

KAREN WOODBURY GALLERY

ABN 97 218 520 851

Colliding Histories
Melanie Flynn

One of my university professors once said that the history of art is the study of one movement replacing that which came before it. Renaissance artists' innovative use of perspective replaced the linear compositions of the Trecento, then long necked Madonnas of Mannerism supplanted the Renaissance passion for the scientific. Often the rejection of the previous, seemingly outdated genre is verbalized with fierce criticism. Flying between artist, gallerist, academic and critic; reviews, letters of differing standpoints and the ever present 'top whatever' lists have existed since Vasari's *Lives of the Artists*. In this 16th century version of Italy's 'top collectable artists', Vasari's very selection was the first hurdling block to recognition, only to be followed by a clear bias towards artists from his own region. Living and working within the Florentine school, he threw verbal stones at the Venetians, articulating their shortcomings.ⁱ

Similarly figuration, in the painted form, could be seen in recent years to have been viewed as an outmoded form within contemporary art, at least in Australia. Perhaps in part this is to be attributed to a backlash against the canon of contemporary Australian artists of the 20th Century: Nolan, Brack, Tucker, Drysdale all primarily worked in a figurative or narrative mode. After aspects of Australian urban and rural life had been frequently depicted during a key identity-forming period for Australia, maybe we needed a change? Maybe that is in part why, in recent years, the painted figure has often been conspicuously absent from contemporary art events of note here, as it is associated with an important period of painting in Australia that is no longer of the present?

However there is another key aspect to this structure of 'style rejection'. That is, it inherently, and vigorously, creates a dialogue between what has been and what is now. Further, the model quite importantly frames what is key to most artists in their practice, namely artists referencing other artists. In this manner two paths are often trod, one which deliberately encourages its audience to engage in a game of spot the reference, and another which is more akin to an

intimate dialogue with the past, that gives back to the previous generations of artists, while also heading toward the next bend in the road.ⁱⁱ The second approach informs the work of the four artists in this exhibition.

Looking at the paintings of Del Kathryn Barton, McLean Edwards, Nusra Latif Qureshi and Jonathan Nichols has led me down the path of remembering old friends lost (apologies for the sentimentality), and discovering new ones (an unending task). Pierre Bonnard, William Morris, the Company School, Rembrandt, Louise Bourgeois and Henry Darger have all been in my mind, because they have been in the artists' minds. These artists and schools are never stylized in the exhibition, however by reading each work we can see historical references of composition, tonality, or brush strokes. This presents a challenge for us: to consider what is new in the making of these painting. What is it in their techniques that is inventive, and most importantly, is of our time?

Del Kathryn Barton's work reflects on physiology, the study of living organisms, body parts and functions. In her impressive work on paper, *to anymore...*, we see a delicate female form, emerging from the water, but simultaneously part of it. The running paint glides across her chest, seeping pink, as if her being is trickling into the lake and sky – a reminder of the importance of water in the composition of our own bodies and the earth's. Two women face towards us draped in a multi coloured scarf in Barton's painting *i ate the rainbow up*. Entwined together with threads from the unfurling garment, the women are at once part of each other and part of the universe, emerging from an ocean of dot like organisms and cut out stars. Their intricate strands of hair and elongated fingers reach out to the moving sea behind, desiring to be part of their cosmos.

McLean Edwards's figures emerge from a heavier darkness, as if dusted off from a distant historical narrative that never existed. Reminding us of the theatrical dramatizations of Rembrandt, complete with exotic costumes and props, Edwards depicts men, albeit not always dressed as such, in

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uniforms or fancy dress with objects of contemporary society. In *A Sauce for the Goose*, one man reveals himself to a nurse from behind a black cat costume while another stands like a failed guard, whose loose hands could hold no weapon. The figures are serene despite the oddness of their companions, and seem resigned to being captured by the paint strokes. *Plain Clothes* reveals four figures who all have an equally somber mode, as the thick black brushwork of the dark setting focuses us on the eyes, peering off into a distant, uncertain future. As if they are playing out their lives mentally in their minds, their focus is aloof and introspective.

Nusra Latif Qureshi's works, which draw technically on her training in *musaviri* painting,ⁱⁱⁱ echo history through the depiction of hollow figures. In *WHERE THE SUN NEVER SETS*, surf lifesavers are outlined, tropes of Australian culture. But they also sprout native flora. Like x-rays, devoid of their bodily mass^{iv}, the lifesavers are our heroes, protecting us from our adopted environment, and also symbols for the history of people arriving in Australia. The fine line-work schematically depicting boats sits in contrast to the loose, seemingly random depiction of the remnants of flora and fauna that dance across the three panels. The images are like notes in history, reminding us of how memories are captured, questioning the decision regarding what is today made visible and what is not. Asking us to consider what moments in time are carried on into the future, her layering of imagery re-configures our visual recollections of Australia, offering space to consider the absences of histories that are not talked of.

Jonathan Nichols' paintings are also a study of what can and can't be seen. His varied painterly techniques combine with unexpected perspectives to make us question what it is we are observing. Taking an exploratory approach to colour and textures, Nichols' subjects remain deliberately anonymous. Instead his work is an active investigation into the possibilities of painting – conveying a moment caught in time that is now, but that also talks to 'dead people' through subtle homage's to the experiments of other painters.^v In *Atman* a woman is seen from above, grey, purple hair creeps down to her dress that then becomes part of the blue ground below. A

dismembered arm reaches back into the painting. As if documenting this second in time, the painting is literally depicting figures, and yet they are not the subjects. Instead the passers by are ciphers for the paint itself, its past and its future, a new work, a new possibility that lives alongside other historical ideas in paint.

Each work in this exhibition is a testament to experimentation with conveying new modes of meaning through paint, the subjects and ideas can only be read and understood through the very deliberate and individual decisions regarding composition, palette, gesture, line and form.

Considering these paintings I am reminded of documentaries about 'lost' civilizations, the Incas, Aztecs, Yamana Indians. I sometimes feel melancholy, thinking of the cultures that are no longer. But I am also reminded of the lessons of art history, and that artists who are gone are continually being invited by living artists to come along for the next part of the journey. Evolving, mutating, growing and shrinking – loss and revelation, becoming and unbecoming, memory and forgetting. Sometimes with sadness, sometimes with awe, we can travel alongside other figures in history, and hold their stories with us for a little while. And these collisions in history either affirm or disaffirm our directions, our thoughts, and our paintings.

Melanie Flynn, January 2009

ⁱ Vasari, Giorgio, *Lives of the Artists*, Penguin Books, England, 1965, p.443. For example his discussion of Titian suggests that he 'failed to see that, if he wants to balance his compositions... the painter must first do various sketches on paper to see how everything goes together.'

ⁱⁱ Thanks to Jonathan Nichols, our discussions largely informed this essay.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Musaviri* is a terms that literally means 'figurative painting' and is used to describe refined figurative painting in Pakistan and Iran. See Raffel, Suhanya, "My Sister in the Garden of Wonders", *The 5th Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art*, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 2006, p.203

^{iv} Divia Patel, "Different Spaces Different Times", *Acts of Compliance*, Green Cardamon, London, 2005, p.20.

^v Jonathan Nichols, January 2009.