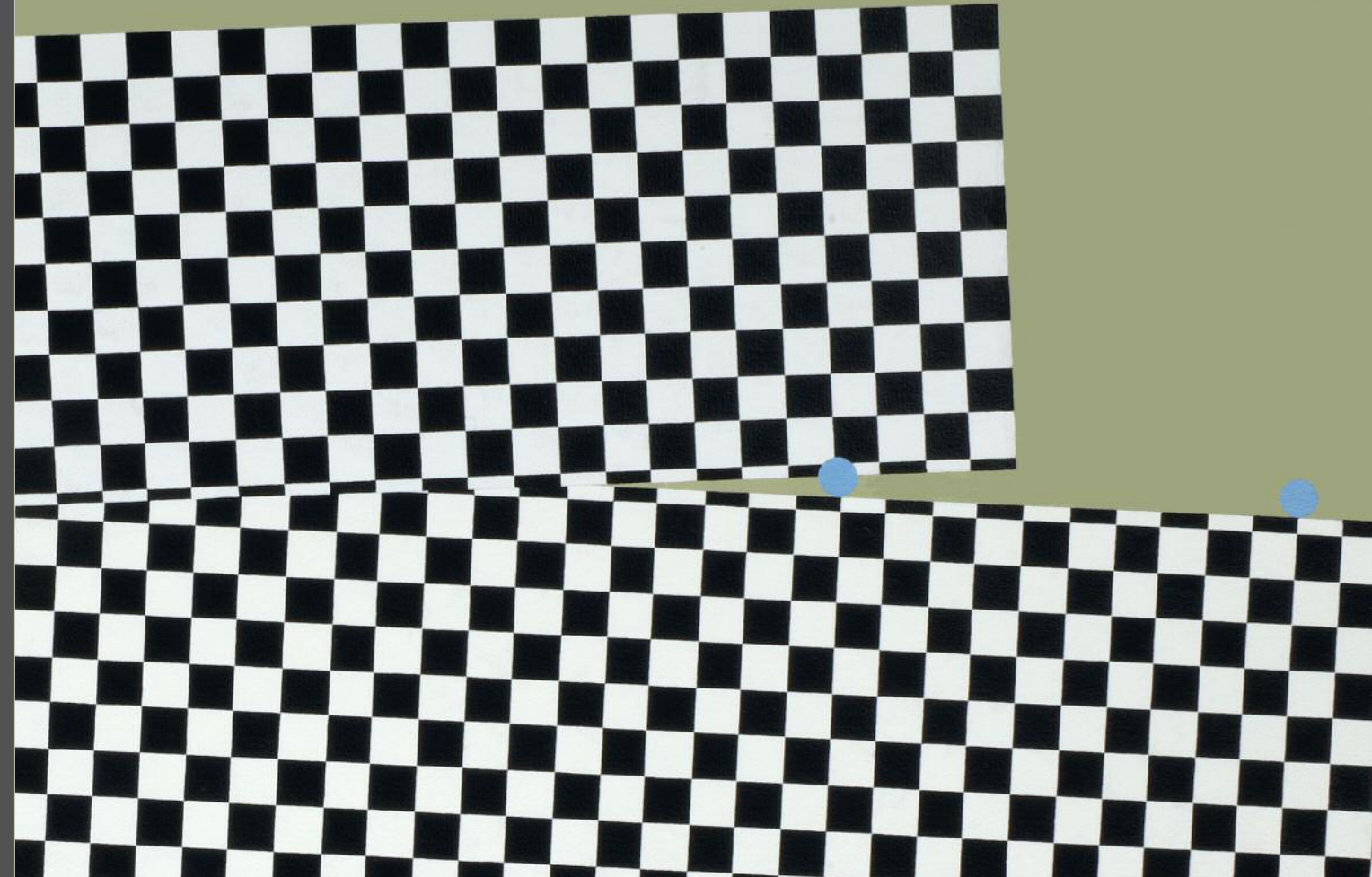


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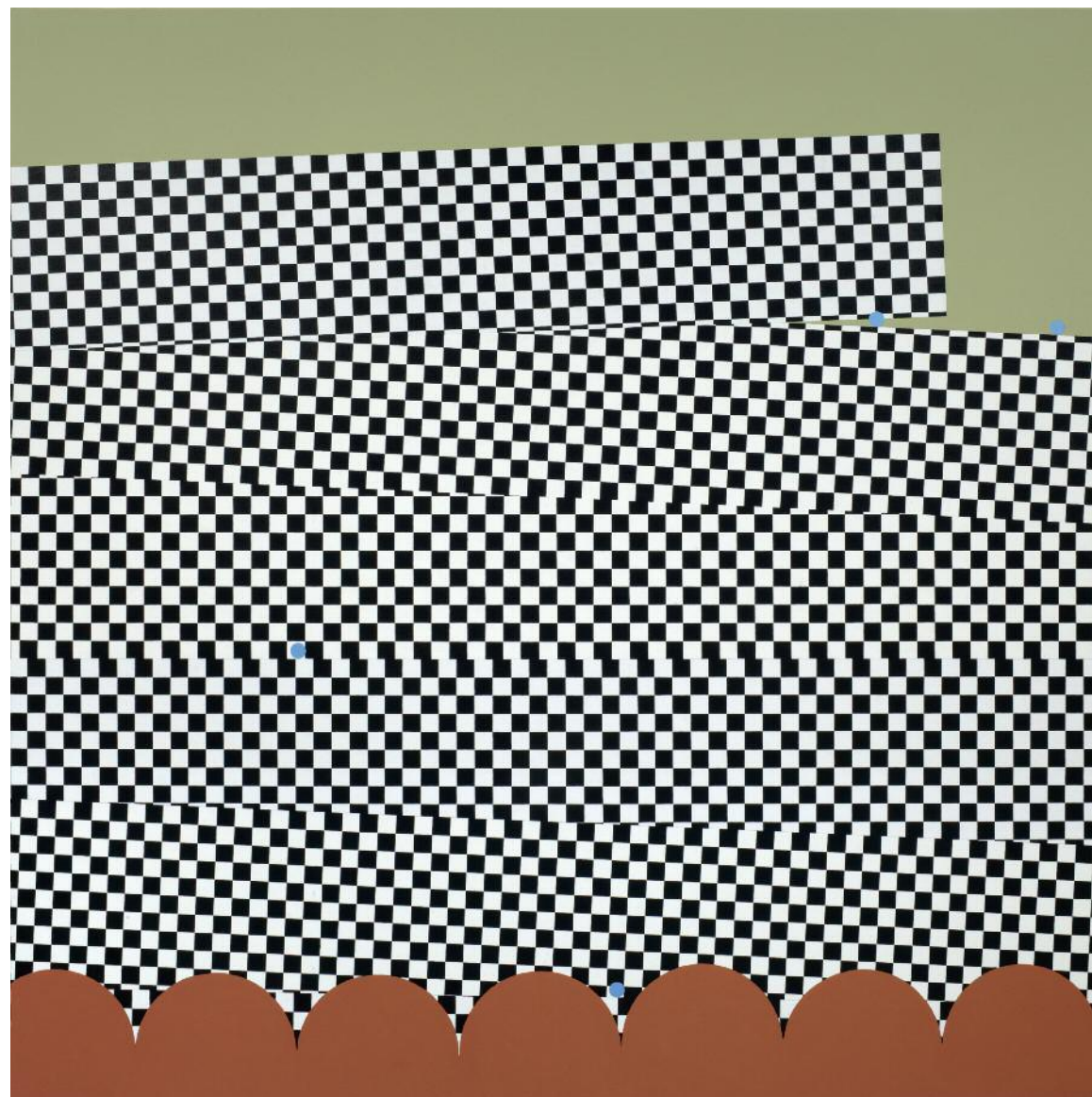
4th September–4th October 2014

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Shine on me, 2014, acrylic on canvas, 183 x 183 cm

DANIEL STURGIS

HISTORY PAINTINGS

CHARLES DARWENT

Look down the list of Daniel Sturgis's solo exhibitions and a pattern begins to emerge. Two patterns, in fact. To every title, there is an equal and opposite title—*Everybody Loves Somebody* paired off with *Abstract Logic*, *Tough Love* with *Possibilities in Geometric Abstraction*, *Fill of Beauty* and *Equal Minds*. Emotion and intellect, heart and head, twine around each other like the strands of a double helix. So, too, with Sturgis's art.

[1]

Take *Shine on me*, a new work in this exhibition. A quick glance will tell you that it is two things, an abstract painting and a painting about abstract painting. If it looks like a Bridget Riley, then that is not by accident. One of the demands Sturgis's picture makes of the viewer is an answer to the question of how it is likely to be seen historically—whether it is possible, in the 21st century, to paint a canvas with bands of black-and-white checkerboard squares without somebody, somewhere saying, 'It looks like a Bridget Riley'. Beyond that again is the broader question of whether there is *any* lode of abstract painting that has not already been mined, and in what ways that might matter.

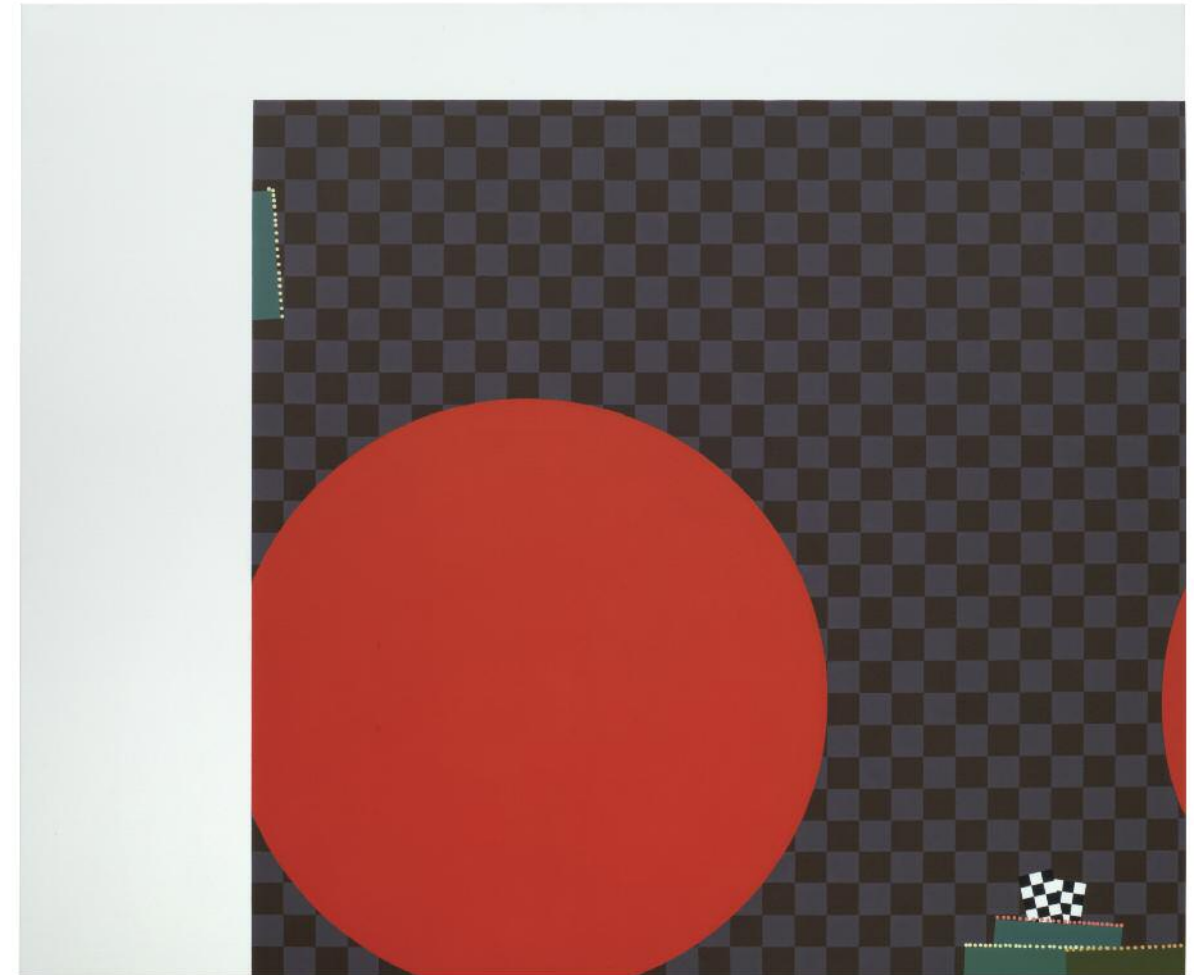
It is an impasse a century in the making. From Malevich on, the driving force of abstract painting was, and had to be, centrifugal. Abstraction defined itself by what it was not—not traditional, not representational, anti-conformist; revolutionary.

This was a problem. Revolution demands radicalism, so that abstraction was forced to define itself outwards, pushing its followers further and further along whichever painterly road they happened to have taken. Once he had adopted Neo-Plasticism as his mode, Mondrian could only and ever be more like Mondrian, until he arrived at the point that there was nowhere more Mondrian-like to go. Abstraction, which had begun with the year-zero paintings of Malevich's *Black Square* and *White on White*, led irresistibly back to them.

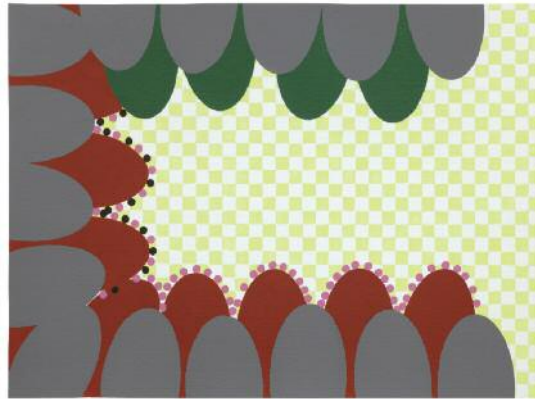
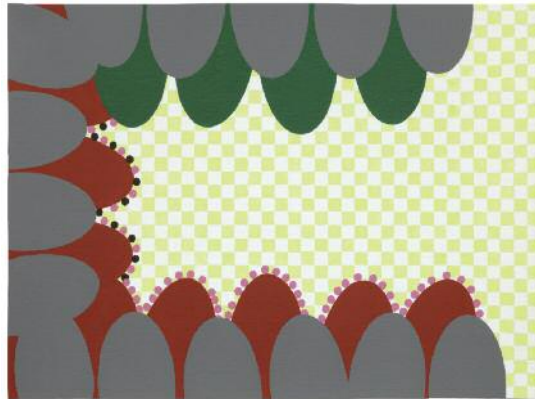
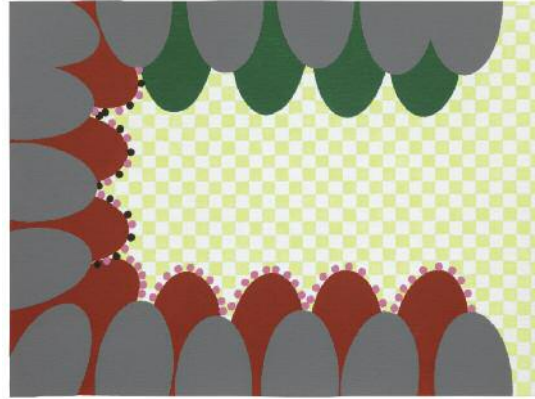
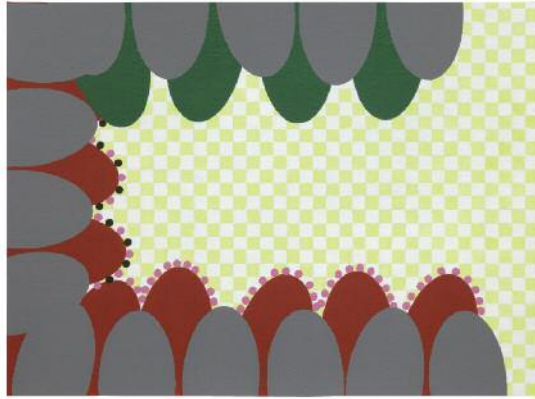
[2]

Possibly the greater problem was that what lay at the end of each of these various visual *culs de sac* was its own specific classicism. Revolution may breed a new status quo, but it is a status quo nonetheless. Bridget Riley's black-and-white *Movement in Squares* was revolutionary when she painted it in 1961, but it is now as canonical as Claude Monet's *Impression, Sunrise*, and as recognisable. In a mode of painting that allowed itself the luxury of tradition, this might not have mattered. In one that had set out to overturn it, it mattered greatly.

If, as an artist, your instinct is to paint abstractly, how do you deal with this problem? That question is key to *Shine on me*, as to Sturgis's work as a whole. The most obvious solution is to reach for the word 'postmodern' and defuse



Learning to fail. 2014, acrylic on canvas, 153 x 183 cm



TOP **Untitled 1, Untitled 2**, each: 2014, acrylic on paper, 29,5 × 40 cm

ABOVE **Untitled 3, Untitled 4**, each: 2014, acrylic on paper, 29,5 × 40 cm

history by being seen to embrace it. That is part of the answer of *Shine on me*, and of the other paintings in this show. They are know-ing, a word Sturgis is happy to use of them.

The background of *Position and accord* has the same knowingly Op-ish checkerboard pattern as *Shine on me*; its central, stop-sign motif clearly borrows from a different moment in the history of abstract painting, one that itself borrowed from the graphics of motorway signage. Sturgis's stop-sign, though, seems oddly mobile, tilted to one side and clipped at the edge as though it is about to exit the canvas stage right. Rather than marking an historical end-point, it questions whether such end-points exist. In the same way, the red-and-yellow circle implies perspectival depth by sitting in front of the checkered background behind it, pulling the viewer into the picture rather than barring the way. What Sturgis calls the 'florid motif' on the picture's left edge makes a bow to its specific moment in abstraction not by shape but by palette.

There is another history being worked out in *Position and accord*, though, and that is its own. Throughout his career, Sturgis has painted in series—Stacked Paintings, Boulder Paintings and Circle Paintings, of which *Position and accord* is one. Fringed around the edge of the sticking-plaster shapes on its border are the little Sturgis dots that have appeared in much of his work, which identify it as his. These seem oddly frail things to have found themselves caught up in an art-historical battle, so much so that you occasionally fear for their safety. Like the works in which they appear, though, the dots are more robust than they seem.

Look again at the easy, speedy graphics of *Shine on me* and you find that—dots included—they are neither speedy, easy nor graphic. The white squares are not uniformly so: some are painted in flake white, some in titanium. Like all of Sturgis's canvases, this one has been primed with a roller and then worked over, slowly and methodically, with sable brushes. There are five or six layers of each colour—'You can see that it's hand-made', the artist says, 'even though [the surface] is solid enough to hide any kind of gesture.' A work such as *Learning to fail* is about the times it evokes, but it is also about the time it took to make. And it is about both of those things equally and at once.

[6] The art of the last 40 years, and painting in particular, has been vexed by the question of irony. The line between modernism and postmodernism has seemed absolute. You can be one thing or the other, but not both—modern or postmodern, ironic or actual, painterly or not. Sturgis is having none of this. There is no either/or in his work: 'I like the idea that things can speak in multiple voices', he says.

This is as true of the suite of four new works on paper in this show as of the canvases. Sturgis likes to refer to these works as drawings, although they are actually paintings made in thin acrylic washes. Again, there is the florid motif—or perhaps floral in this case, its elements here being petal-shaped—peopled with Sturgis-dots, like tiny cartoon characters silhouetted on flat-pack cartoon hills.

Just as the stop-signs in *Position and accord* and *Learning to fail* were prone to move, so the composition of Sturgis's drawings feels unstable, the grey petal-menhirs

in their foreground about to topple over. The organisation of colour seems simple—grey in front of green, green in front of oxblood, oxblood over yellow and white—although the perspective it implies feels tenuous: two grey petals overlap each other in one corner, one green petal seems to sit on the same frontal plane as the grey. As with the canvases, there is a sense that something may be about to kick off; an animation or characterfulness that seems light-hearted and yet faintly anxious.

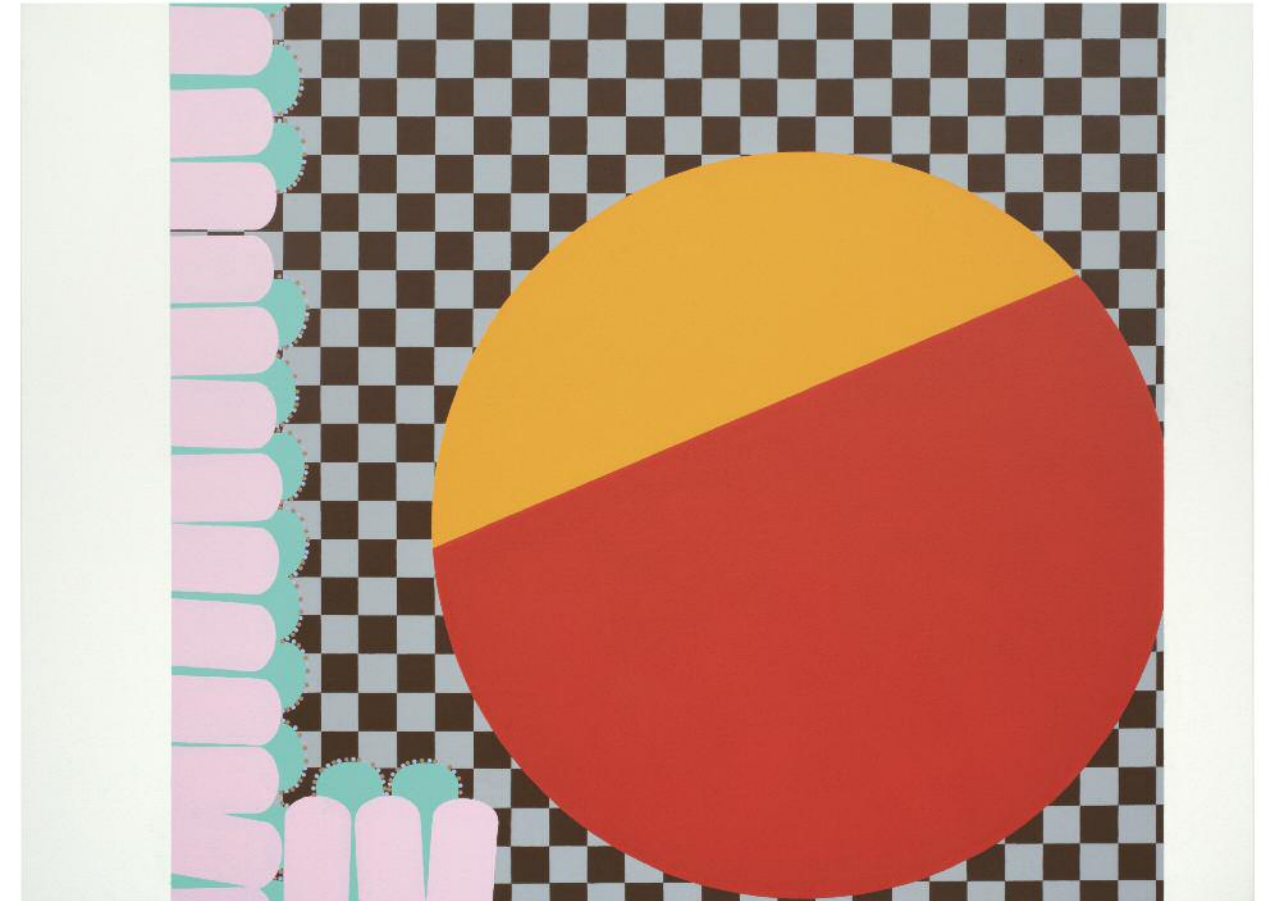
This duality is very much what the works are about. As with the larger paintings, the drawings resolutely refuse to take themselves seriously, but in a resolutely serious way. Looked at quickly, they might be taken for prints; and that mistake in identity is intentional. Things that are slow, painstaking and painterly set out to appear quick and mechanically made. They also appear to be identical, when they are not. Each is minutely different from the other, one having a nick of oxblood pigment missing from its top left edge, another an extra column of lemon-and-white squares on the right. They are, Sturgis says, 'not equal but equivalent'.

Why make things that are so difficult look so easy? You might think of a Jeff Koons balloon-dog, a piece of fairground trash to which insanely high production values and costs have been applied. Koons's aim was to ironise, though, and Sturgis is emphatically not an ironist. That is not to say that he doesn't see irony, but that his work takes it as a subject rather than as a process. Working in multiples is part of this double strategy. 'Series were the stock of much

[7]

modernist painting, implying ideas of progress or aping industrial manufacture', Sturgis says. But his use of concurrent series and multiples are also a means of working methodically, moving his painting along incrementally. They allow for the exploration of small things, change, order and difference, for experimentation. They acknowledge and diffuse aspects of the realities of modernist painting history but they do so in a painterly way.

It strikes me, as I write this, that Daniel Sturgis's fondness for the offhand may mark him as a very English artist. Writing of a work in an earlier show, he described its composition as being 'politely positioned'. It is an interesting choice of words. Rather than setting the disparate elements of his paintings against each other, Sturgis introduces them to each other—irony to painterliness, postmodernism to modernism, frivolity to seriousness. The meeting is amiable rather than combative, aimed at reaching consensus. There is never any doubt, though, who is calling the shots. 'Politeness sounds like a neutral thing, but it is actually more powerful than that', Sturgis says. 'It starts by asking the question, *What is the etiquette here?*'



Position and accord, 2014, acrylic on canvas, 120 x 165 cm

DANIEL STURGIS

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4th September-4th October 2014

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