

## nigel milsom

Nigel Milsom describes Kasimir Malevich's *Black square* c1915 as a screen of dark and light correspondence, similar to a cinematic space where the viewer is entranced by its inherent qualities.<sup>1</sup> Malevich's painting encourages us to invest meaningful significance in a black square on a white canvas. Considered *absolute* abstraction or ground zero, for Malevich the square equalled feeling and the white field around it an infinite void. Along with the work of other historical European painters, the graphic relationships and formal reduction of Malevich's painting, more than its cosmic ideology, are reference points for Milsom. He sees the void as a space for exploration and employs a similarly austere palette from which to conceptualise reality.

By creating large bodies of work where meaning is amassed in the unfolding of each canvas with the next, Milsom has sought to describe the nature of painting and its subjective effects: form and space and the slippage between illusionism and abstraction. In the *Choir* series of 2006, for example, a woman's open-mouthed expression changes by variations in angle and perspective across a series of similarly sized canvases. Approximating Malevich's adaptations on the square in space, Milsom's obvious shifts in the woman's spatial location translate into changes of perception. Consequently, in the varying perspectives and flashing contrasts of light's effects, each canvas deftly expresses a different mood despite depicting ostensibly the same image.

Milsom has employed a similar approach in his recent work *Untitled judo house part 2* 2008–09. In this series two judo wrestlers function as a metaphor for the collaboration between Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque in 1909, a collaboration about which one of the artists was apparently quoted as saying: 'We were like two mountain climbers roped together.'<sup>2</sup> The intensity of shared experience, along with their struggle to forge a new way of painting, is powerfully thematicised by Milsom's casting of the artists' wrestling. Here, Milsom treats light and space together, with the artists' faces rendered from multiple viewpoints and with planes of space and form intersecting, characteristic of the cubist era.

These bodies of work demonstrate Milsom's deep understanding of art history and his fascination with conceptual representations of reality: by studying the past he strives to generate new ways of approaching the painted surface in the present.<sup>3</sup> His work could be described as being located at the middle point between Édouard Manet's realism and Malevich's abstraction; connecting the former's naturalism and flatness and the latter's radical 'non-objectivity' and infinite space. The unpredictable emotions of seeing 'things' differently in the world lies at the heart of modernism – which was experimental and freed artists from the conventions of realism and traditional concepts of genre and form – so it is not surprising that Milsom's journey begins with Manet. Stating that his work is about 'abstracted narrative', Milsom tussles with these opposing dimensions and with how to represent 'things' poetically, even subjectively, in paint.



But it is not always about art history for Milsom. Developed from a video piece produced in 2007, his most recent body of work – *Untitled judo house part 3 (bird as prophet)* 2009–10 – is named after 19th-century German composer Robert Schumann's Romantic piano piece *The prophet bird*, from *Waldszenen (forest scenes) Op 82* (1848–49). The melody describes a bird in flight and its choral sections allude to the spirituality suggested in the work's title.<sup>4</sup>

American singer/songwriter Bill Callahan's 2009 album *Sometimes I wish we were an eagle* inspired Milsom too; exquisite in its moody combination of lyrics and music, the overall ambivalence of the album is akin to a journey through the emotional equivocation of light and dark. Both Schumann and Callahan are deeply romantic, they use the symbolism of birds to tell stories, they create imagery with music, and their compositions have a melancholy atmosphere.

The suite of paintings in *Untitled judo house part 3* evokes related sentiments and extends the figurative struggle articulated in *Untitled judo house part 2*. Milsom draws on the symbolism of the peregrine falcon and the dove, the imagery of which in both art and literature stretches back to pre-Christian times. The falcon, a bird of prey and a mythological symbol of power and speed, is often bestowed with visionary abilities. A dove is a sign of love and innocence; in the Old Testament a dove returns to the ark after the flood with an olive leaf for Noah as a sign the waters have subsided, and in the New Testament Jesus is touched by the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove. The different historical, cultural and spiritual meanings of the falcon and the dove (as hunter and prey) produce a metaphorical argument that Milsom translates into paint. Like Schumann and Callahan, Milsom draws on the bird's distinctive qualities, its ability to fly and make meaning and to evoke subjective qualities. As he says: 'I see birds as animals that represent lightness, darkness, love and hate – moving objects that float through space with autonomy: an image of consciousness.'<sup>5</sup>

Milsom's paintings are not literal. On a flat black ground his bird-like forms shimmer in various states of abstraction and movement – like flashes of feathers or the furious flickering of wings in the dark of night. From canvas to canvas, hung salon-style, white paint pulses forward and recedes, gathering momentum, urging closer to abstraction only to return in the next canvas to a semblance of reality. In the central canvases the distinction between dove and falcon implodes – black and white fragments of brushwork vie for equal attention. Like Callahan's emotional equivocation, the meaning of real and imaginary ambivalence is expressed in terms of contrast, which partly explains why Milsom paints with a stark palette and minimal tint given that colour is too closely allied with illusionism. We see this in the cubist faces of his judo wrestlers and in the shining features of a bird offset against a dark compressed background. It is there that the unexpected emotions that are possible from seeing things in the world differently take hold – flying, soaring, from the viewpoint of the skies – in the depths of Milsom's paintings. NATASHA BULLOCK

1. Nigel Milsom, in conversation and correspondence with the author, 14 Dec and 25 Dec 2009

2. H H Arnason, *A history of modern art* (3rd edn), Thames & Hudson, London, 1988, p 152

3. Nigel Milsom, email correspondence with the author, 24 Dec 2009

4. Wing Ling Cherry Li, *Narrative and representation in Robert Schumann's Waldszenen Op 82*, unpublished PhD thesis, 2009, circle.ubc.ca/handle/2429/11994 (accessed 24 Dec 2009)

5. Nigel Milsom, 24 Dec 2009

*Untitled judo house part 3*  
*(bird as prophet) 2009*  
oil on canvas  
193 x 150 cm









*Untitled judo house part 3*  
*(bird as prophet) 2009*  
oil on canvas  
100 x 90 cm

opposite:  
*Untitled judo house part 3*  
*(bird as prophet) 2009*  
oil on canvas  
180 x 120 cm



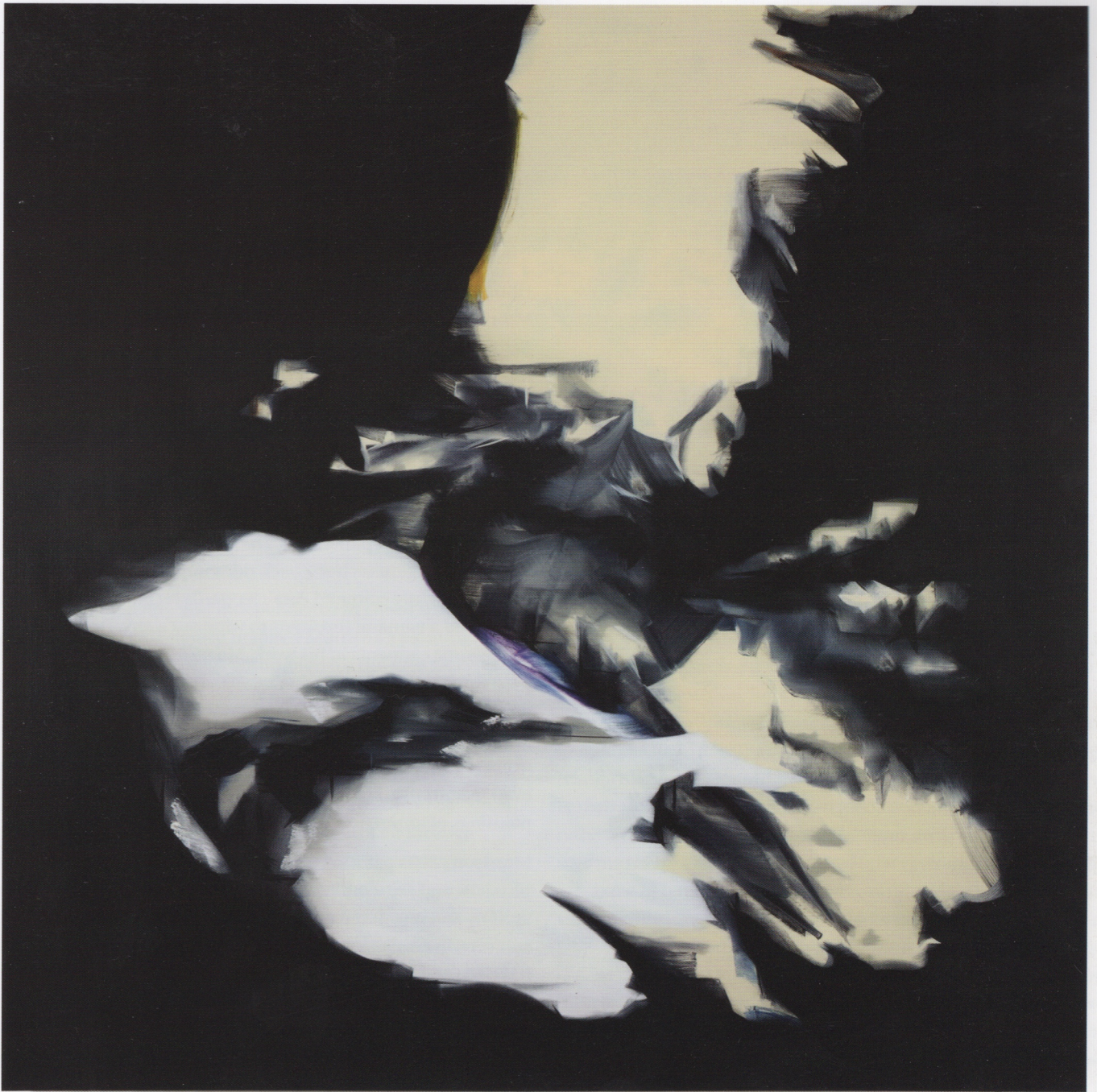






*Untitled judo house part 3  
(bird as prophet) 2009  
oil on canvas  
106 x 137 cm*





*Untitled judo house part 3  
(bird as prophet) 2009  
oil on canvas  
160 x 160 cm*