

John Spiteri: Paint a Rumour

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Sydney artist John Spiteri adds to his personal lexicon of references and techniques in his latest exhibition of uniquely presented paintings

WORDS: Lionel Bawden

“Introspection has produced strange fruit, and Spiteri’s works embody a sense of otherworldliness that is as eloquent as it is inventive”

If we view the works of Sydney’s contemporary artists as a bunch of misfits kicking around town together, Spiteri’s paintings are the enigmatic guy always sitting at the edge of the group in contemplation. Neither cool nor sullen, they are mindful, ethereal and philosophical – the other kids in the gang hang on his every sparse word.

Spiteri’s paintings are remarkable for the force of their understatement. His restricted and at times sombre palette reflects an almost monastic sense of control, which permeates all aspects of the work. His recent exhibition at Sydney’s Sarah Cottier Gallery conveyed the feeling that the artist had undertaken a steady and considered project, making slow discoveries along the way. Unsurprisingly, this introspection has produced strange fruit, and Spiteri’s works embody a sense of otherworldliness that is as eloquent as it is inventive.

The figures in Spiteri’s works bring to mind the protagonist (the stranger) in Robert A. Heinlein’s 1961 sci-fi novel *Stranger in a Strange Land*, which tells the tale of a human child of astronaut parents raised on Mars by Martians and later returned to Earth, where it is imagined he belongs. The protagonists in Spiteri’s paintings are not quite human and neither are they entirely alien. They seem strangely knowing – soothsayers or mythical beings. The works draw you in yet maintain a distance, initiating a kind of push and pull, once described by art writer Peter Schjeldahl as a kind of “physiological standoff of attraction and reverence” that one can only name as beauty.

The title work of the exhibition, *Paint a Rumour* (2009), provides an

evocative metaphor for an artist’s conundrum of constructing an image, that process of piecing together a picture from little bits of information both known and imagined, embellishing reality and articulating thoughtful deceptions. A tower of small figures (each one part-Venus of Willendorf, part-Sale of the Century hostess) present offerings to a single larger figure. Willing sacrifices, subjects submitted to the artist’s scrutiny, the figures succumb to the inherent repetition implied in the title (the retelling of the rumour), reworked and distorted through generation upon generation of images.

Spiteri frequently employs a fragmentation of the figure as it crosses over geometric fractures in the composition. Regions of paint become imposed upon the body and figures pass from one dimension to another, becoming transfigured through the sequential abstraction of Spiteri’s delicate geometry.

In *Turn the night into day* (2008), time and space is controlled by the artist’s whim. Two figures are held in dynamic tension within a pattern of interference; colour shifts across various delineated sectors, literally turning night to day. One figure seems ready to fly aloft, its upper body contained within a kite form yet restrained by a line which connects this polygon to the core of the second figure, balancing its companion. The sparseness of the painting belies the complexity of its weight and composition, allowing the peculiar joyousness of the work to slowly emerge rather than overpower.

The recurring motifs of urns, platters and offerings found in much of Spiteri’s work conjure the excess and idolatry of ancient Rome, marked

by ornamentation and artifice. The lithe figure in *Forgotten flame* (2008) seems to struggle as it carries a vast urn on its back across a field of pastel hues. The figure emanates a miasmatic vapour while watery fluctuations of the paint draw the eye into the vast dimensionality of the work’s surface.

Spiteri likes to experiment with disturbing the pristine surfaces of his paintings, often creating haphazard frames, which sit in opposition to the image. The painting *Profiles in 3D* (2008) gives the impression of wanting to reveal itself, employing, as it does, a device which asserts the artist’s desire to move outside the frame. Small areas of red paint haemorrhage from the normally barren sides of the stretched canvas, alerting us to the unknown inner life of the image, the leaking red patches remaining unseen when viewed in the conventional way: from the front.

Spiteri’s process is delicate and involved. Creating and deconstructing drawings, the artist masks off areas of the canvas, accentuating the tactility

of raw linen against painted surface. He then cuts, reassembles, paints through and draws over these “mono-prints”, lifting traces of the paint from the canvas, archiving the trajectories of the work. For this exhibition, he staged a dynamic installation in the gallery window – his mono-prints speared from behind by a series of cut palm fronds inferring the mark-making tool and toying with ideas of support. In relation to the neo-tribalism of his imagery, the spearing asserted mark-making as a kind of transformative violence: a physical act giving body to its intellectual and psychological properties.

It might be said that Spiteri belongs with the likes of Hany Armanious and the Canadian David Altmejd: “mystic” artists who create artifacts that evoke myriad questions, both material and immaterial, and defy reduction to a specific meaning. Spiteri mines reality for ordinary subjects and dissects them with beguiling tenderness, a project he continued in this compellingly original exhibition.



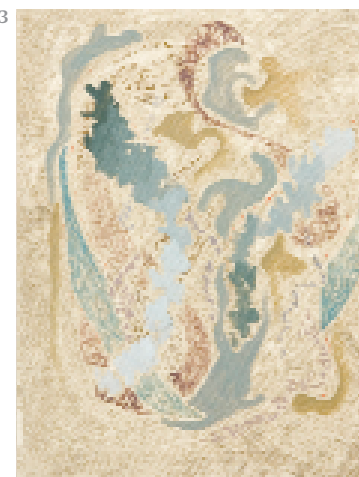
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1 *Head and shoulders* (2007), oil and enamel on canvas, paper, 30.5 x 38cm

2 *Forgotten flame* (2008), oil on linen, 35.5 x 41cm

3 *Profiles in 3D* (2008), oil on canvas, 71.5 x 56cm

4 *Cubic country* (2008), oil on canvas, artist’s frame, 41 x 51cm

5 Installation view, Sarah Cottier Gallery

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Images courtesy the artist and Sarah Cottier Gallery