

ELISABETH CUMMINGS

Sometimes a short story is given a lesser stature than a novel, despite the fact that it is replete. The magnitude of execution has always been rewarded by history: a vast mural sustained, a mountain traversed, the epic.

And yet, in painting, scale is deceptive and mutable. A small work can have such heft and a major painting, lightly executed can intone a minor key. Works hung in a gallery invite this sense of graduating sequence; the many smaller studied and concentrated preludes building to the centrepiece. It's not unlike entering a famous church; we scurry past the Stations of the Cross when rushing to the altar.

Elisabeth Cummings slows the pace. Her smaller paintings submerge the eye in dense composition and rich assured colour, they function completely as individual entities but also contribute to the frenetic whole. Above all they beckon concentration, packed with pigment, playful erratic line and a highly intimate sense of interior logic that has been honed over decades. Some of these works *allow* a literal or associative reading. We spot a bottle or a tilting table or some convex bulging mountain bluff and perhaps superficially these commonplaces resemble a scene. But this artist is not after scenery. She left the figurative a long time ago. Her new paintings slice between the extremes of grand landscapes, confined interiors and the scratchy agitation of thin bush shrubbery and they also bear reductive titles but their range of association is nebulous. Expansive. Broad. Bleeding out of domestic life rather than draining back into it.

Mastering her materials, these are not kitchens or forests that fell into an abstract painting but perhaps the reverse. There is room for the spontaneous and the familiar because she has such a strong grasp on both. Elisabeth Cummings has been referencing the same cycles of terrains for many years: favourite places in the Kimberlies

and Central Desert, pockets of light within her studio and living space, glimpses and shards of the trees outside her window at dusk or in moonlight. A sense of place is always humming beneath the skin, yet she is the first to state her work is actually anti-phenomena. Her gathering process is well documented as physical; Travelling, drawing, sleeping inside the landscape and simply sitting with it. Yet in its completion, her painting practice rebounds to the conceptual. The “not knowing” of the studio. The rigorous rebound to an unfinished canvas over time. And, most often, the service of fugitive colour rather than obedient form.

Bonnard once said “the main subject is the surface” and that colour has its own laws “over and above the objects”. It’s not a lazy assumption to link this idea to the haptic poetic and capable fluidity that jack knifes within Cummings work. Her skill in summoning a physical thing or completely deflating it, often within the same picture plane, dances with our perception. Like Bonnard, her paint application and graduations of intensity and line fluctuate. She can work and furrow and glaze and gauge or lightly trace with the sheerest skim of paint and hue. And she loves specific places but she slides elusively from one to the next.

Just as colour is its own subject, it is also a subtle geographic signpost. I could swiftly find the difference between a desert floor and a creek bed in these works and I think we are meant to. Her titles carve a rough spike in the ground but her palette reveals the subtle shifts and stubborn allegiances. However vivid and French these walls and tables, her primary palette homes back to the green half-light of the Antipodes. The colour is the map.

And because the works move so rapidly between tropes: abstraction, interior, landscape, vista, still life, the best way to gain some bearing is through their spectrum. Here is an idiosyncratic sensibility that deals in extremes: from a frosty monochrome to a lusty yellow. Yet all of it is shot

through with light, a consistent luminous glow that generates craving and repose. Cummings takes such pleasure in her surfaces. This is work so tactile it makes you forget the raw canvas, even if it is the underpinning of suffused light that unites so many knots and arguments.

And, momentarily, you might also stall before apprehending the major work, a large abstract landscape distinguished by a monochrome furrow of trees. This painting, hushed beneath a glaze that looks like nightfall, is properly vast, a large major presence evoking an even larger vista. And yet, of course, it is not at all the finale. The imagination at work is too restless, curious, perpetually rambling for that. And in complicity we ferret back to the smaller works, retracing our steps and maybe the artists own. There is so much adventure in the details she tends to, such animation in the uneven ground and the shifting light.

The balance between rapid drawings and sugared pigment or delicate passages and stabbing jagged lines builds the whole. The mark of a mature artist is that nothing they make feels inevitable. Bright and pale, big and small can all trade places. How good to know, there is no rush to get to the top of the hill.

Anna Johnson

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