

Christina Mackie Sets Duveen Galleries Ablaze with Color at Tate Britain

JJ Charlesworth, Thursday, April 2, 2015

SHARE



Christina Mackie, "The Filter" (2015)

© Christina Mackie Photo: Lucy Dawkins, Tate Photography

Being asked to make a site-specific work can be a poisoned chalice for an artist, particularly when the site is the suite of three neo-classical Duveen galleries that form the architectural spine of Tate Britain. These vaulting, pompous spaces –named after the wily Edwardian art dealer Joseph Duveen, who paid for their columns, pediments, and polished floors –have each year been given over to a British artist to work with. Last year, Phyllida Barlow dominated the space by filling it with a forest of wooden scaffolds, suspended blocks and mountains of wooden pallets. Refusing to be daunted by its environment, Barlow's *Dock* simply filled it up. It was a great example of what you could call 'atrium

spectacle'—the now knee-jerk habit of public galleries with big spaces to fill to put in ever more awesome, large scale sculptural installations that are supposed to wow the crowds.

Tate has of course had its fair share of atrium-fillers, especially at Tate Modern, which pretty much invented the format, and currently has Richard Tuttle's giant hanging structure *I Don't Know*. *The Weave of Textile Language* in its Turbine Hall. So Christina Mackie's *The Filters* at Tate Britain, could, by the atrium-filler measure, be a complete failure. The first gallery is a fair 'atrium-filler': suspended from the vault are nine tapering silk gauze tubes, stretching down from their supporting rings and narrowing until they reach their tips, each one dangling just above a wide, shallow dish, each filled with a different colored dye, which may explain the color which seems to have soaked up each fabric tube. All the colors of the rainbow, they're eye-catching and set up Mackie's peculiar interest in color in its everyday forms—dyes and pigments fused with all manner of physical materials, plastics, textiles, glass.

Now, Mackie could have given the Tate's meandering visitors three galleries of this and nobody would have minded—atrium spectacle, right? Instead, Mackie shifts it all down a few gears, and all really quickly: in the central rotunda, there's an odd contraption leaning up against the wall—a bright yellow metal armature which contains and supports a set of transparent acrylic pipes and a range of yet more gauze tubes, at the base of each of which are strapped heavy cylinders of cast glass, tinted and clouded with drifts of inky color.

Who knows what this thing is? It looks like science experiment for children, or better, a piece of production plant for the chemical industry. And sidling up against the wall, as it does, makes it look like it isn't really meant to be there. Just as, in the third, long gallery, just away from the wall, an odd, chest-height wooden cylinder stands. Peer into it, and you find half a dozen chunks of raw glass, colored through and streaked with vivid tones of pistachio, lurid oranges, custard yellows, all semi submerged in whitish sand.



And that's kind of it. The wooden cylinder with the glass chunks standing alone in the otherwise empty length of the north gallery, the odd contraption in the rotunda, and the gauzy tubes and dye-troughs in the south gallery.

All of which means that you can either criticize Mackie's installation for not being crowd-wowing atrium-filler, or instead enjoy the dissipated, obsessive attention to how color exists in the world of ordinary stuff; the shift from dense and heavy to light and airy, from solid glass to wispy gauze veil, in which pigment is used not for picture-making, but for the sake of its own capacity to color the human-made world, making it distinct from the matter and hue of the organic world.

Of course all that has a minor relation to the place in which Mackie's installation exists, although there's an obvious contrast with the ponderous stony surfaces and contours of the Duveen galleries. But that's incidental and there's nothing particularly 'site-specific' about Mackie's installation – the hanging tubes have already been seen at the Renaissance Society in Chicago in 2014.



Christina Mackie, "The Filters" (2015)
© Christina Mackie Photo: Lucy Dawkins, Tate Photography

But that's maybe the sore point here—we've become accustomed to these gallery spaces being given over to attention-grabbing artists and iconic works with a punchy presence—Mark Wallinger's *State Britain* (2007), a reconstruction of the placards an anti-war protester evicted from Parliament Square; or [Martin Creed's](#) 2008 *Work No. 850*, in which sprinters ran the length of the otherwise empty galleries every minute; or Fiona Banner's fearsome *Harrier and Jaguar*—fighter jets stripped of their paintwork and dangled from the gallery rafters. But Mackie's installation remains resolutely indifferent to all this, and almost goads you to want a bit more spectacle, a bit more drama in the space, which it steadfastly refuses to provide.

But maybe it can't quite ignore its site, however much it wants to, and yet the vast un-use of space asks its own question: isn't atrium-filler art getting a bit tired as a format? And shouldn't we expect a bit more of art than just the feeling of being wowed by big things in even bigger

spaces? It's a nice sensation to have at the fairground, but who needs it in an art gallery?



Christina Mackie, "The Filters" (2015)
© Christina Mackie Photo: Lucy Dawkins, Tate Photography

Wandering in and out of the Duveen galleries, which eat up so much of Tate Britain's floor space, while its permanent collections crowd in the two wings of the rooms either side of it, it's perhaps surprising to find how much else is going on here—in the scattering of smaller special displays and solo presentations which are all at least as interesting as Mackie's (particularly [Caroline Achantre](#)'s current solo presentation). So perhaps Tate Britain could try something else with these huge but underpowered rooms. And perhaps, having made its point, Mackie's quiet and quirky installation could be the last in these galleries for a while.

But just as I'm writing these lines, it's announced that Tate Britain's director for the past five years, Penelope Curtis, is [stepping down](#). Curtis, over the last 18 months, has suffered a growing chorus of criticism over her programming at Tate Britain, in large part for the unusual and offbeat themes of many of the temporary exhibitions she's green-lighted. Much of the ire directed at Curtis has been a barely concealed philistinism towards what is seen as her "scholarly" approach to shows that, as the self-regarding *Sunday Times* critic Waldemar Januszczak puts it, "are trying to speak to other curators, not to the public they are employed to serve." Januszczak obviously felt Tate Britain wasn't speaking to him, but now that Curtis is gone, Tate Britain will be facing a stark choice—between a more crowd-pleasing, crowd-pulling agenda on one hand, and an even more speculative, experimental take on British art's history and British art's present.

Already, the *Guardian*'s predictable Jonathan Jones has declared that Tate Britain "lacks fun." Grumbles Jones, "It should be possible to really

lose yourself here in the art of Britain, to wander and play and not feel all the time like some curator is telling you what to think."

Poor thing, being forced to *think* by those mean curators, rather than being allowed to wander and play, like a child. But as I've often noted on artnet News, the one thing our brilliant British art critics hate most is art that makes them have to think; and the thing they hate more than that is the suspicion that someone, somewhere, is cleverer than they are.

So, if Curtis's critics win out, we'd better get ready for some more fun-of-the-fair, crowd-pleasing, child-pleasing, atrium-filler art.

JJ Charlesworth is a freelance critic and associate editor at ArtReviewmagazine. Follow [artnet News](#) on Facebook and [@jjcharlesworth](#) on Twitter. For more artnet News content by JJ Charlesworth, read [The Cultural Boycott of Israel Isn't Solidarity. It's Condescension](#) and his December 2014 essay [The Ego-Centric Art World is Killing Art](#).