

subtle awkwardness of off kilter marks, yet with colours plucked from a mid-twentieth century kitchen, capable of transporting us to a former, safer, warmer, homely life. They tug at our heartstrings, we are engaged, and as the works beg enquiry, they arouse curiosity and investigation. At first glance they may appear unrefined, unfinished, or even humorous. However, I suggest that these surfaces warrant serious attention, and that they are capable of teleporting the viewer from the realms of social media and headline horrors into an alternate reality, reminiscent of Lewis Carroll's liminal world "through the looking glass".⁴⁸ If this is the case, is Conland's opening statement spot on? Can today's abstract paintings distract us sufficiently to escape current global scenarios of viruses, war, and environmental collapse? Could this be our "*Momentary Lapse of Reason*",⁴⁹ as we drift into someone else's dream realm? Or am I being a hopeless romantic?

Certainly, when engaged with the studio process, the anxiety of resolving a painting's puzzle displaces the major and mundane issues of the world, giving licence to focus on a "thing" for a moment in time. As our mind wanders, it transports us to the realm of in-between-ness; a chill space of productive flow follows. However, once the work is on the wall in the white cube, whether that existential moment of making penetrates and communicates beyond the painting's skin is an unknown factor. Sadly, *A Necessary Distraction* may have missed the mark in some ways. Though the walls were rip-shod and bare, referencing the Kiwi handyperson, the works were not quite as fresh and risky as the curator had intended. All the exhibited pieces were gleaned from prominent art dealers' stables, thus leaning on safe recommendations and a certain polished pool of makers. Nonetheless, amongst them were painters who do take risks and resist the confines of formulaic uniformity, such as Adrienne Vaughan and Saskia Leek.

⁴⁸ Lewis Carroll, *Alice Through the Looking Glass* (New York: Macmillan Publishers, 1871).

⁴⁹ Pink Floyd, "A Momentary Lapse of Reason", EMI, Columbia, 7 September 1987.

Aotearoa Mahi

Adrienne Vaughan

My primary research begins with two painters, Adrienne Vaughan and Saskia Leek. I have known both for a number of years and respect their consistent professional approach to studio production. On discussing painting and life with these practitioners, the following flow occurred.

New Zealand painter Adrienne Vaughan sees her works as having an independent presence; she avoids evidence of self and wishes to “not over explain things”.⁵⁰ Her approach as a painter is to disregard, or put aside, the weighty art world to focus on the problem of painting: “Let the critics argue the worth of the discipline, as a student I learned to forget the art world”.⁵¹ Avoidance of personal reference or narrative is a common factor for both Vaughan and Saskia Leek, who I will discuss later. Every effort may be made to side-step the personal, yet subtle slivers of reality occasionally slip in and evoke a sense of domestic nostalgia. The patterned grounds reference textiles, as John Hurrell states: “compressed tweedy textures, hint of a certain Edwardian masculinity”,⁵² and as such a simple pattern suggests something familiar which is lodged in our memory. These subtle insertions trigger a sense of nostalgia⁵³ and may cause us to ache for the comfort of a thing long gone.

Vaughan’s works have, by her own admission, evolved over time. Her use of scale and media have changed to accommodate altered circumstances such as family, children and personal responsibilities which steer her available space and time for work. *Untitled*

⁵⁰ Adrienne Vaughan, in conversation with the author, March 2020.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² John Hurrell, Eye Contact, New Zealand, March 2012, <https://eyecontactmagazine.com/2012/03/unusual-pairing-at-miles>.

⁵³ Peter Schwenger, *The Tears of Things* (London: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

Drawing, 2020 (fig. 16), is a clear example of this methodology; started on the kitchen table using wet media and collage, these paintings pull together various components in one composition as time and responsibilities becomes available.

Figure 16
Adrienne Vaughan
Untitled drawing 2020
Ink, oil and collage on paper,
425 x 520 mm
REDACTED

Vaughan's consistent mark making practice remains, and these days with more confidence. She has developed a dedicated habit of drawing on paper by maintaining a sound eye-hand connection which overflows into her painting practice. She states, "paper is cheap and ubiquitous and requires little preparation. Up to fifty drawings may be made in preparation for works on canvas".⁵⁴ Vaughan's attention to details evidences a keen eye. Allan Smith states that "her various patterns with various checks, stitches, herringbones, and loose threads evoke the textile of life."⁵⁵ Patient rendering of those familiar fibre patterns is apparent in her "slowly worked finishes".⁵⁶ Her detailed objects and patterns are complex, non-confrontational, even comfortable, and the carefully drawn designs frontroom-ish. However, soothing as the colour, tonality and patterns may be, the compositional structures keep the eye and mind busy; we are suitably

⁵⁴ Vaughan, in conversation with the author.

⁵⁵ Allan Smith, *Necessary Distraction* (Auckland: Auckland Art Gallery, 2016), 35.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 36.

distracted, there is little time to relax. These small paintings traverse our mind carrying us to a personal memory or past association.

Figure 17
Adrienne Vaughan
Flug 2013
Oil and enamel on
canvas 502 x 655 mm
REDACTED

In Vaughan's work, *Flug*, 2013 (fig 17), we see detailed attention to the handmade, with considered planes and repeat patterns which support abstract forms. These planes hold the forms in a structured composition, as scaffolding holding them in an abstract dimension. Vaughan openly discusses her love of Nozkowski's works, referring to them as "quirky abstractions, where figure/field relationships are uneasy, the distinctions between the figure-ground are disturbed."⁵⁷

The connection between Vaughan and Nozkowski's nondescript abstract figures appears in the use of their meticulously rendered, patterned fields. Both painters work and rework their surface, engaging the technique of "distressed surfaces; dry, fresco-like coatings and multiple layers, evidence passing of time and change."⁵⁸ Vaughan's use of a limited palette unifies her composition, and the layered pictorial field builds an intriguing

⁵⁷Vaughan, in conversation with the author.

⁵⁸ John Yau, *Thomas Nozkowski* (London: Lund Humphreys, 2017), 67.

surface, revealing ghost-like traces of her former mark-making. This well worked platform references the painting's history, enticing us to ask, *what came first?* Nozkowski's works reveal a similar approach. Using veils of transparent glazes as an editing technique he covers earlier marks, pushing back the underpainting to allow the flimsiest trace of the former to be evident. His works are a statement that nothing is so precious as to avoid erasure. These technical practices and use of pictorial compositional structures are seen in both Vaughan's work *Ringer* (fig. 19) and Thomas Nozkowski's maze-like shape, *untitled 6-113* (fig. 18). The working of the surface ground is a method I took to the studio to explore and exploit further.

Figure 18
Thomas Nozkowski
Untitled 6-113 1991
Oil on canvas board
406 x 508 mm
REDACTED

Figure 19
Adrienne Vaughan
Ringer 2016
Oil on canvas
300 x 250 mm
REDACTED

Adopting the process of addition and reduction, I started experimenting with various materials to exploit the potential of surface texture. Areas were built and sanded back. The works on cardboard emerged as a result of Lockdown 3. All my materials were at the Art School and being stuck for resources I located a stash of cardboard tucked away at home, a material I could easily source from the supermarket. This began my relationship with the flexible, porous, and malleable surface of cardboard. At first, the former box seemed a challenge; it was easy to cut but difficult to seal and very unpredictable. I would gesso and glue the surface only to return a few hours later to find it warped and twisted. Many trials ensued to find a way to work with this newfound material.

Once the construction was realized I considered the formal values of texture, colour and scale. A variety of textured waste matter was added to the surface, such as paper, card, dog hair, textile and so forth. Builders' compounds and glues were also incorporated to build and reduce as needed. This is somewhat evident in *Building of Surface Detail* (fig. 20). With the surface at a satisfactory point, I began adding powder clays to oil paints and pigments to extend the viscous structure of the fluid. The building of layers, texture

and colour took time and consideration until a satisfactory outcome was reached. This process proved to be the way forward for my project.

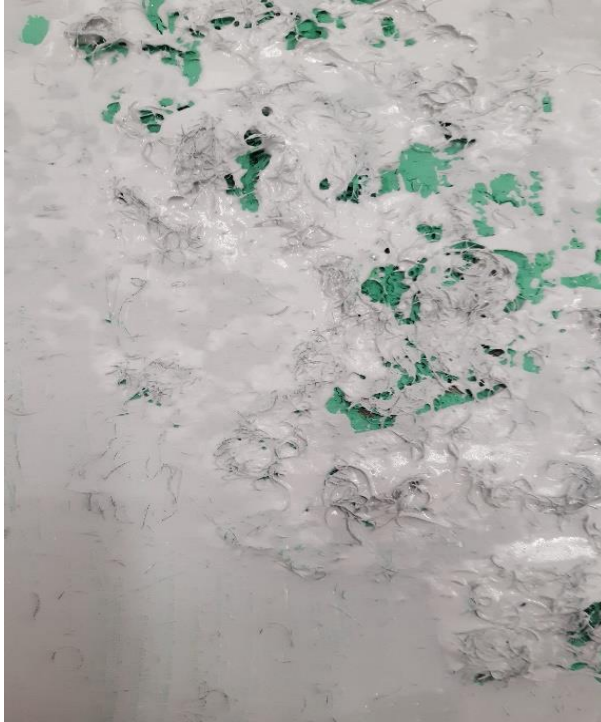


Figure 20
Linda Cook
Building of Surface detail 2022
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Saskia Leek

On reflection, commonalities between the practices of Saskia Leek and Adrienne Vaughan are clear. A relationship occurs within the modest scale of their works and a deliberate preference for elements which may challenge the eye, be “considered wrong or slightly off.”⁵⁹ Both artists are fascinated with comic book culture and lowbrow art, also a reference point in Nozkowski’s works.⁶⁰ One recognises these slightly off, almost comic motifs in both Leek and Vaughan’s works; the floating abstract elements such as clouds or misplaced pieces of fruit, as in *Slopes*, 2017 (fig. 21). Popular, everyday culture surfaces in both Leek’s and Vaughan’s works. The odd, displaced emblems and motifs

⁵⁹ Saskia Leek, In conversation with the author, March 2020.

⁶⁰ Thomas Nozkowski utilised his years of working within the *Mad magazine company* to build an in-depth knowledge of comic book illustration.

reference homely patterns or colourful frames, with a frequent nod to the familiar and the friendly.

For many painters, the practice of painting is a perpetual need, driven by an inner compulsion to connect and receive from the process; flow comes by engaging, almost listening to the work, rather than constructing or making from a preconceived vision. The drive to make came up in my discussions with both Leek and Vaughan. Leek tells me: “I think about the act of making, and ways of making ... I see myself as more of a receiver who enjoys working with givens”.⁶¹ I identify with this statement, seeing myself as a conduit in the studio process with a need to solve the pictorial problem, one which appears each day. Painting can be an enjoyable practice. However, as Leek says, “it can be torturous, like having to face myself every day. This intensity, though, is what sustains my interest.”⁶²

Over time Leek’s career has focused on low brow or amateur art.⁶³ She speaks of her interest in “domestic design and everyday culture”, the handmade and amateur in art. Her earlier works, circa 2000, referenced opportunity shop paintings, those corny sunsets or chocolate box pets, a subverted reality; something painted by, or for, a nanna. In acknowledging amateur, hobbyist painters, is she then celebrating the joy of painting which is accessible to everyone?

In recent years Leek’s paintings have moved into a less figurative realm. Wanting the works to remain, as she states, “broad and emblematic”, her works of the last decade embrace colour and abstraction with more confidence. References to the real world are apparent, but she continually applies a “refusal to disclose precise meaning”, avoiding personal, pictorial content.

⁶¹ Edward Hanfling, “Decoy Subjects: A Conversation with Saskia Leek”, *Art New Zealand*, no. 168, (Summer 2018), 52.

⁶² Leek, in conversation with the author.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

Figure 21
Saskia Leek
Slopes 2017
Oil on board
590 x 470 mm
REDACTED

The motif or emblem may have remained in the current paintings, but the chocolate box images have decreased and the emblems are more banal. Recognisable forms, such as fruit, continually emerge on her painted platforms. Leek has employed these motifs on her canvases across her career. There are many bunches of grapes or isolated lemons, but most curious of all is the lone, iconic banana, a rarity in art history. There it is, the single banana, in *Slopes*, raised to the level of the sublime, a phallic symbol as centrally placed and symmetrical as a religious icon. Pondering upon the works of Leek or Vaughan, and artists such as Nozkowski or Fooks, a portrait of a plastic banana⁶⁴ is perhaps not really that surprising or unusual. Leek's use of the banana as an icon is reminiscent of Velvet Underground's album cover of 1967 as discussed earlier (fig. 14), resurrected like the revolutionary beacon it always was in Warhol's design, familiar and misplaced.⁶⁵ For Leek, these motifs or figures are, she tells me, "Nothing very particular",

⁶⁴ Hanfling, "Decoy Subjects", *Art New Zealand*, no. 168. 52

⁶⁵ In recent times the banana is used more frequently, consider Giorgio De Chirico's use of banana, Maurizio Cattalan's taped banana and others.

or a “background stage or environment for a subject to go into ... like tethering back into the real.” She also describes them as “a decoy subject or signature”.⁶⁶ Is the piece of fruit in fact an anchor, something familiar, allowing us to experience a piece of Leek’s domestic world? Or maybe the misplaced fruit is distracting us before we get too close.

Leek constantly changes the details in her work by employing a process of reduction. This is comparable to the editing process of Vaughan and Nozkowski, who also adjust colour, tone, and content in the pictorial space. Layer upon layer is placed, edited, and eliminated. In Leek’s own words, “in some areas I work against myself, because I am by nature an imprecise maximalist”.⁶⁷

Bringing it Home

Being in the studio is a necessary and motivating part of any maker’s life, even when the flow is absent. Periodically, the creative flow needs priming and a starting point for this is in maintaining a connection with the work, sitting and communing within the studio environment. My personal practice has incorporated the building of a book, reworking the pages of a discarded charity shop book (fig. 22).

Focusing this way transports me from domesticity to a place and time of making. At other times I just sit and look.

⁶⁶ Leek, in conversation with the author.

⁶⁷ Ibid.



Figure 22
Linda Cook
Studio Book
2021 - 2022
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Looking reveals successful and unsuccessful elements of a painting, taking time to look can also cultivate a making period. Other times, working with alternative materials and techniques can assist in sparking a connection with the making process. This could be clay-like products, weaving materials or visiting the print department. In Leek's studio, sitting and looking at her groups of paintings is an essential part of her practice, one which necessitates working on around ten paintings at a time. For Vaughan, studio practice includes the rudiments of what she refers to as busy-work,⁶⁸ meaning prepping and tidying, a term she borrows from Thomas Nozkowski. I have adopted the phrase, busy work, seeing it as the setting up and organising of the workspace, or reflecting on and organising earlier work. In doing this I declutter my thoughts and settle to engage with the work. This disciplined practice opens opportunities to return to the table, or wall, to collect thoughts and refocus. This routine may offer a deemed "failed" work rescue. As Leek says, "it's the works that have been battled the longest, the seemingly hopeless cases that become favourites".⁶⁹ Those periods of stuck-ness may be addressed by working, and although work comes through work, it may also be argued that it comes about through stillness and contemplation.

⁶⁸ Vaughan, in conversation with the author.

⁶⁹ Leek, in conversation with the author.



Figure 23
Linda Cook
*Inquisitive but not
Smiling* 2021
Mixed media on board
1200 x 1450 mm
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The following chapter will focus on my continued fascination with process and material. *Inquisitive but not Smiling*, 2021 (fig. 23), is a large laminated cardboard construct. It required patience and cooperation to work with raw cardboard – a huge learning curve. Plastering it with fillers and powder clays took hours of gentle persuasion. Between the multiple layers are bracing bars; the larger of these non-compliant, pliable works required much more stabilising. I will discuss process more fully while considering the works of painters Cat Fooks and Rebecca Wallis. Wallis uses sheer fabric on pine stretchers to support abundant lashings of fluid which flow across the veils of silk. Sensuality abounds as the works reference the abject and bodily. The lavish works of Fooks switch between sculpture and painting to enter the realm of the object. Her paintings are bricolages of objects, strategically placed onto her supports, then thickly coated in DIY fillers, and slathered in paint. Both painters utilise the structure of the work, taking the paintings into the realm of the object. This approach will be discussed in connection with materiality and process in the following section of my inquiry.

CHAPTER THREE: RAGE AGAINST THE MACHINE

This chapter will consider new materiality and process, situating my methodology in matter, rhythm, flow, and emergence, combined with formal considerations of scale, colour and surface. My praxis is located within the sphere of abstraction, neo-casualism and new materiality. I will refer to the works of painters, particularly Rebecca Wallis and Cat Fooks, and of writers Julia Kristeva, Barbara Bolt, Estelle Barrett, Gregory Minissale, Liza McCosh, and others.

The Studio Floor

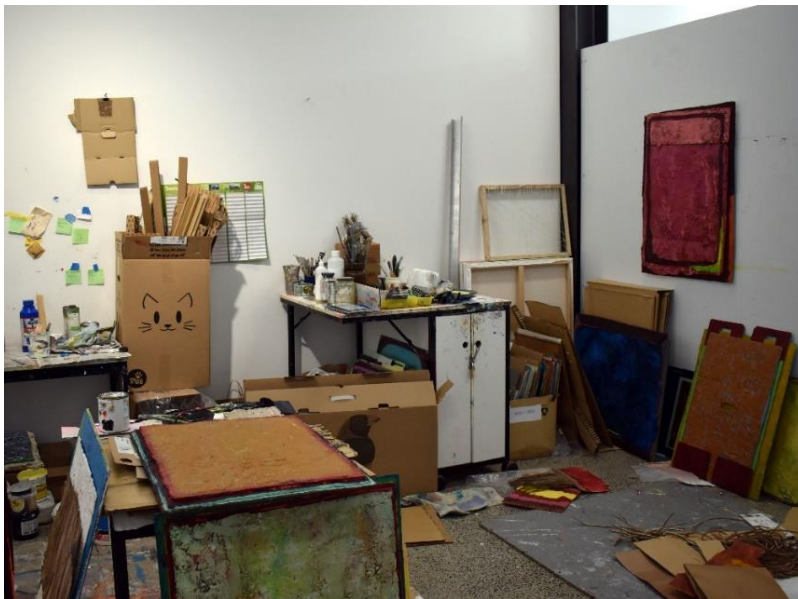


Figure 24
Dunedin School of Art
Studio Floor
Jan – March 2022
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In the beginning there was matter, and a darkness hovered over the inert substance. Within the chaos, disparity and isolation exists, there is a dearth of life. Certainly, this is how it can feel in a working studio at the beginning of a day (fig 24). Waiting for a moment of engagement: there is you and an empty surface and a variety of matter and

tools. Confronted by the expansive void, you wait for an epiphany or a beam of light, even if it is absent. Awareness is sharpened once work begins; “work begets work”,⁷⁰ Mark Braunias once said, meaning just do the work, it’s never complete.

The Hand as Tool

Studio time begins by looking for a connection with the matter, a moment where I look to the work to reveal itself – that moment which causes sufficient effect to trigger sensation and familiarity. While working with unconventional materials such as builders’ compounds, powder clays, household acrylics as well as traditional oil paints, I wait on the materials to coalesce to a point of stability and visual satisfaction. The viscosity within the fluid substance has vitality and presence which is adequate to trigger a semiotik moment. My frame of reference when discussing the semiotik is founded on Julia Kristeva’s definition, which differs from Ferdinand de Saussure’s linguistic theory of signs, symbols, and meanings. Kristeva writes from a point which unpacks the gendered position and affirms female connectivity, in turn adding weight to the meaning produced by the raw flow of the semiotik. Her writing engages with mother, child, body, and abjection. Kristeva’s perspective of the semiotik response is that which may occur when a pre-lingual memory affects a person’s physiology. That historic moment connects and triggers an emotional response which is aroused by an external sensory encounter; in this instance, I refer to colour, texture, and viscous fluid.⁷¹ The inference here is that the sensual nature of material can affect a residual psychological response from the viewer, disposing of a need for narrative, symbolic or figurative element; matter can supersede motif.

⁷⁰ I often heard Mark Braunias say this while I was working towards my bachelor’s degree at Unitec in 2000. I checked this with Mark, and he told me that within the process of each artwork is the starting point for the next. There is no arrival or finish line, only a journey based on the experiential.

⁷¹ Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun* (U.S.A: Columba University Press, 1989), 44–53.

Centering my studio methodology on experiential practice requires building a relationship with chosen materials and tools. By respecting the value and agency of matter, I add strength to the painted object. These moments of fluid connection produce an unplanned and unpredictable outcome and disclosure. Referential symbols are unnecessary. Kristeva calls this a semiotik chora,⁷² eventuating in “an image that is heterogeneous in that it permits a knowing that exceeds what can be captured by the symbolic”.⁷³ In looking to matter to inform the work I acknowledge that it has sufficient presence to affect sensation and response, both in the making and subsequently the viewing.

Here, I acknowledge the abject qualities apparent in my paintings, such as *Pinging from the Underside* (fig. 25). My connection with the materials invokes a bodily connection which culminates in wonky, oozy edges and a soft pulpy surface. The colours reference abject base materials. This connection with matter is reminiscent of my childhood when I would lose myself playing in wet mud. I would smear and mould soil for hours, sieving it through my fingers to intuitively connect with no set criteria or programme. On reflection, I see I was discovering and connecting with formless earthly matter even as a child.

⁷² Julia Kristeva. *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1941), 7.

⁷³ Estelle Barrett, *Carnal Knowledge: Towards a New Materialism through the arts* (London: I.B Taurus, 2013), 65.

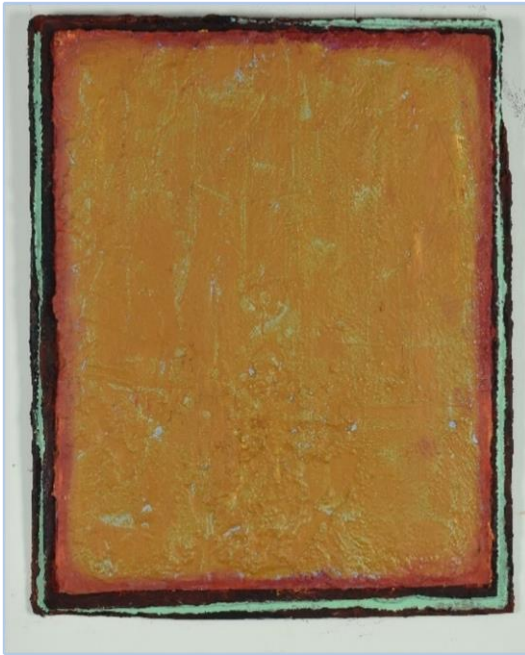


Figure 25
Linda Cook
Pinging from the Underside 2021
570 x 410 mm
Layered cardboard, paper and DIY
fillers with oil and powder clays
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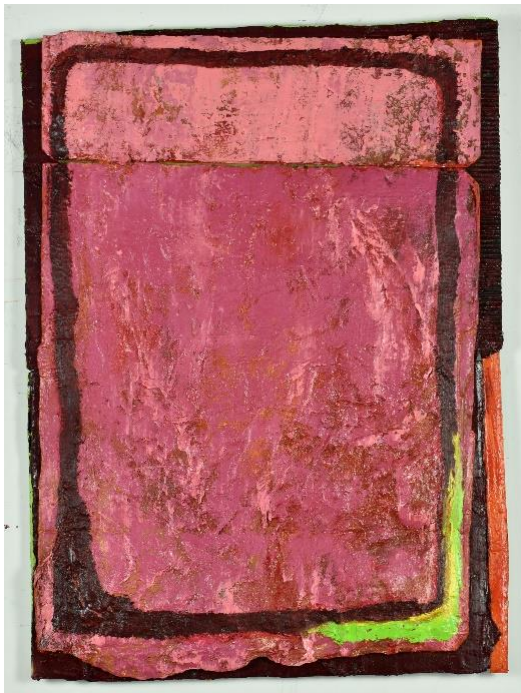


Figure 26
Linda Cook
Total Derangement
2021
880 x 650 mm
Layered cardboard, paper and DIY
fillers with oil and powder clays
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Total Derangement (fig. 26) took several weeks to complete. I began by selecting and constructing multiple layers of cardboard, which were then layered, and each piece sealed and painted prior to being fixed together. This is where the negotiation begins for the varying components, as each layer of the cardboard has an element of difference.

Once constructed, the sections unite to become a single form onto which texture is smeared, and here I look to the materials to reveal that moment of vitality. *Total Derangement* embodies layers of pigment, powder clay, paper pulp and finally cotton muslin. Layers of texture, matter and colour eventually coalesce and cohabit as a single thing.

Looking, building and destroying, digging, delving and constructing, have all become integral in my work. While blending clays and fillers onto a flat surface, I open a relationship as mind and matter coalesce, and we begin to see a moment of unification within the pictorial field. In this familiar work-zone flowtime, dualism is dispensed with, and mind and matter merge into a singular mode of operating. Gregory Minissale, quoting Bergson, writes that this is a moment of “‘pure perception’... the mind without memory is really part of the same matter. It is art that helps us to intuit this.”⁷⁴

Accepting this mode of unthinking, or a semiconscious method of working, sees internal bodily rhythms attune to external matter; as all the senses engage, external and internal rhythms flow. The sensual viscosity of paint can be an addictive substance, a pharmakon; these days it's my drug of choice. By accepting agency and engagement as the priority, a less formulaic process is adopted. My methodology has been strengthened and valued as cognitive intuition is heightened: “it's not a question of perception but of sensation”.⁷⁵

There is always a pursuit for something of value in the work; this is particularly necessary when working to an academic schedule. However, studio time should bring a sense of satisfaction from the action, process, and agency of making, putting aside a perceived end-product. This making zone brings with it, as described by Jane Bennett, the potential “moment of enchantment”, whereby,

⁷⁴ Gregory Minissale, *Rhythm in Art, Psychology and New Materialism* (UK: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 16.

⁷⁵ Amy Sillman. “Faux Pas”, interview with Lynn Tillman regarding the virtual launch of Faux Pas during Covid19 epidemic, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-CM-Q_ERYo8.

... you notice new colours, discern details previously ignored, hear extraordinary sounds as familiar landscapes of sense sharpen and intensify. The world comes alive as a collection of singularities. Enchantment then includes a condition of exhilaration or acute sensory activity. To be simultaneously transfixed in wonder and transported by sense, to be both caught up and carried away, enchantment is marked by this odd combination of somatic effects.⁷⁶

The matter referred to by Bennett has vibrance and life, suggesting that matter is not inert, it has agency and can influence and affect the making process⁷⁷. Once vibrance and life of brute matter is acknowledged, recognition of key moments in production occurs. Here my making is informed and influenced by the material; guidance comes from the flow of the medium. This connection is indicative of those times in studio where the “triple register” is initiated.

Barbara Bolt cites Kristeva’s triple register of artistic function as beginning with a responsive, external excitation or arousal. This is followed by the affect, a sensation or eroticising of the body, and finally the third register, “the sign or integration of the excitation as a sign in the system of representation.”⁷⁸ Several contemporary theorists have discussed the triple register, primarily Kristeva and Liza McCosh.⁷⁹ Firstly, set up the workspace in a typical state of planning and perception, looking, assessing and organising equipment. Whilst setting up, become aware and reconnect with the work. Stage two involves an immersive connection with the work, which is influenced and led by the material affect. Any binary separation of inner and outer consciousness is now united, and a singular mode of operating is actuated. Here, experience of the emotional affect is caused, as a connection between body and sensual matter occurs, thus stimulating and arousing a sense of wonder and enchantment. Stage three requires detachment and

⁷⁶ Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life* (Oxford U.K: Princeton University Press, 2001), 5

⁷⁷ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, Xii.

⁷⁸ Barbara Bolt, *Carnal Knowledge* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2013), 7.

⁷⁹ Liza McCosh, “The Sublime: Process and Mediation” *Carnal Knowledge* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2013), 130. See also: Julia Kristeva, “Giotto’s Joy” in *Desire in Language: A semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (U.S.A.: Columbia University Press. 1980), 210-236.

withdrawal; it is beneficial to leave the work and get some distance on it. On returning sometime later, mindful clarity and critical thinking are engaged. This is the time to assess the pleasure or displeasure factors in the painting. These connect/disconnect moments are important in the process as I look for that Bergsonian moment of “pure perception”.⁸⁰ While making, I look to the materials to reveal solutions. There are many ways to turn with no predetermined outcome. As I engage with matter in this way, fugitive moments reveal themselves to me. By choosing to follow the fluidity of the paint and embrace those clumsy, awkward, even confronting moments, satisfaction often emerges. It may feel like foraging for dirt or as Amy Sillman says, “digging shit in a field”.⁸¹ The key is to capture that moment of cohesion and unity within the material. Sillman calls this a “fugitive moment”,⁸²; for me, it’s my Oppenheimer moment; I revel in the visual pleasure which emerges from the potentially unglamorous detritus.

⁸⁰ Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1911), 15. Full quote: “dealing here with pure perception, and not with perception complicated by memory”.15. See also Minissale, *Rhythm in Art, Psychology and New Materialism*, 16.

⁸¹ Amy Sillman, *Faux Pas* (Paris: After 8 Books, 2020), 223.

⁸² Ibid.



Figure 27

At the age of two, dressed in my Sunday best frock. My father found me sitting in the coal bunker. I have always been attracted to raw matter.

Circa 1956

Photograph: © Frederick Tomkinson
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Matter over Mind

Muddy Fingers (fig. 27)

My physical connection with organic material goes back to my pre-linguistic days and being immersed in materials and process has changed little.

Situating my work within the field of new materialist practice accepts the collaborative act and agency of making. As Barbara Bolt says, “Art is co-collaboration, not a form-matter synthesis, and matter as much as the human, has the responsibility for the emergence of art. In other words, matter has agency.”⁸³

⁸³ Barbara Bolt, *Carnal Knowledge* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2013), 6.

Rhythm and Matter

*The evanescence of elements*⁸⁴

In his book, *Rhythm in Art, Psychology and New Materialism*, Gregory Minissale discusses mind wandering, telling us to avoid the challenges of cluttered thoughts.⁸⁵ A shared studio can present visual and aural challenges, and with this, combined with the urgency of contemporary life, my thoughts can become cluttered, and workflow disrupted. The oneiric process which Minissale refers to stalls: “With our busy packed schedules, how do we find the time to follow [Bachelard’s] rhythmic and oneiric imagination of matter?”⁸⁶ Within the mind wandering space, I find opportunities to merge with the work, a place often referred to as flow time. I find clarity occurs within the realm of unthinking or not overthinking.

Richard Schiff’s essay “Watch Out for Thinking (Even Fuzzy Thinking)” warns of too much thinking. Schiff records an interview with critics Charles Harrison and Clement Greenberg, in which their debate chews over whether we should think at all, or whether rational analysis interrupts flow. For once, I agree with Greenberg, who cautions us: “when it comes to art, watch out for thinking, let your eye or ear, your taste, take over ... Don’t think too much.”⁸⁷ A painter’s eyes and hands are essential tools for every day, but there’s more to this than meets the eye.

⁸⁴ Minissale, *Rhythm in Art, Psychology and New Materialism*, 7.

⁸⁵ Ibid, 250.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Richard Schiff, “Watch out for Thinking (Even Fuzzy Thinking)”, *Common Knowledge* 19, no. 1 (2013), 75.

According to Minissale:

...what the eye sees increases sensory stimuli in the brain. Vibration (or rhythm) also suggests haptic, felt, experiential qualities that are delayed or converted through the flesh: light literally enters the eye, and photoreceptors in the visual cortex turn these wavelengths of light energy into electrical signals and aggregates of sensation.⁸⁸

In those mundane moments of daily life, such as sitting on the bus, walking on the beach, gardening, even breadmaking, musing and reflection occurs; these natural cyclic activities provide clarity and sharpen awareness. In this place of mind-matter connectivity, internal neurological processors engage with external matter resulting in works outside the realm of conscious thought. I consider this my twilight zone; this is where intuition and connectivity are heightened.

Rebecca Wallis

Thinking on bodily connections brings Rebecca Wallis and her fleshy, fabric paintings to mind. I first met Rebecca at an exhibition opening, and her passion towards, and awareness of, her paintings captivated my attention. We connected and communicated about paint enthusiastically.

It was Wallis who introduced me to Julia Kristeva's writings, particularly on the mother, separation and the abject.⁸⁹ Wallis's works bring an awareness of raw materials; a viscous sensuality is apparent. In her work, *Leaking Attachments*, 2021 (fig. 28), the pouring of liquid paint over sheer silk fabrics is suggestive. Maybe suggestive of a night's romp on satin sheets or the delicate young skin of a baby and the abjection of birth? Wallis talks of her works as if they were her children and looks to Kristeva's psychoanalytic insights, making an analogy between mother/child union and separation

⁸⁸ Minissale, *Rhythm in Art, Psychology and New Materialism*, 50.

⁸⁹ Julia Kristeva, *The Kristeva Reader*, editor Toril Moi (London: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1986), 139-159.

and the visual and technical divide and split of the paintings. In her recent works she floods sheer fabrics with paint, then folds the fabric over, then later pulls it apart, splitting it in two, suggestive of the painful, mother and child separation: “there is this other abyss between mother and child ... between my body and this internal graft and fold, which, once the umbilical cord has been severed is an inaccessible other.”⁹⁰ Suppurating, visceral bodily references are present in the works. Wallis says that “the fluid properties of paint arise because I’m a woman, a mother, who has experienced the intimacy of the fluid and visceral self, first hand”.

Figure 28
Rebecca Wallis
Leaking Attachments 2021
Acrylic on silk over cedar bars
1900 X 1300 X 35 mm
REDACTED

There is an element of the Surrealist game, “The Exquisite Corpse”, located in these works – those mis-matched drawing halves which when opened display a strange, unforeseen creature. As the poured paint sandwich is wrenched apart and split, Wallis’s folded fabric also reveals the unseen and unpredictable. The embedded paint skin

⁹⁰ Ibid, 178.

exposes a newly made mark of an unplanned image; in the action of separation, a new image is born. The surface attempts to cling together, but in dividing the matter the artist reveals a curious new visual pleasure. Wallis states this to be “where the materials speak together without my intention.”⁹¹ Her methodology is considered and controlled, yet within her praxis there is ample opportunity for the material to find its own path. As Edward Hanfling writes, the works eventuate from “a controlled action, producing an unpredictable result”.⁹²

A material indebtedness exists within Wallis’s practice and mine. I realise that we both address and connect with our bodily awareness, our journey and connection with motherhood, visceral bodily fluids, secretions, and excrement. Of all the female painters researched, I see that Rebecca Wallis and I connect with our womanhood at a base level. Materials are selected and bodily rhythms bond with matter as mixing, blending and smearing occurs. This is evident in *Incandescent Molecules* (fig. 29), where the paint and clays sit on the surface, and the colour combinations react, sparking energy and interest. In the time of pouring and pushing, I ponder the multiple layers, looking for visual and sensory pleasure to materialise. Where Wallis pulls apart her surfaces, I build and squeeze my cardboard layer together, suggesting intimacy and concealment. The former boards contain visceral secretions which trigger a degree of enticement and emotional response. In *Incandescent Molecules*, the blue underpainting peeps through, adding vibrance to the suppurating lurid yellows of the finished surface. This is not immediately apparent in the painting and, as discussed earlier, a revisit to the work is needed for post-analysis.

⁹¹ Rebecca Wallis, in conversation with the author, 2020.

⁹² Edward Hanfling, “Painting since 1990”, in Gil Docking, Michael Dunn and Edward Hanfling, *250 Years of New Zealand Painting* (Auckland: David Bateman, 2021), 275.



Figure 29
Linda Cook
Incandescent Molecules 2021
Layered cardboard, paper and DIY
fillers with oil and powder clays
600 x 490 mm
© Linda Cook. All rights reserved.

In the rhythmic flowtime, matter connects and informs my movements, pushing, pulling, pouring: “we connect at a molecular level, at the level of matter not subject”.⁹³

The theoretical concepts of new materiality are under constant review; currently agency sits at its core. Research challenges the position of the artist as supreme maker, thus liberating the making experience for me. The book, *Carnal Knowledge*, is a collection of essays by scholars who explore the field of new materiality, considering the relationships which exist between humans and non-humans. These essays have extended my understanding of materiality and the “material turn”, as the text looks beyond the limits of the binary system of artists and materials. Barrett and Bolt suggest that there is an increased awareness of humanity’s position within the world of making and our co-responsibility with matter and things:

⁹³ Deleuze & Guattari “What is Philosophy”, 1994, as quoted by Barbara Bolt, *Carnal Knowledge: Towards a New Materialism’ through the Arts “*, (London: I.B. Taurus, 2013), 7.

The “I” of new materialism is no longer the sovereign human subject but is conceived of as a material-semiotic actor, an articulation that, according to Donna Haraway (1991) encompasses the human and the non-human, the social and physical, and the material and immaterial.⁹⁴

By accepting the co-responsibility of human with material factors, the “I” is decentred and there is an acknowledgment of the shared responsibility of making. In acknowledging this we move towards a broader understanding of creativity, beyond perception and into sensation, as we reconnect with the “matter” of things. Bolt and Barrett’s exploration of new materiality considers agency and responsibility, material indebtedness and a cultural awareness of the material affect. Minissale builds on new materialism, to suggest that engagement and agency trigger “neuromateriality”,⁹⁵ going on to state that “matter should be understood as a dynamic complexity shared by matter, body and the brain.”⁹⁶

An understanding of new materiality supports my methodology and process. Working with viscous fluid both mesmerises and excites, as colour smears unpredictably on the finite surface. Layering pigments and clays adds volume and bolsters the thin paint. The fluid colours become paste-like when smeared over the hard surface, offering body and substance to the flat strata. I look for that moment of enchantment to emerge as the fluids are in flux and fuse with the matter. Quietly, seamlessly I wait on the emergence of an unforetold form.

⁹⁴ Barrett and Bolt, *Carnal Knowledge*, 3.

⁹⁵ Minissale, *Rhythm in Art, Psychology and New Materialism*, 12.

⁹⁶ *Ibid*, 15.

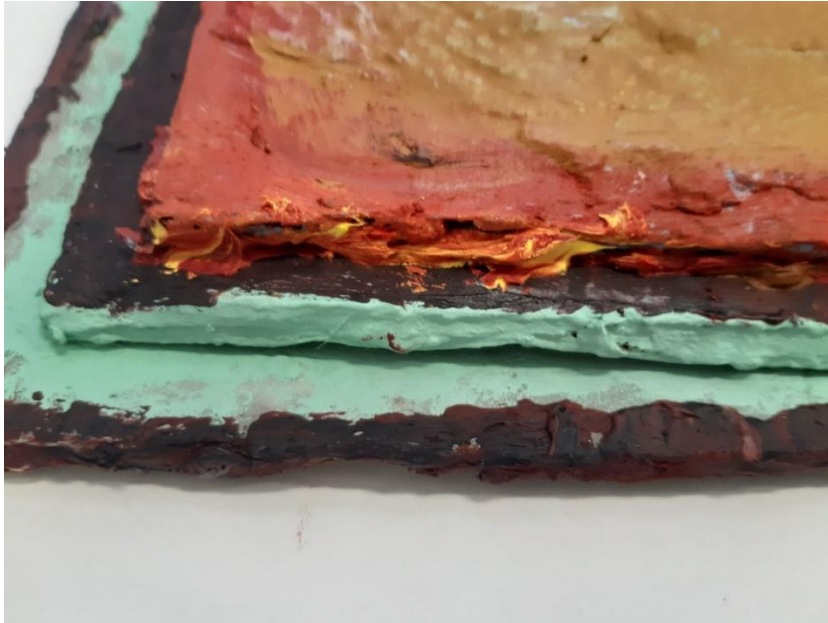


Figure 30
Linda Cook
Edge of work
*No Longer Making
Epigrams 2022*
Oil clay and mixed media
on layered cardboard
© Linda Cook.
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Edging beyond the Surface

Re-surfacing

This project culminates in works constructed from multiple layers of cardboard, each one reducing in size. I think of them as paint sandwiches. Once these layered boards are assembled, sandwiched together, coated, and braced, they can be worked on. With the cardboard sealed I begin applying textures such as paper pulp, hair, mud, straw, whatever comes to hand. This is then worked on with a meld of the powder clays and oil paint. I found that adding small amounts of kaolin and calcite to the oil paints adds viscosity, thickening the paint to a buttery consistency and making it suitable for spreading and dragging across the surface. At this stage there is no resistance, they unite and hold together well. The binary system of surface and paint is gone as they blend and become a single object or form.

I considered the “combine” works of artists such as Robert Rauschenberg and Cat Fooks, and their gluing and constructing of found objects onto flexible cardboard material. But it was the edge that grabbed my attention. Often construed as a frame or simple

regulatory device, the edge can impose limits and constraints on a work, separating the painting from the space it inhabits. I asked myself why paintings are more often symmetrically constructed devices, which are then locked into a contained format or frame.



Figure 31
Linda Cook
Plunging Down the Edges 2021
Layered cardboard, paper and DIY
fillers with oil and powder clays
1450 x 1200 mm
© Linda Cook. All rights reserved.

The edge became a focal point in building up the cardboard planes, as is evident in *Plunging Down the Edges* (fig. 31). As the painting grew, it pushed out from the wall, edging into the domain of sculpture or objecthood. No longer confined to a single linear surface, the planes expanded, and the edges multiplied and opened the centre of the painting. In vitalising the edge, I saw the painting reach potential beyond the confines of a boundary, moving the work beyond the isolating frame – it had presence within the room.

Figure 32
Robert Ryman
Guild 1982,
Enamel on fibreglass panel with
aluminium fasteners,
982 x 918 x 38 mm
REDACTED

To discuss painting as an object, I feel compelled to consider Robert Ryman's works. Ryman lived in New York in the 1960s and became interested in abstract painting whilst working as a guard at MoMA. Inspired by the works of painters such as Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman, he decided to teach himself to paint. This love of painting saw him produce the all-over white paintings, such as *Guild*, 1982 (fig. 32). Although they are white, each one has a different tone and texture. Ryman enjoyed the challenge of experimenting with unconventional materials. My connection with his works occurs as I discuss the object; constructing and building the support is integral to both Ryman and my works.

Ryman builds his surface from layered fibreglass which reveals a honeycomb edge and has a greenish tinge he confesses to liking.⁹⁷ The fibreglass and aluminium constructions move the works out from the wall and into the space of the viewer, or, as Ryman says, "in the place just right", borrowing a phrase from a Shaker hymn."⁹⁸ In an interview with Sheena Wagstaff, he recalls the works of Newman, saying that the "paintings move outward towards a person rather than their looking into it like a picture. The painting

⁹⁷ Robert Storr and Robert Ryman, *Robert Ryman* (London: Tate Gallery, 1993), 172.

⁹⁸ Storr and Ryman, *Robert Ryman*, 41.

moved out of the wall and as a consequence you couldn't put a frame or anything on the edges because that would stifle it".⁹⁹ Painting often sits in the realm of liminality, transporting the viewer from the present moment to a suggested other place. By liberating the edge, the form/object inhabits and works within the space in which it resides. This connects with the realm of the viewer, bringing awareness to our own being in the world; our body, time, and place.

As a painting progresses, I see it as a whole, rather than separate components; colours are considered, and lines are made deliberately awkward. I employ these devices to both harmonise and clash, please and disgust, the intention being that the borders of the paintings add complexity and pleasure to the face of the work. These cardboard constructions enabled me to move the edge beyond an outline or boundary. The layered, multiple surfaces began to float and engage, enhancing and reacting with each other. Now the painting's edge demands attention, seeming to say, "*kindly observe my sides, there is more to me than a pretty face*".

I acknowledge taking inspiration from Jules Olitski's *Sunset*, 1968 (fig. 33). Olitski gives this painting strength by using the edge as an anchoring device. He acknowledges that the frame or margin does more than complement a painting, it sustains the work, it is where the painting both begins and ends. Walter Darby Bannard analyses Olitski's treatment of the edge as an activation of seemingly "empty" space:

... a picture is established not by the coherence of an image or set of relationships within four edges, but by forcing the edges to accommodate enough pictorial incident to rationalize the empty interior space as pictorial space, receptive space, which the left-out area around any centralized image could never be.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ Sheena Wagstaff, "Moving Pictures" 2002, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/barnett-newman-1699/moving-pictures>.

¹⁰⁰ Walter Darby Bannard, "Quality, Style and Olitski", *Artforum* 11, no. 2, October 1972, 64–67.

Figure 33
Jules Olitski
Sunset 1968
533 x 241 mm
Acrylic on Canvas
REDACTED

Olitski's mid-1960s works were admired for their "flat, continuous, homogeneous surfaces of very close value to create sufficient organic unity".¹⁰¹ His painting technique was referred to as "alloverness".¹⁰² These "allover"

fields were created by spray-painting a single field of colour. Later, his works would include that all important edge, line or margin which he would define with markers, brush, pastel or the negative mark left by masking tape. In defining the edge, he activated the dynamics of the internal pictorial plane. The sprayed textural surface sat on top of the canvas, proposing an illusory depth. Kenworth Moffett suggests that these allover textural works reach into the realm of form, saying, "the sculptural appeal Olitski eliminated ... now reasserted itself as the literal sculptural or tactile."¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ Kenworth Moffett, *Jules Olitski* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1973), 22.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 14.

The edge continues to be exemplified in British painter John Hoyland's work, such as *Orlo*, 1976 (fig. 34). Hoyland's lavish and abundant use of allover colour seems to vibrate, but it's those edges which bounce and radiate. I wonder if he listened to ACDC? Looking at this large work, I see the edge first; that dirty purple mixes with the acid blue and green edges, then there's a dash of red which pings against the orange sliver. All of this supports and activates the expansive field of ochre over sienna. These edges do not submit; they are electrified by the juxtaposed blues, reds and yellows which peek and weave in and out of the edges.

Figure 34
John Hoyland
Orlo 1976
Acrylic on canvas
2285 × 1500 mm
REDACTED

Raising the profile of the edge demands I spend time considering the colour, texture, and awkwardness. In doing this, the picture plane is expanded and accentuated, the edges move in and around, merging and withdrawing, each layer individually activated whilst coalescing with the whole, holding the constructed form together.



Figure 35
Linda Cook
Translucent as Jello 2021
Layered cardboard, paper and DIY
fillers with oil and powder clays
470 x 570 mm
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Floating on top of the edge of *Translucent as Jello*, (fig. 35) exist complex surface factors and awkward off-kilter moments. The back boards offer a reactive support while the sides deliver a multitude of colours. I enjoy employing awkward, even absurd elements, such as slightly askew edges or an unrefined surface area. These elements are devices of engagement and humour and bring the pleasure/displeasure affect which I seek.

These recent works also encourage discussion of the object and space. They are constructed from ubiquitous discarded material, lacquered, coated, glued, and plastered. The fact that they occupy a space on the wall is possibly the only thing nailing them to the realm of two-dimensional objects.

Cat Fooks

Fook Yes!

Cat Fooks' works meld painting and sculpture together, resisting the isolation of any category. She shows that anything, seriously anything, can go.¹⁰⁴ Within this small realisation, a gem of awareness grew for me, and I let go of trying to make and embraced the flow. Fooks values the role of matter within her works, utilising the luscious effect of the viscid fluids.

Figure 36
Cat Fooks
Wild Horses 2019
Oil and mixed media on board
765 x 400 mm
REDACTED

¹⁰⁴ Arthur Danto, *Anything Goes: The Work of Art and the Historical Future* (UCA: Townsend Centre for the Humanities), 1997.

Fooks' paintings may be small in scale, but they are larger than life, emitting all manner of matter. Her works are difficult to ignore. They demand a response, and firstly there is joy. The colours alone smack you in the face with their unbridled abundance, then they massage you with pleasure. Her tacit knowledge of matter is evident in these sculpture-come-paintings which Francis McWhannell refers to as "wall works".¹⁰⁵ The constructed, lumpy surface is first covered, almost cast, in rich hue, whether gloss, satin or matt, and appears to have been dipped then cast in a coating of rich chroma. A panoply of colour adorns the surface and frame, suggestive of an energetic session in studio. Fooks' colour palette is reminiscent of a sweet shop. Pattern is applied to the surface with apparent, carefree gestures. Marks are added, unrestrained, edited and removed, in a Sillman-esque work mode of digging and delving. In *Wild Horses*, 2019 (fig. 36), fluid marks confidently array the surface where candy colours luxuriate on a field of compacted pulp and DIY filler. Not only do the colours bounce in and out of the frame, but her use of dusty, matt marks, placed next to a slick lick of gloss, suggests an almost unfinished, neo-casualist look.



Figure 37
Henri Matisse
Interior Aubergines 1911
Oil on canvas
116.2 x 89.2 cm
(copy in public domain)

¹⁰⁵ Francis McWhannell, "The Unmissables: Three Exhibitions to See in August", *Pantograph Punch* (16 August 2019), <https://www.pantograph-punch.com/posts/Unmissables-August-2019>.

The domestic pattern work in Fooks' *Wild Horses* is reminiscent of Henri Matisse's *Interior Aubergines*, 1911 (fig. 37). Matisse's fluid brush work and vibrant colours sing on the paint surface as the throbbing pattern dances across the picture plane, suggesting that the image extends outside and beyond the frame. This pictorial reference is evidence of Fooks' other passion, books; she is an avid reader. At the time of my talking with her in 2019, she visited the Elam Library at the University of Auckland several times a week. In recent years this facility was closed, and I wonder how she deals with this loss.

Looking at Fooks' paintings I take on board her abandon and passion for paint. I have learned to take risks, throw caution to the wind or paint to the surface, for after all, as Richard Fahey would constantly tell me, "It's only coloured mud".¹⁰⁶

Complex fields of coloured skin and texture exist within my own works, the intention being that they create a curious sense of pleasure and tension on the surface. Edges emerge and peak out, suggesting something unspoken, a secreted thing. The works become their own entity somewhere within the process of becoming. I have had to learn to wait and look for this.

This whole process takes time. And through the time of the project, I have experienced a realisation of my own position in the making process, reaching into my psyche to affirm my position as a cultural feminist. This awareness caused me to question the doctrines imposed upon me as a younger woman: to not dream, control my imagination, and constrain my emotions. Untangling these realisations opened an avenue of thinking in which I have found a new, raw connection with my painting and making process. Embracing the sensory connections and cognitive awareness available to me as an individual has enabled a more complex mind and making process, which benefits both myself and my painterly project.

¹⁰⁶ Richard Fahey, while working towards my bachelor's degree at Unitec in 1998 – 2001.



Figure 38
Linda Cook
*Before I Was Born. But I Remember
You* 2021
Layered cardboard, paper and DIY
fillers with oil and powder clays
1800 x 1200 mm
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Conclusion

At some point during 2021, things began to gel for me. This research project commenced as an analysis of paint and abstraction, but it gradually revealed itself to be about an innate fascination with materiality – an insight gained as a result of studio and theory synthesis. Having this period of disciplined engagement added acumen to my process and consolidated my methodology. I began to understand that my fascination with abstraction dwelt in the structure and use of materials, and that matter without mimesis could communicate, scintillate, and excite.

Revelations which occurred over this time include the acknowledgement of tropes which neo-casualism brought to my practice, including embracing awkward, unrefined forms and edges. These devices, combined with an interest in subversive countercultures – that climate of social upheaval which kicked off in the Sixties – began to emerge in my art making. Employing such visual devices as wonky edges, sliding surfaces and clashing colours positioned my work outside mainstream art practices and alongside the slightly bolshy, non-compliant and awkward.

Along with a deviant perspective, alternative materials and a shonky approach to painting, my studio methodology also embraces new materiality and the meshing of mind and matter. Researching this area began with Barbara Bolt, traversed through Jane Bennett, and eventuated with Gregory Minissale. This investigation increased my understanding of working within immersive practice and the acceptance of agency; working as one who relinquishes absolute control of the medium. Many experiments ensued as I explored the sealing and stabilising of twin-core cardboard, onto which I would build complex,

textured, surfaces. My commitment to this project has given me an in-depth awareness of mind-matter merger.

Concluding this project took time and determination. I am indebted to the materials of my practice; the fascination and emergence which comes from painting has kept me on track. However, time never runs in a straight line, and each day brings a new problem to be resolved, such as pandemic interruptions and personal crisis. But in all this, the purpose, focus and consistent untangling has been sheer joy.

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