

Artist's notes

Out on the Plain – synthetic cubism

In mid-winter 2018 and earlier this year, I was artist in residence in the Queensbury Hills, between Cromwell and Wanaka, Central Otago. The residency was a converted boat shed high up in the hills looking across the Clutha Basin to the St Bathans Range and down the valley to Lake Hawea. A very dramatic, remarkable landscape, the light could change markedly within seconds depending on sun, cloud and that mysterious inversion layer mist. Early morning and later in the day were the most extraordinary – with deep shadows creating cubistic effects reminding me of Bill Sutton's Landscape Synthesis series. The valley floor was a patchwork of ordered plantings, grapevines and shelterbelts.

I recalled works I had seen in curator Julia Waite's show at the Auckland City Art Gallery, Freedom and Structure – Cubism in NZ 1930 –1960. That exhibition was an epiphany for me. Although many of the works were familiar, somehow their power, energy and combined voice was extraordinary.

When I'm in a plane, I almost always take aerial photographs – looking below at planting patterns, contrasting colours and textures of crops, intersections, etc. When flying over the Atacama Desert in Chile in 2013, the abstract gridded plantings on mountain terrain seemed incongruous with the wilderness – the sophisticated patterns and designs following the topography could only fully be observed from the sky. 'Out on the Plain' could reference the Canterbury plains, however the works are not necessarily specific to a particular locale. They could be anywhere or nowhere.

Historically, Synthetic Cubism came after Analytical Cubism – which was mostly monochromatic. Picasso, Braque and Gris introduced vibrant colour, flattening of the planes, whilst adding textures and patterns to their paintings, and experimenting with collage – using the everyday (newspaper print and patterned paper, text, cloth, sand and dirt.) With art and life combined, painting began to look more like sculpture – expanding the range of ways painters could explore reality.

My interpretation of the concept synthetic cubism – horticultural plantings and agricultural practices alter the appearance of a landscape – they are like collages on the land. The landscape is a canvas. Stripped bare. When viewed from above the man-made patterns seem strange and intriguing – painterly, abstract assemblages.

This body of work plays with aerial views of abstract plantings, removing references to scale, looking at structure & colour combined with incidental markings. They have the appearance of constructed collage using an array of materials (plywood, corrugated card, towelling, felt and velveteen), also hand drawn elements with pencil, pastel and charcoal, and painterly brush strokes. The photographic element, I think, imbues the finished work with a slightly discombobulating photographic truth.

Many of the works seem familiar and reference other well-known artists though not necessarily intentionally: Rosalie Gasgoine, Colin McCahon, Bill Sutton, and Philip Guston amongst them.

This new body of work is an extension of cubist landscape works I have exhibited over the last couple of years at The Central.