

John Nixon mainly works in series and groups. Since 1990, he has placed his painting production under the rubric of the Experimental Painting Workshop (EPW), designing exhibitions to emphasise the effect made by the work when seen *en masse* and to 'highlight the work's function as research'.¹ Nixon's production within the framework of the EPW is itself made up mostly of projects and series, ranging from small sets of tightly interrelated works to the massive enterprise of EPW: Orange that occupied him for ten years beginning in 1995, an exploration grounded in a single colour that Nixon imaged at one point as a kind of life-project. Nixon's tireless creative energy is stimulated by the relationships between works. Each work suggests the following one that will reverse, recast, or repeat it; the presentation of related works side-by-side generates dynamism, vitality, and formal complexity beyond the 'relatively simple and reduced' individual pieces.²

In recent years, Nixon has honed in on this relational principle and brought it to the forefront of the viewer's experience by producing paintings in pairs, intended to be exhibited together and sometimes attached to each other. In this exhibition, Nixon presents a series of small paired paintings in black and white, most of them measuring 9 x 5 inches. The format echoes the Heidelberg School's *9 by 5 Impression Exhibition* of 1889 in a way that might seem surprising for an artist who has on many occasions stressed his distance from mainstream narratives of Australian art, preferring to emphasise connections to European and North American modernism. However, Streeton & Co.'s use of cigar box lids as painting supports resonates with Nixon's commitment to humble, easily accessible materials. This is evident in the present exhibition not only in the paintings on hessian and towelling, but also in the more conventional canvases, intended for amateur landscape sketches. Creatively mis-used in portrait orientation, their oddly narrow dimensions offer a kind of miniaturised equivalent to the eccentrically attenuated canvases used in some Barnett Newman paintings, a connection reinforced by a very Newman-esque division of the surface with a single vertical band of a different colour or material.

In one pair from 2019, a white enamel monochrome is enlivened by two imperfectly ruled lines forming a central vertical band inside of which foreign coins have been glued to the surface in a wavering line; the black painting repeats the tri-partite structure, but this time a thicker central band is formed by a stripe of hessian belt wrapped around the canvas. In another pair from the year before, a primarily black painting on towelling vertically divided by a central white stripe is paired with a white monochrome on hessian, divided by a cord of braided macramé. The pairings alter our perception of the individual paintings, emphasising certain qualities and suggesting particular readings. Surfaces are contrasted: the roughness of hessian stands out particularly strongly in comparison to the smooth metal of coins. In other instances, the pairings create perceptual ambiguities. In the pair on hessian and towelling, for instance, the near-identical composition of the two paintings exaggerates the way that the macramé protrudes from the surface, in comparison to the other painting, which is flat. At the same time, looking at these paintings in reproduction or from a distance, we might start to question whether the white band on the other painting is not itself also protruding. In this elegant play of contrast and resemblance, Nixon demonstrates the truth of an insight expressed by Donald Judd: 'Often power lies in a polarisation of elements and qualities, or at least in a combination of dissimilar ones'.³

When viewed in sequence, these paired paintings appear as variations on a theme. Yet they are by no means systematic. Nixon does not make use of any rigorous permutational structures; his mode of variation is free.

1 Nixon, 'Notes on the Experimental Painting Workshop' in *John Nixon EPW 2004* (Melbourne: Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, 2004), 8.

2 'John Nixon and Barry Barker in Conversation' in *John Nixon London 2018* (London: Laure Genillard Gallery, 2018), 31.

3 Donald Judd, 'In the Galleries: Lee Bontecou' in *Complete Writings 1959-1975* (Halifax: Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1975), 65.

They are linked less by any shared essential qualities than by a chain of resemblances, resulting in relationships between individual elements akin to the subtle yet complex variation we might see in a row of houses all built roughly around the same time or in different packaging of similar products on a supermarket shelf.

Nixon's work has been described as a 'rule-based practice' and the 'enactment of a system', an assessment that perhaps stems from the almost dogmatic quality of some of his earlier statements on abstraction.⁴ But it has become increasingly clear in recent years that no universal principle underlies Nixon's work; if he is following self-imposed rules, he also permits himself to break them. Even the most central proposition of the EPW, the stricture on 'figurative + relational painting',⁵ has been repeatedly transgressed in recent years, as Nixon has produced works that allude to the traditional genres of portrait, landscape and still life. Rather than an abstract system of belief, his work is guided by a sensibility that values clarity, simplicity, and the things of everyday life. As the works in this exhibition demonstrate, for Nixon, simply painted surfaces, found objects, and the relationships between them are the materials of an indefatigable creativity grounded not in a theoretical system but in a 'visual understanding of the world'.⁶

– Francis Plagne, 2020

4 Emma Busowsky Cox, 'John Nixon: Painting Itself' in *John Nixon: Experimental Painting Workshop* (Castlemaine: Castlemaine Art Museum), 94 .

5 John Nixon, *For Non-Artistic Art* pamphlet (Sydney, 1994).

6 'John Nixon and Barry Barker in Conversation', 30.