

Ces McCully, Holding the Centre

*Hello darkness, my old friend
I've come to talk with you again
Because a vision softly creeping
Left its seeds while I was sleeping
And the vision that was planted in my brain
Still remains
Within the sound of silence*

- Opening verse, *The Sound of Silence*, Simon & Garfunkel (1964)

Holding the Centre reads, in the context of Ces McCully's practice, as an evolving methodology. Resident in country France (since 2019) has allowed a full time engagement with her art practice, and space for experimentation. This leap of faith required the negotiation of unfamiliar geographies of place and language, but is where she found a way to merge her interest in textiles with painting, along with the other elements of abstraction, text and systemic geometries with which she had been working. These conditions have facilitated paintings that explore the centre, engaging deftly with the concept of balance – sensitive to the nuance of polarities.

In these works, united under the collective title of 'hieroglyph' (holy or sacred), there is also a seeking out of what may exist between the human and the divine. In this era of global instability, accelerating technologies and social dislocation, it's hard not to extrapolate a desire to find balance that reaches from the weighted composition of each of these works toward an individual equanimity, conjuring a broader tonal harmony.

Her process begins with shapes created on burlap/hessian, tufted to become three dimensional before being painted in their entirety. Alphabet-like shapes emerge, but are not letters, with other elements created with a level of musical serendipity. Her technique of tufted and glued forms requires no turning back; each decision creates the conditions for the next step. Equally, once a section is painted it may not be overpainted without compromise. Integral to this process is McCully's intuitive response to what has been created, with different timbres and tones used to build individual works toward a particular emotional resonance.

This unique mode of practice, between paint and textiles, was developed by McCully in 2024, her interest in reinvention informed by the way materials have been re-understood in the context of rising digital technologies in the 1990s. More recently, New Materialism has argued that matter possesses agency (and material intelligence) with material necessarily existing in dialogue with people, technologies and environments. Craft has also been revalued in this context given its elevation of the handmade, with power attributed to its labour, imperfections, and a political resistance to mass production.

In these works, musicality is given central importance. Rounded forms speak to a deep bass tone, with others evoking a more percussive sensibility. In each composition there is a reaching for balance, with an inherent tension existing in their media (between textiles and paint), in language that resists decoding. Forms create a clear visual rhythm with tension hovering between text and symbol, textile and paint, two and three dimensions, material and concept.

The surface softness in these paintings draws us in, the tactile, feminine and somehow familiar raised and rounded shapes of each element evoking the universal human connection to thread and cloth. They refer also to a female and feminist craft legacy, notably the work of sculptor Sheila Hicks (b.1934), and the Gee's Bend quilters (from 1860s–present), all of which acknowledge the history of the domestic inherent in fibre.

McCully's motifs, colour, and compositions in this new exhibition cleave in their stylistic abstraction to the modernists – painter Joan Miro (1893–1983), artist and textile-designer Sophie Taeuber-Arp (1889–1943), architect artist Le Corbusier (1887–1965).

In art historical terms, being in-between has broad philosophical connections: a significantly productive site.¹ McCully's practice engages in the ambiguous spaces between reading and seeing, language and image, craft and art, structure and improvisation, control and intuition. She describes her process as developing 'a kind of third thing' with harmony built 'through the continual negotiation of opposing forces' – materially, musically, and compositionally.

In *Hiero: Water gem* (2026) for example, the elements of colour, shape, and typography advance and recede in turn to find homeostasis. Dynamic fluctuations engage the eye, the tension between legibility and potential language unsettling hierarchies of language and meaning; the medium interacts with the feminine sensibility and tactility of fibre while its painterly finish resists such categorisation.

Hiero: Desert city (2026) assembles elements from a letter 'c' to an eye poised on two white triangles, and other geometric shapes and forms with a lively surface. At the bottom centre a blue circle sits on a flat shape that may read as a person contemplating the jostling forms above. Brown, yellow, green and black speak to desert colours, yet specific motifs are resisted. This occupation of unstable ground creates its conceptual force, while associations of softness draw the eye to the balance within the composition which, like its potentially human observer, is 'holding the centre'.

Then in *Hiero: connect study #1, #2, and #3*, the field opens like a summer afternoon, with a sparser background, and fewer colours and elements choreographed to hold space with Calder-like sensitivity.² Balance in these works is even more finely tuned, like a smaller orchestra where less musicians focus the audience, and periods of silence hold suspense tight.

In the global sense, changes to decades-long understandings and economic groundlines between countries and continents are reflected in the material disruptions employed in these works. What holds their centres is the tension expressed in their embodied material, an evolution guided by McCully through process, situation and space. Her making and thinking allows for a musical evolution that builds on the past with contemporary harmonics, silences resonant with their structured yet emotional response to the rapidly shifting realities in our place and times.

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¹ These ideas are explored by theorists from Homi Bhabha (1909-1966) to Edouard Glissant (1928-2011), but also through contemporary discussions focusing on the enduring qualities of liminality.

² Alexander Calder (1898–1976) is known for his sculptural mobiles, three dimensional works in metal that often included percussive sound.