



G A R Y A I T K E N



" painter paintpainted painting "

When we begin to talk about the artist and their practice we ultimately refer to that elusive quality of creativity described as being the phenomenon whereby a person creates something new in Western society or, in the case of traditional Eastern society, rediscovers an aspect of creation (a product, a solution, an idea, a work of art etc.), of course this creative ability resides within us all.

This creative phenomenon reveals itself through the tools of the artist and their art to ultimately enrich the lives of others. Special creative moments occur within an individual's life that ultimately shapes their future. One such moment, recalled by Gary, is of his earliest memory of painting at the age of five.

"Confronted with paint, brush and paper, I immersed myself in the creative activity of painting, like an apparition the paint revealed before me a landscape of viridian green with a cerulean/grey sky and a central single tree form, rendered with expressive painterly brush strokes. The concept of a single central motif still resonates within my paintings today. The painting generated a great deal of interest and response from my teachers and fellow students; I knew at that moment I was to be an artist, a painter."

Gary James Aitken was born in 1961 in Chatham England but is now working as an artist from his home based studio in Golden Bay, Western Australia, where he spends his time immersed in the creative ardor of refining the painting practice. Located on the coastal strip between the Indian Ocean and the natural surrounding bush land of the west coast, Golden Bay is indeed a golden place, which he shares with his wife Zena, and their two boys Khalil and Cohen. As an immigrant from the UK some 35 years ago, the artist has found himself, in his own words, in the "chosen land".

At the age of fifteen Aitken pursued his passion for visual arts by commencing studies in Graphic design at Perth Technical College for three years, then traveled extensively. On returning to Perth he completed a BA in fine art at Curtin University. A series of solo painting exhibitions were to follow: first at the infamous Beach Gallery in North Bridge titled "So Much Paint", then "Paint Painter Painting" at the Art Gallery of Western Australia, which was then followed by the "Picture Show" at the Lawrence Wilson Gallery, The University of Western Australia.

Gary has a creative practice that encompasses many disciplines within the visual arts spectrum including lecturing art, curatorial, public art and a fine arts practice, is summed up by Gary in these words:

"I feel lucky to be lecturing in a higher educational system that provides a platform for the learning process for others and to be working as a gallery curator that gives me the opportunity to engage with other artists, community groups, corporations and local government. The public art arena is an opportunity for me to create art works through collaboration of ideas for a challenging environment, the area of fine art is the most challenging and rewarding of the arts, a creative process that challenges the perception of self, art and everything else". "Art is integrated into every aspect of my life" - "lifeisartistlife".

"Painterpaintpaintedpainting" is the title of a new body of work created from 2009 to 2011. In these new painted works Aitken performs an opera of gestural and painterly maneuvers by flinging, dripping, pouring and splattering of paint, to create a manic optical feast for the eyes and mind. The character of the painted skin is no accident - the results are calculated and clinical - we see parallels between the paintings of Aitken and Pollock in the physical act of painting. Indeed:

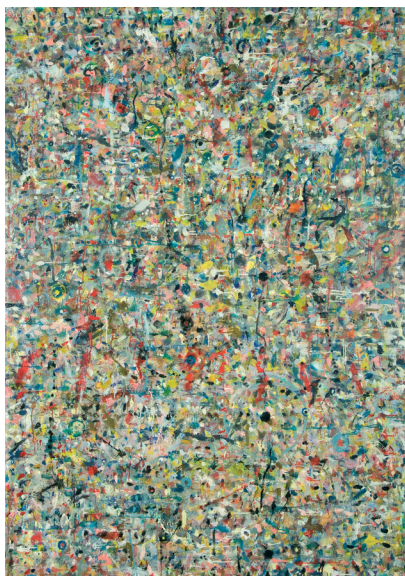
"When I am in my painting, I'm not aware of what I'm doing. It is only after a sort of 'get acquainted' period that I see what I have been about. I have no fear of making changes, destroying the image, etc., because the painting has a life of its own. I try to let it come through. It is only when I lose contact with the painting that the result is a mess. Otherwise there is pure harmony, an easy give and take, and the painting comes out well". Jackson Pollock, My Painting, 1956.

Aitken's new series of paintings have a core focus similar to previous painted bodies of work and can be seen as part of the artist's quest, the one continuous painting, a search for answers and questions related to person, place, process and product through the creative activity of painting, in the pursuit of understanding.

The creative process or creative activity of the artist is the search within, the human pursuit, a search for truth, a religious activity in the search of understanding of the ultimate question, why? *"My thoughts are intuitively expressed in the paint, I trust art and it enables me to see the truth".*

To communicate the penchant of Aitken's work is possibly an attempt of pure folly, akin to the act of painting itself. Nevertheless we are compelled and transfixed by these investigative paintings that mirror our own searching desires for understanding.

The central motifs are not just an attempt to capture a frozen moment in time. On the contrary they are a second by second account of the passing of time in relation to the elusive transforming motif and the immediate thoughts of the artist, like a series of transparent time lapsed images layered one on top of the other.



The specific human scale of the paintings is a crucial factor in establishing the relationship between painting and viewer – a physical doorway into the painting beyond the facade. The eyes flicker across the surface residue of opaque and transparent paint unable to focus or rest at any point. The themes themselves are everyday for Aitken: the studio, the horizon line, the land, the ocean, the sky and self.

"I have achieved an ends when all that can be done has been done and the quality of what has been achieved holds my attention and wonder, then I can live with what I have done". "Artcanbeunderstoodwithanopenmind".

A I T K E N on A I T K E N 2011 a third party perspective.

Abstractly Speaking – the work of Gary Aitken by Dr Phillip McNamara

The first works I saw of Gary Aitken were landscape and figurative paintings involving collage elements with swaths of thick rich oil colour that celebrated the sensuousness and tactility of the medium's viscosity. In quick succession in the mid 90's he held a triune of impressive exhibitions at well known galleries, including our state gallery. If he was considering how his art could gain a more prominent public profile then he had little avenue for impressing, but since then, apart from appearances in group shows and being granted a number of public art commissions, he has largely painted for himself and without further thought of exhibiting.

The current works, though less reliant on the extravagance of abstract expressionism, demonstrate the same understanding and appreciation of the paint medium which was at the core of his early work. Aitken's early figurative work - including landscapes, still lifes and portraits - demonstrated an ability to blend Expressionism and abstraction. The palette of his first exhibition was predominantly dark and brooding earth tones (blacks and greys, muddy browns and reds) and the next couple a rich riot of overabundance. What can be seen here is that over several decades this has lifted to a considered palette and an interest in using innumerable splashes and filaments of shimmering colour, rather than coagulated masses, for impact. Nevertheless though Aitken's now employs a greater range of marks, lush surfaces remain a signature part of his style and expressiveness underlies their enduring impact.

The current work is grounded in both an experience of paint and on information of place as an awareness of light. Such awareness was the basis of Turner's English landscapes, Rothko's nonobjective compositions of indeterminate shapes, and is of course an integral part of the Australian landscape tradition (from the Impressionists onwards). Such an aesthetic is about balancing dots, dashes, lines and patches of colour. Aitken's preoccupation has always been with abstraction – the build up of surfaces and layers of colour. His command of composition and colour has been honed over several decades of continuing looking and making. Knowing some of what he has looked at and enjoyed I can see patterns and devices used by artists he has admired – a little of Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock, Michael Iwanoff, Trevor Woodward, Fred Williams, and others – however these accretions he has made into his own.

Aitken has always painted portraits (mainly self portraits though friends and family have also been subjects). He enjoys the exercise of creating a likeness and uses them as a barometer for his skills. The early ones, one of which I was gifted by Cliff Jones, were restless with an energy that made the subject look existentially edgy and tightly bristling with unanswerable questions. The recent self-portrait, where the artist gazes across the abstract ground of one of his own abstractions, shows the subject as perhaps wryly amused with his own formal control of the painterly process and his passions. Judging by the gaze and rhythmical broad brush strokes of the self portrait he has become contented, almost indifferent, somewhat stately, certainly composed.

That his work is thoughtful – the qualities of the hues of each elegant surface considered – is indicated by the residues of his paint mixing evident in the metal bowls. Some bowls indicate that they have been used for splashing or sluicing on to the large canvases from the steps also on display. Others sport polka-dot designs which indicate that the colour sat whilst waiting to be sparingly used in jabs of brush marking. They indicate the meticulous production and labored backdrop of art, not often seen by the public, and are reminiscent of the encrusted paint brushes and totems that Aitken has previously shown. They also indicate his dedication to always showing that art is an unfolding process and that the studio wall and floor and apparatus become works of art within this art making process.

There is the portrait and then there are the works which suggest large landscapes. One of these is a Boyd like Shoaibaven blue, another a John Olsen desert yellow, another a Fred Williams nocturne blue; though I don't think Aitken would have consciously sought a connection. The colours suggest the landscape and elements of earth, water, sky, in each of the landscapes there is a subtle horizon or feature line which suggest one is looking through mist, water, evaporation, a wave, or at shadows and reflected light as the sun warms the ground down on a forest floor. There is a kinetic quality to these works, yet though full of movement there are also somehow relaxing; the contemplative nature of their origin foregrounded.

The application and layering of marks and hues is mesmerizing. Sketchy lines hover over patches of mottled planes of paint to form undulating meanders. Delicate swirls and coils of paint, along with dots and dashes and layered runs from multiple directions, show that Aitken spins his canvas rather than work from a single side. There is a fluidity and overall weaving of the marks and planes of light which is both firmly structured and loosely lyrical.

There are many risks with such abstraction. It can be overdone and as such look a hectic or disorientating mess. Or it can be underdone and hold no focal interest or overall design. To be successful, along with a sense of placement whereby the colour looks considered rather than arbitrary, there must be a certain repetition to hold the viewer's interest. Such sensitivity to material requires a focus and monitoring of the painterly field which incorporates understanding of aesthetic choices such as proportion, texture, brush loading and transmission, mixing of tone and hue, variety and layering. Eventually, over many years, an artist learns how to accrue such works that exude the presence of the timeless and the sublime. This is what Aitken has achieved in the works on show. Standing before each of his current works one enters the energy pathways that sustain their presence.

Stylistically there are echoes of movement and colour, knowingly there to bring that swirl and flow, a formal shifting or poetic song, that all living beings, all landscapes, the planet itself, brings into space. Within each there is an allegiance to the detritus of both soil and glistening sunlight, yet also the toil of painterly process. The works are thus more than product. Their point appears to be a vehicle of contact with the real world, real self – a burrowing through dialogue into presence, in this way each work is a self portrait and a textual shadow of the world's appearance via the artists' eye. They are superb expressive works epitomizing both his lyrical ability and concentration. I'm pleased that he decided to share them.

"drawingforpainterlypaintingofself"
2010-2011 charcoal 77cmx57cm

"painterlypaintingofself"
2010-2011 oil on canvas 240cmx166cm

"immersedinaplaceofawe"
2010 oil on canvas 240cmx166cm

"awitnesstothepassingoftimeunchangingline"
2009 oil on canvas 240cmx166cm

"hallelujahhallelujahhallelujah"
2009-2010 oil on canvas 240cmx166cm

"donotfearthenightseonlybeautywithoutlight"
2010 oil on canvas 240cmx166cm

"painterlyreceptacle"
2009-2011 oil paint and stainless steel 35 x 23cmx10cm

"shrineforpainting" @ "paintedpalette"
2009-2011 oil on mixed media (studio installation)

"paintingprocessrevealed"
2010-2011 oil on aluminum 15cmx166cm

garyaitken.com

