

A Review of *Painting Amongst Other Things*

Curated by Oscar Capezio

at ANCA, 2018

by Angus McGrath

When walking into ANCA, a person is immediately struck by how muted Capezio's take on *Painting Amongst Other Things (PAOT)* is. This is one of three *PAOT* exhibitions in Canberra, all by different curators looking to probe and present ideas and possibilities of expanded painting. Compared to the other two shows, ANCA's is easily the most austere of the lot. The artists are shuffled together, evenly hung, all eye-level, and the only work away from the walls is Jelena Telecki's "Dead Painter II", which consists of a denim jacket, sheets and pants draped on a chair with some shoes in the middle of the gallery. ANCA is one of Canberra's biggest local art spaces and this was the barest I'd seen it, though it didn't feel empty. This restrained distribution felt bold. Monolithic even.

The shows approach to painting is very academic and Capezio's essay really helps audiences understand it better. A key point at the heart of ANCA's *PAOT* is the spectre-like presence of these artists in their work. They leave distant traces of themselves, only softly perceptible from the edges of objects. This sense of each work's entirety being hidden also plays out in their physicality and materiality, and this veiled performance is where the show is at its strongest. Even though this is an exhibition about painting, the work is most affecting when it moves beyond direct concerns of producing painting-objects, and expands outward beyond any recognisable "painting".

Seeing Ian Burn's work in a show that primarily featured currently practicing artists in a local gallery was exciting as I wouldn't normally imagine it in this intimate setting. The smaller and consciously present-day situation of this exhibition makes the work feel relatable in a way that's often difficult in historic, institutional spaces. The first thing in *PAOT* is Burn's "Grey Reflex", a sheet of acetate stapled over a plywood panel, the under layer treated with a uniform grey resin like that of a car's exterior. In a show about painting, it was so thrilling that this first work was so *nothing*; the actual painting contained no trace of humanity and the only real hand of the artist was the slapdash stapling. The reflective quality noted in the title opens the work out into the physical gallery space, placing the viewer in the work as they observe it. This sparse confidence set the tone of the show.

Much like “Grey Reflex”, Burn’s “Word Painting” is immediately striking with its cool style and continues to open up complex aspects of Capezio’s *PAOT*. The work is a framed sheet describing canvas sizes, movements of line, colours, etc, though these lack specificity. At the time, I couldn’t quite follow the instructions or what the text actually meant. It was so literal and I felt the preciseness of the words pointed to something, though I couldn’t track what that something was. The unfeeling “Grey Reflex” only indicated itself to me (and in doing so, its mirror-like materiality expanded outwards), but the semantics of the written word implied a more expansive meaning. It was only later looking at a photo of the work that it clicked; “Word Painting” does the same thing as “Grey Reflex” but does it *through* text. While I was confused as to whether it documented a painting that was made or if it was instructions to make a painting, it was actually an implied, imagined painting. Instead of acetate stapled to grey plywood being acetate stapled grey to plywood, it was the words “Total canvas surface 96 inches high by 64 inches wide” and “colour: uniform blue” indicating a canvas 96 by 64 inches, all painted blue.

Although I resolved my difficulties with “Word Painting”, it had sent me down an ever-going, feedback-loop of painting and its history which many non-painters (myself included) can feel so distanced from and intimidated by. My sentiments are echoed by Anja Loughhead, who in her review of the Drill Hall Gallery’s *PAOT* show suggested “a fitting subtitle for ‘PAOT’ that is: *I’m a painter’s painter so let’s talk about painting* (and there is no shame in that).” Capezio’s close focus on painting is not necessarily negative, but in such an intimidatingly sparse context it can be difficult for non-painters to access. The same can be said for Capezio’s essay which can at times be equally dense.

Lucina Lane’s work, much like Burn’s, can epitomise both the strengths and difficulties of ANCA’s entry into *PAOT*. Her “Untitled (1994)” appears to depict the back of a painting frame with the title, “UNTITLED 1994”, written next to an upwards arrow. I still haven’t understood or resolved this work which echoed my earlier difficulties with “Word Painting”; its references describe something specific, but provides no context for them. Although I came to understand the implications of Burn’s work over time, I could not and still cannot grasp what this is saying about, from, or to 1994. By dipping too far into the personal without grounding or reference, there is no veil for an audience to enter through, only a hard wall that separates and cements the specific, individual experience of the artist. Maybe in due course I will have my “Word Painting” moment, and will notice how glaringly obvious my oversight was.

Lane's "Thinking" is made up of four small banksia branches bolted together to make a frame, the construction of which is crisp and simple, epitomising the strengths of the exhibition. In section VII of Capezio's essay, he says about the show that "...these artists can be seen to play on the possibilities within the impossibility of objectivity... by keeping the void squarely in the frame". Reading this back after seeing the show, I realised I'd barely paid attention to the synthetic fabric in the centre of "Thinking", which is its first material listed on the room sheet. This is a success in the creation of a void, where instead of depicting a representation of "nothingness", an actual absence is made in the centre of the work which can't be perceived while appreciating the frame. This sense of detail hiding the whole resonates on from an earlier work in the show; Patrick Lundberg's "No Title".

In most posts about this show on social media, Lundberg's "No Title" was what people photographed. Fittingly for *PAOT*, it didn't translate at all to an online platform and required viewing in situ to resolve and appreciate it, equivalent to the physical imperceptibility of Lane's "Thinking". "No Title" comprises dozens of small balls attached to the wall at random, each with intricate patterns painted on them, but at a distance when taking in every ball, the detail can't be comprehended. The network of paint-objects epitomised their own failure for digital representation and continue this ongoing idea about specific parts being imperceptible to the complete work.

Telecki's "Dead Painter II" embraces the open ambiguity Capezio's essay so beautifully describes, as well as the related idea of a work's components eclipsing the complete object. The work is made of old paintings by Telecki which have been cut up, sewn and studded onto a denim jacket, then draped on a chair with pants, a sheet and shoes; all white. It appears as though the person wearing them simply evaporated and in many ways that's true; the work is from an earlier performance prior to *PAOT* where these clothes were actually worn. Considering Capezio's essay, a sense of ambiguity is undeniable - there's a literal absence of the artist, but like Lundberg and Lane, the whole of the original painting cannot be seen, only fragments re-contextualised in a new style. A void is created not only with the missing figure and pieces of the original painting (what were they and what did they stand to mean?) but also this being the only work that isn't on the wall, floating lonely surrounded by the cold paintings and other things.

The scale of Vivienne Binns' works resemble that of painter's palettes and, next to the forthright confidence of the Elizabeth Newman works they sit by, are physically very intimate. Their three-dimensionality and purely abstract form creates distance from any kind of figurative representation. The paint simply just becomes what it is; paint. The works visual similarity to a palette now hung

on the wall becomes like a photographic document, freezing a moment of Binns' practice. With what looks like painting-scrap, this is possibly the truest document possible where instead of an artist constructing and layering their paints on a canvas, the raw "ingredients" are laid bare. The potential of this work as between painting-artwork and painting-leftovers creates a tension in tune with the rest of *PAOT*, where the material simplicity of objects opens up space for these complex and ambiguous performances of/as "painter-artist".

Some works in the exhibition focus directly on key physical components of painting; form and shape and colour. Lundberg's three "No Title (I-III)" works abstract the picture plane by creating a surface very tall and yet very thin, so much so that the works have the dimensions of shoe laces. These represent a compelling approach, but one that feels more aligned with the actual production of painting and at odds with *PAOT*'s performance of "painter" which blurs any recognisable painting-act and leaves a foggy figure of the artist beneath. Elizabeth Newman's "Jazzy One", a canvas with straight, vertical fabric strips glued on had a similar effect to "No Title (I-III)"; these are works that have weight in their explorations of abstraction but feel out of place here. Their close focus on formal painting concerns leaves no space for the artist themselves.

Newman's two works next to each other - a green monochrome hung next to a found wooden palette, both "Untitled" - are where this performance of "painter" feels more fitting than the above abstractions. The palette already exists in the same way that the colour green does, and the creating of both as "ARTWORK" simply requires the artist to performatively decide to hang them up and decree that this, which is not normally art, now is. Being side-by-side, both become rich explorations into texture. The wood palette resembles Binns' work and creates a mirroring of palettes (objects and not artworks) as that; artworks. In the show's essay, Capezio talks about this Newman work as epitomising the contrary balance of the artists vague absence and "ambivalent" presence. The hand of the maker is present only in the performance of proclaiming this an artwork.

The boldness of the show and unashamed intellectual investigation of painting may be confronting for those unprepared, but that is not a bad thing. It feels rare for a local gallery in Canberra to have such an iron-clad serious painting show, and that can be intimidating, especially for us non-painting folk, though when removing the intense and perceived superiority of academia, it's a very simple exhibition. The specific objects I had difficulties with were often the ones that stuck with me, and work like Burn's and Lane's were equally direct yet needed hours to mull over. For a show about painting, the most successful works are very *un-painterly*. In an example like Binns' which obviously foregrounds the medium of paint, it appears more like an assemblage made of paint. As

distant as most of the work appeared, there were endless veiled insights and meanings, and this was reflected in their physical, material qualities, which generally made actually *seeing* the complete thing nigh impossible.

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