

Proscenium

Proscenium: Latinised from Greek and meaning ‘a stage’. More specifically the front part of the stage: the curtains and its framework. It is the metaphorical vertical frontal plane of space in a theatre that can also be considered a social construct separating the actors and their stage-world from the audience, but because both are in the same auditorium reciprocal responses are encouraged.

This *Proscenium* suite of paintings has been carefully staged within a designated gallery space. The gallery becomes a staged setting for artworks that masks me in my absence. The sequential placement of individual works on the walls and the intervals between them provide an overarching narrative constructed through rhythm while each work retains its unique character.

In the past I was very critical of those (mostly) mid-20th century artists who refused, sometimes mischievously, to explain their works and their motivations. Now I get it!

During an informal staff luncheon in 1999 hosted by the Canberra School of Art in honour of visiting artists Frank Stella and David Hockney I asked Frank Stella what he thought of post-modernist art theorists of the 80s and 90s reinterpreting his 50s and 60s work, ascribing new meanings to them. The implication of these revisionists was that like all other abstract painting from that early period his too were dry, idealistic reflections on nothing much: reductivist nothingness. At the time Stella was one of the abstract artists whose work I was analysing as part of my doctoral thesis. Typically well-known for his aphorisms and neologisms he enigmatically replied; ‘Ah, you’re on very slippery ground when you talk meaning’. It took me a long time to understand the layered complexities in this simple statement. I mistook brevity for simplicity, insightfulness for evasiveness. This succinct comment, rather than being a denial of meaning or a refusal to engage in dialogue, acknowledged the limitations of ‘reading’ visual imagery the same way we read the written word and warned against doing this. He was advising me to be wary of using fashionable theory as a framework for defining content. Years later I delivered public lectures at Monash and RMIT Universities titled ‘On Slippery Ground’.

Words are not substitutes for images nor can they adequately elucidate their scope or describe their full range of potential meaning – this is the domain of the viewer.

Despite this, I love to scrawl ‘found’ words in unlined books, spreading them haphazardly over pages. The words look as if they have floated down from the air and plopped themselves down into a sort of topography of thoughts. I’ve done this since the late 80s. I have books and books of interesting words that I sometimes refer to when I struggle to title works or exhibitions – words and images together. Like many of those artists who said little about their intentions, the names of each work and the title of solo exhibitions are associational: clues for untangling what ideas might have generated them.

Words and the alphabet, chopped up and reconfigured to look like maps of actual places, are often the subject, or sometimes the content of my paintings. I like to think of my abstract images as studied signs of illegibility.

To appreciate more than the ‘look’ of a work one should observe the ‘behind the scenes’ of the works’ production but this is not often possible. We cannot witness ideation, experimentation, erasures, revisions, finessing and even rehearsals. The impetus for these resides in the intuitive – and, how can this be explained?

I often wonder whether having been born in the high peaks of the Central Apennine mountains in Italy, where to look down onto troughs and distant valleys – and in winter even clouds – influences my understanding of space in ways that even I can’t comprehend. Many of my paintings look like aerial views, something to fly over rather than view from solid ground. This has the effect of drawing a viewer closer to the work and then propelling them away, backwards to safer ground.

Italian cultural heritage inevitably guides my pictorial impulses, but my work’s content is not personal; it is not about my identity. Rather, artifices of language, displacement, misplacement, replacement plays out in what I make. Languages retain their own resonances recorded in memories, in histories, cultural taste preferences, dreams, ruined monuments and architecture, civilisations that speak to us through their buried, broken and sometimes retrieved artefacts – shards of past endeavours buried beneath layers of time. All of this lies buried beneath my seemingly cheery colours and razor sharp forms.

For Walter Benjamin digging becomes a synonym for self-discovery – a means for making art – where the detritus of the past underlies the construction of site of both modernity and memory. The images of the past ‘reside as treasures in the sober rooms of our later insights’.¹

While writing this essay a friend gave me two articles that I have just read. The first is about the rediscovery of the Linen Book of Zagreb, after an earthquake severely damaged the Museum of Zagreb. It was written in Etruscan letters and later torn into strips and used as bandages to wrap an Egyptian mummy. The text was partially decoded in 1891 but how it came to wrap an Egyptian mummy remains a mystery – centuries separate the two events. The other article is on the 57 ciphered letters written by Mary Queen of Scots during her 19-year imprisonment by her cousin Queen Elizabeth 1st between 1578 and 1584. Rediscovered in the archives of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris in 2018 codebreakers were able to decipher some of the very long and complex texts after years of trial and error and with the assistance of AI software programs.

These discoveries delight me. For me real life detective mysteries are so much more inspirational than fictive ones.

Unlike that body of work exhibited in 2019 under the title of *Fosse* (a Latin, French and Italian word) this time I’ve made linear configurations dominant. However, like

¹ From Benjamin “Goethe’s Elective Affinities”, cited by Mary Jacobus in *Cy Twombly. Making the Past Present* (MFA Boston 2020) p 102

most of my work over many years – in some way or another – the oscillation between form/shape and line creates a perceptual fluttering that tends to confound most viewers. Empty space can become shape and then, with the blinking of an eye, slip back into nothingness.

The frontality of these new works, the linearity that renders spatial readings paradoxical, the painted strokes that identify the hand, the finely tuned colour all contribute to ideas, emotions and implications embedded in their long gestation.

While references to culture, language, ground, space and fragmented archaeological artefacts are present in all my works I think it's safe to say that, unlike their predecessors that dug into the archaeology of the past, I prefer to consider these works as an 'inverted archaeology' – imagined debris mapped for future archaeologists to tunnel into and speculate on the dystrophic 'now'.

If you look into and between the lines in my works, through the colours, inside and outside of bordering edges you will find what I have placed there. I leave the rest to you.

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