

RACHEL BUSBY & DAVID WEBB ON FORM

Of experience, Victorian aesthete Walter Pater tells us:

'all that is actual in it being a single moment, gone while we try to apprehend it, of which it may ever be more truly said that it has ceased to be than that it is. To such a tremulous wisp constantly re-forming itself on the stream, to a single sharp impression, with a sense in it, a relic more or less fleeting, of such moments gone by, what is real in our life fines itself down.'

It is the experience of Rachel Busby and David Webb's paintings that I want to dwell on here, to fix them in words. But words, like impressions, swarm around paintings. They throng, surging together towards a particular motif before veering off. Half of them become distracted by this or that swirling gesture – as vertiginous as its own thought process – while the other half flock towards that strange form over there, the one that looks a bit like a truncated neckline, awkwardly elongated and suddenly cut short, or is it the close embrace of two stiff mechanical structures? Words and impressions proliferate and come to rest only with difficulty, since coming to

rest feels too definitive. Especially when those pictures, like Busby's and Webb's, are evasive. They're soothing but there's always a disquieting twist like Webb's star that presses rather too luminously out of the black, or Busby's faceless figures that are really nothing more than an extended smudge. They are quietly disconcerting and their meaning, their significance, is not easily wrestled from them. Nor should it be. Rather than find meaning in them perhaps instead we might spend time with them, writing them in words.

Busby's forms are swirling, not baroquely but uncertainly. They're bleak, murky. They push around the canvas, over and over again, at pains to make themselves known. But at the same time their movement is agile and sweeping: a path traced thickly, leading nowhere in particular and as it changes direction the splaying of the brush is palpable; or the row of circular shapes that still retain the trail of bristles turned deftly in on themselves marked by striations of grey on grey tones. Sometimes it's clear what they are, or what they were, or what they are becoming: an ark, a blue vase, a figure, a tent, a frame. But very often nothing is clear except the rhythmical repetition of contact between paint and canvas: wiping, smearing, streaking, rubbing. A skin of paint, eroding the form that lies in there somewhere, below the surface 'constantly reforming itself on the stream'.

Webb's forms are forthright and assured, something like 'a relic, more or less fleeting'. They're often stripped back, making way for a variety of textures and consistencies to break the surface; colours too. The simplicity of his colour is stabilising even when it's not entirely clear what forms are being described. We know colour or we can know it, we feel safe in its embrace. Colours are layered, translucent atop a firmer ground. But they're also quarantined, kept apart by a steady line, quietly fuzzed at the edges; the relationships to their neighbours paramount. Sections are delineated, partitioned or superimposed. Formed. Though we sense his organising overtures Webb doesn't impose a wholly controlled, ascetic order. Sometimes he lets rip a riot of shonky handmade forms as in *Suez (Sun)*, whilst at others, like his *Parcheesi* series, there is a framework in which colours, shapes and textures are contained (*Parcheesi (Black)*), though even here they sometimes boil over (*Parcheesi (Arrow)*).

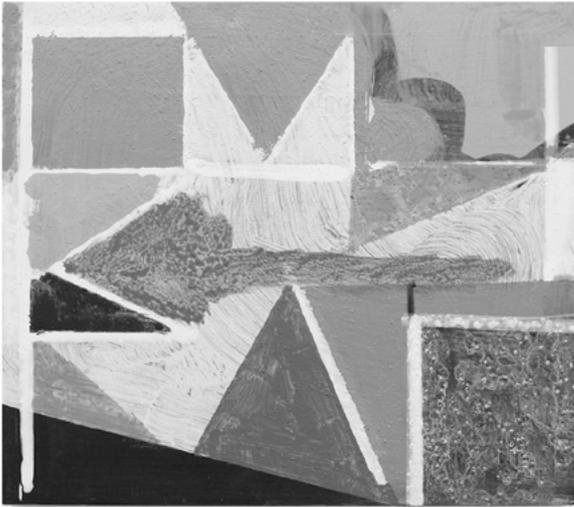
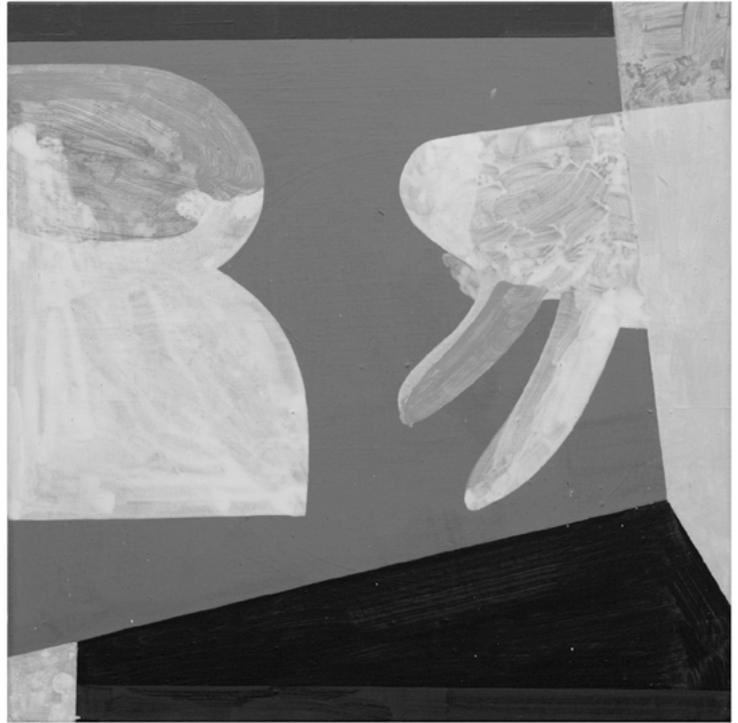
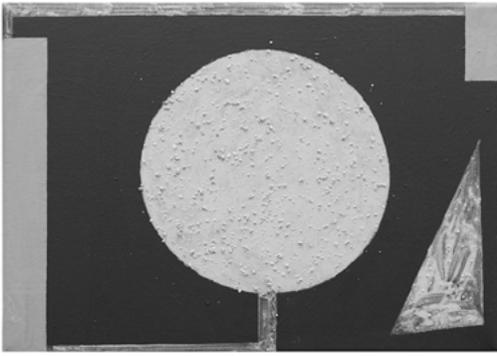
Is this the 'seminal argument between forms' of which, novelist, Ali Smith speaks? Are we watching 'form encountering form'? Is it the

'kick of life force, something growing out of nothing, forming itself out of something else'? Think of Webb's bold red triangle thrust across the canvas setting off a wrangle of primary coloured scribbles and lumps, of geometric or semi-geometric shapes overlaid and coloured in. Or his patchwork — better behaved this time — of grey, black, yellow, white and blue triangles slotted into rectangles that divide up the canvas rhythmically. Webb's 'kick of life force' sees a red dog on a teal background, a purple cartoon cloud of a mountain, a pocked lemon yellow star (that looks like a moon) pressing out from smooth flat black. These highly charged colour and texture contrasts jump-start his compositions. They appear like superimpositions; forthright and hallucinatory. They're somehow precarious, on the brink, resembling faltering luminescent impulses.

Sometimes, when we pounce upon a motif we recognise or relate to — a sun, a rock a jetty, a horizon, a cloud — there's a sense that those motifs are never quite arrived at, a sense that they're not quite what we think they are: that rock lacks bulk, suspended as it is in mid-air; that sun too wan; that horizon too skewed. They're given little context, little to set the scene. But, whether by colours or shapes, textures or titles, suggestions of familiar places and objects emerge audaciously. It's important they're never quite there, only hinted at: the sultry blue of a lagoon, the bulging form of an armchair, the two pronged elephant tusks.

But where do we go with this? How do we pick our way through what Smith calls the 'divide between form and formlessness', between what is and what might be. How do we negotiate it, from the outside, or the periphery? Smith rightly points out that formlessness doesn't mean wordlessness. So then, forms don't mean words, and words don't mean forms and wordlessness doesn't mean formlessness... and here we are again. Busby's identifiable forms melt into a smudgy blur, sucked into a silent vortex of people, objects and places partially forgotten or remembered. In fact her paintings spiral into a sphere of wordfulness, from her extended titles — like *Silver Wheels* poured into next door's tent or *Sunday afternoon*, Anna described the film "Carrie" in such detail, I never had to watch it — we were learning to roller skate at the time — to the visceral detail of the stories she tells, behind the scenes.

Which brings us back to Busby's sombre whirlpooling. Colour strains to assert itself through dry swathes and smears of layers of paint applied and reapplied, chased



Clockwise from top left:

DW Star (2014)

DW Tourist Smoking Room (Gold) (2014)

RB Sunday Afternoon, Anna Described... (2014)

RB Every Day is a Different Day (I) (2014)

RB Sunday Radio (2014)

DW Parcheesi (Arrow) (2014)

round and round the canvas in the hope of catching something. Something. She probes that something unrelenting, rarely appearing satisfied; her canvases like scenes, dwelled on and returned to again and again. Because colour is intermittent when it's there, it sucks you in along with it. Streaks, swirls or scratches of sharp orange, yellow or blue penetrate the gloom. Colour's exhortation resounds, comfortingly around the grey vagaries from which they are called forth, as if grown naturally from these worked up areas, so worked up, they're dulled. Her already muted palette, further dirtied by over thinking, 'Grey through overworking', Busby calls it. In Busby, colour offers respite, a pause, a breath, some sense of light relief that the something of that something that she's been chasing around the canvas has been found. It is momentary however. For in an instant it's gone.

What about those greys though? Busby's grey? Maybe, poet, Robert Hass can help with that. If I said grey: the fug of one's mind turning the memory of a conversation, a place, a story, a time over and over in one's head? The greyness of Time. If I said the grey of a Welsh sky clogged by enveloping rain clouds? Or the dimpled grey of cheerless concrete breeze blocks? Whatever it is, it's stifling, swallowing up details in the telling and retelling. Only with difficulty can we distinguish one element from another. But some things just won't leave us alone: the prick of that blue vase, say.

There's a story behind it, that blue vase, but you don't need to know it. Here it tells its own. Sometimes it's blown up to take on the whole expanse of the canvas, at others it's set back, miniaturised and monumentalised by the excesses of the Howard Hodgkin-esque painted frame. Sometimes Busby's thick brush swoons around its contours in a single continuous swirling movement, at others its outline is slight, offered up more tentatively, with reservation. Phenomenologist and philosopher Eugene Minkowski identified a 'new dynamic and vital category, a new property of the universe: reverberation'. That was in 1936. But Busby's paintings give uncanny visual voice to that reverberation: 'It is as though a well-spring existed in a sealed vase and its waves, repeatedly echoing against the sides of this vase, filled it with their sonority', he said. In *Everyday* a different day undulation of the vase is given form not just by the fact of its depiction, its own unmistakable 'vaseness', but by the undulating space around it, as if the vase itself fills the air with a vibration of curving vasselike forms. As if the vase has swallowed up its surroundings, as if the air around it

reverberates with the memory of this little or not so little vessel.

But while words reverberate around Busby's paintings, Webb cuts them off in their tracks like the truncated form of *If you Jump Awake* that is suspended mid-canvas. Perhaps they demand an extracted form of words, words from concentrate, which is how this all began:

Variations on flags: handmade and bold, uneven and overlapping.

They scrabble

As the outline of each form falters, shape-shifting, shuffling and rearranging.

Imposing angles jut and veer, They bear down, push out, move across.

But when they know themselves there's space

A cavity through which to breathe long, to breathe deeply.

That sharp lemon light, an intravenous muscle relaxant.

An awkward cream pyramid, bathed in a single invisible sunbeam. Near luminescent.

Purple cloud atop a bulging mountain, a comically ill-fitting hat.

The modest streak of lightest blue stretched out below a grainy open sky, Negligible but necessary.

Nothing flighty,

Not even the butterfly whose shadow is frozen in a frame of mustard yellow.

The impact of colour brushing colour, taut.

Then unleashed.

Tantalising forms nestle alongside the familiarity of a house, a roof, a horizon, a boat,

A circle, a triangle, an angle.

Gentle contrasts of texture and opacity: they absorb us and hold us at bay.

The burred seams of these simple things.

Do you know Busby and Webb's painted forms any better now? As soon as we attempt to grasp this painting, impression, colour or form 'it has ceased to be than that it is', as Pater put it. Or perhaps it becomes something else, forever swarming. That's the problem with words; they let you think you might actually know something.

Lizzie Lloyd, 2014

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