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"Perfume"

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beyond the surface

kim pieters maryrose crook séraphine pick susan ballard | DUNEDIN PUBLIC ART GALLERY



perfume

by Susan Ballard

Today I found myself amidst green glowing skies and azure blue seas. Beside me, there was an expanse – blue/grey/green – it was resistant to my definition. The space seemed without support, as if it flickered in time. I could not feel the ground beneath me, but could see it.

I was oscillating between the real and the imaginary. The surfaces were contaminated.

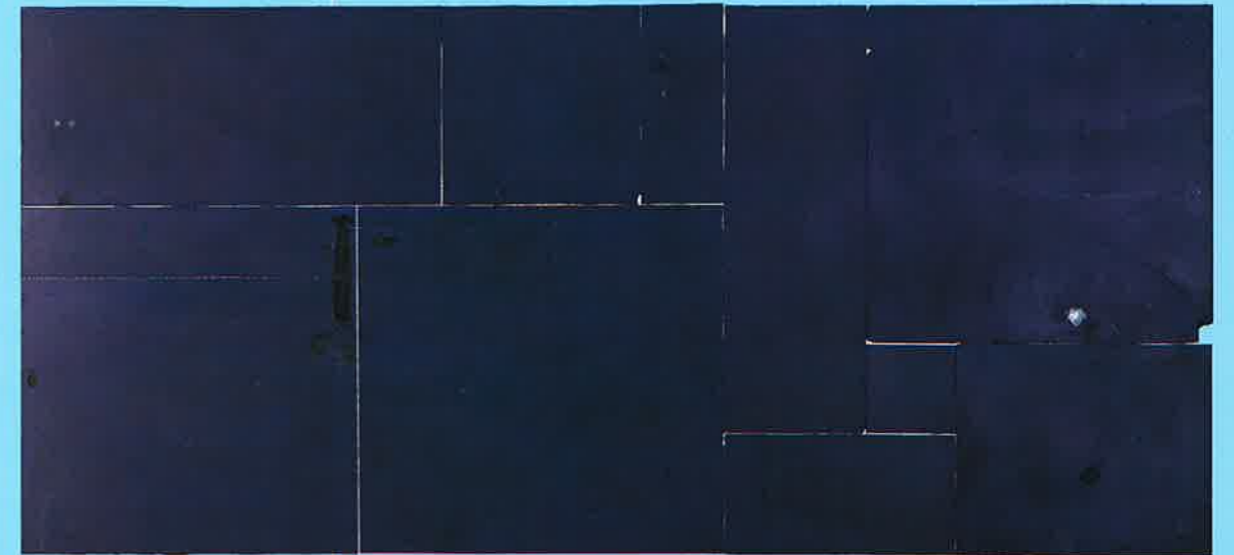
Why had I not noticed this before?

Imagine the colours being mixed. A bucket of basic white being stung by an intense drop of experience... Then coat the walls, clothe them with the idea of colour.¹

The works in this exhibition are not frozen. Their stories undulate and move. The relationships established between the diverse paintings and texts create spaces and tensions. These works do not always appear comfortable together, nor do they need to. Feelings and emotions run fast and high through them, erased as quickly as they appear. As viewers we grasp at their passing, or splutter as we breathe in their closeness.

Pages and paintings generate spaces of activity, where basic white is always stung by experience. In *Beyond the Surface*, three painters and one writer present these visual spaces as fragments that unfold before the viewer. Travelling between the paintings and words in this exhibition, we find ourselves in seemingly exotic places and other worlds, watching fleeting half-lives which are often pervaded by the perfume of earlier thoughts or memories.

Each painting becomes a time-zone, slowing the act of looking to a distinctive pace. Some works clamour for attention, while others wait their turn. Kim Pieters' *nasturtium* is the miniature made large. Colour is spread and amplified across metres of softly scarred board. This chromatic



I am walking across a huge paddock of wheat. I follow occasional tracks, perhaps laid down by possums or rabbits. I come across a meeting point, a clearing in the paddock; others have found their way here but not by the same route. I pause for a while. Immersed in the smell and feel of the surfaces around me. I try to follow the path home, but come out somewhere unknown.

The shapes have moved, the paths not even there, I have experienced the journey as if someone else had been there.

Kim Pieters front left: *nasturtium* (detail) 2001 mixed media on board five panels 1980mm x 2140mm. above: *the lover who does not forget sometimes dies of excess, exhaustion and tension of memory* 2001 mixed media on board eleven panels 1920mm x 4220mm

field engulfs for a second before focus shifts and it fades to nothing. Almost invisible in its detail, *nasturtium* raises the question whether colour is ever meant to be viewed on this scale. The painting discloses a process of simultaneous expansion and evaporation. Flickering between tiny lyrical events and an immersive vapour of colour, it becomes both a single flower and an entire summer.

Maryrose Crook's painting *Show Ponies* has a different sense of movement. Here the image is half-hidden beneath a mist of feathery grey paint. It could be late afternoon, that moment when the weather has packed up and everyone has left the fairgrounds. The focus of the painting is a poignantly gaudy merry-go-round, apparently haunted by the fading sounds of a music box. Each horse is covered by a shroud, doubling the sense of a dream-like stasis, a sleepwalking slowness. A faint melancholy rises from the scene—a feeling of childhood lost, of pleasures stalled—but there is also a magical levity and wit. The horses seem both frozen in motion and galloping blindly forward; the carousel, either anchored on solid ground or turning through some cloudy space of dream.

The work before me talks of memory, not hers nor mine but theirs.
 Two people I remember without ever having known.
 Their portraits authenticate the memory. Tomorrow when I approach them, they will still treat me like a stranger, an intruder.
 They will have forgotten I already know their story. Perhaps I am mistaken. They seem different today.



Some days the archive defies me.

Its voices are overhead, and impossible to record. It is not found in dusty corners but within layers. I am persuaded to travel within its surfaces, tripping over holes and breaks in the page, or slipping down huge previously unseen sand hills. I am always aware that at some time I will have to climb back out of this place. It is a messy looking forward that is trapped by looking back. The archive stains my fingers.

Séraphine Pick front centre: *Don't tell me I'm the one that's got to change* (detail) 2001 oil on canvas 1370mm x 1670mm. above left: *Up close* 2001 oil on canvas 355mm x 460mm. above right: *Earthly Possessions* (detail) 2000 oil and enamel on found objects various dimensions

In all of these painted spaces, the certainties of the 'real'—of the found board surfaces on which Pieters paints, of the seemingly solid landscapes in which Crook and Pick stage their dramas—are destabilised by drifts of memories and associations, patterns and dreams. The works have an evanescence, a quality of shimmering. No sooner have stories and meanings appeared than they are swept away by our next glance. The exhibition explores the hesitation and uncertainty of the partially spoken thought. Half-whispers pervade. Pieters explores this poetics of absence and silence in *the lover who does not forget sometimes dies of excess, exhaustion and tension of memory*. Across the multiple panels there is unexpected movement. Shapes emerge and travel. Within this continual flux, meaning and knowing become difficult terms to grasp. The 'lover' might be the artist, the viewer, or a body evoked by Pieters' ambiguous markings. There is nothing superficial to this surface. Trajectories can be traced without a need for their source, and our desires become the subject of the work.

Each painting in *Beyond the Surface* is home to images and associations, but each new viewer also overlays it with memories and ideas. Séraphine Pick's *Don't tell me I'm the one that's got to change* is a hive of strange and disconcerting signs and images, as if Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights* were reinvented for the talk show age. Seated in the foreground is a bikini-clad woman whose body is partially that of a broken mannequin. Plants sprout from her shoulders, and behind her is a host of dreams and apparitions: flowers, suburban homes, a cut-out tree, all looming and receding in a field of colour that suggests both blood and flame. The devilish face at her shoulder



could be encouraging her either to look back or stand her ground. Perhaps this is a record of lost lovers. Or is the woman growing into new life in the wake of some trauma or damage?

In Maryrose Crook's *Vitium, Nefandum (The sin, not to be mentioned)* the past is literally a storehouse. Locked within a suite of three nineteenth-century cabinets are objects ranging from the occult to the ordinary. Among this hoard are beds, a rib cage, a wasp nest, a hand and a tongue. In the foreground lies a brass nutcracker that is also a woman's torso, a hole where her reproductive organs should be. The earth below her is alive with cells and corpuscles, as if the floral patterns on a domestic carpet have begun to writhe with organic energy. Beyond all this, the sky rolls and billows above a fiercely pruned topiary forest. Nothing in this uncanny tableau seems to have developed naturally. There is a similar uncertainty in Crook's *Where this highway takes me*, where a strange barque with chicken-head and fishtail glides across a huge and fluid landscape. A creature such as this would be unable to survive either on land or in the sea. There is a sense of still time and journeys temporarily halted. In both Pick's and Crook's works, the timeframe is not that expected of history, of events following each other in a linear sequence. Instead these paintings suggest the jumbled storehouse of memory, where events commingle and spawn new images.

Kim Pieters' paintings encode memory in a different way. The board on which she paints suggests the walls of vacated rooms, scarred by human habitation. *Le mal d'archive* might be seen, then, as a reflection on our obsessive desire to retain information, to read the traces of history with certainty and make them visible. It also reflects on the impossibility of total recall, and our futile attempts to freeze time in collections and archives. The marks and blurs in the surface may be dust, marking an attention to the kind of details that are found in the seldom-visited corners of libraries. If there are stories to be found in these surfaces, they do not, to use Jean Baudrillard's phrase, 'have a day after; they are made to be used up.'² Each new viewing yields a new story.

Pick's shelf of *Earthy Possessions* offers an archive of yet another kind. These possessions may be disguised in white paint, but unlike most found objects they do not await some new use. Cameras, tape decks, cellphones—all of these are devices for storing information and recording the past. Pick has cancelled the objects' functions and embellished them with traces of the lives they once led. Grandmother's knitting hands can be found on the radio beside which she sat for years. The lovers have mutated to occupy the device on which love songs once played. And a woman waits desperately for a call from the very telephone she is painted on. Here owners have morphed into the things they possess. The objects seem to declare the impossibility of fulfilling our desires through consumer objects, but they also imbue ordinary things with some of the potency of relics.



In *Beyond the Surface* much is found in imaginary spaces. The atmosphere generated will, inevitably, be uncomfortable for some. Feedback loops out from the image to the viewer, 'drawing them in to become part of the system being observed.'³ By entering the illusion, losing ourselves within intervals, disruptions, fissures and folds, viewers can step beyond the surface. What is seen in the image is tied directly to what we observe, our imagination. Thus the paintings are tied to their surfaces and their viewers, moving, undulating, in-between. Neither real nor virtual, but both, each producing and defining the other.

Beyond the Surface is a cluster of changing elements which resist reduction to a common denominator or essential core. Interplay is all. Like perfume, these paintings are at once seductive and deceptive. Perfume heightens the appeal of the body's surfaces, drawing us in. But perfume can also camouflage things unpleasant or unsettling. And there are times when a perfume can overpower; its closeness can turn sweetness to sickness. Our individual response depends on our histories and memories of the scent, which can take us to other worlds—imaginary spaces of desire. A painting is always a space of excess: colour evokes more than it denotes, shape implies more than it describes. This perfumed excess opens new possibilities of desire, dream and memory.

I feel someone's eyes upon me.

She turns and disappears.

I am alone in this space, haunted by memories of another like it.

I start to write lists. I find fluid networks of pleasure, dreams, anger and falling.

¹ Liz Magor, 'White House Paint', in *Real Fictions*, ed. Linda Michael, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney 1996 p.50.

² Caroline Bayard, and Graham Knight, 'Vivisectioning the 90s: An Interview with Jean Baudrillard', *Ctheory* 24, <http://www.ctheory.com/a24-vivisectioning_90s.html> (1999).

³ N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics*. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London 1999 p.9.

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Maryrose Crook front right: *Vitium, Nefandum (The sin, not to be mentioned)* (detail) 2000 oil on canvas 1000mm x 1200mm. above left: *Show Ponies* 2000 oil on canvas 830mm x 1100mm. above right: *Where this highway takes me* 2000 oil on canvas 850mm x 1385mm

