

When the Dutch artist Theo van Doesburg (1883-1931) painted *Composition VIII (The Cow)* (c. 1918) - an arrangement of solid rectangles and squares in red, blue, green, yellow and black - a familiar animal was polemically transformed into pure geometry. For van Doesburg, the transformation exemplified the principles of *De Stijl* ('The Style', a movement founded in 1917 by van Doesburg and Piet Mondrian (1872-1944) with the aim of challenging pictorial rules by reducing, simplifying and, finally, disassembling representational painting. *Composition VIII* works as a total departure from figuration, and yet it retains the basic geometric blocks of the animal's anatomy. It is, and is not, a painting of a cow. Fast forward to Argentina in the 1940s: avant-garde ideas such as those spawned by van Doesburg and Mondrian concerning non-figurative painting had well and truly arrived, but they were being animated and reshaped by artistic groups such as *Arte Madi* and, later, the *Perceptismo* Group. Instead of the strict geometry of earlier European abstraction, Argentinian artists such as Raúl Lozza (b.1911) and Tomas Maldonado (b.1922) injected a vibrant lyricism into their art, producing irregular and colourful abstract compositions.

The Buenos Aires-born Déborah Pruden creates paintings that fit within this history of Latin American abstraction without pandering to it. She presents us with scenes of colour and line that at first appear dismantled, fractured or even unfinished. The white space of her paintings open up the picture plane, but we are given no illusion of being able to enter this space. Instead, the white of her pictures draws our attention to surface - to the flat interplay of colour and the process of putting paint on canvas. If we recognize an object in her recent paintings - such as a cardboard box, vase, shell or bottle - it is only ever suggested, as though it has been removed or deleted, leaving only a trace, the vestige of a form. In the intersection of line and colour, her paintings recall an architectural plan for an imaginary (and impossible) building, a subway map gone awry, or, simply, the preliminary marks a painter might make on the canvas as a guide for the picture to come. In Pruden's work we are presented with parts that jostle, resisting absolute unity.

In earlier work, Pruden's brushwork was loose and her lines curved, and although her recent paintings indicate she is moving towards stricter constructions, it would be wrong to claim that these are rigid pictures. As the artist has stated, these are 'structuring lines that do not hold anything up. Looking at the way complimentary and contrasting colours meet and overlap what seems to be improvisational joy, a question arises that sounds slightly daft but feels necessary to ask in relation to Pruden's work: at what point does a painting begin to paint itself?

- Tom Francis