



# Down to Zero

Curated by Michael Roberts

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**Works by Eric Butcher, Prunella Clough, David Connearn, Simón Granell, Andrea Gregson, Alex Hamilton, Bridget Riley, Michael Roberts, Dieter Roth and Piers Wardle**

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Down to Zero explores the premise that the artist starts from zero every time he/she begins a new piece of work. This group show examines the idea of completion through the work of 10 artists who at first glance have very different practices and working methods but share commonalities. Beginning a new process, an unknown, never the same, a journey of exploration, where it's not always about arriving at the moment but about the continuous moment, it examines how artists work in diverse ways, with different origins that all lead to an object. In this case a selection of works that stand together. However disparate the beginning and end points they all engage ongoing processes.

All work begins with a starting point and framework. Some artists have very rigid boundaries with little variation, whereas others have loose beginnings where the process is a huge part of the making. However, they all use a myriad of methods; repetition, accumulation, layering, casting and decay and allow accidents to take place and the inherent material qualities to have a voice.

Bridget Riley neatly sums up the tussle between constraint and freedom and eloquently describes arriving. "One evening on my way to the studio, I thought of drawing a square. Everyone knows what a square looks like and how to make one in geometric terms ... I drew the first few squares. No discoveries there. Was there anything to be found in a square? But as I drew, things began to change. Quite suddenly something was happening down there on the paper that I had not anticipated. I continued, I went on drawing; I pushed ahead, both intuitively and consciously. The squares began to lose their original form. They were taking on a new pictorial identity. I drew the whole of *Movement in Squares* without a pause and then, to see more clearly what was there, I painted each alternate space black. When I stepped back, I was surprised and elated by what I saw."

Dieter Roth, one of the most mercurial, restless artist/poets of recent times, was obsessed with decay. This obsession was to find its final and most profound manifestation when he videoed himself in the last year of his life going about his daily routine both at home and in the studio. The resulting work was both compelling and mundane in equal measure but we were left in no doubt that the end was coming. The Swiss curator Theodora Vischer wrote of Roth that he was ambivalent to the completion of works and that he wanted to "record not an exclusive moment but a moment that endures," a process that "remains embedded and suspended in time."

These two artists are good examples because they are at opposite ends of the spectrum. Riley operates from within tight constraints and boundaries and has relinquished the physicality of making; "I give my hands to someone else". Roth developed exceptional skills across numerous disciplines. He revelled in collaboration with numerous artists

and makers and was in a constant state of flux. But the physicality of the object was paramount.

What is it about artists and sports? Mathew Barney says the "athlete is the artist". Simón Granell, Eric Butcher and David Connearn have all at one time or another practised some form of highly disciplined sport, whether Ki Aikido, Triathlon to Judo. This rigour and focus on training the body and the mind has deeply influenced their art making practices. The development of awareness through self-discipline, narrowing down focus to executing a precise controlled movement runs through all their work. The reinforcement through repetitive execution creates an emotional and visceral response both for the artist and the viewer. The use of repetition gives the artist reflective space and this is imbued in the work.

Granell speaks about the act of painting where he employs "a set of rules including colour, brush size, brush mark and the process of application that reduce the possibility of decision making once the painting has started". Butcher's work is a result of the 'accidents' that occur through the action of squeegeeing oil paint and resin over pieces of aluminium section that to the naked eye appear machine-perfect. It is the chance imperfections in the materials/human touch that make each work unique. Connearn has his rules and keeps to them. The dimensions of the support, the nib width and the medium are carefully considered but the outcome is a leap of faith. He speaks of the 'controlled loss of control'. What is fascinating about these three artists is that the very first mark or action made is so fundamental and crucial to the outcome and success of the work.

**"Anything that the eye or the mind's eye sees with intensity and excitement will do for a start. A gasometer is as good as a garden, probably better."**

**Prunella Clough**

This statement by Prunella Clough neatly describes a starting point for work: "Anything that the eye or the mind's eye sees with intensity and excitement will do for a start. A gasometer is as good as a garden, probably better".

Clough whose early work sidestepped the kitchen sink dramas of the 1950's was to find great inspiration in the most mundane objects, the jetsam and flotsam of our daily lives. Plastic bags, discarded industrial gloves, sweet wrappers, plastic bleach bottles all gave a framework for a beginning. This observation and fascination with grids, patterns, stacks, meshes, power cables, repetitive marks and mechanical repetition filtered down into

her work leaving an embedded residue. Patrick Heron wrote of Clough that "her paintings are machines for seeing with".

Piers Wardle also shared this interest in the detritus and ephemera of the everyday. He obsessively collected character trademarks from discarded waste, and was deeply attracted and affected by science and chaos theory. Never one to repeat himself, "what's the point?" his work runs a tightrope of wilful accident and sublime pictorial sensibility.

Bronze casting is a highly sequential process and Andrea Gregson deliberately sets out to adulterate her own practise. Chance and progression are allowed to take centre stage. Molten exterior surfaces hide internal archaeological sites that are imbued with our perceived knowledge of the world.

Alex Hamilton subtly tears and mines away at the fabric of our recognized manufactured existence. He disassembles then reconfigures our built environments, where disjuncture and slippage has become the norm. It is reconfigured so that we have to readdress our understanding of time, place and memory.

Down to Zero examines the similarities and differences in the work of 10 artists. They were selected because of the use of process in their practices, which, however disparate, all involve the touch of the hand. It's through the use of repetition, duplication, layering, casting and accumulation that connections are made, although each artist employs different means in unique and varied ways. What these artists have in common is their conviction to making work with rigour, material beauty and a spiritual undertow. It is at these axis points where things get interesting, tensions arise and questions are asked.

Michael Roberts is a painter and printmaker who lives and works in London. His work is concerned with surface, repetition, layering, boundaries, memory and story telling. He trained at the Royal College of Art, London and Trent Polytechnic, Nottingham. He has shown extensively in the UK and abroad, including Fred and Mann and Transition Gallery in London and at H-Project Space in Bangkok.

# Puzzles + Wonders

**A reflection on the curatorial decisions of Down to Zero**

By Stephanie James

This exhibition is the result of the kind of vision that I really get excited by. Why are these seemingly disparate artworks brought together? Because one person can see the links and connections that to another, un-tuned eye, may be a disjuncture. At face value there is a series of artworks that might be considered uncomfortable bedfellows but for Michael it does, because names have a purpose, they indicate the person, one amongst people, without other connection. But even with names there is content. Each name reminds me of a person I know with characteristics and

Titled Down to Zero this show "explores the premise that the artist starts from zero every time they begin a new piece of work." (Roberts 2014) Yet these artists have the experience and therefore the trust to set off on a new journey each time they make an artwork. There is a strong sense of repetition and escapism in the selected works, a space for the icons and the narratives and the other to exist in.

This is a personal selection, yet not a secretive one. Michael is sharing his 'aspect' his 'angle' giving us a show that is both contemplative and beautiful. Standing before each of these artworks I am immediately struck by their madness and their madness; standing in as representatives of the artist that shaped them. The works make me want to count, pace and do an eyeball workout as the paint records its application and the sculptural surface illuminates the constant hand-touch action in the making; the intuitive actions and reactions made by the artists. I am counting because I am down to zero where we are laid bare; there are few clues but countless triggers.

Butcher, Granell, Roberts, Riley, Roth, Connearn, Hamilton, Clough, Wardle, Gregson ... Eric, Simón, Michael, Bridget, Dieter, David, Alex, Prunella, Piers, Andrea ... Butcher, Clough, Connearn, Granell, Gregson, Hamilton, Riley, Roberts, Roth, Wardle ... Eric, Prunella, David, Simón, Andrea, Alex, Bridget, Michael, Dieter, Piers ... Does that help me? Yes, maybe it does, because names have a purpose, they indicate the person, one amongst people, without other connection. But even with names there is content. Each name reminds me of a person I know with characteristics and

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sensitivities and fiercely individuality.

The work provides a series of puzzles and wonders. Is that a circle? Not exactly, nearly though, it's not a technological circle, it's the hand creating a circle. Right now we are not accustomed to seeing the hand-made circle.

Some of my random thoughts go like this: working methods – the dilemmas – the pauses – every piece of work can be anything – the studio experience is a new one each day – time – more time – the unfolding of narratives.

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