



Up high, where the surface of the work seems to be, the circular mouths of nine nets float in space, open to waves of invisible energy. Long and tapering and suspended just below the vaulted skylights of the south Duveen Gallery at Tate Britain, the nets give an underwater feeling to the space. They hang down and are shaped like plankton nets, yet they might be some rare form of marine flora, reaching upward in response to the light. Abroad in a sea of grey Portland stone, which fittingly is a limestone formed in subtropical Jurassic Period waters, they make for a chromatic

# MACROCOSM MICROCOSM

CHRISTINA MACKIE's extended range of vision

BY NANCY TOUSLEY

**Christina Mackie**  
*The confusion part I* 2012  
 Cedar, brass and nylon  
 2.37 m x 9.85 m x 48 cm  
 COURTESY CATRIONA JEFFRIES GALLERY  
 PHOTO SITE PHOTOGRAPHY

OPPOSITE: **Christina Mackie**  
*Colour drop [Polettes]* 2014  
 Mixed media Dimensions  
 variable INSTALLATION  
 VIEW AT THE RENAISSANCE SOCIETY,  
 UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO



Nancy Tousley, 'Macrocosm Microcosm, Christina Mackie's extended range of vision', *Canadian Art*, Fall 2015

display. Each net is dyed a different hue, and each dye mixture is named for an artist's pigment. Transparent and nearly as ethereal as pure colour suspended in air, they glow and dim as clouds move across the sun and the illumination of the vast hall changes, which also happens as the sun moves across the sky. The nets do not sway, but the shifting light implies subtle movement and echoes a spectator's awareness that time is passing.

Below each net sits the pan of dye in which it was dipped before being hauled aloft by ropes and pulleys, and anchored by cast-concrete weights. The organic vegetable dyes have already begun to crystallize. The dye pans, which eventually will dry up, evoke a palette of watercolours: rose madder, cerulean blue, barium yellow, viridian, cobalt yellow, indigo, burnt sienna, raw sienna and cobalt violet. The dyes will be transformed slowly by evaporation from a liquid to a solid state, a process that began when the pigments were mixed with water.

Christina Mackie's *The filters* is a work in which space, time, physical material presence, natural phenomena and the viewer's body are all brought into play. As the Tate Britain 2015 Sotheby's Commission, on view in London until October 18, the three-part sculpture was conceived for the site, for the long Neoclassical galleries that form the spine of the museum's main floor. Mackie has occupied both the south and the north Duveen Galleries and the Sackler Octagon, the domed rotunda that links them. The first work she has made on such a large scale, it was completed and installed during the three weeks she used the galleries as a studio. The 12-metre-long nets were hand-sewn at her studio, one metre at a time, but rigged to the skylight and dipped and dyed on-site. The full effect of *The filters* could not be known until they were dyed and hung, a risk mitigated by computer modelling and test runs with smaller, related works exhibited in 2014, *Colour drop* at the Renaissance Society in Chicago and *Drop* at the Praxes Center for Contemporary Art in Berlin.

Given their scale and positions, the nets create an immersive environment that the dwarfed, upward-gazing viewer becomes a part of upon entering the gallery. This is where you begin when you enter from Tate Britain's grand Millbank entrance facing the Thames. However, the scale of *The filters* changes in relation to the viewer's body in each of the sculpture's parts. The bright-yellow "machines" in the Octagon—two identical, fabricated apparatuses that evoke the laboratory with its test-tube racks and scientific or technological experimentation—are more than twice the height of the average viewer. Lashed to each other and to one of the rotunda's Ionic columns by orange, grey or turquoise straps, they have the shape and proportions of an iPhone. Their tubular frames are fitted to each hold three nylon nets, which are attached at the bottom to plugs of differently coloured



resin, and flanked by clear acrylic cylinders with copper-mesh filters at the top and bottom. A yellow ball is suspended between the two machines, echoing the Duveen Galleries' plan of two rectangles joined by an octagon.

In the north Duveen Gallery, which might at first appear empty, a discretely placed, chest-high, cylindrical wooden drum holds worked cullet, lumps of glass made by heating and fusing shards of broken coloured glass. Their colours are variegated. Set on a mounded bed of white sand from the Isle of Portland, on the Jurassic Coast in Dorset—the source of the limestone used to build the Duveen Galleries—the chunks of colour are like solid lumps of pigment. Illuminated by a hidden light source inside the bin, they appear at close range but as if they were underwater, recalling objects in the bottom of a shallow tidal pool. One looks down upon them. Arriving at the "cullet bin," the viewer has gone through a kind of decompression, like a diver rising to the surface from the deep. Entering the Duveen Galleries via Tate Britain's Manton entrance, on Atterbury Street, and making the journey from the gem-like objects in the cullet bin to the luminous nets, this process is reversed. The viewer's body becomes visually and psychically compressed in relation to the vastness of the soaring space, and made to appear small in relation to the nets. The reflections on the black surfaces of the dye pans turn this world upside down and display it

ABOVE, OPPOSITE, FOLLOWING PAGE:  
**Christina Mackie** *Interzona!*  
 [details] 2002/12 DVDs, sand,  
 pigments, polished beach stones,  
 ink-jet print, fir, steel cloth,  
 ceramics and fluorescent  
 lamps. Dimensions variable.  
 COURTESY CATRIONA JEFFRIES  
 GALLERY PHOTO SUE PHOTOGRAPHY



in disorienting miniature. Macrocosm and microcosm: these are the two lenses that calibrate the 59-year-old artist's work.

Mackie makes, causes to be made, finds, or finds and alters, real things, to which she assigns metaphorical and symbolic meanings, and inserts them into a gallery space where viewers experience them largely without aesthetic distance. They are here, now, immediate, like a glass of water on a table or objects that have arrived here from some other place. Their "presentness" as objects signals that they occupy the same universe we do, but it is one in which tension is created by the paradoxical existence, on one plane, of the actual and the metaphysical. This aspect of Mackie's exquisitely layered work, a source of its energy, puts one in mind of large philosophical questions: How do we know the world? What is the nature of perception? Where does art intersect with life? What is the state of life in today's world?

*The filters* triangulates Mackie's touchstones: the natural world, the laboratory, the studio. Born in Oxford, England, in 1956, she was taken to Canada one month afterward by her parents. George Mackie, a distinguished marine biologist, had been sent as a boy to live with an uncle in Vernon, British Columbia, during the Second World War. He had fond memories of Canada and applied for and won a position at the University of Alberta.

Christina arrived as a near newborn and grew up in Edmonton. When she was 12, her father took a position at the University of Victoria and moved the family to the West Coast. But even before the move, she had spent her summers on San Juan Island, in the Gulf Islands, where her father did fieldwork on marine animals. That vividly remembered experience continues to have a strong impact on her psyche and her work, as evidenced by *The filters*. She learned she had won the Tate Britain commission while she was in British Columbia in 2012, and made the first sketches for the piece before she went back to London.

During her teenage years in Victoria, Mackie took life drawing with "Miss Morris," the mother of artist Michael Morris, and graduated from high school at age 16. She then studied at the Vancouver School of Art, where one of her teachers was Vancouver Conceptualist Ian Wallace. She was put into the two-year diploma course in painting, and completed it in one year. She was 19 when she enrolled at Saint Martin's School of Art (now Central Saint Martins). At Saint Martin's, where she studied from 1975 to 1977, John Stezaker, a British Conceptual artist who taught cultural studies, was the teacher from whom she learned the most. She has lived in London since her student days, with periodic visits to Canada, where her now retired parents (her mother was a marine biologist who became

Its circles and cylinders rhyme with the lunettes and columns of the Duveen Galleries' architecture. But its unifying thread is colour.

an art historian) still live, in Victoria. The country of her childhood and adolescence remains ever present in her mind, she says, and she and her husband have recently set an anchor here by acquiring a cabin in the Gulf Islands. She joined Catriona Jeffries Gallery in Vancouver, where she exhibited in a two-person show with works by the late Jerry Pethick in 2012.

Although she was a precocious child, Mackie did not begin to exhibit her work professionally until she was 40. During her 20s and 30s, she worked slowly, as she still does, focusing her thoughts and sorting out ways of working. Although she started out as a painter, primarily in oils, she gravitated to things in the real world. Her work neither describes nor represents, she says. She makes sculpture by working with assemblages of objects and their associations, and whatever processes she needs, not only for their significance to her subject matter but also for their ability to add meaning to the work. *The confusion* (2012) and *Interzonal* (2002/12), works she showed at Catriona Jeffries, were filled with references to Vancouver and the coast, and combined red-cedar planks, brass wing nuts, video, back-lit colour transparencies of Vancouver in 1976, hand-thrown ceramic plates bearing Xerox transfers of prehistoric big cats, a silver chain of letters, a colour photograph of a beach, shingles, polished stones, coloured sand and a wood-and-mesh vitrine, among other objects, materials and images.

The elements of *The filters* are reduced and focused. The work is precise and complex in its many layered references. Its circles and cylinders rhyme with the lunettes and columns of the Duveen Galleries' architecture. But its unifying thread is colour, presented in various physical and material states. The cullet might be equated with solid pigment, while the fact that cullet is refuse glass, added to new batches of silica sand in glassmaking to accelerate heating, is also significant. It is both the end and the beginning of a process. It speaks to the work's circular nature, to recycling and to the potential of the material world. The yellow machines, given the larger-than-human scale of monumental sculpture, reiterate the elements of *The filters* (or vice versa), suggesting that the machines, which seem brand new and just out of the box, are agents of transformation, in that they have the

potential to turn the primary colours into all colours. They point to science, utility, industry and technology and, by extension, to commerce, over-production and waste. Strapped to the Neoclassical architecture, they are aligned with old Enlightenment thinking, but have the potential to be moved. A different kind of transformation, actively ongoing during the life of the work, is taking place in the nets. They are filters of the dyes, colour in a liquid state, and of light, colour in a prismatic state. But as the natural processes of evaporation and crystallization occur, colours are changing from a liquid to a crystalline state. The nets, even as they speak to states of being, are in constant flux, like our immediate perceptual experiences of the world.

Colour, of course, is one of the properties by which we know the world, yet what it is theoretically and how perception of colour works is still debated by philosophers. In *The filters*, Mackie makes colour into a metaphor for knowledge: how we acquire it, what we do with it and how we filter out what we need from the deluge of data that threatens to submerge us every day. *The filters* asks us to pay attention to what's going on around us, to look up, to look closely, to look across, to look down, to look into. It is a work about being present in the world. It is an antidote made for the digital age. ■



OPPOSITE: **Christina Mackie**  
*The filters* 2015 Silk, fibreglass,  
aluminum, dye, hemp rope,  
Perspex and pulleys. Dimensions:

variable. INSTALLATION  
VIEW AT TATE BRITAIN, LONDON  
COURTESY HERALD ST, LONDON  
PHOTO ANDY KEATE



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