

Investigating the nature of our ever expanding universe

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Noel Skrzypczak. *Cave Painting II*, 2006, acrylic, installation view, PICA. Collection of the artist, Melbourne. Image courtesy the artist and PICA. Photograph by Eva Fernandez.

In America, 1948, a group of frustrated Abstract Expressionists formed a school entitled The Subjects of the Artist.¹ The name, according to Robert Motherwell, 'was meant to emphasise that our painting was not abstract, that it was full of subject matter'. Stepping into *An Ever Expanding Universe* at the Perth Institute of Contemporary Art (PICA), Motherwell's sentiments ring true.

My eyes take a minute to adjust to the frenzied display of seemingly haphazard style, shape, texture and technique that make up this rainbowed collection. It's hard to avert one's goggle eyes from the candied concoction by duo Pip and Pop. A luscious fluorescence of vinyl, paint and carefully poured piles of colour pigment make up their intricately crafted installation. Masses of swirly lollipop lines, circles and mandalas spill forth to create a dialogue that juxtaposes the *Wham! Bam!* of hyper-consumerism with notions of what lies beneath, perhaps a latent spirituality. Boundaries between artist and spectator are blurred as the work moves from gallery wall to floor and the public can walk, not only around, but within the patterned layers and spiritual motifs.

The Abstract Expressionists sought to take the whole painting right out to the edges, undaunted, and into the corners of the canvas (Barnett Newman once described his *Euclidian Abyss* of 1946-7 as 'my first painting where I got to the edge and didn't fall off').² More than a few of the artists in the PICA show have travelled to the Mesopotamian edge of the world, seen that it was *not* in fact flat and, without pause, dived straight in to the impending ocean.

Noel Skrzypczak's *Cave Painting II* is an elaborately poured landscape of paint. The work is reminiscent of

master paint pourers before her – surrealists Masson, Ernst and later, Abstract Expressionists Pollock and Hofmann. The difference is that the piece leaps forth from the canvas-framed boundary issues experienced by the latter artists who pushed and pulled the paint as if it were alive, trying to force it to contort into a body of its own. Ungoverned by the canvas frame, Skrzypczak has taken to the 12-metre length of the gallery wall itself, spreading forth ectoplasmic painterly tendrils that literally drip down the wall to converge in dark rich tones of mustard, copper, olive and earth. Standing beneath the work, one can witness Motherwell's philosophy in action as colour and shape amalgamate and the landscapes begin to rise up. Desert mirages conjure rugged terrain where camel trains labour slowly across the horizon, on towards crimson volcanoes and a tangerine dawn ... Needless to say, with a glass of red in hand, it's easy to get transported ...

If Skrzypczak's cave painting conjures earthbound fantasies, then Lara Merrett's huge work takes us up, out and into the cosmos. The painting seems to erupt into existence; a star exploding into life. Standing beneath the enormous work where acrylics and watery inks interplay, my mind is freed of the closed inhibition that comes with deciphering finicky, intellectually laborious art. These works have something to say, and like the American Abstract Expressionists of the 1950s it is said with gesture, with line, with emotion, with colour, rather than with masses of descriptive text. To say that *big* is always *better* is an obvious overstatement, but in the universe explored at PICA 'big' certainly makes one aware of how small one really is. When placed amongst so many rampant displays of emotive



TOP: Lara Merrett, *still vast reserves*, 2008, acrylic and ink on linen (two panels). Collection of the artist, Melbourne. Image courtesy the artist and PICA. CENTRE: Ben Pushman, *Untitled*, 2008, acrylic on canvas. Courtesy the artist and Goddard de Fiddes Gallery, Perth. ABOVE: Pip & Pop (Nicole Andrijevic & Tanya Schultz), *Golden Apples of the Sun*, 2008, adhesive vinyl, acrylic paint, ink, pigments and sugar, installation view, PICA. Collection of the artists, Perth. Courtesy the artist and PICA. Photograph by Eva Fernandez.

grandeur, getting sublimely swept away seems a natural part of the experience. Merrett's painting gives the impression the canvas was literally folded in half to create the image. Yet the left side appears ordered and neatly coloured between the lines; the right, a watery reflection; the whole, a powerful nebula that seems continually to grow and morph before our very eyes. The work could very well stand as a metaphoric brain itself or a giant psychoanalytical pictogram. With a title like *still vast reserves*, it's plausible.

Hugely affecting in terms of stripping back to bare emotional vulnerability is the untitled piece by Aboriginal artist Ben Pushman. Relaying feelings of connectivity to the land, issues of displacement and cultural sacrifice,³ the painting is one to be seen to be felt. Imbued with blood-

hued stains of paint that are divided across the canvas by strong lines of black, cream and ochre, a visual reverberation can be experienced when standing in front of the work. Your eyes sting and blur to look at it, but it is also hard to look away. The painting stands staunchly as a reminder of the pain and displacement felt collectively by many tight-knit Aboriginal Nyoongar communities.

What would our universe be, in the context of Australian identity and art, were it not to comment on the great cross cultural divide? What it means to be Australian seems always to have included what it means not to be. It is this great convergence, this assimilation or dissimulation, this incorporation of foreign ideals, seeking and re-creating identity, this borrowing from heritage, however many generations past, that creates such spirited uniqueness in Australian painting today. James Gleeson, painter and critic, once said that the art of Melbourne painters 'contained elements of expressionism, primitivism and impatience in varying proportions and ... focused on that elusive thing – the national image'.⁴ Whether he was being derogatory towards the Melbourne painters at the time (he went on to say 'Sydney has always taken a more cosmopolitan point of view') is a matter of opinion but what remains today, perhaps more so with globalisation and hyper stimulation of every sense, is that very elusiveness.

Possibly the most refreshing aspect of *An Ever Expanding Universe* is that it created endless openings for dreaming and fantasy. Amidst these works, within this space, our minds can wander, free to concoct meaning if and when they choose to do so. With gesture and expression at the helm, these are pieces that stir your insides rather than leaving you listless and pondering on end over brazen political and intellectual hyper-opinions vaguely disguised as Conceptual Art (by this I refer to visual art reduced to such a theoretical level that one searches for the 'visual' in it at all). Pardon the cynicism. Put simply though, *An Ever Expanding Universe*, in its mystical way, took us on a journey as cosmic or tangible as our imaginations allowed.

Notes:

1. Niknos Stangos (ed.), *Concepts of Modern Art: From Fauvism to Postmodernism*, third edition, Thames and Hudson Ltd, London, 1994, pp. 181-183.
2. Stangos: 1994, p. 195.
3. Melissa Keys, *An Ever Expanding Universe*, exhibition catalogue, Perth Institute of Contemporary Art, Perth, 2008, p.
4. John Douglas Pringle, *Australian Painting Today*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1969, p. 47.

An Ever Expanding Universe was curated by Melissa Keys, and included the work of Maria Cruz (NSW/Germany), Tim Johnson (NSW), Lara Merrett (VIC), Viv Miller (VIC), Pip & Pop (Nicole Andrijevic & Tanya Schultz) (WA), Ben Pushman (WA), Nusra Latif Qureshi (VIC), Noël Skrzypczak (VIC) and Gulumbu Yunupingu (NT). The exhibition was held at the Perth Institute of Contemporary Art (PICA), 12 June to 3 August 2008.

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