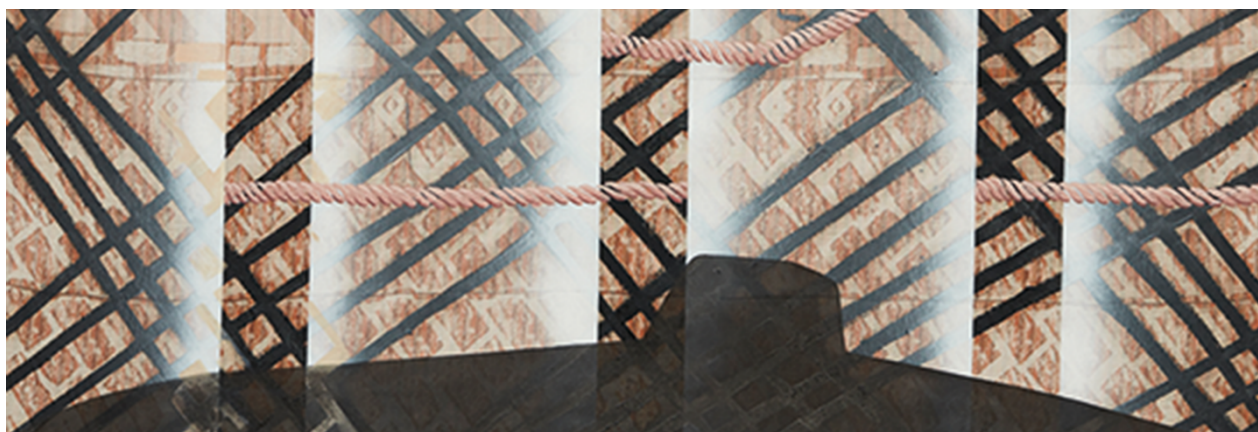


Hettie, Judah. 'Three Painters Exploring The Edge of Form'. *Frieze* Online. 19 August 2018 [excerpt].

Frieze

Three Painters Exploring The Edge of Form

Recent paintings by Caragh Thuring, Phoebe Unwin and Clare Woods mine the tension between physical and imagine worlds



Caragh Thuring, *Deep Screw*, 2018, oil, line marker, bitumen and graphite powder on woven cotton and linen, 1.7 × 1.4m. Courtesy: the artist, Thomas Dane Gallery, London, and Anthony Meier Fine Arts, San Francisco.

Sitting in her Hackney Wick studio in the East End of London, discussing some of the art we've seen recently, Caragh Thuring becomes unexpectedly impassioned. She deploys perhaps the most withering insult available within the British lexicon: 'It's like health and safety – I can't bear it!' The object of Thuring's exasperation is art that she considers hermetic: work that leaves no point of access for its viewer, no labour for them to perform; art for which the most important relationship is with its creator rather than its audience.

Thuring is a painter, although it might be more accurate to say she makes pictures in which paint plays a role. Her canvases carry fragments of precisely rendered image – cranes, potted plants, submariners – and the suggestion of material presence behind and in front of them. Recently, Thuring has painted these fragments onto textiles custom-woven with brick patterns or in works such as *Loop Bridge* and *Bank Shot* (both 2018) pre-painted with tartan. For *Deep Screw* (2018), she doubles up, pre-painting the tartan onto one of her own brick-pattern textiles. 'It's about how much you can put in by doing the least,' she says. 'I don't want to show something that's already well understood.'

[...]

In the recent Tate St Ives exhibition 'Virginia Woolf: An Exhibition Inspired by Her Writings', Thuring's *Dutch Details* (2013) looked huge, loose, almost pictorially exploded alongside early 20th-century works by Vanessa Bell and Winifred Nicholson. Whereas their paintings are set within a domestic



Caragh Thuring, *Baize*, 2018, acrylic, oil, sumi ink, oil stick and graphite on linen, 1.7 × 1.4 m. Courtesy: the artist, Thomas Dane Gallery, London, and Anthony Meier Fine Arts, San Francisco.

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interior, gazing longingly outward into the freedom of the landscape, Thuring's studies of large, Dutch picture windows look intrusively inward from the street. Reflections on the glass of the surrounding road are visible alongside details of the window dressing – curtains, orchids, ferns – and hints of an interior. 'The window is a thin strip of territory,' says Thuring. 'You can see beyond the surface – for all sorts of reasons, it's like a portrait.'

Thuring grew up near the Holy Loch on the Firth of Clyde in Scotland: a site used, until the early 1990s, as a base for the US Navy *Polaris* and *Poseidon* nuclear submarines. 'You would be in this amazing landscape and then see a submarine,' she recalls. (This jarring combination of the high-tech, built environment and the wild lochs in turn echoes a question posed by Scottish artist and poet Ian Hamilton Finlay in a 1976 lithograph: 'Are Aircraft Carriers Urban or Rural?') In Thuring's *The Silent Service* (2016), the shadowy form of a submarine – an object designed not to be seen – sits like a black void within an oval frame of plants and figures suggestive of a romantic Scottish landscape painting.

In *Polaris* and *Bubblehead* (both 2016), painted tartan patterns form the background to details of the goings on at Holy Loch: a crane loads nuclear fuel rods; a diver in a wetsuit comes through a hatch. 'Tartan is a language. It tells you what's what,' says Thuring, who has also worked with patterns formed from pichação – a protest graffiti native to São Paulo. Both are readable combinations of symbols, the deeper significance of which is easily overlooked by those without the knowhow to interpret them: in the case of tartan, the ancient, original combinations of colour reflected the local plant life available to dye wool. The tartan pattern on which *Polaris* is painted (which itself is known as 'Polaris Military') was commissioned by the commander of the submarine squadron based at Holy Loch in 1964.

Built structure, the demarcation of territory and the relation between these imposed forms and the human body are themes Thuring has revisited across multiple series. She finds echoes of the body in the built environment – describing two shapes in recent paintings as 'a nipple bulb' and 'a cocky thing' – and echoes of the built environment in the constructed human form. In works such as *Aggregate Man* (2015) and *Hamburger Helper* (2016), the silhouettes of idealized bodies, male and female, are rendered in brick patterns. 'The fact that the images are going towards something figurative, that they're not entirely abstract, has always been important for my work,' says Unwin. 'That's where the tension comes in.' While otherwise distinct in their stylistic approaches, this underlying tension forms a common thread between these three painters. Each is pushing back against the current tendency for quickly consumed images. Their paintings do not succumb to digital speed. Works by Thuring, Unwin and Woods might tease with their suggestion of recognizable forms and evoke strong associations in their use of colour and pattern – but they don't yield easily.

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