

In the Picture

Neville Weston

Brush with words no contest.

It is often said that a picture is worth a thousand words and yet, increasingly, pictures are accompanied by words - sometimes just by their titles. But sometimes words can also form part of the art works themselves.

Our understanding of the luminous painted quilt-like forms of Matthew Johnson's new paintings at Greenhill Galleries is directed by the words in the catalogue and by the paintings' titles.

At Galerie Düsseldorf, Lesley Duxbury's prints occupy the gap between painting and poetry, and in the same gallery space even abstract Brian McKay does not divorce his exciting new work from words and titles.

Even the display of Max Ernst's art books and graphics at the Art Gallery of WA is saturated in words.

With so many words in these exhibitions, should we conclude that the pen is mightier than the paintbrush after all?

Not really, because the visual is always the most significant element of each of these artists' works,

Text never quite becomes content in the prints of Duxbury, and in Johnson's luscious colour paintings text merely aids our reading and enhances our enjoyment. His paintings are quite big, bright and colour saturated, but never sharp and harsh.

In the earlier pictures, the kaleidoscopic coloured marks cluster around either a dark or a light heart, with the vaguely hexagonal forms, glowing and jostling gently with their neighbours. The later works recall the divisions of land, sea and sky of traditional figurative and representational painting,

These surface-rich paintings pulsate with rhythmic warmth and colour temperature, creating a sense of visual activity akin to the landscape itself. The titles leave you in no doubt where, the stimulus came from for these painterly abstractions of the essence of places.

One of the abstract paintings from Matthew Johnson's New Works exhibition the stimulus came from for these painterly abstractions of the essence of places.

Lesley Duxbury's extraordinary metallically based works and inkjet prints also derive from the optical response to the world, and particularly the sky.

By pairing oppositional texts over the same cloudscapes, we are challenged into seeing the same scene as both fair and foul, balmy and miserable.

Her unsettling meteorology and occasional arcane references, however, are so exquisitely made that they stand outside logic and simply satisfy as fine, well-made objects, wrapped in their own mysterious language.

Because printmaking had its origins in the provision of multiple copies for a growing market, it is interesting to see that some of these works are unique while others are in editions of eight.

But as some are inkjet prints, how can we tell that they are restricted to that edition size?

McKay has also used unusual techniques to produce his intense show. He has tantalisingly mixed geometric forms with energetic, almost expressionist, scarification. Each work is unarguably unique.

They, too, have a lusciousness which almost reminds me of the popular decoration that can be found in cheap picture shops, and yet, he always keeps to the high art ground.

Measurement and the straight edge are anathema to many artists, and yet McKay, like Howard Taylor, somehow achieves the Jungian dream of reconciling opposites,

Dusseldorf's shows always keep to a high standard, and this handsome and unlikely pairing of artists is no exception.

Max Ernst's exhibition at the Art Gallery of WA is vast in comparison with the shows in the commercial galleries. It deserves several visits to take everything in. Each time I look around, I decide something quite different from my previous visit.

Of course, you can't easily get over the monumental presence of an heroic figure such as Ernst,

He is as overpowering by legend alone. And yet so quirky are his spidery drawings and menacing skyborne motifs that he is as well known to us and as approachable as our own personalised night-time theatre - our dreams.

Because he is a key surrealist, the dream and hallucinations are very important to his art. As with the work of one of his key sources, Lewis Carroll, you cannot easily find the logic in much of Ernst's work, But it is there if you seek it out.

The key is that for all his attacks on logic, the dull and everyday life, basically he had one research topic in all his multi-faceted art, This was to explore the meaning of - and roots of - creativity itself.

As a World War I gunner, he felt that commonsense had bled away in that conflict and that ordinary people had huge stores of creativity waiting to be used.

Finally, the Swap Meet exhibition at the Moores building is a welcome demonstration of the success of the Artists' Foundation's exchange program between WA and Swiss artists.

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