

Exhibition: SHEILA GIRLING
Institut Valencià d'Art Modern, IVAM
26th April – 11th June 2006

Organised by: Institut Valencià d'Art Modern

Curator: Sue Hubbard & Consuelo Císcar

The exhibition of Sheila Girling held at the IVAM until the 11th June comprises 31 canvases and contains a selection of works from all the artist's series and periods. The show is the first exhibition of Sheila Girling organised by a Spanish museum.

In her early works, Girling experiments with the new possibilities offered by acrylic paint and in the late eighties, after these first series of fast, intuitive works, dictated by feelings and instinct, she begins to use collage as the main body of her work. The collage technique offers her new freedom, since it enables her to make images that are unpredictable and at the same time subject to radical change.

The catalogue published for the exhibition contains reproductions of all the works displayed and includes texts by the curator, Sue Hubbard, and the Director of the IVAM, Consuelo Císcar.

Collage first became accredited as a serious artistic practice in the first half of the 20th century when it drew its main materials from the proliferation of mass-produced newsprint, journals and advertisements that the new technologies were making readily available. The Cubists were the first to incorporate real objects –bus tickets, headlines ripped from the daily

papers, café bills, etc.— into their work. These had the dual function of being both “real” objects made from non-art materials, which brought with them an accumulated history of use, as well as contributing a unique visual quality to the picture surface. Later collage was given further credibility by the Futurists and the Dadaists, who used the method for their own anarchical ends. It also became a favoured technique of the Surrealists, who emphasised the juxtapositions of disparate and incongruous imagery to say something about the role of the unconscious. But it was Matisse, in his later years, when confined to his bed following two operations for duodenal cancer, who was to elevate collage to new heights. He instinctively understood its emotional power and range as he strove for an art of “balance, serenity and purity”. It is Matisse’s legacy that can be most clearly seen in Sheila Girling’s work.

Girling favoured the quick medium of watercolour on paper, which she ripped, tore and stuck down with glue gum, and became more deeply involved with the possibilities offered by collage. It was to become the start of a more three-dimensional way of working. Collage allowed her to delay decisions, gave her permission not to have to get everything right in one hit. For a painter it is often hard to keep colour pure, not to muddy the paint. The use of acrylic and collage allowed her colour to remain vibrant and fresh. She was never consciously influenced by the American Abstract Expressionists, for her work has always had more control, but collage allowed her to incorporate the spontaneous gesture that was their hallmark with something more considered. While the sensuality of colour is, in Sheila Girling’s work, always paramount, the constructive process that occurs with collage is more akin to the three-dimensional dynamic of sculpture, for each component dictates the placement of the next piece.

Collage is a form of drawing that allows her great visual freedom. She searches for an intuitive unity within the picture, where the shapes talk and relate to one another. She is never precious when discussing her art. “You could get shape only through the actual movement of the paint and the tool,” she says. The work has been dictated by nothing other than a feeling for colour, an instinct for form and an unerring eye. Her working method is complex. She cuts, paints, shifts things around, subverts and then, at the last minute, often retrieves decisions to arrive at works of spatial complexity. Colour is always the point of departure, though figurative elements are often implied –a view remembered, say, or a group of figures. If something suggests itself while making a painting, she simply goes with it.

In the exhibition we can see how her works, stripped away, pared down and then reconfigured, become poetic evocations of what it means to live in a constructed world that addresses the pleasure of painting.

Sheila Girling (Birmingham) was educated at the Birmingham School of Art and the Royal Academy Schools, London. Since her first solo exhibition in 1978, she has had solo exhibitions in many parts of the UK as well as in the USA, Canada and Germany. She has been included in numerous group exhibitions both in the UK and abroad with acrylics, collage paintings, watercolours, clayworks and drawings. She has participated in a number of international workshops and been a Selector of Paintings for *Whitechapel Open*. Her works are represented in many public and private collections.

In 1949 Girling married the sculptor Anthony Caro. In 1950-51 she was included in the annual *Summer Exhibition* at the Royal Academy of Art in

London. She visited USA for the first time in 1959, meeting Kenneth Noland, Robert Motherwell, Helen Frankenthaler and other leading New York and West Coast painters.

In 1978 she held her first solo exhibition, *Watercolour Landscapes*, at Edmonton Art Gallery in Alberta, curated by Karen Wilkin. The show toured to Calgary Art Gallery, Alberta and Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse. The same year, she participated in clay workshops at Syracuse University, New York, organised by Margie Hughto; resultant work is exhibited in a solo exhibition at Clayworks Studio Workshop, New York, 1981, as well as group exhibitions at Everson Museum of Art 1978 and 1981; the latter touring to New York, Birmingham, Buffalo, San Francisco and Dallas between 1981 and 1982.

In 1982 she participates in first Triangle Workshop, organised by Anthony Caro and Robert Loder for thirty sculptors and painters from USA, England and Canada at Pine Plains, New York. She participates annually from then until 1988 and exhibits in regular Triangle Workshop Shows, including one at Smith's Galleries in London in 1986.

In 1985 she establishes her second home at Ancram, New York, which she subsequently uses as a US studio. In 1987, she works with Anthony Caro and Frank Gehry on architectural/sculpture "village" at Triangle Workshop at Pine Plains, and at Triangle Workshop in Barcelona she starts working with collage.

In 1993 she shows in the first London Contemporary Art Fair, Business Design Centre, London. She is included with Clyde Hopkins, John McLean and Derek Roberts in *Contemporary British Art* organised by Francis

Graham-Dixon for Bayer AG, touring to Bayer sites in Leverkusen, Düsseldorf and Newbury.

She holds a joint exhibition with Anthony Caro in 1996-97, *The Caros: A Creative Partnership*, organised by Chesil Gallery in Dorset. Around this time, she participates in the First International Biennale of Contemporary Art in Florence. Girling works in theatre for the first time in 1998, designing the costumes, poster and programme for Northern Broadsides' dramatic interpretation of Milton's tragedy *Samson Agonistes* at the Viaduct Theatre, Dean Clough, Halifax (director, Barrie Rutter, sets and props, Anthony Caro).

In the year 2000, Girling is commissioned by the Royal Collection at Windsor Castle to draw Sir Anthony Caro for the collection of portraits of all those awarded the Order of Merit. In 2002, she is invited to contribute to *Made in Birmingham: Regional Artists – International Reputations* at the Birmingham Royal Society of Artists, where she first exhibited in 1948. In 2003 she participates in a joint exhibition with Graham Boyd, *The Energy of Colour*, at Pilgrim Gallery, London.