

Biggs & Collings

“There simply isn’t a culture at the moment of finding abstract content fascinating. Instead, the audience is provided with stories”

EMMA BIGGS AND MATTHEW COLLINGS are well-known for, respectively, mosaic-making and art punditry. The married couple also collaborate on abstract paintings, whose rhythmic geometry and shimmering colour plays create a kind of visual music. They recently spent six months making *Five Sisters*, a two-part installation at York St Marys church, named after and responding to a 13th-century stained glass window in York Minster. The piece brackets *Clay End*, a floor mosaic by Biggs comprising thousands of potsherds from a medieval kiln site, with the joint work *Paintress*, a pair of pale, multi-panel paintings. The limpid tones employed reflect their ethereal inspiration: “All the other windows in York Minster are bright, but *Five Sisters* is beautifully grey and changeable, like mother of pearl,” says Collings. **INTERVIEW:** *Vici MacDonald*

Why put Biggs before Collings? Which of you is answering these questions?

Alphabetical order – we’re both answering. *[Via emails written by Collings – Ed.]*

You are a married couple. How does the labour divide up within your paintings?

We pool our different skills and experiences. MC does the painting, EB thinks up the formal ideas. We seldom give much consideration to the psychology of how we work together.

Matt’s writing is noted for a certain flip irony. Is this seen in your joint oeuvre?

The paintings aren’t as flexible as MC’s writing. They’re narrower. There are precedents for artists who are capable of a fun attitude when writing, but go serious in their studio practice – Ad Reinhardt, for example.

Is the slightly Festival of Britain feel of your “harlequin” paintings deliberate?

No. It is an unwanted association, though it may have something to do with an interest in the look of an industrial (optimistic) rather than post-industrial (pessimistic or blank) approach to modernism. What happened when high art came to a broader public was really exciting, whether it was jazz or curtain fabric. But the colours in our paintings have many different starting points. They’re never as bright or simple as “harlequin” suggests.

Your palette is united by dusty, almost Morandi-esque tones. Is there a theory behind your colour schemes?

No, it’s all done by eye. Theories are too limiting and sterile for making something. We do the first relationship, which is arbitrary: a colour next to another one, the paint put on in a certain way. Then we do another set. Then we keep going. Very soon in the process we start changing the colours. The changes are about dynamism, finding a balance that feels realistic, like something visual in the world. It’s not actually realistic,

of course, it’s abstract, but we’re thinking about how things actually look, what the effects of light are really like.

The paint handling is neat but looks quite relaxed. Do you think much about the nature of your brushwork, Matt?

A relaxed look is only a look. I really work at it, and I do sometimes think about it. I mean, I wonder what it is: why is it necessary to put the paint on in different ways – thin, thick, scrubby, scruffy, in one direction or different directions? I think it’s always – in the moment you’re actually doing it – to get a feeling of light. I don’t care about strokes as such, I think that’s just perverted, to fetishise brush strokes. It’s the illusion of light that is important.

Is it boring, filling in all those diamonds?

We never find it boring. We think about what we’re doing. We find it frustrating in the last stages, when we really feel the painting is finished, but there are still some balances that seem blank or dead. We’re pushing and pushing, making tiny decisions. It’s hard not to feel uncomfortable with that kind of work.

Matt, do you prefer painting or writing?

I find them both a mixture of pleasure and pain. The context is the decisive thing. With painting I really trust the situation, but I’m not always so fortunate with my writing jobs. Some of my jokes in my writing are about nervousness at the context: what is expected? Who am I talking to?

Are your paintings conceptual?

No, they’re visual. They aim for visual intensity. But they have very serious ideas, which are about order and structure.

Abstract painting seems to be getting trendy again. Any theories as to why?

We don’t see any difference between abstract and figurative. We like the abstract meaning of Luc Tuymans’ paintings, for

example. We think it’s unlikely that anything serious in present-day “abstract art” is really noticed by most people. There simply isn’t a culture at the moment of finding abstract content fascinating. Instead the audience is provided with stories of some kind, various unlikely intellectual “meanings” on the one hand, and on the other hand, glamorous narratives of artists’ carryings-on, or art-world mythologies. This is something we try and fight with our own stuff.

When does art become decoration – and is that a bad thing?

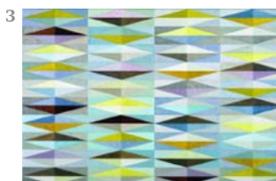
It’s bad when there’s no originality. The job is always to refresh tradition, so you can re-see it. Not to conserve tradition but to see your own world. Tradition provides strong visual modes. The impulse to refresh them comes from your own sense of reality, which is a shared thing, the ideas of the time, what Jackson Pollock called “the aims of the age”. “Decoration” isn’t really an issue. We don’t fundamentally disagree with the common notion that Matisse or Bonnard or Ellsworth Kelly or whoever, transcends “mere” decoration. We feel that’s just a problem of terms, or of language. We think all three are magnificently decorative actually. So is Pollock. But what does it matter what you call it?

Finally if you could live with any work of art ever made, what would it be?

EB: A mosaic of Moses and Elijah from St Catherine’s monastery in the Sinai, Egypt. Or any painting by Manet.
MC: We’d like something good by Matisse, like one of those paintings with lemons, or a grey one – the *Piano Lesson*. Or Picasso’s *Les Femmes d’Alger* [1907], or *Guernica* [1937]. Or the painting we’ve already got by Bob & Roberta Smith, called *TONY BLAIR IS A ZOMBIE OF DEATH*.

Exhibitions: Five Sisters, York St Mary’s, York, UK, ends 11 Nov, www.yorkstmarys.org.uk

CV Born: EB: 1956, Kent, UK; MC: 1955, London, UK Studied: EB: Leeds University, Leeds, UK; MC: Byam Shaw School of Art, London
Live and work: London Represented: Fine Art Society (FAS), London Artists’ website: www.emmabiggsandmatthewcollings.net



1 **Correct Original Plan** (2004)
oil on canvas, 152 x 228cm

2 **Two Squares** (2005)
oil on canvas, 117 x 243cm

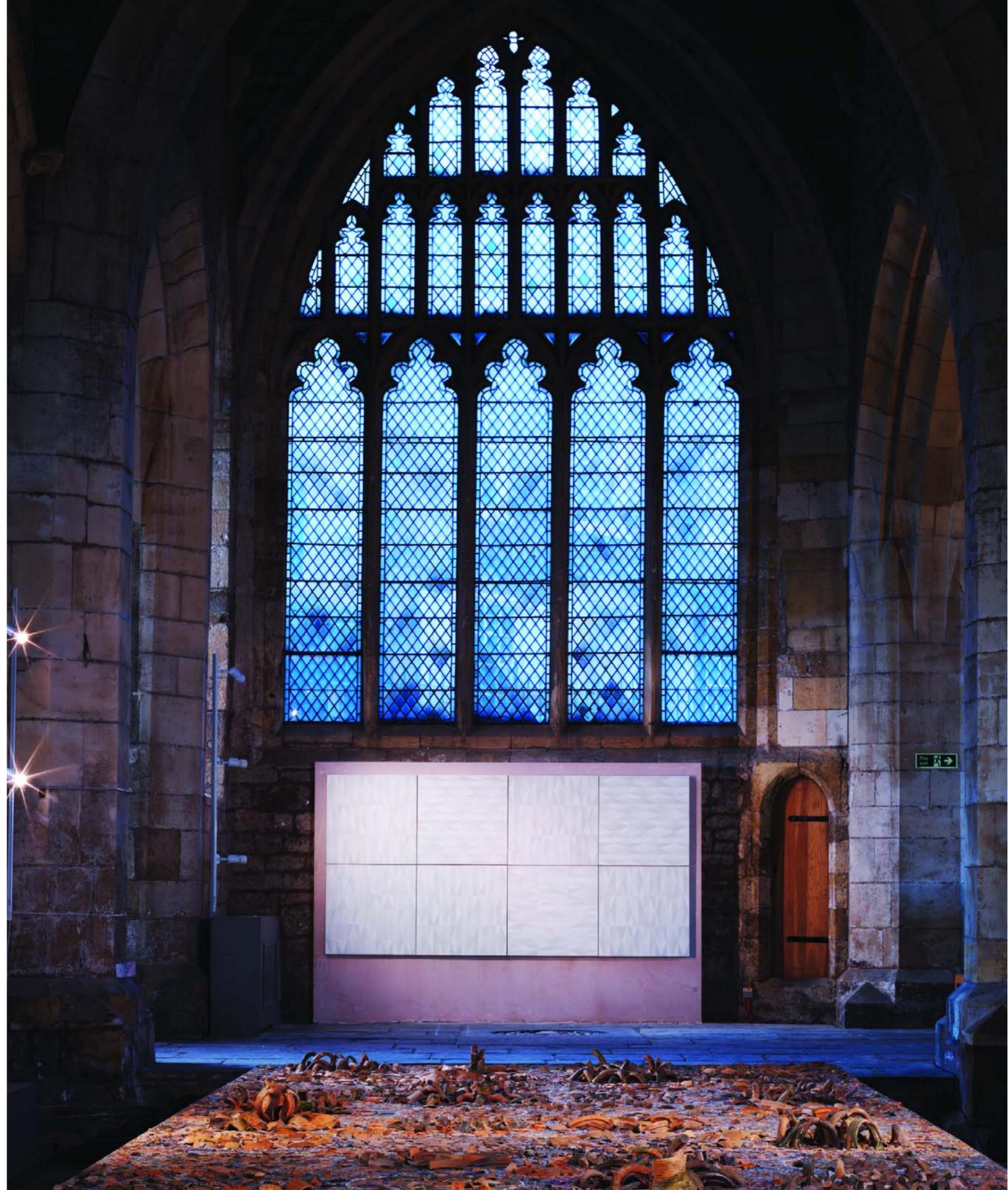
3 **Mother Town** (2008)
oil on canvas, 51 x 76cm

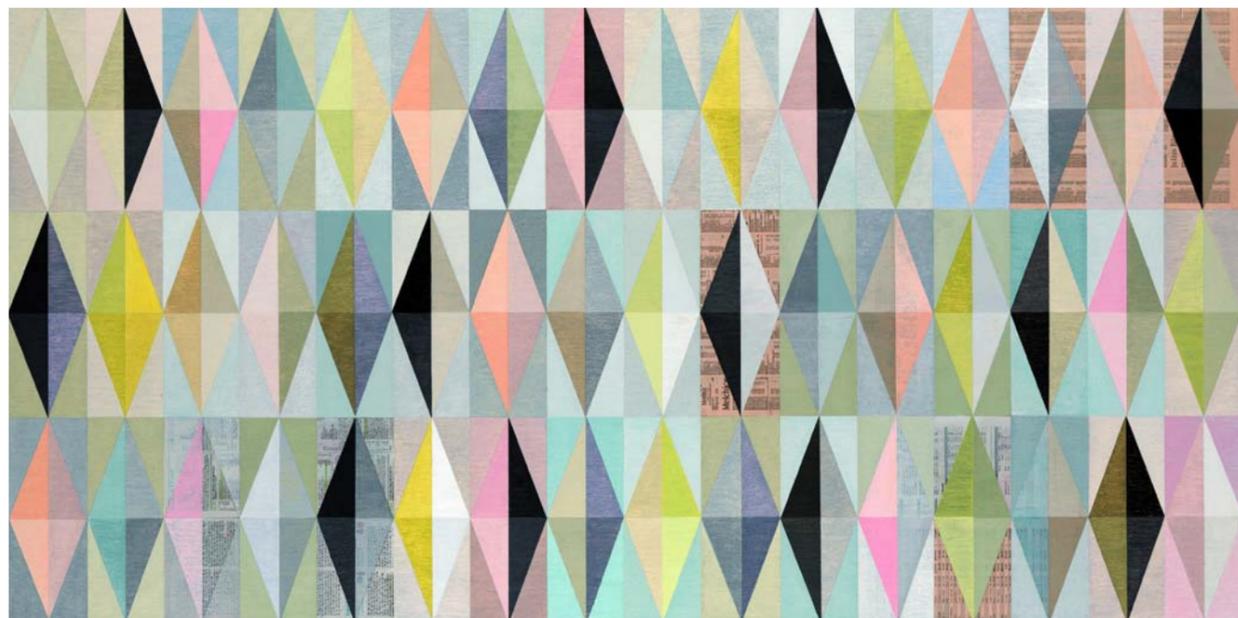
4 **Detail of Paintress** (2009), oil on canvas, 150 x 300cm, from *Five Sisters*

5 **Detail of Clay End** (2009), mosaic of potsherds, 1500 x 500cm, from *Five Sisters* installation, York, 2009

Opposite: Five Sisters (2009), mosaic, oil on canvas, installation view along *Clay End to Paintress* 1–8, York St Mary’s, York, UK, 2009

All images courtesy Emma Biggs and Matthew Collings; Clay End detail photo by Mikki Singoby; Two Squares courtesy the Higgins collection; Mother Town and Paintress courtesy FAS





Top: **Bentilee** (2008), oil on canvas, 512 x 760cm Above: **Melchior** (2009), oil and collage on canvas, 80 x 160cm



Nile Street (2008), oil on canvas, 76 x 63cm

All images courtesy Emma Biggs and Matthew Collings; Melchior courtesy PAS