Surface Tensions: On Works by Russna Kaur and M.E. Sparks

Jayne Wilkinson

My first questions about art always have to do with process. What is this made from? How did the artist start? How does a familiar material transform into this unfamiliar thing before me? Part of art's magic is the moment when paint or glue or canvas or charcoal coheres into an image, when materials disappear into the becoming of something new. It's a kind of magic trick. Representational or abstract, the fact of an image and not of its composition is what makes an assemblage of material art. I can't say whether I'm entirely invested in this idea—it's impossible to claim that art exists divorced of its maker—but, still, the magic trick of art, the reason we respond to artwork with speculation or imagination rather than only analysis, is this disappearance of everyday material into illusion.

In 2019, artist Amy Sillman organized an exhibition, *The Shape of Shape*, in which she attempted to understand modern art through a history of shape. Sillman writes:

> Shapes are how you make distinctions, get the lay of the land, or even tell time. And doesn't everyone have two shapes, really? The first is your own body, which you can't get out of, and the second is your shadow, which you can't get rid of. … Your shadow is your personal shape, your silent companion, your own flat echo.[1]

Since reading her essay, I've become alert to shadows and the possibility of perceiving the world in two dimensions. My eyesight is generally poor, and without lenses I cannot read signage or distinguish faces, or really navigate the world at all. But this condition does offer me an unusual pleasure: remove the glasses and I exist in a strange sensorium without the crisp dimensionality of 20/20 vision. All is blurred colour, imagery distinguishable only as shapes floating on the surface of my eye. This optical trick immerses me in a world without depth, a world of surfaces. It's a bit like the experiments in colour and shape we find operative in *We can only hint at this with words.*

The artists in this exhibition assemble patterns and materials through an attentiveness to shape, line, and cut. Using different methods, and to different ends, their works are invested in a process of collage as they reassemble colours, forms, patterns, and surface textures to produce new works that deviate from their origins. This type of collaging is very different from the cut-and-paste technique that was once revolutionary and is now commonplace. For Russna Kaur, this happens through a process of outlining, in-lining, and experimenting with line as the tool to define a shape; for M.E. Sparks, a shape is defined through its cut. Both offer an investigation into what happens when unexpected juxtapositions join together on a surface. And both explore the flatness of a world of shadows, colour blocks, light patterns, and floating shapes, investing it with new meaning.

Russna Kaur's colourful paintings offer the uncontained chaos of explosively full sur-

faces, ones that reward close but unfocused looking. She draws influence from aspects of identity, personal biography, and artistic legacy, keeping her references thoroughly embedded such that her surfaces often overtake whatever concept or intention might exist beyond the frame.

Kaur typically works in a modular way, meaning her paintings can be installed in different configurations—a strategy that also allows her to prepare gallery-wall-sized installations from her more modest studio. Her frames are contingent: they come in different sizes, and can grow or shrink or rotate. Her surfaces slide around, from canvases to walls and across other supports; the edges are never bound, and in that (both practically and metaphorically) she is able to map the patterns and images of the world onto a nonrepresentational space of vibrant, flowing texture.

In the two large wall works on display at the Gordon Smith Gallery of Canadian Art, Kaur incorporates multiple panels whose surfaces she has built up using acrylic paint and spray paint combined with other mediums, like sawdust, that add volume to distinguish certain outlines and shapes. These panels are riotous and colourful, every hue clashing and combining, though rarely blending. Her colours sit alongside each other, allowing new relationships to emerge through a process that is alive to the permutations and possibilities of colour, shape, and line, evolving across the canvas to continually exceed their containment.

Some of these approaches have come through the influence of Kaur's family. Her mother owned a local clothing boutique in Brampton, and designed Indian bridal and formal wear, so as a child Kaur was immersed in the colourful, patterned world of commercial textile design. She talks about how this influenced her aesthetic choices, and how trips to India involved sample shopping, where one vibrant pattern was always abutting another. Kaur's influences also extend in other, perhaps unexpected, directions. Her undergraduate education was in biology, a pursuit that requires careful study of microscopic details—a way of looking that has surely influenced her approach to mark-making and the relationship between an individual element and a whole. Kaur grew up in Brampton but since 2017 has been living and working in Vancouver, where she completed her Master of Fine Art at Emily Carr University of Art + Design, learning from artists whose influences have likewise marked her practice: from Elizabeth McIntosh, a graphic use of colour and modular approach to canvas; from Damian Moppett, a method of abstract, linear painting; and from Ben Reeves, her supervisor during grad school, a keen attention to the relationship between painting and perception.

For Kaur, line is an important conceptual guide. A straight line is constricting, rigid, formulaic; but overlapping lines, broken lines, layered lines, repeating lines—these are where she finds the flow required to achieve her large abstractions. The surfaces of each module, ruptured by uneven assembly, form a distinct yet internally consistent composition. It's like she's stitching or quilting with paint—hence, an affinity with collage. It's a method that brings objects, forms, and materials together unexpectedly, demanding a roving eye that trips across the surface.

This exhibition marks the first time Kaur has combined several mediums in one room: painting, printmaking, and photography. Clearly influenced by the materiality of twentieth-century art processes, Kaur's project is refreshingly invested in the importance of physicality and tactility. Through all mediums, hers is a practice of wandering lines, of moving shapes, of elements coming in and out of focus across so many scattered and uneven surfaces. Ultimately, these works cohere around a kind of playfulness, or at least an exploration, in experimenting with what it means to look at the world differently.

M.E. Sparks's approach to shape is defined by flatness—an elision of depth in favour of shifting surfaces—even when working with conventional sculpture and three-dimensional forms. Her rearrangement of surfaces, of mixing and reassembling and recombining elements, borrows heavily from disparate sources to produce new meanings and associations. It's a practice that understands a different relationship to history and, like many artists of our era, Sparks recognizes much is to be gained from a less direct approach to painterly influence.

Sparks's grandfather was a painter and illustrator who worked in San Francisco during the 1940s through the '60s. This period is significant for Sparks, as it marks a transformation in the ways that women, femininity, and the ideals of youth—even the very notion of "being a teenager"—were being culturally constructed and represented. Fashion was also shifting in palpable ways. Sparks refers to these shifts, albeit obliquely, by incorporating fabric patterns from this era.

Each cut-out sculpture includes a front side of oil paint on prepared canvas and a back side of raw, unpainted canvas, which is then draped over a wooden support. In the pieces included in *We can only hint at this with words.*, some of Sparks's cut shapes—borrowed from her grandmother's early twentieth-century sewing patterns—resemble the literal cut-outs of paper dolls. Other shapes she directly lifts from paintings by the Polish French modernist painter Balthus, an artist whose problematic legacy has been widely debated because of his penchant for working with underage girls as models (and who shares a timeline, if not a geography, with the working years of her grandfather). Incorporating difficult and historically contestable material is part of what makes Sparks's ambitious approach all the more unique. What happens when a shape travels through time, when a form returns? These works offer a kind of colour-blocked Rorschach test, abstracted just enough to be barely recognizable, where what we perceive in the strange floating forms is as indeterminate as our individual psyches.

Sparks's technique comes from experiments with the picture plane and owes much to the aesthetics of collage, a medium traditionally about the production of new ideas through recontextualizing existing images or language. This approach is perhaps most evident in her Dadaist-inspired digital project *in_your_painting* (2022), where each click of the screen produces a new phrase generated from the titles of Balthus paintings and the names of fabric prints. These are then randomized to generate a new, continuous piece of narrative poetry. The abstract nature of language is captivating, and the website operates as a parallel to how Sparks paints: collecting disparate references that, when recontextu-

alized, form new possibilities. The artist discusses being struck by phrasing in Virginia Woolf's 1928 essay *A Room of One's Own*, where she writes of the woman writer who must find new shape for the male-dominated novel form: "No doubt we shall find her knocking that into shape for herself when she has the free use of her limbs; and providing some new vehicle, not necessarily in verse, for the poetry in her."[2] Woolf is writing, persuasively, about the politics of finding new narrative possibilities so that women, as readers and writers, might expand the boundaries of their practices. Sparks's "knocking into shape" likewise takes on new forms by reworking the visual language and conceptual framing of the historically and still male-dominated world of painterly abstraction.

I want to return, briefly, to think about shape as something that performs its work somewhere between a structure, an outline, and a form. Shapes give and take; they produce ideas and pull them apart; they structure and they deconstruct. Crucially, shape is a thing that is representational and abstract at once. In "Shape: A Conversation," art historian David Joselit distinguishes shape from form by calling it "a kind of intermediate thing somewhere between a body and a geometric figure." The curator Michelle Kuo replies: "Shape seems to be somewhere between composition and anti-composition, form and formlessness, between good gestalt and raw matter." But for Amy Sillman, it's exactly the in-betweenness of shape, the indeterminacy of something that is generally understood as determinate, that defines it: "Shape is the fruit of a certain kind of compositional labor and attention … something between linguistic structures and random outlines."[3] It is in these shifting areas of surface tension that Sparks's and Kaur's works perform their transformational magic acts.

1. Amy Sillman, "further notes on shape" in *SHAPES: The OG v.14* (New York: MoMA, Spring 2020), 2–15.
2. Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (London: Bloomsbury, 1993), 126.
3. David Joselit, Michelle Kuo, and Amy Sillman, "Shape: A Conversation," *October*, no. 172 (Spring 2020): 143–44.