

MARGARET MELLIS ~
STRUCTURE AND COLOUR ~
SELECTED BY ANDREW LAMBIRTH

ANDREW LAMBIRTH is a writer, critic and curator. He has written on art for a variety of publications including *The Sunday Times*, *The Independent*, *Modern Painters* and *RA*, the Royal Academy magazine. Recent exhibitions he has curated include *Eileen Agar: An Eye for Collage* at Pallant House, Chichester, *Matthew Smith: Landscapes* at the Victoria Art Gallery, Bath, and *Critic's Choice* at The Wills Lane Gallery. Among his many books are monographs on Craigie Aitchison, Nigel Hall, Maggi Hambling, Roger Hilton, John Hoyland, David Inshaw and Margaret Mellis. He is currently art critic of *The Spectator* and lives in Suffolk.

MARGARET MELLIS St Ives and Margaret Mellis are intimately linked, and it's deeply appropriate that her work should now be on view in the town. When she and her first husband, the writer and painter Adrian Stokes, were searching for somewhere to live outside London in the late 1930s, they chose St Ives, but they also looked at other places, mostly in East Anglia. It was a momentous decision. If Mellis and Stokes had settled in Walberswick or Aldeburgh, the course of 20th century British painting would have been different, for one of their first acts was to invite their friends Ben Nicholson and Barbara Hepworth to stay with them. The Second World War had begun and London expected heavy bombing. Ben and Barbara stayed, and they were soon joined by Naum Gabo and his wife Miriam who took a bungalow at the bottom of Adrian and Margaret's garden. Thus was the nucleus of the St Ives School established, almost by accident. And it could all have happened in Suffolk.

With Ben Nicholson in the house, it was difficult for Mellis not to be aware of what he was doing with abstraction, and she derived much inspiration from his work and from the constructivist example of Gabo. As a result she made her first abstract collages and constructions in the early 1940s, though she abandoned this experimental course when her marriage to Stokes broke down in 1946. Over the next decade she returned to figuration for psychological support, only gradually beginning to approach abstraction once more through a different route: an Ecole de Paris painterliness. But by the early 1960s, Mellis decided she was ready to experiment again with geometry. As she said: 'why use things, why not just use circles and squares and diagonals and just abstract shapes instead of using bottles and pears and boats and hyacinths...?'

Thereafter, the impetus of her work diverged from the visible world, and sought out instead the elemental forms underlying appearances. Mellis even experimented with hard-edged geometrical imagery, both in painting and relief, though this was not to be a long-standing preoccupation. Her real inclination was to keep in the mind's eye the forms and dispositions of the natural world, however distilled. As a result, her abstraction frequently has an organic quality to it: the

curves suggest the shapes of fruit or moon, and the triangles are arranged in dynamic rhythms which recall the movements of wind and tide as enacted by keel and sail.

Even her most rigorous abstractions are rarely slide-rule perfect. Look at *Untitled (Envy)*. Although it is dominated by triangles, near-squares and rectangles, the shapes are wonderfully “off” – imperfect and rough-edged, and as a consequence jostle each other imaginatively and don’t meet at the corners. This lively imprecision is reinforced by the choice of colour: orange and red striking sparks off the green hub of the picture, and these various directional thrusts embedded in a quilt of richly modulated blue. This key painting may be seen as a forerunner of the jewel-like studies Mellis was to make in the 1970s and 80s, some collaged but mostly painted, on un-stretched and un-primed canvas, of which there is a magnificent range in this exhibition. Leading out of these small works are a couple of paintings on stretched but similarly unprepared canvas which also explore themes of budding and growth. *Black Moon 1* and *Red, Green and White* are potent examples of forms exploring the territory of the picture plane, abutting and digressing across the canvas, containing and liberating the picture space.

The layout of forms in these paintings also resembles an aerial view of land and buildings. *Black Moon 1*, in particular, suggests a harbour or other kind of sea defence, and there remains a pronounced nautical component in Mellis’ work. She loved the sea, preferred to live by it, and the raw materials of her later work were largely the sea’s bounty – driftwood collected from the beaches of Suffolk. (Mellis had moved to Southwold in 1975.) Of the two driftwood reliefs included here, *Cloud Cuckoo Land* demonstrates how far Mellis had travelled in terms of the telling simplification of forms. She began this series of wooden sculptures by making works which were like trays of assembled objects, screwed down and hung on the wall. *Cloud Cuckoo Land* dispenses with a solid backboard and is more reminiscent of a window frame looking out onto a landscape. Mellis had long been intrigued by notions of pictorial transparency, and her use of blank canvas may also be compared with the glimpses through this relief of blank wall behind.

Six Colours and Two Discs is one of her last reliefs, beautifully constructed from diagonals and horizontals, with the two circular elements implying the cycle of life and endless recurrence. It is a hearteningly optimistic work, a mood conveyed by the formal dynamic in alliance with vibrant and varied colour. Made from recycling man's junk, it yet transcends its raw materials and evokes the movement of the tides or the ripple of wind through a reed-bed. The association with the perceptual world remains close in Mellis' work, as can be seen from her more naturalistic drawings of flowers. She made her first envelope drawing in the 1950s, but didn't realize until 30 years later its full potential – that a fruitful dialogue could be established between the shape and colour of an opened-out envelope and the drawing done on it. Flowers had long been a preoccupation, and Mellis found in their perky or drooping forms a constant source of inspiration.

Some of the works in this exhibition are illustrated in my monograph on Mellis, others have never previously been photographed or exhibited. Thus we are dealing here with a mixture of the known and unknown, though all are united in their concern to relate shapes and colours and explore edges. In so doing, they offer tangible evidence of that great liberation of the spirit which is art.

Andrew Lambirth

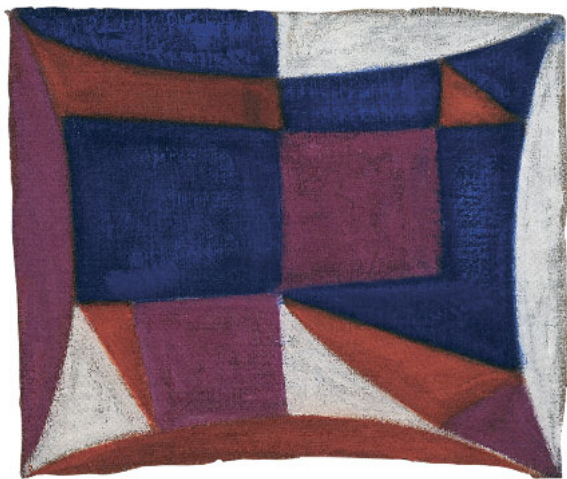
MARGARET MELLIS

UNTITLED (ENVY) C. 1964-6
OIL ON HARDBOARD
71 X 76.2 CM
EST. NO. 6.021



MARGARET MELLIS

MARINE II 1975
OIL ON CANVAS
33 X 40.7 CM
EST. NO. 8.008

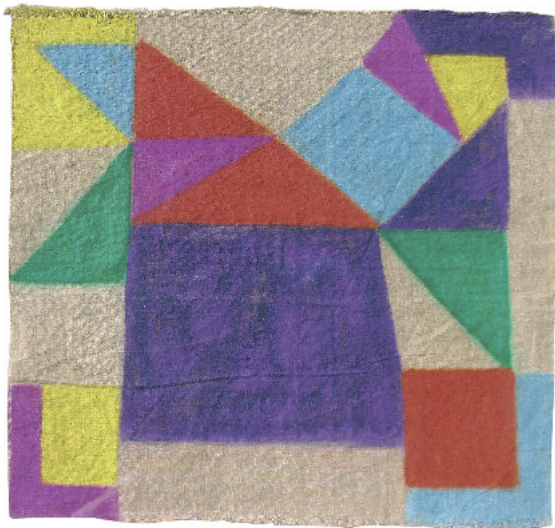


MARGARET MELLIS

SMALL JADE 1979
PAINTED CANVAS COLLAGE
14 X 14 CM
EST. NO. 8.085



MARGARET MELLIS



MULTICOLOUR STRUCTURE (VERSION 2) 1981

OIL ON CANVAS

41 X 43.5 CM

EST. NO. 8.283



MULTICOLOUR STRUCTURE (VERSION 3) 1981

OIL ON CANVAS

34.3 X 44.4 CM

EST. NO. 8.154

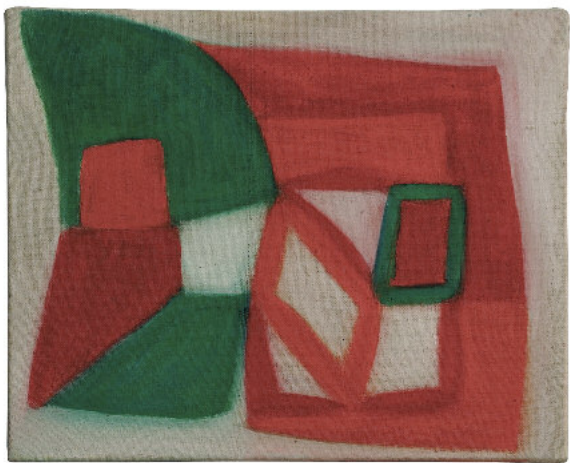
MARGARET MELLIS

BLACK MOON I 1982-3
OIL ON CANVAS
35 X 35 CM
EST. NO. 8.106



MARGARET MELLIS

RED, GREEN AND WHITE I (BOUQUET) 1983
OIL ON CANVAS
33 X 41.9 CM
EST. NO. 8.126

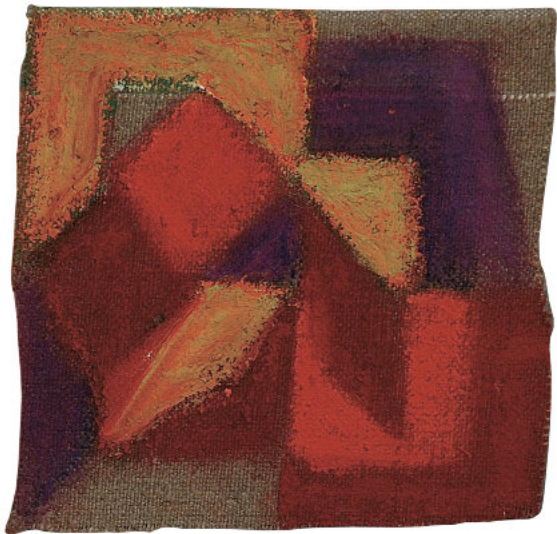


MARGARET MELLIS

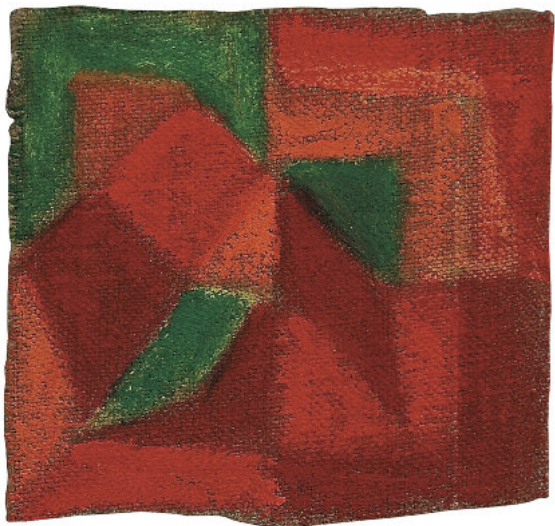
PETAL SERIES STUDY XI
OIL ON CANVAS
14 X 16 CM
EST. NO. 8.217



MARGARET MELLIS



LOZENGE SERIES: (STUDY I) 1983
OIL ON CANVAS
14 X 14.5 CM
EST. NO. 8.212



LOZENGE SERIES: (STUDY II) 1983
OIL ON CANVAS
12.5 X 13.5 CM
EST. NO. 8.213

MARGARET MELLIS



ENVELOPE DRAWING: IRIS (PURPLE) 1988
CRAYON ON ENVELOPE
36.5 X 23.25 CM
EST. NO. 10.056



ENVELOPE DRAWING: PINK ROSE 1988
CRAYON ON ENVELOPE
26 X 25 CM
EST. NO. 10.019

MARGARET MELLIS



ENVELOPE DRAWING:
JOHN'S WHITE & PURPLE COCHICUMS (OPENING) 1989
CRAYON ON ENVELOPE
26 X 24 CM
EST. NO. 10.180



ENVELOPE DRAWING: HYDRANGEA 1990
CRAYON ON ENVELOPE
26 X 24.5 CM
EST. NO. 10.178

MARGARET MELLIS

CLOUD CUCKOO LAND 1991
DRIFTWOOD CONSTRUCTION
99 X 127 X 7.6 CM
EST. NO. 9.106



MARGARET MELLIS

SIX COLOURS & TWO DISCS 2000
DRIFTWOOD CONSTRUCTION
34.5 X 46 X 3.5 CM
EST. NO. 9.193



MARGARET MELLIS



FRILLS SERIES STUDY V 1983
OIL ON CANVAS
11.5 X 12 CM
EST. NO. 8.198



BLACK SPRING SERIES 1983
OIL ON CANVAS
26 X 22.5 CM
EST. NO. 8.211



LOZENGE SERIES STUDY III 1983

OIL ON CANVAS

10.3 X 10.5 CM

EST. NO. 8.214



LANDLOCKED LIGHTHOUSE SERIES STUDY I 1983

OIL ON CANVAS

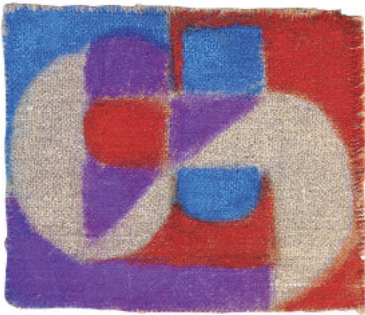
11.5 X 12.5 CM

EST. NO. 8.159

MARGARET MELLIS



UNTITLED SERIES STUDY I 1983
OIL ON CANVAS
12.5 X 14 CM
EST. NO. 8.254



PETAL SERIES STUDY X 1983
OIL ON CANVAS
12.5 X 15 CM
EST. NO. 8.167



PETAL SERIES STUDY XII 1983

OIL ON CANVAS

11.5 X 12.5 CM

EST. NO. 8.218



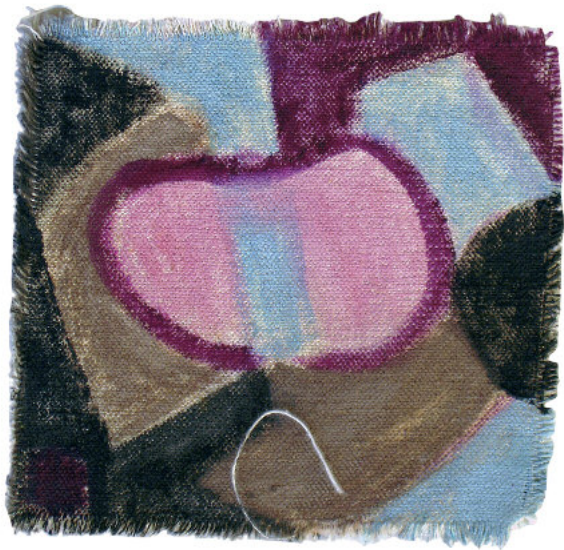
RIPE/UNRIPE SERIES STUDY III 1983

OIL ON CANVAS

7.5 X 9 CM

EST. NO. 8.204

MARGARET MELLIS



WHIFF SERIES STUDY 1983
OIL ON CANVAS
13 X 14 CM
EST. NO. 8.264



WHIFF SERIES STUDY III 1983
OIL ON CANVAS
11 X 11.2 CM
EST. NO. 8.266

WORKS BY THE FOLLOWING ARTISTS ARE AVAILABLE

PAINTINGS

NICOLA BEALING
STEPHEN CHAMBERS
DAISY COOK
RICHARD COOK
BARBARA DELANEY
MAGGI HAMBLING
DAVID INSHAW
TORY LAWRENCE
LOUISE McCLARY
MICHAEL PORTER

DRAWINGS

KATIE CUDDON
IRENE LEES
REBECCA OLINER
SHEILA OLINER

COLLAGE

MICHAEL GINSBORG

PRINTS

STEPHEN CHAMBERS
DAVID INSHAW
SHEILA OLINER
ANA MARIA PACHECO

PHOTOGRAPHIC WORK

SUSAN DERGES
BRIGID EDWARDS
ANDER GUNN

GLASS

TAVS JØRGENSEN
JAMES LETHBRIDGE

METALWORK

DRUMMOND MASTERSON

WOODWORK

GARY ALLSON

JEWELLERY

KELVIN BIRK
MELANIE GEORGACOPOULOS
MARLENE McKIBBIN
ANETA REGEL DELEU
CAROLINE SCHUCK

FURNITURE

PETTER SOUTHALL

CERAMICS

MICK ARNOLD
KATIE BUNNELL
EMMANUEL COOPER
TAVS JØRGENSEN
ANETA REGEL DELEU
DANIELLE SPELMAN
SUTTON TAYLOR
NICOLA TASSIE
JANICE TCHALENKO
CLEMENTINA VAN DER WALT