

David Harley in conversation with Kate Nodrum

For his exhibition

Moving Painting Works, Charles Nodrum Gallery, 2 – 23 March, 2024

Saturday 16th March, 2pm

Kate – Welcome everybody... David, you started out as an easel painter; you exhibited at Pinacotheca here in Melbourne throughout the 1990s and then you got involved with large format printing. Can you tell us what that is and how you got into it? And tell us about the three prints included in this exhibition.

David – I started as an easel painter and went to RMIT and did my undergrad there. Through the 1990s it was nice of Bruce Pollard to show me at Pinacotheca which was just over the road and down the lane here in Richmond. I was very excited to be there. I was one of the younger artists in the last decade of that gallery. I love Robert Hunter's work particularly so that's why I approached Bruce to show there. At that time, I painted very lightly stained paintings, sometimes quite large, over 3 metres long or 1.5m square. I had three shows there. I went on to do my Masters of Fine Art at RMIT in 1995 and the lecturers there, Rhett d'Costa, Louise Weaver & Fran Van Riemsdyk, encouraged me to come into the digital lab and I started working with Photoshop and that created a big challenge for me. Much like AI is having an impact now, there was this otherness that I had to engage with and it really upset my assumptions about painting. You could come up with something that looked flashy quite easily. It destabilised me and I started to make a whole lot of other work which had a lot more formal play. I went travelling shortly after that and in London I met up with this fellow Tristan Humphries who was running a program at the Camberwell College of Art in South London that was about the integration of computers into fine art and printing. Large format printing was just coming in; this was after big screen-printed billboards and when actual digital printing – what was called ink jet printing - was coming in. I was there for 7 months and I really launched myself almost totally into using computers and working with the large format printer there. It made me think about infinite scale; suddenly you're not fixed by the canvas so this whole other exploration of scale happened for me. Also with Photoshop, I now had this ability to go behind the canvas and make things behind it – that really exploded what I felt I could do with abstraction. All the way through from there to now I'm informed and encoded by my first discipline which is painting and I've taken that discipline through all my approaches to all the different technologies I've used since and I've folded what's become available in terms of technology into my processes. In a way it allowed me to take the language of mid-20th century painting to see what I could do with it with the computer - to expand it. Getting back to the prints – in the two hallways here, there are two prints [*Apropos Return to Green*, 2022-23 & *Apropos Naples Black*, 2024] which relate to the moving paintings in here [*Return to Green*, 2018-2020 & *Naples Black*, 2022]. I've done two installations in this gallery before which were floor to ceiling prints. When I was printing, I really got into installation and did a whole series of works which addressed the corners of galleries – I'd do the whole two walls and play with the illusion of abstraction and the wall and what that does to make people question illusion. The thing with abstraction is one can't help reading so many things into it; you might read a spatial interpretation into it. In some ways I wanted to walk into the canvas and discover the field beyond it. The long print in this exhibition [*Drawing Wall #31 (print)*, 2018-2024] is a small version of the one I did for Shepparton Art Museum; they had a series of commissions for wall projects so I did one of those and it was floor to ceiling. This is a small version here on a self-adhesive textile. And talking about the

illusion, that plays back into this work [*Drawing Wall #31 (Moving Painting)*, 2018-2020]; after the print I wanted to imagine what the space behind it was, so I built the [print] work in three dimensions and then tried to analyse it from different angles and that's what's showing here [in the moving painting]. So when you look at the print you see the reference – the flat – and then you see the moving painting to explore the space behind.

Kate – That's a good moment to go from your earlier days of Photoshop and the other programs you were making your works on for print to your moving paintings. How did you move into video work? The earliest video work in this exhibition is from 2003, [*Flute Sculptures*], it's a collaboration with Andrew Blackburn (sound creation) and Jean Penny (flute) – how did you come to that; how did your work move into moving painting from print?

David – Well, once you've got an image on a computer it just lends itself to animation; suddenly it's freed into this other space that totally suggests animation. It was an effortless thing to start moving from the still image to animation and to deconstruct an image through animation. It had this new flexibility; it meant you could take a still image into various programs and then you could take a whole layered photoshop document into a program like Aftereffects which is the program I've used here [*Flute Sculptures*, 2003]. You can place the layers back in space and animate them. This one is done with a sort of flat software Adobe Aftereffects which is good for just expanding Photoshop - so you're working with motion graphics. Each time I bring a whole new technology and different type of animation technology to a work. Andrew played me some of his music and that to me suggested a whole lot of different spatial arrangements and sonorous relationships. It's a surround sound work and it played with the illusion of how sounds work in space and the way the visual elements slowly move in relation to each of the sounds.

Kate – As the years went on, did you keep an eye out for new software and programs and give them all a go? Do you want to talk about some of the other technology you used and whether they opened any doors for you to make other sorts of moving paintings?

David – I'm not a programmer; whatever was off the shelf, whatever arose, I would put into my work. And depending on where I was – I did a PhD later – meant I could get some software for free - you know, when you're studying. So I started to use a program called Maya which is used for making special effects for movies but what I did with it was make all these smudges and wonky shapes in the field; so you construct this abstract world in the computer and, at that stage, those early ones you built the whole thing in wire frame - that means you built the structures and then you'd, what you called, *apply* the materials, so you apply the colours and things through a rendering process. It's a very labour intensive, not such an intuitive, way. Later on, once I finished my PhD I no longer had access to Maya so I moved onto Blender which is a free open source version equivalent of Maya. This work here is done in Blender [*Drawing Wall #31 (Moving Painting)*, 2018-2020]. Then I've moved on in the last few years to using Virtual Reality headsets and that's jumped everything because instead of having to make structures you can actually see structure and textures as they emerge in space. You've got controllers and you can paint in space and you've got a palette you can access. So these two on the wall mounted screens are generated that way [*Return to Green*, 2018-2020 & *Naples Black*, 2022]. The beauty of this technology is that you've got this construction in the computer which you can go back and revisit any time; you can go back and move things around, change the composition, you can put virtual cameras in there and tell the camera to go through the field. So this one [*Return to Green*, 2018-2020] is one continual camera shot through this whole world.

Kate – You've got to imagine David in his backyard: he's got his VR headset on; he's got his toggles in his hands; and he's created a 3D world and he's standing in it creating all of these shapes, colours,

compositions, scribbles, forests of lines - he's actually drawing them all in space, in time, with his toggle. And he can walk around and move through this world and he can move things and paint things in space - behind him, underneath him. Then he'll go back onto the computer and manipulate what he's made - the gestures that he's put into space - with these cameras he inserts. I think of him as the driver of a space ship we're on with him and he's leading us through this galaxy - these worlds - he's made for us; he's charting a course for the viewer.

David - I think they're derived from a really painterly, mid-last-century painting language. I was probably lucky because in a way I was born in the wrong era but I was given the contemporary tools to work with and sort of expand that language of abstract painting. There's always been a parallel with abstract film; there's a whole genre of abstract cinema that arose almost at the same time as abstract painting. There's Léopold Survage who was a Finnish painter who worked in France who made a form of storyboard abstract paintings for film, in 1915 - and of course later, Oskar Fischinger. My PhD gave me the opportunity to delve into that other parallel practice - some people call it visual music. It's interesting to have that alongside a painting practice. I see animation more akin to painting than creating, say, still 2D images on the computer because of being able to take out and add to it. I'm concurrently using all different mediums. Each software I think of like the material - you know, painting relates to the material - I feel the parameters of a software is the material that I work with, and I use those parameters to make those particular works.

Kate - You're talking about mid-century painting as a root of your work - do you want to explain what you have in mind exactly, particular artists for example?

David - I've always been interested in abstract expressionism - which had its roots right back in early modernist painting in America. In Europe they were doing it much earlier - early Russian art for example, also the Bauhaus, Klee, Kandinsky, which I have a fascination for. I wasn't trying to deconstruct painting - I still feel a connection with that sort of work - I'm applying a conviction that comes from that period of work. I also use music: when I'm working on a work, I use a particular piece of music as a reminder of the world I'm in. So I might be working on several works at once, but I'll note which is the dominant music for that particular work and it allows me to locate myself; it puts me in a situation where I can feel a conviction related to the music and the development of the imagery. I'm distracted like everyone else, and the music reminds me of the mood-relationship that I'm exploring in the work. I want each work to be autonomous - which is an impossibility in a sense - but it gives me the opportunity to give specificity to each work.

Kate - So a piece of music helps you get back in the zone of a work. What sort of music are you listening to?

David - All sorts of things. I'm not an insider in music, I'm more of a listener. I was brought up listening to classical music. In this work here [*9 Minute Painting*, 2005] you can hear Hummel, Haydn and Prokofiev. When I did this the volume was really loud and I became embarrassed because, you know, if you have music with an animation of course the music is going to have too much influence - so what I did was downgrade the sound and put sounds of me on top of it. So it's a faux thing of me working in a continual improvisatory way although it's constructed.

Kate - So this is you whistling, coughing...

David - ... and Prokofiev in the background which is a trigger to the playfulness to that particular section of the work. There's a middle part which is more a sombre adagio from a Haydn trio. I go through all sorts of obsessions with different composers - Richard Strauss I really adore and I see a connection between his music and the Rococo painter Giovanni Battista Tiepolo; they're from a

completely different periods but I see a connectivity in the heightened emotional state of their works.

Kate – Do you want to tell us a little about the smallest work in the show [*File_310317*, 2017] which is presented on a Kindle. You had it in a group exhibition at the VCA which reimagined the famous 9x5 exhibition – so all the artists were required to enter a work 9x5 inches. And you went for an Ipad, a kindle?

David – Yes, I found a tablet that was the right dimensions to fit in there.

Kate – Did you make the work on an Ipad – a bit like Hockney?

David – This one was made on Aftereffects, so not on that particular device.

Kate – Have you made any Ipad paintings?

David – This one here (*9 Minutes Painting*, 2005) was made on a Mac with a stylus – similar to what Ipads do now. So it records the development of the image and you can play it back at different speeds. What I found when I went back to working from still to moving image, I recorded how works developed so I could play them as films when I was working on a Mac but I found it was the journey that was more interesting than the end point; the durational aspect of it. It became like a choreography. I've been using the same technique ever since. On Ipads there are painting apps called Procreate and Brushes (which is the one that David Hockney used). When it comes to the different materiality of the technologies, the Ipad paintings on Procreate lends itself to the improvisation - they're real time developments of the work - whereas the 3Ds are much more constructed. So I'm working with different modes that come from different traditions of abstraction and somehow putting them together. And in the past these intentions would have had different interpretations. But I guess I see it as an exploration of different modes of abstraction. This work down here [*Transit*, 2009] - because I was embarrassed about the music for this one [*9 Minute Painting*, 2005] - I made another work... I had an exhibition in Munster [Germany] and I had a whole installation ready and when I got there – in a music theatre – the musicians objected because I was going to spray paint all the walls. So I thought what am I going to do while I'm here? I was called to a funeral in London and I made this animation [*Transit*, 2009] on my laptop in transit. It was negative 15 degrees (which I think can be seen in the animation). I hummed the sound track from [*9 Minute Painting*, 2005] onto this work [*In Transit*, 2009] and they were in the exhibition together – sort of joined together. This work [*Beforegreen*, 2015] I made for my PhD using Maya. I used all these smudgy marks and actually kept all the wireframes as elements. And then I went back and voiced every one of the behaviours of all the different marks. There are 35 layers of sound – that's me voicing all the different marks and what they're doing. And in surround sound they go across the space, so the sound reflects the space in the computer. And for me, it suggests a quandary of how to interpret abstraction; it kind of gives a clue about the spatial dynamics, that the field suggested through the voicing. There's no stepping in there because I didn't want any relation to music - in a way, it's an anti-music. I didn't digitally manipulate the sound, they're all according to the behaviours in the composition. They're all pure, unadulterated sounds layered together.

Kate – You've got a good voice, David! Are there any questions at this stage?

Questioner - *not audible* The question was about the duration of the animated paintings.

David – Most of them are about 5 to 10 minutes. It depends on the piece. It's like when I talked about specificity; it's what feels right for what emerges in the work. Sometimes, with some of the

improvisatory works, I sped them up and worked out a tempo - how they might increase in speed as they go. Some of the Ipad ones might be made up of 15 short films, that I make into one film. This one's a very slow, developing one...

Questioner - And are there multiple works playing on each device?

David – Yes, for example I've put five on [this projector] – but for the sake of the installation to work: you've got to figure out an effective display. It was a tension that had to be resolved. In a way it's like stepping into different parts of someone's brain.

Kate – Yes, people have walked into this exhibition and said it feels like they're entering into the artist's brain with so much going on, on all these devices; different dates of works, people feel like they've walked into his history. And we had a bit of back and forth with that, didn't we David? I was like, how are we going to present this? How are we going to make a list so that people can understand what work they're looking at? But David's saying, well, you know, some of the works work really well on a small device and they move fast, others work better on a larger projection, some work on both devices. So, could we have works playing on both small and large screen devices? So, in the end, he's looped and connected various videos together on different devices, but they're individual works.

David – Yeah, and I'm personally very happy with the way it's turned out. This room is so beautiful to work with, it's my third installation here. It's been a privilege to work here, particularly in this environment because of the legacy of abstract painting and how important this gallery is for a generation of abstraction. In some ways, it's partly that legacy that informs my work.

Questioner - My question was along similar lines, about time and temporal aspect of the work, and pacing. And whether to some extent that relates to the making, you know, the drawing of the line, your ratio of the line or the shape - or whether you're thinking more about how a person would experience it?

David - I think it's probably a dual or reciprocal thing, isn't it? It's how you build in the knowledge of how people might respond. And how things evolve. I'm consciously thinking of the viewer, but there is also that sort of cultural memory which becomes an intuitive thing eventually. I mean, I presume that those things work for people, but I don't know.. that's a very interesting question.

Questioner - And how related is it to filmmaking? Because particularly with the 3d works, it's effectively camera work that you're doing - moving through worlds and turning perspectives.

David - I'm sure it must. In my PhD I did a lot of exploration of the work of Robert Breer and there are so many filmmakers working in abstract cinema. I like to think of my work as evolving out of their ideas. You can't help seeing some narrative in [the moving paintings] but it's a different relation to narrative because it becomes a painting space too.

Questioner - They seem like very contemplative works, but I wonder what sort of emotion you as the creator engender in the work?

David - That's an interesting question, because going back to the point about movement and the tempo, it's related to that in a way. You know, what's my cultural memory? What's my intuitive memory? And what's come together there? But I'm interested in this junction between what action painting was and what abstract expressionism was; I think Rothko rejected the notion of abstract expression as having an effect in the viewer - so it's a constructed thing. So there's always

those tensions of abstraction working between those things. I suppose it's similar to a composer constructing an effect in someone too. How much can be intuition?

Questioner - David is music going through your mind the whole time and impacting the effect of the work?

David – There are so many different aspects. Sometimes I approach in terms of gesture, sometimes related to sound, others are emotional moods. It depends on the piece and the specificity of it. These are questions I ask myself a lot all the time! They're always things to revisit: what creates effect and how do you construct effect.

Questioner – Part of my question was answered... I understand that the composition of your works are quite sort of intuitive, and so there is no sort formalism of how you structure the image, but nonetheless abstraction is a certain language the artist uses to say something: so the question is through your works, what are you trying to say? What are you trying to express through the work and through the language that you've constructed?

David – I suppose it's similar to what a composer might be attempting in a sense: dealing with the world... processing... communicating what is to be alive, I suppose. These sound like platitudes. I'm trying to formulate or elucidating different ways of experiencing the world – or trying to find other forms of language to do that. Also to speak to art history. I suppose in some ways it's a little too far to call my intention humanistic. I suppose it's like the world of the imagination; helping to extend the language of relating to things.

Questioner - Is there a sense of automatism in all of this in which it's moving faster than what you are curating and therefore it's telling you, in a sense, and you become just the manipulated rather than manipulator?

David – Yes, that's true; the thing in painting of working the material, and the material communicating back to the work. I think that's certainly the case, especially with the iPad works and the improvisationally developed works.

Questioner - I'm also thinking in terms of the colour; you either select or it so quickly changes and how that affects you theoretically or emotionally or conceptually and therefore the response then to the next step is a response to what's taken place – but it's projecting you ahead of the game as well so there's a state of rapidity perhaps?

David - I think that's true for some of the work. You want to be surprised on the way or have it take you somewhere you don't expect. And they're the best times because it's so easy to fall into repetition. With the sort of improvisational recording of development that I do, I mean I do thousands of these things, but there's only certain ones that work and actually have a development that I find is unexpected and can *inform*. And that's partly why I move between mediums because it stops that habituality; you've got to continue to break the habitual and get the work can take you somewhere else. And in a sense that's taking a principle from mid to late 20th century painting back into technology.

Kate - Do you have an idea of where you're going to go next? Flowing on from your answer just now, are you being led somewhere or driven somewhere by technology? Or are there aspects of your moving paintings that you want to explore more?

David – I'd probably like to start introducing AI elements into some of the works and see what happens. I just see that as another tool.

Kate – what's on the horizon there?

David – Well, it's almost limitless as a tool. It could probably learn my habitual ways of doing things and then create things from there. Some of the arguments around AI are so explosive: how detrimental it can be in the wrong hands and things, but it's going to be a fact of life now so it's something to now fold into the tools of expression. In some ways I could be intuitively ready for that.

question not audible

David – There were a lot of people who related particular colours to particular notes but I'm not looking that structural connection, I'm looking more at particular colours making a particular key combination because it's got to be in context of a whole lot of other chords.

question not audible

David - Christian Schubart – he was 18th century – he gave each key a character. I often think I'd like to work with his characterizing of the keys to make particular works.

Questioner - How do you distribute these works; do you buy the file?

David – Yes, you buy the file and sometimes I like to specify the conditions of the viewing – some lend themselves to certain viewing, projections for example. They all have different orientations and formats.

Kate – All the works are editioned; generally speaking they're an edition of three and David keeps an artist copy. And you buy the artwork on an external hard drive and you present the work on your own device. David would specify if he preferred it as a projection or another format, but he could advise you based on what device you already have. But really, once you've bought it and you've got it on your external hard drive, you can do what you like with it: you can watch it on your Ipad, you computer screen, your TV screen.. what David doesn't know can't hurt him! Digital art in general is a bit more friendly for institutions because they've generally got more devices more space and more bandwidth to work with an artist to present the work ideally. But there's an established digital art market, and there are a lot of private collectors of digital art, and they've worked out how to make it work: Smart TVs, I think have been revolutionary for digital art, it's allowed people to plug in and play, or have a still on the screen.

Questioner - There's a collector in New Zealand who's got a refrigerator screen which he runs his digital art collection off!

Kate – Well, shall we wrap it up?

Applause.