

# The Shetland Times

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## Richly textured Spanish art

**THERE'S a lot of problems with the word "abstract".**

Use it in the context of art and you seem to have an instant reaction which is generally a switch-off. It doesn't seem to happen in music; Mozart wrote some of the most "abstract" music ever but it's universally loveable. However, nearly 100 years after the first acknowledged "abstract" painting in Western art (that's a Kandinsky watercolour, although some will argue about that) the majority of people will announce that they don't like "abstract" art, don't understand it and it does nothing for them.

If we stop looking for meanings and explanations and just open our eyes the label "abstract" can fall away. And to be honest, it's the wrong word anyway. Used literally it means to abstract or to take out, to remove from and could be used in the context of much of what we call "representational" art.

Using this argument, Van Gogh's paintings are "abstract" in that he took out from the French landscape elements which he put down in heavy, thick brushstrokes, lost the details and changed the colours to his own liking.

I prefer "non-referential" to "abstract". Non-referential suggests art that doesn't refer to the world around us. If read this way, the new show by Amador Vallina at the Bonhoga Gallery is not "exclusively abstract" as it is classed in the Shetland Arts Trust's press release.

Amador Vallina is a Spanish artist working currently in Soller in the north-west of Mallorca and this is his first exhibition in the UK.

His work is unashamedly uncompromising. Vallina seems to identify with the organic quality of materials, in the way that the artistic process becomes a natural process. His means of expression is textural and includes many non-artistic materials and processes.

As with his fellow countryman Antoni Tápies, a Catalan but an artist who is an obvious reference for Vallina, the materials he uses are taken to extremes. These materials speak just as materials do in nature, in the cliffs, the ground, the plants and the seashore. We can say that his work honestly imitates nature, not in representational terms but in the true use of the word "abstract" and in natural processes. They begin to look like bits of the real world around us.

The processes are complex. There's evidence of numerous pressings, overlays, techniques like collagraph (a mixture of collage and printing), embossing, collage and monoprint. The finished work includes prints but also pieces that do need to be called "works on paper" if only because the process is a mixture of painting, printing, collage and sculptural relief.

The work, almost to suggest a non-referential quality, is presented untitled although the artist does attach titles to them that haven't been used. Some refer to the process or the colour in the work while others make reference to things we can identify. Some are more obvious than others; numbers 42, 44, and 46 have leaf-like impressions more like organic embossing. Numbers 22, 24, 30 and 32 are heavily dependant on embryonic shapes.

In contrast, number 34 is the most geometric piece. It consists of two embossed shapes, white on white, one looking like the aperture of a camera. Nos. 29/31 contain strange markings which put them closer to neolithic carving than contemporary art. But that's a good way to approach it. The work from megalithic cultures often included geometric and non-referential imagery and we accept these as highly creative and everlasting forms of expression. We don't dismiss them because we don't know what they mean.

Vallina also uses sequences of pieces often generated from the same plate as in numbers to 40. This has the look of a highly rusted metal surface. Some of my favourites are the sequence of prints from 17 to 20 in which two shapes, one embossed and highly textured while the other, powdery black and organic, circulate the rectangle, exploring different ways of placing the image.

Not all work satisfactorily. Number 16 unfortunately reminds me in a very mundane way of how not to artex a ceiling or the results of removing floor tiles. However, in most cases, the work is closer to algae, mould, lichen and other organic growth.

In the most extensive of these groups, numbers nine to 14, there seems to be one plate used, recognisable due to its almost landscape-like horizontal mark. It is subjected to a whole gamut of effects. Numbers five and seven are the most textural incorporating debris, tiny stones, sand, and dried plant material. The paper has undergone a tremendous assault with a network of organic, plant-like lines criss-crossing it.

Throughout this show there's an absence of colour. It's earthy, sepia, browns and black – the colour of bitumen, rust, decay but the emphasis on texture more than makes up for this. And finally as you leave or enter by the door outside is a work that for me is one of the best things in this show; an entangled image suggesting fire-symbolism, cremation, charcoal and ashes. This is the most "Spanish" of the work on show. This is why, although it's certainly lots of things, serious, exploratory, richly textured and highly imaginative, it's not "abstract" in that narrow, misunderstood sense of the word.

The exhibition continues at the Bonhoga Gallery until 13th April.

Peter Davis