



Connectivity and Continuation:
Charting dualities and similarities in the
artistic practice of Jessica Douglas

by Mirabelle Field

Jessica Douglas, *Joined*, 2021, acrylic on canvas, 450 x 350mm

At first glance, Jessica Douglas' art appears deceptively simple. The balance between basic shapes and primary colours that endures through her distinctly different mediums ensures that her artistic creations seem familiar and recognisable. There is an inherent and immediate connection between the viewer and the artwork upon first sight. It is this connection, the power of art to feel at once bright and comfortable, new and intimate, which resonates throughout Douglas' practice. Douglas herself has emphasised the importance of this connectivity, in the artists own words, *my work explores our need to relate to and connect to each other; to overcome and cross the boundaries which isolate and separate us*. In this exhibition, Douglas presents a diverse array of artworks created across an extended period of time, all united around several key concerns and themes.

Upon entering *Cells* we immediately encounter a unique and immersive space of bold colour and geometric forms. Woven plastic mats adorn the walls and floor, composed of plastic golf balls, syringes, and plastic tubing. These seemingly disparate and mundane elements combine to create intricate patterns through the artist's touch. Through the use of the modern medium of plastic and their display in an art gallery context the traditional technique of weaving has been removed from its historical conventionality. Traditionally, weaving has been relegated to the status of craft and the context of home, due to its role as a female centred creative process and it's close relationship to indigenous practices in New Zealand and across the Pacific. By displaying these woven works on the wall and floor, Douglas successfully elevates this vital, historically female, medium into a space of traditional artistic display, whilst also alluding to their potential functionality. For the artist, these works evoke the role of weaving in major life-cycle ceremonies, such as births, weddings, and funerals. During the course of these ceremonies the woven mat takes on a ritualistic identity, and their relationship to the traditional role of women as wife, mother, and homemaker is emphasised.

Plastic is a deeply contentious medium, which comes into our collective consciousness as a symptom of our current climate predicament and the tendency for our contemporary social attitudes to the environment. The creation of such physically enduring artwork in the traditional and historical medium of weaving imbues plastic with new meaning. Aware of these concerns, Douglas no longer creates work with plastic, further highlighting both its nature as an antagonistic and evocative material and the importance of charting developments in artistic practice.

The different coloured plastic golf balls visually imbue these woven mats with vibrancy and contrast. Symbolically, they are intended to represent red and white blood cells, yellow symbolises infection. The perforated holes inherent in their makeup allude to the potential for interaction and movement between each element. At the time of their creation, from 2003 - 2007, the specific investigations into biology - which saw her draw on intravenous tubing lines and syringes - were related to Douglas' personal circumstances. But they take on an entirely new, and critical, meaning in our current climate of pandemic crisis. It is this investigation into cells, as the title tells us, which unites the diverse body of work presented in this exhibition.

Another body of work, intimately related to the woven mats through its artistic concerns and symbolic endeavours, emerges as we move through the gallery space. Though immediately diverse in their medium and technique, threads of meaning connect these artistic creations. Here, Douglas has presented a series of small scale paintings, hung at regular intervals in the gallery space. The artist describes, *these paintings continue the conversation around borders, flow between spaces, and the relationships between separate entities*. The woven mats provided an initial source of inspiration and a starting point for this new series of paintings, which were created following a twelve-year break from artistic production.

The use of bright colours and geometric, primary shapes, seen in both the paintings and the plastic works, produces an immediate visual connection between the seemingly disparate series. This technique serves to emphasise Douglas' bold use of colour and, in these paintings, it allows the diverse array of colours to interact with one another, creating a sense of dynamism and movement. This interaction is the primary focus of Douglas' artistic practice: interaction of colours, forms, people, artwork, artist, and viewer. These paintings are created from repetition of the base geometric shape that Douglas utilised in her earlier plastic mats, the circle. This circle, as the only naturally occurring geometric shape, refers to Douglas' biological interest in the cell, but it also references interconnection on a socio-cultural, personal level. The inter-lapping circles represent our need to interact with and depend upon one another, our need for connection. In our pandemic climate both the cell and a sense of personal connection is of vital importance and will resonate with viewers in deeply personal and unique ways.

The small scale of the work further reinforces this personal connection, they are at once intimate to view, and small enough to be held and cradled during the painting process. This process is extensive - each work involving many very thin layers of paint built up on the canvas to create an interplay between the flatness of the paint surface and the illusionary three-dimensionality of the shapes, which appear to move and swirl before the eye. These paintings emerge from the artistic process as if they have a life of their own, developing from a meditative headspace through a layered process of paint application. In contrast, the woven plastic works are highly planned and created through a specific and technical process. In this way, the two bodies of work not only show us the distinct ways in which artistic creation can be brought about but they also emphasise a duality that is significant to Douglas - mind and body. The way in which this painting process emerges from techniques of transparency, layering, and overlapping through the artists hand assists in their communication of ideas about proximity and exchange, our closeness and similarity, as well as our separation and difference.

A sense of separation is further reinforced through the use of lines, which cut across the overlapping circular shapes and create an endpoint, a point of difference, between the sinuous and gentle repetition of the painted circles. For Douglas, the line once again represents a sense of duality: it can separate or push between boundaries, create an ambiguous sense of space, or act as a bridge between diverse forms, a device to draw them closer together. This duality is reflected in the meaning of the paintings themselves, which sit between a number of binaries or oppositions: inside and outside, sight and perception, surface and distance, two-dimensional and three-dimensional. In this way, it becomes apparent that Jessica Douglas' artistic practice, though varied in visual appearance, technique, and medium, tells a story of continuation and connection. *Cells* highlights the importance of art in constructing and conveying our collective social needs, our desire for connection.