

KATIE
PRATT IN
CONVERSA-
TION
WITH
SUZAN
FRECON

Figurative versus abstraction: that's something that I left behind so long ago. I don't want to have to insist on that. But I want to have a painting be on a high plane of abstraction. And I love paintings that have figures in them, I go to the museum and look at them all the time. But today, in my time, I know I could never paint like Bellini, nor is that my intent. I don't want to paint "story".

Katie Pratt: Yes. It seems very base to talk about the borders between figuration and abstraction. With a lot of the artists you've talked about previously, and with, say, obviously Mondrian, but also Giotto and Velázquez, there is a hidden geometry in the work. It's not necessarily explained in the work, but there's a kind of geometric structure. I'm thinking of rectangles within rectangles in Velázquez, or the Giotto in Padua; those frescoes where everything is subdivided into – well I suppose – a comic book kind of grid. So everything is contained in this grid, but at the same time it's encased in the overall frescoes, and also within the architecture. Do you think that's relevant?

Suzan Frecon: Actually, I was more struck by Fra Angelico, Piero della Francesca, and Uccello as far as use of geometry. That was more powerful

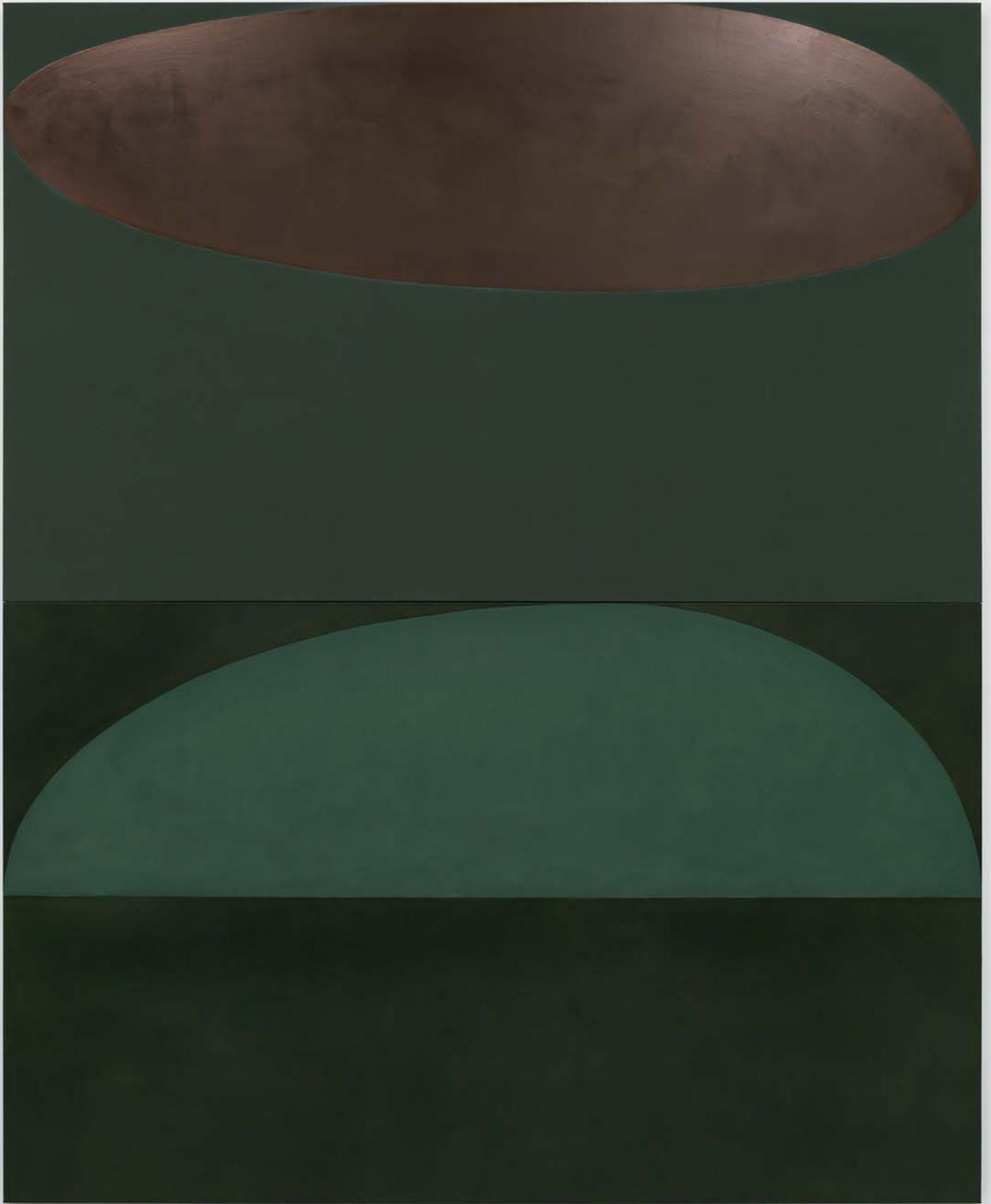
to me when I started really looking at pre-Renaissance Italian paintings and frescoes, and the structure of crypts in cathedrals and churches that held the art. Giotto was the celebrated painter, but I actually related more to Duccio and artists such as Cimabue and Sassetta, as well as by earlier anonymous fresco masters that I saw in the Romanesque churches. Their work also came across, to me, as more abstract. I was looking more at the paint itself and the structuring, rather than at the story.

KP: But the surface of the frescoes is also significant. When I look at the surface of these works, it very much reminds me of the way the gesso might absorb pigment: how there are different levels of absorption in the surface. I mean we're seeing these paintings when they're very old, but we still get a sense of working against the surface and trying to work with the surface to make it absorb or not.

SF: Yes. Grounds are important to the marriage of the subsequent painting layers. But in my oil paintings, the pigment, though adhering to the oil ground, is not really absorbed by the ground but by the oil medium. In my case, more or less quantity of oil is mixed with pigment to arrive at the sheens, reflections, and matte qualities. In fresco painting, the pigment is actually locked into the *intonaco* – or damp layer of lime putty – after the paint is applied and then dries. So ground and pigment become one and the same in fresco painting. Years ago I made true gesso grounds for the wooden panels I used, because I was applying burnished gold, and the ground of skin glue and whiting was best suited for its adherence. I had observed how the burnished gold background in a Cimabue painting could shift back and forth from a dark or a light in the composition depending on the stance of the viewer. I wanted to impart such a shift of negative/positive light into my own painting. But then I realised that gold leaf was taking up too much of my time so I started to

Opposite:
terre verte
2014
Oil on linen
108 x 87 cm

© Suzan Frecon
Courtesy of the artist and
David Zwirner, New York/London





make it happen with the paint itself.

KP: If I were to point out the most striking features of your work – we talked about surface, and also, the higher plane of abstraction – they are all features that are largely resistant to story; to representation. One of the things I think of is precision. I think of a very, very precise inner-vision coming from the artist. But also, the inbuilt imperfections; you never do a curve that is symmetric; it's always got a slight asymmetric element to it. I wonder what drives that?

SF: I use precise underlying asymmetry to realise compositions because I find that the resulting painting can be more dynamic and unpredictable. Very early on, I was using very simple geometric compositions in single panel paintings to provide structure. I felt that my paintings (and a lot of my contemporaries' works, as well) were weak in composition, which is such a vital component. But since many other artists were using geometry in their paintings as well, I didn't

feel confident that I could contribute something significant. So I left geometry on the back burner – let's put it that way. Then I started combining four paintings of irrational different lengths together; they all had the same height. I didn't want the ensemble to be symmetrical. I found four to be visually more open-ended without beginning and end in the progression. It gave me a better chance to free the paintings from their enclosing edges through the material of the paint, and with the way that I handled the paint. At that time many artists seemed to be using grids as structure. I came to feel that the grid seemed static as a foundation structure for the paint. Some artists do use it beautifully. But I wanted to break out of it, though it is still there as a starting point to work against. In 1989, I saw a show of Hilma af Klint in New York. And I really loved it. I saw that she had asymmetry in her work, something that I was trying to incorporate as well. Somehow, seeing her paintings gave

Studio Shot
Courtesy of the artist

Opposite:
Installation view
moroccan persian
2017
David Zwirner, New York

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David Zwirner, New York/London





Studio Shot
2017

© Suzan Frecon
Courtesy of the artist

me the strength to go back into using geometry. I slowly worked my way back into it. Little by little, I tried using very simple verticals and horizontals in the compositions. Then I went further into imparting imbalances, movement and dissonance in the compositions, which come into play with the colours and reflections – and absorptions – of light on the composed surfaces.

KP: There's a precision in your work but the geometry seems to be consumed and internalised as an interior geometry.

SF: It is the bedrock of the painting. So the painting – including the colours, material, and the handling of the paint – is held by a geometric foundation. Eventually I started putting two panels, one on top of the other, as my starting point. Some years after working with this double-stacked format, which continues, I turned it the other way and explored where I could go with that. And that continues too.

KP: You paint the edges of your supports. That's something you just don't pick up on in reproduction, obviously. Well, I don't know if there's an image,

but the forms go around; you continue the edges of the forms round the sides of the support.

SF: Yes, it's a visual decision, like everything. Every decision finally has to be visual.

KP: I want to ask you about the role travel has played in your work, because there's a kind of palpable general knowledge and understanding of global culture present.

SF: I haven't travelled as much as I would have liked. I love living in a big city because I can go uptown and see a Duccio or I can see Japanese artwork without going all the way to Japan. But going places has also really impressed my work. You know I went and I saw a page from the *Book of Kells* in Ireland. And I saw Italian paintings and frescos during my travels. And I saw marvellous artworks and architecture in Japan recently. I went to Crete in the 90s and that had a big impact on my work.

KP: Because you were painting labyrinths for a while, weren't you?

SF: I'd say the idea of the labyrinth was coming into my work. And I think labyrinths had a lot to do with drawings that I was doing. When I was there, I would stand in front of the ruins and I would just try to imagine how complex these structures were. As I looked, I imagined how one navigated these complicated structures. How life existed there... and the colours... You know, the earth reds were there, and the other colours in the Mediterranean light.

KP: That brings us back again to the sense of your work being incredibly experiential. That it was being in the place where the works were that enabled your whole imagination and thinking process to be triggered. When you think about works that have stood the test of time, whether it's Cézanne or Minoan culture, and the raw materials of your work – the elements of your work – the earth that we stamp on and then grind up to make paint...



SF: Yes. But I don't restrict myself to using just earth colours. If I want to use another colour, well, it has to look right. It is experiential as you say. It's not theory; it's actuality. I don't want to have a story laid on my work about how I grew up on a farm, so I'm painting the specific colours of fruits and nature. But I think that unconsciously this must have had some bearing on my work – walking

through the land, observing colours and light changes throughout the times of the day and night, even the smells and the sounds of these experiences. You know, usually I think any painting looks better in natural light. Light is so important. For example, seeing the dim light gradually defining a Coppo di Marcovaldo cruciform painting in a cathedral in Italy as I moved closer was a real experience.

noh
2017
Oil on linen
214 x 264 x 4 cm
Each panel:
214 x 132 x 4 cm

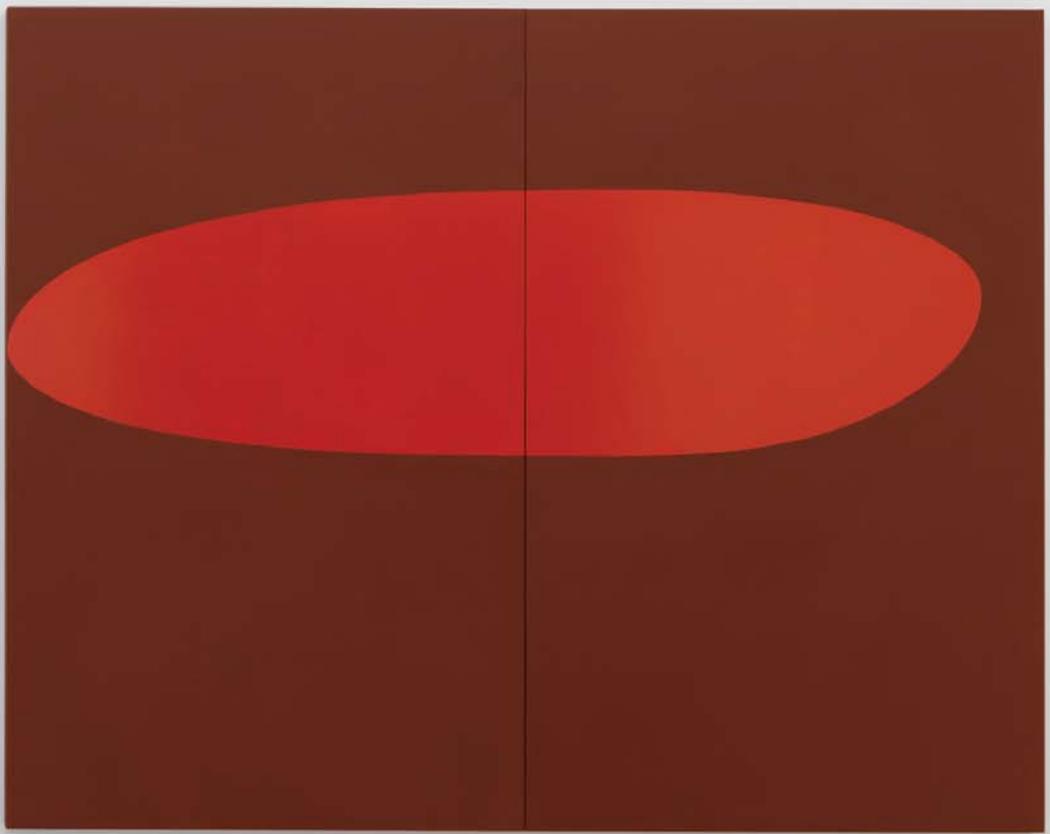
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Installation view:
vermilion
2017 (foreground) and
f.r.s.p.o.
2016 (background)

Suzan Frecon: recent oil paintings
David Zwirner, New York, September
14 – October 14, 2017

© Suzan Frecon
Courtesy of the artist and
David Zwirner, New York/London





KP: I'm bowled over by the surface in this painting (*haematites*). The surface-quality seems so precise.

SF: The pigment makes it play with the light. Haematite is an interesting pigment. It can turn silver – like that – even though I'm aiming for red. So it's very mysterious because it has these silvery shifts that can happen. And sometimes it turns completely silver, but I haven't gotten that in my painting. I want to explore it more but it's just so hard to handle; it's very grainy. And it's very elusive to do what I want it to do. So I try to go with it but still control it, so that I can make it visually work for me. All are red haematites in this painting; four different brands and four different pigments.

KP: It normally exists as a rock, doesn't it, haematite?

SF: It used to be called bloodstone.

KP: Yes – and you get it ground down as pigment.

SF: Yeah... and I've seen jewellery – haematite jewellery – that's totally silver. And one time I was working on a painting, I thought, 'if I build up the colour it will become more dense...' And it became more silver.

KP: The surface is... it's incredibly smooth. I mean it's not glossy all over. In fact, where it is glossy, it's somehow maybe slightly less smooth than these are. Some of the surfaces look very... well... not manufactured, that's for sure, because it has a very handmade feel to it... But their lustre – they have a very smooth lustre to them.

SF: This one does because it is just cold-pressed oil and pigment. It was hard to find four red haematites that I could orchestrate together. There are also violet haematites, and they look very brown. But I wanted red ones. It's so unpredictable how it's going to come out. I could use the same formulas for a big painting and it wouldn't look like this small one.

KP: And the other very specific thing

about this work is the very marginal, nuanced difference between surface and colour, and also in application. In some of the areas you know the brushstroke looks quite palpable. But in other areas it's very reduced, it seems. It's something you really don't pick up on when you see it in reproduction. These are still very glossy. Is that the under painting?

SF: There is sometimes stand oil, and at times sun-thickened oil in the mix. I mostly use cold-pressed linseed oil in the earth red pigments. As I said earlier, each pigment absorbs different quantities of oil. So I measure each pigment versus oil proportion and test it first. The haematites and red earths can dry grey and dull. So I adjust the mixtures with more oil until it results in a sheen I like, neither too glossy nor too dull. Sometimes surfaces dull down again with time. So I put a little oil on my hand and rub it in to bring out the hue. But not too much. I don't want too much. I've observed that time can affect the oil sheens, but over years they seem to keep the character of what I started out with.

KP: It's very interesting what you were saying about how, on a large-scale, the pigments and the paints that you make yourself, largely I think, behave quite differently than they do in small areas.

SF: Going from painting a small painting to painting a large painting is exponentially more difficult. This painting that we're looking at is on wood, and this other one is on linen, so that factors in. Linen expands and contracts. It is constantly moving and very susceptible to changes in humidity and temperature.

KP: Yeah, linen's quite difficult to work with. One of the things about using lots of earth pigments consistently is it makes me think of your interest in particular places. Haematite's an American pigment isn't it? Is it from the Southwest?

SF: I think you can find it all over the world because it's a red earth. It's interesting to research pigments and

haematites
2012
Oil on wood panel
50 x 61 cm

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Courtesy of the artist and
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discover where they're from. This other painting is titled *terre verte*. It's part of a series and the four earth greens are all slightly different. And they come from all over. There's Russian earth green. And then there's Cyprus earth green and German earth green and Italian earth green...

KP: And you don't ever use chemically manufactured pigment? You always use the authentic pigment?

SF: I don't have any rules that might interfere with visual possibilities, but I am drawn visually and materially to earth pigments. But if I need cadmium orange I'll use cadmium orange. Everything in my painting is a visual decision. I don't have any symbolic reason for choosing earth red except that I like to look at it. I love seeing earth reds in different parts of the world and I love seeing how humans put these hues into their art. First, I see if I like a colour and then I use it. I don't use cobalt blue so much anymore but I use lapis. I also use ultramarine blue, which is a replacement for lapis.

KP: When you were talking earlier I thought it might be quite useful if you had a chemistry qualification to do your paintings...

SF: That would be too... that would lock me into something. I am very interested in all the sciences but I want to be free of having something that's going to interfere with absolute abstraction – what I want to do with my composition and where I want to take my painting. So I'm adamantly against the story part. But there's content; you know you can talk all day about subject and story versus content. The paint is the content in my paintings and hopefully, the artwork is the result. The material for me is an important element in the painting, and how it's handled and how it's composed.

KP: The paint-making process, is that important? Is that thinking time? Or is it part of the actual painting itself? Or do you see it as a necessary preparation, when you're making the paint?

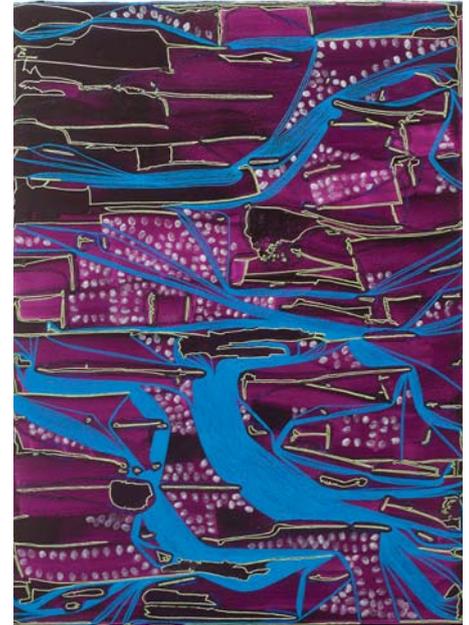
SF: When I'm grinding pigments?

It's really part of the painting. I guess orchestration is a word that I like to use because you have all these elements and you have to kind of orchestrate them and turn them into... build them into a painting that you hope is art. It's just part of it – one of the steps that I have to do – and you know it's one of the building blocks, like building the composition. There are so many colours I would like to use. And I have all these pigments that are just beautiful. When I get up to the final layers then it starts to get really exciting because then I'm starting to see the reality of the painting's existence. And then there's the point where I'm like, 'Oh voilà! Ok, I like it'.

KP: And is that when it's finished, when you like it?

SF: Yes. When it seems okay to me.

When it comes off the wall and out into the space around the painting, so to speak. The entirety is suspended. And I think a range of time is a positive; I like to give the painting time. So I give it a few months to see how the colours are going to dry. And sometimes they don't dry right and I have to come back into the painting and work on it again. But then when I'm finally finished, then I'll sign it and hope that it's going to affect others as I experience it. That's the only thing I can do. The experience of seeing the actual painting is not theoretical. It's physical and mental.



Katie Pratt
Prathogen
2017
Oil on canvas
90 x 65 cm