

The background of the book cover is an abstract painting. It features thick, expressive brushstrokes in a palette of earthy browns, deep blues, and hints of red. The composition is layered and textured, with some areas appearing more saturated than others. The overall effect is one of raw, gestural energy.

The Mystery of Appearance

Conversations Between
Ten British Post-War Painters

Catherine Lampert
Tom Wood



[1] Matt Price, ed., *Vitamin P2* (London, 2011).

[2] Barry Schwabsky, ed., *Vitamin P* (London, 2002).

[3] Damien Hirst, *Corpus. Drawings 1981–2006* (New York, 2006), pp. 34–35.

Given the recent deaths of Freud and Hamilton, there is poignancy in the timing of *The Mystery of Appearance*. Yet the ongoing relevance of these ten artists is evident from the impact their work continues to make, often in unexpected ways, on a generation of international artists. *Vitamin P2*, a large volume recently published by Phaidon, introduces 115 emerging artists, considered by the book's contributing writers and curators to be among the most exciting new voices in the field.¹ *Vitamin P* was published in 2002 with the same aim.² All of these artists—some 229—are linked by their primary medium: paint. While none of those in this exhibition is featured, their attitudes, whether in the handling of paint, the approach to subject matter, or the combination of the abstract with the figurative, is suggested across the pages of both books.

One might recall Freud in the stark nakedness and domestic surrealism of Ellen Alttest's paintings, while Dana Schutz's use of colour is reminiscent of early Hockney. Elsewhere, Varda Civano's corporeal surfaces bring to mind Kossoff, just as a Cecily Brown seems to occupy a space between de Kooning and Auerbach, and Adrian Ghenie's sinister tableaux appear indubitably after-Bacon. The fusion of media, art, and politics in Wilhelm Sasnal can perhaps be traced to Hamilton, and the veiled light and low-flying plane perspective in Dirk Skreber's scenes evoke an atmosphere we have encountered in Andrews' Lights series, while Zhang Enli observes figures and objects in isolation with a similar exacting purity as Uglow.

The emphasis on a formal rather than social reading of the work above and in the discussion below is based on a desire to investigate this relationship between the appearing and the appearance of a painting. While Catherine Lampert's essay draws on her friendship with the artists to construct a vivid sense of their histories and the context of their emergence, this essay proposes fresh trajectories against the grain of generational or categorical groupings and focuses instead on the canvas.

Furthermore, despite their often discussed admiration for Rembrandt, Poussin, Velázquez, et al, the artists in *The Mystery of Appearance* are wary of simplistic attributions of influence. In turn, we should be mindful of insisting connections in the other direction. Partly there is a danger of relegating the work of the older generation to a cultural artefact, but also because the works, which have been produced over careers of fifty and sixty years, are remarkably diverse. But for his inimitable eye, it would be hard to connect the draughtsman in Freud's schematic early portraits with the moulder of his late nudes.

Equally, it can seem a long way from Caulfield to Kossoff, from Bacon to Uglow, Freud to Hamilton, and suggestions of further links cannot be categorised by a generational, national or stylistic yardstick. In many ways the aim of the exhibition is to show how unrestricted the influence of these artists appears to be, one that is not confined to parochial, vaguely pejorative terms like "London School" or "modernist realism," nor necessarily even to painting.

For example, consider the play of influence between a painter and an artist whose best known work is three-dimensional. The former is known for his visions of the tormented human soul and the latter for ironised interpretations of existential dread embodied in dead animals. In one, the spectre of death hovers immovably and in the other it is a cold, hard fact. Both set these scenes of being and nothingness within cages. For Bacon, they are metaphors for the imprisoned self locked in and isolated from comfort, while Damien Hirst's formaldehyde tanks represent an apparatus for optimum viewing. The tension in Hirst's exploration of Bacon's thematic comes from its three-dimensional literalisation. He describes "the horror" in Bacon's painting as "biological," "like touching something," and admires the process involved in achieving this effect: "Painting's got a better process of time [than photography] . . . To work and work and work like that, eventually only to create a glimpse of something, is a great thing to do."³

Opposite: Glenn Brown, *The Day the World Turned Auerbach*, 1991.