

The collapse of the Soviet Union, and the rise of corrupt oligarchs following in its wake, has left Yelena Popova's birthplace in the Urals largely unfazed: the settlement remains – as a Cold War centre for the production of weapons-grade plutonium – a closed city, one of the most polluted regions of the earth. Much of the worst pollution is radioactive and, by its nature, invisible. This is important in the reception of Popova's work and practice. So too is the fact that she is part of 'Primary Collective', a co-operative group of some twenty artists occupying a red brick Victorian school in the centre of Nottingham (UK), where she is based. When two worlds meet, there exists an invisible community. This is where Yelena Popova's practice resides and the concept provides a fundamental backdrop against which she negotiates the physical, economic and political articulations of painting today.

Popova explores the type of non-Euclidean geometry pioneered by Nikolai Lobachevsky in the early nineteenth century. She also attempts to deflate painting's overstated status, presenting it as a prop or ghostly image breaking free from conventions of display and the constraints of the frame. Popova makes paintings, but also works with installation and video, her films and videos providing a wider context and detailed elaboration of the questions she brings to the medium of painting. *Balance of Probabilities* (2012) offers a configuration of Constructivist gestures where painting is supported with the aid of deconstructed pallets, studio furniture and even a strategically placed doorknob. *Portrait Gallery Withdrawn* (2012), shown at Eastside Projects in Birmingham (UK) marked an important moment of clarification and expansion in Popova's practice. The display questioned what – or how much – one sees in an exhibition? Painting on her favoured support of linen, Popova mined an archive she had amassed of postcard reproductions of portraits held in national collections in Britain. The original portraits, gathered together and, by extension, offered up for consumption through museum shop postcards, are an expression of wealth and power. Surrounded by a constellation of pale geometric abstractions on oval or circular linen supports, Popova's portraits present an immaterial figure where there is no body of paint. There is a withdrawal from the painted image in these works, which render only a vestige or ghostly shadow in an installation where light is the agent in revealing the absence of a face.

Popova's most developed series of paintings to date are also her apparently least worked. In the 'Invisible Paintings' (2014–ongoing), she embarks on an extended examination of the visibility of that which is largely invisible: labour and its value, not to mention the use, exchange and surplus value that labour creates. *Untitled, Invisible Painting* (2014) is made from a coarse upholstery linen sized with rabbit skin glue. The pigment, which forms an immaterial image of isolated circles, has been applied as distemper with a binder of rabbit skin glue. Akin to the resistance to the industrial, corporate and capitalist treatments of the stuff we eat through the slow food movement, Popova mixes her own pigments and eschews artists' supply shops. 'Ready-made paint is as evil as ready-made food', she says with a peasant's cunning. Her 'Invisible Paintings' and methods of labour are something of a slow antidote to the speed and overload of a digital culture and economy predicated on the image.

– John Slyce

YELENA POPOVA Born 1978, Urals, Russia. Lives and works in Nottingham, UK. **Selected Solo Exhibitions:** 2016 – Nottingham Contemporary, UK; 2015 – 'Recite a Painting', Upton House, National Trust, Warwickshire, UK; 2014 – 'A World to Gain', Figge von Rosen Galerie, Cologne, Germany; 2013 – 'Lobachevsky's Dream', Jalima Collection, Düsseldorf, Germany. **Selected Group Exhibitions:** 2015 – 'Future Light', MAK, Vienna Biennale; '30 Years of the Future', Castlefield Gallery, Manchester, UK; 2014 – 'The Other Side', Garage Project Space, Moscow; 2013 – 'Infinite City', CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, San Francisco; 2012 – 'Gaiety is the most outstanding feature of the Soviet Union', Saatchi Gallery, London. **Selected Bibliography:** 2014 – Emily Burns, 'Drying Time', *Apollo*, Apr; 2013 – Henry Little, 'Yelena Popova: The Portrait Gallery', *This is Tomorrow*, Feb.

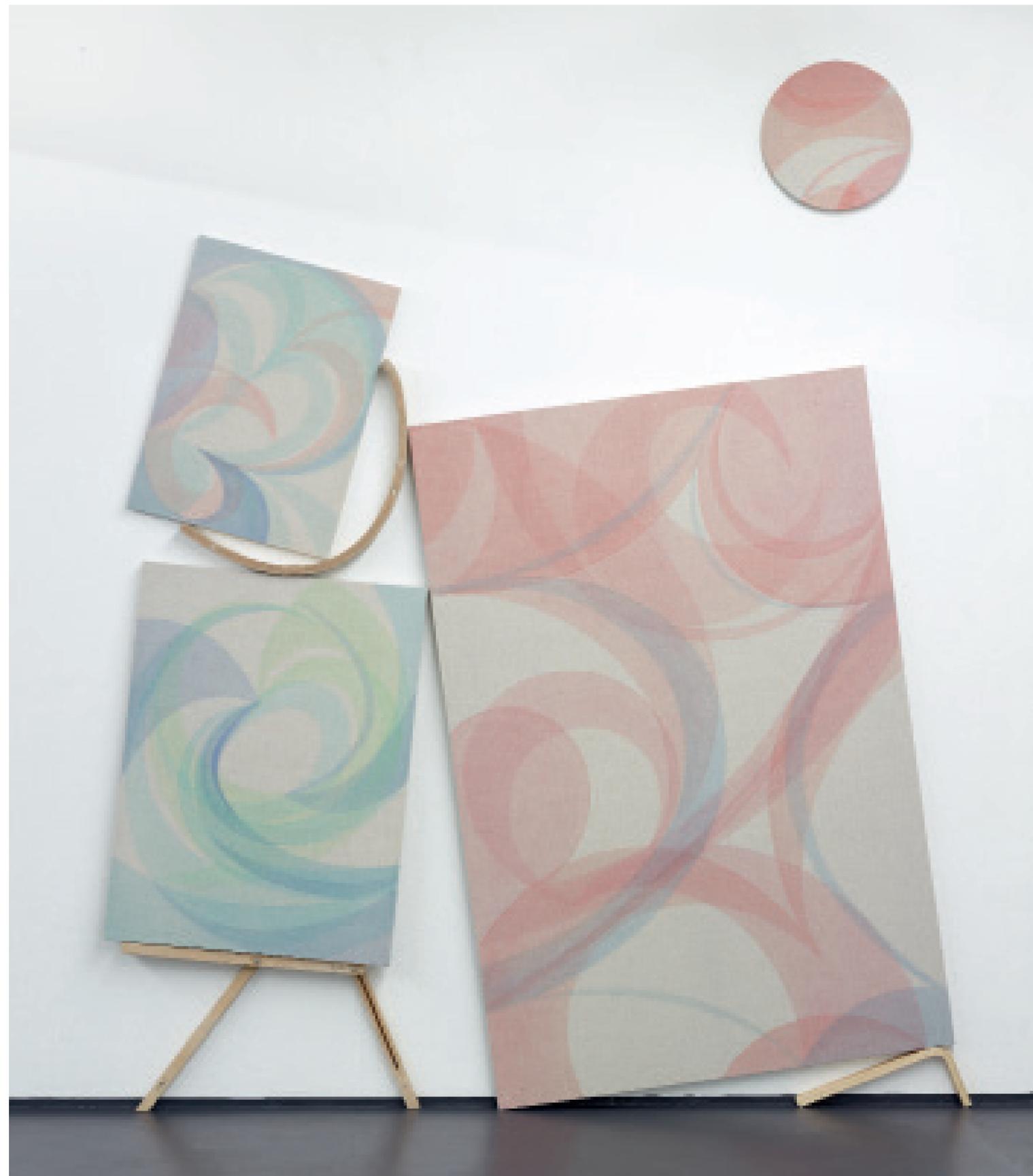


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2.

1. *Untitled, Invisible Painting, 2014*  
Mixed media on linen  
71 x 51 cm / 28 x 20 1/2 in
2. *Untitled, Invisible Painting, 2014*  
Mixed media on linen  
71 x 51 cm / 28 x 20 1/2 in
3. *Untitled, Painting Arrangement, 2013*  
Mixed media on linen, wood  
Dimensions variable



3.