

# UNKNOWN FUNCTIONS

NEW PRINTS BY JAMES ATKINS



Digital catalogue to accompany the exhibition.

## **Exhibition**

**Friday 24 November to  
Sunday 7 January 2018**

Wednesdays to Saturdays 10am–5pm

Sundays 10am–4pm

## **Foyer Gallery**

Broadway Studio & Gallery

2 The Arcade,

Letchworth Garden City SG6 3EW

## Unknown Functions

In this recent work I have returned to a lexicon of shapes and forms I developed some thirty years ago. A visual language that emerged out of drawing (landscapes initially) and obsessively repeating the same subject. I reduced to a minimal set of marks that are as much to do with handwriting as drawing. The cross or 'X' is a particular form that repeats. A cross can have multiple meanings - a vote, a negative, a crossing out, a selection on a web form, a kiss, the signature of a person who cannot read or write, or it can have religious connotations. It's a simple shape made of two strokes - one step above the fundamental pre-historic human marks of handprint stencils found in the caves of South West France.

Many years ago I use to make images in the darkroom. Instead of using a camera and film, I would blacken (with soot) a piece of glass, draw on it then contact print onto photographic paper. (I thought I'd originated this process, but subsequently found that in the 19th Century, Corot used a similar method, known as 'Cliché Verre' to reproduce drawings - well before the invention of cameras.) Due to the fragility of the soot, every version became unique as it degraded with each 'print' - counter to the exact reproduction of machine-based images. 30 years later, these new works are still made on glass. The glass now happens to be touch-sensitive and attached to a CPU and an operating system.

Most technology tends to hide the visual artist's hand. Electronic music can have texture and atmosphere; computer games can often seem more real or engrossing than real life but '2D digital art' is usually discounted as cold, characterless or generic. The digital world has an aesthetic - high-key colour, repetitive beats, samples or libraries of 'sprites' (elements or characters) in programming or computer games. In the same way I reuse some digital 'sprites' over many works and attempt to create a digital texture. I'm interested if a line made on a tablet can record the human touch as much as a pencil on paper without 'looking like digital'.

I'm not trying to replace painting or mimic painting, but interested in bringing painterly process to the digital world. Instead of contemplating the next mark or colour or composition on the studio wall, a working screenshot might appear online, on 'Instagram' or as a desktop background; and I will 'live with it' for while. Friends might 'like' a piece and unknowingly become part of the process. I might see a work with a fresh eye on a phone screen and consider areas that need work or colour changes. 'Painting out' whole areas involves manipulating layers or adjusting colours, removing, recomposing, adding new. The artistic decisions are the same - even trashing a whole work where the 'delete' button is the same as painting out a whole canvas.

Inevitably as with traditional painting, changing one element affects every single other element. The images are just as hard won — and there are only so many ‘undos’ that you can rely on (and contrary to common perception, the app doesn’t draw for you, so it’s not somehow ‘cheating!’). Many artists have several paintings on the go at the same time – they inform each other; themes emerge, elements evolve, obsessions become evident. I work in that same way. Some pieces will take a long time to make – several weeks, others a few days. A title will emerge, usually related to the digital world.

With digital art, the conventional idea of ‘an original’ no longer fits. The work exists virtually and goes online first, until it’s physically reproduced. I like the idea of ‘responsive editions’, where images remain as ‘zeros and ones’ until a copy is ordered. Individual pieces in an edition can even be different sizes according to location and material.

Print technology has moved on hugely in the last 10 years or so, and I get the same sense of excitement seeing an image being tested on a new digital press as I did when one emerged from chemicals in the darkroom or a first impression of an etching was revealed. I’m now trying to push print technology to its limits particularly in terms of colour gamuts in digital print, inks and substrates.

I’m interested in the ‘idea of painting’ in the 21st Century. What it looks like, how people perceive and consume images; what happens to them when they appear online. What ‘painting’ is to programmers and app designers ie. ‘paint tools’ which are sometimes inadequate, bearing little resemblance to actual paint, ink or pencils. Even with these inadequate tools, ‘painting about painting’ can be updated to ‘digital about painting’.

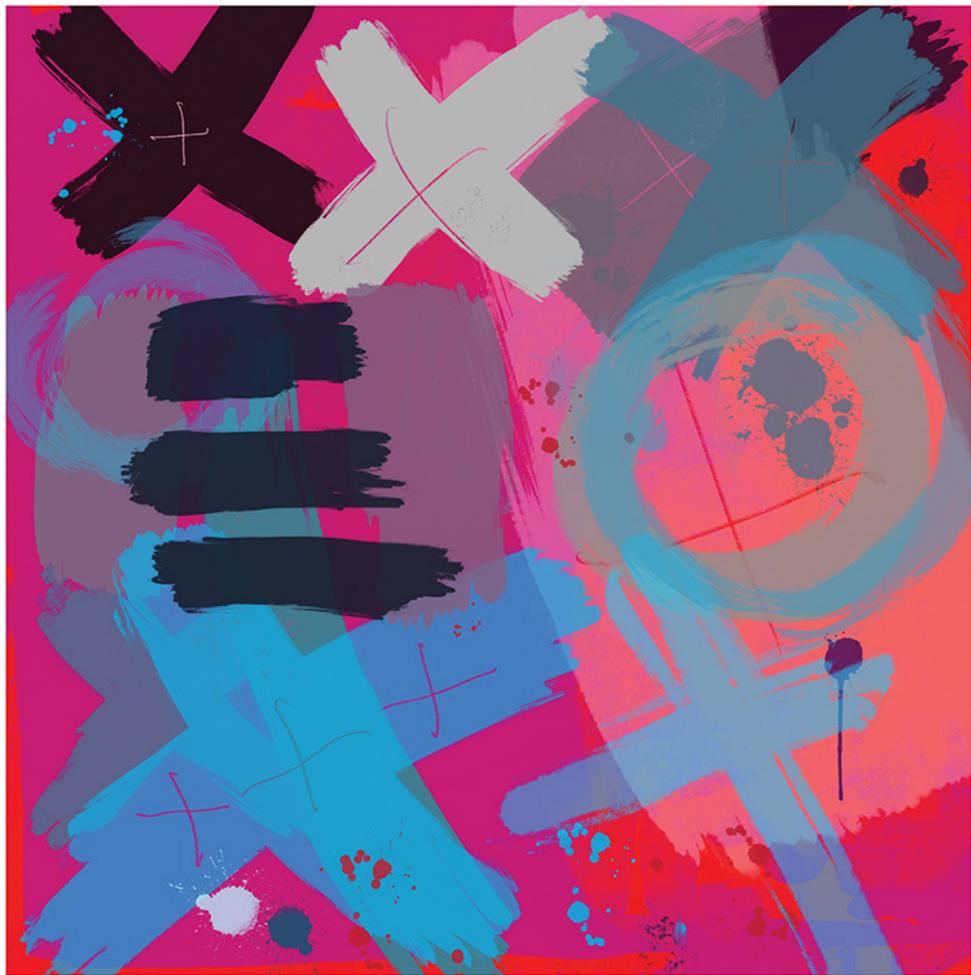
As a result, I’ve often been asked if these works are ‘oil on board’ or ‘acrylic on canvas’ or ‘can i buy the original?’ I like these misunderstandings, of ‘what it is’. For me, these are wholly outdated perceptions developed in the 500 or so years up to the 20th Century about what painting is, the functions of art and artists what they actually do today.

Many thanks to the Laura Dennis and the team at the Broadway Studio and Gallery for help and support in showing these new works.

**James Atkins**  
**November 2017**

## **Unknown Functions**

New Prints, 2017

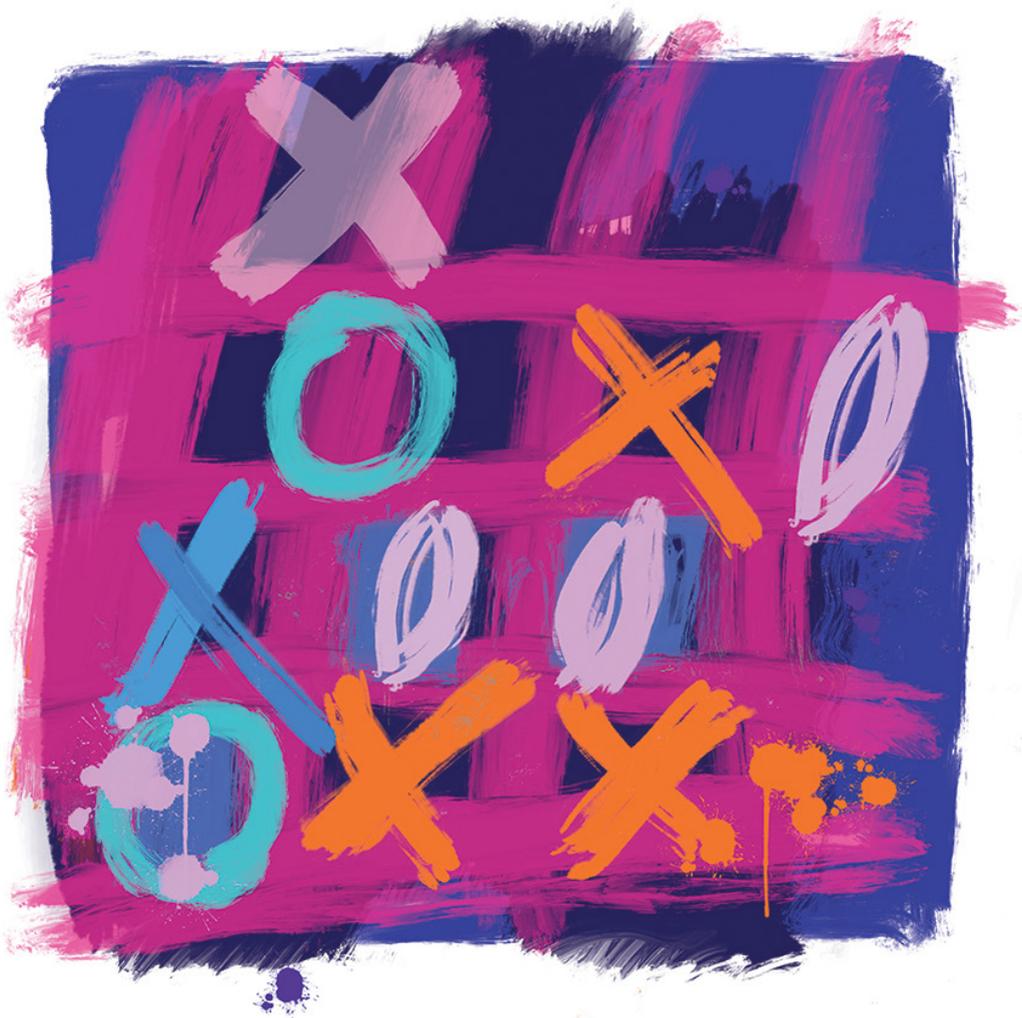


REVEAL ALL (FRANCE, 2017)

2017

Limited edition of 50 & 5 Artist's proofs

41 x 41 cm



HSB  
2017  
Limited edition of 50 & 5 Artist's proofs  
45 x 45cm



CTRL-X

2017

Limited edition of 50 & 5 Artist's proofs

45 x 60cm



UNKNOWN FUNCTION

2017

Limited edition of 50 & 5 Artist's proofs

45 x 60cm

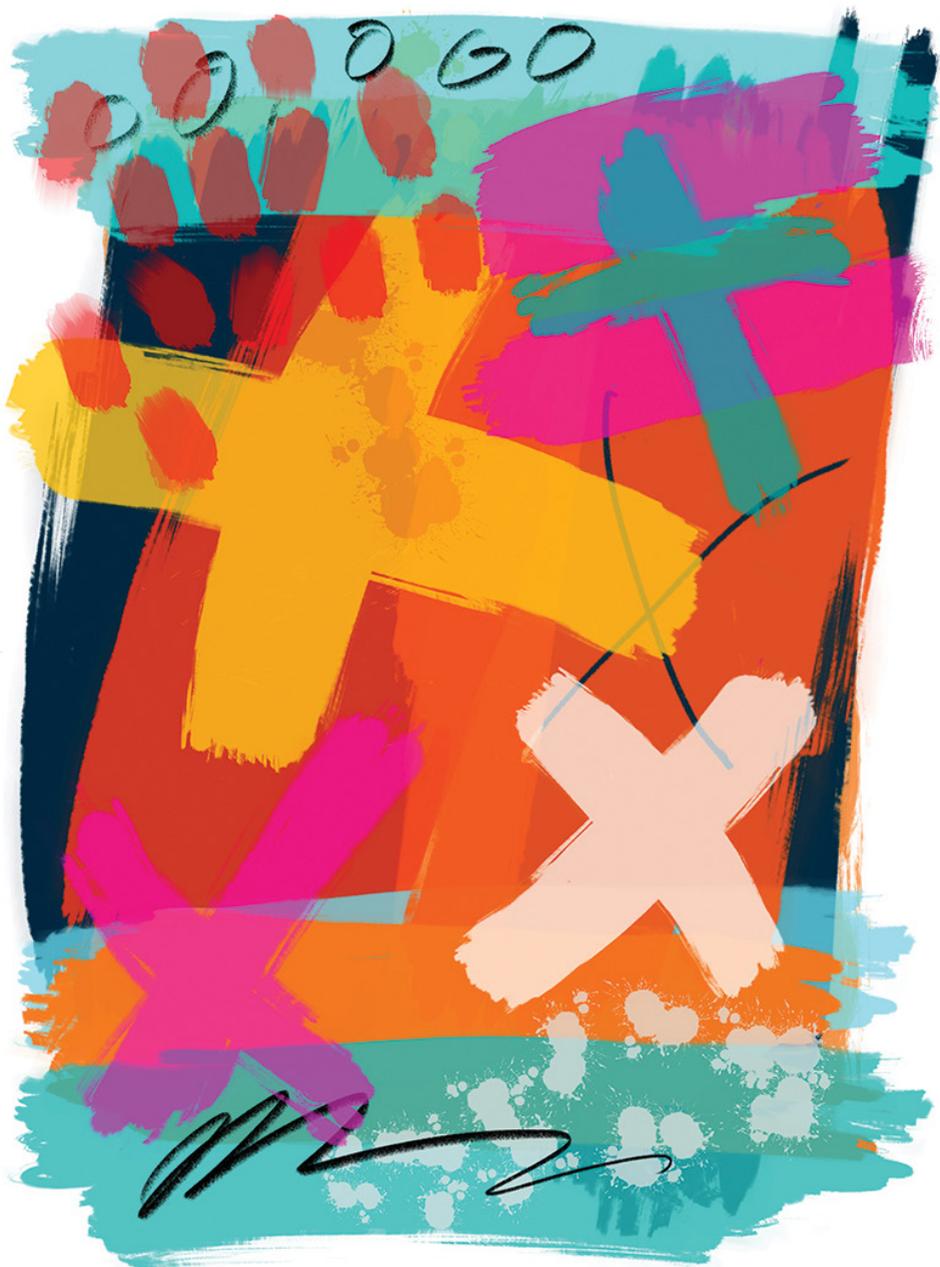


JS CONSOLE

2017

Limited edition of 50 & 5 Artist's proofs

45 x 60cm



SYNTAX ERROR

2017

Limited edition of 50 & 5 Artist's proofs

45 x 60cm

## **James Atkins**

(born 1966, United Kingdom)

James studied Fine Art (Painting) at Camberwell School of Art in London, graduating in 1988. Tutors and visiting artists included Ian McKeever RA, Anish Kapoor RA, Eileen Cooper RA, Dr Jonathan Miller and Bruce Maclean.

From an early age he had an interest in typography and letterforms and is an early adopter of technology to make images. He became a graphic designer in the early 1990s, working freelance at some of London's top brand design agencies. He subsequently moved into web design and helped create one of the UK's first web design agencies. He set up James Atkins Design in 1997.

Throughout this time he continued to paint and make artworks but rarely exhibited his work. In the last few years Fine Art has once more become his focus, with a particular interest in those boundaries of traditional painting, drawing and digital art.

James has work in private collections in France, Italy, Switzerland and the UK. He is currently based in Ariège, South West France and in Hertfordshire in the UK.