

OSCAR PERRY

STORY LAURA COUTTIE



When we visited Oscar Perry at his studio in a large warehouse complex in Brunswick, he was working on a new series of paintings to show at the Melbourne Art Fair in August. The studio itself is in a state of productive chaos, with unfinished paintings stacked against the walls and paint paraphernalia spread around. Oscar tells me that ‘people are shocked when they come into the studio, like it’s a crime scene or an episode of Hoarders’. Our conversation is rather like his creative process: long, meandering, a bit messy and full of tangents, obscure facts, and interesting stories.

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OSCAR, YOU TRAINED AS A PAINTER, AND FORMALLY your paintings seem to stem from a modernist, abstract expressionist lineage. What is your relationship to the traditions of modernist painting?

Yeah, that stuff shaped me as kid. I remember being obsessed with this Royal Academy [of Arts] catalogue for a show ‘A new spirit in painting’ from 1981. It made a big impression on me. But I think it can be hard to carve out your own space in painting. That’s why early on I approached the paintings as backdrops or decoys – like they were stand-ins for paintings.

What do you think makes a good painting?

I like paintings that you can’t get a hold of. I’ve got a few Kate Smith and Jake Walker and Vivienne Binns paintings at home, and you can look at them for years and years. I look at them every morning when I’m having a cup of tea. That’s a nice thing to try and fight for, but you never know when that’s going to be the case. A painting can die on you six months after you thought it was the best thing you’d ever done. I think the best painting occurs when your ego is removed and you’re on autopilot. The less you’re involved with them, the better.

You sometimes incorporate unusual or found objects into your paintings. Can you discuss your use of materials and how they shape your process?

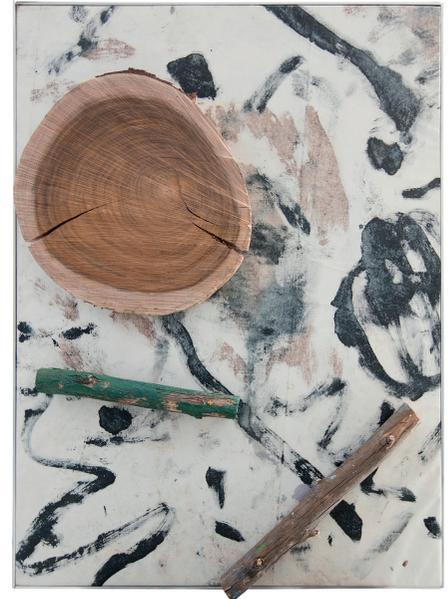
I guess materially it’s all about different approaches. I gravitate towards materials that can keep me guessing. I like the studio to be chaotic – it keeps you unsteady, or keeps your painting unpredictable. I think you quickly fall back into stuff you know. I don’t hone in on a kind of precision of painting, and so they’re all just tactics to try to keep painting fresh. I’ve been painting a lot with beeswax, which you heat up with pigment in electric frying pans. It’s really beautiful stuff to use. It became a nice way to have a more defensive painting style because I was going





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02 'The Natural', 2017, installation view, Fontanelle Gallery, Adelaide, photograph Grant Hancock

03 *The real Marlborough man is Chinese*, 2017, acrylic and timber on cotton, framed, 61.5 x 45.5 x 6 cm

04 *The Texas fast shooter fallacy! Velvet hush puppies*, 2017, oil on board, framed, 162 x 182 x 4.5 cm, Artbank Collection

through thousands of dollars of paint all the time, just squeezing it on and making stupid paintings. With the beeswax you can heat it up and make a gesture and it dries straight away, almost like acrylic paint but with the thickness and vibrancy of oil paint.

How long does it take you to make a painting?

It's all over the shop. I can have a really productive two or three days and make a painting. But I don't usually trust a painting until about three months down the track. Usually they're made in a series of sessions. I'll work and save up money and buy myself six weeks in the studio, and really paint and get into that rhythm where you're match fit and you're ready to come in and paint. You do need to put time aside and actually keep it going. Forgetting how to paint happens very quickly.

Your practice expands beyond painting, often including sculptures and installations. What motivated you to branch out from painting, and how do these different art forms sit together in your practice?

I think I just needed a bigger world. I had lots of ideas and they didn't necessarily translate to paintings on the wall. The sculptures started as props but over time have become closer to the paintings. The installations satisfy a different part of the process. They are less about art and more about atmosphere. They operate as stages or floats.

The installations you create often resemble film sets of everyday environments – like a living room, garage, pub or club – spaces people can comfortably spend time in.

I've always hated the coldness and class system of art. I've got so many friends that won't go into galleries and won't engage with art. But then you'd go to the cinema with them and they come out and have an opinion on everything they've seen. I hate that art sits outside music and cinema like that. For me the installations are a chance to control a space and shift what the idea of these spaces could be.



Your works involve an unusual combination of narratives, including personal references, popular culture, art history and obscure cultural histories. What stories are you drawn to, and how do these narratives inform your work?

I've always situated my paintings within narrative or semi-performative frameworks. It gives me a chance to load all these accumulated fictions and histories into the show. I'm interested in unfocused revisionist history. I find an interesting character, conspiracy or artwork and basically take it to the end of the road. I make a lot of maps and drawings, which I then use to try and generate a body of work. Recently I've been writing a lot more, and I feel like I road test a lot of my ideas through writing before they make it into the studio. Here's a poem I wrote recently:

LIST

- 1 x Twenty-foot pole for touching people you wouldn't touch with a ten-foot pole*
- 1 x Ticket to The College of Chiropractors Annual Pillow Fight*
- 1 x Scented Dented Thermos full of Scarecrow tears*
- 1 x Margaret Thatcher/Reagan water feature (missing pump)*
- 1 x Collection of con man's final moments*
- 1 x Non fatal car crash on a sleepy country road*
- 1 x Handful of Horse vitamins*
- 1 x Lookalike Garlie Naan (Sean Penn)*
- 1 x Upside down lighthouse for submarines*

Language seems to be integral to your practice. You often use word play, such as puns and spoonerisms, in the titles of your works and exhibitions. How do the titles engage with the work itself?

I loved making titles for the paintings initially. It would become this nice ritual leading up to the opening of an exhibition where I would sit down with all the works and make these elaborate titles. And after that, maybe the stories of the exhibitions start to emerge. But for me it was a kind of ritual thing, to make the footing a bit unsteady, to affect how you approach looking at a painting.

Who or what is inspiring you right now?

I've been reading a lot of poetry. Some of my favourites are Jacques Dupin, Thom Gunn, Seamus Heaney, Hannah Sullivan, Mary Oliver, Simon Armitage, Ben Lerner, Sam Shepard, John Ashbery, Frank Bidart, Charles Simic, Michael Robbins, Wislawa Szymborska, e. e. cummings, Doris Lessing, Hera Lindsay Bird, Liam Ferney and Mark Strand ... Reading poetry, listening to friends' bands and watching the World Cup. ■

📷 @oscarfperry

05 'The Michelin Star', 2018, installation view, The Commercial, Sydney, photograph Sofia Freeman/The Commercial

Courtesy the artist and The Commercial, Sydney