



### *Manifold*, 2012

In his exhibition *Manifold*, Nathan Peter tests the limits of the canvas, seeking moments when it can act as both surface and object. He drapes and folds the canvas, cuts shapes from it, strips it threadbare. The first work encountered upon entering the gallery, *unravelled black and silver* (2012), is his most extreme dissolution of the canvas's surface integrity; a striped painting – unwoven into a flimsy curtain of strings – dangles from the ceiling to the floor. All warp and no weft, the work becomes a delicate textile, an impossible surface that cannot cover, nor carry anything.

The other pieces allude in different ways to the drapery of fabric, particularly as depicted in 17th-century still life paintings. This reference is made clear in *tarred and feathered* (2012), a small painting from which layers of oil paint and crayon have been scraped away to reveal a vanitas-like portrait of a bird carcass on a tablecloth. In contrast to *unravelled black and silver*, the still life proposes the canvas itself as a tablecloth upon which content is laid out, or perhaps as a curtain opened to reveal this content.

The canvas *fruits of the fold* (2012) is suspended from the ceiling and refers to tablecloths and curtains; due to its scalloped and starred patterning the work also alludes to national flags, especially when considered in conjunction with *unravelled black and silver*. While the stripes of *unravelled black and silver* suggest the flag of the United States, the stars on *fruits of the fold* are not the expected five-point ones but

rather varied shapes resembling designs from Islamic architecture. With this piece, the exhibition began to deviate from its course. The initial line traced from 17th-century vanitas via Abstract Expressionism to Conceptual Art and Postmodernism is a plausible if slightly tenuous one (the artist's inspirations run from Piero Manzoni via Clyfford Still to Steven Parrino). To incorporate another set of motifs borrowed from another cultural tradition seems to splinter this trajectory rather than to complicate it in a productive way.



The allusions in Peter's work can be conceptually connected, but trying to pull together such multi-layered, disparate bits is beyond the exhibition's capacity. And indeed, the most generous piece, *peel* (2012), works precisely because it isn't too heavily laden with references: a painting's yellow border has been sliced away, leaving an empty square draped casually over an overturned pedestal. Here, the canvas is liberated, lightened, delicately balanced between dependency and autonomy.

It is possible to interpret Peter's treatment of the canvas as a continuation of the Modernist pursuit to further the discipline of painting by challenging its flatness. Yet Modernism built the act of deconstruction into the history of painting, and to do so today seems not only conventional, but also strangely anachronistic. Removing the canvas from its supports or shredding it in novel ways does not undermine the painting tradition; it is part of that tradition. The question is not whether there are ways to mutilate a canvas that have not been tried before, but why the medium of painting still needs to be challenged – unless we no longer believe in the validity of solving formal problems within its confines. Has the burden of history made it impossible to approach

painting as such? Does a single painting need to contain the entire history of the medium?

—by *Elvia Wilk*

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#### About this review



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