

Celia Gullett

Spirit into matter

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There are paintings that tell stories, and there are paintings that ask to be inhabited. Like a piece of music, they resist immediate explanation, unfolding instead through rhythm, repetition and pause. Their meaning lies less in what they describe than in the relationships they establish: between colour and sound, weight and balance, surface and space. We do not stand before them searching for narrative so much as allowing them to work upon us over time. Celia Gullett's paintings belong to this quieter tradition. They invite a slower form of looking, one in which meaning emerges gradually through sustained attention rather than instant recognition.

Music has become one of the clearest ways she understands painting. She speaks about her compositions as "frameworks or armatures" upon which colour can create "harmonies, discords or just fields, whereby there might be a sonic possibility." Like a fugue by Bach, where no single note carries the melody alone, each colour, edge and proportion exists only through its relationship to the whole. The exposed linen is as active as the painted surface, the spaces between forms are as carefully considered as the forms themselves. Silence in music is never an absence. Nor in Gullett's paintings is the unpainted ground.

This understanding extends well beyond abstraction itself. Gullett looks as readily to fourteenth-century Sienese painting and Indian miniatures as she does to twentieth-century abstraction, not in search of visual similarities, but of shared ways of seeing. She studies the mass of a composition, the emotional temperature of colour and the subtle relationships that allow disparate elements to belong together. These works become less about sources of influence and more about companionship, in the conversation about what painting can be.

Reading Hisham Matar's *A Month in Siena*, it is difficult not to think of this kind of looking. Returning day after day to the paintings of Siena, Matar discovers that prolonged attention affects not only the work itself, but the viewer who stands before it. Looking is never passive. It becomes a way of thinking through experience. One passage from the book, which Gullett returns to often, feels particularly resonant: "*Maybe what an artist wants is to make a flat surface give way to open up a space.*" That simple observation feels remarkably close to Gullett's own ambition. Their surfaces remain resolutely present, yet through colour, rhythm and material they open onto something less tangible: a space where memory, emotion and perception are invited to unfold.

If the paintings possess this sense of openness, it is because they emerge through an equally open process. Gullett doesn't begin with a fixed image but with materials. Coarse loom-state linen, the grain of timber, the absorbency of the surface and the behaviour of paint all participate in the work from its earliest moments. She describes painting as "a way of understanding what it is to be alive, to be human. We have two realities, the one around us and the one within us... Making paintings is a way I can merge the two realities and make a material object." Materiality, then, is never simply technical. It is the means through which thought becomes physical, and feeling acquires form.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of Gullett's practice is her willingness to wait. Her paintings resist easy resolution, unfolding instead through a sustained conversation with colour, surface and time. "The meaning to me arises through the act of being engaged and listening to the painting itself," she states. Listening here, is not simply a metaphor but a method. Each work develops through careful attention rather than predetermined intent.

To spend time with Gullett's paintings is to experience something of that same attentiveness. They ask little more of us than the generosity with which they were made: to slow down, to look carefully, and to allow meaning to emerge gradually rather than all at once. Like music, they unfold through duration rather than explanation. They ask only that we remain with them long enough for something to emerge.

– Milena Stojanovska

ABOUT THE ARTIST:

Celia Gullett has been exhibiting her work since 2002. In 2024, a solo exhibition of Gullett's work 'Shaping Colour', was presented at South East Centre for Contemporary Art (Bega, NSW). Celia Gullett has been a finalist in major prizes including: the Mosman Art Prize (2002, 2011, 2012, 2016, 2025) in which she was awarded the Allan Gamble Award in 2025; Paddington Art Prize (2010); Fleurieu Water Prize - Fleurieu Biennale Art Prize (2012) and the Ravenswood Australian Women's Art Prize (2025). She has also exhibited in Singapore (2013), London (2017, 2018) and Sweden (2017). Her paintings are held in the Macquarie University Art Collection, South East Centre for Contemporary Art Collection and a number of national and international private collections.