

SOME SYMPTOMS OF PAINTING

**Douglas Kelaher
Jemma Poole
Iain Cheesman
Nathan Thompson
Michael Morley
Jay Hutchinson
Katrina Thomson
Curator-Cathy Helps**

Cathy Helps CURATOR

Some Symptoms of Painting, what can this mean or more importantly do? What possibilities are being practised within the heterogeneous field that painting has now or could become? How have digital and filmic media/contexts affected art practices and in particular, painting practices? What has their role been in redefining representation? These are just some of the questions asked of and about painting today. I begin by suggesting painting as a series of questions. Taking a sample of possible “symptoms” of painting, definitive representations of “painting today” that may prioritise artists or types of practice which may be currently “fashionable” are hopefully avoided. In alluding to some “symptoms” of painting, diverse art practices that exhibit signs of the existence of contemporary painting are brought together for discussion.

Painting, or perceptions of what painting is, has bothered the art world for decades, even centuries. But like a bothersome itch, it won't lie down and die or quietly go away. Painting has been repeatedly condemned to death over the years, putting it into crisis. But such situations promote self critique and resulting transformation. Today painting can no longer be regarded as it was in the past. Artists may appear to be moving within existing categories but they are also

producing alternate ways of ‘thinking’ and practising. Painting keeps reinventing itself, mutating and diversifying in ever expanding directions. These alternate approaches are simultaneously happening in other art mediums as existing boundaries blur and are dismantled.

Nearly twenty years ago in her text, “Sculpture in the Expanded Field”, Rosalind Krauss asks questions of sculpture; what sculpture was and what its present possibilities are. She relates sculpture's possibilities to an “expanded field”¹ that allows for an expanded but finite set of related positions, for artists to occupy and explore. Within this field, artists are not bound by the definition of a given medium on the grounds of material or perceptions of that material, but are dictated through a set of terms of what sculpture is or could be. She says that a similar set of terms organizing an expanded field can be applied to painting.

More recently Daniel Birnbaum writes of painting: “... as an extended field centred around the idea that painting no longer appears as a strictly circumscribed mode of expression but as a zone of contagion, constantly branching out and widening its scope. Painterly practices emerge in other genres such as photography, video, sculpture, printmaking and installation”.

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Ali Bramwell

The title of this project "Some Symptoms of Painting" could imply a hypochondriac self-examination. Another project in August 2007 by Justin Paton at the Dunedin Public Art Gallery was titled "The secret life of paint" a slightly defensive proclamation that 'paint' is secretly alive. One is reminded of On Kawara's postcards arriving saying "I am still alive". Or perhaps Mark Twain's famously dry retort, "The reports of my death have been greatly exaggerated".

However, rather than examining a terminal patient, curator Cathy Helps was seeking to expand the existing definitions, borrowing from Rosalind Kraus. This project posits, perhaps, a phenomenological approach to diagnosis. Most significantly a symptom causes something to happen, because by nature symptoms are active, they create a change-effect on the body. Cathy Helps is using a viral metaphor to consider painting both as a verb, and a contaminant. The contaminating elements the curator has coded freshly under the banner of painting are primarily colour, light and movement. The selection of works also invites us to reconsider cross-disciplinary boundaries, each artist has contributed a non-traditional response as a painting work. As well as sculpture, drawing and embroidery there are four projected video works included which Helps poetically describes as painting with light. The experience of the exhibition is immersive; while each work is distinct and individually read the effect of the total is cumulative. Entering the room was like diving into washes of active colour.



Some Symptoms of Painting (2006) Installation view

The first thing you see when entering is video travelogue as impressionistic landscape. *Dust and Scratches* (2006) by Jemma Poole is focused on a rural landscape view from a moving vehicle. Poole has applied filters to soften and diffuse the image. The result is a gentle landscape study, with the hypnosis of eternal travel as the seamlessly looped image only appears to change, and no arrival point is achieved. To the left of this work on the same wall is *A Visit to Uncle G* (2006) by Iain Cheesman. Cheesman has also directed his camera from a moving vehicle. The movement in the image is similar to that in Poole's work (a steady horizontal) which creates a formal connection between the two works, enhanced by the projections being similar size and the placement on the same wall so direct comparison can be made. Cheesman's work is also a travelogue but otherwise markedly different from Poole's. The light is harder and the view is not bucolic, it is the view from the train on the London Underground on the line to Heathrow, and like all urban train travel the view is far from picturesque. Only undesirable or industrial property overlooks a train track so we see great deal of concrete and unofficial urban art of a non-celebratory nature, spray paint being the preferred medium. The video loop is cleverly handled, the train finally pulls into the destination station and then it reverses its journey.

In the same room is a second and related work titled *G I Dig London Man* (2006), a miniature cityscape (one of only two works in the show that actually involve the use of paint). Here Cheesman has used a lightbox to throw light upward through two ranks of inverted glass containers. Each of the jars has had layers of paint poured over it, using a palette that refers to the colour found in the video work. The thick layers are then scrafftoed with abbreviated drawings of high-rise buildings, with light finding its way through the paint and the etched lines. The two works form an effective whole, playful with medium, scale and depth of field. *A Visit To Uncle G* is a personal travel document and a painting of a city.



G I Dig London Man Detail (2006) Iain Cheesman

Immediately through the arch into the Dark Side Gallery is Jay Hutchinson's work *My Embroidery Drips* (2006). Once again the colour is important. A hot fuchsia pink leaches off the diptych onto the wall, making the boundaries of the work indistinct and lending the two stretched canvases a sculptural quality as forms that emerge from the wall, rather than placed onto it. The dependence of the work on walls is extended by the content, urban graffiti transposed into the gallery. There appears to be an intentional de/re-naturing, the adolescent



Some Symptoms of Painting (2006) Installation view

extroverted (and predominantly male) urgency of the graffiti mark is rendered in a slow, gentle, interior (predominantly female) process synonymous with hand-embroidery. The work is rich with inversions and paradox not least in the bold use of colour, the graphic content of the work is rendered in lime green, a screaming contrast colour to the hot pink ground. Helps, in discussion with the artist, has extended the colour field potential of the work by painting a vertical band of the same shade of green at a remove but in visual contact with the pink.

To the left of Hutchinson's work is a quiet work by Michael Morley *Studies for a Revolution* (2006). One kind of quiet in the work is the loud silence of absent sound, as the work is a collection of small drawings of guitar amps, part of an ongoing series for Morley. Another quietude is the modesty of the drawings in size and deceptively simple rendering. The absence of colour here is just as quietly loud as the missing sound, the negative spaces formed around the work draw you in, especially in proximity and contrast to the extroversion of Hutchinson's work nearby.



Some Symptoms of Painting (2006) Installation view

Nathan Thompson's large projection *The Forevernow* (2005) sends a haze of flickering light into the gallery, the mauve of old bruises, seen before you encounter the image. He has created a very short loop from found footage, taken from *The Birds* by Alfred Hitchcock (1963), the result is a view of a domestic interior alive with dark swooping and fluttering shapes. It is both atmospheric and hypnotic, an un-still study that appears to change much more than it actually does. The uncanny resonance that Hitchcock created in the original sequence is exaggerated by time refusing to move on remaining, as Thompson intended, now, and also now, still.



Some Symptoms of Painting (2006) Installation view

The bird infested lounging furniture in *The Forevernow* is mirrored by another piece of domestic furniture diagonally opposite in the gallery is Katrina Thomson's work *Oasis* (2005). Thomson has created a different kind of un-still life study. *Oasis* looks like it might be a place to rest, a view of sunset through waving grasses is projected onto a large rolled arm chair. It should be idyllic but it rests a few degrees off in a way that takes a few breaths to understand. The sunlight is acidic and the waving grasses are synthetic, a garden paradise constructed from industrial by-products. The armchair is too fragile to take any weight, as someone found out by trying to sit in it, breaking a large piece right off of it. It turns out it was carved life-sized from florists foam, the kind used as a basis for dried flower arrangements. A false promise of rest.

The last work is a characteristically witty offering from Douglas Rex Kelaher *Googly Eyed Doll In A Nifty Stretchy Stripy Jumpsuit Hanging On A Wall* (2006). The small sculptural piece is wall mounted at the approved gallery standard height for two-dimensional works. An enigmatic and disarming carving of an improbably large eyed creature over which the artist has imposed bands of colour. The painted lines remind of a hard edge colour-field school that frames colour very precisely, exploring the associative potential of colour by altering the placement and size of each band. The horizontal lines are precise and carefully straight, making no concession to the contours underneath them, so that the disjunct between the form and the colour is almost complete. The almost saccharine figurative charm of the carving has been overwritten by a minimal austerity so that the two codings compete and neither is entirely comfortable. The result is a pithy and tongue in cheek summary of five decades of modern debate about the unstable relationships between figuration, narrative, and abstraction



My Embroidery Drips (2006) Jay Hutchinson



Forevernow (2005) Nathan Thompson



Oasis (2005) Katrina Thomson



Dust and Scratches (2006) Jemma Poole

Taking Birnbaum's concept of painting as "zones of contagion" as the idea underpinning the show, each artist included has explored the connections between and as well as incorporating aspects of a variety of art disciplines within their art practice. Many painters today work from a reality that is already image, and set out to explore/debate these practices within and in relation to media saturated contexts. We live in an age of sampling. A variety of art disciplines and media compliment as well as borrow from each other, incorporating processes, ideas and methodology from a number of sources. Cliched mediums like painting now sample from a range of influences and references.

The film maker, David Lynch admits that he has always loved painting and initially got into films to make 'moving paintings'. Influences of his favourite artists resonate in his dark and film noir style movies. One of the artists in *Some Symptoms of Painting*, Nathan Thompson, also describes his recent work where he combines sound and image, as 'moving paintings'. In Krauss's words, painting is truly an expanded field of possibilities.

Everything is possible.

¹Krauss, Rosalind. "Sculpture in the Expanded Field", in *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*, Donald Preziosi (ed.), Oxford University Press, 1988, p.281.

²Birnbaum, Daniel. "Late Arrivals" in *Painting at the Edge of the World*, Douglas Fogel (ed.). Minneapolis: Walker Art Centre, 2001, p.85.

Curator : Cathy Helps

Catalogue Text : Ali Bramwell, Cathy Helps

Catalogue Design : hutchinson.jay@gmail.com

Photography : Nathan Thompson,
Iain Cheesman, Jemma Poole,
Cathy Helps

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Douglas Kelaher
Jemma Poole
Iain Cheesman
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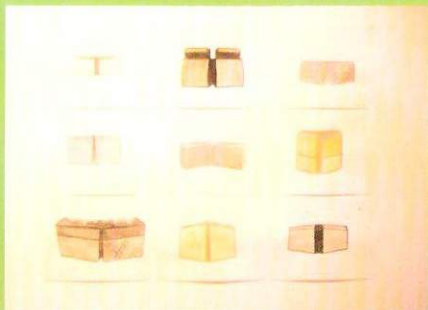
Blue Oyster Art Gallery
www.blueoyster.org.nz
Basement, 30 Moray Pl
Dunedin, New Zealand



Googly Eyed Doll in a Nifty Stretchy Stripy Jump-Suit Hanging on a Wall (2006) Douglas Kelaher



A Visit To Uncle G (2006) Iain Cheesman



Studies for a Revolution (2006) Michael Morley

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