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RACHEL HOPE PEARY
PAINTER

The artworks of **RACHEL HOPE PEARY** are still paintings, no matter how far they stretch the fabric of the medium. They could be paintings about paintings, or even deconstructions of the discipline, because they play, quite seriously, with the materials and qualities that paintings conventionally have. Normally, what we see “in” a painting is actually what is “on” it – paint applied to canvas. The canvas typically covers a wooden stretcher, which remains concealed. In Peary’s paintings, we see in. Sometimes we see abstract passages of acrylic paint, chalk and oil pastel rubbed into thin cotton fabric, and through them we might also perceive the cedar stretcher and perhaps traces of scrunpled fabric stuffed in from behind. In other works, there is no paint, but instead fine threads of cotton, a stretcher and (framed and veiled) the wall against which the painting hangs. Peary’s paintings represent, then, or make transparent, the conventional ingredients of a painting, plus a few more less conventional ones. It is as if the artist is pulling apart the medium from within, scrutinising its foundations. But rather than merely interrogating the medium, or putting it under a penetrating, forensic gaze, Peary engages with painting on the level of feeling (in the senses of both emotion and touch).

It was in the 1960s that the “objecthood” of painting became a thing. Minimalists manufactured pared-back sculptural objects that were interesting more in their influence on the viewer’s experience of a space than in themselves. Frank Stella made black striped paintings; his stretchers were conspicuously thick, sometimes non-rectangular; he said “what you see is what you see”. More recently, a considerable number of painters have, like Peary, drawn our attention to, and messed with, the material conventions of their medium, among them, in New Zealand, the likes of Oliver Perkins, Johl Dwyer, Cat Fooks and Rebecca Wallis. Peary is closest to Wallis. Both artists show us the “bones” of the stretcher and the “skin” of the fabric stretched over it, but both refuse to treat the painting only as an object. To objectify (as we know from the history of the female nude in western representation) is to deny agency, whereas people and paintings alike have the capacity to be active and alive. Peary’s paintings are distinctively fleshy and translucent, and, like bodies, poised between states of containment and permeability.

A picture frame, of course, is indelibly associated with containment, demarcating the boundary between what is inside a painting and what is outside, between “art” and “world”. Peary’s paintings tend to explore the kinship between an external “box” frame and an internal stretcher frame, the latter becoming at once part of the picture, due to the transparency of the painting’s surface, and a frame for what we can see through it.

It is a funny thing the way words come and go (at least, the words are always around somewhere, but they become more or less useable). For a long time, it was perfectly commonplace to talk about a painting’s “content”, but by the 1980s, as theories about language and representation took hold in the art world, the word became doubly suspect: For one thing, no one was quite sure what the word referred to – subject matter, iconography, the artist’s intentions and emotions, the visual forms ...? And for another, it seemed reasonable to accept that whatever meaning an artwork might seem to have is not a fixed “truth” held within it, but is projected onto it by the viewer; there is nothing behind the surface; it is always “open to interpretation” (an oft-repeated refrain that now seems rather deadening, rather than, as it was intended to be, liberating). There are various ways of reclaiming content from this sceptical appraisal. We might take heed of the communication of knowledge within Te Ao Māori, where material things, such as carved taonga, embody the continuing life of ancestors. There is too an ever-increasing body of “posthumanist” or “new materialist” theory that grapples with the agency of seemingly inanimate things. And we might attend to artworks with a view to determining how their meaning is bound up with their materiality – not just what the materials are, but what they do.

The artworks of Rachel Hope Peary are still paintings. Moreover, they unashamedly afford an experience of aesthetic beauty, in their luscious skin tones, sensuous cedar surfaces and veiled opalescence. Subtle textures and a medley of arcs and smudges also lend a level of detail or complexity of form comparable to the fine nuances and blemishes of human skin, or to the gradations of tone found in the kinds of representational paintings that aim at verisimilitude. These qualities give the eye something to get into, and savour, without being overtly engineered effects. There is a sense of give and take between, on the one hand, the discipline and intuition of the artist, and on the other, the infinite and irrepressible potential of materials to act upon each other and upon the artist.

Peary’s openness to, and nurturing of, material agencies is significant when considered in light of a statement written by the American critic Lucy Lippard in 1976: “Perhaps the greatest challenge to the feminist movement in the visual arts ... is the establishment of new criteria by which to evaluate not only the aesthetic effect, but the communicative effectiveness of art.” Many artists associated with second-wave feminism in the 1970s and ‘80s avoided painting altogether, wary of the patriarchal baggage it carried. For Peary, aesthetic and specifically painting-related decisions are communicative. Witness her refusal to rigidly control the materials, an implicit rejection of an ego-centred conception of art; the withheld, understated nature of the mark-making (almost indiscernible at times); the foregrounding of physical features of a painting (such as the stretcher) generally kept hidden, subservient to the painted image; the modest scale or non-monumentality of the paintings; and the evident pleasure in absences and gaps, pauses and silences. Such qualities again recall the ethos of the New Zealand artist Joanna Margaret Paul, who, after attending a 1968 lecture by the powerful American art critic, Clement Greenberg, remarked approvingly only of the pauses in his oratory. By invoking the body, too, Peary fleshes out an understanding of the “aesthetic” that extends Lippard’s call for a new set of values. The painterly is political.

EDWARD HANFLING