

Paul Uhlmann in conversation with Caitlin Yardley

in her studio at Old Customs House, Fremantle, 24 March 2006

Pour

Fremantle Arts Centre, 2006



Pour 40, 2006, oil on canvas, 83 x 91 cm



Pour 33, 2006, oil on canvas, 83 x 91 cm

Heads pass, bobbing by the studio window from time to time, while the full colour of the Fremantle streets and port harbour drift into the room, mingling with our conversation. The world outside appears grey. The ashen light makes Caitlin Yardley's work, which leans against walls and lies belly-up on the floor, breathe with a dazzling internal glow. There is the immediate feeling of the body and of tender, sensual skin with these paintings.

These watery works appear as 'frozen moments', recollections of a series of carefully constructed plans and decisions. When I ask her if she considers these works to be representations based on the world, she says they are not. Although they are images, they are not images of the world as we see it or know it. They are however based on felt responses, felt experiences. The largest works reflect the physical limitations of her body. Caitlin says that they are constructed with personal systems which involve an "incestuous cycle of paint" and are as close to pure works of abstract painting as she can make them. Abstract painting implies experimentation. The studio reveals itself as a kind of laboratory; a site for experimentation, process and assessment.

She outlines her process and states that the creative act is for her a scene of conflict and a "battle ground" as she wrestles with how the work may be delivered, how it may be conceived. Her words tell an intriguing story of how she works within her private, secret cell. The paint is worked wet on wet in liquid form. She pours this paint against the tightly stretched canvas so that the pigment suspended in oil appears to be living matter, and flows on its own path set against the alternating rhythms and dynamics of the alchemical mixtures. Once these dynamics are set into play the artist steps back and abandons the work – allows nature to take its course; this fluid, liquid, body of light. At such a point in her choosing she moves away, steps back from the work and closes the door.

We sit in her studio and say nothing for a while so that our silence ebbs out over the room. It seems to me that there are hidden tools of the artist at work in the process of the making – that there are hidden players in this game of chance and control that Yardley so skilfully employs. In a sense they are the factors that work with and against her depending on the state of the battle that engages her. The canvas before me balances precariously on four milk crates and I reason that gravity is one of the hidden and perhaps unpredictable tools of the artist. "Yes and the weather. The weather has a lot to say." This is borne-out by the frozen temperature changes that have stretched and pulled the surface of one of the paintings we hover over. Its surface really does look like bunched and stretched skin. These stretch marks make it almost feminine in this way. Its pinky softness echoes the skin and the invisible movements of the body lending the work an erotic charge. Looking a little closer the floor also emerges as a silent partner in the creation of the work, with the heavy red, jarrah boards tilting slightly to the street side.

Despite the artist's intentions, her paintings do evoke images. In this way, they have an ambiguous power. They conjure images, we can't help but see them as representations. She tells me that when her grandfather saw one of these works he saw the apparition of a horse's head leering out from the canvas. This recalls Leonardo da Vinci's story so loved by the Surrealists – if Leonardo wanted inspiration, he simply marched to a wall in the centre of Florence most favoured by the men of the town for relieving themselves. This popular 'piss wall' was a veritable feast of images – through the layers

and stains of the ages Leonardo's imagination would see battles and crowd scenes; clouds racing through the heavens; hideous heads. It seems we have a need for this - a hunger to see representations and images housed within the barest of smudges. However, just as Caitlin steps away from her paintings at a certain point in the making, so too at the completion of the work, her ego, severs connection and control and allows the painting to have its own life. She cares little for the impression of the horse's head or anything else for that matter. For such impressions are accidents and casual by-products of the making. After all, as she says, they are really "painted blind."

Thinking quietly my thoughts momentarily leave the work and focus on a pair of eyes at the window. The eyes stare ahead appearing to look into the room, but I suddenly realise they are sightless. At least, they are eyes that do not see into the depths of the space we occupy, do not see the room surrounded by potent images. Instead they stare at the glass and seem only to be aware of their own reflection. A moment passes and the head reacts with a slight jolt as this stranger's vision pierces the reflection to see two sets of eyes staring back...

We don't so much look at things as look through them.