



## **Ben Cook Found Paintings**

4 May – 30 June 2002  
The Deck



**THE LOWRY**

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## Ben Cook Found Paintings

**find, finding, found (verb):** 1. to discover or obtain, esp. by search or effort; 2. to become aware of; to regard as being; consider; 3. to look for and point out.

**Found Paintings** is a major solo show by Manchester-based artist, Ben Cook, and the latest of The Lowry's Artists' Projects for The Deck Gallery. It presents a new commission produced in response to the architecture of The Lowry, alongside recent works.

This exhibition shows the many forms Ben Cook's work takes; it is similar to a product range, branded with the artist's distinctive logo. On show are abstract paintings – both painted and found, digital textile paintings, unstretched football strip Bagged Paintings, digitally printed fabric, bespoke shirts, a limited edition book, silk scarves and T-shirts.



### A Process of Discovery

Ben Cook studied Fine Art at the University of Sunderland and Manchester Metropolitan University and has been based at Manchester Artists' Studio Association for the last twelve years. The Found Paintings project came out of his early work where he painted directly onto textiles instead of traditional canvas.

He began to look for appropriate fabric to paint on in Manchester's many reject fabric shops and mills. He found that the mistakes and faults created by misaligned print rollers and failing ink jets were strangely painterly, and interested him more than his own interventions with paint. The process of selecting this support soon replaced any mark making.

Searching through lengths and lengths of misprinted fabric for traces or signs of a pictorial composition, Cook describes this process as 'looking for something which satisfies my sensibilities as an abstract painter' but he acknowledges that his decision-making has a lot to do with taste, stylistic and conceptual interests. Informed by his fine art training, he sought out combinations of form, colour, line and gesture that appealed to his eye. Flaws and misprints in the fabric were appropriated as abstract gestures and shapes. Despite being machine-made, these subtle marks have the appearance of having been made by hand. Each Found Painting has its own visual language, but as the project has progressed a shared, common artistic language has developed.

### A Language of Art

Cook has developed Found Paintings as a way to question definitions of painting and to suggest ways to expand the vocabulary of abstraction. He has been strongly influenced by abstract painting that developed in America in the 1950s and '60s. At this time artists, such as Morris Louis and Helen Frankenthaler, were using new types of acrylic paint to create paintings by pouring colours directly on to unprimed canvas. The staining allowed the colour and the canvas to become one and gave this work a remarkable luminosity of pure colour. The processes used by these artists meant that once a mistake was made the canvas could not be corrected and the 'failed' painting had to be discarded. Cook, however, celebrates the chance failures and accidents of the manufacturing dye-printing process and uses them as the inspiration for his work.

Found Paintings are full of contradictions. On first sight, they look like richly coloured abstract paintings. Close up they are revealed to be flawed printed textiles: mistakes transformed into resolved works of art. Found Paintings question the nature of originality – a quality that is usually a defining factor in art. They can, perhaps, best be described as authentic fakes. Although they are not paintings in the conventional sense, they become authentic through people's reactions to them: through people reading them as paintings.



*Polar Nightscape with Meteor,*  
1999

Cook embarked on the concept of Found Paintings with a series of works using discarded football strip material. He has worked with the strip used by a number of different teams but the later black and white works are made from material used for kit worn by referees. All the works in the Football series had specific titles to avoid them becoming visual puns. These

titles direct the viewer to the painterly content suggested by the flaws: the shapes, lines and blobs that might be reminiscent of features of the landscape or of the body. In this painting the viewer is drawn into a white, empty landscape, dominated by the dark, night sky that is interrupted by a shape reminiscent of a meteor.

*Found Painting No.52  
(Purple Spear), 2001*

The dimensions of a Found Painting are limited by the width of the cloth. Cook finds that the restrictions imposed on him by the fabric are useful; it is helpful to have certain options closed down. This image comes from a series of works from a roll of very wide



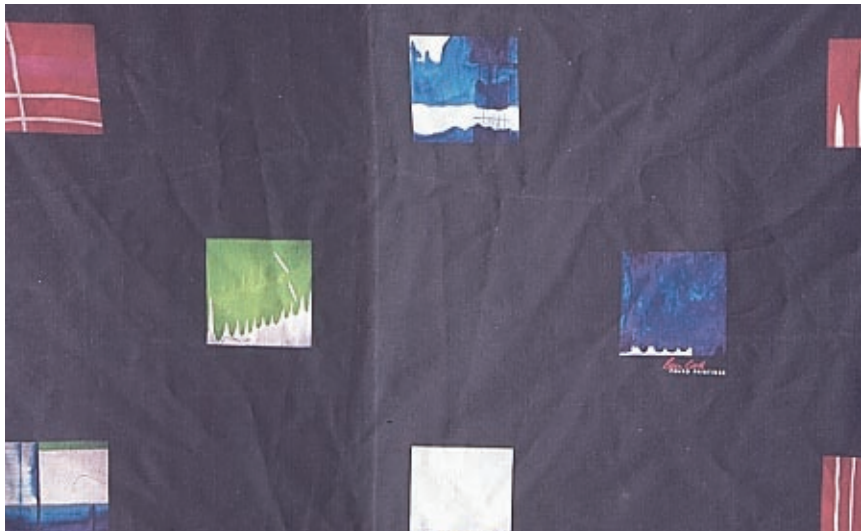
cloth that enabled him to expand the scale of his work. It is striking for its vivid veils of colour. Although Cook is not interested in physically mixing up and making colours, he has great delight in recognising, or finding, them. Colour and surface are completely integrated, increasing the sense of depth and space in the painting. Cook feels that the manufacturing process produces highly subtle marks and these are more delicate than could be made by the hand of the artist. At the end of this series Cook felt that he had exhausted the potential of looking for accidents in fabric and needed to find new areas of practice.



*Paintings of Found Paintings –  
A False History, 2001*

After finishing the Found Paintings Cook decided to make small oil paintings of some of them. Initially he wasn't sure what he intended with these paintings, but was interested in continuing to blur ideas of authenticity in art. The painting process is very obvious. Cook tried to keep as close as possible to the

originals – making notes of the colours and marks directly on the canvas – yet he used a casual painting technique, ultimately unconcerned whether the painted pictures copied the Found Paintings. It was a liberating process to go back to using paint. These painted pictures have become a record of the Found Paintings, exploring all the marks and colours. They are also part of a false history he was building up for his work: creating a series of studies, diagrams and source material. These give the impression that Found Paintings were indeed created in paint by the artist. They challenge the historical importance of this traditional way of working, of developing paintings through preliminary studies and sketches.



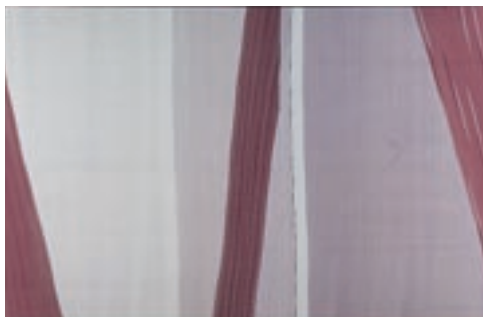
*Ben Cook Signature Fabric, 2001*

Cook made this fabric during his Year of the Artist residency when he worked in the textile design archive of Macclesfield Silk Museum, researching historical swatches. He also wanted to intercept the textile manufacturing process at source, by working in a commercial company. He spent time at Belford Prints in Bollington, which produces printed textiles, designed on computer, in very limited runs for the fashion industry. Cook had a selection of his Found Painting images scanned and worked with a technician creating a repeat motif for a sample fabric. The actual sample was badly printed and crumpled; it is a satisfying irony that flaws were created in his own fabric.

*Digital Dancing, 2001*

This composition of delicate white and red lines was created by accident whilst Cook was working at Belford Prints. He had been trying to create accidents deliberately and found it very difficult; but then pressed the wrong computer key and created a new image from three superimposed images. By cropping and selecting on the screen, he homed in on this particular area of the image to create the composition. Making these works

always requires a leap of the imagination, and there is a significant risk that what looks good on screen will no longer work in its transformation to the digital print on fabric. This image was printed on silk and shows details of historical fabrics in extreme close up.





### *Display Case*

Cook's approach to painting as an expanded practice has enabled his work to develop in a number of ways. He has created branded products on the theme of Found Paintings. They explore the recent phenomenon of contemporary art being absorbed into the mainstream as a lifestyle choice.

The display case presents a number of the different approaches. He produced Bagged Paintings to store pictures that were filling up his studio: taking them off the

stretchers and creating a pack to store them in. But this pack has become a work in itself and raises the question of when does a Found Painting stop being a painting? Does it have to be stretched on a canvas or can it be kept folded up in a bag? The picture comes in kit form, with a certificate of provenance in the bag and a photograph of the painting stretched up.

The silk scarves were created to commemorate his residency in Macclesfield. The designs were created in collaboration with the technicians and designers at Belford Prints, based on his investigations in the textile archive. Cook was fascinated by the process of handing over decision making to another party in creating a Found Painting work. He developed this with a series of shirts he had made by Frank Rostron Shirtmakers. These shirts have been made from the same fabric as the Found Paintings. He selected the fabric for the Shirtmakers so they would have to use the flaws in the fabric rather than avoid or work round them.





*New work for The Lowry, 2002*

Cook has been commissioned by The Lowry to create new work in response to the building. He took photographs of interior and exterior architectural details using a macro lens on a digital camera and then used a sampling process to create digital textile paintings. From the numerous photographs, he selected three images, made small acrylic paintings and then worked with the computer technology at Belford Prints to make the final pieces. These are hybrid works that exist somewhere between paintings and textiles, and blur traditional boundaries between craft and fine art disciplines.

Cook is concerned with continually exploring new ways of working, experimenting with different processes, techniques and materials. He is constantly seeking abstract compositions in the real world, exploring unexpected corners and areas for inspiration.

*Emma Anderson*

*Curator: Exhibitions and Programmes*

## Ben Cook

1967 Born, Gloucestershire

1997-98 MA Fine Art, Manchester Metropolitan University

1986-89 BA Fine Art, University of Sunderland

### Recent exhibitions

2001 West Park Museum, Macclesfield

2000 The Mappin Art Gallery, Sheffield

1999 *Finding Faults*, The Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester  
*New Contemporaries*, Liverpool, London  
*Departure Lounge*, MART, Manchester

### Collections & Awards

Pebeo International Painting competition, Marseilles. The Arts Council of England Collection, London. The Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester. The Atlas Collection, Manchester. The Lowry Hotel. Private collections

Works are for sale. Please enquire at the Gallery Reception Desk.

The Found Paintings website can be visited at [www.bencookfoundpaintings.com](http://www.bencookfoundpaintings.com). A publication documenting the Found Paintings exhibition tour and new commissions will be produced in 2003 – 04.

Part of The Spotlight Programme supported by the Regional Arts Lottery Programme through North West Arts Board

**The Spotlight Programme**



Exhibition supported by the Arts Council of England with National Lottery funds



Ben Cook is part of Manchester Independents and his work can be regularly viewed at Object 57 Gallery, Manchester.

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Galleries open: Sun – Fri 11am; Sat 10am closed: Sun – Wed 5pm; Thu – Sat 7:30pm  
Information: 0161 876 2000 [www.thelowry.com](http://www.thelowry.com)

### Exhibitions also on show or coming up:

#### Gateway to the Commonwealth

4 May – 30 June

Artists explore trade and social links between the Manchester Ship Canal and Docks and the Commonwealth.

#### Shine: sculpture

11 May – 22 September

The Galleries shimmer, sparkle and radiate this summer with shine.

#### A City's Pride: The L S Lowry Collection

ends 22 September

A chance to see the entire Lowry Collection.

#### ArtWorks Imagined Steel: Sculptures by Sokari Douglas Camp

From 1 June

The spirit of life on the streets of Nigeria and London comes to The Lowry this summer, with Sokari Douglas Camp's powerful steel sculptures. Admission charge

Open: 10am; Last admissions: 3pm weekdays; 4.30pm weekends; 5pm holidays

