

FrameWork 1/13

Kim Neudorf on Patrick Howlett



A sketch, a drawing, shavings of colour floating across a crammed shape of wood. Blinking, tiny with eyes glazed in the knot-hole of a naked expanse of white wall.

An arrow shape of flag. Plain fruit. Plastic blues and curving snips of green. Edges held fast. Flue closed. Soup tin and the slope of water. Balanced, hunched forward. Flat-rinse, watery lens. Get inside the shape, inside the outline of a thought.

Slow going. Ice cream pool, scraped back surface. Playing-cards on a mobile surface, papery corners trembling. Pull purple into pink, pulled and closed into the weave. Wax melts, its skin folding. Pinned in place. Held shut with a rubber band, snipped sharp. Shaved edges. Plain fruit meets dirty floor.

Sugary, marbled surfaces. Knives scraping across toast. Crumbs in the seams. Taking corners like an etch-a-sketch. Industrial day-glow against a film of mud, or fluorescent rinds and crusts in take-out white.

These paintings trace a tightly woven path, only to pull predictions sharply into the intimate space of labour. What appears as one surface expertly mimics the residual effects of another, as if saying “it could be this way, and also this way”. Mind following matter.

Any instant associations to art history – a more hygienic, un-embellished, crisp or harmonious abstraction – deviate. A fussy Cubist bouquet, a Bonnard bath, a Stuart Davis eggbeater-glove-fan, a Mel Blanc cartoon backdrop. Systems, premises, intuitive or process-based. Are these set-ups? Staged expressions? Even if they are, what artist isn't also “in libidinous relations to their systems”?¹ For *these* paintings, what is being suggested, asked, transformed, and not necessarily on behalf of *painting*?

There is a pattern of compositional choices, a familiar stage. Careful shapes are flattened and stretched into a kind of skin of angles. Each shape is not so much fused but growing directly out from one another's edges, most often in the closeness of mark-making. Centrally-focused areas of tension are often diffused in the moment of viewing, entering into a space of collaboration between control and a quietly defiant materiality. This happens through a careful, skilled modulation of the physical qualities of medium, colour, texture and line under the unique conditions of each painting.



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Otherwise self-contained works lose territorial power through close proximity to other paintings. Solitary, tiny works which appear like studies are well spaced from other clusters, their physicality quietly, almost imperceptibly influencing one another. The suggestion is that of a working influence – that which has surrounded the life of each work, and that which surrounds it now – and that of an ability to place familiar decisions (or familiar thought) under new, even risky conditions.

There are moments when these paintings completely lose their own train of thought, seemingly pulled outside of themselves, awkward and charged with vulnerability. Proximal space creates porous space.



Symbolist curves and orbs and the carved, icy scratches of shallow marks co-author a startling transformation: a hell/heaven sunset eye evokes a silent film villain (the word *villain* forming the folded shapes of an insect's limbs or the dip of a tooth) in the vicinity of brittle cross-hatching stretched taut over white.

The texture and colour of a line pulls itself through a hole into a pursed point. Another *line* about matter reaching out to represent; asking what kind of matter, what “being” of the painting itself would *picture* such an object through this pointing towards?²

Seemingly fully-formed shapes of texture emerge impossibly from shallow surfaces, suggesting thickness while simultaneously slick and concise. A residual image draws back like a snake upon the woolen surface of the painting across from it. Bruised, dislodged, jagged shapes are softened into the worried paths of burrowing cracks and furrows. Pleasant pinks and oranges nestle, then burn, casting themselves into the next room. A kind of materiality as a shifting, errant field, matter which “simply, arbitrarily, but politely...take the minimum angle necessary to veer away – prefer not to go with the flow.”³

Glaring shapes of acid-yellow-green. The upturned corner of an eye fused with its eyelid of crawling curls of stains. Planar meets intersection. An inwardly-curved wash changes direction to meet scribbly fits and the peeled tufts of papery fur. Glass shards are eye crusts.

Stories of objects left inside tree hollows. Tin foil and string. Sealed with cement, eyes shut.

Stories of rusty bicycles fueled by yellowy glue, trailing greenish from pipes. Nail soup. Morning spots.

How hummingbirds choose flowers has something to do with these. Scanning through paragraphs to find the instance. First the blink of tin foil, chewing gum. The tree-knot. The knot-hole.

¹ Isabelle Graw. “Conceptual Expression: On Conceptual Gestures in Allegedly Expressive Painting, Traces of Expression in Proto-Conceptual Works, and the Significance of Artistic Procedures.” *Art After Conceptual Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press; Vienna, Austria: Generali Foundation, 2006), 129.

² Richard Shiff. “Cezanne’s Physicality: the politics of touch.” *The Language of Art History* (Cambridge [England]; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 138.

³ Jane Bennett. *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* (Princeton, N.J.; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001), 100.