me, from which I would make new paintings. Tracy Chevalier came to mind as I wanted to collaborate with someone whose work had a strong, figurative narrative to it, because that would work for the purpose of the translation. I gave her John's memoir *Touching the Rock*, which is amazingly uplifting because it can almost make you feel quite jealous of his experience of the world. He gives a positive stance to a different way of being in the world. Tracy loved it and wrote texts which were strongly narrative, something you wouldn't immediately associate with my paintings. They went off to John and the words that he sent back were incredibly in tune with the paintings. This strange result had happened; the person who hadn't actually seen the paintings really understood them."

All images courtesy Jane Bustin and Emma Hill Fine Art, London



**Beloved** (2008), oil on linen on wood and fabriano paper, 28 x 53cm



**Holzlied** (2008), oil on gesso on oak, 17.5 x 57cm