NEW REVISED EDITION

Nick Austin

Andrew Barber

Nicola Farquhar

John Ward Knox

City Gallery Wellington

A publication produced to accompany the exhibition
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Curated by Abby Cunnane

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Oil on calico, 1000 x 1000mm. Courtesy of the artist and Robert Heald Gallery, Wellington.

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CONTENTS

New Revised Edition: Andrew Barber, Nick Austin, Nicola Farquhar, John Ward Knox

Every practised editor knows you start with the scan: the glide pace, eyes-wide-open read. The problems will find you, no need to go looking for them. It's a good place to start with an exhibition too, a look around which is not halted, which asks quite uncomplicatedly, what brings all these works together, and how is that internal logic sustained? *New Revised Edition* starts with the paradox implicit in the title phrase, with the acknowledgement that rather than offering *newness* in itself, an exhibition is necessarily an endlessly revised text, and that an exhibition of paintings in a white walled gallery is always an 'edition', one instance within a series or system, that it is time-bound, provisional, and reliant on certain conventions of visual literacy.

The same may be said of the works in this exhibition, which are less intent on presenting something new, more concerned with quite specific terms of engagement with what is made possible by, is particular to, and interesting for painting now.[1] Extending the editorial analogy, *New Revised Edition* draws together a number of recent works by four contemporary artists—Andrew Barber, Nick Austin, John Ward Knox and Nicola Farquhar—constructing a situation which allows us to consider both lines of association between individual works,

and aspects of painting's connection to this moment. It doesn't aim to make a definitive statement about contemporary painting, or reflect the breadth or intent of these practices. Rather, it might be thought of as a point to ask how priorities have shifted for this group of contemporary painters, how we might now talk about the medium—and why it's even still a point of reference.

Undeniably these works share some of painting's material conventions: oil paint and stretchers, canvas and linen, paper and acrylic. You don't have to look hard to find evidence of the formal elements that have energised painting as long as we have defined it as such: figuration and the use of colour, abstraction and the grid, dependence on the stretcher and the wall. We might view such works in the light of their medium's forebears, and certainly a critical awareness of art history is subtext within each of these artist's practices. (This interplay between material, visual and historical aspects of the medium is ever more interesting in a contemporary climate where the painted object is predominantly viewed as digital image on a computer screen, homogenised and dislocated from a physical setting, but of course this is not particular to painting.)

'Provisionality' has been a popular rubric for the critique of contemporary painting since Raphael Rubenstein's essay 'Provisional Painting' appeared in *Art in America* in 2009. Initially a fairly reductive formalist reading which circulated around work with an identified propensity to 'look casual, dashed-off, tentative, unfinished or self-cancelling…[to] turn

away from "strong" painting for something that seems to constantly risk inconsequence or collapse,'[2] more recently this has been usefully complicated, to include more than the refusal of heroic painting. Provisionality might more expansively be understood to include intentionality and the making of a painting, as engaging with problems particular to the medium, internalising a kind of iconoclasm, and determinedly rejecting the teleological impetus of art history. In his 2012 part two to the earlier article, Rubenstein writes, 'This is what a provisional work can do: demolish its own iconic status before it ever attains any such thing. The provisional is born the moment when the painter hesitates between painting and not-painting—and then begins to paint anyway.'[3]

Painted anyway, the works in *New Revised Edition* each contend with painting's longstanding conventions. More significantly, they take these conventions on as productive points of difference from which to operate; the specifics of the medium provide a set of givens, from which to look outward. Conditioned by the site and time of their making, they take it for granted that the borders of a painting are infinitely porous and absorbent to other media, and that they function within an intricate system of critical, popular and market forces. Jan Bryant writes, 'Perhaps it is only in the play of contradiction (both necessary and destructive) that contemporary practice, now unburdened by the demands of older discourses, is able to open to this potential: to be both itself and to be not itself, to *be both painting and not painting*, to be simultaneously immanent

and contingent (isolated and dependent on wider networks).'[4] With this in mind it is most interesting to think of each of these works as pushing towards the certain limits of painting, to a point of rupture where the painting becomes almost something else. *What* else a painting might be compels us to think about how it is made, how it occupies the exhibition space, how it deals with an art historical inheritance, and how it demonstrates a particular understanding of time and materials. *New Revised Edition* takes shape around the consideration of a series of the 'problems' these works productively engage with.

The problem of the grid

A diagonal line frequently appears in Barber's recent work. This may materialise within diamonds of sewn fabric, as the series of lines painted across a square canvas, or in the transversal of a large-scale freestanding screen work bisecting a gallery space.[5] *Why Flag* (2013), a 4x4 metre stretcher of unbleached denim, stands front and centre in the exhibition. Its diagonals are inconspicuous, marked by the contrasting stripes of denim. Looking closely at the front of the two-sided work reveals the fine individual threads which are densely overlaid on the diagonal within the fabric, while across the back the seams meet in a succession of blunt-edged diagonal lines.

But there is another diagonal at issue here, a larger frame within which we might view the work. *Why Flag* sits wedged between two lighting tracks which run the length of the gallery. Made to measure for this room, the looming stretcher's

angle is reliant on the tracks for its position and for support. If we visualise the gallery from an aerial perspective it becomes apparent that this work—and Barber's two other free-standing canvases which flank it—effectively divide the whole space up along zigzagging diagonal lines. The diagonal compositional motif which underpins this work then discretely infiltrates the whole space. Composition, conventionally the preserve of the artist's decisions made within the canvas, expands here to implicate the room at large, affecting choices about lighting, the way viewers navigate the space, and sightlines between and around the tall stretchers. Drawing only on what already exists—the track, the rectangle of the room—the work asserts its presence as something structural within the whole. It makes a provisional case for the viewing of the entire room as a composition, as a painting in itself, but one which will only make sense for the duration of the exhibition.

The diagonal is of course contingent on the square, and on the grid, a right angle or series of right angles which it triangulates. In *Why Flag*, the grid of the cedar stretcher serves as physical substructure; invisible from the front, at the back of the work it becomes a framework which assertively divides the plane. The grid, the definitive element in modern art—associated with Cubism, de Stijl, Mondrian—works to order the abstract field, marking it as a space where aesthetic decisions are primary. Rosalind Krauss has written of its ubiquity in modern art, 'Flattened, geometricized, ordered, it is antinatural, antimimetic, antireal. It is what art looks like

when it turns its back on nature. In the flatness that results from its coordinates, the grid is the means of crowding out the dimensions of the real and replacing them with the lateral spread of a single surface.'[6]

While Barber's work has always paid particular and affectionate attention to modernism and the history of abstraction, his use of the grid is resistant to the demand for aesthetic autonomy. Rather, he puts it to work. Making the need for walls redundant, the grid here points to a relationship with the wall, and with the site at large. Literally leaning on the gallery infrastructure, it provokes us to consider what is occurring outside of the painting. Positioned with the expectation that both sides are available for viewing, encouraging us to acknowledge the three-dimensionality of the painting-as-object, these immense works assert the logic of their geometry and making on the entire space.

Often shown in relation to studies such as the wall-mounted *Study (cotton hedge)* (2012) in this exhibition, Barber's works—while subscribing to the material affect, mobilising some of the possibilities of abstraction—frequently contain reference to the landscape, the site of their making, or to the worlds of fashion, design or sport. *Why Flag* is constructed by a sail maker, on an industrial machine able to deal with the massive bolts of cloth it requires, while the work is stretched and installed by the artist. Its title borrows from the international maritime signals used in competitive sailing, where the 'Y' or Yankee sail is used

to appeal a referee's decision ('why?'), or if conditions are dangerous. The original flag is red and yellow; in Barber's work it's pared back to the raw fabric, ghosting the real-life signal or sublimating that communication within the muted language available to the material.

Y3K Monochrome (2011–13) refers to a gallery in Melbourne, its original site. The work was recently sanded back to raw linen and then rehabilitated to its present state, a Malevich-hailing black square which nonetheless reveals careful brushstrokes, and the seams which join panels of fabric—this last the pragmatic response to local unavailability of large reams of cloth. *Dromorne Rd – Putiki St* (2012) again refers to the sites of its production. Made from a number of drop sheets used by the artist over 12 years working as a professional house painter (the first job was at Dromorne Road, while Putiki Street was the exhibition location for the sheets-become-work), its materiality takes the embedded narrative of the site further. The painting here is incidental, a passive document of past activity. The prescriptive grid of modernism is twice subverted, through illusion and allusion; in the upended work the series of diamonds take on an almost trompe l'oeil effect: it looks like a marble floor.

The problem of literacy

If, asks a painting by Nick Austin, the rain were made from pieces of string, the pieces of string looked like apostrophes, the apostrophes fell rain-like across a grey-blue rectangular

board bisected by more string, like a window, like watching rain through a window…where would that leave us? What language would be useful to talk about such a picture, which operates as visual tautology—where each element of the work is more 'like' something else than what it actually is, so that nothing can be described on concrete terms? How can this view of nothing be about more than itself, be *about* anything at all? [7]

To stand in front of such a work is to be confronted by an eloquent blankness, an image of what the distracted eye might rest on. Rather than offering a meditative view, these works deliver absence and inertia; look at anything long enough, they tell us, and it becomes abstract, inscrutable, mildly absurd. *Fallin'* (2006) (this is where the apostrophe is borrowed from) is one of several works in the exhibition which quietly negate the narrative rationale of historical painting. Instead they propose composite, idly cryptic images and associative play that makes a new kind of sense, overturning the linear logic of conventional literacy. In *Fallin'*, Renaissance theorist Alberti's painting as window on the world dissolves into a flat ground, a literally and figuratively opaque statement about the limits of illusion, allusion and expression. Perhaps it is the window on a screen. Certainly it's a substitute window, not simulacrum but substitute, in the way that in speech we often substitute a likeness or cliché for an actual object. It will do—and will do quite exquisitely—but it is neither an object nor a picture of one. It's almost as if the painter was thinking

of something else altogether.

The Curtains (2006), another early work, defies the possibility of painting as a scene in perspectival space, as a frame in which something might happen, while punning on the idea of painting as an 'act'. Flanked by weary-looking curtains, instead of a stage we are confronted by a brick wall, black and impenetrable—at least, as impenetrable as a wall painted on newspaper can be. Easily the most fragile in the exhibition, this work is pinned to the solid gallery wall, amplifying its worried-at, somewhat slack surface; it is as if the application of paint has been all but too much for it, the curtains almost literally falling under the weight of pigment. Consistently concerned with tonal flatness, of both delivery and form, Austin often uses an acrylic paint which dries matte, like gouache, a kind of material deadpan. In this work a micro-drama unfolds in the encounter between materials, and in the wilfully amateur depiction of obdurate brick on used newspaper, that most throwaway of materials.

There is always something to look at in Austin's works, but on occasion elements are rendered so slightly on the canvas that they are almost not there at all. In *The Past* (2012) a barely identifiable birthday card recedes from us—or perhaps, even as we look at it, we leave it behind in time. 'Happy Birthday', barely perceptible, is written backwards on the card, or rather, we are now on the other side of that event. Albertian perspective here gets caught up in a kind of melancholic existential joke, where the idea of an object in a painting receding in space is shown

to be as arbitrary as the idea of an event receding as time passes. The everyday experience of digital images on screen, 3D animation and projection has rendered the illusionistic picture plane strange. Works like this contend with the legacy of that shift, picturing objects eccentrically alienated from both real and illusionistic space.

'I made these works thinking about worry', writes Austin of the newest series of envelopes, large scale works which reveal a shark's fin in the envelope's clear window. The envelope has had a long history in Austin's work, performing as a kind of grid which he returns to.[8] Alongside other stationery, in his work the envelope contains the suggestion of private address or a vehicle for communication, becoming an emblem of how form carries content. Increasingly rare in a digital moment, the envelope is a kind of endangered species. In this work the DL business envelope is magnified, flattened, made doubly redundant, and with its size it becomes comic, like a telethon novelty cheque. The heroic scale of history painting is made to seem like so much bravado, and yet, the envelope might be understood as a kind of history painting itself within the present information age, where communication is dematerialised, and even menacing bills rarely come in the mail. The shark's fin—again painted flat, two-dimensional—and the laborious scumbling effect of the white surface both register a kind of anxiety, and a sense of inevitability; yesterday's ephemera has become today's monument.

Reading and Driving (2010) is the ultimate picture of

inattention, suggesting a state of mind both reckless and distracted. In this series of six works painted on denim we watch the staggered process of a snail's consumption of a book, ultimately transforming itself into a canvas shoe. Or, following a darker line of reason, a shoe descends gradually on the snail's passage, ultimately squelching it. A visual pun on reading as 'devouring' a text, an endorsement of self-help, or a play on grandiose iconoclasm, as in many of Austin's works, one might identify a kind of anti-intellectualism at stake here, or the inference that observation can be an intellectual activity in itself. Rather than asking for a knowing, well-read audience, these works consistently present different kinds of literacy: looking is another kind of reading they suggest,[9] a digression can be a type of transfiguration, the incidental has its own relevance. The small wooden shelf on which each work 'rests' makes its slight incursion on the world of real space and time: books and shoes need something to sit on, it attests—even something as light as a snail does—everybody knows that.

The problem of mass and form

It's unusual to look at a painting and think of its weight, or the mass of the forms it depicts. It's particularly unusual to think of both these things at the same time. An encounter with John Ward Knox's work in this exhibition brings both to mind. In these representational works in oil on calico, it is the empty-of-pigment fabric—sheer, light-holding and semi-transparent—

that makes up the better part of the surface. Through it we can see the wooden stretcher, holding the work taut and offering its own impression of solidity and form. It's hard to know just where to look: to the place where the wooden stretcher and fabric meet the white wall, through the fabric to the 'inside' of the work, at the finely textured woven surface, or at the small square picture in the centre of the frame. Whatever the case, you are compelled to stand close.

Within their deep margin of white, the images in these untitled works each offer a different interpretation of solidity: the fleshy weight of the body, the implacability of marble, the unrelenting shoulder of the wind in a sail. Dislocated from their original whole, the fragmented forms are not denied the weight of gravity, or a relationship to their earthy heft. The works have a photographic source, each a detail cropped from the original. Positioning his image-making as an essentially sculptural process, Ward Knox has spoken of this photograph as the intermediary between two sculptural forms: the three-dimensional subject in the world, and the three-dimensional painted object, while the image itself becomes a kind of rehabilitated solid. The painting then offers a doubled experience of mass, both within the picture and through the objecthood of the whole. Returning pictures to a solid state could be read as a gesture of resistance to the dominant screen-based experience of images, in which they frequently become fleeting placeholders, back-lit portals to click through, scroll past.

Intimations of human tenderness and vulnerability abound

in these works, in the line of a woman's jaw, in the flare of the striped dress on a girl lying on the beach, the exposed torso in the bath, the ecstatic arc of the sail. The recurrent image of the hand—hanging, clasped, in repose—offers its own acknowledgment of the manual labour and dexterity of the painter. To look at these hands is to recall representations of hands throughout art history, it is to zero in, and then again to look *through*, back down a telescope of historical images. Some are familiar—two of the hands here are from Michelangelo's 15th century *Pietà* sculpture, the Madonna and Christ's on the cloth of their garments. Ward Knox has spoken of an interest in the layers of representation, both solid and insubstantial: the soft cloth carved into marble, and then re-presented on calico; the Renaissance sculpture subversively subjected to minimalist treatment; the allegorical narrative of mortality and humility, represented in monumental and idealised sculpture, and then re-presented in paint hundreds of years later as minute and dislocated detail.

The act of cropping is of course its own kind of brutality. Heedless of the whole, it hacks up and sections off; what is newly extraneous is sloughed away and discarded. In a Photoshop-saturated visual environment, the endless mutation, filtering and reconfiguration of images is commonplace. Ward Knox's images, in their almost photoreal connection to human and organic forms, make us uneasy again about what the cavalier manipulation of images might mean. They come imbued with an expectation that

we be human, humane again. They also oblige us to focus very closely on a single element, first as something purely formal, and then as the psychological pivot (we assume) of a larger picture it seems must exist. Appreciating these works' completeness acknowledges that the crop is irreconcilably distant from the whole, that there is no way it can conceivably return to its origin. Addressing the work in terms of mass and form, disregarding the wholeness of a picture in favour of precise observation of its elements—both pictorial and material—we find the painting expands, incandescent, to fill the space there is, even the white periphery.

The problem of the future

Their heads are about the same size as our own, we intuitively recognise the measurement. Always women, increasingly inseparable from their rampant, fertile backdrops, if these are portraits in any sense then they are speculative, future-oriented ones. The conventional portrait might be understood as simply providing a format for these works, which are less interested in psychological revelation than in visualising our biological future.

In this scheme the breath is the most important. The breath goes in and out, taking in oxygen, expelling carbon dioxide, performing an exchange with the surrounding atmosphere. This exchange, crucial to human existence, is one of many sensory functions which together shape these figures. The mouth, the ears, the eyes, the skin, the corporeal organs which

make contact with the external environment, these borders of perception are understood as being in a state of radical change; their geometry and order is inherently related to that of the wider environment. Humans are in a continual state of evolution, these paintings suggest, responding biologically to factors such as bacteria and climate conditions. We might understand the body as somewhat contained; in Farquhar's painting it is opened up, presented as a host of vigorous particles and dynamic reactions.

Painting's traditional preserve is the past tense. It functions as a record of what happened, what it looked like; it is an aesthetically sanctioned kind of looking backward. In this sense painting has always enacted a gap between seeing and record, between the living-event and the document, has always embodied a kind of untimeliness. Farquhar's paintings invert this equation; deeply interested in the contemporary situation, they project into future time, asking what is to become of the human when humanist philosophy and a human-centric notion of the environment no longer make sense. In a moment where globalisation raises questions about national borders and cultural difference, where medical advances including genetic therapy, synthetic transplants and technological alterations to the body are all under discussion, it could be argued that we are becoming less recognisable to ourselves as human beings. Farquhar's women, physically changed and yet personifying a kind of exultant interrelationship with the ground they occupy, may be seen as exploring our need to adapt, while maintaining

vivid sensory perception and psychic independence.[10]

Future time is also connected to thinking around deep or geological time, and especially the consideration of its relativity—as a sequence of events rather than units of numerical time. From the point of view of human history, an understanding of deep time is necessarily condensed: in order to conceive of vast tracts of history we refer to indexical markers such as 'Lucy', the most familiar of early hominids. Farquhar's interest in human evolutionary history centres on this idea of condensed time, and how we often reconstruct it in human terms. Thinking of geological time, and the fossil record, requires an elemental understanding of the body—humans are first carbon and water, hydrogen and nitrogen, a sequence of chemical reactions on a molecular level. In these paintings the biochemistry of the body is part of its physical manifestation, integrally connected to its environment, while the painted surface is also a field of reaction and adaptation. [11]

The liquid body of paint itself—mineral and oil—is critical within Farquhar's work, and to our understanding of its relationship to time. Anthony Byrt writes of her chosen medium, 'Oil paint is organic matter…it changes over time and in different conditions: It expands, contracts, dries in relation to the environment, even cracks. It breathes.'[12] Requiring two week intervals of drying time between layers, oil paint embodies the idea of suspended time. Farquhar has spoken of her sadness when the paint inevitably dries; it is the fluid state which interests her most, the ability of colours to mix and

transform on the canvas. Often lurid or acidic, always striking, the colour choices she makes include the use of raw unmixed paint straight from the tube, as well as painstakingly pre-mixed colour.[13] These are applied with a range of techniques—stippled, sticky daubs in one area of the face meet the long bolt-like brush stroke of a single chord of hair, or the spiny ellipses of foliage in another part of the image. The paint continues across the canvas, and over and around its edges; this is a seething, unruly surface with its own biological imperative, it does not stop with the edges of the square.

In the most recent works, such as *Figure 1* (2013), the identifiable figure is subsumed altogether. An egg-shaped form is nested into the painting's central space, leaving no room for consideration of back and foreground, up or down. Horizontal lines, or vines, congregate thickly across the work, binding it together or serving as support for the implied weight of its principle form. In this work the decisions made on the painted surface are acutely evident, while just beneath that surface is a less resolved, tumultuous space where decisions are yet to be made. There is the sense of what the painter might be about to do next. Time is condensed, again; we are back at the edges of sensory perception—this time our own.

Each of these practices is studio-based. It's a reasonable assumption that the time of making is a private one, and that this time—generally suppressed in the exhibition context—sits as conceptual counterbalance to the object-in-space on

the gallery wall. Often, these works point to a time before. This may be their own past tense, as in Barber's drop sheet work *Dromorne Rd–Putiki St*, shared history, as in Ward Knox's works which reintroduce us to fragments of classical sculpture, or more personal history, as in Austin's *The Past*, which watches a birthday card retreat in space. The future is also a present concern; in Farquhar's work the notion of deep time shares the canvas with the anticipation of an evolving human biology. Collectively these works project a sense of their own *untimeliness*, or of being in state of self-reflexive transition or suspension.[14] There's also a marked interest in the time of reception, the moment at which the painting meets the world and its public in an exhibition context. They make understated yet pressing demands of our time and presence. Following the initial scan, it is time for a closer reading.

ABBY CUNNANE

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1 On newness, Jörg Heiser writes, 'Now, as always, interesting painting means those new pictures that could only have come about in painting and not any other way. The "new" doesn't exist as a sparkling clean something out of nothing, but as the dirt that gets stuck in the spirals of history (the spiral as a model of development that is neither linear or cyclical; dirt as that which at first just seems to be left over, but then takes on meaning after all).' *All of a Sudden: Things That Matter in Contemporary Art* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2008), p.104.

2 Raphael Rubenstein, 'Provisional Painting', *Art in America* vol. 97:7 (2007), p.123.

3 Rubenstein, 'Light on the Earth: Provisional Painting Part 2', *Art in America* vol. 100:2 (2012), p.84.

4 Jan Bryant, *Thoughts on Painting* (Auckland: Clouds, 2011), p.88. [my italics]

5 Barber's recent work is inherently connected to site. Gwynneth Porter writes, 'Painters don't usually measure up a space first, approaching it as a tradesman might, with a certain obliviousness to the grand traditions of painting. Moving with the desensitised transience that is expected, the paintings' proportions are dictated by that of the room.' Gwynneth Porter, *Studies*, exhibition text, Hopkinson Cundy, Auckland, 2010.

6 See Rosalind Krauss, 'Grids', *October* vol.9 (Summer 1979), pp.50-64.

7 '…an art that wants to be nothing in the most particular way[.] It's not quite nothing, it's more that everything particular seems the clearest example possible of something generic.' Allan Smith, *In a Room*, exhibition text, Starkwhite, Auckland, 2006.

8 'The envelope is Austin's grid and like Mondrian he is ever capable of extracting some new configuration from its geometry.' Megan Dunn, 'Pushing the Envelope with Nick Austin', *EyeContact*, 21 April 2013. http://eyecontactsite.com/2013/04/liquid-dossier-pushing-the-envelope-with-nick-aust. Accessed 21 April 2013.

9 'Austin's work moves in the non-space between the two processes of 'reading' and 'looking', it at once resists becoming fully concrete and evades recapture by language.' Sarah Hopkinson, 'Nick Austin', *The 4th Auckland Triennial: Last Ride in a Hot Air Balloon* catalogue, Natasha Conland (ed.), (Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, 2010), p.59.

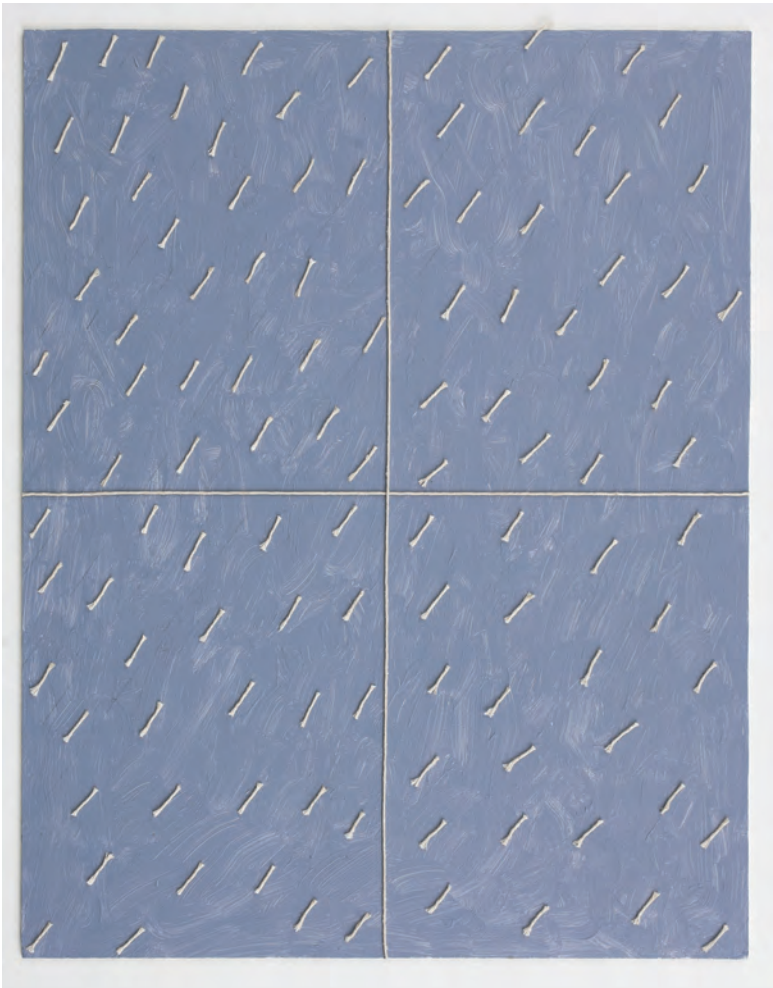
10 'I want the figures to feel empathetic, like warm feeling bodies, like partners or guides or something like that.' Nicola Farquhar, email to the author, 23 May 2013.

11 '…the surface itself appears to be adapting to its own environment.' Danae Mossman, *Daylight's Feeling Forms*, exhibition text, Hopkinson Mossman, Auckland, 2013.

12 Anthony Byrt, 'Just Breathe: Introducing Nicola Farquhar', *Art New Zealand* vol.144 (Summer 2012-13), p.41.

13 'Colour here can look like light. A copper sulphate blue is a suspension of time and of metal salts and the elemental aspect of pigment in oil.' Gwynneth Porter, 'Things are in pieces', *New Paintings,* exhibition text, Hopkinson Cundy, Auckland, 2011.

14 For a discussion of this tendency with regard to contemporary painting more generally, see David Joselit, 'Painting Beside Itself', *October* vol.130 (Fall 2009), pp.125-134.



Nick Austin *Fallin'* 2006

Acrylic and string on board, 596 x 470mm
Chartwell Collection, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, 2006

Nick Austin *Reading and Driving* (detail) 2010

Acrylic on denim, wood railing, six elements, each 285 x 350mm approx.
Courtesy of the artist and Hopkinson Mossman, Auckland. Photo: Jennifer French

Nick Austin *Lettuce Poems* 2012

Acrylic on canvas, 1000 x 1300mm
Hocken Collections, Uare Taoka o Hākena, University of Otago

Lettuce Begin

Little Gem

Consider the lettuce (*Lactuca sativa*). It is good for you. Healthy. A lettuce is not calorific. Commonly associated with salads and slugs, the lettuce is a humble vegetable, first cultivated by the ancient Egyptians, who turned it from a weed used to produce oil into a plant grown for its leaves. Lettuces are divided into those that form hearts or heads, and those that are loose-leaf.

'Heirloom names are often enigmatic and beautiful. They can have a story in their title,' Nick Austin says.

Lettuce Poems is a painting of four manila folders on a brown background. Each folder features a hand written title that spirits the reader away from the bland world of administration into fancier, frillier realms.

'I hope the work allows for different, shifting, ways of imagining a relationship between lettuce and poems.'

Austin's favourite artists include text in their work enigmatically. Ree Morton established her career in the 1960s as a 'funny, brash, but still rigorous voice in a sea of Minimalist high seriousness.'[1] Morton's early drawings referenced different habits and characteristics of plants and featured inscriptions like

'snake grass', 'forget-me-not' and 'swamp cabbage.' Morton's life was cut short; she died in a car accident, aged 40.

Find relief, in the tale behind a lettuce leaf.

Grandpa Admires
In 1977, 90 year old Chloe Lowry named this family heirloom lettuce after her grandfather, George Admire, a Civil War veteran.

Bronze-tinged leaves form large, loose heads.
Mild flavor, slow to bolt, even in extreme heat.

Matchless
The ideal reader matches Austin's art whim to whim. His work is endearingly introverted, a snail half in, half out of its shell. His titles range from the oblique to the inanely literal. A crossword can be cryptic or aimed at the beginner. Similes and metaphors run along the horizontal and vertical axes like clues. This is art made out of ellipsis. 'Ambition' is incognito, trivia prioritised. Austin offers diversions,[2] a chance to read for pleasure, the pleasing punctuation of a pun well placed. His visual conundrums are rendered simply, economically. Mood is important. Austin's frivolity errs on the side of melancholy. Each exhibition creates a contemplative climate. His works are occasionally aloof, but never less than cordial.

Austin looks for a triangle of factors in artworks: the funny, the sad and the strange. 'Consistency of tone is something that I am concerned about maintaining. I want my work to have just the right pitch. I am pitching for that triangle plus a z-factor (you can't say x factor anymore) and if I get it there then I am happy.'

Winter Density
A snail inches along a leaf,
dark green, slightly savoyed
sweet, succulent flavor.

MEGAN DUNN

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1 Quinn Latimer, 'Ree Morton', *Modern Painters*, Dec 2008–Jan 2009, p.25.

2 Austin notes that 'diversions' is often the title for the games and cartoons page in the newspaper.

Andrew Barber *Dromorne Rd – Putiki St* 2012

Patchwork cotton, polycotton, 3250 x 3250mm
Courtesy of the artist and Hopkinson Mossman, Auckland. Photo: David Straight

Andrew Barber *Study (cotton hedge)* 2012

Patchwork, denim, 850 x 850mm
Courtesy of the artist and Hopkinson Mossman, Auckland Photo: Alex North

Andrew Barber *Y3K Monochrome* 2010–13

Gesso, oil on linen, 3900 x 3900mm
Courtesy of the artist and Hopkinson Mossman, Auckland.

Dilated Sense

There is a museum dedicated to Mikhail Bulgakov in Moscow. Residents of the block in which his apartment was situated set his former flat up as a museum in order to prevent further loitering.

Loitering is being in a place for no obvious reason.

There are a series of large paintings, much bigger than one person could carry without them tipping unmanageably, and three are wedged into the space between the floor and the ceiling of the art museum that occupies a repurposed municipal building. It has no collection, so, works coming and going, stability is found in relation to permanent architectural features and volumes.

When encountered in a museum space, these paintings are interruptions to what would normally be expected. It is like walking onto the physical remnants of a dreamed task. One of those that somebody finds themself engaged with without being privy to how it started, or even being aware of that earlier phase. If it ever existed. The task is to work with the conditions and carry out an imperative. Things seem wrong, but they are workable due to an odd optimism. Motivation is not questioned, and seems to have a blessed momentum, even if the nerves are a little alarmed at the tight timeframe and the lack of assistance. Time stretches and yet is also astonishingly compressed, but none of this is obvious at the time.

There are patterns that form in the way that museums, as a subset of thresholds, appear in the imagination. In novels,

the museum tends to figure as a place of non-thought where the play of the aesthetic unconscious allows a derangement or disassembly of the day.

Desires and attraction are not necessarily explicitly articulated in thought, one sense of volition possibly concealing a more subtle wash of affect and action. For example, a visitor might seek simple respite, but she may also be experiencing something in proximity to the museum's project of grouping and ordering. The fixity of language would have us believe that classification is possible, but its shadow is a fundamental impossibility. In the presence of this we can sense something of our true state, a blessed discontinuity that is not for the faint-hearted.

Genres depend inseparably on non-genres and conversely, non-law on law, and between the segments of order, desire flows. Painting, here, is not separate from floors, furnishing fabric, patchwork, flags, or determined within its own subgenres—landscape, abstraction, realism, colourfield, etc.

In any case, the visit takes place, and it is often for different reasons than the museum itself might have anticipated.

I am thinking of a song from my adolescence, 'The Queen is Dead' by The Smiths, that goes "We can go to a place where it's quiet and dry and talk about precious things." I had thought that it also talked about arches, which made me think architecturally when I heard it, but the line actually goes "hemmed like a boar between archers."

(Talk of columns and I hear Philippe Starck, who is now of course fashionable again, intone, "Behind columns people

hide, they fall in love, they kiss… Behind columns people spy, they kill, a quote is born…")

I think museum visitation is often on that level. Some sort of folie-à-deux in which at least one partner is idle.

The only thing I thought was interesting in a museum studies text I read recently was an account of how an immigrant Parisian taxi-driver, suspended from work because of an illness, would go to the Pompidou Centre just to be among people.

Vinyl or cork tiles used to be the standard surfaces for institutions and areas that need mopping. They created diagonals reminiscent of board games and seem to present a series of possible logical choices for movement on a single plane. There is great comfort in this abstraction.

Fabric, conversely, resists the plane. It is there to be cut and recomposed to fit an object in the round. Maybe a moving one, or one on which a moving object will rest.

A chequered flag is raised by yachtsmen to spell out the letter N, or to reply 'No'. A flag with diagonal stripes denotes the letter Y, and potentially asks 'Why?' It also means 'I am dragging my anchor.'

Once a signal flag is raised, waiting ensues. In this space, engaging with the field of the possible, there is much comfort.

Perhaps meditation is a dilation of sense, and museums offer a deferral of thought.

Maybe people go to museums to, becalmed, answer questions too big to formulate.

GWYNNETH PORTER

Nicola Farquhar *Figure 1* 2013

Oil on linen, 400 x 500mm

Courtesy of the artist and Hopkinson Mossman, Auckland. Photo: Alex North

Nicola Farquhar *Melanie* 2013

Oil on linen, 450 x 450mm

Courtesy of the artist and Hopkinson Mossman, Auckland. Photo: Alex North

Nicola Farquhar *Kirstin* 2013

Oil on linen, 600 x 500mm

Courtesy of the artist and Hopkinson Mossman, Auckland. Photo: Alex North

Nicola Farquhar *Vicky* 2013

Oil on linen, 600 x 500mm

Courtesy of the artist and Hopkinson Mossman, Auckland. Photo: Alex North

Vicky

When Matisse painted a green stripe on his wife in 1905, everything changed. The slash down the dead-centre of *Mme. Matisse*'s face—a single, literal stroke—was as much a vulgar confession as it was a shadow: the starkest evidence imaginable of how the image came to be in this world, and an act of violence that left it permanently on the cusp between painting's illusionism and its base materiality. After that, painting was never the same again.

Nicola Farquhar's green stripe in *Vicky* (2013) represents a different kind of bravery. It's a few inches to the right of Matisse's. It's also brighter: more obviously paint sitting on a surface than slanting light. Of course, when it comes to the radicalism of each, there's no comparison: Matisse's put everything on the table; Farquhar's, a century later, illustrates that she has every painterly option at her fingertips. There are other quotes too: the shock of mauve-pink hair, which mirrors the top left corner behind Mme. Matisse, and the red, ruffled neckline that mimics the colour of Mme. Matisse's dress.

These quotations could be seen as gestures of resignation; open acknowledgements that this embarrassment of riches is also contemporary painting's greatest problem—that there's nothing left to be discovered or done. As a result, *Vicky* becomes a problem, of time, and of space: why has Farquhar bothered to create her here, now? To answer this, it's important

to understand her origins. *Vicky* is typical of the 'women' Farquhar has been painting, pretty much exclusively, for the past few years. They've developed quickly, in part because of Farquhar's own increasing deftness, but also because evolution is built into their DNA. Farquhar is deeply influenced by posthuman philosophy and feminist science fiction, both of which focus on our physical, rather than technological, evolution, with women as the most obvious (pro)creative instigators of change. For Farquhar, the female face becomes that space of transformation, where its primary functions—to see, to hear, to breathe, to feel—are negotiable facts rather than organic givens.

The fundamental 'femaleness' of these works acts as an anchor for our empathy, using bodies to create a continuity between the slowly transforming world inside the painting and our own. But *Vicky*'s mutability has extended well beyond the realms of human potential: a smudge that isn't really a nose, an arcing stroke that only just passes as a jawline, and of course, that stripe—as much the trace of a decision Farquhar made with a brush as it is a scar or breathing apparatus on the figure it's so loosely connected to. This is the point that we might have to concede that *Vicky* is not so much a 'she', as an 'it': a painting, pure, simple.

The stripe is blunt confirmation of this: evidence of where *Vicky* came from and what she's made of. But it's also an illustration that Farquhar has a deep understanding of what Matisse intuited when he tore open his wife's face: that

painting—good painting, at least—is about the interaction between its materiality, and that material's capacity to collect, rather than merely stop, time. In *Vicky*, an art historical past, complex projections about our evolutionary future, and the very present act of painting all play out on the same surface. Despite seeming initially to look back then, *Vicky* is a remarkably progressive thing: a work that offers up a history of its own making, an indexical relationship with the world beyond its frame, and a vision for the future, both for its subject (woman) and its object (painting). Even a hundred years on, a lot still happens when you paint a green stripe.

ANTHONY BYRT

John Ward Knox *No title* 2011

Oil on calico, 1000 x 1000mm
Courtesy of the artist and Robert Heald Gallery, Wellington

John Ward Knox *No title* 2011

Oil on calico, 1000 x 1000mm
Courtesy of the artist and Robert Heald Gallery, Wellington

John Ward Knox *No title* 2011

Oil on calico, 1000 x 1000mm
Courtesy of the artist and Robert Heald Gallery, Wellington

Untitled

I was in Istanbul recently during a period of civic unrest. I do not wish here to discuss the greater causes or implications of this, rather to share some peripheral observations from my brief engagement with the event, and eventually to relate these back to painting.

Sometime around 2am on Istanbul's main commercial promenade. I had been moving back and forth with the main protest, intrigued by the crowd and captive to my own rushing blood. A tear gas canister or cannon retort would send a pulse of response through the crowd quicker than spoken communication could; flight reaction faster than conscious thought. This sudden leap to beating was stirring all sorts of reactions, and it was no surprise that some of these took the form of violence and anarchy. A young man scaled the wall of a store and ripped an aluminum Nike 'Swoosh' off. Then he ventured down the block and started attacking a McDonalds store front with it, swinging it as an axe. He was evidently enjoying expressing himself in this way, and I wondered whether he was aware of how exquisitely he was personifying the slogans of these commercial giants. He was just doing it, and lovin' it.

Hours later, weary and eye-stung, I retreated down the promenade away from the main thrust. I was trying to breathe some reality into my perception when I came across a group

of men together in the street, raising their voices in a solemn column of song. They were standing by the remnants of a street stall treat, a shucked and supped pile of discarded mussel shells. As the song swelled and descended, the singers crushed the mussel shells underfoot as makeshift percussion. The brittle rhythm crackled through the background canister fire and cries of terror, and punctuated the huddled and haunted warmth of the men's early morning song.

Later, I found myself in a distant suburb, having missed my flight out of the city due to the disruption. I was passing the evening sitting on a roadside curb. I was looking toward Europe. The descending sun lit pink a towering cumulus cloud and made the blue wall of a shopping mall into a strange and radiant plane. A flight of birds was stirring the air in their nightly ritual, feeding perhaps, scaring airborne bugs into a controllable vortex or maybe just having fun together. Whichever the case, they were silhouetted blackly against the cloud for most of their course, except for at a point where they banked and the sun caught their backs and they flashed gold for an instant, then black again. The next time around they flashed a more silvery hue; each subsequent pass they occupied a slightly different place on the spectrum, tracing a dotted path from gold through to purple, before becoming invisible altogether.

Here I apologise for the amount of adjectives I use, but it is necessary because I am trying to pull detail through your chest and into your head. Right now for example, as I sit writing in my flat in Auckland it is raining outside and I often stare

vacantly at the water as it pools on a tabletop. An occasional watery merger compels a droplet to the edge where it hangs in suspension above a stool, another wet plateau with droplets of its own. I have been idly spinning half a lemon on the window sill, and wondering whether or not a spinning citrus is a relation of a falling apple.

What I am trying to suggest is that we need these details as a way of maintaining a grasp on the hurtling vastness, because the phenomenal majority of experience is elsewhere. The details of my particular story sketched here are not important for their individual implications so much as they are cyphers of the incredible magnitude of potential in the universe. Nearly everything that will happen in the world will be outside of our perception.

I am trying to come to grips with responsibility through these paintings. As I see it, they are one way of promoting a relationship to the world based not upon consumption, but on imagination. Our connection to images is changing, now more quickly than ever. The commercial world is constantly asking us to buy into an image, I would prefer we think into them instead. I create these as a challenge to myself and to others to slow down, to regard the potential of satisfaction from incomplete, vague things; fleeting moments.

JOHN WARD KNOX

Contributors

Abby Cunnane is Assistant Curator at City Gallery Wellington.

Megan Dunn is a Wellington art writer. From 1996–2000 she was co-director of the artist run space Fiat Lux, Auckland. In 2006 she completed an MA in Creative Writing at the University of East Anglia.

Gwynneth Porter is a writer, editor and publisher, currently living in Melbourne where she is a PhD candidate in the Art History and Theory department at Monash University. She is Co-Director of the art book publishing house Clouds.

Anthony Byrt is a writer based in Auckland. His work has appeared in *Artforum International*, *frieze*, *Art World* and the *New Zealand Listener*, among other publications. He is currently Director of Research at Whitecliffe College of Arts & Design, and is the 2013 Critical Studies Fellow at Cranbrook Academy of Art, Michigan, USA.

Nick Austin (b.1979) is based in Dunedin. In 2004 he gained a MA in Fine Arts from Elam School of Fine Arts, The University of Auckland. In 2012 he held the University of Otago Frances Hodgkins Fellowship, Dunedin. Recent solo exhibitions include *The Liquid Dossier*, Hocken Library, Dunedin and *Total Dread*, Hopkinson Mossman, Auckland, both 2013. His work has been included in exhibitions including *Collecting Contemporary*, Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington, 2011, and *Last Ride in a Hot Air Balloon: the 4th Auckland Triennial*, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, 2010. Nick Austin is represented by Hopkinson Mossman in Auckland and Peter McLeavey Gallery in Wellington.

Andrew Barber (b.1978) lives and works in Auckland. Recent exhibitions include *Earth, Wind and Fire*, Peter McLeavey Gallery, Wellington, 2013, and *Studies*, Hopkinson Cundy, Auckland, 2010. In 2007 he co-founded Gambia Castle, an artist run space on K Road in Auckland, and was on the board until it closed in 2010. Between 2003 and 2006 he was co-director of RM103, also on K Road. Andrew Barber is represented by Hopkinson Mossman in Auckland, and Peter McLeavey Gallery in Wellington.

Nicola Farquhar (b.1978) lives and works in Auckland. She received a MA in Fine Arts from Elam School of Fine Arts, The University of Auckland in 2009. Recent exhibitions include *Daylight's Feeling Forms*, 2013, and *New Paintings*, 2011, both at Hopkinson Mossman, Auckland. Nicola Farquhar is represented by Hopkinson Mossman in Auckland.

John Ward Knox (b.1984) is based in Auckland. He graduated with a MA in Fine Arts from Elam School of Fine Arts, The University of Auckland in 2008. Recent exhibitions include *a lightening strike, a hand on a shoulder*, 2013, and *moon draws water (i) & (ii)*, 2012, both at Robert Heald Gallery, Wellington, and *moving on looking*, Ivan Anthony Gallery, Auckland, 2011. His work has been included in exhibitions including *Contact. Artists from Aotearoa/New Zealand*, Frankfurter Kunstverein, Frankfurt, 2012, *Prospect: New Zealand Art Now,* City Gallery Wellington, 2011, and *Stealing the Senses*, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth. In 2008 he was a founding member and co-director of Newcall Gallery, a studio collective and gallery which ran for two years. John Ward Knox is represented by Robert Heald Gallery in Wellington, and Ivan Anthony Gallery in Auckland.