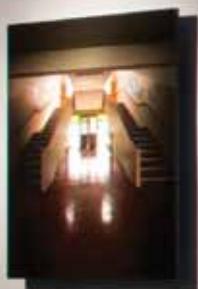


Gina Heyer

Order & Division

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22 August - 3 October 2012





# Intensities of emptiness in Gina Heyer's *Order & Division* series

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Hayden Proud

It is because of emptiness that all things and events can be established; without emptiness, nothing can be established.

Nagarjuna, Buddhist philosopher, c.150 - 250 CE

The mundane interiors that are the determined focus of Gina Heyer's paintings might seem to be an unusual choice of subject given their utilitarian nature, if not their banality. The open passageways, landings and vacant ablution areas that the artist so obsessively records seem as public and as impersonal as almost any interior spaces imaginable. Almost Kafkaesque in their bureaucratic anonymity, their emptiness, silence and incipient menace, they contradict the warmth, pleasures and intimacy of domestic interiors, offering little sense of 'home'. A variant of the 'interior' genre was established by Matisse, Vuillard and Bonnard. Adding to the tradition of interior *genre* first established by Dutch artists like Vermeer, they alluded to spaces of privacy and relaxation to which we attach the term 'intimist'. André Gide characterised this as an 'art speaking in a low tone, suitable to confidences'.<sup>1</sup> Paintings of interiors nearly always have a whispering 'presence', but in Heyer's are akin to an echo chamber.

All of Heyer's paintings on *Order & Division*, apart from *Exit I* and *Exit II*, are of the interiors of a primary school with which many will identify. They operate as groupings of diptychs and triptychs, and also as a collective whole. They reflect the obtuse functionality of the type of school building commissioned and erected by the Public Works Department (PWD) in the 1970s and 1980s. As Heyer states:

I see these spaces as archetypal of my experience growing up in South Africa. More than light on surfaces, I aim to capture the way these surfaces and spaces feel, the way they smell, the way they negotiate interactions with the 'other' and the way these types of public spaces are collectively remembered.<sup>2</sup>

Schools tend to consist of 'repetitive modules of predictable dimensions'.<sup>3</sup> Corridors and wide doorways facilitate access and movement of pupils. As Larry

Speck has noted, 'schools are mostly workhorse buildings...if they are doing their job, they are not pristine eye candy. They are vital, messy crucibles of human life'.<sup>4</sup> They are also predicated on divisions according to age and sex. Areas exist for staff use, or along gender lines for ablutions. Heyer's unspecified school was built along utilitarian lines. Face-brick exteriors and large multi-paned windows keep maintenance and lighting costs down.

The interiors in Heyer's paintings reflect the misbegotten, utopian ideals of international modernism. Its heyday in South Africa was congruent with the apartheid and the theocratic policies of Christian National Education (CNE) in 'white' schools. The formality of these school interiors now evokes the period's alienation and its Calvinist *zeitgeist*. In David Goldblatt's photographic essay *The Structure of Things Then* (1998), the exteriors of other building types have been framed as representing this 'era of baasskap'. Heyer's earlier renderings of the waiting areas of an urban hospital, and her new focus on the 'order and division' of a primary school in the Boland seem their 'interior' equivalent. This is not to suggest that Heyer's paintings have arrived at indistinguishable results; both artists have each made use of different mediums and processes of selection. The camera's role as tool and framing device are perhaps the only superficial denominators in common. Realising that her wide-angle lens was not wide enough to cope with the confines of certain school spaces, Heyer digitally extended and combined her source images. The effect was to give a greater distance from the subject and emphasise the near-surreality of the space. The emptier peripheries subtly frame and emphasise the central subject, drawing attention to the greater detail lavished on this area.

The lack of a human presence in a representation of an interior arouses a sense of 'absence' or even perplexity at an apparent loss of 'subject'. The interior becomes yet another 'empty' object. There is of course the notion of the interior as a 'still life' in itself, which Dutch painters like Samuel van Hoogstraten (1627-1678) explored in works such as *Interior with Slippers* (Louvre, Paris). Here, the exclusion of figures was deliberate in order to create a sense of ambiguity. The abandoned slippers, in context, became a metaphor for a dissolute lifestyle. For American photorealists like Richard Estes painting in the 1970s, the absence of the direct human presence in an interior is thus not new, even if it still appears odd. Others, like Ralph Goings, have included figures, but have depersonalised them so ruthlessly that they seem as lifeless as other objects.

In these paintings, Heyer distills the interiors of a Boland primary school, stripping it of all objects of casual use. Only indiscernible framed photographs under glass, each representing a piece of insignificant history, remain on the walls. Tell-tale

detritus that suggests unseen, living presences is eliminated. In this sense Heyer is a kind of 'minimalist', proposing within the terms of reference of realism, which is normally concerned with a teeming plenitude of detail, that 'less' might in fact mean 'more'. When we say that these corridors, landings and bathrooms are 'empty', it also means that they are empty of us. They now enfold only silence. The children's cavalcade that once inhabited these spaces has moved on. Like every school, everywhere, this one has been continually emptied of each generation and its objects. The chatter of young voices, the sound of names being called; the clatter, squeak and echo of rubber soles on lino floors are no longer heard. A vacuum is created which cries to be filled. What fills this accretion of absences and loss is memory and thought on mortality.

Perplexity may arise as to the meaning of Heyer's paintings because of her deceptively simple concern with emptiness and surface. As she says: 'my paintings could be argued to consist only of the interaction of light on interior architectural surfaces and objects as they are transformed through photography and then described in paint. This could be somewhat akin to the 17th-century Dutch preoccupation with describing surfaces rather than staging obvious grand narratives'. The inclusion of objects in Dutch interior-paintings had an obvious symbolic or moralising significance at that time. What could be made of their reduction to untrammelled surface in Heyer's work? In her *Single File*, for example, the interior surfaces of the corridor seem obsessively clean and, apart from a slight rippling of the lino floor's surface, they are almost unnaturally pristine. The surface sheen reflects multiple light sources; one from the fluorescent ceiling lights, and the other from the daylight at the far end of the corridor. Is there some deeper significance to the whiteness of the light and these pristine surfaces? The title *Single File* suggests that all movement in this space is subject to rules. Since CNE policy held that 'all authority in school is borrowed from God',<sup>5</sup> it is no idle injunction. An immaculate corridor such as this evokes notions of 'the straight and narrow' and of 'cleanliness' being 'next to Godliness'.

Thus Heyer's *Order & Division* series frames spaces into which can be projected a shoal of collective childhood memories and associations. Emptied of everything but the atmosphere that fills them, they even evoke olfactory memories of the distinct smell of such spaces. Heyer is most interested in such collective memories: 'although the interiors show a specific building with specific features, my intentions were that they would convey a familiar building type. We have all experienced our small-scale bodies in relation to the grand designs of the apartheid era; we have all touched those handrails and scuffed our shoes on those lino floors'. With purpose, she

conceals the identity of the school and resorts to titles that do not refer to any time or place. Thus, *Corner Passage*, *Lower Landing*, *Upper Landing*, *Bathroom*, *Basins*, and *Single File* could represent any school anywhere in recent times.

Contemplating these vacant school spaces confronts us all with the transient nature of existence. As generations successively discard childhoods spent in such spaces, so the world itself is continually, as the essayist Chris Arthur puts it, 'sloughing off our presence'.<sup>6</sup> Arthur's speculations on memory and meaning in relation to an empty room form a useful, concluding pendant to Heyer's images:

Thinking about the liminal, haunting state of the room, and of our increasingly precarious, near fugitive status in it, the fact that we shall soon be gone from it forever, acts as a reminder of our temporary sojourn in every room we occupy in the strange house of existence – whether it be the room of mind, body, cell, corpse, coffin. All of them, in truth, are empty. For a while the [room] gave us the illusion of permanence and security, in the same way that our personality and our body do, but they are temporary enclosures only. Things pass, we pass, emptiness remains to enwrap other forms and provide the invisible breath that animates every particular. The room of the self, of identity, is at once as strong, and as fragile, as the rooms we occupy...things may ultimately be empty, but they appear swollen with a fullness that is breathtaking'.<sup>7</sup>

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Author's email correspondence with Gina Heyer, July-August 2012.

Chris Arthur. 2006. 'Room, Empty', *Irish Pages*, vol. 3, no. 2, 'The Home Place', pp. 43-58.

Wayne Franits. 2004. *Dutch Seventeenth-Century Genre Painting*, Yale University Press: New Haven & London.

Nell Marquard. 1959. 'Christian National Education', *Black Sash News*, September, vol. 3, no.21, pp. 4-6.

Larry Speck. 2011. 'Schools and Modern Architecture', editorial, *Architype Review*, January 13, see [bit.ly/Mr9ShB](http://bit.ly/Mr9ShB) (accessed 31 July 2012).

1 See *Britannica Online Encyclopaedia*: [bit.ly/MVsmm7](http://bit.ly/MVsmm7)

2 All comments by Heyer are cited from the author's correspondence with the artist, July-August, 2012.

3 Larry Speck. 2011.

4 Larry Speck, 2011.

5 Nell Marquard. 1959: 5.

6 Chris Arthur. 2006:52.

7 Chris Arthur. 2006:52-53.

# Paintings



*Single File*  
2011-2012  
Oil on board  
44 x 46 cm



*Basins I*  
2011-2012  
Oil on board  
44 x 46 cm



*Basins II*  
2011-2012  
Oil on board  
44 x 46 cm



Detail from *Lower Landing*



Detail from *Single File*



*Upper Stairs*  
2011-2012  
Oil on board  
44 x 46 cm



*Lower Stairs*  
2011-2012  
Oil on board  
44 x 46 cm



*Corner Passage II*  
2011-2012  
Oil on board  
44 x 46 cm



*Corner Passage III*  
2011-2012  
Oil on board  
44 x 46 cm



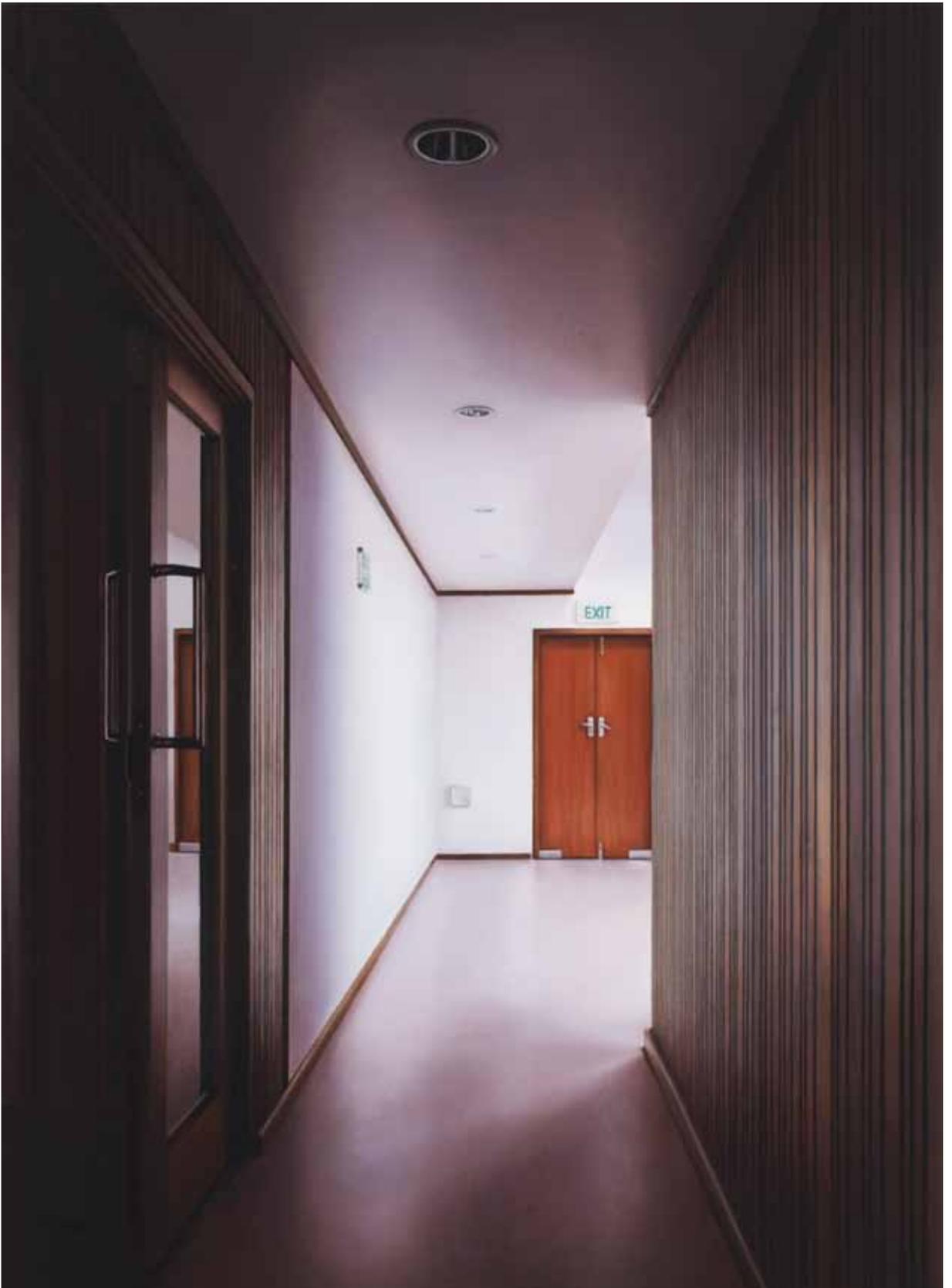
*Corner Passage I*  
2011-2012  
Oil on board  
44 x 46 cm



*Lower Landing*  
2011-2012  
Oil on board  
48 x 46 cm



*Upper Landing*  
2011-2012  
Oil on board  
48 x 46 cm







Previous spread, *Exit I & Exit II*  
2011  
Oil on board  
32.8 x 46 cm

*Bathroom I*  
2011-2012  
Oil on board  
48 x 46 cm



*Bathroom II*  
2011-2012  
Oil on board  
48 x 46 cm

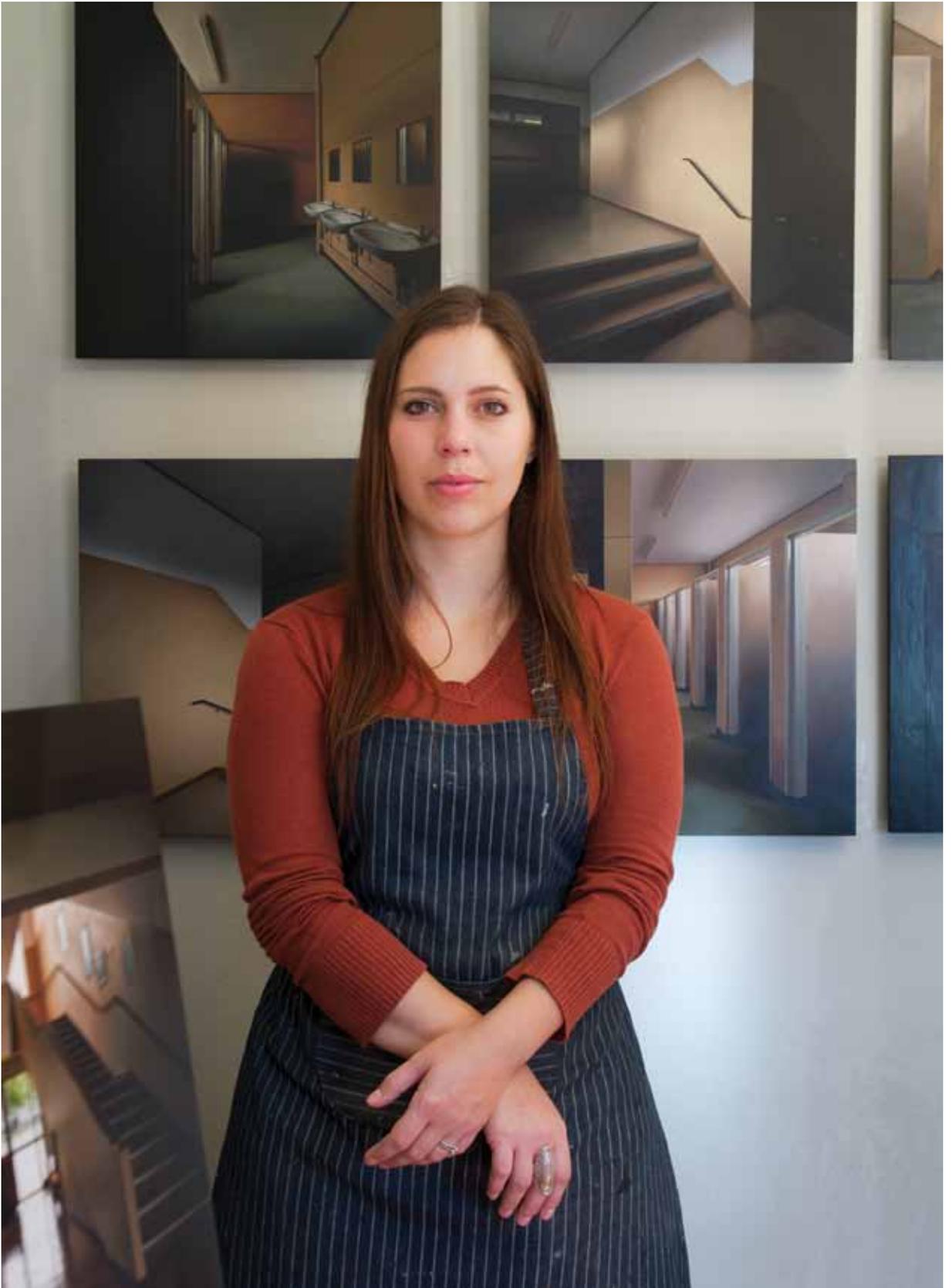


*Bathroom III*  
2011-2012  
Oil on board  
48 x 46 cm

# Curriculum Vitae and Acknowledgments







# Curriculum Vitae

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Born 1983

## SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2012 'Order and Division', BRUNDYN + GONSALVES, Cape Town
- 2010 'Threshold', iArt Gallery (now BRUNDYN + GONSALVES), Cape Town

## SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2009 'Propositions: MAX Masters in Visual Arts Students Exhibition',  
US Art Gallery, Stellenbosch
- 2006 'Portrait Exhibition', AVA, Cape Town
- 2006 Absa L'Atelier Awards, Pretoria
- 2006 'Graduate Exhibition', Sasol Art Museum, Stellenbosch
- 2005 PPC Cement Young Sculptors Award, Pretoria

## AWARDS

- 2006 Public vote favourite artwork, AVA Portrait Exhibition
- 2005 1st Prize in technical excellence; PPC Cement Young Sculptors Award

## PUBLICATIONS

- 2010 Melvin Minaar, Art Times (Review)

## COLLECTIONS

Iziko South African National Gallery  
University of Stellenbosch Sasol Art Museum  
Sanlam

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Gina Heyer  
2012



Catalogue no.16

Gina Heyer

Order & Division

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Cover Image: *Corner Passage II*, 2011-2012, Oil on board, 44 x 46 cm