

He moves through the forest without straying from the warm glow that forms a cone around his car. The headlights are on high beam. The night is cold. A little foggy. The light shrouds all the spooky things that linger in the unknown. And yet, this cone of light is fragile, like gossamer. If he allowed himself to think about the way illumination also intensifies the darkness beyond it, and its secrets, he would ... But no, hail the gods!, He won't go there. He remains in a perpetual limbo of light and colour, of humour and randomly wrought connections...

Midnight Dashboard is the name of Fu On Chung's exhibition of new works at Two Rooms, Tāmaki Makaurau. It is also the title of a single painting, the idea for which came to him on a trip home to Kirikiriroa on the banks of the Waikato. After a day of gardening, a pair of pink, washing-up gloves had been flung across his parents' brown decking. This tiny, domestic gesture amused Fu. He wondered why his parents hadn't used gardening gloves. Fu's humour is light, always a little off-kilter, personal. But then he will draw away from the initial image to re-arrange the illusion in unexpected ways. When he saw the gloves on the deck, he was reminded of a car dashboard.

Images appear to Fu in everyday life as the origins of a painting. He begins with observations scribbled into a notebook, explaining that this is a recent development in his practice and "most of these thoughts are nonsensical or diary-esque and possibly not useful at all. But a starting point."¹ If a shared wont of urban dwellers is to retrace familiar steps around their habitats, then Fu has excavated his own habitual channels of movement around Melbourne (Naarm) where he currently resides, retreading the same steps over time between home, café-work, friends and the studio. I can picture the way a city's underground rail-system (re)produces the same routes, connecting at junctures and then shooting off into diverse and singular destinations. (Re)iteration, repetition, sameness. Fu's secret is the way he avoids his own senses from being ground into a grey paste as he travels familiar routes outside the studio.

And, although travelling is not requisite, on a recent trip to Aotearoa, new perspectives on family idiosyncrasies yielded new images: "I took a lot of photos of Dad's bonsai today [he has many, some older than my older sister]. They are beautiful. Dad always wanted to be an artist, but his family lacked status and money, so he didn't get to art school. He spends his time gardening, keeping his bonsai and drawing and painting in his spare time."

Hidden under Fu's imagery is a 'desperation' to keep things light and funny.

¹ All quotes are taken from Fu's notes.

Is the word 'desperation' too much? Would 'desire' be more apt? But 'desire' sounds a little limp. Perhaps his motivation is found somewhere in the spectrum between these two nouns that so easily morph into verbs or even adverbs. I love the slipperiness of language. It parallels Fu's painting ways. His own slippy-painterly ways.

"My sister told me my hair is starting to thin. I went down a bit of a spiral. Will start rosemary oil asap. If that doesn't work—I'll start popping those pills that I get ads for."

The initial spark for Fu's paintings, those raw observations extracted from his world are unknowable in the final paintings. Images are wholly plastic and mouldable, so unlike the *plein-air* painters of the 19th century, or even the line of modernists from Frances Hodgkins to Rita Angus, the initial motivation for Fu's work is not evident. Rather, it is now hidden under a relentless pursuit of abstract-form and colour. Lest the mystery of painting be ruined, I decide not to delve further into the source images, but to become the viewer-archaeologist. Truth from deduction, ridden with biases, scant evidence and limited knowledge about origins—only titles remain as possible clues to the grounding moment. But they are not Rosetta Stones.

I choose an especially seductive painting, *Screens* (2024). Since it pulls me towards it, and won't let me go, the word 'charmed' seems appropriate for its witchy allusions. The use of the illuminating (nearly fluorescent) crimson is used to highlight a kind of a central box form with distorted fuzzy edges. It appears to be melting under the weight of waves and lines of light. Bright and dark spaces help me to span the painting's surface and painterly movements. There are limey-green patches in the outer regions of the canvas. I begin to see how the light and colour is deeply layered so that the paintings' two-dimensionality begins to collapse under the illusion of depth and form. Might the title, *Screens*, be hinting at the haze of competing broadcast images? Or is it a lack of focus caused by a world of incessant digital imagery? And yet, Fu's humour is likely to be alluding to something completely other, unimaginable.

For Fu, painting continues to reveal a special kind of loving and generous madness. He takes images from the world and then re-forms them in ways that may be unthinkable to others, a hankering to stay away from the dark fray lapping at the edges. To return to the rail metaphor, there are those who travel on the lines of the underground with no overlap to Fu's, those strangers who come to *Midnight Dashboard* without prior knowledge of the work. I like to think that no matter what kind of mood or what level of familiarity a visitor brings to the show, they will succour the lightness and fun of Fu's paintings. Fu's work, full of colour and amusing allusions, is directed by a very focused motivation: "I'm looking for paintings that conjure an image. Paintings that imply a sense of space—seeking of catharsis." Light and healing.

Jan Bryant, January 2025