



## Silhouettes of a rectangle

By Zali Matthews

The art historian Richard Shiff once quoted American sculptor Richard Serra as claiming that squares typically appear heavier than rectangles of the same size.<sup>1</sup> What Serra identifies here is an innate space, or 'gap', between a shape's physical attributes and pictorial qualities as perceived by the viewer. With his assertion comes the questions: why should rectangles appear lighter than squares? Where does the pictorial diverge from the physical, and where do they convene?

Natalie Lavelle's latest exhibition, *Pictorial Space*, ventures to answer these questions – or, rather, respond to them – with a variety of small-scale acrylic works on board and linen, each testing the boundaries between their pictorial and physical capacities. Painting forms a primary focus of these explorations: several works have been painted with wide, gestural brush strokes and light washes of colour. Semi-transparent and exposed, they depict paint as residual evidence of the artist's presence. Others are blanketed with thick layers of paint, each almost concealed by the next, so that only mere glimpses of colour can be found peeking out from underneath the works' film-like surfaces. In both cases, whether with exposure or concealment, Lavelle imbues paint with a sense of bodily presence and spatial depth.

Amongst these declarations of materiality and objecthood, Serra's proposal violently inserts itself as a rectangular motif, endlessly repeated across each work. Sometimes it appears as a fine outline, meticulously painted; a darkened, central void; a shadow emerging from layers of thin acrylic washes; or a wobbly contour drawn with a single finger. In each instance, the intention of this motif remains ambiguous; does it mean to draw attention towards the works' materiality, or describe a pictorial quality which refers to some illusory sense of shape, weight, or depth on a two-dimensional plane? Could it be intimating both at once?

Lavelle's 'Unframed' works, also present in this exhibition, turn this conversation on its head. Removed from their frames and attached to metal supports, these works thrust themselves forward into the gallery space, prostrated. Not only is the viewer encouraged to walk around them, but also to look *behind* them, at the bare linen and the occasional splotches of colour which have bled through. In these works, the materiality of the linen and its supports, as well as their sense of spatial depth, forms a distinct impression upon the viewer. Even then, the hint of a rectangle remains in the silhouettes of their exposed edges.

*Pictorial Space* toes the fine – and uncertain – line between pictorial illusion and physical embodiment. The beauty in Lavelle's work perhaps lies in her willingness to lean into this tension instead of placating it, leaving this conflict unresolved.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Shiff, *Experience Beyond Language*, lecture presented at Nasher Sculpture Center, January 28, 2017.