



Everywhere/Always

Abstract Painting from Christchurch

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For over a century Canterbury painting has been associated with landscape and figuration, but that is by no means the whole picture, although its abstract painters are often overlooked. For me, abstract painting is far more than the old Walter Pater-derived chestnut that 'all art aspires to the condition of music' and the very narrow definitions that Clement Greenberg-as-Moses superimposed over the luscious riot of German Expressionism reincarnated across the Atlantic in New York. For me, abstract painting is about the artist trying to achieve an almost quantum simultaneity and omnipresence with everything in the universe.

In Douglas Adams' *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, Zaphod Beeblebrox, President of the Galaxy, is placed in the Total Perspective Vortex, a method of execution that blows the victim's mind by showing you how microscopically irrelevant one is in comparison with the with the infinite magnificence of the Cosmic All (as electronically extrapolated from a small piece of cake). I think abstract painting tries to achieve similar ends. Zaphod, of course, survives, because he is in an artificial universe, especially created by someone else, in which he is the most important person in the universe. That in itself could be an apt metaphor for the many bloated self-opinions

in the New York art world from the 1950s to the 1980s. In New Zealand we are not so precious.

In Sanskrit aesthetics, the states of mind that art can excite are called *rasas* or 'essences'. The fully developed artwork should express all nine of them: wonder, joy, sexual pleasure, pity, anguish, terror, disgust and laughter. The circuitry of the Western brain doesn't seem to be able to blend these easily or naturally, but something of that Eastern 'oceanic' or 'global' consciousness is approached in the making of 'non-objective' or 'non-representational' art. Abstract painting allows us a pseudo-understanding of the incomprehensible—a celebration of the Sublime, the transcendental. The Renaissance humanist and father of modern historians, Giambattista Vico, wrote in his *Principles of New Science* what seems to me to sum it up nicely:

As rational metaphysics teaches that man becomes all things by understanding them [*homo intelligentia fit omnia*], this imaginative metaphysics shows that man becomes all things by not understanding them [*homo non intelligendo fit omnia*]. Perhaps the latter proposition is truer than the former, for when man understands he extends his mind and comprehends all things, but when he does not understand

(above) TELLY TU'U *Cathode Ray* 2009
Oil on board, 1200 x 1200 mm.

(opposite) KATIE THOMAS *Navigator* 2008
Oil on canvas, 1400 x 1950 mm.

he makes things out of himself and becomes them by transforming himself into them.

It is very much the reality of early twenty-first century painting worldwide, that it presents an unassuming face and revels in making connections to some of the more obscure and least understood phases of twentieth-century modernism. While perhaps not echoing Marx's paraphrase of Hegel that history repeats itself, first as a tragedy and second as farce (every age gets the Marx it deserves), it is true that what was once forgotten or discarded as irrelevant, is once more accessible to younger painters like Telly Tu'u, Wellington-born and of Chinese and Samoan descent, in his final year at the University of Canterbury School of Fine Arts. Like a game of poker, it's not the winning that's important, but the sum of all the bets on the table.

The first thing that strikes me about these paintings is the sophisticated counterpoint of pictorial volume, a harmonious use of colour and fragmented painterly plains. These features combine to create a sense of ephemeral corporality that is aesthetically very satisfying and strongly reminiscent of the great David Bomberg. At the same time the composition treads lightly on a tightrope between a Proustian nostalgia for the biomorphic surrealism of Joan Miró, André Masson, and Matta (Roberto Matta Echaurren), and a kind of dreamscape distantly distilled from Salvador Dalí, Yves Tanguy and René Magritte. Joan Mitchell, Phillip Guston and Dana Schutz make appearances and are further filtered through the kind of objectively expressive technique associated with Soutine and Sickert. And yet this art-historical mélange seems to blend quite naturally. There isn't that sense of the *recherché* you quite often find in student work.

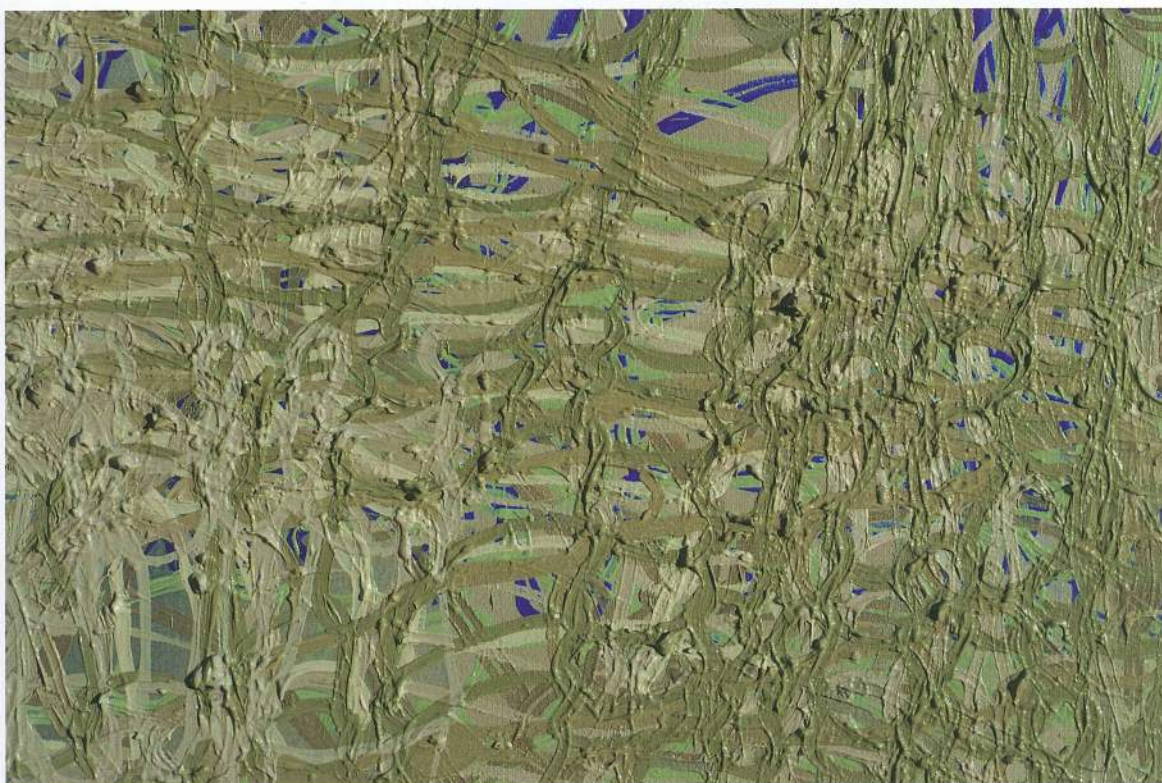
In the works that make up Tu'u's first exhibition *Thalamus* (named for the part of the brain that

processes sensory inputs) concentrates on a convergence, a knot of abstract forms and schematic, calligraphic frameworks. The ambiguous, heterogeneous backgrounds, reminiscent of those found in the paintings of Francis Bacon, barely seem to touch the highly-organised compositions suspended before them. Frequently the compositions almost seem to resolve into head-like shapes, like a mind-map created by some kind of advanced brain scanner.

While Katie Thomas, a Canterbury graduate, has been a professional artist for somewhat longer (first showing in 2001), she deserves to be better known nationally. Having in the last few years made the transition from jewel-like resin sculptures to painting, she has retained her favourite motif of the knitted stitch, resulting in canvasses every bit as complex and Gordian as the fantastic dress of the fictional sorceress Sidonia von Bork in the Edward Burne-Jones 1860 painting of the same name.

The use of motifs is an important aspect to abstract development; consider the importance of the drip to Jackson Pollock, the onion dome to Kandinsky, the grid to Mondrian (ultimately derived from his studies of trees) and Gordon Walters' use of the bulb-stopped line taken from the *koru/pitau*. Thomas' loose and tangled layers of stitches create both a rhythmic tension in the pictorial plane and a depth enhanced by deft use of colour and texture.

Thomas' varied palettes create distinct characters for her paintings, ranging from the almost monochrome, reminiscent of Malevich's white-on-white paintings (eggshell, taupe, greys, off-whites, and silvery-rose, accented with lemon and pink), to pulsating, vibrating webs in almost-fluorescent oranges, magentas, purples and blacks. These pigments have subtler colours mixed into them, which give them the kind of





Byzantine warmth, and high-frequency of vibration suggestive of living flesh.

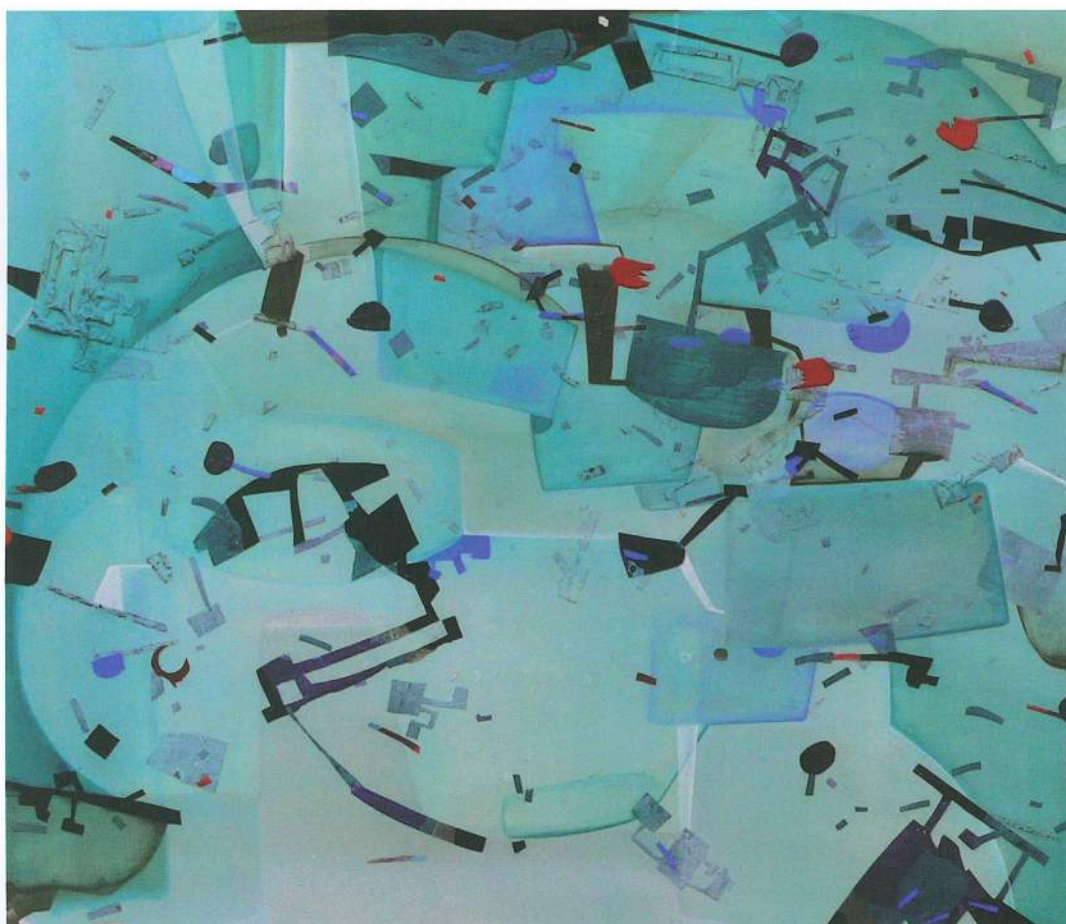
An artist who seems to me to have certain resonances with Tu'u's tangible ambiguity, is Cristina Silaghi, who emigrated from Romania to Christchurch in 1999, and graduated from Canterbury in 2007. These richly-layered paintings are built up through a process-based exploration of the pictorial space of the

canvas, giving the viewer the impression that one is simultaneously looking at a flat painterly surface and a window into an imaginary space.

The paint is variably thick and thin on these canvases, folding and submerging like tectonic plates, twisting and distorting like space-time in a powerful gravitational field. The paint becomes a collage of second and third dimensions, further making any sense of illusory space ambiguous. The painting offers a kind of candour about the sculptural nature of painting—its addition and subtraction.

Helen Calder, an established Christchurch artist and Canterbury MFA graduate, has floated somewhere just below the radar, despite having exhibited regularly since 2003 and having been a finalist in the Trust Waikato National Contemporary and Christchurch Centre of Contemporary Art Anthony Harper Art Awards in multiple years. In 2008 Calder showed in Berlin at the Bridge Art Fair, and at CCNOA gallery in Brussels from a travelling show curated at The Physics Room in Christchurch as part of a travelling project that co-opted artists from each new venue.

In many ways Calder takes her cues from British painter Ian Davenport, pouring house paint onto board from a consistent height and tilting it so that the paint pools in a controlled randomness, and anti-formalism that looks formal, removing the hand of the artist from the process. In some ways they are as neat a parody of the Abstract Expressionist drip as Lichtenstein's cartoon brushstroke. More recently the streamline arc has given way to a more irregular



(opposite above) CRISTINA SILAGHI *Alluvion* 2008
Synthetic polymers on canvas 1200 x 1000 mm.

(opposite below) CRISTINA SILAGHI *Intertidal* 2008
Synthetic polymers on canvas 700 x 1000 mm.

(right) HELEN CALDER *Black Wave* 2009
Plywood and acrylic, 1500 x 570 x 535mm.

(below) Helen Calder's *Yellow Skin* and *Orange Skin* at
City Art Rooms, September 2009

biomorphic blob that in some cases escapes altogether from the incontinent canvas.

In many ways Calder's work is the complete opposite of that of an artist like, say, Judy Millar, who actively strives to represent her physical body in her painting through the gestures of making. In fact, Calder seems to be philosophically closer to much younger artists like André Hemer (who distances himself from 'painting' by inserting a digital process), Miranda Parkes (who seeks to break out of the four-sided corset of the canvas stretcher entirely) and Kara Burrowes (who is similarly interested in recording the passage of time through the movements of paint)—all three Canterbury graduates. These factors, as with the irregularity and trompe l'oeil complexities of Silaghi's surfaces, again suggest a discourse between painting and sculpture, and the ambiguity between ground and object, plane and space.

Without fail, every 20 years or so, the theorists declare painting dead, superseded by some new methodology or medium. They've never been correct. I am excited that the University of Canterbury School of Fine Arts, which for a long time has made painting something of a specialty, has undauntedly produced and continues to produce, and offer nourishment to, New Zealand painters.

