

In the Morning Sunlight: John Nixon's Paintings at Two Rooms

With their shining colours, simple forms, and uncomplicated methods of construction, these paintings by John Nixon from 1990–2014 come together beautifully in this exhibition as variations on the theme of geometric abstraction. Joyous and cerebral, as they seem to me in equal measure, each painting speaks with a singular voice to the central analytical concerns of Nixon's Experimental Painting Workshop (EPW). Their pared-back minimalist and hard-edged designs, mostly articulated in enamel paint on Masonite, exemplify what John called 'the poetry of reduction'.¹

The earliest paintings shown here—two orange monochromes—were made in 1990, the same year that he conceived of the EPW, as a means of conceptualising the principles of his painting practice. He described the EPW as 'not a physical workshop, but 'an intellectual proposition'², and it drove his exploration of painting's abstract possibilities, as against modes of figurative realism and narrative. We might see the paintings grouped here are an edit or sampling of the EPW which represents, in Nixon's words: 'ideas and models of non-objective experiment'.³

The colour orange is present in almost all the paintings in the Two Rooms exhibition. There are three orange monochromes, and another painting which Nixon designated a monochrome, despite the small black disk that punctuates the orange field. Nixon's first orange monochrome was made in 1986, and he subsequently included them occasionally in his repertoire up until 1995, the year that he founded EPW: Orange. Initially conceived as a five-year project, but continuing much longer, this subset of the broader EPW signalled a dedicated focus on orange, a colour he describes as: 'bright, uplifting, positive and declarative'⁴, and 'full of energy and light'⁵. Different shades of orange taken from differently branded paint-tins purchased whilst travelling aboard gave further inflection to his output in this most exuberant of

¹ John Barleycorn, 'Art + Life', in *John Nixon: Tableaux*, exhibition catalogue, Gallery 14, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, Brisbane 1989, n.p.

² John Nixon, 'Notes on the Experimental Painting Workshop', in *John Nixon Thesis, Selected Works from 1968–1993*, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, 1994, n.p.

³ John Nixon, 'Notes on the Experimental Painting Workshop'

⁴ John Nixon 'Some Answers in Advance of Some Potential Questions Concerning My Work (written on the train between Basel and Karlsruhe, 29 January 2001), in *Nummer 11* magazine, Kunsthaus Baselland, Basel, Switzerland, in conjunction with the exhibition *John Nixon, EPW: Orange*, n.p.

⁵ John Nixon, *EPW: Silver*, originally published as an exhibition text for Anna Schwartz Gallery in Melbourne in 2006. Nixon applied the description to both orange and silver colours in his work.

colours. Orange in all its diversity has since become a signature colour for Nixon, despite his continued categories of work in other hues.

One such category is EPW Polychrome, which he founded in 2006. John loved to set a ground principle but then in the spirit of enquiry invert it to explore the opposite. Thus, alongside monochromes, Nixon also made multicolour paintings in a range of formats, though always including orange. Contrasting with the sonorous clarity of the monochrome in which one colour is given space to sing, the chromatic spectrums in Nixon's polychromes set off syncopated rhythms that give these works a distinct musicality. In this exhibition he uses stripes in a play of diagonals against horizontals, adding circles, triangles, and rectangular shapes to create a kind of notation. Music seems embedded within the polychromes perhaps in part because John often made these paintings on the back deck of our Briar Hill house, 'in the morning sunlight, out of doors on a table whilst listening to New Orleans jazz music', as he described in 2007.⁶

The sky-blue monochrome *Untitled (Block Painting)* 1993 stands apart from the other works—measuring 10 x 10 x 4 cm it is diminutive by comparison. Its cube-like shape, accounting for the painting's name, distinguishes it from the works on Masonite that lie virtually flat to the wall. Revealing a careful attention to the detail of material construction, the work is part of an important group of 'block paintings' from 1992–1994, which hearkened back to an earlier group Nixon made in 1968 at the beginning of his oeuvre. John developed the block painting format as 'a unit sufficient in size and intensity to hold and explore a content about painting'.⁷ Exemplary of this idea, *Untitled (Block Painting)* is unassuming in appearance and size yet compelling in its sense of conviction, and it reminds me that magnitude is not always related to scale.

Colour and material; surface and plane; space and structure; counterpoint and rhythm. These are key elements from which Nixon's poetics are wrought, and through which he enacts his analysis of what might constitute a painting, in a continual renewal of the abstract experiment he loved.

Sue Cramer, Briar Hill, Melbourne, January 2023

⁶ John Nixon, *EPW: Polychrome*, Melbourne, 2007, published in *John Nixon, EPW: Polychrome* exhibition catalogue, TarraWarra Museum of Art, Healesville, Victoria, 2007, n.p.

⁷ John Nixon, "General Notes on the Block Paintings' Sydney 1992—1993, published in *John Nixon, Thesis*, n.p.