

Tira Walsh works on her paintings top down, laid flat on a table like bodies or blueprints. Already large on the wall, they become bigger on the horizontal, cumbersome objects to be circumnavigated, reached over, regarded from above and beside like a surgeon or an architect. When I visit her petite studio at Parnell Station, a canvas is lying supine on the table, exuding paint fumes from its still-wet centre. It's hard to believe the large paintings Walsh is known for are made in such a small room, especially as most of it is given over to storage, with canvases stacked ten or more deep against every wall, evidence of a painter who cannot be satiated.

On the day I drop by, Walsh has been working wet on wet, cobalt spray paint on top of grey aquagloss to create an unexpected texture as the matte blue dries before the slick grey, forming an opaque film that contracts as it congeals, breaking apart into patches of floating colour. Peering over the canvas, I notice something more: random portions of both paints seem to have been rubbed away, or perhaps not rubbed but lifted. When I ask Walsh how she did this, she tells me it was an accident, not this time but the first. While on residency at Karekare House, she was painting with the windows open when a sudden gust carried a sheet of plastic drop cloth across the wet surface of a painting. Despite peeling it off carefully, a layer of paint came away from areas where the plastic had sat against the canvas, leaving marks – or rather, absences – at random intervals. Since then, she has experimented with the technique, trying different plastics to pull away sections of paint before realising that the best option was the one delivered by divine interference. The flickering black striations found across multiple works in this series are the result of using this technique in reverse, painting onto plastic drop sheets and pressing them against the canvas surface.

This kind of experimentation is typical of Walsh's practice. When I first met her in 2018 when she was working out of a massive shared studio, her space was filled with paintings in progress and innovative self-made tools. Among these was an extra-wide brush made from multiple sparsely bristled brushes set out in a line and attached to a long handle, almost like a thin broom. In preparing for this exhibition, Walsh revisited old works from this time, was inspired by specific marks found on old works including the delicate pattern of stripes made by stroking this multi-brush instrument gently across the canvas. Even at such a large scale, these spidery black forms make me think of a mascara marks left on a white pillowslip, their lines fine as lashes, or conversely, the curving layers of geologic strata found in rock formations across the world, or the hypnotic concentric circles found when an old tree is sliced open, each ring representing a year of growth. Just one of many painterly tools (literal and figurative) in her kete, the evocative, undulating lines made by Walsh's rake-like brush shimmer between macro and micro, creating tension and dynamism as our initial impressions falter and shift. This is the particular power of Walsh's paintings, to grab attention with their immediacy, the urgency of nomadic marks looping and scurrying across the canvas, of sharp neon lines cutting through the black and grey, and to hold it by shifting gears. Bold forms are disrupted with large chunks removed or blocked out, meandering spray-painted marks drift around the canvas, lurking just beneath the surface so as to appear out of focus, unintended, phantasms captured or something stuck to the lens, textures stretching, reaching out only to stop abruptly, to change direction, form or simply fade away. As we try to parse the language of paint, we are held. This expression, *the language of paint*, is paraphrased from something Walsh said to me in the studio. "You think you're making the decisions, but you're really not... paint determines its own language." Walsh talks about paintings as though they are autonomous, as though

they are people; perhaps whānau, close friends or lovers, folks she can have a disagreement with and still stomach seeing the next day when she opens the studio door. Bolshie, mercurial people who rarely acquiesce to her desires, who love to create problems that only she can solve. In this sense, her paintings are not so much improvisational as collaborative, borne from a relationship that is responsive as opposed to merely generative. Walsh tells me she named this series *Ricochet* for the way the works bounce off one another, textures, hues and motifs hitting the painting surface and glancing away only to hit another, manifesting differently. It is a title that reflects the unpredictability of the works, the way they glow, flicker and punch, appear restless, unsettled. In crime scene investigation, forensic scientists are often brought in to analyse bullet ricochet patterns from which they might reconstruct a sequence of events, using the marks left to determine the positions of bodies in the room as well as the type of firearm used, the velocity of the bullet, and so on. This is one way to encounter *Ricochet*, as a scientist or investigator finding evidence to aid in understanding what happened here, what layer was put down first, what materials came in contact with this paint, this canvas, and when. To linger in front of these paintings is to reconstruct a series of events, to sense the way time stretches and contracts during the painting process, how ideas and paint may ricochet off the canvas but their marks linger long.

Lucinda Bennett, March 2024