

International Velvet

Amongst Julian Dashper's early works there is a small body of paintings on velvet. Apart from their lush and evocatively kitsch grounds and the particular way thick paint and crayon sits on their surfaces, they are similar in style to his other paintings of the time, which consisted of seemingly random smears, patches and asymmetric lines of thick and brightly hued pigment, trowelled or squeezed onto unsized canvas or paper. These are often thought of as Dashper's neo-expressive phase, a supposedly undigested take on the new painting that was finding favour in art centres like New York, Milan, Cologne and London in the 1980s, channelled through his exposure at art school to the likes of Philip Clairmont and Alberto Garcia-Alvarez, and preceding the pared-back conceptual approach that came later. They were the works that got him noticed, along with his fellow classmate at Elam, John Reynolds, as an artist of the moment, and which saw him quickly taken up by top-end dealers (Peter McLeavey in Wellington, then Sue Crockford in Auckland and Judith Gifford in Christchurch).

I'm not sure these works were ever unselfconsciously expressive or naive in their borrowings, or that they are, in anything other than appearance, different from what comes later. To me they are true to what Dashper always delivered: on the one hand, a considered meditation on the nature of painting, and, on the other, a mode of story-telling, about where he was at any particular moment.

Of the velvet paintings, my personal favourite is *Purple Rain at Glorit* (No 3, March 1986, Collection of Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa), which Luit Bieringa purchased from Peter McLeavey for the National Art Gallery and included in *Content/Context*, the large-scale survey exhibition he organised and presented between September 1986 and February 1987. To me this one painting summarises an era—the late 1980s—and a place—Auckland—better than any other I can think of. I can say this without misgivings as I was there; it was my time as much as Julian's.

Imagine a road trip out of the city circa 1986. Take the route out north and west, past Helensville on the back road that skirts its way around the Kaipara Harbour and climbs through hilly farmland to meet State Highway One at Wellsford. That's where you'll find *Glorit*, or at least the country hall that sports that name. Pull over on the gravel beside the hall, turn the stereo up and listen to Prince's signature tune, from his chart-topping album (remember he was huge then, like those other American superstars, Springsteen, Madonna, and Michael Jackson). Listen to the music build as the dust settles and the landscape rolls out around you. It is big-sky country around there, with a scale and openness that is breathtaking. McCahon knew and loved the place, and you can see in his Kaipara drawings (like the *A Poem of Kaipara Flat* series of 1971) an almost profligate abandonment of good taste for some of the most vibrant and high key paintings he ever made: blues, pinks and oranges capture this airy brightness, only approximating the drop-dead colours the sky actually turns to as the sun sets on that westerly horizon. Of course this is before the road was tarsealed all the way through, and Alan Gibbs had not turned a failing dairy farm into his private sculpture park. Julian would have known the road well as it offered an alternate route from Grey Lynn to visit his parents who lived just out of Warkworth. I used to drive it to escape for weekends north of Auckland and avoid the bottlenecks.

Of course this is not what the painting shows, or at least not in any obvious sense. Sure, you could link the lushness of the music and Prince's flamboyant costumes to the plush purple ground and the brilliant colours on top of it. You might even feel how that odd word 'glorit' rolls around in your mouth and imagine it serving as an adjective for what the paint looks like. For me, though it works better if you treat the title and the work as two separate but contingent elements; or even further, as two inadequate sign systems that point outside themselves towards each other and to the motifs they hopelessly stand in for, using your own experience as the medium in which to enrich their approximations.

Taking the long view, the painting now not only reminds me of a period in my life, but also models our thinking at the time, which was obsessed with the nature of representation and angst-ridden over the failures of language to deliver truth or meaning. Not only does the work take me somewhere quite specific—to an actual geographical location and to that time when we listened to songs like 'Purple Rain'—it also reminds me of our sober realisation of what Hal Foster called the 'expressive fallacy'; delivering me, that is, to the intellectual ferment of postmodernism as it unfolded here in the 1980s.

To dismiss Dashper's 1980s' works either as unreconstructed revivals of macho painting or as Schnabel wannabes is to miss their point completely. These are honourable responses to their moment which seek to channel a myriad influences—mainstream American culture, local art history—through the lens of individual circumstance. I see Dashper's 'velvet period' like Prince's reincarnation of Jimi Hendrix. Neither is 'true' to their original, nor are they trying to be; instead they embellish their sources to make music (Prince's legendary Minneapolis sound) and pictures (Julian's abstractions of Auckland) with the rich irreverence of an off-kilter but thoroughly embedded perspective.

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