

Julie Shiels

unfinished painter's business

[CHRISTOPHER HEATHCOTE](#)

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(Five Walls, 1st Fl, 119 Hopkins St, Footscray, until Dec. 13; www.fivewalls.com.au)

With 25 arresting canvases displayed across three interconnecting rooms, Julie Shiels has the biggest solo show I've seen at Five Walls. More striking still, her work doesn't follow this venue's preferred 'geometric abstract' house style. Instead, Shiels delivers a fresh statement in Conceptual Art.

In keeping with that post-Minimal idiom her work is the tangible outcome of a research-like cerebral exercise the artist set herself, then systematically followed through. When visiting museums on a trip to Europe, Shiels took close-up photographs with her mobile phone of major Old Master pictures.

What she specifically sought out and photographed were sections of bunched draperies within either a Renaissance or a Baroque oil painting. She appears to have fixed upon paintings of unsoiled fabrics woven in a single colour, completely avoiding more tricky patterned material, embroideries, lacework and furs. (Shiels's eye favours quality fabrics, often fine linen or silk, laboriously woven by artisans before the appearance of mass-manufactured cotton in the 1770s.)

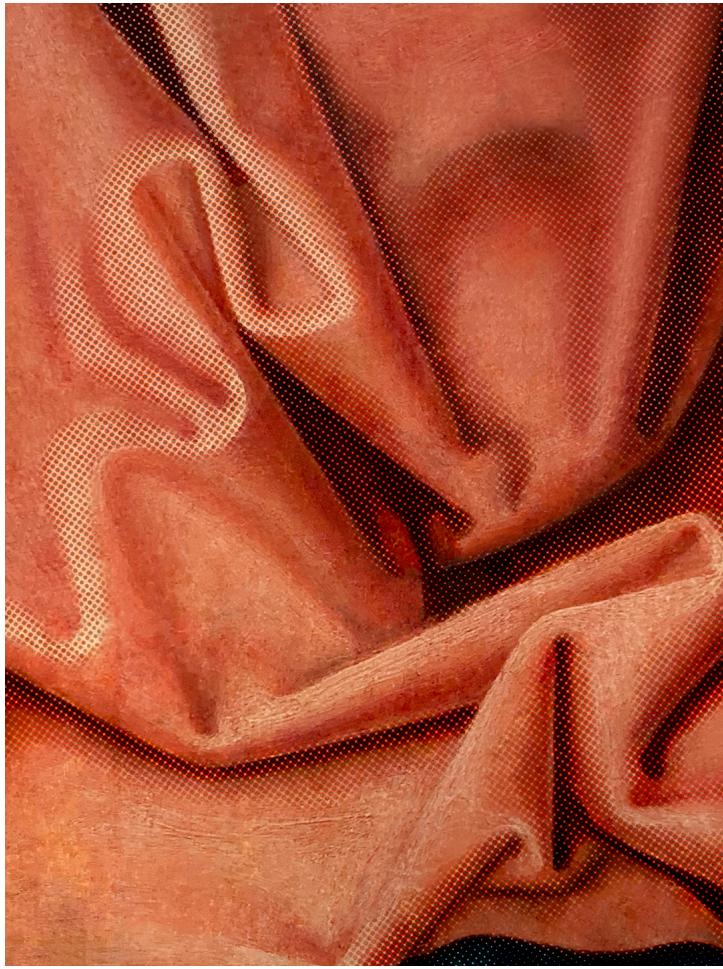
Upon returning to Australia, Shiels then worked with her digitised photographs of pictorial fragments, cropping as need be and turning them into a sequence of individual compositions. Each of these was printed upon canvas using a commercial reproduction process, with the piece being finished off by being spread over a custom-sized art stretcher. Notably, a technical side-effect of printing on the canvases is each work is overlaid with a transparent honeycomb-like pattern, which is most pronounced when you directly see the works, but invisible in reproduction. (Hence the catalogue's photos do not convey what the works are like 'in the flesh' as it were.)

With her exhibition Shiels displays the works in groups mostly according to colour: three similar size white bunched fabrics beside each other on a key wall, for instance, three different size green draperies in a configuration at the end of the long room, a large lush red fabric positioned as a visual feature in the side room, etc.

As already stated this show is so visually arresting. Unlike customary post-Minimal sequences of documentary photographs, Shiels does not try to portray her subjects as inherently geometricised and patterned (as, for instance, in major sequence photographs of Sol Lewitt through to Hans Haacke right down to Bernhardt & Hilla Becher). On the contrary, Shiels presents fabric details within Old Master works so as to emphasise formal values: as her exhibition notes say, the eye now savours them in terms of 'line, colour, form, texture, and composition'. The last category is debatable, because surely it is Shiels herself who when editing each digitised image translates a detail within a larger painting into what appears a cohesive, unified *composition*. My point is, it wasn't this before she altered it.

At risk of seeming pedantic, the artist needs to review titles. If the specific painting photographed remains unidentified, her titles follow the format: *After Raphael 2, After Crivelli, After Jan Van Eyck 1*, with the original painter indicated. Some artists have full names listed, where others are shortened—consistency is needed here. And there are a few schoolboy clangers in titles. The name of that portraitist was 'Giovanni Battista Moroni', not what is in the exhibition list; while there was no Master named 'piombo' which is Italian for lead metal. Instead, the Venetian virtuoso Sebastiano Luciani, a favourite painter of mine, was affectionately nicknamed 'Sebastiano del Piombo' ('of the lead'), it being customary among painters to give rising talent nicknames when young: as in 'Angelic brother' (Fra Angelico), 'little dyer' (Tintoretto), 'from Verona' (Veronese), 'the Greek' (el Greco), and 'big George' (Giorgione).

If you're among those people lazy about making the trip out to Five Walls, you really should try this month. This is one of those shows your eye will not forget.



Julie Shiels, *After Master of Frankfurt*, 2025, pigment print, 95 × 70 cm, Ed.1/1 + 1 Artist Proof