



Climbing Form

Mary Martin

Not on display**Title/Description:** Climbing Form**Artist/Maker:** Mary Martin**Born:** 1957**Object Type:** Sculpture**Materials:** Perspex, Steel, Wood**Measurements:** h. 355 x w. 70 x d. 70 mm**Accession Number:** 31631**Historic Period:** 20th century**Production Place:** Britain, England, Europe**Copyright:** © Estate of Kenneth and Mary Martin**Credit Line:** Bequeathed by Joyce and Michael Morris, 2014

In 1953 Mary Martin began a series of tall, narrow, constructed reliefs, titled *Climbing Form*. [1] In *Climbing Form* (1957) Martin experiments with a freestanding double-sided relief, with carefully calculated flat and sloping surfaces of black and white Perspex, unpainted wood and stainless steel. She has used rules of geometry to determine the measurements and proportions of the sections of the relief, while the black and white Perspex distinguish its front and back planes. As a result, *Climbing Form* leads the eye up and down its surfaces, tilting through the positive and negative spaces of its planes. [2]

In 1968 Martin described the space between the varying planes of her reliefs as 'a sphere of play, or conflict, between opposites, representing the desire to break away and the inability to leave the norm'. [3]

An early supporter of Mary Martin's work, Michael Morris purchased *Climbing Form* from Lord's Gallery in London in August 1957. Earlier that year, Martin had exhibited a large, freestanding *Climbing Form* relief as her contribution to the group exhibition 'Statements: A review of British Abstract Art in 1956' at the ICA. [4] This highlights the significance of the *Climbing Form* series to Martin's practice in this period.

As Alastair Grieve has noted, the *Climbing Form* series informed the double-sided mural that Martin created in 1957 for the architect John Weeks' new building at Musgrave Park Hospital in Belfast. [5] By working playfully with the modern materials and proportions of the new hospital building, Martin further developed crucial interconnections between her abstract reliefs and the environment in

which they were experienced. [6]

Lisa Newby, January 2021

[1] For a discussion of the Climbing Form series, with direct reference to this work, see Alastair Grieve, *Constructed Abstract Art in England: A Neglected Avant-Garde* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2005), pp.153-5.

[2] See Paul Martin, 'Analysis of Selected Works' in *Mary Martin*, exh. Cat. (London: Tate Gallery, 1984), p.35.

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

[4] The sales receipt for *Climbing Form* describes it as a maquette, suggesting a possible relationship with the work exhibited at the ICA in 1957.

[5] Grieve (2005), p.154.

[6] Lawrence Alloway discusses the significance of Martin's approach to working with the modern materials and proportions used in the architecture of the Musgrave Park hospital in 'Real Places', *Architectural Design*, 28, No.6 (June 1958), p.249. Copy available in the Sainsbury Centre Archives. For a recent critical analysis of the significance of Martin's Musgrave Park commission, see Sam Gathercole, "The Lost Cause of British Constructionism: A Two-Act Tragedy", *British Art Studies*, Issue 18, <https://dx.doi.org/10.17658/issn.2058-5462/issue-18/sgathercole>

Exhibitions

Mary Martin, Tate Gallery, London, 1984

'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

Alastair Grieve, *Constructed Abstract Art in England: A Neglected Avant-Garde* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2005), pp.153-5, ill. No.196, p.155.

Tania Moore and Calvin Winner (eds.), *Rhythm and Geometry: Constructivist art in Britain since*

1951 (Norwich: Sainsbury Centre, 2021), p.98.

Provenance

In October 1984, the University of East Anglia accepted a planned bequest from Joyce and Michael Morris (UEA Alumni). Michael died in 2009 and Joyce in December 2014 when the couple's wishes were implemented.
