

Wrasse: Metamorphosis by Janis Nedela

We cannot decide whether animals have painting, even though they do not paint on canvas, and even when hormones induce their colors and lines; even here, there is little foundation for a clear cut distinction between animals and human beings. Conversely, we must say that painting does not begin with so called abstract art, but recreates the silhouettes and postures of corporeality. . . Deleuze and Guattari

In fact, this oddly animated image struck a sympathetic, vital chord in his work, a preoccupation, even an obsession that has been at the heart of his painting for at least a decade. Nedela has long been concerned with the material paradox of painting, the making of coherent coloured marks, both as the act of the artist and as a way of seeing for all of us. Painting is constantly caught between an ever-slipping animal animation to whose vital traces we respond as viewers and an abstract designed, predictable order, shape and intention.

Successful painting may well exist primarily as a reprise of animal life, moment to moment. Perhaps the viewer may only recover the pleasure of painting through metamorphosis, by ringing the changes on perception, swapping rippling skin for water, harmonic lines of chromatic dots for the roiling curves of coloured scales. So that, finally, they become one sensation, one painting.

As they are to be seen, now, in the gallery, one can imagine a lively movement across the four large canvases, misty shadows overlap from one to the next. Muted stains in ochre reds, yellows and blues come to a point, literally, a high point of colour, in a particular mark, or a small cluster of marks at a certain moment, as one's gaze travels across each area and across each curved boundary, like a reconnaissance plane over a landscape searching for signs of life amongst the camouflage.

Janis Nedela's grand four-panel painting, *Wrasse: Metamorphosis* began with a highly coloured fish, or rather an image of a fish in the *National Geographic*, a wrasse photographed through the sunlit surface of the sea as it appeared, shifting between highlight and shade amongst the rocks, weeds and coral below, the slow sweep of the tide. These seemingly pedantic distinctions matter, because the painting, as one sees it, is not a painting of a fish and, self evidently, not a transcription of a photograph.

I've always been fascinated by aquariums and by fish in general. I like the idea of how fish appear in and out of water. In water they can camouflage themselves. Out of water (their safety zone) and out of their environment and in a distressed state, that's when you get to see all the surface colours.

It is clear that it is the traveling eye that unifies the work, not an immutable sequence of four rectangles. Nedela points out that he conceived each canvas separately in response to the image of the wrasse, that each has a different mood or quality in its making. They may be displayed in any order or no order, or viewed separately, apart from each other. There is no up or down, as he works around each edge of the canvas clock wise or anti-clockwise. They are united not by a rigid design, but an interdependent ecology of marks and sensations. This remains consistent, even as the overall shape and dimensions of the work before us changes. Nedela has discovered a unique way to engage this ecology of marks and moments as painting. He worked in two stages.

First he completed the 'image' on each of the four canvases from low broad smears to detail high points, micro to macro, fast to slow and back again.

I started with black on a white canvas sketching in the idea of how the whole thing was going to look. Very consciously adopting a Japanese approach, (the placement of balanced areas of

black/white, rest areas/active areas), the entire, four panels, had to work as one even though one panel might be lively and loud and another quiet.

He imbedded rustling highlights in lichen-like stains, always about to seep and spread. There was a final session in which each canvas was tuned against the others, not for graphic consistency but harmony, the harmony of a complex artifact of nature.

The second stage concerned the application of a layer of lines of small dots of paint across the entire canvas. These dots are not imposed as a mechanical grid. At least two organic effects modulate their presence and position. Nedela applies them with a pin head dipped in liquid, nearly always domestic, paint. There is usually enough paint for five or six dots at a time but, of course the reduced load of paint requires a slightly different touch for each dot. Then there is fatigue, the rhythm of the lines of dots changes as each session of dot making draws on through time. Finally Nedela works with the canvas horizontal, flat so that he can shift around its edges as convenient, this too deprives the lines of dots of any possibility of becoming a grid. They are more like a spoor, regular animal tracks woven into a curtain that shifts and shapes slowly before one's eyes, in response to gentle puffs of light, the rising and falling of the tide of vision.

In the upper left corner of the second panel from the left there is a golden red shape, like a nebula, a patch of camouflage across the spine of a fish or a micro-organism heeling over slowly in a rock pool. The dots interact with this shape, not as a screen but as place marks, some kind of tether to stop it floating away across the canvas. They must chart its stresses and strains against their rhythms. A floating glance across it will show this process at work. Nedela's dots bring each work to life by stressing its precise limitations.

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Two further influences helped Nedela square the circle, to reconcile abstraction and anarchic vitality in his painting. The first is Japanese painting and wood block prints. Ernst Chesneau, one of the first western critics to see Japanese painting, pointed out, astutely, that in contrast to European painters, the Japanese artist alone reconciled realistic description with a disciplined decorative order.

One thinks at once of the motif of the leaping carp, those magnificently curved fish winding across the paper, whose shapes dissolve into lithe rhythms of curved overlapping scales and limpid brush strokes, each one slightly different, registered with a unique pressure and tension, just like Nedela's dots.

Nedela's other more recent re-discovery has been Turner, or to be more precise the romantic underpinnings of Turner - the moral metamorphoses of light and shade in the great marine paintings of the 1840's. He had been overwhelmed by the new Turner galleries at the Tate in 1986.

Last year he began to make simple landscapes, expanses of coloured tones beneath a curtain of dots. These are Wrasse Landscapes, the land as living breathing skin.

Some of them hinted at Turner. So he began to experiment with the tonal structure of works such as Typhoon - Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and the Dying. First he transcribed their broad structure in tone and colour, but not the image. Then he added a curtain of dots. At once the canvas acquired a vivid corporeal presence.

It is just pure suggestion: just mark making and tones. I was looking at Turner's mark markings and tones: I wasn't looking at objects. What was compelling, was his colour displacements and the balance of colours.

In one case a version of the Chateau d' Argent, Nedela turned his transcription of the tones upside down because, for his purposes, it looked better. Nedela appreciated Turner's energy. At the end of a day working on these homages his arms and shoulders ached with the effort.

Turner was an enthusiastic angler. He had a bent for transcribing his common visual experience into his paintings. Perhaps his memory of the shifting tones and shadows of the river and the energy of the fish drawn from the water inspired his visions of life and death against an infinite landscape of light and dark. Nedela also fished' -coming from Albany and going fishing at three o'clock in the morning as a young boy and teenager, embeds it deeply in your subconscious.

This exhibition is more than a bold new step for Nedela. It proposes a vital new frame for painting, a revelation of its corporeal being. As Deleuze and Guattari suggested painting is first and always a living body.

David Bromfield

The quotation from Deleuze and Guattari is taken from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari A Thousand Plateaus, Capitalism and Schizophrenia translation and foreword by Brian Massumi, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis London 1991

The comments by Janis Nedela are from an interview with David Bromfield on the 26th June 2005

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