

House of paine (suits us!)



Ralph Paine, *Series Series*, Ramp Gallery, WINTEC School of Visual Arts, Hamilton, May 2005

Terminus Hotel (detail), indian ink, gouache and pencil on paper, 2000

Taking my cue from its title's singular multiplicity, the exhibition *Series Series* provides me with an opportunity to not only review one of Ralph Paine's recent shows, or even just discuss the various bodies of work it contains (in full or in part), but also to consider a practice I've enjoyed immensely for some time. Perhaps even to serve as a modest, albeit very personal, introduction to an artist that Tessa Laird called in a recent *Listener* review 'one of our cleverest and most obscure painters'¹.

In fact over the almost fifteen years I've known him I have been fascinated by Paine's practice as an anomaly to just the kind of marginalising historicity that confers such obscurity. I was first introduced to his work in the early 90s alongside that of so-called 'New Image' artists like Paul Hartigan, Denis Watkins, Dick Frizzell, and especially Gavin Chilcott with whom he collaborated on a number of occasions. These artists, associated with an international 'return to painting' in the 1980s, were big names to me as

an art school student, but they were not 'hot', a category that was then burgeoning with new names in the equally burgeoning dealer scene. Nor were they the names on the lips of those of us arguing the early programme of artist-run space Teststrip (although some time later Paine showed with, and even for a brief moment joined, Teststrip). The 'New Image' painters were characterised for us by a graphic sensibility ranging stylistically from Matisse, Morandi and De Chirico, through Lichtenstein, Warhol and Hockney, to Memphis, Raw Comics and Red Grooms. They felt like a crisp, sometimes camp, wise crack of coloured vision in the face of the preceding, sometimes dour, gravity and darkness of McCahon, Fomison and Clairmont. Learning well perhaps the importance of lightness from them none-the-less, their character seemed international rather than national, and took the earlier artists introverted but authoritative autonomy and made it extrovert.

Paine, formally trained as a graphic designer at a polytech, was something of a late arrival in the 'New Image' camp, and his signature use of gouache, inks and acrylics, with occasional collage, assemblage, and installation, extended their presence in many public institutions for some time. Commissioned projects such as *Scheme* (with Gavin Chilcott, 1992) for the City Gallery Wellington; the massive scrolls commissioned for the old Canterbury Provincial Council Chambers by the South Island Arts Project for 'Tales Untold' (*Hegel's Utu*, 1994); and for what had been the Auckland Telephone Exchange, then recently renovated to become the Auckland City Art Gallery's contemporary galleries (*Call Waiting*, 1995) never led however to the inclusion that one might have expected from such major works in the then increasing number of curated shows here or overseas. I always felt it was equally bizarre for such commercially viable work that this trajectory was echoed in a dealer gallery scene which seemed only to provide one-off venues and still sees him without an ongoing dealer relationship to this day. Throughout this, having shown frequently at, and been a longtime member of, the much more grass-roots Artspace of the day, Paine has been by no means averse to showing in small-scale project and artist-run spaces (as *Xeropolis*, Artspace, 1990; *Terminus Hotel*, Cuckoo at the Moving Image Centre, 2000; and *Series Series* itself attest to). However, looking back now, all these projects appear occasional moments in a far more prolific studio practice that seems more like an on-going, but not unjoyful, going-to-ground.

The same hindsight makes me wonder if it was perhaps the same vague pleasure of anomaly that leads me to write this now that infused first meeting Paine and inflected the friendship that followed. I well remember trundling down with fellow student Martin Poppelwell to what was in 1991 Auckland's one-building SOHO, The Strand, to review Paine's show *Cypher* at Gregory Flint Gallery for our somewhat precocious weekly art show on bFM, and being completely dumbfounded by perplexing and elegant 'floor plans for tents' that seemed to hold a delicate, even secret, geometry of the history of nomadic thought and activity. Their quietness was completely at odds with so much of the brash or whimsical bravado I associated with much painting of the time yet they seemed to draw on the equally prevalent field of 'theory' without any of the dry pedantry I was already bored with in much text-based work. While Poppelwell and myself struggled rather clumsily to substantiate the importance of 'theory' in the context we felt ourselves to be working in, in a still very resistant art school environment, we found a most compelling engagement in a place I, at least, had never expected to find it. Visiting Paine at his home some time later revealed to me a practice equally sustained by the modest domesticity of a garden studio and the avant-gardism of an extensive library of continental philosophy, literature and art history as well as a rich resource for his interest in Asian and Pacific cultures. To a first year art school student exploring performance, and attracted to the most confrontational practices, delicate work like Paine's might have seemed staid and uninspiring, but I had already had such preconceptions shattered by the charismatic non-



Emotional Geographic, watercolour on paper, 2002.

conformist behaviour of Chilcott, whom I came to think of as a kind of suited anarchist. Certainly the sense of value that Chilcott and Paine seemed to have in their work, for their own lives and lifestyle at least, was at odds with the external accountability of context driven, and increasingly institutionalised work that I was engaged in. Now, as a teacher at the same art school I attended, I more often find myself discussing with students the difficult question of the meaningfulness of an arts practice in terms of this rather abstract value to their own lives, rather than in the specifics of social, political, or economic change. Paine taught me about the aristocracy of the artist, not in the sense of a sovereignty that sets one apart from other people so much as the sovereignty of all people.

But from here I wish to leave the artist-personae for work-itself, the work of *Series Series*...

So here we have a series of series... To start with, four series, each with its own proper name and date:

1. *The Battle of Erewhon* 1999
2. *Terminus Hotel* 2000
3. *Emotional Geographic* 2002
4. *Philosopheme* 2004²

This exhibition's use of the mode of the series at once affects a useful and enjoyable engagement with the activity/thought/place of the work-itself and gently invites us to shift our own activity/thought/place as easily as we move along the wall following the work, or shift from foot to foot in front of a single work. I find in each of these series a thinking through, an active use, of the various possibilities imminent in this most fundamental of methodologies; the singular and the serial, what is shared, echoed or repeated as difference, what is different, specific to itself and a new possibility, an event to be faithful to in a series of events... The series here is an aesthetic sleight of hand that makes the infinite appear finite (as opposed to *seriality* which so-called Minimalist artists used to make the finite appear infinite). Because it is spread out before us in comfortable finitude, like a hand of cards placed face-up on a table, we are quietly drawn in



rather than overwhelmed. The trick works a treat as the comfortably familiar, perhaps even conservative, appearance transports us to radical alterity without invoking in us a conservative defence of whom or where we already are.

The young girl maintains the pose that she has had for five thousand years, a gesture that no longer depends on who made it. The air still has the turbulence, the gust of wind, and the light that it had that day last year, and it no longer depends on who was breathing it that morning.

— Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*³

Perhaps it is the philosophical dreaming-space of the work that allows us to move into the arena of the ‘politically incorrect’. In a kind of atrium off the main gallery we walk amongst the most recent series *Philosophemes* – 26 graphic limbless busts and reliquaries of young women on plinths, each with its own letter of the Latin alphabet. Thus we are within a much greater crowd than we first see, an alphabet, an infinite combination of friendships⁴ that can produce an infinite number of meanings. To find instead an enemy in these bodies is to overlook the opportunity to think outside of our own bodies / time / place. It is our historic body politic that we mistake for being fixed on a plinth. The *Philosophemes* are not pornographic, they are anti-oedipal, they are not sphinxes precisely because they offer infinite alternatives to strangling ourselves when we confront their riddles. If they are to be seen as portraits they are, as Paine said in his floor talk, after Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, portraits of ‘a people yet to come’.

The Battle of Erewhon, acrylic on paper, 1999

Moving through this almost psychedelic folding and unfolding in the tradition of portraiture, and on into the main gallery, we find the exhibition’s largest series, *The Battle of Erewhon*, itself drawn from an even larger installation first produced for the massive foyer wall of the Dunedin Public Art Gallery in 1999. In this work an ancient earth⁵, distant cities and gathering armies form a patchwork, this time quilted together from the traditions of landscape and history painting. Its tempestuous air is drawn up into a rainbow of golden light, arching over it high up the wall of the gallery. This form is in turn echoed on another gallery wall in the smaller scale series *Emotional Geographic*, this time in the lurid colour of National Geographic or tourist postcard photography. Each muddy landscape has its own rainbow, hanging over it like a geopolitical promise rendered dangerously close to a greeting card sentiment.

At the end of the line we find *Terminus Hotel*, certainly the most dense, and even didactic series, as it renders in text a long philosophical tract in response to the sale of the work McCahon gifted to Victoria University.⁶ Alongside this text a stately architecture is drawn, shot through with perspectival lines that might guarantee its monumentality but appear equally like scaffolding for its dismantling. Washed in red these works are further layered and bisected by the black lines of angular gestures, appearing sometimes to be cranes implicated in the architecture’s fate and sometimes as a kanji-like calligraphy intensifying the text.

Terminus Hotel strikes me as a perfect place to break this review, its politics, like that running through all of Paine's practice, simultaneously singular and a launching pad, a 'place where we rest-up before making a leap into the future'.⁷

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Notes

1. Tessa Laird, "The Future Looms", *New Zealand Listener*, volume 199, No.3396, June 11-17 2005
2. Ralph Paine, *Series Series – Notes for a floor talk*, unpublished, p1
3. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, Verso, London, 1994, p163
4. Eme is an obscure word meaning friend (Ralph Paine, op cit, p4), perhaps encouraging a reading of 'Philosopheme' beyond the tragic figure of a 'pheme/femme' fatale, to a befriending of philosophy.
5. While the title of Samuel Butler's utopian novel *Erewhon* is well known as an acronym for the related terms 'now here' and 'nowhere' I have recently wondered about it's relationship to the English word its actually closest to 'erewhile', an archaic and literary term, though certainly used in his day, itself meaning 'some time ago', and enjoyed a further complexity in its spatiotemporal collapse.
6. Colin McCahon's painting *Storm Warning* was gifted to Victoria University in 1981 and sold by them in 1999 amid considerable debate.
7. Ralph Paine, op cit, p 4



Philosopheme (detail), coloured pencil on canvas, 2004.