

MICHAEL GREAVES



*I SUDDENLY REMEMBERED
MY GRANDMOTHERS'
WORDS*

RDS Gallery
2020

**'Like Letting the Brakes Off': Abstraction, Figurability
and Expressiveness in the Art of Michael Greaves**

by Alistair Fox

**You Are Already Here: Michael Greaves and Painting
as Time-Machine**

by Brendan Jon Philip

Essays on the occasion of the exhibition

Michael Greaves

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13 November – 12 December 2020
RDS Gallery, 6 Castle Street, Dunedin

Cover Image: Michael Greaves, *BIG 70's HALO* (2020, oil on canvas, dimensions 31x26 cm).

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'Like Letting the Brakes Off': Abstraction, Figurability and Expressiveness in the Art of Michael Greaves

by Alistair Fox

The 2020 exhibition of new work by Michael Greaves, one of the impressive group of artists to emerge from the Dunedin School of Art in the 1990s, emerges out of his sustained exploration of the nature of painting over the past two decades. In a 2012 essay, Greaves notes: 'For me, this "window to the world" idea of painting, a mode so similar to the ubiquitous photograph, does not accurately present the position that painting occupies, although it was the pathway and the projected road to a successful painting promoted during my early years, emphasising correctness to the representation of sight'. In so doing he recalls the evolution of painting since the photograph's inception and the debates that mark these passages. Like many artists of his generation who came to painting in the 1990s and early 2000s, these debates exercised a significant influence on how his practice evolved.

Not surprisingly, then, following his early venture into figurative verisimilitude working under the direction of New Zealand painter Grahame Sydney, in the course of his subsequent career, in particular during his thesis work culminating in an MFA in 2017, Greaves has sought to interrogate the terms of representation that defined his initial introduction to painting. In so doing, his exhibitions have served to explore the figurative capacities of painting as a medium enacted through a set of gestural performances that seek to encompass an understanding of human experience as mediated retroactively through processes of memory and cognition. Influencing these explorations are his own speculations on the nature of his creative processes, as well as crucial questions such as 'what is a painting?'. The result of this ferment of critical enquiry is the current series 'I Suddenly Remembered My Grandmothers' Words', which seeks to identify the 'more' that art includes beyond the representation of reality as a depiction of a 'window on the world' such as we commonly believe that we perceive it.

As a consequence of this process, Greaves realized that he was engaged in an effort to understand what is at issue when a painter begins to feel that he or she is reaching the moment when, in his words, 'one lassoes the pre-rational moment at which the painting begins to speak back to the artist'. For Greaves, in a subsequent phase of his career, this meant, for example, allowing himself to overlay the figuratively

represented object in his paintings with non-figurative elements that were prompted by intuition, such as circles, tessellations, lines, an investment in the nature of the surface, and various forms and colours, all of which suggest what he calls 'meta-painting' – painting that reflects on the nature of painting.

In the works included in the current RDS Gallery exhibition, Greaves has pushed this process of reflection and enquiry still further, largely omitting any suggestion of representation as a literal transcription of a visually perceived object. Instead, he has allowed the formal properties of the work (shape, colour, line, texture, etc.), in combination with titles that are designed to trigger reflective speculation on the part of the viewer, to convey his sense of the 'more' that resides beyond the constraints of figuration as 'representation', both on the part of the artist who creates the painting, and the viewer who looks at it.

His new work reminds one in some ways of the colour field paintings of Mark Rothko, except that Greaves' paintings have a frame: usually incorporated into the painting itself as bands of paint applied top, bottom, and sides, but sometimes in the form of a colour edging – thus taking on an emphatic three-dimensional status. As Greaves points out, 'The frame is to say, "this is a painting", meaning that "everything outside the painting is something else"'. Like Rothko, Greaves feels

that the move into abstraction allowed him a much greater expressive freedom; in his words: 'It was like letting the brakes off'.

Among the qualities the great American abstract expressionist Mark Rothko known for his colour field paintings ascribed to a work of art were the following: 'Sensuality', 'Tension', and 'Irony'. All these qualities are to be found in Greaves' new paintings. There is sensuality expressed in the thickness of the paint, with expressive applications of pigment left in the form of visible ridges; there is tension in the play of juxtaposed colours – sometimes complementary, but not always – that suggest the complexity of conflicting emotions; and there is intense irony throughout, imparted through the relation of the titles to the intrinsic nature of each painting. Most notably, the title of the exhibition, 'I Suddenly Remembered My Grandmothers' Words', is deeply ironic, because Greaves has revealed that, to his sorrow, he cannot remember the words of either of his grandmothers, whom he revered, and with whom he was very close, when he was a child.

In the absence of these particular memories, 'words' – as an unspecified phenomenon, a group of words rather than a set of specific words – have provided a motivation for these new paintings. They evoke things one might have experienced, but are now no longer able to reconstruct or reproduce at the level of a specific verbal memory, with the kind of precision

that this entails – but which nevertheless exist in what some call ‘pre-linguistic form’ as part of our ‘implicit memories’. Instead, one can have recourse to what Greaves describes as ‘a pictorial moment’ – that conjures up not a specific ‘object’ – such as a word, for example, but a set of experienced associations that are pre-verbal in nature – what Daniel Stern, psychiatrist and paediatrician, termed ‘vitality affects’ associated with ‘dynamic shifts’ in direction, speed, intensity, etc., experienced at the pre-verbal level by a human subject as an infant and throughout his or her life. This ‘pictorial moment’ is what, Greaves believes, the expressive powers of painting as a medium have a unique power to convey.

References

Greaves, Michael. Quoted by Alistair Fox. Conversation with the artist, 7 October 2020.

Greaves, Michael. ‘Praxis, Memory, Things and the Nearby: Painting Representations’. *Scope (Art & Design)*: 13 (2017), 12.



Michael Greaves STARING AT MY FEET (2020, oil and aerosol on linen, 31x38 cm)

You Are Already Here: Michael Greaves and Painting as Time-Machine

by Brendan Jon Philip

Only once you can build a time-machine can you build time-machines. If time-travel is possible it might only be possible when someone from the future arrives with a time-machine and shows us how to build one, thus ensuring there are time-machines in the future to be brought back and gifted upon the past. Casting, however, backwards through time there must have been an omega point in history before which our species lacked the technological development, or maintained a cognitive block in our understanding of consciousness, that prevented the transcendence of our temporal bonds. Perhaps intrepid chrononauts from the future instead will prepare the ground of history for their arrival by seeding the idea in the culture, conjecture and entertainment of their past. Then, when we are finally ready - pop - it's time-machine time, and only once you can build a time-machine can you build time-machines.

The painting of Michael Greaves operates in a similar nebulous and negotiation relationship with what we perceive

as the linear flow of time. Each painting-object displays obvious traces of the painting-process. Layers are applied to layers with strong passages of medium, never quite completely obscuring what has gone before and leaving an evidential archaeological stratum of creative practice. Through the shimmering interaction of these sequential tonal fields and indeterminant forms the narrative is that of paint encountering paint in successive collisions, each phase of development an impact that reverberates into the next. Blocks of colour shift through the application of layers of paint with a play of hue and tonality, tracing a process of mutation and expressing in the final field the constituent gestures of its manufacture. This interplay between painted layers acts as an exploded drawing, giving the viewer an appreciation of the working parts.

As with many painters working in a non-representational mode, Greaves' work is positioned as an encounter with, or discovering of, the work rather than bringing into being a prescribed descriptive form. The implicit suggestion here is that the work must already exist in some state to be discovered. Anything one desires to make, if carried to completion, must exist in the future in its final form. With a little bit of abstract thinking one can posit the art-making process as a retro-causal feedback loop between the finished creation and the impetus to create. Every brush stroke or rattle of the spray can is not a generative act but one of revelation,

a lifting of veil draped over that which, from our limited temporal viewpoint, appears as yet-to-come. The telos of the work contains its original seed and the journey towards its completion, as the genesis of each in its anticipation contains the final form of the piece. The future is one of the vectors that influences the present.

An analogy to recorded music may also work here. Each moment of sound is a cluster of notes non-simultaneously apprehended – and yet, as the move into one occurs, another one arrives – until the point at which the listener has experienced the whole composition. Yet the complete piece has existed the whole time in whatever medium it was recorded and played.

The exhibition title, 'I Suddenly Remembered My Grandmothers' Words', is irretrievably entangled in loose threads from the fabric of time, all at once invoking immediacy, memory, age and the evanescence of language. Suddenness, memory, and words as ephemeral phenomena sit in counterpoint to Greaves' concerns with paintings as distinct and discrete objects in and of themselves. In this contradiction the immutable thing-ness of the object is activated as a living system – a vitality is brought to these formal arrangements witnessing them as objects both embedded in and passing through time. Flashes of inspiration, like striking a match in the darkness of uncertainty, will build

into a fire that illuminates the context from whence they came.

As we follow time's arrow, perhaps not being pushed from the past but pulled into the future, the painting of Michael Greaves reminds us that what we consider as yet-to-be could just be what we are yet to see.

Keep going, there is a time-machine in your future.

Artist's and Authors' Biographies

Michael Greaves (b. 1976) currently lives and works in Dunedin where he graduated from The Dunedin School of Art at Otago Polytechnic in 2017 with a Masters of Fine Art (Distinction) and holds the position of Senior Lecturer in Painting. He has exhibited nationally, and internationally, and has work held in the James Wallace Arts Trust, the Otago Polytechnic Collection and in numerous private collections in New Zealand, Australia, the UK, the USA and Europe. Recent work by Greaves has been exhibited in Berlin, Auckland and Dunedin.

Alistair Fox, Professor Emeritus, University of Otago, began his career as a university lecturer, moving to Dunedin in 1974. His initial area of scholarly expertise was English Tudor literature and history, in which he published a number of foundational texts. His later work focuses on New Zealand literature and culture, and cinema studies, extending into contemporary literary and film theory and New Zealand art. An interest in the creative process lends coherency to his published research as it extends over forty years. Among his numerous publications, he counts 7 single-authored and 2 co-authored monographs, numerous articles and book chapters, several co-edited volumes, and four volumes translated from French into English.

Brendan Jon Philip is an artist, writer, and musician based in Dunedin. Drawing these distinct practices into a syncretic whole, he has exhibited, published and performed throughout New Zealand.