



Expanded Canvas

TOWN HALL GALLERY

SAT 23 APRIL – SAT 2 JULY

EXHIBITION CATALOGUE

IMAGE: Lara Merrett, 'Time after time (compendium of gestures)', 2017, acrylic on canvas, dimensions variable. Installation view, 'Superposition of three types', 2017, curated by Talia Linz and Alexie Glass-Kantor, Artspace, Sydney. Image courtesy of the artist and Sullivan+Strumpf.

EXPLORING NEW FORMS OF CONTEMPORARY PAINTING

ESSAY BY

Town Hall Gallery Curators
Rachel Keir-Smith and Stephanie Sacco

Painting is a continually expanding and evolving medium, afforded a special status in art history given its longevity and diversity. An expression of ideas and emotions, combining the artist's technique with their choices of medium and form, the traditional definition of painting has largely remained the same over time: an image, an object and an action to a particular surface. 'Expanded Canvas' brings together six Australian and international artists who test the boundaries of this definition in their practices, resulting in works that challenge the possibilities of scale, surface and materiality, embodying the innovation and dynamism of contemporary painting practice.

New Zealand artist Judy Millar pushes the boundaries of scale by enlarging and exaggerating the painted surface. 'Double Hand', 2020, measures over six metres in length and is painted on vinyl fabric used for the printing of large-format billboards. The marks on the surface of the work are intensely expressive and physical, created by processes of wiping and scraping paint. Each mark records every bodily movement of the artist, alluding to the intersection of painting and performance. The forms are suggestions of letters or hinting at human figures, but ultimately remain abstract, leaving the viewer to contemplate their own personal experience of the work. The importance of painting to Judy is to bridge

the mental and physical worlds that we inhabit, to 'attempt to resolve these two seemingly disparate existences and tie them together. Mind and matter converging.'¹

Also exploring the confluence of psychological states and physical gestures, Tom Polo combines figurative and abstract painting to create expanded acts of portraiture. Drawing from acute observations, absurdist encounters, personal histories and imagined personas², Tom's subjects are impish, playful characters rendered through swirling lines and colour blocks. Propped up by theatre backings often used for set pieces on the stage, on display are three large canvases depicting humorous and alluring caricatures. Sidestepping the gallery wall and occupying space often reserved for sculptural forms, the works are posed like 'actors' in a scene, each leading the viewer through passages of potential meaning. As Tom explains, 'I am interested in the 'encounter' and what it means to pass through thresholds of physical, emotional and psychological space. I think about my paintings as theatrical witnesses; as figures constantly oscillating between the stage and the audience – of looking and being looked at.'³

Celebrating the painterly effects of saturation, Lara Merrett repurposes drop sheets from her studio as the surface



IMAGE: Judy Millar, 'Double Hand', 2020, acrylic on vinyl, 250 x 690cm, image courtesy of the artist and Sullivan+Strumpf. Photography by Cheska Brown.

for her atmospheric, three-dimensional paintings that also challenge the thresholds of space. The hefty, hardware store-bought, protective materials are prime surfaces to create large scale, colour field artworks. Cultivating happy accidents, Lara experiments with hue and opacity, shape and volume, gesture and mark making, to transform the peripheral aids from her practice into tactile encounters that spill out and surge across the space they inhabit. Paint is applied on and through the porous and laminated sides, staining the cotton weave with paint runoff, spills and leftovers from other works. First shown at Artspace in 2017, 'Time after time (a compendium of gestures)' is an immersive environment created from billowing, boldly coloured drop sheets, inviting visitors to enter and navigate its folds.⁴ 'This ever-changing work is so personal,' Lara says. 'It provides a record of where I've been and holds significance as it maps out my creative space. I'm also drawn to this work not having a beginning or an end. It captures moments in time and has many configurations, responding to where it is placed and is sensitive to its environment. It is not static at all, and there are open possibilities to change. I hope it also creates a place for the viewer.'⁵

Similarly interested in how surface and materials meet in a physical and gestural way, Huseyin Sami's practice explores time,

action and process. Honing an intimate knowledge of household paint over two decades, he pours straight from the tin to create tangible, physical colour matter that thrusts out from the canvas. Negotiating the horizontal format, Huseyin dances around and reaches across the canvas to drape large films of material colour into position. By dripping, rolling, stretching and cutting dried segments of paint, he enlarges the surface area to 'allow for the material to expand space and for colour to envelop the viewer experientially.'⁶ On display are three 'Skin' paintings illustrating that painting is not just flat colour absorbed by the absorbent canvas. These works embody the challenges associated with bigger paintings and the relationship of the artist's body to the process.

David Harley challenges the notion of the flat 2D plane further by diving into the space beyond the painting's surface. Using digital processes to create what he terms 'free-form' abstract painting, David's practice imbues the synthetic and mechanical nature of the digital with the personal and the idiosyncratic nature of creativity. His tools include working with virtual reality (VR), computer-aided design (CAD) programs, wall spray painting, large format printing, motion graphics and animations. He seeks to explore the possible space behind the surface illusion of the 'canvas'; the confines of various software or platforms become

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the material he works with. The 'moving paintings' in this exhibition are created with the aid of a VR headset which allows the artist to be situated in the midst of the work while creating it. In this instance, the final work is intentionally not exhibited in a headset but instead returned to the flat surface of the 'canvas', so that the work is experienced not as a video with a linear narrative, but similar to how a painting may be experienced - as something the viewer can choose to come back to on their own volition. The pace of movement in the videos emulates the slow reveal that is often associated with the experience of painting practice.⁷

The confinement of the canvas is abandoned altogether in a new work created by Bundit Puangthong. Bundit's artistic practice mixes his training in traditional Thai art with a western-based arts practice. He uses a range of techniques from detailed brushwork and stencilling, which is a key technique used in traditional Thai temple arts; to contemporary practices such as graffiti, abstract expressionism and pop art.⁸ For this exhibition Bundit will paint a large-scale mural directly onto the gallery wall which continues the artist's tradition of creating murals inspired by the Ramakien, the traditional Thai epic considered an integral part of the Thai literary canon. This latest chapter tells the story of the monkey god Hanuman who

receives an order from the deity Phra Ram to help rescue the kidnapped princess Nang Sida, who was abducted by king of the demons Thotsakan. The gallery wall itself will become canvas, story book, and celebration of the artist's culture all in one.

Often considered a window into another world, the tradition of painting has expanded exponentially in contemporary art practice to include elements from theatre, advertising, house painting, graffiti and even the digital realm. Celebrating the ideas and aesthetics that characterise painting today, 'Expanded Canvas' illustrates the extensive creative potential of the medium when fused with other disciplines and modern materials.

1 Judy Millar artist statement, November 2021.

2 Bradley Vincent, 'Tom Polo - AGSA', accessed 23 Feb 2022, <https://www.agsa.sa.gov.au/whats-on/adelaide-biennial-of-australian-art/2022-adelaide-biennial-of-australian-art-freestate/tom-polo/>.

3 Tom Polo, email correspondence, 9 March 2022.

4 Lara Merrett, email correspondence, 25 November 2021.

5 Lara Merrett, email correspondence, 9 March 2022.

6 Huseyin Sami artist statement, November 2021.

7 David Harley artist statement, December 2021.

8 Artist website of Bundit Puangthong, accessed 23 February 2022, <https://bundit.com.au/>

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IMAGE: Huseyin Sami, 'Untitled (WPPPB)', 2021, polymer paint on canvas,
183 x 183cm, image courtesy of the artist and Sophie Gannon Gallery.
Photography by Christo Crocker.





IMAGE: David Harley, still from 'ReturntoGreen', 2021, 4K video, dimensions variable, image courtesy of the artist and Charles Nodrum Gallery.

OPENING HOURS
10am–4pm, Mon to Fri
12–4pm, Saturday

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