

The specific properties of acrylic paint – the suspension of pigment in a polymer emulsion – worthy of autonomous investigation as a material in itself, is an ongoing preoccupation in the work of Helen Calder. By subtracting the canvas and allowing paint to assert itself as an object in its own right, painterly concerns move upon sculptural sensibilities, pulling open possibilities in the interstice. The basic content of painting – colour, line and form are still present, but extended into three dimensions.

By contracting in the architecture of a given space to collude with her work, Calder allows it to provide subtle directives to guide the way the work is presented - through the reciprocal influence of their respective properties. Architecture becomes an essential element in the way the works are perceived, and constitutes the third element in a triad – along with brightly hued forms created from poured and solidified acrylic paint, and the structures that support these forms.

*Reflecting on Possibility* has Calder deploying these paint forms in three 'modes' of display: draped on thin steel frames, suspended from black silicone cords, and placed upon lean, spare stools. There is a manipulation of the forms in differing measure: some are simply draped over steel armatures, remaining smooth and flat; some hang from cords and hooks, allowing the 'skins' to curl in upon themselves, introducing further three-dimensionality; and some are collapsed into folded piles to rest on stools. This sets up a resonance between the paint forms and the structures they interact with, and allows the viewer to speculate on the tactile qualities that they take on in these differing states.

Calder has approached this particular space by presenting her paint forms in iterative units that allow the possibility for adjustment, rearrangement, addition and subtraction in concert with the demands of the room. The central columns of the gallery provide breaks in vantage points, and furnish the ability to obscure or reveal as movement around the gallery dictates. The thin steel frames of *Fifteen Metres of Red Standing* incorporate hinges that give them the facility to be 'dialled in' precisely in order to find a favourable angle in relation to the wall, controlling the shadows projected onto it. *Stacked Red* can roam the floor, arbitrating the relationship between the wall-based works. The *Gathered* works can find rapport within and between their spectrums of colour.

Here, there is a reengagement with her exploration of the psychological and physiological qualities of red. *Fifteen Metres of Red Standing* reframes the unequivocal viscosity which was apparent in *Qualia 760-620*, shown at Enjoy Contemporary Art Space in Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington in 2014. In a direct throughline between then and now, the same paint skins from that show, where they were hung from racks, have been reconstituted – folded and piled on the stools in *Stacked Red*.

For these particular works, Calder has pulled back on a wider variation in surface patterning evident in other recent work, that she accomplishes using the technique of building up layers of paint on a mylar surface, which are then transferred onto the layer of poured paint when solidified and lifted from that surface. Instead, the single subtle painterly pattern on the surface of these skins look as if achieved through the simple undulating passes of a paintbrush, acknowledging the material's origins as a medium normally applied with the same.

The individual skins in the *Gathered* works come closest in their allusions to garments. Cinched at the top by the cords, they curl in upon themselves and in doing so create approximate tubular shapes, enclosing a hollow interior space. Implied in this association is the awareness of an absent body. Previously, Calder has said of the paint forms hung in this manner that they are 'very bodily', and this is reinforced by their dimensions as bodily in scale.

Scale in relation to the paint forms and the employment of simple methods of display produce a satisfying affinity with the works, alongside their obvious compelling attributes of saturated colour, texture and the play of light of their surfaces. The painted forms hint back to the domestic world encountered in the course of the everyday: clothes, bed and bathroom linen. The hinges on the steel frames evince a utilitarian function beyond gallery furniture. The stools are simultaneously plinths and stools. This web of associations pulls back the work into the realm of the domestic, pulling a taught thread between the quotidian and the rarefied abstract art object.

Calder's attendance to bodily scale looks back to issues that were born out in sculpture in the late mid-twentieth Century. Minimalist sculpture tended towards human scale, relating to the phenomenological awareness of one's body in relation to the object. Additionally the importance of situation in the experience of the sculpture required the work to sit in a generative relationship to the space and the viewer. By taking these conditions into account and employing attributes of both painting and sculpture, Calder is able to tease out what resonates when aspects considered the domain of one are admixed with the other.

James Hope, September 2025