

# ARTIST PROFILE

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ISSUE 59  
artistprofile.com.au

Aus \$24.99  
NZ \$24.99

**REVIEWS:** This language that is every stone,  
23rd Biennale of Sydney: rīvus, Pliable Planes







# CALLUM INNES

## I'll Close My Eyes

THERE ARE APPROXIMATELY SEVENTY WORKS BY CALLUM INNES IN PUBLIC AND PRIVATE COLLECTIONS ACROSS AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND. IN 2006, THE EXHIBITION *FROM MEMORY* TOURED FROM EDINBURGH'S FRUITMARKET TO IKON GALLERY, BIRMINGHAM, AND ON TO SYDNEY'S MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART AUSTRALIA. IN ADDITION TO PAINTING, INNES HAS COLLABORATED ON ARTIST BOOKS WITH POETS AND WRITERS INCLUDING COLM TÓIBÍN, AND HAS UNDERTAKEN MONUMENTAL PUBLIC ART LIGHT PROJECTION PROJECTS. HE NOW DIVIDES HIS LIFE BETWEEN HOUSES AND STUDIOS IN OSLO AND EDINBURGH, WHILE EXHIBITING GLOBALLY.

Story PETER HILL

When I first met Edinburgh-born Callum Innes in Aberdeen in 1985, he was a very promising figurative painter in his early twenties. He looked destined to enter the canon of neo-expressionist painters, dominated then by Anselm Kiefer, Susan Rothenberg, Mimmo Paladino, Peter Booth, Nancy Spero, Julian Schnabel, and Steven Campbell. But he was curious about other things, new processes and techniques, self-generated rather than imported from London magazines and New York galleries.

The year before, while still a student, he won the Aberdeen Artists Society First Prize – unheard of before or since. It's been a pleasure to see his life and career unfold over nearly four decades, as he's exhibited all over the world, and moved from studio to ever-larger studio.

"I wanted to get away from the kind of figurative paintings I had been doing," he tells me. "They were full of gesture and personal mythologies. And I was too young to make grand paintings at that point. I hadn't lived enough, and there were falsehoods. I wanted to make a more authentic – for me – kind of art."

I once had hesitations about writing about the work of fellow artists. Artists who I have known for many years – in the case of Callum Innes, for decades. Then I read a wonderful book by Nikos Papastergiadis called *On Art and Friendship* (Surplus, 2020) in which the author catalogues numerous ways the reading, the experience, of an artwork is enhanced by a friendship between artist and writer, or artist and artist. It is dedicated to his own friend, John Berger. After describing how

"the practice of hospitality" can help sustain "a dialogue across differences," his conclusion is that "the spirit of creativity thrives in an atmosphere of friendship."

And so, I opened up my memory for this profile, and let it roam across several decades, studios, cities, and most importantly, conversations. I began by thinking of how he is constantly experimenting and improvising. And I reconfirmed these reflections in April over a two-hour Zoom meeting.

The real turning point for Callum came when he was awarded a one-year tenure at the Scottish Arts Council's Amsterdam studio. It was 1988, and I was returning to Scotland from Australia on a KLM flight. I had to transit in Amsterdam for twenty-four hours. Callum generously offered me a couch for the night, and we sat up talking into the wee small hours. I told stories about Nick Waterlow's Biennale of Sydney – I was reviewing it for *Artscribe* magazine – and my meetings with Hermann Nitsch on Pier 2/3. Callum gave me his overview of the current Dutch art scene. Neo-expressionist painting was still dominant in Scotland, but in Amsterdam – so close to Cologne, the de facto capital of the art world in the late 1980s – new tendencies were emerging: appropriation, deconstruction, and a cynically-named new form of abstraction tagged "neo-geo" (new geometric abstraction – Peter Halley, Ross Bleckner and others, all of whom hated the term). Callum didn't hitch his star to any of these. But he was curious. He was looking for a personal change. Reflecting on this important year from the viewpoint of 2022, he tells me, "I think when you are an artist, especially a young artist, and you get a residency in a new city, you should get out and about



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01 Callum Innes, photographed by Lasse Fløde, 2020

02 Doorway, entrance wall, *In Position*, Château La Coste, 2018, photographed by Gautier Deblonde

03 *From Memory*, 1989, oil on cardboard, 88 x 74 cm

04 *Resonance fifteen*, 2004, oil on canvas, 175.5 x 164.5 cm, photographed by Saul Steed

as much as possible. Visit galleries and artists' studios. Spend time thinking and reflecting. Then experiment a bit with something new. And when you get home, that is the time to get to work."

I remind him of a story he told me that night in '88: how he had recently gone into a gallery and all that was on display was a single red tulip, fixed to one of the white-cube walls.

"That was Paul Andriess's gallery. It was a bit of a sanctuary for me throughout my residency in Amsterdam. I spent a lot of time in there. I just loved the audacity of the tulip, that something so simple and pared back could have such a visual impact." I remembered the roll call of the gallery's artists from previous visits: Albert Oehlen, René Daniëls, Shirazeh Houshiary, Pieter Laurens Mol, Richard Wentworth, Jean-Marc Bustamante, James Lee Byars, Marlene Dumas, and Thomas Struth.

It wasn't a tulip but a tiny plant form, in Amsterdam, and a small scrap of corrugated paper, that changed Callum's entire way of working. He pressed the drawn plant, a wild cucumber, into the ridged paper, and meditated on the resulting marriage of shape and ground. On his return to Edinburgh, The 369 Gallery (where his studio was also based) was expecting a new body of figurative paintings from him. Instead, he exhibited sixty monotypes, each comprised of a series of lines. He was stepping through a portal into abstraction, through a logical progression of reduction that Bridget Riley, Ellsworth Kelly, and Mondrian had previously taken.

"Just after this, I discovered in Holland a new – new to me – kind of paper. It's coated with a paraffin wax and used for wrapping





*“ I was still frightened of the idea of the painting passing on a message to everyone. I wanted to get a sense of loss, of something being taken away ”*





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and protecting metal objects, particularly etching plates. And it was very cheap to buy. By this time the figurative painting I had been doing stopped, but I kept a sketchbook of similar natural forms to the cucumber plant. I added to it every day. Some of the early paintings on this paper were based on actual plant forms, paintings of leaves and stems. I was still frightened of the idea of the painting passing on a message to everyone. I wanted to get a sense of loss, of something being taken away. I wanted the idea of a painting becoming an object, whereas in my figurative painting I had been adding, adding, adding. These days I still add and add, but then I take it away, usually with turpentine. This paper from Amsterdam started the taking away.”

For almost a year, I shared an apartment in Edinburgh with Callum and the Scottish artist Kevin Henderson. I was a frequent visitor to his studio. I saw not just the development of his practice, but the unfolding of his career. A group exhibition at Glasgow’s Third Eye Centre in 1989, called *Scatter*, led to his selection for *The British Art Show 3* in 1990. Then galleries and dealers came calling. He has stayed loyal to Frith Street Gallery, in London, while adding many others around the world: Sean Kelly Gallery



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in New York and Los Angeles, Ingleby Gallery in Edinburgh; Look Galerie in Berlin, Fox Jensen, Sydney, Fox Jensen McCrory, Auckland, Kerlin Gallery, Dublin, and many others.

Using words about pure mark, colour, and process can be difficult for writers, and sometimes painful for readers. Many of the short YouTube clips of Callum painting and (un)painting – removing layers of paint with turpentine – will explain his methodology better than my words ever could. He once gave me one of his catalogue essays where the writer used the metaphor of “elevator surfing,” that late 1980s craze of American youth to jump on top of moving elevators and surf vertically up and down skyscrapers. It inspired me to write a short story called “The Up and Down Boys,” about the World Elevator Surfing Championships in Chicago. And decades later, the harnessing of gravity in the creation of his works makes me think of the current Biennale of Sydney and José Roca’s

**05** *Exposed Painting Carribean Turquoise*, 2021, oil on linen, 120 x 118 cm

**06** *Exposed Painting Carribean Turquoise* (detail), 2021, oil on linen, 120 x 118 cm

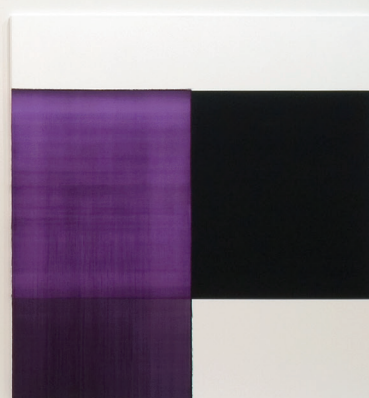
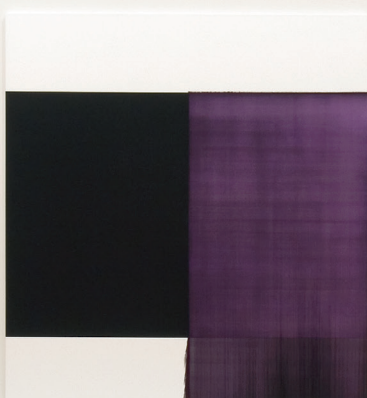
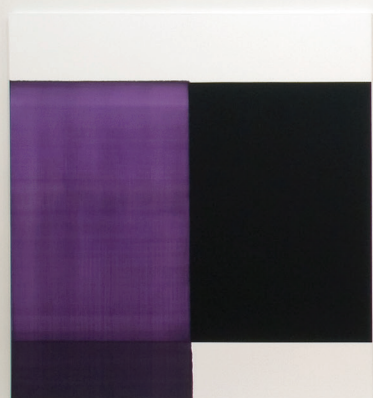
**07** *The Regent Bridge*, 2012, light installation, commissioned by Edinburgh Art Festival and Ingleby Gallery, photograph Callum Innes Studio

**08** *Exposed Painting Dioxazine Violet*, 2005; *Exposed Painting Dioxazine Violet*, 2005; *Exposed Painting Dioxazine Violet*, 2005, installation view at Callum Innes: *From Memory*, Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, Sydney, 2007, photographed by Jenni Carter



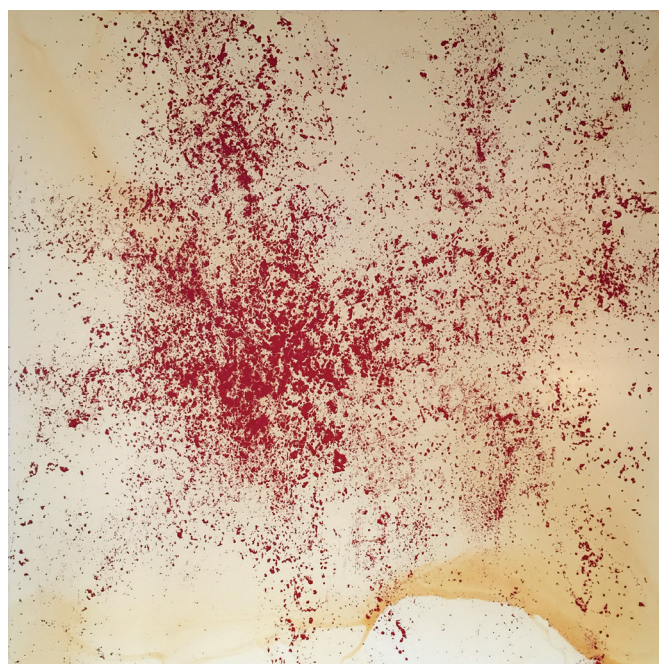
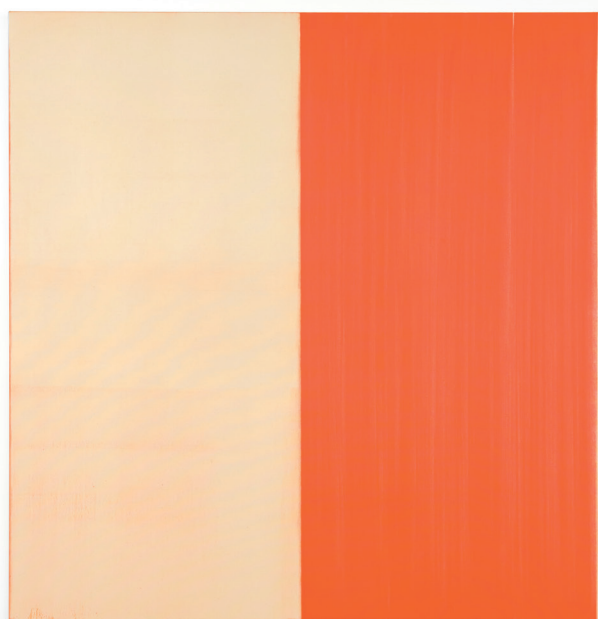






*"I was too young to make grand paintings at that point. I hadn't lived enough, and there were falsehoods"*

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**09** *Untitled Cadmium Orange Deep*, 2021, oil on canvas, 180 x 175 cm, photographed by Øystein Thorvaldsen

**10** *Untitled*, 2001, shellac and oil on canvas, 143 x 139.5 cm

**11** *Identified Forms*, 2005, oil on canvas, 212.5 x 207 cm

**12** Installation view, *water/colour*, Sean Kelly Gallery, 16 December 2010 - 29 January 2011

**13** Innes in his studio in Oslo, photographed by Callum Innes, 2020

Courtesy the artist and artist's studio, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, Fox Jensen Gallery, Sydney, Fox Jensen McCrory, Auckland, and Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, Sydney

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notion of natural forces – oceans, weather systems, non-human life-forms – being “participants” in the creative process.

It was in his Edinburgh studio in 2017 that I saw a number of large works in progress – black tape arranged in straight lines with slightly frayed edges deliberately, and almost imperceptibly, left ragged in some places. He uses the Scottish phrase “off-kilter” to describe when something is not quite aligned – such as an implied horizon line. Two years later, in Berlin’s Looock Galerie, I attended an opening of these tape works. They looked magnificent. As dark and mysterious as an Ad Reinhardt monochrome.

The monochrome has long been a fascination for Callum, as seen in masterpieces such as *Orange Wall Painting*, 2017, at Château La Coste in France. To one side of it hangs *Untitled No.22 Lamp Black*, 2017, and in between a diffuse green light projection towers above both.

Often his works are untitled, or are self-referential in that they are named after the colours that they comprise. But the titles of his books and his exhibitions are hauntingly poetic, often with erotic undertones, such as *I’ll Close My Eyes*, a major survey show at De Pont Museum in Netherlands, 2017.



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Still, the experimentation continues. He was holidaying in Naples when Mount Etna erupted. He gathered pieces of the volcanic glass and ash, ground them in a pestle and began to “play” with the black powder. Then he worked on a book of watercolours and text with Irish writer Colm Tóibín. The story and the images reference a sense of loss that both men have for a parent who died tragically too young. In Edinburgh, under the monumental arches at the back of Waverley Station, he installed a spectral lightwork as a piece of public art. A similar project will happen soon in Bergen, Norway, but will be even more painterly through overlapping skeins of projected light. “When I paint,” he tells me, “I like dissolving two colours together and creating a new colour. It’s about tension and creating space and light. I like to be surprised.” He talks about the combinations – Delft Blue with Transparent Orange, for example – as if they are newfound friends. There is a Zen-like clarity to his descriptions: “A deep violet and a red can create a third colour that is lighter than either of the two you started with.” He uses the word “spiralling” as often as off-kilter, in relation to the personal cause and effect of his works.

But in the end, he says, “It’s all about the light off the east coast of Scotland. Really, I’m still a figurative painter.” ■