

# The Guardian

## Artist of the week 167: Rachel Howard

Rachel Howard's bright and abstract paintings create a catalogue of private hells using nothing more sinister than household gloss paint



▲ Sense of dread ... Rachel Howard's Fear of Madness

**R**achel Howard's paintings have a disturbing glamour. Realised with household gloss paint, their surfaces are all sheen, like varnished nails or a sports car bonnet. Beneath the lacquer, the colours - built up in narrow stripes - are vivid but threatening: the red of dried blood or the hazard warning of neon orange. Be seduced by the lustre of Howard's work and you'll soon find yourself facing up to something sinister. Her thin lines of paint spill down canvas like tears or are intricately layered in cage-like grids.

Howard graduated from London's Goldsmiths College in 1992, a few years after the YBAs had blazed a trail there. The paintings she became known for in the late 1990s were bright and abstract, reimagining the spiritual American colour field painting of Mark Rothko or Barnett Newman with household gloss paint: the perfect medium for a workaday world of non-believers. But while Howard's paintings have riffed on the Seven Deadly Sins or the Stations of the Cross, it's present day suffering she's concerned with rather than religion. In the last decade, various wraiths have been conjured between her layered lines of paint - from the black dog of depression to victims of addiction, torture, self-harm or madness.

There's a catalogue of private hells in *Folie à Deux*, Howard's current show, which explores slippery perception and the phenomenon of "madness of two", where couples share a psychosis. With its outline flickering and fuzzy against a dull neutral ground, a small painting of a lonely table and chair sets the scene for domestic anguish: a secret, unstable world behind closed doors.

A similar sense of dread shimmers in the enormous *Fear of Madness*, where headache acid yellow lines zing against dank concrete grey. It seems to ripple like a curtain, behind which neuroses surely lie. *Regulus*, on the other hand, is sheer glowing horror: a blood orange disc of a sun against grey and screaming fluorescent lines, inspired by the story of the Roman general whose eyelids were sliced off. With their sharp colours and bleeding forms, Howard's paintings certainly cut to the quick.

**Why we like her:** For the series of "suicide paintings", which Howard was compelled to make following a friend's death. Her shadowy spectral figures, their forms contorted and their features obscured by streaks of black, channel potent feelings of alienation and mental oppression.

**The Apprentice:** Howard once worked as *Damien Hirst's* assistant and he remains a friend and collector of her work to this day.

**Cleanliness is next to Godliness:** Howard had a religious upbringing at a Quaker school and, though now an atheist, she still sings hymns in the bath.

**Where can I see her?** *Folie à Deux* is at *Blain Southern*, Derring Street, London W1 until 22 December.