

Imagining rafts, the number two, and other thoughts.

I have been reflecting on the desire to paint as opposed to the need to paint. I have been thinking long and hard about the theorisation that has edged around painting as opposed to the lived personal experiences that might also drive it. In my own case, certain places and events have driven changes from expressionistic, to figurative, to abstract, to socially oriented and so on.

But how for example, does desire to address the urban, the persistence of technology, picturing the city as a set of layers, the politics of globalisation, the occupation of territory and 'bearing witness' measure against a maddening curiosity for what might be simply achieved through material experiment and saturated colour with paint on canvas?

I have also been thinking about the importance of the number two. For from the late eighties onwards I have sought out an intellectual rationale to support what has been an intuitive interest in dualities. Some examples: nocturnal abstraction / floating figure; expressive painterly background / tight layers of stretched architectonic overlay; a field of fragments / a possible overall meaning (The City Submerged); a subjective narrative / a personal politics.

I am no closer to surrendering to a singular conceptualising or way of making than all those years ago. Nor have I found at this stage a completely satisfactory philosophical underpinning. But, there has been for my part as an artist and maybe as a social human being, recognition of the singular influence of particular personal experiences. My sister's untimely death in 1983, a reflective sojourn in the Veneto, a period of living and working in New York, a collaborative project in India, working in Seoul and a profoundly affecting trip to Timor Leste in 2008 at the behest of The Australian War Memorial are some of the particular experiences that have brought about compulsive changes in my imaginings of place, time and sociology.

In part, it is the creative possibility of emotional or physical displacement – an off balance moment – that offers potential for reconfiguring one's existing predilections, for maybe busting out with something new. Did I feel displaced in the Timorese bush on patrol with armed personnel for example? Yes indeed, and I felt a strong uncanny presence too. That strange ghostly surveillance experience is now all synthesised through a 'night vision' aesthetic.

By degrees I have come to recognise also the beautiful power of serendipity. In June of 2011, I happened to be in London doing some research at the Imperial War Museum. I spent many hours there surveying the collection. I submerged myself in an intriguing video commission, discussed conflict with notable artists and thinkers and took further stock at the Imperial War Museum's Manchester campus. Yet for all the potential intellectual worth of this information gathering, it was coming across by accident, a very orderly and ordinary pile of hard rubbish in Gloucester Rd that proved most important as the particular and defining experience of that trip. Junk- carefully assembled into a 'raft' of discarded belongings. I was struck not only

by the neatness (very English?), but the potential for object histories; identity markers; what might be salvaged and by whom. It felt like a marooned craft, a hastily constructed vessel of personal parts in search of a new port. Its wake of attendant ideas radiated towards me at once.

In this exhibition, in my 'Imagine a raft' paintings I have used as a starting point, simple digital photographs of various hard rubbish collections, beginning with that first collection in Gloucester Rd, to present interwoven structures and objects that have a more open meaning. I have a habit now of staking out opportunities to surreptitiously record these collections as they mysteriously appear and disappear a few days later. I have discovered there is discomfort to having one's refuse recorded. People get anxious. Perhaps they are expunging some wilfully excluded part of their life through the act of chucking. Perhaps it might be environmental conscience. Certainly the sprawling suburban tips I have visited have given me the guilts.

It remains a sweet mystery to me that constituting in paint those layers of identity and memories of the urban has become so fundamental. I suppose my picturing of the urban began in earnest with my desire to surveille and paint the nocturnal streets of St Kilda in the late eighties and I feel something of that is in these new works. Meanwhile as a counterpoint, in late 2011, I also created a number of largely monochromatic works. My original thinking was to create a set of warm red vistas to float images upon. These 'Absence Field' paintings offer a concurrent abstract possibility. I see these as more material experiments engaging the immediate, the gestural and the saturated. These red paintings are less formed- less about the seen and more about the felt journey. I cannot say too much more about them now except that, yes, I think of the number two.

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