

MATERIAL SYNTAX

"What Materiality ultimately proposes is that we learn (again) to see material, that we listen to matter and that we let the substances that art is made of communicate their own agency."

- *Materiality*, Petra Lange-Berndt

Material Syntax celebrates the growing focus on materiality as a fundamental aspect of artistic expression. Artists have continuously expanded the boundaries of painting, a medium traditionally constrained by the limitations of canvas and paint. Here, an eclectic array of materials are portrayed as a powerful catalyst in creative practices, shown in works spanning across decades, from the innovations of twentieth-century works by Pierre Cardin and Verner Panton, to the contemporary contributions of artists including Dillwyn Smith and Kevin Rouillard.

The exhibition unveils how artists have infused their works with the distinct properties of materials – using texture, pliability, and even historical resonance to build complex layers of visual and tactile experience. By integrating unconventional materials such as felt, velvet, polyester, wool tapestry, burlap and metal, the unique physicality of these materials becomes essential to the viewer's interpretation and understanding of the work.

Material Syntax beckons us to reconsider painting as not just a finished surface, but as a perpetually evolving dialogue between material, method and meaning. By weaving this rich, multi-faceted narrative, the result is a body of work which questions the boundaries of surface, form and production. In their pursuit of material explorations, Kearsey & Gold have brought together ten artists whose work reveals the profound, inquisitive and multifaceted role of materiality within the landscape of contemporary art.

– Curated by Roxane Hemard

Verner Panton (1926-1998)
Victor Vasarely (1906-1997)
Kevin Rouillard (b.1989)
Florence Reekie (b.1991)
Daniel Brusatin (b.1989)
Filippo Antonello (b.2002)
Pierre Cardin (1922-2020)
Dillwyn Smith (b.1958)
Guy Haddon Grant (b.1986)
Louis Benjamin Barrett (b.1999)

Experiments of Perception

Victor Vasarely, Verner Panton, and Kevin Rouillard have pushed the boundaries of perception through their manipulation of materials and how one perceives it in space.

Coined the father of Op Art, Vasarely's optical works create illusions of movement and depth, drawing the viewer's gaze into a dynamic visual dance. His works from the 1960s in particular showcase the artist's explorations where material, forms and perception become entirely intertwined. He often opted for durable, manufactured materials that could be replicated and made in large format. This practice was precisely used to enhance his visual tricks, fabricating works using industrial processes to then integrate within our urban environment. Made with wool and gold thread, C.T.A 102 is a timeless example of how material can be leveraged to manipulate perception on both a visual and spatial level.

In a similar way, the physicality of Rouillard's work focuses on how the everyday industrial material can be transformed into an immersive experience, merging the realms of sculpture, architecture, ready-made and minimalist art. His body of work explores the limits of artistic agency and the ways that creativity is shaped by both human and material boundaries. By hammering, flattening, and welding metal containers, Rouillard transforms "poor" materials into commanding, complex, contemplative works. As he puts it, the medium asserts its own rules and dictates the process. As the series progresses, the artist becomes physically and mentally worn down by the struggle of working with container metal. The result is a gradual shift from the artist's initial control to a place of surrender and exhaustion, ultimately questioning who is really in charge of the creative process; the artist or the material itself.

Verner Panton's bold, modernist design tampers with space and form in such a way that it amalgamates art with functional design. He often adapted his designs based on the material used which shows his sensitivity to their dexterity in creating immersive environments. His *Kyoto* tapestry is a significant example of how the artist used materiality to bring his vision of geometric, psychedelic aesthetics into different mediums, in this case, wool. The wool tapestry becomes more than a mere decorative element, but one that becomes architectural with a soft textured presence. It is rooted in ancient weaving practices but presents a distinctly contemporary aesthetic – reimagining it to suit a bold, modernist vision.

Dialogue of Surfaces

Contemporary artists Florence Reekie, Filippo Antonello and Daniel Brusatin harness materials in their expressive qualities, pushing beyond traditional aesthetics. Their work draws on the nuanced textures of fabric, enticing the viewer to reconsider the material – not as mere ornamentation, but as a central force to their paintings, where material takes over as the storyteller.

Reekie's use of suede, tarp and other recycled fabrics replaces the traditional canvas, reflecting a modern engagement with consumerism and recycling. Her subject matter counters her experimental backdrop, instead retaining the lusciousness and emotionality evoked by Old Masters drapery, offering us a world of nostalgia. However, her imagery draws from contemporary history, referencing designers such as Vivienne Westwood and Jean Paul Gautier, continuously decoding fabric in its symbolic and emotional significance. Here, the surface of the tarp takes a new modern significance, completely isolated from the figure and context it traditionally clothed.

Antonello's use of velvet expands this dialogue on the transcendent qualities of material, now a symbolic substitute to the accustomed canvas. For Antonello, fabric is more than just a visual element but a narrative vehicle that carries collective experiences. His process explores the tensions between control and spontaneity – continuously manipulating his canvas and using oxidising agents in place of paint. This rhythmic creative exchange at the heart of his practice becomes a dialogue or dance between material and artist. It encapsulates his pursuit to uncover the complex layers of meaning that are embedded within a physical textile or fabric. Here, the sensual quality of velvet is contrasted with the violence of bleach.

Daniel Brusatin's ideology revolves around the fight to redefine mediums, pushing the boundaries of painting beyond the constraint of its frame. Known for his experimentation with materials, he is driven by innate curiosity, seeking to uncover the “canvas”'s physical and spiritual presence within a space. The works spark an exploratory journey, stirring the viewers' imagination as they move and interact with it. He approaches material not merely as a functional element, but as a dynamic participant in the works' narrative, often selecting materials to provoke thought and elicit connection. With this comes a yearning to bring the viewer into both the work and the process which to him is the greatest quality of materiality.

Methods of Production

A conversation unfolds between the mass-produced and the artisanal, as seen in the works of Pierre Cardin and Dillwyn Smith.

Dillwyn Smith's experimentative work is deeply attuned to the metaphysical qualities of materiality. He began as a colour field painter heavily inspired by Renaissance masters such as Piero della Francesca and Tintoretto, but has since shifted his practice to stitched fabric works – what he calls “placebo paintings”. His selection of material and its colour is entirely guided by his memories and associations tied to his geographical surroundings. The works therefore carry a conversation between the materials themselves and their cultural, historical, and emotional resonances. The work is incredibly organic, transforming light from a mere illuminator to an active participant. Light responds to the material in real time to changing environmental conditions, creating a sensorial experience of materiality where the viewer perceives the subtleties in colour, texture and form that continuously fluctuates.

Where light enhances the material used, Pierre Cardin's use of tapestry absorbs light in a way that reinforces its commercial quality – blurring the lines between fine art and mass production. Known for his futuristic and avant-garde fashion, the French designer extended his vision to tapestry, experimenting with materials beyond traditional textiles, such as metal and vinyl – embracing both function and experimentation. His bold colours and patterns introduced a modern, visually arresting quality to tapestry, helping to make them feel like statements of art rather than traditional decorative pieces. Cardin's tapestry work is a reflection of his broader design philosophy, pushing the boundaries of material and form whilst bringing a new level of sophistication and modernity. The tension between the two works lies in the way light can either support a work or reinforce its mass-produced, iconic essence – a dichotomy of material as a conceptual tool versus a sensuous, physical medium.

Dishevelled Room

Placed within Kearsey & Gold's emblematic dishevelled capsule room is a sculpture by London-based artist Guy Hudson Grant. The tall, thin, and seemingly fragile work holds a grounded yet rough form that blends introspective and cultural narratives. Positioned between abstraction and figuration, Grant's creations draw inspiration from Greek mythological creatures and classical sculpture, reflecting an ongoing exploration of abstract and classical styles. What lingers in prominence, however, are the vivid traces left by the artist's hand, guiding the viewer into a dynamic and rhythmic experience. One catches glimpses of realism amid the turbulent, chaotic and organically textured nature of plaster.

Framing Grant's sculpture is a custom backdrop created in-situ by London-based artist Louis Benjamin Barrett. The furniture designer's practice redefines functional objects through innovative spatial design, transforming the everyday item into a sculptural experience. Titled *Suspended Earth*, the piece confronts the viewer with the paradox of earth as both a physical foundation and an ever-shifting force. By translating a typically grounded, tangible substance into a flexible, suspended form, the artist invites reflection on the fluidity and adaptability of our relationship with nature. These elements evoke a dynamic tension between the material's earthy origin and its new, weightless existence, offering a meditation on impermanence and reconstruction. Barrett's "curtains" create a beautiful, raw yet protective stage to Guy's sculpture – forever honouring the essence of fluid, organic and natural forms.