

mother's annual 2016

Maggie Madden *hardly audible*

April - May

In 1672 Isaac Newton demonstrated that light is actually made up of the different colours one sees when it is refracted through a prism, rather than the prism colouring the light. As with many of Newton's experimental discoveries, this changed the way one of the most basic aspects of living in the world is fundamentally understood. Newton's discovery led to the first colour wheels and so theories of colour emerged, which led to new directions in artistic practices. Colour has since been quantified and analysed within physics (we can explain why the sky is blue and sun appears yellow)ⁱ and in terms of the brain activity of perception. Yet people still marvel at rainbows and congregate to view the polychromatic saturation of the horizon at sunset.

Colour is deeply psychological and, for all its ubiquity, is perpetually powerful and provocative. As Hans Hofmann – a major proponent of the mid-twentieth century Colour Field movement – stated, "The whole world, as we experience it visually, comes to us through the mystic realm of color."ⁱⁱ Maggie Madden's work – elegant, subdued constructions that antithesize the monochromatic and harness the prismatic – revels in this "mystic realm of colour". In a blank, blanched space she embeds slivers of luminosity, injects flashes of bold brightness and makes whole segments awash with powdery, pastel pigments.

The sculptural installation, *hardly audible* exists in two parts, incorporating the unique features of the gallery space as part of the architecture of the work. It scales the height of one wall and utilizes the steels below the skylight of the vaulted ceiling as its external supports. Across these structural hanging beams, a many-coloured patchwork of thin, translucent plastics is draped, creating panels of stained light above and softly slicing the space in front. Veiling the wall ahead, a similarly geometric but asymmetrical conglomeration covers much of the usually visible surface with blocks of varying hues: pale baby blue and deeper cyan, lemon yellow and mild ochre tones, mint green, cerise pink, candy stripes and salmon.

The work hangs like an abstract tapestry of tonally thematic rectangular forms. The blocks of colour are orderly arranged but the mode of attachment – with scotch and brown plastic tape – is left decidedly visible, adding another layer of lines and crossovers to the composition, alluding in its provisionality to the jerry-rigged sails of a flailing sailboat or the makeshift shacks of shanty towns. This is a persistent facet of *hardly audible*. Throughout there is a dual sensation of the vastness and complexity of the world being distilled into Madden's abstract, refined constructions while these same constructions provoke the emergence of entire vistas and induce imaginative conjecture and meaning-making.

Initially the two parts of the installation seem like three, as only the overhanging portions of the draped work are visible, sandwiching space and layering across distance so that different medleys of colours coalesce and shapes overlap with every step. The full expanse of the work is detectable however as it bathes the area over which it is suspended with tinted light, casting a chromatically tinted shadow. There is something very gentle about the act of draping here. The space becomes hushed by *hardly audible*. The patchwork forms a canopy – creating shelter, shrouding a subtle pathway within the gallery space. The material – recognizable as that of commercial shopping bags from the discernible handles and familiar silhouette some still bear – puckers where the panels are taped together and its filmy fragility is not only visible but tangible from the detectable minor movements of the hanging pieces.

Despite its abstraction, the evocation of the landscape pervades *hardly audible*. This is like the colour-coded map of certain continents where borders have been more recently drawn, or the divided segments of cultivated pastures, even the cityscapes of exotic urban regions (in India, Jaipur is the 'pink city' and Udaipur the 'blue city', so-called for these particular tonal proclivities on housing exteriors). Mark Rothko - strongly associated with the Colour Field movement, but who rejected this label - stated of his paintings, "...if you, as you say, are moved only by their color relationships, then you miss the point!"ⁱⁱⁱ Colour can instantiate moods, elicit emotions, cultivate atmosphere. This potential gains more potency due to the three-dimensional and abstract formal qualities of Madden's work, which together in *hardly audible*, provide a distinctive and refined version of the subtle particularities of the world.

The majority of the rest of the works in *hardly audible* are similarly delicate and subdued, but are made primarily from different coloured telephone wire and optical fibre. Only one work combines these two predominant materials. *Out of focus* consists of brown telephone wire and the separated halves of a blue (the evocative hue of sadness, sea and sky) plastic bag. A length of telephone wire is threaded carefully through one of the bags, weaving in and out only twice in order to hold its place. The wire makes a right angle, dropping from the point of suspension at its corner. Madden embraces the imperfections and material disobedience of the wire, which still bears the visible indentations and undulations of its former use – once coiled in bundles, entangled, en masse. Although with another material this extreme change in direction may be a natural tendency this geometrical fragment constitutes two separate pieces of telephone wire, fused impeccably at the junction, deliberately devised by the artist.

The bags overlap, darkening the blue strip where one part lies in front of the other. The duplication of the bags and their overlapping emulates the kind of disrupted perceptual experience one has with double vision, illuminating the shifting, unreliable nature of perception. This disorienting and deceiving of perceptual experience is an integral aspect of this body of work. The title may be *hardly audible* yet a defining characteristic of many of the works is their barely visible-ness. Their presence is discernible from a distance only from the secondary evidence of the shadows they cast and the colours they project.

This is especially apparent in *Field*, the first work encountered in the darker antechamber of the gallery. A slight and varicoloured wire structure, *Field* hangs upon two tailor-made fixtures, conforming to the plane of the wall but suspended outward in space, drooping in places from the weight of itself under the pull of gravity. The colours – blue, green, grey and black – are seamlessly merged together and blend with the wall at times, so one sees only the consequential shadows, highlighting the meticulousness of Madden's process. The colour palette has the tonal range of a mossy landscape – this could be a topographical representation of the kind of field in its title. It is a simple shape, a restrained delineation of form in space, echoing Madden's conception of them as "drawings in space".

In the main gallery space, *Fallen field* exudes a more sculptural presence, made from green optical fibres, which are slimmer than the telephone wire, that extend from the wall and curve out and over unto itself. The rudimentary linearity of these abstract forms fosters the impetus to find recognizable shapes and interpret them based on some known symbols, engaging the arguably inherent human urge to 'read' meaning. *Fallen field* sits between two other optical fibre works. *Offering*, consists of five strips of optical fibre, blue, grey, pink, yellow, green, each resting upon small wire fixtures protruding from the wall. The length of the fibres and the fixtures taper towards the top in a triangular formation, which in conjunction with the title suggest gestures of presentation. *Here* resembles *Field* in structure. It is similarly diagrammatic, although the blue and pink of the fibres relates it more to *hardly audible* – it could be a skeleton of, or blueprint for, the constituent pieces of that installation. There are various such instances of reduplication throughout the installation: visual echoes reverberate, patterns surface.

The poised simplicity of Madden's constructions belies the practical utility for which the constituent materials were originally created: materials of transmission, that carried signals for communication and the goods of human consumption. Madden embraces the material memory of this discarded, accumulated and now refashioned matter – the folds and bends, pleats and undulations are not smoothed entirely or eradicated. The gravity-induced curves of the optical fibres are smoother but this highlights the different nature of these substances function in the world.^{iv} Even the colours of the materials were assigned for reasons otherwise; telephone wires and optical cables are tinted according to specific colour-coding systems, but now bereft of this function, recombined and contextualized anew, they allow for new associations. Madden fragments these former things-with-a-particular-purpose, establishing her own dialect within existing and familiar languages.

The works in *hardly audible* prompt consideration of the intrinsic properties of these materials and the artist's relationship with this: Madden's harnessing, manipulation and surrendering to it. In comparison to Madden's earlier work – where more visually complex and three-dimensional constructions proliferated – the guiding principle here has been more to relinquish control of these materials, to work with their particularities and within the parameters they circumscribe. This marks a more restrained sensibility, as well as aesthetic, at work throughout *hardly audible*. Madden's interventions and orchestrations of the materials are deeply thoughtful and necessarily precise, and rely equally upon the facets and forces of the physical world: of light, gravity, equilibrium. The placement of *hardly audible* is scrupulously planned yet at the same time the draped half is let loosely lie, to rest on a support, trusting it won't collapse or fall, knowing that the carefully calibrated system that has been devised will keep it there.

Each element of *hardly audible* is as much about lightness as it is light. *Fleet*, a ball of collected jumper fluff suspended from a transparent thread appears to float in mid-air. *Fleet* exudes a sense of density despite its evident weightlessness; the colours are darker, it has (more) volume; multiplicity, a foaming, forming outwards. The exterior bits of woollen fluff hold to the core structure only via the force of static. This is the most explicit situation in which the laws of physics, the inherent properties of particular materials, literally hold the work together. There is more precariousness as a result, the links are more contingent, such that the work embodies the kind of transience captured in the term 'fleeting' prompted by the title. A fleet also refers to a group of ships sailing (which resonates with the sail-like nature of *hardly audible*) or vehicles performing collectively and like – but even more than – elsewhere *Fleet's* structure is predicated on its constituents functioning in relation to each other.

The sense of operating together – or interconnectedness – percolates the entirety of *hardly audible*. Shapes, colours and forms mirror each other, themes recur, techniques persist and correlate otherwise disparate pieces in the installation. The buoyant yellow outline of another telephone wire work, *Long distance* (a title that speaks more directly to the former function of its composite materials), hangs nearby. This piece looks like an inverted *Field* but the presence it exudes is shifted markedly by this yolk-y hue: the colour that distinguishes the artist's primary colours from those of the physicist, the colour of cowardice and summertime, multinational fast food chains and the Yellow Brick Road. Half the structure is comprised of conjoined yellow wires, the other half consists of white and grey. Illusive shadows and lack of contrast hinder perceptual processes and so, from a distance, the eye struggles to discern its exact formation against the stark white wall. With *Long distance*, the perceptual and phenomenological experience of the work in the space chimes with the conceptual indications of the title such that the various levels upon which Madden's work operates and communicates become more apparent.

This kind of contrasting two-part structure is emulated in *The weight of a shadow*, nestled in another corner. It consists of a thick, heavy and weathered cuboid of found, hard wood, the robustness and evidently decaying nature of which acts in counterpoint to the skeletal wire structure of a similarly-sized cube placed on top of it: one part taking up space, the other outlining it, boxing off space. This work in particular propagates associations with historical pieces, such as Bruce Nauman's *A Cast of the Space under My Chair*, and the late American minimalist sculptor Fred Sandback's ideas around creating "...sculpture that didn't have an inside"^{iv} and, along with the other linear works in the installation, may find a contemporary counterpart in the fragile and illusionary site-specific spatial installations of the Korean artist Jong Oh. But despite these formal affinities the multi-faceted and polychromatic nature of Madden's work exerts its singularity. The wood retains traces of once being painted a lurid orange and the telephone wire chosen is a vivid, nearly fluorescent orange, such that the constituents mirror each other in both colour and in form.

Resonance and duplicity – chromatic and otherwise – permeate *hardly audible* and with *The weight of a shadow* – as the wire mimics the wood - this duplication insinuates the possibility that these constructions may refer to something existing, out there in the world. In one space, Madden provokes the idea of the weight of a shadow and conjures continental landmasses; she prompts emotive elicitations and conceptual connotations. She challenges perception, straddles thresholds – almost, barely, *hardly* – and masterfully captures the strange, disorienting and deceptive nuance of the world.

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ⁱ This is due to *Rayleigh scattering*, the elastic scattering of light by particles smaller than the wavelength of the radiation. Sunlight scatters in the earth's atmosphere, changing the colour of the sky. Blue has shorter wavelengths than other colours and so it scatters in the atmosphere more than other colours, hence the sky usually appearing blue.

ⁱⁱ H. Hoffman. (1948) "Search for the Real in the Visual Arts". In S. T. Weeks and B. H. Hayes Jr, *Search for the Real, and Other Essays*. Andover, MA: Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, p. 45.

ⁱⁱⁱ "Notes from a conversation with Selden Rodman" (1956). In M. López-Remiro (2006). *Writings on Art: Mark Rothko*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

^{iv} The Shannon Limit of a communications channel refers to the theoretical maximum rate at which data can travel through a given medium without losing integrity. This is higher for optical fibres than telephone wire.

^v F. Sandback, *Remarks on my Sculpture, 1966 - 86*