

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

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The New York Times

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 29, 2017

Gary Hume's Valentine to His Mum

After a long break, an artist was willing to take risks.

By BARBARA POLLACK

No one would accuse Gary Hume's paintings of being confessional or revealing. He came to fame on the crest of the Young British Artists emerging in the late 1980s, but is often described as the least flamboyant of the bunch.

Instead of the exhibitionism of peers like Tracey Emin or Damien Hirst, Mr. Hume practices self-restraint, modestly producing near-abstractions that opaquely deflect straightforward narratives or easy interpretations.

So it is highly surprising that in his latest shows this fall at Sprüth Magers in London and Matthew Marks in New York, Mr. Hume has turned to a personal subject, namely his mother, or mum, as he affectionately calls her. Mr. Hume, 55, has not shown in three years, taking a break for the first time in a 30-year career that was covered in a Tate Britain retrospective in 2013. Having experimented with new materials and approaches to painting, he became willing to take a big risk with what he depicted.



GARY HUME, MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

"Mourning," 2016.



"Mum in Bed," 2017.

Pollack, Barbara. "Gary Hume's Valentine to His Mum," *The New York Times*. October 29, 2017, p. F30.

"I just wanted to paint a picture of my mum, and I wanted to do it to honor her," he said this summer in an interview at his Catskills farmhouse, where he and his wife, Georgie Hopton, live four months of the year, spending the rest in London.

His mother, Jill Henshaw, 85, has dementia. She raised five children pretty much on her own after his father abandoned the family when Mr. Hume was an infant, he said. Mr. Hume described the relationship with his mother in only the most loving terms, emotions that made the painting process challenging. The artist found he was incapable of producing a portrait that objectively captured his mother, either as the vital young woman he remembered managing a doctor's office or in her current condition.

"Even though I wanted to honor her, there's a selfish paradox where I can't see her as a person, I can only see her as my mum," Mr. Hume said, stating that the paintings turned out to be mainly about his relationship and feelings for his mother, rather than a snapshot of her appearance or personality.

The series is divided into two parts: works that reflect the artist's point of view as a child looking at his mother, based on family photographs and memories; and paintings that capture his mother from his more adult perspective, based on recent visits. One painting, "Mum Twisting, 2015," was inspired by a photograph taken by Mr. Hume in 1968 during a summer outing in Cornwall. The resulting painting is a swirl of lines circling above the viewer, mirroring the patterns of his mother's dress as she twirled about in the wind, standing above her son on a grassy hill.

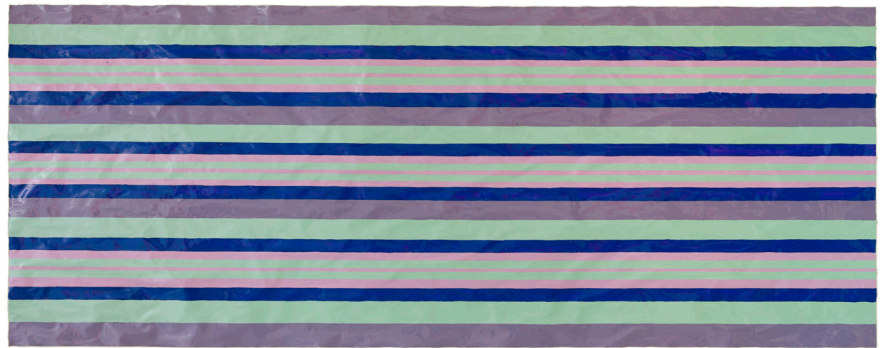
Another painting, "Mum in Bed, 2017," solemnly conveys the outlines of his mother's face in a steely shade of blue against a background of institutional green. Here, the artist is looking downward from the standpoint of an adult. Mr. Hume said there was one work, "Grandma Looks at the Garden, 2017," that presented his mother's world from the perspective of her grandchildren, but nothing in this striking composition of silhouettes of flowers revealed this back story.

In fact, the true innovation of this latest body of work is not the subject matter, but Mr. Hume's new approach to paint on paper, allowing the material to pucker and curl under the weight of the slick enamel house paints he employs. He is best known for his glossy paintings on aluminum, creating reflective planes by sanding down layers repeatedly until achieving a flawless sheen. But in this new work, the surface of the paper is as crimped as a seersucker suit, defying standard techniques for sizing paper to avoid just such an effect.



NATHANIEL BROOKS FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Gary Hume seen through his sculpture "Wonky Wheel" at his home in the Catskills.



IMAGES VIA GARY HUME/DACS, LONDON, 2017, SPRÜTH MAGERS AND MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

"Windbreak," 2016.

"I love the waviness. Without the waviness, forget it," Mr. Hume said, explaining that all of the paintings that approach his mother from the perspective of a child were created this way. The fragility of the paper and the reflection of light created by the wobbly effect seem perfectly suited to such subjects as "Mum's Cardigan, 2015," a line of white, oversized buttons against a pale mauve background, or "Rain, 2017," a pattern of yellow dripping lines against an orange sky.

Inspiration is an uncomfortable term for Mr. Hume, who recoils at any interpretation that reduces the work to merely being a response to his visits with his mother. He prefers to think about the relationship to subject matter as a process of "permissions," or, as he explains, the subject of a painting allows him to explore aesthetic choices that may seem unusual or out of character for him. He points to a large work on paper, a field of purple, pink and green stripes, titled "Windbreak, 2016," recalling a picnic at the beach and all the families huddled behind lengths of fabric to protect them from the wind.

"I love stripy paintings," he said. "I think stripy paintings are lovely. But, I can't make stripy paintings. There are already great stripy paintings out there. But when I'm thinking about this holiday with my mum and thinking about the windbreak and how she acted as the windbreak, I can make a stripy painting. The permission is the windbreak."

A new technique allows paper to pucker and curl under the weight of slick enamel.

He tears up at times when talking about his mother, but eschewed overt sentimentality when creating these paintings. That may be why so many people have described his work as "cool," a label that he said was a misnomer.

"I've never thought of my work as cool," he said. "I think all my work is hot, but maybe I've got a lower boiling point."

Indeed, he said that all of his work, not just the series about his mother, had something to do with love.

"I think if you don't love the moment you are doing it, if you don't love the line, if you don't love the brush with the paint on it, it doesn't work," Mr. Hume said. "I have to love it while I'm doing it. If I'm not loving it, I don't like it."