



Jahnne Pasco-White and the porosity of painting

Tara McDowell

Much of life with small children revolves around loss of control and disintegration of physical boundaries. – Moyra Davey (as quoted in Szymczyk 2010, 88)

Late in 2019, in the halcyon days before the Australian bushfires and the coronavirus pandemic, I visited Jahnne Pasco-White's exhibition *becoming-with* at Gertrude Glasshouse in Melbourne. Canvases hung loose and unstretched from clamps in the ceiling, interrupting the space and the path of the visitor, who moved through them like a theatre scrim or laundry hung to dry. Perhaps dirty laundry rather than clean—the canvases were dyed and scrawled on with pigment and taped with bits and pieces of rags. Indeed, the list of materials on the room sheet conjured images of the domesticated home, but also the bush, and included ingredients both imported—such as olives, beetroot, turmeric, paprika, avocado skins—and native—as in wattle, lilly-pilly berries, lichen, and leaves. *Scrawl* really does get to the mode of mark-making, which could be painterly (liquid, luscious) or drawn (scratchy, juttled, dry). The palette was determined by those ingredients, and leaned heavily toward mustard yellow; the deep, dull purple of storm clouds; or pale rusts and pinks. I'm tempted to flirt with a more vivid, leaky domesticity than laundry and kitchen, and describe that

mustard yellow as the unique colour of the faeces of an infant subsisting on breastmilk or formula, or one smear of concentrated red as wound or menses. But I won't.

A more intrepid interlocutor than me might identify which ingredient produced which colour, but I'm hesitant to perform this kind of decoding, just as I suspect that there's no real point in differentiating individual paintings, either. Instead, what I felt in the gallery that day was a porosity, a cross-contamination of these paintings, as if they were all really the same painting. This porosity was surely the result of the materials used across the paintings' surfaces, but also how they were installed—canvases of different shapes and sizes overlapped one another, having shed both the frame and the autonomy of the spaced white wall. (This was not the first time I'd experienced unstretched paintings hung from the ceiling lately—Helen Johnson, Sam Falls, Emma Fitts and Vivian Suter all come to mind as examples of the same strategy, so clearly something is in the air about canvas-as-textile and its relation to body and environment).

Later, when I visited Pasco-White's studio as she begun to make works for the show she now presents at STATION, *inter-giftedness*, I learned that she places canvases on the floor, walks on them and allows the 'outside' to track onto them too, including in the form

of her young daughter. I began to understand this mode of porosity as an ethics of relationality. I thought, too, of Moyra Davey writing so perceptively (as she always does) about how ‘much of life with small children revolves around loss of control and disintegration of physical boundaries’. The porosity I’m describing dovetails with a seemingly contrary impulse, which is the painting as archive, or perhaps better (and more Donna Haraway-ian), compost. By this I mean how all manner of material collected on the adventures the artist takes with her daughter eventually finds its way into her paintings, such that they become repositories of a much larger landscape, as well as time capsules of a particular season, mood or day.

Pasco-White’s show was at once highly accomplished and undone. There is a quality in her painting practice of gracelessness *and* skill or, to dust off an art historical term, “facture”, by which I mean the manner in which something is made. She holds in suspension form and *informe*, the made and the unmade. The show was titled *becoming-with*, after a line by Donna Haraway. In her illuminating essay written for the show and reproduced in this volume, curator Amelia Wallin quotes Haraway (1989, 39):

That’s why, of course, women have had so much trouble counting as individuals in modern Western discourses. Their personal, bounded individuality is compromised by their bodies’ troubling talent for making other bodies, which individuality can take precedence over their own, even while the little bodies are fully contained.

This porosity of self and body—the unbounded, uncontainable self of motherhood—produces a promiscuous painting practice, I would argue, in which porosity and contamination are the operative mode in life and in the studio (the two are themselves porous). It’s a practice redolent of dirty nappies and wadded up used tissues. It traffics in relationality rather than autonomy. The myth of independence or autonomy has gotten us into a lot of trouble, while the truer fact of relationality, rather than positionality, as Mary Graham (2014) would put it, becomes more absurdly evident every day, despite late capital’s attempt to keep us self-dosing, atomised. As the writers of “Co-becoming Bawaka: Towards a Relational Understanding of Place/Space” make vivid, ‘everything exists in a state of emergence and relationality.’ They continue, ‘Not only are all beings—human, animal, plant, process, thing or affect—vital and sapient with their own knowledge and law, but their very being is constituted through relationships that are

constantly re-generated’ (2016, 455). As we settle into an era of prolonged and multiple planetary crisis, we would do well to learn from and listen to indigenous understandings of being as *always* in relation.

To insist on relationality during a global pandemic is both more urgent and more difficult. My next studio “visit” with Pasco-White occurs over Zoom, when a planned outing to Chewton and Castlemaine is cancelled due to another round of Victorian lockdown. We talk about the pleasures of long bush walks with our daughters, but also how tired we are, parenting small children at this time. This labour is mostly invisible and mostly gendered—its aftershocks will be felt for years. Pasco-White tells me how she’s recently—to her great satisfaction—cut up the Gertrude Glasshouse canvases, which she layers one on top of another to make new paintings. These thick, slab-like canvases will become the *inter-giftedness* body of work she will show at STATION Gallery. Given her preference for using material that’s near at hand (driven in part by a desire for a light ecological footprint, despite maintaining a material practice), recycling her own paintings in this way seems like a natural step. They’re quite rigid and heavy, which is weird, she tells me, pointing her screen at the studio walls—so different from the limp hang at Gertrude Glasshouse. I have to take her word for it. I still haven’t experienced these works in person, though I long to. Pasco-White is clearly not afraid to handle her paintings—in addition to cutting them up, she is working directly on the floor, spinning canvases around as she paints. This lack of orientation is of a piece with the porosity, or relationality I’m trying to describe, and which Pasco-White terms *inter-giftedness*, pointing to exchange and responsibility, to one another and to all other more than human bodies. Points of contact, seepage, and influence are multivalent and multidirectional. She’ll place large canvases directly on the STATION’s gallery floor, prompting visitors to move around them and to be in fluid relation to the work.

I see around me, in Pasco-White’s *inter-giftedness* body of work and in the essays in this book, a bone-deep desire for an expanded sense of mothering: a collective mothering in solidarity with other care workers, with the “polymaternalism” of Black feminist thought, with queer mothering and Indigenous matriarchies, with non-biological mothering and surrogacy, and with reproductive and domestic labour. Last year I read an essay by Saidiya Hartman, “The Anarchy of Colored Girls Assembled in a Riotous Manner”, a critical fabulation of the lives of young black women, who had been surveilled and incarcerated but essentially remained “unthought” and thus, their

history untold. ‘To appreciate the beautiful experiments of Esther Brown and her friends’, Hartman (2018, 471) writes, ‘one needs first to conceive something as unimaginable and unprecedented as too fast girls and surplus women and whores producing “thought of the outside,” that is, thought directed toward the outer bound of what is possible’. The outer bound of what is possible—isn’t that most where we need to be?

But we’re already there. When my old home, California, isn’t burning, my new one, Australia, is. A sixth extinction is underway, Australia is stricken with drought and floods, refugees are detained in offshore prisons, and authoritarian rule is on the rise. We are clearly at the end of something—an entire way of being in the world that has manifested as the heads of the hydra of patriarchy, empire, capitalism, and religion (what the queer poet Robert Duncan referred to as the monstrous ‘Daddy Sunday’). Thought of the outside would be the thought of all those who have been *left* outside: Indigenous people, refugees and migrants, slaves, “essential” workers of colour, non- and non-binary-humans, fast girls, surplus women, whores, mothers, and all those who fall outside the traditional systems of classification erected by Daddy Sunday.

When I read this line by Hartman—*thought of the outside*—it reminded me of something that the poet Bernadette Meyer (1994, 19) wrote from inside the fever dream of new motherhood. ‘Women’, she wrote, ‘can still wind up writing some unheard of things don’t you think, I mean things that have never been written yet’. Well, yes. Let’s write some *unheard of things*, let’s direct some thought toward the *outer bound* of what is possible—this is what is urgently needed, as though all of our lives depended upon it.

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