

ARTS

Art review Peter Haynes

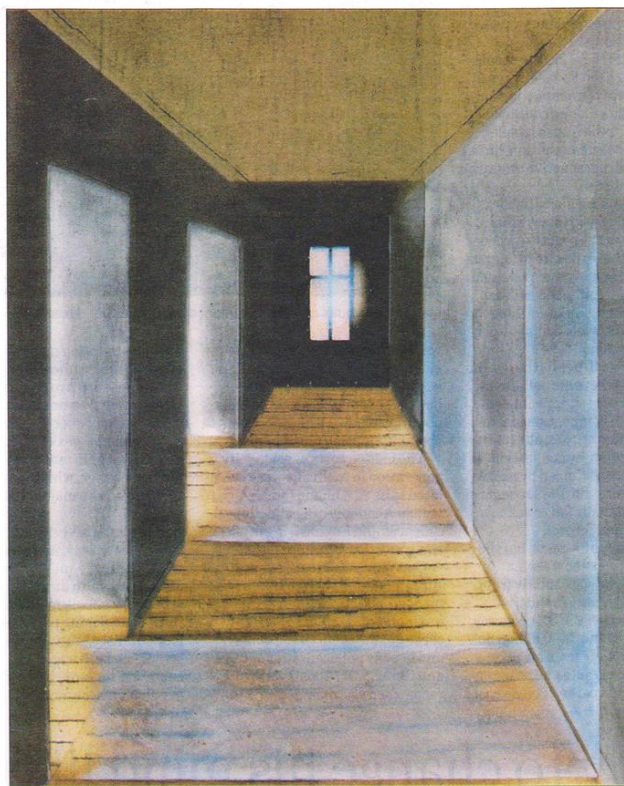
Exploring where the light falls

Where the light falls.
Ruth Oliphant, Beaver Galleries.
Until November 3.

This is Ruth Oliphant's third solo exhibition (each of which has been held at Beaver Galleries) and the first in which she exhibits wall-based works. The works continue the artist's interest in the built environment and here particularly with the changing effects of light as we progress through the day. She has elected to capitalise on the psychological impact of the empty room, the space devoid of human presence, pared back to its architectural essentials, viz. bare walls and floors, gridded windows. This formal paring back has resulted in expressively strong visual statements that, aligned with a subtly nuanced palette and carefully modulated scale, have for the most part produced a substantial and resolved exhibition.

Aspect - afternoon is a free-standing plaque of kiln-formed and cold-worked glass. It is one of three similarly-titled variations on a theme, each dealing with light falling into an empty room at differing times of the day (morning, afternoon and evening). In *Aspect - afternoon* the corner space of the room is divided into three adjoining areas: a blank wall, a section of the floor and a wall with a window. The window looks onto a band of city buildings receding downwards towards the right-hand edge of the work. The pictorial basis of Oliphant's works makes it difficult not to speak of them in the language of two-dimensionality, but the insistent "blockiness" of each underscores the physicality of the buildings they describe and of which they are a part. She plays with ways of looking that are not so much "trompe l'oeil" but rather optical double-takes. While we know that her pieces are rectangular panels of glass with inherently flat frontal surfaces, we are also asked to accept the visualised three-dimensional configurations of the interiors that sit on or in these surfaces. Each aspect is integral to the aesthetic integrity of the whole.

The space in *Aspect - afternoon* (and in the others of this series) is carefully and geometrically delineated, as befitting the architectural starkness of the room. The space is ostensibly still, the only movement

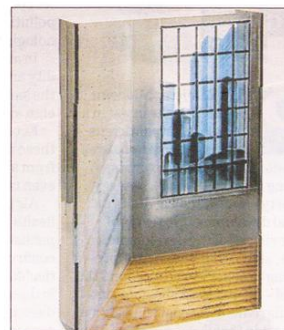


Variations on a theme: Ruth Oliphant, *Moments of illumination* in *Where the light falls*.

being that of the light that drops on to the left-hand wall, the blank whiteness formed by the light broken by the cruciform pattern of the window grid. Within the geometries of horizontals, verticals and diagonals, the light, despite its inchoate character and disturbingly spectral presence, disturbs the stasis of the room and invests a quivering

kinesis into this work (and others) that imbues it with not only an exquisite aesthetic tension but with an acute psychological edge.

In other works (*Half light*, *Crest* and *Golden hour* for example) Oliphant eschews the freestanding mode for wall-based presentation. These are visually more

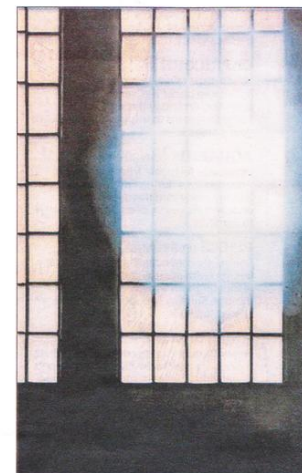


Ruth Oliphant, *Aspect - morning*.

concerned with pattern and less with simulacra of the real world. While window are certainly there as the chief motif, the predominant gridded multiple rectangles the variously coloured windows tend to dissipate the inculcation of moving space in favour of a flattened picture plane that, while attractive, does not hold the drama as seen most of the other works in the exhibition.

Moments of illumination is a powerfully resolved piece. It is a marvellously contrived combination of a deeply receding central corridor, flanked on the right by walls enlivened by the light that streams in through the two openings in the sinisterly sober blankness of left-hand wall. The spatial construction is beautifully controlled and the intimations of psychological suspense alluded to in other works is given clear expression here. The richly complex spatial structures of Giorgio de Chirico off themselves as comparison.

The central corridor leads to a brightly lit window with a(nother) cruciform pattern on its surface. The light here has the character of some sort of spiritual presence – an aura. As referred to above, this device/motif becomes the activating agent for the otherwise surrealistically still space and can be read as a metaphor for the persona of the artist as it is moved spatially and temporal through this beautiful and mysterious metaphysical construct.



Ruth Oliphant, *Crest*.

The use of light as "a presence" is continued in other wall-based pieces. In a series of bipartite works (*Passage of time 1, 2 and 3*) light falls through upright windows onto the floor of parallel wooden boards. The milky whiteness of the light, both on the windows and on the floors, is invested with a living quality that stands in stark contrast to the static geometric structures of the walls and floors. These create spaces in which light "operates" as an almost living entity, again, symbolic of human activity or perhaps of the artistic psyche. The *Passage of time* works are not served well by the intrusive brackets that detract from their otherwise tightly conceived structures.

This is an important exhibition for the artist, marking as it does her venture into wall-based work. Her understanding of the visualisation of the complex balance of two-dimensional and three-dimensional ways of viewing the world has found appropriate vocabulary in the built environment, and appropriate expression through her understanding of the glass medium.