

Solving the Rectangle

Picture yourself at a meat market full of abstracted intestinal limbs about to run through a human sausage conveyor belt. This scenario echoes the compressive gatherings of figures, body parts and squiggly forms assembled in Nick Modrzewski's new paintings. Floating heads haggle for a bargain among herds of gooey shapes squished together, manifested through the artist's scrappily precise methods of applying paint. While his last Sydney exhibition in 2022 focussed on the absurd behaviour of lawyers and bureaucrats, in *Pulping at the Forum*, the artist takes us out of the courtroom and into some kind of crowded bazaar.

There are plenty of formal tricks to be found: hazy spurts of airbrush spray make guest appearances, but their primacy is overridden by hairy, confident gestures and flourishes of bold colour. Scraped backgrounds are spotted over with opaque punches of deep violet purple. Objects you might find in a neighbourhood garden are also peppered into the mix: ornate vases, sunflowers, spiderwebs, latticing.

I love approaching paintings like a daydreaming detective; I often call it 'solving the rectangle'. Perhaps this exhibition holds evidence of some kind of foul play? The artist Stanley Whitney talks about how colour can misbehave when certain hues are placed alongside one another. Have you noticed the tiiiiiny slither of radioactive green in the centre of *Conference*? It's cheekily nestled inside an all-over crimson composition that halts the viewer like a referee's red card. It also works to throw us off our tracks.

There's a distinctive epidermis-like thickness being conjured up. I feel the artist is surgically operating on the canvas, reordering its entire bodily makeup and implanting foreign painterly microchips of associative potential. Their compositions are arrived at not by design, but by battling it out through endless adjustments and negotiations. I can sense the artist asking himself questions during the process, like: How can the painting become its own agent of consumption? What precious sections of the canvas need forfeiting? What if this round shape becomes a floating boiled egg?

Whatever the setting, nothing in these paintings seem static. Rather, they enter into chaotic states through strategic acts of partial destruction. In mathematics, catastrophe theory describes the sudden disruption of homeostasis to a point where the entire physical laws that govern it have to restart and transform themselves completely. The objects and figures in these paintings seemed to have erupted from this catastrophe phase, ready to mutate to another realm. Modrzewski's works revels in this model of alien arrival, allowing for virtual, unseen forces to rear their heads.

Semi-figurative details seem crucial to establish some semblance of spatial logic. In the painting *Breeder*, it's as if a series of decorative masks have begun to spawn, multiplying and recasting themselves into a new order of amoeba-like forms. They remind me of the clay characters of the *Gumby* universe. We also see a fragmented zebra missing a head, its stripy pattern interrupting the rest of the pinkish, fleshy jumble of creaturely limbs. When I return to the show for a second visit, the gallery director points out a wispy atmospheric section in the top-left part of the painting; a rare moment of pause amongst the beautiful chaos. It presents an opening, a parting of the clouds that I gravitate towards like an escape route. But I don't necessarily want to leave just yet.

In A Light Skirmish, two small teams of disfigured limbs hover over some kind of sports field. A visual cacophony of outstretched legs, plumpy fingers and worm-like scribbles are on a friendly collision course. This is when I realise the unique temporality captured in all the paintings. It's the moment just after the siren has gone off, the whistle has blown, and the trading bell has been rung. Someone, somewhere, has declared "GO!" But instead of human players grounded in Euclidean space, the whole fabric of this slippery painterly reality has begun to mutate.

The artist paints like a coach overseeing a rugby scrum. Each gameplay presents us with a concentrated formation of shapeshifters springing into action, enticing us to follow. Enter the rectangle and blow the whistle - let's disappear into the crowd.

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