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Elisabeth Cummings

Through the Window

4 October - 29 October 2022

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## Elisabeth Cummings' Interior Landscapes

Terence Maloon, Director of the Drilli Hall Gallery

*A certain vibration of nature is called 'Man'.*

*Vibration: the intermittences of the heart, those of death and life, of wakefulness and sleep, of heredity and of personality (originality).*

*Brownian movements.*

-Francis Ponge<sup>1</sup>

Elisabeth Cummings' art is attuned to vibration – to thronging energies that course through a landscape, ricochet between the surfaces of a confined space, and riddle a painted surface to bursting-point. To meet and to match her impressions of this all-encompassing energy, Cummings has developed her resources in drawing and colour and her approaches to composition accordingly. Typically her images will strike a viewer first and foremost as concentrations of sheer visual excitement – before we are able to identify whether it is a landscape or an interior, before we can ascertain whether it is figurative or abstract, before we have had time to read the work's title. As a consequence, the poet Francis Ponge's allusion to Brownian motion touches on one of her work's essential features – its irrepressible vivacity – and helps us identify her links with the works of her artist-forerunners and contemporaries.

Brownian motion is a phenomenon first recorded in 1827 by the Scottish botanist Robert Brown. He noticed that the grains of pollen in the water drop he was examining under a microscope were in a state of constant agitation. What was giving them the jitters? The inference that the pollen grains were being buffeted by invisible atoms or molecules began to gain credence. Proof that atoms and molecules actually existed was little by little extrapolated from Robert Brown's discovery – culminating in Einstein's publication of his famous "breakthrough" paper on Brownian motion in 1905.

More or less simultaneously an analogous phenomenon began to be observed in western painting, with repercussions that grew increasingly tumultuous and anarchic. Pierre Schneider has given the classic description of this phenomenon:

"Even in canvases where colour did not blaze openly, the stroke quivered, simmered, darted in all directions, spilled over the outlines of forms, seethed, scattered itself, whirled, melted and abruptly broke off."

In other words, this strange parallel to Brownian motion had taken hold of paintings by Turner, the Impressionists, the Neo-Impressionists, the Nabis and Fauves – with

the eventual result that "the realistic image was torn to tatters," as Schneider put it. Yet it was not only the realistic image, but naturalism in its broadest application, and ultimately representation itself that fell afoul of what Schneider called "the maenads of colour"<sup>2</sup>.

Whether consciously or inadvertently, Elisabeth Cummings' paintings return us to the crack-up of naturalism, refocussing our awareness on its historical perpetrators, Bonnard and Vuillard first and foremost. She became aware of Bonnard and Vuillard when she was a student at the National Art School in the 1950s at the urging of one of her teachers, Wallace Thornton – and they are "still the ones I respond to a lot," she told Leo Robba<sup>3</sup>.

There is an extraordinary letter that Vuillard wrote to Maurice Denis in 1898, where he described the crisis of confidence that was affecting his ability to work at the time. It had forced him to dispense with many traditionally sanctioned aspects of painting and drawing, which he had come to consider inessential, inartistic and unsustainable. As a consequence his work had become "more elementary," he told Denis.

In reassessing Vuillard's achievement of the 1890s, it is his astounding economy of means and the untrammelled, hands-on immediacy of his technique that strike us today as virtually ageless. Much of his work is astonishingly "ahead of its time," some of it wellnigh abstract. The art historian André Chastel has commented apropos: "Abstract art could have been invented around 1895 had the Nabis [Vuillard, Bonnard and their associates] wanted to make such a bold decision"<sup>4</sup>.

Despite his agonies of doubt and restriction to unprecedentedly "minimal" pictorial means, there were consolations and compensations associated with his dilemma, as Vuillard admitted to Maurice Denis: "I have friends – and with their support I have kept my faith in simple accords of colour and shape. Leaving this aside, the important thing is that there is enough there to go on working with"<sup>5</sup>.

Consequently Vuillard didn't experience his "crisis of modernity" entirely negatively, nor was it so for his closest kindred spirit, Pierre Bonnard, nor for the legions of other artists who followed in their wake and were able to profit from their lessons. The "realistic image torn to tatters" gave rise to a more specialised focus on "simple accords of colour and shape," and the upshot of this was much less a shutting-down than an opening-up of possibilities. The latent energies of media – the dynamic association of lines, colours, shapes, textures, patterns, etc – could be seen and enjoyed independently of their representational function, and painting could then become

truly painting, autonomous and free. Elisabeth Cummings described the liberation she inferred from looking at Cézanne's work:

"I didn't really understand it until then – that inner life. Cézanne's paintings were rocking with that tension and life, they were energy and life. It moved, it moved. To have that life in the painting..."<sup>6</sup>

Bonnard articulated the modern painter's credo: "It's not a matter of painting life, but of bringing painting to life."<sup>7</sup>

And: "The principal subject is the surface which has its colour and its laws above and beyond the objects."<sup>8</sup> Yet despite his acute awareness of an abstract substrate underlying his compositions, he was never tempted to cross the frontier into total non-objectivity: "It's always necessary to have a subject, no matter how minimal, to keep one's feet on the ground," he declared<sup>9</sup>. In her words and deeds Cummings expresses a similar wariness of the borderline of abstraction, although it is apparent how she crosses it time and again in the formulation of her images.

She also shares with Bonnard his propensity for the oblique – her work implies a similar categorical distinction between "the model before one's eyes and the model one has in one's head," as Bonnard put it. The model before one's eyes might serve as the stimulus or pretext for one of Cummings' paintings, yet the painting is understood to be a wholly independent entity whose ultimate reference is "the inner life" and "the model in one's head." Direct (too-direct) observation of the model was a taboo for Bonnard, as it is for Cummings. The mere idea of transliterating a motif part by part and detail by detail was abhorrent to Bonnard, the epitome of everything commonplace, unintelligent and inartistic. ("People always speak of submission in front of nature, but there's also submission in front of the picture," he protested)<sup>10</sup>. Wallace Stevens expressed in verse the modern painters' antipathy to realism:

*It was difficult to sing in the face*

*Of the object. The singers had to avert themselves*

*Or else avert the object...*

*They sang desiring an object that was near.*<sup>11</sup>

It is commonly supposed that plein-air painters (the Impressionists in particular) bare their souls to nature and transcribe the sensations they receive with dogged literalness, yet Bonnard had a very different understanding of how painters engage with their motifs. He thought that they developed methods and devices to ward off the authority

of the motif, to prevent themselves from merely copying what they saw: "The painters who were able to approach the motif directly are very rare – and those who were able to extricate themselves [from the spell of the motif] did so through a very personal means of defence"<sup>12</sup>.

In the twenty-first century it might seem completely beside the point to draw attention to the obliqueness of Cummings' approach (the artifice, the abstractness of her painting) and to want to attribute it to a defence against the priority and precedence of the motif – since there are untold thousands of twentieth-century painters whose approaches to their subjects are so much more obtuse and distanced than her own. Nonetheless it is important to recognise that Cummings' paintings are less representations than they are radical metaphors or equivalences – and that they derive so much of their freshness and expressive force by perpetuating the most extreme aspect (the "tearing to tatters" aspect) of Nabi painting.

*Art is the love of truth and the love of falsehood: of truth because art is based on the search for the exact relationships between things; on falsehood because it always ends up with an artificial result. But if fiction is to merit our consideration, its creator needs to be impelled by a great love of truth.*

*In art the love of truth entails negation and destruction to an extreme degree. There is therefore a mysterious limit that the mind needs to know how to reach and not over-reach.*

*Nature is complicated. What a tangle of lines, shapes and colours.*

*But because it is true, nature's rapport with the mind is simple.*

-Pierre Reverdy<sup>13</sup>

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Endnotes:

1 Francis Ponge, 'Notes premières de 'L'Homme,' in *Le parti pris des choses*, Gallimard, Paris, 2015, p 216.

2 Pierre Schneider, Matisse, trans M Taylor and B Stevens, Thames & Hudson, London, 1984, p 115.

3 Elisabeth Cummings interview with Leo Robba, *Artist Profile*, 2010, p 66.

4 André Chastel, 'Vuillard et Mallarmé,' in *Fables, formes, figures*, Flammarion, Paris, 2000, vol 2, p 422

5 Édouard Vuillard, letter to Maurice Denis (19 February 1898), quoted in Terence Maloon (ed), *Paths to Abstraction*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2010, p 131

6 Elisabeth Cummings in conversation with Sioux Garside, 'Elisabeth Cummings – Observing nature, ANU Drill Hall Gallery, Canberra, 2017, p 49

7 'Les notes de Bonnard,' in Dominique Bozo et al, Bonnard, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, 1984, p 202.

8 Ibid p 191.

9 Ibid p 202

10 Ibid p 198.

11 Wallace Stevens, 'Credences of Summer,' in *Collected Poems*, Faber.

12 Angèle Lamotte, 'Le Bouquet de Roses, Propos de Pierre Bonnard recueillis en 1943,' *Verve*, vol 5, nos 17 & 18, Paris, August 1947, np.

13 Pierre Reverdy, 'Le Gant de crin,' in *Œuvres complètes*, Flammarion, Paris, 2010, vol 2, p 543.

# Paintings

## ***Corner of the Studio***

2021

oil on canvas

115x130cm







***Dry Creek Bed***

2021

oil on canvas

135x150cm



***White Bottle***

2022

oil on canvas

80x100cm





***Under the Trees***

2021

oil on canvas

105x130cm







***Wedderburn Studio Interior***

2022

oil on canvas

115x130cm



***Yellow Vase***  
2021  
oil on canvas  
45x45cm





***Wall Calligraphy***

2021

oil on canvas

45x45cm





***On the Banks of the Darling***

2022

oil on canvas

65x80cm



***Table Top with Plants***

2021

oil on canvas

45x45cm





***Pink Still Life***

2022

oil on canvas

80x65cm





***On the Arltunga Road***

2021

oil on canvas

100x122cm



***Bottles at Wedderburn***

2022

oil on canvas

55x65cm





***Outdoor Cafe***

2022

oil on canvas

120x100cm







***Pond***  
2020  
oil on canvas  
45x45cm



***Black Vase with Pear***

2022

oil on canvas

45x45cm





***The Golden Hill***

2022

oil on canvas

40x37cm





***Striped Cloth***

2021

oil on canvas

45x45cm



***Into the Garden at Night***

2021

oil on canvas

45x45cm





***Through the Window***

2020

oil on canvas

45x45cm





***The Billabong***

2021

oil on canvas

45x45cm



***Summer Walk***

2021

oil on canvas

45x45cm











