

The Bureau, Melbourne

ILAM PRESS

Mono 1:1

Robin Neate

*I think I'll go on down to the
Pacific and from there I'll
Improvise, Part II*

Winter 2014

I think I'll go on down to the Pacific and from there I'll Improvise, Part II

I was once asked what my painting really means in terms of society, and my answer was that if my work were properly understood, it would be the end of state capitalism and totalitarianism.

Barnett Newman¹

Accidental encounters between unlikely elements have become the stuff of everyday life.

Jacky Bowring²

Today, the certainty of Barnett Newman's claims about painting's ability to solve the problems of the world's economy and government, merely seem like evidence of modernism's final moment of misguided faith in its status in Western civilisation. And if an artist like Robin Neate – a painter whose work shares an inquisitiveness with modernism – has any interest in Newman's work, it is most likely to reside in the way Newman's minimalist aesthetic eventually found its way into popular interior design in the 1980s.

Where Newman put forward an argument in the 1970s for colour-field painting as critical to the fate of Western civilisation, Neate's recent paintings, by contrast, are decidedly more measured and tacit – yet arguably – no less about the connectedness of painting to time and place. And without wishing to overstate a case for the influence of immediate environment on the work of any artist, Neate's painting over the past three years have possessed a curiously perceptive and empathetic spirit with the 'otherness' of the earthquake damaged city of Christchurch in which he lives.

¹ Barnett Newman, 1970, https://education.moma.org/moma/learningresources/cms_page/view/366529

² Jacky Bowring, 'The Sublime, the Surreal and the Melancholy: Surveying the Setting for Scape 7,' *Scape 7 Public Art Christchurch Biennial*, Volume One: Guide/Reader, Christchurch: Scape Public Art, 2013, 22.

In February 2011, the inner city's environs, (largely planned and built at the very moment the modern movement began to assert its presence throughout Europe at the turn of the 19th century), were exposed and revealed from an entirely altered perspective. In 2013, Head of the School of Landscape Architecture at Lincoln University in Christchurch, Jacky Bowring, reflected:

Accidental encounters between unlikely elements have become the stuff of everyday life. Surprising old signs painted on the side of walls suddenly revealed by demolition create unexpected juxtapositions with the contemporary city.³

Neate's paintings circumnavigate histories and traditions of modernism from its more overlooked, but no less interesting corridors or points of view, testing questions about its importance in the 21st century; how is it still possible for painting to position itself as relevant to the here-and-now?

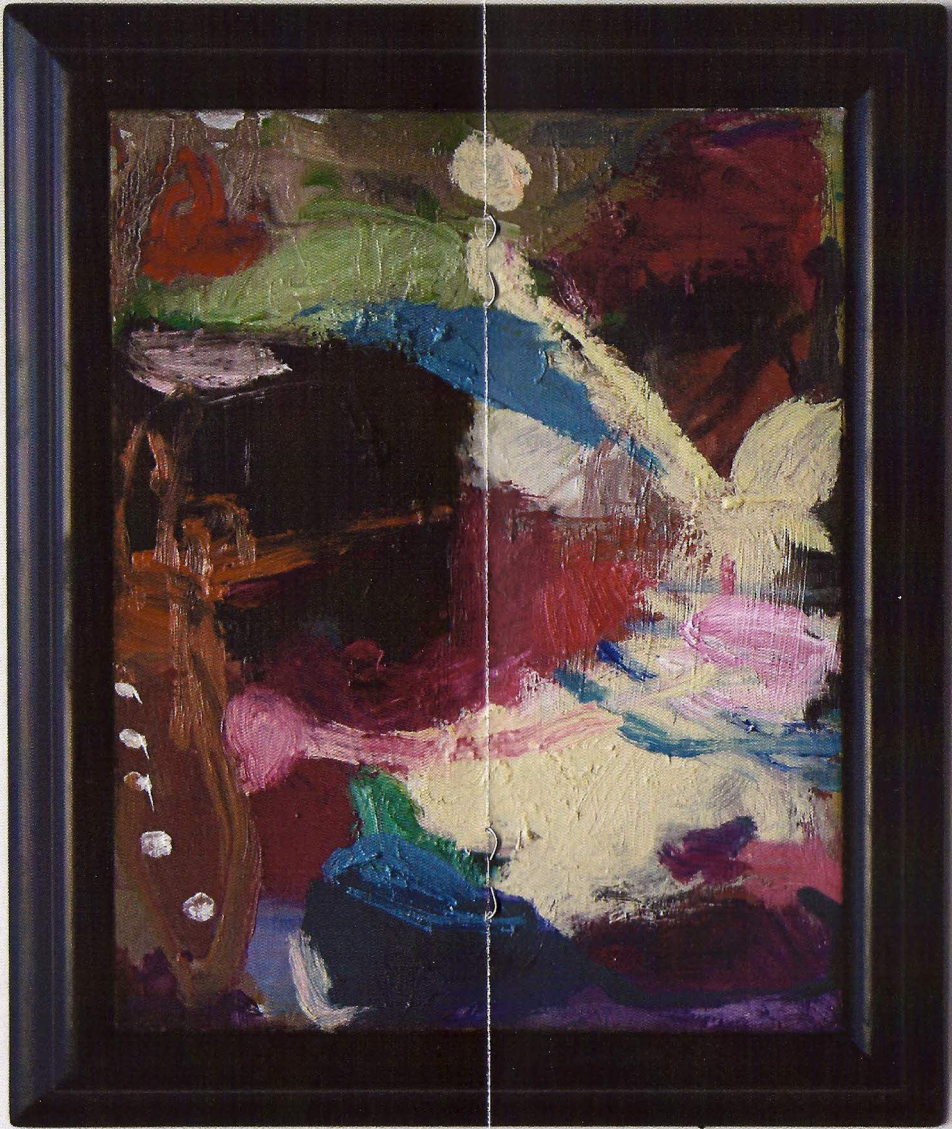
A first encounter with Neate's recent practice suggests that if his paintings from 2004 conjured up the spirit of Picasso's Blue and Pink periods, his more recent works seem like a compounded visual history of modernism. Are they appropriations of forgotten still life paintings by Odilon Redon, or maybe recently found colour studies for Willem de Kooning's abstracted landscapes from the 1950s? Neate suggests it would be ill-advised to limit the spirit of this series to any specific time or place: 'They are reminiscent of a lot of paintings but somehow they aren't like any in particular.'⁴

These paintings however, do represent and attend to fundamental questions about modernism and abstraction. There is, for example, the obvious evidence of the artist's

*I think I'll go on down to the Pacific and from there I'll
Improvise, Part II*
Oil on canvas, 2013
300 x 240 mm

³ Bowring

⁴ http://hamishmckay.co.nz/artists/Robin_Neate





hand and gesture in the application of paint, as well as an awareness of modernist principles, orchestrating a body of work in which outcome is determined by engaging and critiquing the processes and actions of painting. Neate's art declares its curiosity in the essential principles of modernism – its tenacity and enduring commitment to evaluating the discipline of painting – to entrench such a discipline more firmly in its 'area of competence.'⁵

Outwardly, Neate's practice over the past three years possess all the hallmarks of Greenbergian authenticity. Describing his working processes Neate observes:

The paintings usually get to a point where I can't decide what, if anything, to do next. Does it need more? Should I take something out? Then I have to put it aside and not look at it for a while. When I come back to the painting it's usually obvious what the next step will be... I may begin again, or I may decide it's finished. It's an accumulative, haphazard process.⁶

Yet, Neate's painting is certainly not founded upon the kind of certainties that artists like Wassily Kandinsky, Newman or Jackson Pollock subscribed to. At the very least, viewing his work and making sense of the intimacy of its scale from the seemingly contrary perspective of its bold, expressive application of paint, marks out a different agenda. These paintings are as much a reminder of an audience's ingrained expectations about the experience of modernism, as they are about re-evaluating its potential as an aesthetic tradition, still capable of commanding our attention and interest.

These are artworks layered in deceptions. They appear to belong to familiar tradition of abstraction, yet also deny their

⁵ Clement Greenberg, *Modernist Painting*

⁶ Robin Neate, Interviewed by Peter Vangioni, Robin Neate. *The Ray Paintings & Other Yesterday Paintings*, Christchurch: Ilam Press, 2013, unpaginated.

allegiance to any assumed ideologies or principles. Their imagery is pervaded by art historical references and inferences, (symbolism, expressionism, surrealism, abstract expressionism and neo-expressionism), even though the collective pedigree and 'genuineness' of such references, only seems to exist to undermine any remaining faith in the authenticity or integrity of any particular art movement.

More deceiving is the way in which Neate's work can be perceived to so utterly represent principles of pure abstraction, yet the titles selected to provide a degree of identity to their content, have a tendency to open up wider, more subtle readings and ambiguous storylines. Even the application and substance of paint is in on the act – its presence, shape and form, implicating its own potential narratives. Neate comments:

The titles should be seen more as a cue than a key... I suppose, I'm just trying to set the scene. To give some sense of where I'm coming from and what I might be alluding to... I'm trying to prompt associations in the same way I hope the painting's physical appearance does.⁷

Surprisingly, in this uninhibited rethinking of Western painting – critiquing and acknowledging the virtues and vices of modernism – these paintings still maintain a sincerity and affection for the traditions and agendas under review and revision. These are paintings that perfectly comprehend the merit of the unanticipated and enigmatic – as Neate suggests, 'a sort of ordered chaos.'⁸

Dr. Warren Feeney

Dr. Warren Feeney lectures in Art History at the University of Otago and is co-director of Chambers241 Gallery in Christchurch. He also reviews and commentates regularly on New Zealand art.

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Ibid

Mono 1:1 is an exhibition series in which one artwork is exhibited for two days. Each artwork will be accompanied by a small, limited edition, catalogue.

Around 1970 minimalist artist Carl Andre formulated his Three Vector Diagram. Andre speculated that the work of any artist can only come into being if there is a convergence of 3 factors. These factors are: the *subjective* characteristics of the art-maker, the *objective* characteristics of the materials and the availability of *economic* resources.

Hi-jacking Andre's vector as a loose working model Mono 1:1 considers the restricted economies of time, scale and place as a curatorial provocation, site specific event and publication. For example when artworks are exhibited beyond their country of origin, freight and packing costs can be expensive or problematic. In such instances Mono 1:1 embraces these limitations calling for artworks that are small, singular, compact and light for easy dispatch through conventional mail.

Writing in *After Art* Art Historian David Joselit argues that the primary aesthetic and political struggles of modernity are both concerned with, and embrace, the dislocation of the image as a nomadic practice. Mono 1:1 reframes the concept of the nomadic as the movement of an artwork from its site of origin and its translation through networks of exchange, distribution and consumption.

The Bureau
Nicholas Building
Level 8, Suite 13
37 Swanston Street
(Cnr. Flinders Lane & Swanston Streets)
Melbourne, 3000
Victoria
Australia

www.thebureau.info
julianholcroft@gmail.com

All enquiries regarding Robin Neate <http://hamishmckay.co.nz>

Designed by Jessica Tabke
Printed at Ilam Press, School of Fine Arts, University of Canterbury
ISSN 2382-0764