

Exhibition Guide

Betsy Bradley
Chasing Rainbows

3 December 2021 — 13 February 2022
Second Floor Galleries

Ikon presents the first major solo exhibition by Midlands-based artist Betsy Bradley (b.1992, Bath). The show explores Bradley's approach to painting as a life force that traces "the dance between thought and action". Her meditative practice is rooted in mark-making, surprise and play. Always intuitive, her inspirations come from what she describes as "miraculous everyday phenomena", such as the incidental colours of a worn billboard, or the rainbows reflected through the glass of her front door.

At Ikon, Bradley presents recent paintings made on voile and organza. These translucent fabrics dissolve the distinction between image and environment, inviting the play of light. Flashes of neon acrylic dart across the works, glowing with intensity. Experimenting with materials, she draws upon found objects and reclaimed fabrics to create her painting supports, improvised structures and mark-making brushes. Here, dust sheets are transformed into canvases and discarded wooden slats become painterly tools when tied to dustpans.

Moving through the galleries, viewers encounter three-dimensional works made in dialogue with Ikon's architecture. Materials are suspended from the ceiling to make a floating canopy or draped across trapezes. Driven by impulsive gestures, Bradley celebrates chance as a means of freeing her artistic process and the viewer's experience. Inspired by Eastern and Western traditions, of Wabi Sabi, Arte Povera and Mono-ha, she explains: "I see my work as an invitation to the present moment – an escape as well as a grounding – which enables the viewer to let go."

Having studied her MA Fine Art at Birmingham School of Art, Birmingham City University from 2017–18, Bradley emerges as a contemporary painter whose practice is one of ongoing evolution. Jostling with the conventions of painting by refusing to consider its limitations as a medium, her works reveal the sculptural potential of the canvas and foreground the value of artistic instinct.

IKON

Gallery 4



1. *Kensho* (2020) Acrylic on voile

This work is the result of a trip to a haberdashery shop. The surface is voile – a lightweight fabric used to make curtains and clothing. Stretched over a readymade frame, Bradley has applied the black acrylic wash with a homemade brush and the orange with a squeegee (a tool used to control the flow of liquid on a flat surface). This method of application means that the paint is absorbed quickly into the surface, creating an unexpected texture that mirrors the grain of the wood. The resulting object resembles a silk-screening frame, however it has not been used for this purpose. Rather, it has its own essential character, which is underscored by its title, *Kensho*, a Japanese term from the Zen tradition, meaning “to see one’s nature”.



2. *Above the Clouds, Beneath the Trees* (2021) Acrylic on voile, found wood, hemp rope

This sculpture plays with the form of painting. Suspended from the gallery ceiling, it moves ever so slightly with the circulation of air in the room, directly interacting with its environment and appearing to breathe. For Bradley, the act of swinging gives a sense of weightlessness and “letting go”. However, it is not an object intended for use (the irony being that the painting could not support her body). Rather, the structure demonstrates the poetics of painting, as “an entity that materialises out of thin air”.



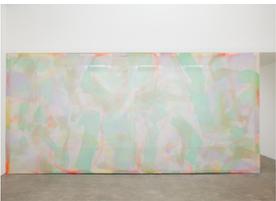
3. *Juggernaut* (2021) Acrylic, emulsion and spray paint on dust sheet

The dust sheet is a common material found in Bradley’s practice, predating her use of more delicate fabrics. There is a humour to this work, titled *Juggernaut*, emphasising the unstoppable force behind its gestural forms. Once stretched, the improvised canvas was placed on Bradley’s studio floor, where she used a variety of homemade tools to apply the paint. Traces of spray paint reveal quick and deliberate actions and, at the same time, a loss of control. Bradley enjoys the release of pressure from the aerosol can, regarding this material as coloured air, the energy of which is caught by the sheet.



4. *Ultrasonic* (2020) Acrylic on muslin

A contrast between muted, earthy tones and bright, synthetic colours is often found in Bradley's paintings. Watering down paints and mixing fluorescent and darker colours produces surprising results. The combination of warm black, neon yellow and cobalt blue in *Ultrasonic* creates a strong sense of visual vibration. This effect might be due to the cobalt, as an element found in supernovas, giving the other colours a powerful, luminous quality. The metallic pigment is captured by the sheer fabric, which is so fine that the crossed bars of the stretcher are accidentally printed on its surface – a chance occurrence that the artist embraces.



5. *Boogie Wall* (2021) Acrylic on voile

Bradley replaces an entire partition wall of the gallery with a voile fabric structure, offering faint glimpses of movement as bodies move on either side. The phenomenological aspects of her practice are observed here, as the painting changes according to the position of the viewer; looking face on to the canvas, there is a faintness to the forms and colours, which sharpen at an oblique angle. Inviting the movement of the viewer's body, the work is activated and becomes a playful surface of continual motion.



6. *Chi* (2021) Acrylic and spray paint on voile



7. *Totem* (2020) Acrylic on organza

As a student at the University of Brighton, Bradley took part in an exchange programme with Nagoya University of the Arts, Japan. The classes introduced traditional art forms, including calligraphy. Students were encouraged to create characters using large tools and sheets of paper placed on the floor. She remembers improvising work with a brush taller than herself and involving her whole body in the mark-making. It was during this trip that she stayed at a Buddhist monastery where she encountered a philosophy and practice that increasingly influences her work and life. The work *Totem* has a spiritual significance, like a wall scroll with abstract gestures, which embody an uplifting energy and invite the viewer to let go.

Gallery 5



8. *Canopy* (2021)
Acrylic and spray paint on voile



9. *Pure Shores* (2021)
Sand

Regarding painting as an adaptable, uninhibited form, Bradley animates the surface and encourages a level of interactivity between viewer and artwork. The middle gallery contains a large, suspended canopy, which seemingly floats across the space. Reimagining the gallery ceiling as a painterly sky, its translucent fabric invites light and shadow to play with the work, creating transient sensory moments for the viewer. Coloured sand surprises the viewer by taking on the form of painted gestures; improvised, impulsive moments that could be swept away in an instant, emphasising Bradley's interest in impermanence and the unpredictable.

Gallery 6



10. *Through Whispers* (2021)
Acrylic and spray paint on voile



11. *Shapeshifter* (2021)
Dust sheet from the artist's studio, found wood

Shapeshifter contains a plank of wood found by Bradley on the street. It already had its black and orange marks and accumulated more paint whilst in her studio. It rests between the floor and a curtain, used as a dust sheet and also covered with flecks of paint, held up by another block of wood. Balancing on the floor, it captures the spirit of Mono-ha – a 20th century art movement led by artists in Japan and Korea – combining natural and industrial materials in an unaltered and ephemeral state. Bradley sees this work as painting in its most flexible and fluid form.



12. Whirligig (2021)
Acrylic and spray paint on muslin

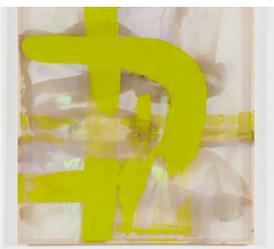


13. Inner Winds (2020)
Acrylic and spray paint on muslin



14. Fireworks (2021)
Acrylic on dust sheet

Stretched with a thicker, interlining fabric, this painting has a more solid form. It was painted in Bradley's garden, where it was open to the elements. Working on a large scale, with heavy wooden tools, translated her physicality into painting. For Bradley, this is an act aided by the practice of letting go and finding space in the mind, an important part of Buddhist meditation. Made for the gallery, the painting mirrors the dimensions of the facing window.



15. Abracadabra (2021)
Acrylic and spray paint on interlining



16. Surfing Between Dreams (2021)
Acrylic and spray paint on voile
Surfing Between Dreams is composed of two layers of voile creating a moiré pattern – an intricate, geometrical design resulting from the superimposition of curved lines. The optical effect is familiar, like looking through the folds of a net curtain. Watery forms of turquoise and pink have a dreamlike quality, which is disrupted by the sprayed, green lines. The most recent in this series of experiments, Bradley has allowed “the painting to paint itself”, accepting the flecks and bleeds, never returning to add highlights or finishing touches.



17. *Exhale* (2020)
Acrylic on voile, found wood, hemp rope

More recently, Bradley has started painting on loose fabrics, enjoying the movement of the material and the idea that "it is not fixed". In ***Exhale***, the fluidity of paint is captured in voile. Suspended from the ceiling, with rope and a wooden frame reminiscent of a trapeze, the painting gives in to gravity, gathering in a loose pile on the floor. It has a downward pull, like a cascade, giving a sense of release, like a long, outward breath.



18. *Red Door* (2021)
Acrylic and spray paint on interlining



19. *Jungle* (2021)
Acrylic and emulsion on dustsheet



20. *Spirited Away* (2019)
Acrylic on voile



21. *Midnight Magic* (2020)
Acrylic and spray paint on muslin

Second Floor

Exit

15. *Abracadabra* (2021)

16. *Surfing Between Dreams* (2021)

21. *Midnight Magic* (2020)

Gallery 6



14. *Fireworks* (2021)

17. *Exhale* (2020)

20. *Spirited Away* (2019)

10. *Through Whispers* (2021)

18. *Red Door* (2021)

19. *Jungle* (2021)

13. *Inner Winds* (2020)

12. *Whirligig* (2021)



11. *Shapeshifter* (2021)



8. *Canopy* (2021)

9. *Pure Shores* (2021)

Gallery 5

Lift

Entrance

7. *Totem* (2020)

4. *Ultrasonic* (2020)

Gallery 4



6. *Chi* (2021)

5. *Boogie Wall* (2021)

2. *Above the Clouds, Beneath the Trees* (2021)

3. *Juggernaut* (2021)



1. *Kensho* (2020)

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