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ISSUE

26

exhibitions

chora

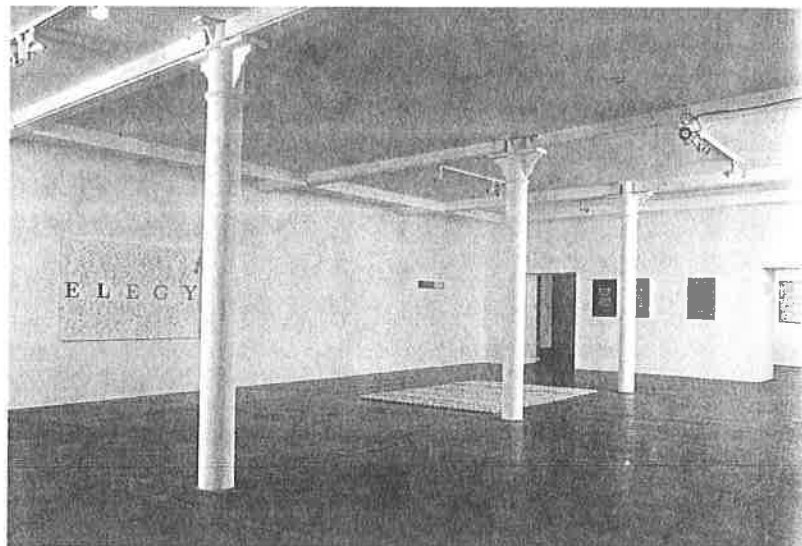
by Hugh Stoddart

This show stakes a claim: it's about debate. Most of these artists were showing simultaneously in London anyway, and so the main thing was the grouping, the theme, the proposition. Importance is attached to both the artists and the texts that the curators bring together. The following quotation, from the writings of Julia Kristeva, forms part of the exhibition, displayed as text on the wall:

Plato's *Timaeus* speaks of a *chora*, a receptacle, unnameable, improbable, hybrid; anterior to naming, to the One, to the father, and consequently, maternally connoted to such an extent that it merits "Not even the rank of syllable".

The curators speak of 'the representation of the unrepresentable'. Frances Aviva Blane's four small charcoal drawings are powerful and positively ache, perhaps a little too much, with that difficulty. In her commentary, Hubbard links the quote from Kristeva specifically to this work and refers to 'traumatised surfaces' with endless erasing and re-beginning. Edward Chell seems to move us on: his work is concerned with mutability and the degradation of image through reproduction, yet he achieves paintings which hold us by their enigma. They evoke a beautiful but hermetic musical notation.

Tim Davies has arranged stacks made from tiny squares of starched blanket to make a large grid on the floor. Each stack is slightly fanned to reveal every square. Despite tantalising references in the text to uncleaned blankets with pubic hair still on them, that's not how this piece looks or feels. Indeed, Davies has achieved a striking transformation: something soft and mutable stiffened into precision. It balances on a razor's



edge between figurative meaning and the abstract.

Maria Chevska's large and elegant painting explores the issue of language by portraying hands in silhouette – seemingly making signs for those unable to hear – and then laying over that a thick looping calligraphy, like much-enlarged handwriting yet with no discernible words. The notion of lettering (or rather non-lettering) continues in the work of Simon Morley, whose painting uses letters which tumble in wavering lines down the canvas. The whole is built around the signal central word ELEGY, which appears in colours reminiscent of camouflage, but otherwise words aren't discernible here either. The small letters have been drawn in pencil and then 'coloured in' – in that sense the surface rather lacks interest. The explanations in the text as to meanings and sources don't really remove this worry.

Martin Richman's sculpture is a small and minimal glass 'house' sitting atop a cardboard column. A sensor is triggered by passers-by and lights up the house through its glass floor for a minute or so. There's no point of entry into, or exit from, this house, and up close (it's around eye-height) we see only infinite reflections. Despite Hubbard's erudite commentary, I couldn't help reading this piece (titled *Day In Day Out*) as a witty evocation of tedium and domestic claustrophobia rather than as being all that concerned with 'the unnameable'. Helen Sear's work engages with the same motif. There's a wall-mounted photograph of a mysterious green Grimm-evoking 'house' and below – board-mounted and propped against the wall – is a second, larger image of grass studded with spookily bright primroses. It's a daring piece in formal terms but, though the wall-mounted image was wonderful, I felt finally unconvinced about the conjunction – the second image seemed weaker, if only by comparison.

Jane Bustin's painting is small but commands a lot of space with its long and narrow shape. Its proportions

chora installation shot, featuring works by (left to right) Simon Morley, Jane Bustin, Tim Davies, Susan Hiller, Peter Griffin. Photo: Andy Keate

are suggestive of text, but the work is rigorously abstract in its chosen mode of making. It has authority, though that's a term Bustin doubtless wouldn't care for. She clearly shares some tenets with the abstract expressionists, but there's a hollowing out of the space achieved in her work (acutely commented on by Hubbard) which draws us towards the central theme of the feminine, the receptacle, implicit (à la Kristeva anyway) in the term 'chora'.

Jane Mulfinger's work adds a nicely enriching element to the show. The 'words' theme continues here: the artist has etched them (in fact, the text of a short poem) on the lenses of spectacles which sit in rows on glass shelves. These are spotlighted: light is focused through these lenses and makes pools on the jaunty red board behind. This piece draws us in by humour, then leads us on to complex reflections around notions of sight, reading and understanding.

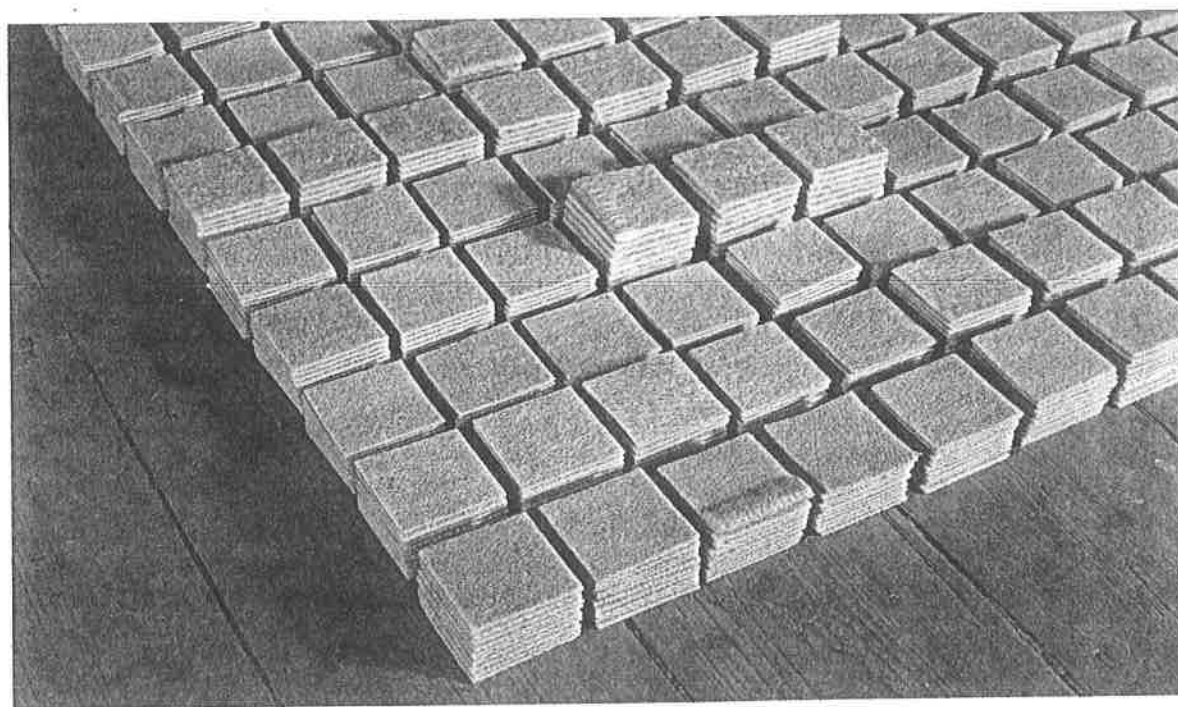
More words in Peter Griffin's work – but here they're crossed out. This seemed a bit obvious as a visual device (censorship, repression, right?) as did the splashing of red implying blood. Turning more to the publication now, I have concerns about what I'd term 'overclaims' of meaning. The ubiquitous 'accompanying text' sometimes tells us more than it should; it claims more resonances and weight than the art is actually carrying. In Griffin's case, there is a whole mound of information about Pablo Neruda and oppression in Chile. Similarly, in the text on Davies, some of the comments about Welshness press the same 'overclaim' buzzer. I'm sure this is absolutely not what these curators intend, but the danger is that art will increasingly be seen as illustration

– read the opinions, the attitudes, the theories, and most of all the biography, then look at the art!

Susan Hiller's work echoes Chevaska's, with its indecipherable writing-like mark-making. I was surprised to see that this work dated from 1983, which rather sets it apart from the rest of the show. I'd say Hiller's done better work, and I'm unsure whether she's really a natural for this exhibition anyway. If the show had set out to have a more historical angle, then a lot of other people would spring to mind too, surely? And finally, there was Paul Morrison. The painting listed in the text was not in the show: the previous choice was, I was told, 'too big' – but there was lots of bare wall. I love Morrison's work, actually, and it was an arresting idea to include him, but I'm not sure his work fitted: it seems to have other concerns (see reviews page 64), and perhaps a larger work would have made that too apparent.

The art-world wheel spins quickly. The curators say they started thinking of this show three years back and maybe it was true then that its concerns are 'often denigrated within contemporary debates on art'. But is that true now? Even if it isn't, this show is the product of enormous, almost over-anxious, care and thought. People other than me will likewise argue about who's in and who isn't, and the whys and wherefores – but that's OK. *chora* is running up an important flag, and I'm happy to salute it.

chora was at 30 Underwood Street, London, 18 September – 30 October, and tours to the Hotbath Gallery, Bath, 23 February – 22 March; South Hill Park, Bracknell, 1 – 30 April, and Abbot Hall, Kendal, 9 May – 18 June



TIM DAVIES, *Parallax*, 1999, blankets, dimensions variable