

## Sediment Blossoms (to Meaghan)

Three thoughts were on my mind in 2023 as I set about making (more) circle paintings:

1 The sway of timber now lining Northland's surfaces, (the potential of hügelkultur?) and sediment flows (the Earth foraging for soil replenishment?) And trucks, laden with bunches of logs, trolling out of Levin from the hills above my Upper Queen Street walk.

2 A book on Van Gogh's 'ear incident', from the Foxton library. He ate his paint, painted a branch of spring blossom (unusually and alluringly realistic for him) for the birth of his nephew; both amidst a period of madness.

3 Building a ramial (green branch) wood chip pile to spread on my vege garden, soil food for spring growth.

And I read Lisa Garforth's *Green Utopias*, 2019, from the Takere, the Levin library.

I first noticed the circle, flat to the eye, in Australian John Nixon's art. There is something slightly unknowable about his circles. An edgy presence, yet subsumed with a wholeness. Born of his Marxian distraction to be *The Worker and The Artist*. A painter's intellect mechanistically turning out finished, daily products, like 60's designer clothes off the rack. Marxian, yet Capitalist as well. And mostly I love the felt presence of the object-ness of his circles, perhaps of a Jane Bennett kind. I enjoy the paradox. And the surprise. The practical provides, but more than expected. I had been dallying with flat paint on coloured linen ground, monochromatic circles under the heading of "Even", taken from watching high school students look desperately to Duchamp's "A Bride, Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, even" for any telling forms of such lustiness. Much later I think of Duchamp's strange title less as formalist, yet more-so perhaps: Art as Bride, Malevich as one of her Bachelors. My bare circles ground me, the series unfinished, the images themselves very finished, retainers for works that might follow.

I am very glad of these groundings. As the year turned my thoughts became distracted by the log circles, Northland's catastrophe, and the translation of these from the cool tv screen images to studio experience: the paint overflows and underflows around the stencils and taped edges, how it sits on top or soaks into the canvas. And always the battle between what is allowed, and what is not, what is finished and what is not. Stretching, sketching, across the circles with the brush, to know their form as substance, built from paint, constrained at the edges, by the edges, even. *AN ABSTRACTION THAT IS NOT ABSTRACT?* I want to see that self-conscious appearance of its own presence. And to hold that imagined utopia, that sense of what-could-be-done-now, in all this mess. *IS THE PAINTED IMAGE SIMPLY A THIN SCULPT OF A FELT IDEA?* Do we even feel ideas?

To paint over the circles, hiding them, strangely has the effect of showing them, screened onto the canvas. Even blocking the paint from printing shows an absence that presents as presence. Sort of like "Let's not talk about it, and it will always be there"? Later the images even attempt to evade the camera lens. And the colours hide their origin: paint bases of red and green oxides and yellow ochre mix into a rolling beige. Singular circles metastasize, blossom, into offshoots, branches of optimism, of pink. *Elemental, Sedimental*. Did the ground get a hiding, a pink bruise left behind, like Covid's metallic after-taste? My flower garden is full of yellow, of Van Gogh's medicine. To work with beige is a risk, its dullness scarily depressing, but it's earthy presence I can't resist. It's just where we are right

now, ecologically slippery. A woman in my local butcher's shop said "The sun has no heat". It was frightening to hear, could it be true? What if there were no blossoms this spring? My mind is all over the place, a mess.

Three philosophers, TERRENCE W. DEACON, MICHEL SERRES and TIMOTHY MORTON's words help explain my thinkings over the year, as I lived with the making of these canvases:

Deacon is such a serious guy. No pictures here, but I feel them, mesmerised by his detail, his stories are like gradualism with jumps. Logic is fascinating, so allowed to be so certain. "*INCOMPLETE NATURE. How Mind Emerged from Matter*" is a long and eminently explicative read about the certainty of what seemingly began as a very much less than certain outcome.

*114 Organism forms evolve in the process of accomplishing a task critical to maintaining the capacity to produce this form, so the task space and the form of the organism are essentially inseparable...Organisms spontaneously develop. Their parts differentiate from an undifferentiated starting point. Organisms' components are integrated and interdependent from the beginning, and...they exist as a consequence of having at some point been relevant for already fulfilling some function.*

Serres' ambiguous sincerity is more my thing. Variegated lists that ramble in quick fire lines of detail, seemingly flippant un-relations, that hold an instructive fickle. Figurations figure for us. To be able to paint like that, as it never finishes. I found much more than lists in his book "*THE PARASITE*". Paragraphs, pages even, with figures of Noise and Message, and interestingly appropriate to Northland's dilemma. Sediment from a flood, picking up as it flows, leaving behind as it moves on. Sediment as static, static as noise, noise becoming message.

I wanted to be partner in the making, to allow the paint its room, its quibble, its rambling merge of coverings hiding and showing the shape of the circle. To be with the sense(s) of the stretched canvas, with the drag of paint across the flatness, the mixed colour, the thinned down paint figuratively embodying soak and flow, displaying its noise, its static, and its message. The static of paint, and the message of the circle; the message of the paint, the static of the circle. We live seemingly clean lives now, never static on our screens. Yet I live with tinnitus, as Van Gogh with his madness, and Serres his Parasite (the word *parasite* in French means static or interference). Noise before the message comes through, then becomes noise itself, as another message comes in. To paint, to point.

*178 The invention of an empty space, its discovery under the flood waters or its constitution by the sweat of our brow, open a gap in the world's tissue, produce a catastrophe, a distance, a fault through which rush, not the excluded multiplicity, but rather the mad multiplication of the most random or the best adapted single unit. The previous equilibrium was sewn with differences. But in the local whiteness that we produce, homogeneity appears. Swelling of the waters. Stock.*

*67 I have found a spot where, give or take one vibration, moving a hair's breadth in either direction causes the noises to become messages and the messages, noises. Of course this crest is jagged, random, stochastic. Whoever watched me in my comings and goings would think that he was watching a fly. I guide myself by sound. I am on the saw's teeth of the mountain, at the edges of noise. Not an echo, not at the centre of everything like a sonorous echo, but on the edges of messages, at the birth of noises.*

Art making is deeply involved in finding beauty, and not an easy task. I have often claimed I don't care if others like my work or not, yet I have begun to wonder if that is so. I do like to show it, the manner of display is critically part of how the works appear. I have a picture in my studio of an early exhibition of Malevich's in a corner of a room, with a chair nearby, another of Yves Klein in his living room surrounded by his sponge works and some monochrome paintings, yet another of the shaman prince holding a curved sausage, it's slanted cut held flat to a tv screen. Because beauty is an elusive thing, to go straight towards it seems I will never find it.

But there it was, wrapped in guilty horror, to see beauty in those rivers slain with timber, the brash winds and unrelenting rain, brush marks of intention, of Ecology saying "you wanted wood, well, now you've got wood"? Now that's Display. Like being in the depths of Morton's sticky ecological chocolate. A woman on tv said this is a man-made event. We know what she means. And the earth-grounding follow up, it began with a wind, wet with rain, then came the logs.

This is not a painter using geometric forms to describe, a kind of abstract realism, a formalism. Circles were circles, things already, long before me! And yet, the flow of mud, the mess of things, the drag of the paintbrush, the log ends, their packed formation on the trucks, the murky beige: forms at the end of things, seamed together, as 'pictures' of the mind. Single circles feel like spirits, assembled circles call out construction; each functioning in their own way.

What I wanted was to be submerged in the way of painting, and the process: the making of the colour, and the analogy, of muck, significance and promise. And the dribbling sides of the canvases, a challenge to those tidy frameworks we have of care and precision. Sometimes I went too far, covering the circles so much I couldn't see them. Yet even the precision of selection seemed wrong here. To paint a thought, many thoughts, to drown in them even, (yet not eat them, not quite!)

Morton, in *The Third Thread of "DARK ECOLOGY For a Logic of Future Coexistence"* is an unexpected source of ideology on Beauty, but one that makes sense here.

*149: Beauty is virtual: I am unable to tell whether the beauty resides in me or in the thing – it is as if it were in the thing, but impossible to pin down there. The subjunctive, floating "as if" virtual reality of beauty is a little queasy.... [F]rom veer we obtain environment and perversion. When a ship is veering, it's not certain whether its acting on the ocean or letting the ocean act on it. In the same way, beauty requires a veering toward a thing. The thing emits a tractor beam in whose vortex I find myself; I veer towards it.*

*150: Beauty is the givenness of data. A thing impinges on me before I can contain it or use it or think it. This impingement is not susceptible to being pinned down. It is as if I hear the thing breathing right next to me. And that is the true origin of the uncanny inertia we sense in its proximity. Something slightly "evil" is happening: something already has a grip on us and this is demonic insofar as it is "from elsewhere". This "saturated" demonic proximity is the essential ingredient of ecological being and ecological awareness, not some Nature over yonder.*