

*Jazz Plastic* is an exhibition of paintings by Melbourne-based artist Rohan Hartley Mills. The title refers to the material plasticity of paint, alongside neoplasticism and its promotion of pure abstraction. It also alludes to the improvisatory impulse underpinning both jazz and gestural abstraction, where musical notes or brushstrokes are often made in immediate response to their predecessor, echoed in the way Bebop paralleled the rise of abstract expressionism. Similarly, Mills's works exhibit an open-ended, unfolding quality. As both fan and critic of painting, his spontaneous strategies deconstruct its traditions and materials while testing new ways in which painting might operate.

Mills is always experimenting with new ideas and possibilities. Speaking of his process, the artist asserts, 'I make paintings to make other paintings.' Here the works on paper reflect the role of drawing processes in his practice, based on responses to the world around him. The photographs on his Instagram account (@drawing\_rehearsals) reveal an eye for found abstractions – from a pair of rusted 40-gallon drums on a West Australian farm, to a battered old dartboard, to a grid of packing tape applied to a cardboard box. In a similar way, curator and writer Bruce E Phillips notes that Mills 'creates paintings that investigate the structural properties of colour and the expanded associations of abstraction.' Observed and remembered moments find connections with local and international art histories, and are visually and materially transposed in his paintings. His markings are at once self-referential while delineating forms that are almost familiar yet elusive. The artist reflects that, 'Each painting for me is a mission and a challenge of what I can achieve within a "limited" space. What limited materials, marks or forms can I use to successfully bring a painting into the world, out from within the universe of my own head, back down to earth?'

Artist, curator and writer Glen Snow notes that Mills's work 'hovers between drawing and painting' and that 'something is being worked out before our eyes.' Snow, in his review of *Drawing Rehearsals*, a group exhibition at Two Rooms in which Mills participated, also notes that 'there is the sense of the final picture being the active procedure of finding that picture.' Echoing the musical analogy of *Jazz Plastic*, although the works on paper may resemble drawings – and hence perhaps be viewed as rehearsals for other paintings – the artist asserts these paintings as artworks in their own right. Though generative, fluid and exploratory in form, they also demonstrate the structure and restraint of finished works.

True to its title, *Jazz Plastic* also features a selection of paintings on corrugated plastic (commonly referred to by its trade name Corflute) often used for outdoor real estate signs and other commercial applications. The artist cuts shapes from sheets of the coloured plastic and fixes them to a stretcher. Mills's deployment of this material – unfamiliar in art practice, yet ubiquitous in contemporary signage – speaks to his ceaseless testing of painting's limits, a sensibility one might liken to 'free jazz'. Speaking about the parameter of the frame, and Mills's acts of reframing, curator JA Kennedy notes that:

*Mills' work makes use of the painting frame as a starting point, often allowing Corflute to stand in for paint. Mills' work flips on its head Donald Judd's complaint about painting – that the rectangle of the frame determines and limits whatever is inside of it. Here, the rectangular frame creates an opportunity, becoming the control in a series of experiments, and providing the artist with a certain stimulus, a need to challenge the limitations of painting. The rectangle constitutes a determined playing field, creating a boundary that the artist may either work within or push outside of.*

Delighting in improvisation and the act of pushing paint around, *Jazz Plastic* embraces the serendipities of chance and automatism, with traces of the artist's process keenly felt in his celebration of the 'continual flow of ideas'.

– Emil McAvoy

## Endnotes

- 1 Sarah Downs, 'Favourite Things: Artist Rohan Hartley Mills', *Viva*, 23 May 2018, [www.viva.co.nz/article/culture-travel/favourite-things-rohan-hartley-mills/](http://www.viva.co.nz/article/culture-travel/favourite-things-rohan-hartley-mills/).
- 2 Bruce E Phillips, 'Rohan Hartley Mills', [bruceephillips.com](http://bruceephillips.com), 8 March 2014, [bruceephillips.com/curating/rohan-hartley-mills](http://bruceephillips.com/curating/rohan-hartley-mills).
- 3 Rohan Hartley Mills, quoted in JA Kennedy, *Empirical Matter: Rohan Hartley Mills*, Krystina Kaza, J. A. Kennedy, exhibition text, State Gallery, Auckland, 2018.
- 4 Glen Snow, 'Painting in Flux', review of Rohan Hartley Mills' 'Drawing Wall', *EyeContact*, 18 May 2014, [eyecontactsite.com/2014/05/painting-in-flux](http://eyecontactsite.com/2014/05/painting-in-flux).
- 5 Glen Snow, 'Rehearsing Further Abstractions', review of Drawing Rehearsals (Gretchen Albrecht, Sandra Bushby, Fu-On Chung, Rohan Hartley Mills), *EyeContact*, 17 March 2016, [eyecontactsite.com/2016/03/rehearsing-further-abstractions](http://eyecontactsite.com/2016/03/rehearsing-further-abstractions). The title Drawing Rehearsals was borrowed from Mills' MA's dissertation.
- 6 Kennedy, *Empirical Matter*.
- 7 Rohan Hartley Mills, artist biography, *First V*, exhibition catalogue, IWT Projectspace, Auckland, 2017, p 51.

