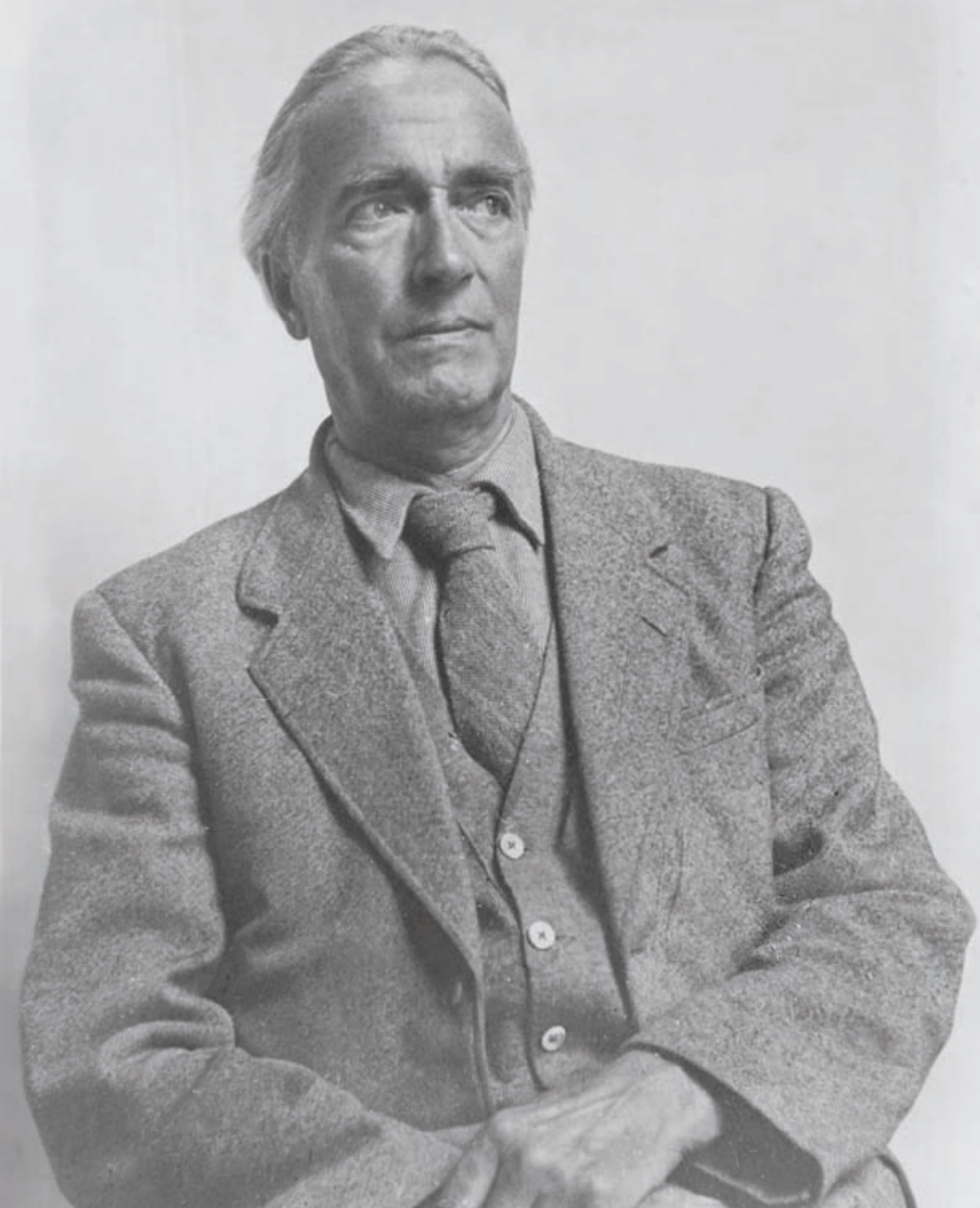
For best viewing of this Stephenson catalogue,

set your PDF reader to display two facing pages at the time.



JOHN CECIL STEPHENSON
1889–1965

THE FINE ART SOCIETY
IN ASSOCIATION WITH PAUL LISS

FOREWORD

When in the fifties, I became engaged to Simon (David) Guthrie, he took me to meet his mother, Kathleen Guthrie, and his stepfather, Cecil Stephenson. They lived in a studio; to me, a novel idea. 6, Mall Studios, in Belsize Park, had been Cecil's habitat for some thirty years. The main studio was a large room with a big north light running from the floor up into the roof. In one corner were Cecil's easel and paints; in another were his machine tools and lathes and in a third was his piano [figure 1]. The fourth corner contained a sofa and some bookcases, where Kathleen could sit and read, or listen to Cecil playing his favourite Brahms or Chopin. Kathleen was Cecil's second wife. She was herself a professional artist; a Sladey-lady and like Cecil, a founder member of the Hampstead Artists' Council. There wasn't room for her to paint in the studio, so Cecil had built her a painting shed in the garden [figure 2]. The garden also had a small pond with a large population of newts and some very decorative Koi carp, and a monorail for Cecil's hand-built model steam locomotive.

Cecil was a warm-hearted man of many talents, but modest and self-effacing, and meticulous in all his many under-takings. His output of paintings was small, due to the pressures of earning a living by teaching, and his inability to refuse requests for his engineering skills, whether it was to make a new part for a friend's old Lagonda, dash off a metal staircase or a new set of wrought-iron gates. Perhaps he was overshadowed by his brilliant friend and erstwhile neighbour, Ben Nicholson. Other neighbours included Barbara Hepworth and John Skeaping, the art critic and writer Sir Herbert Read, and later, Henry Moore and Bernard Meadows.

Half title Portrait photograph of Cecil in the 'fifties, taken by Bernard Meadows

Opposite title page *Divertimento*, 1950 [catalogue no.16]

Figure 1 Cecil drawing in front of his piano, 1960

Figure 2 Kathleen in her studio, 1960

When Cecil died, he left quite a body of works which the family have cherished and enjoyed for the last forty years. These include most of the pictures in this exhibition. Simon retired from academic life in 1990 and he devoted himself to trying to promote his stepfather's reputation. First he wrote a biography, based largely on Cecil's abbreviated but carefully kept diaries. He then devoted much time and energy to trying to persuade a gallery to mount a proper retrospective of Cecil's work, particularly the early abstracts. Remembering Cecil's northern roots, he tried hard to interest various galleries in the north of England in such an exhibition. Sadly his ambition was never achieved. So his family were very willing to co-operate with the suggestion of The Fine Art Society to mount this show, in the hope that many more people could derive pleasure and satisfaction from these fine paintings.

Marjorie Guthrie

CECIL STEPHENSON 1889–1965
PIONEER OF ABSTRACTION

PEYTON SKIPWITH

Execution and technique play an important part in the aim of establishing a more or less objective vision which the essence of the non-figurative work demands.

Mondrian in his essay 'Plastic Art and Pure Plastic Art (Figurative Art and Non-Figurative Art)' in Circle, the Manifesto published to coincide with the exhibition of Constructive Art at the London Gallery in July 1937.

Cecil Stephenson was one of the pioneers of abstract art in England, along with Ben Nicholson, Barbara Hepworth, Henry Moore, John Piper, Edward Wadsworth and half-a-dozen others. This move towards abstraction had two principal strands, one leaning towards surrealism and the other to geometric abstraction, or Constructivism as it came to be known.[1] Stephenson and his friends were mostly in the latter camp, and the London Gallery's exhibition drew them together along with a distinguished group of foreign exhibitors including Moholy-Nagy, Calder, Giacometti, Hélion and Naum Gabo.

Circle, edited by Leslie Martin, Ben Nicholson and Naum Gabo is more than a manifesto, it is a book nearly three hundred pages long, divided into sections on 'Painting', 'Sculpture', 'Architecture' and 'Art and Life', with essays by Le Corbusier, Herbert Read, Naum Gabo and Marcel Breuer among others. The sequence of reproductions in the 'Painting' section opens with a 1916 work by Malevitch: it is, of course, essentially non-figurative, but consists of a central rod with three arcs in descending sizes, giving the impression that it is part of some vital – in every sense of the word – piece of machinery. Apart from an early Cubist work by Picasso and a 1918 Leger, it is the nearest that any of the illustrated works gets to being an interpretation of a tangible object.

Figure 3 Stephenson painting the flourescent mural for the Festival of Britain, 5 April 1951

Just as Mondrian began his journey towards non-figuration through the modification and simplification of forms, natural and man-made – branches of trees and elements of church architecture – so Stephenson began his through isolating and refining industrial elements – cogs, axles, wheels, pistons, etc – derived from the multiple pieces of machinery he managed to house within his Hampstead studio. J.D. Bernal, another contributor to *Circle ,* in his essay 'Art and the Scientist', analysing the problem faced by Constructivists in the formalisation of content in painting, drew attention to the possible use of forms 'such as occur in modern engineering practice, but with a strong tendency to geometricization and abstraction.'[2] He could have been writing directly about Stephenson's early 'thirties paintings; however, the painting chosen by the editors of *Circle* to illustrate his work, *Six Elements,* (1937), had moved as far aesthetically from such works as *The Pump* (1932), *The Lathe* (1933) and *Mechanism* [catalogue no.2] of 1934 as *Mechanism* had from the 1919 naturalistic portrait of Ethel Brown [catalogue no.1]. In the eighteen years that separate this directly observed and sympathetic portrait of his friend Gregory Brown's young daughter from *Six Elements,* Stephenson had travelled from naturalism through abstraction to geometric non-figuration. A logical and satisfying journey, but it wasn't to end there. The War years brought him back again to more direct *raportage* with scenes of the blitz, including *The End of a Doodlebug,* which he exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1944, then, post-war, under the influence of Abstract Expressionism and Tachism, he was to immerse himself once again in total non-figuration. This time, though, texture rather than geometry was to become the overriding feature, and, during a final burst of creative activity in the late 'fifties, he produced a startling series of brightly coloured and aggressively impastoed canvases, before a near-fatal stroke brought to an end his painting career.

If Stephenson had been born fifteen or twenty years earlier he would have been an ideal recruit to that band of artists who

clustered around the Arts and Crafts Movement. His lifelong fascination with making and repairing things, coupled with his obliviousness to time and the cost of materials, is akin to those same qualities manifested by W.A.S. Benson and that gentle dreamer Edward Johnston.[3] Johnston always had pockets full of string and sealing wax, tools and sandpaper, ready to immerse himself in any diverting task, oblivious of the main job in hand. Stephenson, only seventeen years his junior, turned, with equal enthusiasm and wholehearted concentration, to making and repairing, but utilising machine tools rather than handcraft. The large-scale model engine, the 'Aberdonian', which he built, was strong enough to take the weight of two grown men, whilst Jim Ede entrusted him with repairing a sculpture, *Fish,* which Guthrie[4] ascribes to Brancusi, but was more likely Gaudier-Brzeska's *Bird Swallowing a Fish,* one of the few works to have been cast in Gaudier's lifetime. Like Johnston, Stephenson would have subscribed to Lethaby's dictum that 'A work of art is a well-made thing, that is all. It may be a well-made statue or a well-made chair, or a well-made book. Art is not a special sauce applied to ordinary cooking; it is the cooking itself if it is good. Most simply and generally art may be thought of as the well-doing of what needs doing.'[5]

What were the driving impulses behind his aesthetic development? And what is his place in history? To answer these questions it is necessary to look back at his early life and training, as well as those accidental circumstances arising from his service in the munitions industry during the Great War, and later serendipitous meetings with Hampstead neighbours.

John Cecil Stephenson, known to his family as Cecil, and to other friends such as Ben Nicholson as Stevo or Stevoe, was born in Bishop Auckland, County Durham in 1889; his father was an ostler and, later, inn-keeper's assistant, who, by dint of hard work saved enough money to enable him to open a small grocery shop shortly before the outbreak of the Great War. The typical reaction of a working class family at that period to the thought of a son of theirs going to art school would have been 'that's not for the likes of us lad.' When Charles Sargeant Jagger, a near contemporary, was seen by his father carving a piece of stone, he was sent into the garden to cut the hedge, with the comment 'that will teach you to make things into shape.'[6] Jagger never dared tell his father, until after the event, that he had applied for a scholarship to the Royal College of Art. However, Robert Stephenson and his wife, Elizabeth, were clearly more broadminded than Enoch Jagger and were pleased, within their limited financial means, to foster their son's ambitions. Their eldest son, Alfred, had settled in France and worked for a large export company, so they were able to concentrate on Cecil, who was both musical and artistic.[7] From the local primary school he went to the Art School at Darlington Technical College, before winning a scholarship to Leeds College of Art, remaining there until 1914 when a second scholarship enabled him to go, like Jagger, to the Royal College of Art in London. He was not entirely happy at the College, but a further scholarship the following year allowed him to transfer to the Slade. A remarkable progression.

With the prolongation of the War his period at the Slade was curtailed, and he moved back to Bishop Auckland, working first of all at Tilney's Engineering Works and then at The Old Forge on the production of munitions. After eight years as an art student the contrast of heavy manufacturing industry was largely beneficial. As Simon Guthrie says, 'the munitions work provided Stephenson with an insight into structures and construction, which in the long term affected his view of Art in a positive manner. The uncanny speed and precision with which a billet of metal could be transformed into an object of utility fascinated him. He also found that he was very good at doing this. Looking round he could see that the shapes of lathes, milling machines and routers, had a purposive beauty which depended on a strict relationship between their constituent parts, dictated solely by function.'[8]

Cecil had begun to sell works whilst still a student and had

also built up a local Bishop Auckland clientele for portrait commissions; these works were strictly traditional in terms of execution, as can be judged from the slightly later portrait of Ethel Brown, but he would also have been aware of more modern trends. Frank Rutter, a champion of Post-Impressionism, had been appointed Director of Leeds City Art Gallery during Cecil's time at the College, whilst Michael Sadler, the first Principal of Leeds University was a collector of works by members of the New English Art Club and, along with his son, an early advocate of Kandinsky's work, which he had first seen at Rutter's Allied Artists Association exhibition at the Albert Hall in 1911.[9]

Moving back to London after the War Stephenson made contact with friends from the Royal College and the Slade, and was also introduced to Sickert, who, he reported to his family, 'liked my drawings very much indeed,' and encouraged him to get a studio. This he did, installing himself at the end of March 1919 in No.6, The Mall, Parkhill Road, Hampstead, which was to remain his home for the rest of his life. Although during his early years in the Mall Studios his finances were dire and he was often lonely and despondent, as time went by it was to prove a particularly fortuitous choice; in 1927, Barbara Hepworth and her then husband, John Skeaping, moved into No.7 and the following year Herbert Read joined them at No.3. Henry Moore and Ben Nicholson were also living nearby in Parkhill Road, and during the following decade this 'gentle nest of artists' as Read described it was joined by Naum Gabo, Mondrian, Hans Erni and Hélion. Also, by 1933 Nicholson had replaced Skeaping as Hepworth's husband and was ensconced immediately next door at No.7. Stephenson's finances had also improved slightly due to his appointment as Head of the Art Department in the School of Surveying and Building at the Northern Polytechnic in Holloway Road in 1922.

By 1933 Stephenson had already turned his back on the straightforward landscapes and portraits, which had attracted his early patrons from County Durham, and embarked on the series of simplified and stylised machine paintings, of which *Mechanism* [catalogue no.2] is a fine example. The hard, mechanical forms in these paintings are refined and pared away to their constituent parts.[10] The arrival of Ben Nicholson in the adjacent studio at this time was particularly fortuitous; they had each separately started blurring the boundary between figuration and abstraction, and were now engaged on exploring the potential of pure form free of reference to the tangible world. In Stephenson's small panel, *Abstraction* [catalogue no.6] painted that same year, 1933, it is tempting to see the first evidence of a neighbourly exchange of views and cross-fertilisation of ideas. The shapes are no longer either referential or structural but float freely in space; the powder blues, whites, charcoal and chewing-gum browns of *Mechanism* have been joined by ochre and crimson, which, along with sage green, was to remain his basic palette throughout the decade, though the intensity of colour varied. Stephenson's regular contact with architects at the Polytechnic helped stimulate his interest in space and spacial relationships, adding an extra optical dimension to his work at this time; not only do shapes float in space they interweave one with another creating an extraordinary sense of progression and recession. This is particularly apparent in both *Interpenetration 1* [catalogue no.5] of 1934 and *Nine Uprights* [catalogue no.7] painted three years later. In *Interpenetration 1* Stephenson plays with perspective through the overlayering of cubes, part opaque, part transparent, thus manipulating the sense of space: in this he anticipates Gabo who, in his article 'Construction in Space', writes about the 'space in which the mass exists made visible.'[11] Gabo was, naturally, thinking three-dimensionally rather than illusionistically, but the effect is the same, and to illustrate his article he chose two contrasting plywood cubes.; one solid and box-like, the other open, consisting of an × frame with a top and base, thus revealing the space within.[12]

The Nazi terror may have, briefly, enriched the community around Mall Studios with the arrival of Gabo, Mondrian, Erni and Hélion, but this was only temporary; the refugees duly

Figure 4 Solar House, Rickmansworth, with the staircase and mural in situ

departed in search of more permanent homes, Read had already moved to Buckinghamshire and, with the outbreak of war, Ben and Barbara and their children left for St Ives. Only Stephenson remained. Whilst the Nicholsons retained No.3, Henry Moore later took over the lease of No.7, which he retained until his death; Bernard Meadows used it intermittently but, during the war years at least, Moore and his family were based at Much Hadham. Despite air raids and bombing, which did considerable collateral damage to the Studios, Stephenson was able to go on living there, spending many nights fire-watching from the roof of the Polytechnic, where he was still teaching. Ben and Barbara wrote frequently from Cornwall, often their letters were concerned entirely with domestic affairs concerning the safety of the studio, or with the fate of mutual friends – Mondrian, Hélion and Gabo particularly – but in January 1941 Ben wrote exhorting him that 'We must affirm that abstract painting is a new dimension of plastic creativity: an invention that affects the kind & not merely the quality of painting. Again it is still a tentative & experimental art which has an immense capacity for growth & achievement. It, too, is an art of the future – if there is to be a future.'[13] Despite this pessimistic ending, Nicholson was still able to do some work and, later, would consult Stephenson with regard to materials, glues, etc., to assist in the making of his constructions.

Post-war recovery was slow, but Stephenson was lucky to still have his job at the Polytechnic, to which he had remained loyal despite approaches from other more prestigious institutions, then, in 1950 he received the commission to produce a ceiling painting for a corridor within the Industry Building for the Festival of Britain [see catalogue no.17]. Although the commission was welcome the location and elevated position of the work was not ideal. For this work, to be executed in luminous paints, he reverted to pre-war geometric ideas, though the patterning became consciously two- rather than three-dimensional; the last thing visitors wished to be conscious of whilst passing along the corridor was a vision of concrete forms bearing down on their heads. A few years later, in 1955, he was approached by a young architect on the staff of the Northern Polytechnic, Bill Curtis, with a proposal to provide a mural, iron staircase and central firegrate for a house he was building at Rickmansworth in Hertfordshire. Solar House, as it was called, was of a revolutionary design and received considerable coverage in the architectural press. The mural [catalogue no.20], now removed, like that for the Festival of Britain, is of a geometrical design, but the forms have become rounder, fatter and generally more substantial, filling the entire surface. A development anticipated in such works as *Chromatic* [catalogue no.19] of the previous year, picking up on some of the visual ideas Hélion had been experimenting with in the 1930s in his attempt to define 'shallow space'. As a result of this, the kinetic quality of his earlier work was replaced by a new solidity.

The 1950s was a decade of fresh opportunities and experimentation: although due to the general economic situation individual collectors were few and far between, there was the promise of public patronage both from the state and private sectors, and a new awareness of the demand for art for public spaces. Stephenson responded to the challenge. In addition to the Festival of Britain and Curtis's Solar House, he received a commission from one of the many new start-up companies, Plyglass Ltd., manufacturers of laminated glass, asking him to produce a series of designs for panels to show off their new material. In all he produced about a score of designs ranging from catalogue no.22 with its sensation of black leading and a diapering of brightly coloured lozenges, reminiscent of sheets hanging out to dry on the balconies of some Mediterranean tenement block, to the decorative panels for the new Engineering Block at Queen Mary College, University of London and the 170 foot long geometrical facia panel for the British Industrial Pavilion at the 1958 Brussels Exposition. Perhaps inspired by the wider possibilities of laminated

Figure 5 Stephenson working on the Plyglass design for the facia panel for the 1958 Brussels Exposition

Figure 6 British Industrial Pavilion at the 1958 Brussels Exposition with the finished panel in position

glass, he produced alongside these more tightly controlled designs, his final series of Tachist-inspired paintings including *Dorian* [catalogue no.24] Whilst his non-figurative geometric works of the 1930s have the restraint of classic English good taste, these late paintings bear the hallmarks of Abstract Expressionism and are unashamedly and exuberantly executed in the International style of the 1950s. They are redolent of that decade which witnessed a new, young generation of European painters emerge from the ravages of war, starvation and post-war rationing, with an ineluctable lust for life, and a perception of New York rather than Paris as the fountainhead of vital contemporary art.

What Stephenson had achieved in his 1930s paintings such as *Interpenetration 1, Nine Uprights* and *Six Elements 1,* illustrated in *Circle,* was not only a sense of depth and three-dimensionality, but also a sense of movement, an illusion that anticipated Op Art by some thirty years. He further exploited this illusory sense of motion during the remainder of the decade, gradually moving on from rigidly geometric forms to embrace both curves and irregular shapes. The sketch for *Six Curved Forms* [catalogue no.12] of 1938 and *Vortex* [catalogue no.13] of the following year, explore two-dimensionally the same optical material that Alexander Calder was treating in his mobiles. It cannot be coincidental that one of the two Calder mobiles illustrated in *Circle,* dating from 1936, belonged to Ben Nicholson, and was thus in the neighbouring studio.[14] There is absolutely no doubt that during the 1930s Stephenson was both geographically and aesthetically at the very heart of British Modernism. Ideas flowed backwards and forwards, not just between the studios but across national boundaries. Postwar, although perhaps no longer in the avant-garde, he still remained within the mainstream producing work of an international dimension.

Geometric non-figuration was at its zenith in the mid–1930s and Stephenson was at the forefront of the movement. If some individuals are better known than others, it has as much – if not more – to do with personalities as achievements.[15] Stephenson, conscious of his Northern working-class roots, had always retained a certain detachment from cosmopolitan artistic circles. By temperament, if not necessarily by choice, he remained something of an outsider. The fact that this restraint in no way detracted from his achievements is clearly borne out not only by Read's recognition that he was 'one of the earliest artists in this country to develop a completely abstract style'[16] but by the current display in Gallery 22 at Tate Britain, where his 1937 egg tempera *Painting* more than holds its own alongside works by his international peers from the *Circle* group – Moholy-Nagy, Gabo, Hélion and Calder, as well as with those by Ben and Winifred Nicholson, Piper, Moore and Hepworth.


ONDON PAVILION

1 'In the late thirties, as it became increasingly clear that there were forms of abstract art which were incompatible with the kind of work published in *Circle,* 'Constructive' came to replace 'abstract' as a means of self-identification for those opposed to Surrealist influence.' Charles Harrison, *English Art and Modernism, 1900–1940:* Allen Lane / Indiana University Press, 1981, p.287

2 *Circle ,* Faber & Faber, 1937, p.122

3 Edward Johnston, 1872–1944, almost single-handedly revived the art of calligraphy. He designed and made a water-clock to open his chicken-house in the mornings as well as a pump to irrigate his Thames-side garden, whilst the toys he devised for his children were works of pure genius.

4 Simon Guthrie, *John Cecil Stephenson,* Cartmel Press,1997, p.68

5 *Imprint,* July 1913. For extra emphasis Lethaby printed the last six words of this quote in large capitals

6 Ann Compton, *Charles Sargeant Jagger,* The Henry Moore Foundation in association with Lund Humphries, 2004, p.12

7 Jasia Reichardt, in her introductory essay *Musical Abstractions* to the catalogue of Fischer Fine Art's 1976 Stephenson exhibition wrote: 'Stephenson occupies a special place in the avant-garde movement of the 1930s. There is one very specific reason for this. He drew inspiration from music and architecture and these are the essential and inevitable qualities which his work conveys.'

8 Guthrie, op. cit., p.22

9 See Tom Steele, *Alfred Orage and The Leeds Art Club 1893–1923,* Scolar Press, 1990, p179–80

10 This concentration during the early 'thirties on isolating mechanical parts may have been stimulated, at least in part, by Paul Strand's photographs such as *Motion Picture Camera*. Harold Clurman describes the machine in Strand's photographs as having in some mysterious way 'become conscious of its own admirable and independent life, its own elegance of line, suave hardness and density of substance.' *The Studio,* Vol. 98, 1929, pp.735–8

11 *Circle*, op.cit., p.106

12 Gabo presented these cubes to the Tate Gallery and they are currently on display at Tate Britain in Gallery 22, along with other Constructivist works relating to *Circle*

13 Letter 7, 12 January 1941, Tate Archive

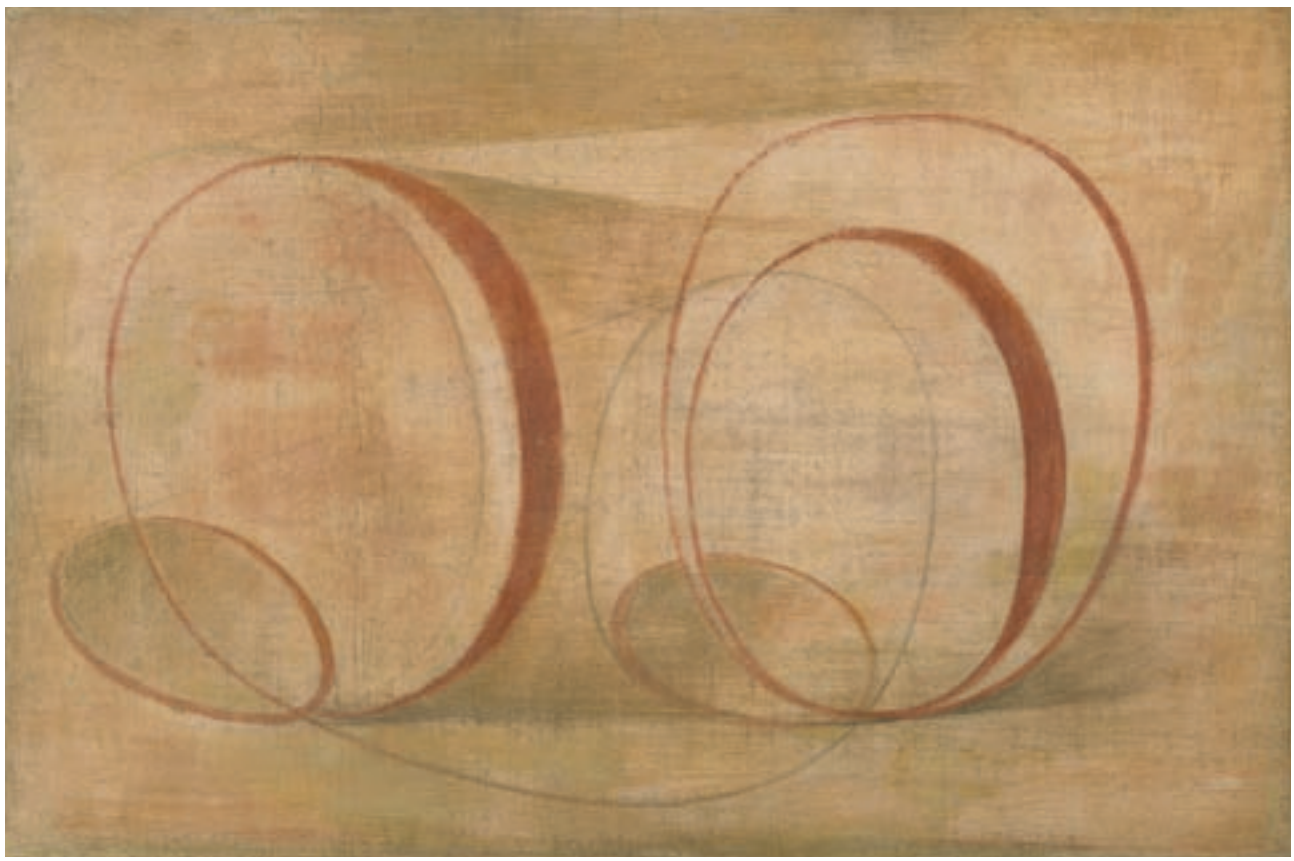
14 Calder produced a number of such mobiles at this time, and Marjorie Guthrie recalls one hanging in 6 Mall Studios, which is not surprising, considering that the second London performance of Calder's 'Circus' was performed there to an admiring audience of Nicholsons, Gabo, et al. See Simon Guthrie, *John Cecil Stephenson* and Sarah Jane Checkland *Ben Nicholson: The Vicious Circles of his Life and Art*.

15 Herbert Read wrote in his Introduction to the catalogue of Stephenson's 1960 Drian Gallery exhibition: 'The vicissitudes of the art world are such that it is possible for an artist of great talent to work for a lifetime in obscurity, and only towards the end of his career find the recognition that is due to him.' Extraordinarily, despite the fact that he had been working for over forty years, this was Stephenson's first one-man exhibition

16 Ibid

1 Portrait of Ethel Brown, 1919

Oil on board · 9 x 11 inches · 23 x 28 cm
Literature: Simon Guthrie, *John Cecil Stephenson,* 1997,
(1) illustrated p.131



2 Scrolls III, 1933

Oil and pencil on canvas · 12 x 18 inches · 30.5 x 45.5 cm
Signed and dated verso of blind stretcher

3 Mechanism, 1933

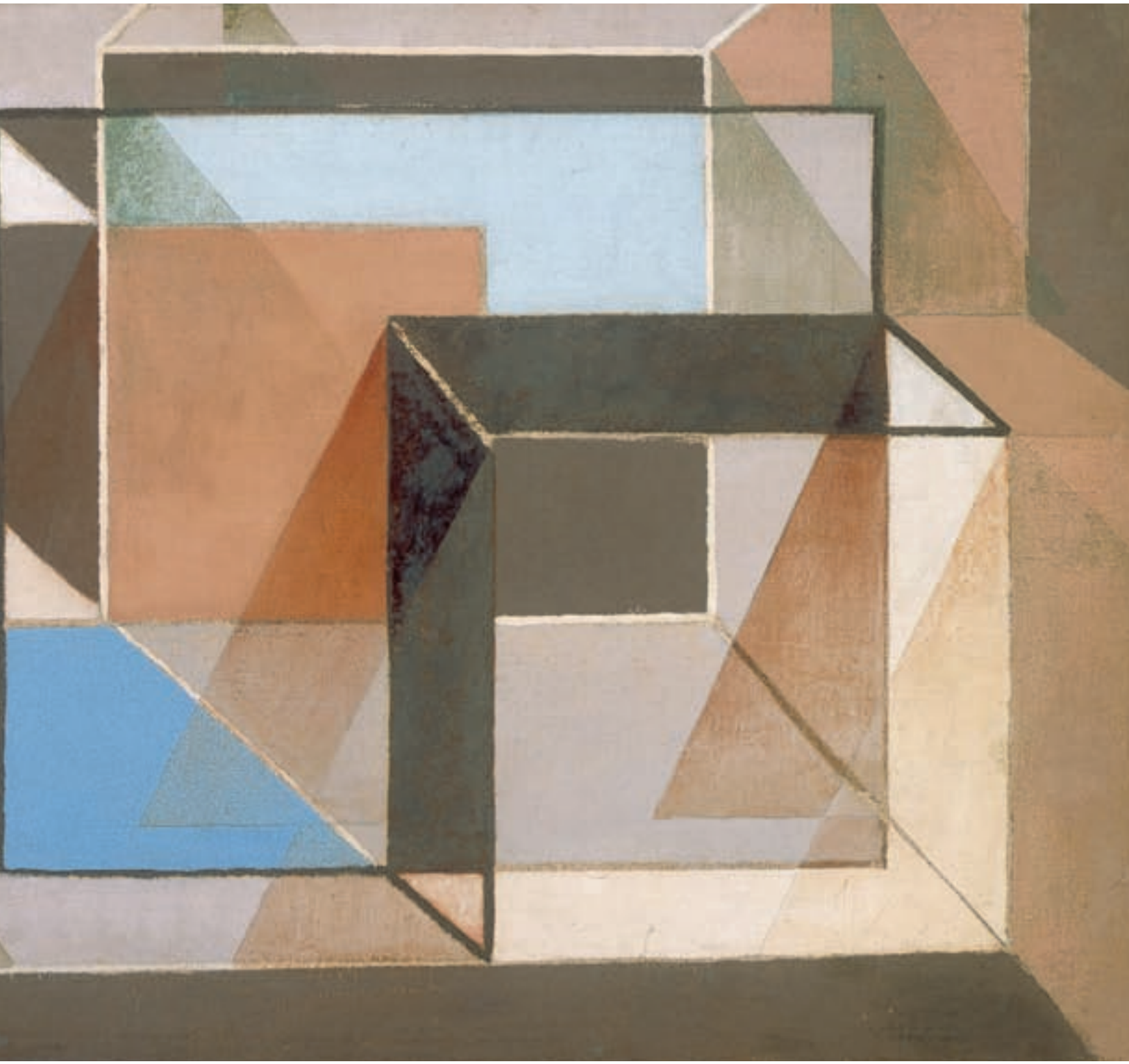
Oil on canvas on board · 18 x 14 inches · 46.5 x 35.5 cm
Literature: Simon Guthrie, *John Cecil Stephenson,* 1997, (28) illustrated p.146

4 Mask, 1934

Oil on canvas · 13 x 13 inches · 33 x 33 cm
Signed and dated verso
Exhibited: London, Leicester Galleries, Seven and Five Society 1934; Camden Arts Centre 1975
Literature: Simon Guthrie, *John Cecil Stephenson*, 1997, (29) illustrated p.146

5 Interpenetration 1, 1934

Oil on canvas · 36 x 23 inches · 91.5 x 58.5 cm
Signed & dated verso
Literature: Simon Guthrie, *John Cecil Stephenson*, 1997, (6) illustrated p.134



6 Abstract, *c.*1935

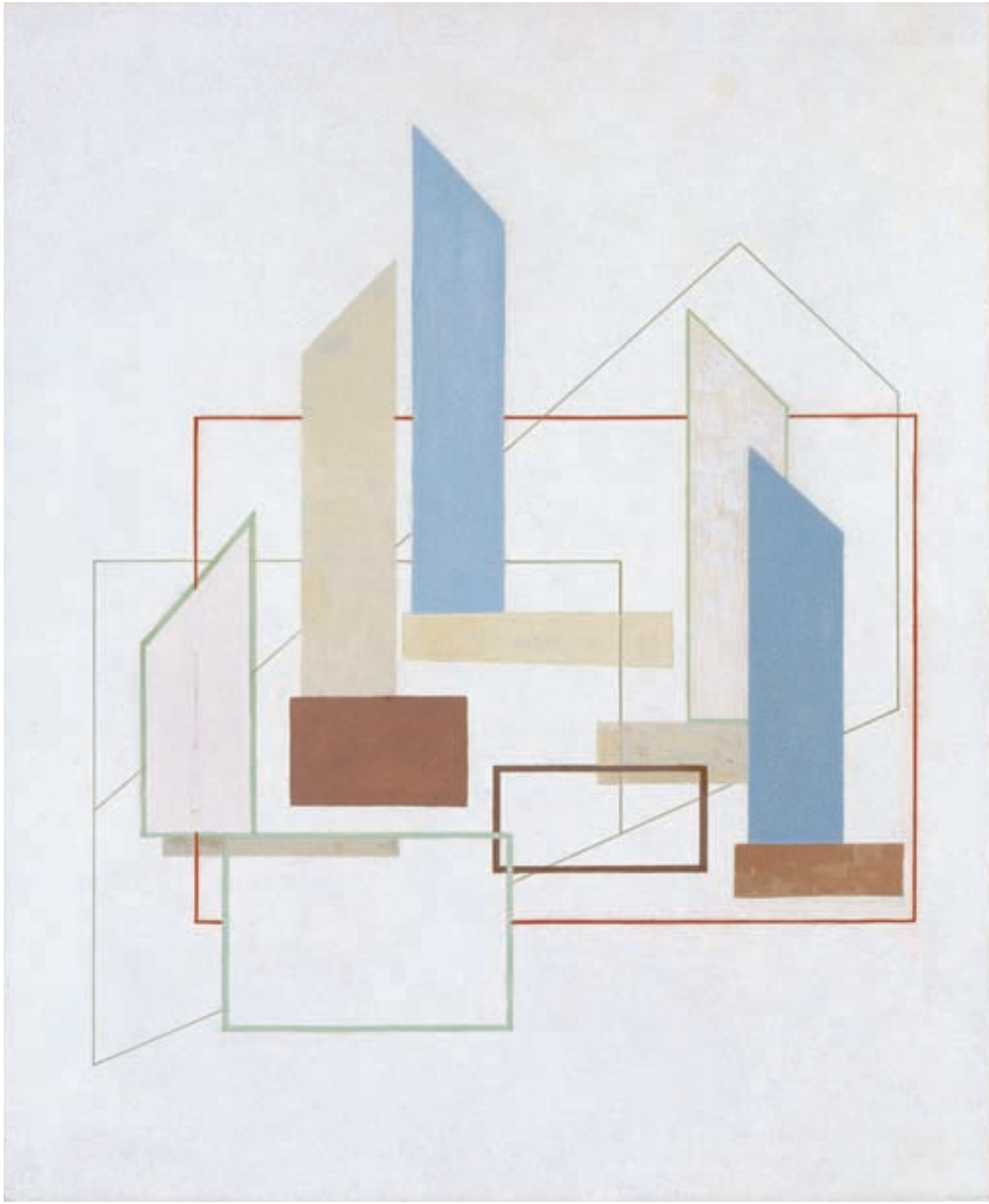
Oil on panel · 10½ x 8½ inches · 26.5 x 21.5 cm
Signed and inscribed verso

7 Nine Uprights, 1937

Egg tempera · 27 x 30 inches · 68.5 x 76 cm
Exhibited: London, Drian Gallery, 1966; Camden Arts Centre, 1975
Literature: Simon Guthrie, *John Cecil Stephenson*, 1997,
(8) illustrated p.135

8 Rust, Indigo, Blue, Buff, 1937

Gouache on paper · 21¾ x 17½ inches · 55 x 44.5 cm
Signed, dated and titled verso



9 Bright Triangles, 1938

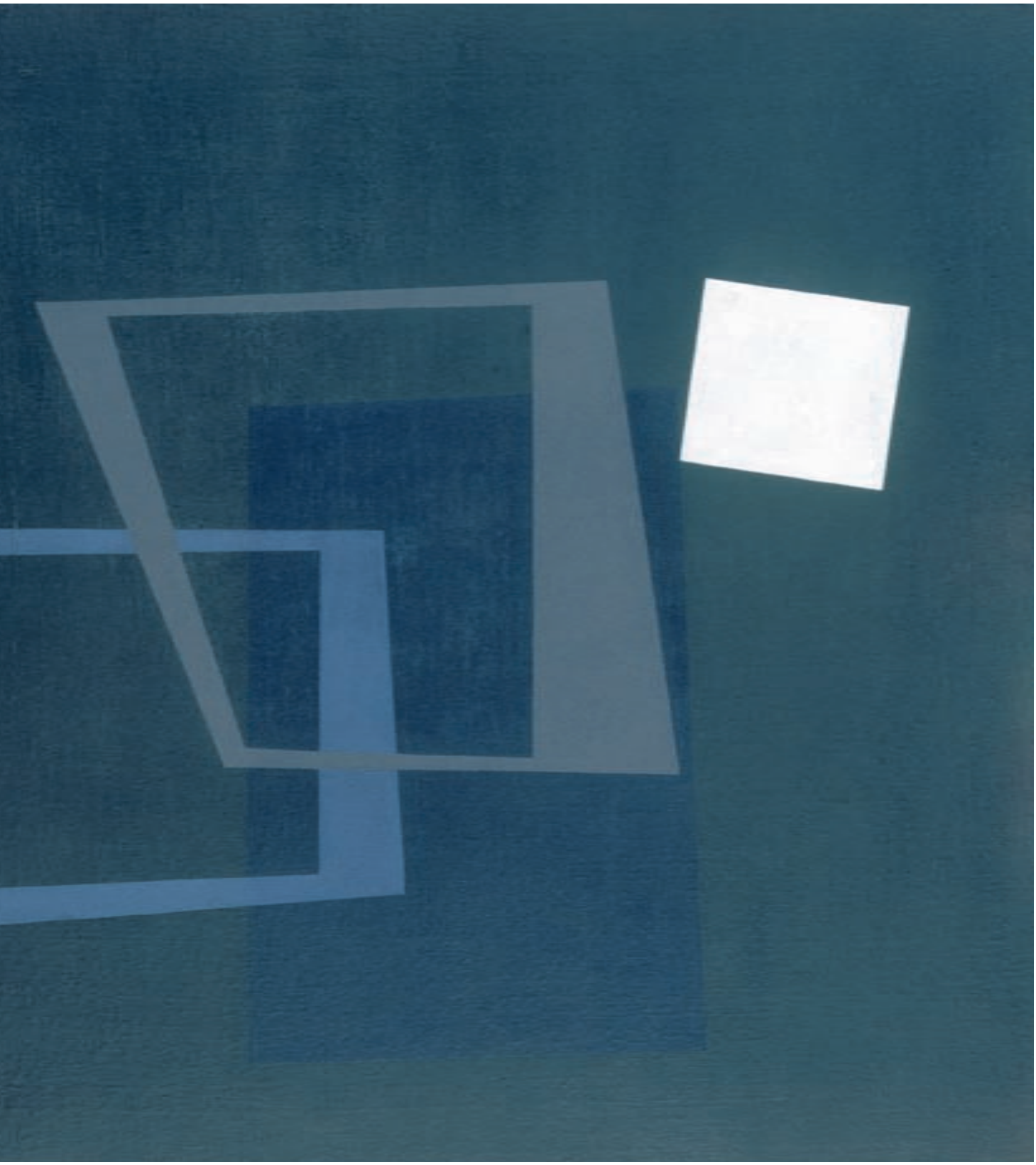
Collage and coloured pencil on paper
12½ x 8 inches · 32 x 20 cm
Signed and Inscribed verso

10 Untitled, 1938

Egg tempera on canvas · 22½ x 30 inches · 57 x 76 cm
Signed and dated verso
Reproduced in *London Bulletin*, 1939

11 Tension, 1938

Egg tempera on canvas · 30 x 22½ inches · 76 x 57 cm
Signed, titled and dated verso
Inscribed in JCS hand
Exhibited: Camden Arts Centre, 1975 (42); Fischer Fine Art, 1976;
Gillian Jason Fine Art 1986



12 Six Curved Forms, 1938

Gouache · 14½ x 11¾ inches · 37 x 30 cm
Facsimile signature, studio stamp
Inscribed verso 'Sketch No 8'

13 Vortex 1, 1939

Egg tempera on canvas · 26 x 20 inches · 66 x 51 cm
Signed verso
Exhibited: Camden Arts Centre, 1975; Fischer Fine Art, 1976
Literature: Simon Guthrie, *John Cecil Stephenson,* 1997,
(12) illustrated p.138

14 Clarabella, 1950

Tempera on canvas laid on board · 32 x 24 inches · 81 x 61 cm
Signed and inscribed verso
Provenance: Peter Nahum

15 Divertimento, 1950

Illustrated opposite title page
Gouache on paper
28 x 35 inches · 71 x 89 cm

16 Obbligato, 1950

Oil on canvas
24 x 18 inches · 61 x 45.5 cm
Signed and titled verso

17 Design for Festival of Britain Mural No.12, 1951

Gouache and collage on black paper · 30 x 19 inches · 76 x 48 cm
Signed upper right
Inscribed on back by Kathleen Guthrie, 'Collage for Ceiling in the Industrial Building'
Exhibited: London, Drian Gallery, 1966; Camden Arts Centre, 1975
Literature: Simon Guthrie, *John Cecil Stephenson*, 1997, (14) illustrated p.139


Cecil Stephenson 51
FESTIVAL OF BRITAIN FLUORESCENT
12

18 **Rondo** (À Nous la Liberté), **1953**
Tempera on board · 32 x 24 inches · 81.5 x 61 cm
Signed verso
Literature: Simon Guthrie, *John Cecil Stephenson,* 1997,
(37) illustrated p.149

19 Chromatic, 1954

Oil on board · 36 x 28 inches · 91.5 x 71 cm
Signed, titled and dated verso
Exhibited: Camden Arts Centre, 1975; Gillian Jason Gallery, 1986
Literature: Simon Guthrie, *John Cecil Stephenson*, 1997,
(15) illustrated p.140

overleaf

20 Mural for Solar House, 1955

Tempera on plaster laid down
87 x 127 inches · 221 x 323 cm
Literature: Simon Guthrie, *John Cecil Stephenson*, 1997,
(38) illustrated p.150

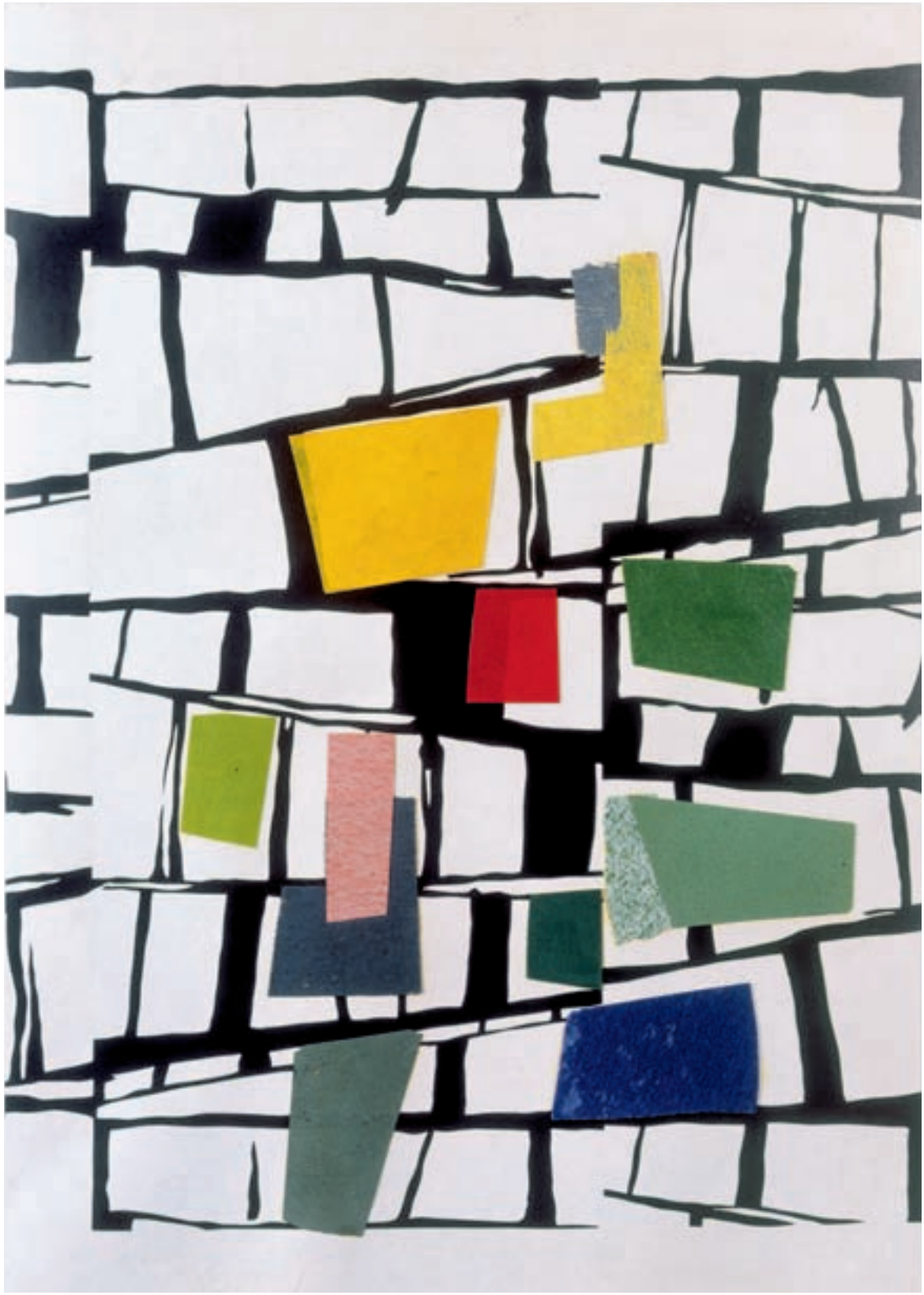
This work was painted in 1955 for Solar House, Rickmansworth. When the house was later sold the panel went to Churchill College, University of Cambridge.

21 Rhythm, 1955

Oil on board · 36 x 28 inches · 91.5 x 71 cm
Signed, titled and dated verso
Exhibited: Camden Arts Centre, 1975; Fischer Fine Art, 1976
Literature: Simon Guthrie, *John Cecil Stephenson*, 1997,
(16) illustrated p.141

22 Sketch for Ply Glass, 1957

Ink and collage
17½ x 11½ inches · 44.5 x 29 cm



23 Sketch for Ply Glass, 1957

Gouache on card
10 x 14½ inches · 25.5 x 37 cm
Signed on label verso
Exhibited: Fischer Fine Art, 1976

24 Dorian, 1958

Oil on canvas · 24 x 18 inches · 61 x 45.5 cm
Signed, dated and titled verso
Literature: Simon Guthrie, *John Cecil Stephenson,* 1997,
(18) illustrated p.142

25 Zarzuela, 1960

Oil on board · 24 x 33 inches · 61 x 84 cm
Exhibited: AIA (1915)

26 Descant, 1960

Oil on board · 24 x 33 inches · 61 x 84 cm
Signed, titled and dated verso

27 Abstract oil sketch, *c.*1960

Oil on paper · 6 x 4 inches · 15 x 10 cm

28 Abstract oil sketch, *c.*1960

Oil on paper · 5½ x 4 inches · 14 x 10 cm

JOHN CECIL STEPHENSON

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

1889

Born 15 September in Bishop Auckland, Co. Durham, to Robert and Elizabeth Stephenson.

Educated Bishop Barrington School, Bishop Auckland

1904

Won a Scholarship to King James 1st Grammar School, which fostered his musical as well as artistic talents.

1906–8

Darlington Technical College; decides to become an art student

1909–14

Won a scholarship to Leeds School of Art for three years, followed by two years as a pupil teacher.

1914

Scholarship to Royal College of Art, London.

War work as a skilled hand on large lathes turning artillery gun barrels

Meets Walter Sickert, who advises him to find a studio. Takes the lease of 6 The Mall Studios, Belsize Park, London, where he lives for the rest of his life. Paints portraits and landscapes.

1922

Appointed Head of Art, teaching in the Architectural Department, Northern Polytechnic, London; lectured and taught painting and drawing

1926

Tours Italy and visits his brother, Alfred, in Paris

1928

Tour of Northern England to produce series of watercolours of Northern castles.

Barbara Hepworth and John Skeaping move into 7 The Mall Studios. Henry Moore moves into 11a Parkhill Road.

1930

Tours Highlands of Scotland

1932

2 January Marries Sybil Mason

2 October Meets Ben Nicholson, then living in Parkhill Road.

Produces *The Pump*, his first abstract work, followed by a series of machine pictures in which the design possibilities of lathes and pumps are developed; from this point Stephenson developed a series of geometric abstracts exploring the possibilities of particular basic forms – *Scrolls*, (1933), *Tapered Uprights* (1934–37); *Squares* (1934–38), *Regular Triangles* (1936–1939); *Curved Triangles* (1938–51)

1933

Ben Nicholson and Barbara Hepworth move into at 7 The Mall Studios

Herbert Read (and new partner Margaret Ludwig) move into 3 The Mall Studios

Exhibited with *7&5 Society*, including *Mask* [catalogue no.4]

Figure 7 Cecil, 1938

Figure 8 Cecil's hand-built model steam locomotive, 1931

Figure 9 Cecil with Barbara Hepworth and her son Paul Skeaping at Brighton, 1935

Hampstead arts community was becoming a haven for refugee painters and sculptors, and JCS met new influences including Gropius, Naum Gabo and Hans Erni.

Exhibits in 'Abstract Section' at the Artists' International Association, London.

Leslie Martin, Nicholson and Gabo produce a book, *Circle, International Survey of Constructive Art*; essentially a manifesto of the Modern Movement in Britain, coinciding with an exihibtion at the London Gallery. It included a full page illustrated by JCS, *Six Elements*. It was intended to establish the position of British Abstract Artists in the international forum.

In October, the Nicholsons gave a party at No.7 which included Fernand Leger and Alexander Calder. Calder rented a flat in Hampstead for five months, during which time he became a frequent visitor to JCS' studio.

1939

JCS divorced Sybil, on grounds of her adultery with the surrealist, E.L.T. Mesens.

January-February *Living Art in England*, London Gallery

February-March *Abstract Work*, Artists International Association, Whitechapel Art Gallery, London

March *Abstract Paintings by 9 British Artists*, Lefevre Gallery, London

Described as a constructivist, and one tempera illustrated in *Living Art in Britain* catalogue, London Bulletin, published by London Gallery.

Ben Nicholson and Barbara Hepworth move to Cornwall; Henry Moore takes over lease of No.7

21 September Piet Mondrian arrives from Paris with Winifred Nicholson. Moves into a flat in Parkhill Road. For the next twelve months Mondrian and Stephenson see much of each other.

1940

The recent successes were halted. No.6 Mall Studios was damaged in the Blitz, which also prompted Mondrian's departure to the USA. Made redundant by the Poly (apart from fire-watching) and directed into war-work, there was very little painting.

1941

Married the painter Kathleen Guthrie.

1942

Return to figurative work; paintings of the Blitz bought by the Imperial War Museum, and the Northern Polytechnic, where he was re-engaged.

1944

Worked on war pictures including 'Death of a Doodlebug', first shown at the RA; also semi-abstract works based on the human figure.

1950

Returned to abstract work on a larger scale

1951

Luminescent Ceiling Decoration in the Pavilion of Power and Production at the Festival of Britain, 10 x 30 feet, executed in fluorescent colours and illuminated by ultra-violet mercury lamps.

1956

A friend and colleague, the architect Bill Curtis, planned to build himself a pioneering 'Solar House', heated and cooled by solar panels and heat-pumps. He commissioned JCS to design the hand-made iron staircase, and a large mural (10 x 8 feet, catalogue no.20). The mural later went to Churchill College, Cambridge, and then to the USA.

1957

As a result of the Solar House, commissioned by Ply Glass Ltd to design a series of coloured laminated glass murals for buildings in Newcastle and London, (including *Engineering* for the exterior of the Engineering Faculty, Queen Mary's College, London University, Mile End)

1958

185 x 13 feet plyglass mural for the British Industries Pavilion at Brussels International Exhibition; dismantled and re-erected at a sports stadium, Hilversum, the Netherlands; Stephenson won a silver medal for this design.

Article on pavilion and plyglass design in *Architecture and Building* magazine.

1959

Canon (2), 1958 (oil on board, 90 x 69.6 cm) bought by the Arts Council of Great Britain

1960

First one-man exhibition at the Drian Galleries of recent work, all with musical titles; catalogue introduction by Sir Herbert Read.

Plyglass designs by Stephenson and Edward Curtis exhibited at the Association of Industrial Artists

Suffered three strokes which left him unable to move or talk

1962

Work reproduced in *British Art and the Modern Movement* by the Arts Council of Great Britain

1963

Painting, 1937 acquired by the Tate

1964

Early abstracts included in *Mondrian, De Stijl and Their Impact*, exhibition at Marlborough Galleries, New York

1965

March Early paintings in *Art in Britain 1930–40* exhibition at Marlborough New London Gallery

August Works included in *Historically Important 20th Century Masters* exhibition, Drian Galleries

Articles on Stephenson in *Architectural Design* and *Studio International* in March.

13 November Dies at his home, 6 The Mall Studios

1966

November–December Memorial exhibition held at Drian Galleries

1967

Work included in *British Painting* at the Tate Gallery

1972

Work reproduced in *The Non-Objective World 1939–1955*

1973

October Four works included in *Aspects of Abstract Art in England* exhibition, Alexander Postan Fine Art

April – May Three works in *Hampstead Two* exhibition at Edward Harvane Gallery

1974

August – September Three works exhibited in *Aspects of Abstract Painting in Britain 1910–60* at Talbot Rice Art Centre, Edinburgh; and then in Brussels, November – December 1974 and Germany, March – April 1975

1974

November *Mechanism* and *Vortex I* exhibited in *Hampstead in the Thirties* exhibition at the Camden Arts Centre

1975

Retrospective exhibition, Camden Arts Centre, London, touring to Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle

1976

October – November Fischer Fine Art, Exhibition of paintings, gouaches and drawings, 1932–1957

2007

Painting, 1937 included in *British Art 1900–2007*, Tate Gallery

Figure 10 Tools and machine tools, 1960

Figure 11 Cecil at his easel, *c.*1960

The Fine Art Society

Dealers since 1876

148 New Bond Street · London W1S 2JT
Telephone +44 (0)20 7629 5116
Email art@faslondon.com
Fax +44 (0)20 7491 9454
www.faslondon.com

Published by The Fine Art Society in association with Paul Liss for the exhibition *John Cecil Stephenson*, held at 148 New Bond Street, London W1, from 18 October to 8 November 2007.

ISBN 978 0 905062 42 6

Photography by A C Cooper
Designed and typeset in Univers and Futura by Dalrymple
Printed in Belgium by Die Keure

Cover: detail from *Nine Uprights* [catalogue no.7]