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AN INTERVIEW WITH KATE KESSLING

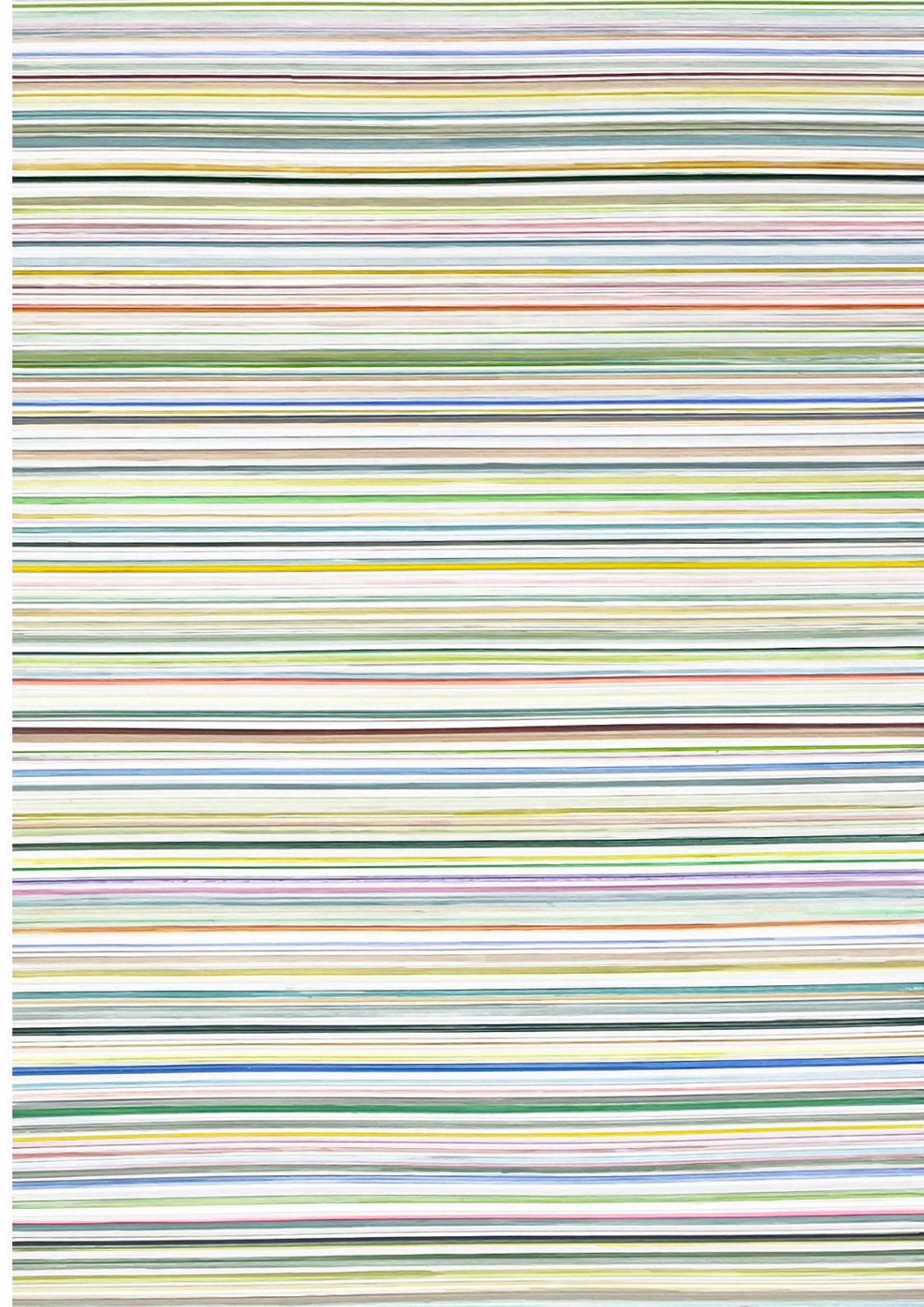
Kate Kessling is a British artist transforming found objects and paper into sculptural works, adding a layer of narrative to each. Here, she shares insights into her Paper Assemblages series, exploring texture, colour, and rhythm to challenge the viewers perception.

CG How did your experiences at Goldsmiths College in the late 1980s influence your approach to art, including your choice of primary medium in your art?

KK Studying Fine Art and Textiles at Goldsmiths, London during the height of the Young British Art movement was transformative. Under the guidance of conceptual heavyweights like Michael Craig-Martin, we were pushed to challenge conventions and redefine what art could be.

Joseph Beuys profoundly influenced my process—his use of felt, fat, and wood demonstrated how materials could go beyond their practical functions to offer new or different symbolic meanings. I began working with found objects, intrigued by their ability to shift contextually and tell new stories within an artistic framework.

This approach for me was about turning the mundane, the everyday into something rich with significance. Having said that those early experiments occasionally confused the college cleaner—more than once, meticulously curated pieces like colour-graded bottle tops and pin heads ended up in the bin!





CG Considering your background in textiles and your interest in both sculpture and conceptual art, have these influenced your artistic trajectory and techniques?

KK After Goldsmiths, I was awarded a British Council scholarship to Poland, where I had the opportunity to work in the studio of the Polish sculptor Magdalena Abakanowicz whose work was recently shown at a major retrospective at Tate Modern. I was there the year that the Berlin Wall came down, materials and resources were scarce, we worked with what we had, ideas driving the work across different disciplines. This openness to change has been central to my practice, allowing me to evolve and experiment with new concepts and mediums as they emerge, and as life changes too.

CG What is the significance of using found objects in your art, and how do they serve as a means of ‘mark-making’?

KK For me, the purpose of using found objects in my art lies in the richly layered meanings and possibilities they bring with them. As a mark-making facility, ‘found objects’ inherently contain far more information, emotion, and history than I could ever create myself. They are real and honest, embodying genuine actions and experiences. A small, discarded button, worn from constant use - these objects carry a tangible sense of life and history, there’s something potent about how objects reflect the passage of time.

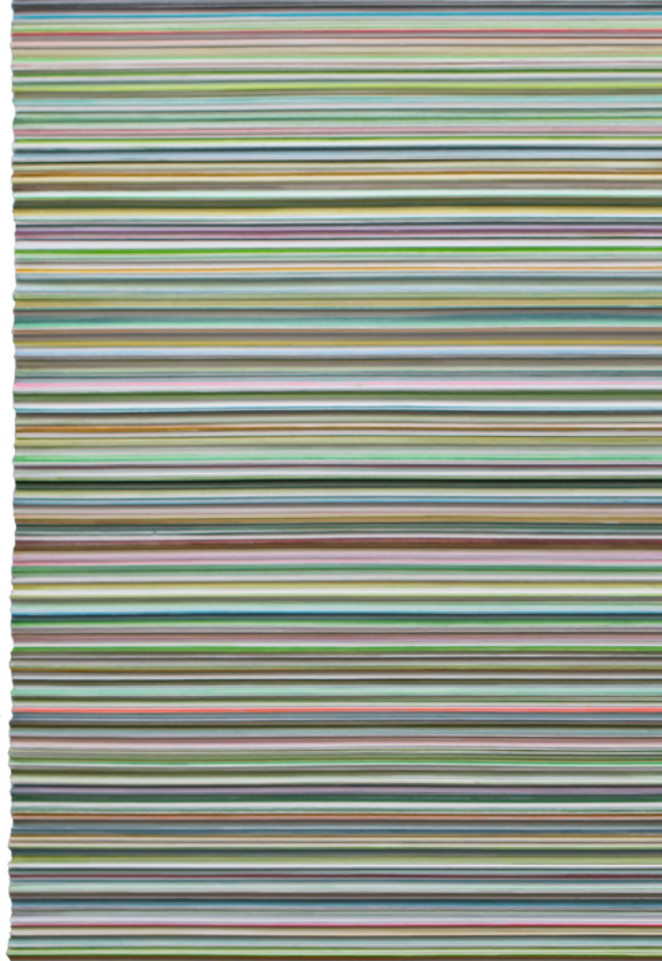
At the same time, working with found objects is a response to the overwhelming tide of mass production and material consumption that defines contemporary life. These objects, often cast aside, represent the stories we discard and the layers of meaning we overlook in a culture dominated by the new. For me it’s a way of grappling with the material excess around us, giving new purpose to the overlooked and forgotten, and inviting viewers to consider their own relationships with the objects that populate their lives.

CG How does your practice of collecting everyday objects inform the development of your projects?

KK I have a feeling that a lot of artists like to collect; it's our way of cataloguing the world around us. It's like gathering together memories, emotions and events and holding onto them in physical form - even though in the case of an old button picked off the street, it's not my memories or actions that it holds, but it still feels like a relic of somebody else's life and therefore relevant.

I'm interested in using found objects that hold the potential to tell a story, but the specific history of the object itself is not the focus. We are surrounded by countless objects that carry untold possibilities and narratives, yet they should not feel tied to one person, space, or time. The essence of these objects is what matters most; it's their ability to evoke emotional resonance and a sense of universality. For me it's about harnessing the energy of the object or a series of them to create a collective emotional experience, rather than focusing on the individual narrative attached to each piece.

CG How did you develop your concept and process for the paper assemblage works, including using traditional bookbinding techniques to assemble reams of paper?



KK My husband and I, both artists, have collected art books over the years, these visually eclectic shelves were the starting point for my paper assemblage series. I was interested in looking at the backs of books and the textured, colourful edges of stacked paper. These glimpses of the underside and edges of books seemed to hold their own narrative of histories, craftsmanship and materiality. Similarly, I was drawn to images of paper factories, with their massive reels of brightly coloured paper in production. These oversized industrial forms embodied both grandeur and repetition, which offered a sense of scale and rhythm I sought to explore in my work.

In my early paper assemblages, I used traditional bookbinding techniques to assemble large reams of paper, pressing them to create undulations and patterns. This process gave the works a sculptural quality, blending craft and concept into tactile, layered narratives.

CG Could you walk us through the process of creating your paper assemblages, from the initial casting to the final application of pigments and waxes?

KK Creating my paper casts was driven by my desire to turn the delicate, changeable paper bound forms into solid, durable

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sculptures that preserve the traces and material qualities of paper. Developing this process involved extensive technical experimentation, refining the casting method, phone calls to suppliers, pouring over books, and asking questions.

The casting solidified the paper's ephemeral qualities. What follows is a meticulous painting process where I use delicate brushes to build layers of pigment that enhanced texture and depth of the stacks. Finally, waxes are applied to seal the surface, adding a luminous, tactile finish to the colours.

CG What do you hope to convey through the textures and choice of colours in your Paper Assemblages?

I'm interested in the concept of colour itself - how it is categorised, commodified, named, the cultural resonance of different tones and combinations. I'm often poring over pantone charts, colour charts and paint charts. For me, works such as The Florentines and Persian Red, the textures and colours are my attempt at creating a visual language that goes beyond traditional associations, such as how an array of colours can evoke one colour or link to concept evoked in an established paint name. It's my attempt to offer the viewer the chance to experience colour in an emotional form.

CG What do you find compelling about repetition and rhythm in art, specifically in relation to your Paper Assemblages?

KK I think I'm drawn to breaking established orders and drawing attention to the overlooked. In my Paper Assemblages, the repetition and rhythm challenge conventional structures—my works extend beyond the scale of books or traditional paper stacks, subverting expectations. Even in my earlier button works, objects would evoke buttons without directly being them. It's about encouraging viewers to question familiar patterns and pay closer attention to what might otherwise go unnoticed,

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inviting a deeper, more thoughtful engagement with everyday life.

CG How has your approach to creating art evolved since your education to your current practices, is there someone or something that continue to inspire your work?

KK I'm very focused on finish, almost to the microscopic level - and how that can make a surface buzz. LA based artists in the 1960's like Billy Al Bengston and De Wain Valentine took the surface of their pieces to another level using modern techniques and materials - De Wain Valentine even had a special resin designed just for him so he could produce pieces weighing over a ton which were then polished exactly like a car. Whereas these artists use modern materials, my work is much more traditional using hard casting plaster and paint, but possibly with a similar aim - to work on the eye almost subconsciously and make viewer questions what they are looking at!



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16 Crawford Street, London W1H 1BS