

Unpopular Mechanics

Alyssa Beckwith
Reece King
Kenneth Merrick
Kirsten Roberts
Emma Smith
Tira Walsh

Exhibition Dates:
5th – 26th September
2024

Toi O
Waikato

Gallery hours: Mon – Fri, 9.30am – 4.30pm
Email: gallery@unitec.ac.nz
Building B108, Unitec, Carrington Rd,
Mt Albert, Auckland.
Unitec | Te Pūkenga

Unpopular Mechanics

Visually at least, we pluck our way through this life in a seamless, obsessive sort of way. We intercept images, and images pollute or pollinate in our algorithms, cross our commute paths, pipe out of our half willing subscriptions, and this is all plainly understood. What is more interesting is the way we recalibrate, reprioritise, calculate and articulate the residue of these disturbing, inconstant tides. With the collection of works here it's the way that the painters chart it, dodge it, soak it up and carp from the sidelines, that is especially interesting to me.

Protests about the efficacy of painting as a contemporary medium are as fatiguing as over-compensations that lean heavily on other fields to engender validity or ascribe intellectual vitality. The buoyancy is anyway present, albeit amorphously so. Painting is an inherently deeply thoughtful practice, and the things that one can understand from it exist in internal realms and highly intangible ways.

This makes it hard to talk about with concrete assuredness, and accounts for a natural desire to see connections with views of the world through the lens of other disciplines. There are of course wonderful connections, important ones. They are perceptual, experiential, collective, and they locate us in time and place, so important in this atlas of horror; atomisation, dispossession, bigotry, and cultural trauma.

In most fields though, things get really interesting when we look at the conterminous extents of what we know. At the edge of the unknowable, a degree of terror and possibly the ability to see the whole thing anew exists. I'm intrigued by how we make decisions, respond, react in this or that way to accumulated experiences and cultural echolocation. I can, as you can, Rolodex this and that experience or exposure, that led to this predilection or appetite, this way of thinking. In doing this we draw cultural insight individually and collectively. We can drill down into these factors as deeply as we feel to be sincere estimations of their presence and meaning, and after that point, we simply step into uncharted gloaming. We are tethered to a tangible position but there, we float in a bloom, where accepted positions or 'real enough' assumptions become restless, transmutable notions, flimsy stand-ins for certainty.

I like to watch this line cast off— from things that seem on terra firma—until mid-cast they change states, solid to gas, the detached light of a dead star, out there, thousands of years old. This is what I think painting does for the painter and I hope the audience too, it offers ever shifting forms for us to see, wriggling and partial. If painting needs to legitimize itself by relying on its connection to the world of things, and the things we think about it, then I hope it's at the edge of those methods where the expertise of the structures fall to wonder.

Our lives are populated with varying degrees of individual and collective assuredness, hope, estrangement, grave uncertainty, and doubt. Uncertainty can be quite tangible, intangibility can be uncertain. They are not the same.

Culturally, cerebrally, we do ourselves a disservice if we need to shy away from the unknowable. Sometimes coincidence, disposition, predilection and the markedly strange, cluster in an assaulting or crystalline manner, and this reveals a kind of insight that seems profoundly meta, beyond the confines of our regular lives. Sometimes this involves a painting. Maybe it's possible to say that paintings prepare us for the possibility of a momentary reshuffling of demarcations at an atomic level. Their speed, slower than glacial, their forms quite loosened from context, their hues pulling us to implausible associations, these things and more, operating outside of whatever nominated intent existed in its production.

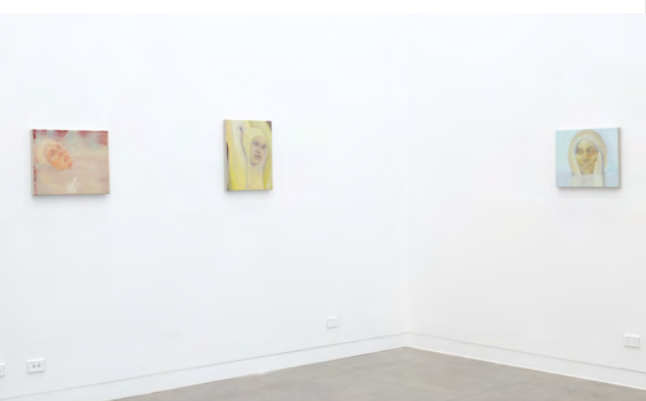
Paintings can be widely viewed or hardly seen at all, they operate with the same strange shadow drawn over the attempt, irrespective of their place on a wall, in a book, on a coffin. Willing people have these strange experiences with paintings and I'm not convinced it's necessarily connected to the intended meaning, context, or form, at least not as directly as we tend to assign these attributes.

The field and the way we consume or experience it—the format—offers a situation where we practice looking, attuned to the possibility of finding something we've never

Kirsten Roberts
Lemon Loop, Baby, 2024



Kirsten Roberts
Loveliness like a shadow, 2024



Reece King
15 drawings, 2024



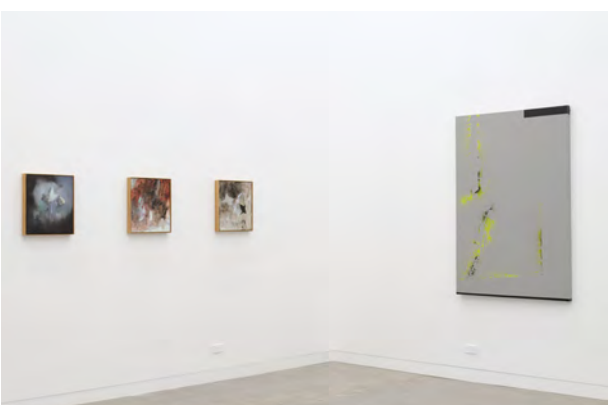
Emma Smith
Embankment, 2024



Tira Walsh (Ngāi Wairere, Ngāi Hauā, Tainui)
Stuffer, 2024



Tira Walsh (Ngāi Wairere, Ngāi Hauā, Tainui)
Vertigo, 2024



Emma Smith
Bark bill, 2024





Kenneth Merrick (Ngati Wai)
Parallax, 2024



Alyssa Beckwith
Untitled, 2024



Alyssa Beckwith
Untitled, 2024

seen before. Most of the time we are satisfied to drift alongside some technical facility, cute moves, check prevailing winds, have some things confirmed and if we're lucky, see some history as we go. These "most of the time" experiences are sustaining to be sure, but that strange shadow that troubles the surface of a certain work, as it oscillates in unsure form, sensing *that* is what the practising is for.

The shadow is a kind unpopular mechanical feature of really good painting. I suspect it is formed out of what is not said in a work, a gaping silence that glares alien and tacit, familiar and remote. You've never seen it, but now it's there you recognise it as always known, haunting you at a molecular level. The visual output is implacably still, it is pockmarked with its own evolution formally, conceptually, and countless readings that follow, but still the mechanism flutters inconstant, so it can't be named. Your course is only to accept its presence (or not), and acclimatise to observing something turn in on itself, over and over.

The practice of reconciling the practical with the unknowable may be a marker of wisdom or expertise, or perhaps just a trained disregard of assumptions. Interestingly, it looks like something that cannot be meaningfully autogenerated, and this is no small consideration given the immediate promise of truncation to pictorial invention posed by the technology.

A significant tranche of mid to late 20th and early 21st Century painting has revealed candour and frailty in the constructed image, through an emphasis on the bones of form and process. This has resulted in a wide acceptance of the partial, rudimentary and nominally signalled, as a kind of salve to the emphatic goading (and ultimate diminishment) of the primacy of universality. It has meant a degree of tender reverence for the drawn, an appetite for laying bare the procedural sequence, and a kind of frankness that reveals uncertainty as a wobbly constant.

In Beckwith's practice the stained surface subsumes the basic integers of construction, the image is lightly held, porous and ruinous. We see hurried, violent, partial flickers of representation, but there is a kind of elegance too, a lightness of gesture, accomplished handling of snatched figurative elements. There is a Vesuvian blanket of ash-drag to the field, the smell of sinking soil and sodden bogs of colour. The abstraction is monstrous, as it sometimes can be, too heavy to be fluid, too light to be bound to gravity. We're left with a queasy distrust of the solidity of fabrication.

Merrick's work shares this enthusiasm for the drawn. It is scrubbed and coloured and covered and pulled back over the top in a mad worry of mismatched parts and impossibly vague instructions. It is the sponge at the base of a leaking tap, soaking up overflow, a kind of lightly ineffectual trap for the tides of visual material in our way, coupled with a frenzied enthusiasm for almost everything. There is a kind of happy mania in play, a radical openness to experience—*What is it like to be in a cult? To work in a stationers? To be an alien acting accordingly? To be a shiny arse cheap suit bureaucrat ? To be ancient and troubled?* And in all this effusive spirit there is the unsettling undertone, if shucked open, known through a quick fossick, this material glut could shapeshift right in front of you, and it might reveal some kind of pattern or purpose you are entirely unprepared for.

King's work exhibits an unapologetic delight in the dissection of the physical world through drawing, and laying out plainly the procedural staging of image making. We can tell the way it is made, and it is frankly put. The assuredness is commanding, and King is riding goofy at the same time. He makes forms that fly low, flop on couches and sigh heavily in team building meetings. They are approximations, schematic notions of things with an ambiguity of finish, caused by disregard or certainty (this is unclear). In their bareness though, they exhibit a reverence for something contradictorily iconographic and proto universal. The ambition and collision is comical and filled with pathos—it's a bit like not being able to walk when you're on acid- kind of alarming, very funny, and mostly your fault.

In distinct contrast to this tender frankness, another significant painting discourse of the same period focusses instead on concealment. Elaborate subterfuge, the hermetically sealed, illusion, and a disjuncture between the appearance of and the

experience of the thing, are repurposed in an epigonic mimicry. And, in a world of so much falsehood, manufactured finish, spin and fall, why not reject the insult of authenticity (whose anyway?), and hide instead in plain sight. For here existential questions with pictorial consequences like *can we apprehend something utterly remote to our experiences?* are bit rotted down to *do or did you suffer from eye brow blindness?*

Roberts’ work operates in this stealth mode. The works parade competitors in some indefatigable nameless quest for excellence, betterment, perfection. Aberrantly ageless boxers, swimmers, wrestlers, alien day spa goers, cling with unnerving placidness to this unknown monumental calling. They are suspended in the reticulation chamber of some dystopian dynasty, where health and service, singularity of purpose, and the reverence of work coalesce in a quiet deadening of the spirit. There is no pain, nor is there much gain. The figures loop around and around the arena, pool, room, unable to reach the sides, the exit, and us—we watch, lightly chilled. The paintwork is masterful, lush, saturated and peaky and it’s a seductive counterweight to the disquiet that lurks in the water with them.

Walsh’s work is deftly agitating beneath the surface, behind the scenes. Decisive dispatches are forcefully measured out on changing playing fields. Odds are reckoned, fates are sealed, double or quits, long game, quick solves, slow burns, last calls, all compressed into these precise, guarded moves. The surface is stained, a light scrape to the bodywork, from some old encounter. This is sealed in by staged stings. Darkness closes in about the field, and high colour spews forth jarring like a sudden brake light, like a blinking fluoro in a late-night car park. Lines makes forms like tyres screech on the polished concrete of underground supermarket carparks. There is a lot of waiting besides, drawn out days, and a heavy sense that the run of memory cuts the sentence short.

(and the silence holds.)

Years ago, I lived in a downstairs flat with wide windows that let the night right into the room. There were white datura flowers with pink throats on the fence line. They hummed at dusk. For a long time I tried to paint them as they seemed utterly their own thing. The blooms became sails, became tents, ripped tarps, ropes whipping, planes noses, thick smoke, drones, white flags, stadium lights, search lights, anxious lanterns, distant fires, phosphorescence from below. These shapes still resist a final form and so too do the conditions about them. They are in scorched fields, floating in the dead air of space and falling in fiery plumes. I have always loved to chase down mutable forces, so too I think, do each of these artists.

Emma Smith

Unpopular Mechanics
2024

Thanks to the contributing artists, to Toi o Wairaka Committee, Gina Ferguson (gallery curator) and Hohepa Renata (Kaihautū Creative Industries), Jonty Valentine (publication design), technical team Danny Rowlandson, Karen Crisp, and Michael Craven, and Richard Fahey, William Bardebes and Karen Crisp for editorial advice, also Peeti Lamwilai (Academic Programme Manager) and Vanessa Byrnes (Head of School).

Copyright: Toi o Wairaka
Unitec | Te Pūkenga
Auckland, New Zealand

Tag us on Instagram
[@unitec_dca](#)
[@unitec_creative](#)

