

ARTICULATED ARTISTS

Friday, 11 April 2014

John Mills talked to Alli Sharma at Weekend Gallery in Los Angeles

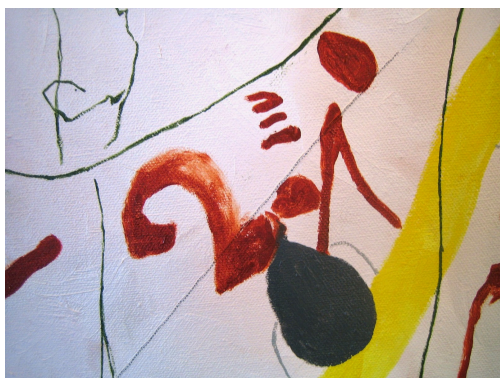


AS: When I look at your paintings I imagine some of the marks are made from felt tip pens, is that something you use in your drawings?

JM: Most of my paintings are based on prior ink drawings. For a long time I used black ink on paper, then I discovered coloured markers and that opened up the process because then I could start drawing with colour as a means to create composition and think about how shapes and colours interact on the initial drawing surface. It was a revelation, but I have been doing this now for a long time. So the painted marks reference prior marks that I made in a drawing process. Sometimes they're mediated to appear almost precisely how they were originally in the drawing and sometimes I allow the paint to be thicker or barely there at all. I diverge from that script often by using the tactility of the paint, how paint behaves differently to ink.

Fried Fountain, 2013, oil on canvas, 36x36"

AS: Do the same motifs crop up in the drawings?



Detail more obvious than others. In these pictures we're looking at now, that one has almost a distinctive head, which is uncharacteristic of my recent work.

JM: I have this thing for loopy, curvy shapes that reference things like language. I use a lot of signs, they could look like letters or numbers but then they can become pictures in themselves, like hieroglyphs. It's a distillation or meditation on language, the language of forms in a way, but also the language of seeing in the world and making sense of how we, as humans, come to spoken and visual language. Writing is a visual experience and letters originally started out as these symbolic shapes but when you learn language you forget about that. You see words, but in reality they're just pictures. I find that fascinating, how our brains function and how we perceive things in space. There are forms that coalesce, some

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AS: So if that starts to happen do you do something to stop it? I can see things are rubbed out and over.



Detail

JM: It's a thin line. I like references. I like things that look like things. I like a shape that looks like a bird or whatever. To me, this is like a leaf. At one point I had this painting upside down and this looked like a bird sitting on a branch so there are these forms that happen, made by marks. I try to play it up but my goal is often to reference things but not have them explicitly defined, so that when you see it you don't quite know what you're looking at.

AS: It seems to me that there are two distinct things happening with these thin lines and then bolder filled-in forms of things.

JM: I am trying to create a balance between a plodding, thick approach to making sense of a picture and then there are also lighter, sinewy lines that come in. It's about a nuanced, yet clumsy, way of depicting something. As an analogy to being a person in the world, we're imperfect and you can't know the answers to everything, so the imperfection of what I do is about that. It's about trying to be real in the sense that you accept your limitations as a conscious entity.

AS: We went to see the Calder exhibition together at LACMA and there were lines and forms and the idea of balancing things, was that something you could connect with?

JM: Absolutely, but the imperfection I was talking about is the conceptual difference. When Calder came to the fore in the 1930s and 1940s, it was proper modernism. People were trying to make something beautiful and transcendent, and in his case, also surreal. I guess I try to do the same thing, however, I exist in the 21st Century where all these systems and ideas about oneness, linear progression and the abstract expressionist sublime got turned on their head with postmodernism. Things are no longer so certain and I think that is the precariousness of our times, right now, the climate, everything, its all a mixed up fragile jumble. So I really do appreciate Calder's simplicity in his constructions. There is freeness and a wonderful focus on a level of form that is very beautiful and poetic. I try to go for that but, in the end, I want to include the dirt of things. These grounds are ruddy and if you look closer often I have been scrawling-in marks, almost like graffiti, as if I am tagging my own work.



Calder

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AS: Sounds like sabotage?

JM: I like layers, flat layers. You see a surface on a train and one person came along and did this then another person came along and did something else but its all on a flat plane and there's all this overwriting happening. I really appreciate systems that get overwritten, like modernism being overwritten by contemporary life and all its dysfunctions. The result I think is an existential strangeness that can feel alien or uncanny.

AS: Like in your work, you can see a layer of something that was there before.



Gentle Land, 2013, oil on canvas, 36x36"

JM: Up until a couple of years ago all my grounds were gesso and so the marks would sit on top of an empty plane. Then I started painting all the ground with white frenetic brushstrokes prior to painting the coloured parts and that has become an interesting process for me because preparing grounds has become a thing in itself. So there is this surface that I modulate and it has become more and more dirty. I paint this first and then I make these marks and what I've been doing is taking pencils and carving into the wet paint (and sometimes later when its dry). I do this part without the foreknowledge of the image that is going on top. So I try to create systems that are overlapping and incongruent, but they fit in the end. It's a mash up.

AS: You deliberately mess up the blank canvas and start to build using your own rules?



Maidstoned, 2013, oil on canvas, 54x54"

JM: That's definitely part of it. What I like about my process is that I do these drawings, small scale on paper and then I translate them into a larger scale in a painting form with a brush. A line that maybe took a second to do with a pen takes me a while to do in paint. I mess around with how I put things down and so my process is a meditation or investigation of my own subconscious, because the images start out as these freeform drawings, but then, when I paint them, I am methodically trying to get inside my own head. Why did I make this?

AS: So you go back to the drawings to try to understand them?

JM: Yes, in a way it's a mental analysis and I think of it as to do with the construction of one's identity, as a person, and what does it mean to be a conscious being. So, looking at what I have done, this thing I have created, and trying to make sense of it by translating it into a painting.



Just Like a Prayer, 2013, oil on canvas, 54x54"

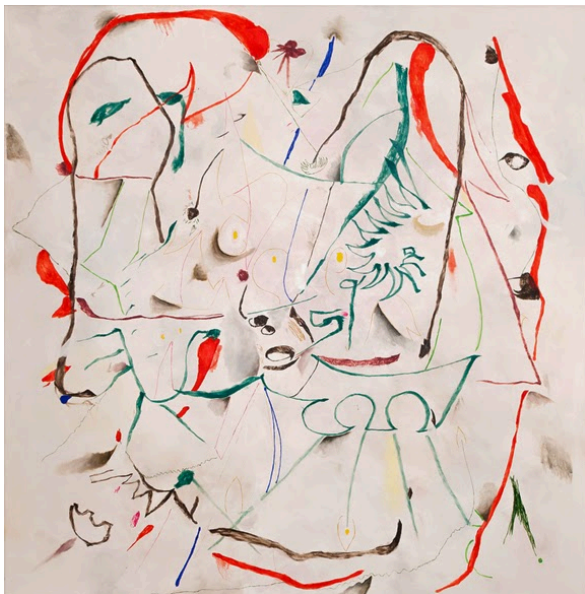
AS: Like a more conscious way of doing it?

JM: It's more conscious but then I also try to step outside of the descriptive sense of things. I'm saying ok, I've got this line here in my drawing and I try to do that but then other times, when I paint this I might try to make it rougher or different to how it was and try to subvert my own systems

AS: Once you're into the translating phase of making a painting do you come back with the white again and cross things out? Do things start becoming more integrated?

JM: There is definitely an integration process that happens at the end, like these little subtle shaded smudgy areas. I include those a lot and maybe go back and draw things so I try to get to this balance. But for me, a balance may be what someone else may consider an imbalance. I like this clumsy painting over a line where I paint white back on top. And I put in this shading area. This painting wasn't working until I went back into it and did these things and I also put in these pencil marks

and for some reason that's when it started to click for me. The space was too empty and simple so I needed this complexity. A very different thing happens in a drawing and in a painting. As a thing, a painting has depth, it has tactile surface, paint, brushstrokes, subtle changes in colour, where this line is heavier here and these are all little subtleties that make a painting a painting. A drawing is a simple thing, that is beautiful, but when it becomes a painting then it becomes much bigger than what it was originally.



Shelter, 2013, oil on canvas, 78x78"

AS: Do you have favourite artists you come back to?

JM: I don't necessarily have particular people ... well I do. There's Matisse, with his cutouts. They have a lot of the same elements, white ground with these colours that were cut out and placed on the surface. Also Paul Klee, I've always liked his work. I haven't focused on it, and I try to do my own thing, but I really respond to his work. I

think it is similar in the sense that he was trying to depict a psychological state and the strangeness of being alive.

**John Mills will be exhibiting 7 June - 5 July 2014
at Rosamund Felsen Gallery, 2525 Michigan Avenue, Santa
Monica CA 90404**

Source -> dailynews.com/lifestyle/20140130/gardening-with-australian-and-south-african-plants-create-a-textured-layer-of-artistic-looks

