



Judy Millar

'I will, should, can, must, may, would like to express'
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acrylic on canvases, acrylic on walls, timber construction



Robert Leonard talks to Judy Millar about her New Gallery show.

In this show you're really letting rip, doing new things, expanding your terms of reference. There are huge canvases, wall paintings, even a sculpture. What's going on?

It all comes out of my thinking about painting. I don't think of paintings as discrete objects. For me painting has always been a set of relations: relations between the painting and the space it occupies and beyond; relations between the painting and the history of painting. This show is an opportunity for me to explore these relations more thoroughly, more ambitiously. It's an installation. Paintings are always installed, but their installed nature is usually downplayed. Having access to this much gallery space let me really investigate the relationship between paintings and the space, to make explicit the relationships beyond the frame. The paintings are made to be read together, so you can see them as one work or at least move from one to the other. You can see where things have been carried over from one painting into another, expanded, reduced, cancelled.

I'm used to seeing your works installed cleanly, discretely, where the white of the gallery wall sets them off. The white wall seemed crucial to the way the paintings read, until now.

I've put brushstrokes on the walls and hung the paintings on top. It complicates things. The canvases have a lot of open unpainted areas, and that's picked up in the wall paintings. It's hard to determine precisely what's sitting where and what's in front of what. The canvases and the wall paintings leach into one another. There are some cool moments, like there, where that little hot spot in the painting bleeds into that red mark on the wall. And you notice some of the colours are used in the paintings and on the walls.

The canvases are massive, around 8 by 3 metres, your biggest yet. What does this increase in scale do?

It brings about an openness. When I was painting them I could literally move around within the canvas. It allowed me to make really large gestures but also leave areas unworked, so it's difficult to see where the paintings stop and the wall begins. Being able to work so generously has liberated the gestures, letting them get out of the skin of the overall painting. It allowed me to find new compositional possibilities, new connections between thought and bodily movement.

At that scale they have a blockbuster cinemascope quality, echoes of the Pollock-McCahon heroic.

The intention was to show my ambition, to wear my painterly ambition on my sleeve if you like. I could talk about this in two ways. Painterly ambition is, I guess, inseparable from the heroic. Certainly it speaks of exertion and a desire for weight, a certain beyond-ness. But I overdo things, show off my ambition to be ambitious, which could be seen as overblown and exaggerated, absurd. Of course with paintings of this size you instantly think of billboards, yet these have no message.

From the sublime to the ridiculous then! Those swirling 'tumbleweeds' are certainly comic – I think of the way cartoonists depict fights as clouds of action lines. The colours are funfair fluoro-lurid. And the big magenta painting, it's like a child's finger painting on the scale of *The Raft of the Medusa*.

I love the ridiculous. And yes, I think the paintings are a little funny. I'm certainly aware I'm making a caricature of the brushstroke. I'm often laughing in the studio. But then I laugh when I see Goya turn yucky ochre into gold buttons.

The three big paintings seem quite different. One has more of a composition logic, one more of a pattern logic, and the other is like an all-over field, but they are all unravelling.

I like the idea of paintings unravelling, coming unstuck. I'd become uncomfortable with the all-over nature of my painting, its limitations. I'd been trying to find a way through, which is incredibly hard. If you are not using a clear representational composition you have a problem, how are you going to organise the painting? We had the grid for a long time and we had the all-over. Perhaps there's another way. For some time I've been thinking I could make paintings by simply accumulating actions, bringing different marks – signs of different attitudes – into play. Now I'm thinking of my paintings like construction sites. You see how things are placed on a construction site. On the one hand it's chaotic, on the other it has this necessity to it. Clear decisions have been made to put this here, that there, but there's no overarching governing idea.

How does that work? When you add, are you trying to enhance what you've just done or cancel it out, respond to it or ignore it?

It's never that clear.

How much coherence do you need?

Well, that's the question. Do you need coherence, do you need unity? How much incoherence can you tolerate? Obviously there has to be something holding it all together. I like it when the painting is just on the verge of resolution so it involves and implicates the viewer, forces the viewer to make the completion.

This magenta painting, you can tell it's been painted in a series of sessions. You can't tell the sequence exactly, but you can see this bit was painted before that.

That painting is the most composed, but you can't really account for its logic. And that's what I enjoy. It evolved out of purely painterly decision-making, where one thing leads to another. That's what I mean by accumulation. You can register complex notions of time in a painting. Paintings are made over time; they are compressions of traces in time. Paintings can be taken in in an instant but also unpacked slowly. A lot of abstract painting in New Zealand downplays that temporal dimension. Our abstraction – the tradition of Mrkusich and Walters – comes out of constructivism. I'm not so interested in that. I'm more interested in the American painting I was fed as a student and cubism before that. Cubism was the first art that really excited me as a teenager. The temporal dimension in cubism is so important.

The earlier paintings were more decorative, likeable, they were eye candy.

Well, I was never trying to make them likeable or unlikeable. It's not really of interest to me, although sometimes I can be surprised by what is likable in them. I just don't want them to be static. And I think my earlier work was too static, too easily got, too bite sized.

These new paintings are one part pretty to one part gritty. Gerhard Richter was obviously a reference point in the earlier paintings, where the strokes are very clean, slick, and feel highly mediated. But these works make me think of Julian Schnabel, who refuses decorativeness, coherence, easy ideas of quality.

I've never been a big Schnabel fan. Certainly I wanted to create more excitement and more layers in the work. I guess I wanted to attack niceness, but really to offend myself, to take myself to the edge of what I could accept. I'm not sure if Schnabel was trying to do that. He may have wanted to offend people but I don't think he was trying to offend himself. I think a good painting has to contain irritants, and that was really lacking in my earlier works. Now I'm keen to see how much I can push a painting in terms of agitation and irritation. I think of rock and roll, with a guitar that sets your hair on end but it's exhilarating. I want a little of the screaming guitar.



And what about the see-through wall?

At first I was going to simply unclad a wall, expose its insides. In the end I ended up building an unclad wall. The perversity of creating an undone structure appealed to me. It's not exactly a wall, more a model, a 1 to 1 scale model of an unclad wall. Look how sharp and fetishised the construction is, with its thinned timber. It's a conceptually slippery object. It looks like furniture or a Sol LeWitt sculpture. It allows views through to the paintings. It changes the quality of the space and sets up the idea of looking through, looking through the wall and looking through the paintings. It sets up all kinds of frames for the paintings to kick against.

You have described your approach as 'cheap illusionism'.

Painting is always illusionistic and that's its magic. Greenberg was wrong: flat painting is not possible. You put a mark on a surface and immediately you have an illusion. Painting is a virtual medium; as a viewer you project yourself into its fictive spaces. That's why people love paintings and why they still travel enormous distances to see them. They're fascinated by the magic, by painters conjuring illusions from coloured mud. That said, my paintings are never convincing illusions. They unravel and flatten out. They are full of holes, incomplete illusions. It's like a magician performing a trick, but also showing how they do it.

You have been putting an interesting spin on action painting for some time. The title of the show declares an ambivalence about the expressive.

What is the expressive anyway? A Clairmont isn't any more expressive than a Gordon Walters, they are just different forms of expression. The title is about taking a step back. It's like, you could look at things this way. It lets in doubt.

But your paintings can be exuberant, immediate, confident. Lack of doubt has a place too.

Sure. You act out a certain position and it's embodied in a mark. A shy approach will produce a shy mark, and so on. The viewer can read the commitment in a mark so quickly. They can read tentativeness in a mark, they can read confidence.

So you still have a lot invested in the idea of expressive mark-making, the idea that the marks betray the maker.

But not in any essentialist sense. It's not that they betray who you are but simply how you have gone about things. You can't fake it.

You make it sound very speculative and experimental but there's an aspect of breezy virtuosity in the painting, like it's all well rehearsed.

Sure, part of painting is good technique. Sometimes I feel like a tennis player. I can put in a good day's work just practicing my strokes. But there has to be more to it than the well rehearsed. Registered on the painting's surface, there has to be a desire to find out. So, while you have a notion of what you want, and while you've rehearsed it to some extent, the decisions on the canvas have to be fresh. And if they aren't, it shows, absolutely. Good technique really comes down to being better at finding things out.

You talk about painting like it's a thing; not this painting and that painting, but painting as such. You talk of issues of painting and for painting. It interests me that while you're not interested in paintings as discrete objects you are interested in painting as a very discrete enquiry, a grand tradition.

For me painting is defined by its history. I often think of it as separate from the wider world of art. It brings its own set of problems and possibilities. Painting constantly redefines itself, but in terms of its own history. For me that's rich. For me every-time I make a painting I'm dragging the whole history of painting with me. I identify with Quentin Tarantino. His films refer to films, to the whole back catalogue of cinema. A black limo appears and it's more than just a gangster mobile, it's every gangster mobile that's ever been in any film. You have the whole history of the genre there immediately. Tarantino sees cliches as a rich shorthand. It's like the brushstroke in my work, or the drip, or the splash. They've already been played out endlessly. But while they could seem thin, I want to redeem their richness. I want to pick those things up and use them invested with everything they have ever stood for.

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Judy Millar is an Auckland-based painter. In 2002 she won the Wallace Art Award. She is represented by Gow Langford Gallery, Auckland; Bartley Nees Gallery, Wellington; 64zero3, Christchurch; and Galerie Mark Mueller, Zurich; Spielhaus-Morrison Galerie, Berlin.

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