



White-Faced Relief

Mary Martin

Not on display

Title/Description: White-Faced Relief

Artist/Maker: Mary Martin

Born: 1959

Object Type: Relief

Materials: Paint, Plywood, PMMA, Wood

Measurements: h. 640 x w. 945 x d. 115 mm

Accession Number: 31209

Historic Period: 20th century

Production Place: Britain, England, Europe

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The symmetry that dominates the two horizontal rows in Mary Martin's *White-Faced Relief* is deliberately disrupted in the lower section. Here, the largest rectangle has been broken into several proportionally related blocks, creating another layer in Martin's sequence of overlapping squares and rectangles. [1] Martin used the rules of proportional geometry to generate the sequence. Working initially with a grid of eight squares, she applied the 'golden section' ratio to suggest new divisions and relationships. [2] For Martin, this process was carefully calculated and unpredictable, she emphasised that 'the whole, or the effect is unforeseen until the work is complete'. [3]

The abstract arrangements of proportionally balanced squares and rectangles in Martin's work were intended to enhance self-awareness and sensitivity to the environment, as she described in a statement published in 1968:

'Our own apparent symmetry and real asymmetry are bound up with the degree of relationship between symmetry and asymmetry which we seek in a work. There are many deeper sensations which may be engaged which are concerned with our physical make-up. The inner logic, or content, is limitless.' [4]

In *White-Faced Relief* Martin uses colour, material and three-dimensional space to further develop these sensations. Black, grey and yellow ochre have been used to distinguish the different layers of the relief, creating a lively relationship with the white plastic front and back planes. [5] The artist Susan Tebby, who had worked as an assistant to Mary Martin, highlights the impact that this has on experiencing *White-Faced Relief*:

'The close proximity of the vertical elements means that it is impossible to see the colour of one stratum in its entirety at any one time: the viewer has to move in relation to the work in order to encompass the perimeter of colour surrounding a vertical element. In this way, the viewer becomes actively involved in making discoveries about the work, the extent of those discoveries being limited only by the effort expended by the viewer.' [6]

Mary Martin loaned *White-Faced Relief* to the University of East Anglia in 1968 for the exhibition 'Art and the Machine', organised by Alastair Grieve at the recently opened University Library. Later that year UEA acquired this important work for the University's pioneering collection of twentieth century abstract and constructivist art. [7]

Lisa Newby, January 2021

[1] For an overview of Mary Martin's work and the significance of *White-Faced Relief*, see Alastair Grieve, *Constructed Abstract Art in England: A Neglected Avant-Garde* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2005), pp.151-166. For another version of *White-Faced Relief*, see https://gulbenkian.pt/museu/en/works_cam/white-faced-relief-149349/

[2] For a full description of Martin's working process for *White-Faced Relief*, including diagrams, see Susan Tebby, 'Mary Martin: Working Methods', republished in *Mary Martin 1907-1968*, exh. cat.

(Huddersfield: Huddersfield Art Gallery, 2004), pp.18-23.

[3] 'Statement by Mary Martin, December 1967', published in Alan Bowness 'The Constructive art of Mary Martin', *Studio International*, 175, No. 898 (March 1968), p.121.

[4] 'Mary Martin: Reflections' in *DATA: Directions in Art, Theory and Aesthetics*, ed. by Anthony Hill, (London: Faber and Faber, 1968), p.95.

[5] Martin notes the influence of Paul Klee's 'positive-negative line' on her strategic use of colour in *White-Faced Relief*. Using a 'colour logic', she describes basing the relief on 'an idea of folded, coloured strata'. See 'Statement by Mary Martin, December 1967', *Studio International*, 175, No. 898 (March 1968), p.121.

[6] Tebby in *Mary Martin 1907-1968* (2004), p.19.

[7] For an account of the early development of this collection see Alastair Grieve, 'A Retrospective View of the University Art Collection', in *The University of East Anglia Collection of Abstract and Constructivist Art, Architecture and Design*, ed. by Veronica Sekules (Norwich: University of East Anglia, 1994), pp.7-9.

Exhibitions

Essays in Movement: Reliefs by Mary Martin, Mobiles by Kenneth Martin, ICA, London, 1960

British Constructivist Art, ICA/American Confederation of Arts touring exhibition, USA and Canada, 1961-2

Construction England, Arts Council touring exhibition, UK venues, 1963

Art and the Machine, UEA Library, Norwich, 1968

Mary Martin, Tate Gallery, London, 1984

Mary Martin 1907-1969, Huddersfield Art Gallery and touring venues, 2004-2005

Constructed, 40 Years of the UEA Collection, Sainsbury Centre, Norwich, 2008

'Rhythm and Geometry: Constructivist art in Britain since 1951', Sainsbury Centre, UK, 02/10/2021 - 17/07/2022

'Rhythm and Geometry: Constructivist art in Britain since 1951', Djanogly Art Gallery, UK, 07/03/2023 - 23/07/2023

'Kandinsky's Universe: Geometric Abstraction from Constructivism to Op Art', Museum Barberini, Potsdam, 15/2/2025 - 18/5/2025

Further Reading

Tania Moore and Calvin Winner (eds.), *Rhythm and Geometry: Constructivist art in Britain since 1951* (Norwich: Sainsbury Centre, 2021), p.75.

Alastair Grieve, *Constructed Abstract Art in England: A Neglected Avant-Garde* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2005), pp.151-166; ill. No. 202, p.158.

Susan Tebby, 'Mary Martin: Working Methods', republished in *Mary Martin 1907-1968, exh. cat.* (Huddersfield: Huddersfield Art Gallery, 2004), pp.18-23; ill. p.21.
